

# Maimonides on the Meaning of ‘Perplexity’ (*hayra* = *aporía*)

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## I. Introduction

Maimonides (1138–1204) called his philosophic masterpiece “The Guide of the Perplexed” (*Dalālat al-Hā’irīn*). What is the meaning of the “perplexity” mentioned in the title? And who are the *perplexed* for whom he has written his *Guide of the Perplexed*?

The Arabic term “*hayra*” or “*tahayyur*” (“perplexity”) was used in medieval philosophic literature as a translation of the Greek “*aporía*.”<sup>1)</sup> Etymologically, “*aporía*” (*a-poros*) means “without passage” or “impasse.” One is, as it were, unable to pass—there is no exit, no door, no pore. Plato and Aristotle held that philosophy begins with *aporía* and its attendant emotion of wonder (*thauma*).<sup>2)</sup>

At *Metaphysics*, III, 1, 995a 27–30, Aristotle advises that science must begin with recognizing the places of *aporía*, “for no one can unravel a knot he does not see.” At *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 2, 1146a 24–27, he associates *aporía* with the mind’s inability “to untie the knot of the argument.” These passages evidently left an impression on Maimonides, for he writes in *Guide*, II, 2, that his intention in the book is to help the reader unravel “many knots.”<sup>3)</sup>

Alfarabi, the medieval philosopher most respected by Maimonides, defined “perplexity” as follows: “Perplexity [*tahayyur*] means that a man is caught in bewilderment [*hayra*] between two contradictory convictions... Hence to refute someone is to transfer him positively from one of the two contradictories to the other, while to perplex him is to transfer his mind from the first to the second, from the second to the first, and from the first to the second; soon the assertions following from the two contradictories possess equal force, at which time perplexity occurs.”<sup>4)</sup>

## II. Joseph ben Judah Ibn Simeon

The first use of the term “perplexity” in the *Guide of the Perplexed* occurs in its Epistle Dedicatory. The *Guide* was dedicated to Rabbi Joseph ben Judah Ibn Simeon, a young man who had been a student of Maimonides’, but had to discontinue his studies before their completion.<sup>5)</sup>

From the Epistle Dedicatory addressed to Joseph, we learn that Maimonides had originally accepted him as a student on the basis of his impressive compositions in rhymed prose (*maqāmāt*) in which he expressed his love of science. Maimonides knew from those poems that young Joseph had a great desire for knowledge, but did not know if he had the necessary intellectual ability. Joseph subsequently studied logic, mathematics, and astronomy under Maimonides’ tutelage, and proved to be an excellent student. However, he was impatient. Although he had not yet mastered physics, he begged Maimonides to teach him metaphysics and to reveal to him the secrets of the Torah. He desired quick answers. Before studying with Maimonides, he had read books by representatives of the school of theology known as “Kalām.” Having now studied logic, he wanted to know whether the arguments of the Kalām were demonstrative, dialectical, or rhetorical. Maimonides writes:

You demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you some things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you of the intentions of the Mutakallimūn...and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative... I saw you had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself. You were perplexed [*ḥā’ir*], as stupefaction had come over you... Yet I did not cease dissuading you... and enjoining you to approach matters in an orderly manner.<sup>6)</sup>

Maimonides describes his student as “perplexed.” Joseph’s “perplexity” seems to be connected with his impatient and imprudent desire to learn the secrets of the Torah before he had mastered the prerequisites. He passionately desired to know what he was not academically prepared to know, and this seems to have led to his perplexity. Maimonides insisted that he progress in his studies in the proper order. The need to study subjects in their proper order was a major pedagogical principle for Maimonides. One should not try to study astronomy before mathematics, and one should not try to study metaphysics before physics. It seems, therefore, that Joseph’s perplexity was caused by a combination of his passionate desire for knowledge and his lack of preparation. He desired to know the secrets of the Torah, but was not yet qualified to comprehend them. His perplexity presumably could be alleviated once he had studied physics and other prerequisite disciplines.

In any case, we learn from the Epistle Dedicatory that Maimonides wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed* in order to help his *perplexed* student, Joseph ben Judah, and other students like him.<sup>7)</sup>

### **III. Two Kinds of Perplexity Related to Scripture**

In his Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides explains why he has entitled his

book “The Guide of the Perplexed.” His explanation gives us some more information about what he means by the term “perplexity.”

He speaks here about two different kinds of perplexity. Both concern an apparent conflict between Scripture and Reason. The first kind of perplexity relates to *words*, the second to *stories*. Both are described by Maimonides as being potentially harmful and acute. He refers to each of them separately as a “great perplexity” (*hayra shadāda*).<sup>8)</sup>

In the first kind of perplexity, the individual does not realize that a certain Biblical *word* is not to be taken literally, because it is equivocal, metaphorical, or amphibolous. For example, the Bible uses the expression, “the hand of God” (Exodus 9:30). This usage of the word “hand” is clearly metaphorical, and refers to God’s power. If one does not realize that the usage is figurative, one could be led erroneously to attribute corporeality to God, and to think that He has a biological hand similar to that of human beings. Such anthropomorphic thoughts about God would conflict with the demonstrated proposition that God is incorporeal, and cause “great perplexity.”

In the second kind of perplexity, the individual does not realize that a certain Biblical *story* is not to be taken literally, because it is a parable or allegory. For example, the Bible relates the story of the Garden of Eden. There are strange things in this story, including a talking snake, that seem to contradict our knowledge of nature. If one does not realize that the story is a parable or allegory, one could be thrown into a “great perplexity.” If, however, one is made to see that the story is figurative, one is freed from one’s perplexity and can “take the right path.”

After explaining the two kinds of perplexity, Maimonides concludes: “This is why I have called this treatise, “The Guide of the Perplexed” [*Dalālat al-Hā’irīn*].<sup>9)</sup> Maimonides seeks to help those who are perplexed, and to serve as their guide.

Now, it might be said that both these two kinds of perplexity are caused by conflicts between Jerusalem and Athens, that is, between Religion and Philosophy. This statement would be largely correct, but not wholly so. It is true that in both cases the perplexity is caused by a conflict between Scripture and Reason. In the first case, *words* in Scripture seem to contradict Reason. In the second case, *stories* in Scripture seem to contradict it. This conflict between Scripture and Reason would seem to be an example of Jerusalem vs. Athens.

However, it cannot be overemphasized that for Maimonides the belief in God’s incorporeality is not only a philosophic doctrine, but also a *religious* doctrine - and indeed a fundamental religious doctrine. The doctrine of God’s incorporeality, according to Maimonides, is the Third of the Thirteen Principles of Judaism.<sup>10)</sup> In Maimonides’ view, the doctrine of God’s incorporeality is a necessary premise of the fundamental Jewish doctrine of God’s oneness or unity. He thus writes explicitly of

the reader faced with a conflict between the external meaning of the Biblical text and Reason:

[H]e remains in a state of perplexity [*hayra*] and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect... or hold fast to his understanding of those terms [according to their external meaning]... while at the same time perceiving he has brought loss to himself and harm to his religion.<sup>11)</sup>

In other words, by rejecting Reason and sticking fast to the external meaning of Biblical words, a person “*brings harm to his religion.*” The reader who rejects Reason and sticks fast to the external meaning of the Biblical phrase, “the hand of God,” has not only turned his or her back on philosophy, but has also *brought harm to Judaism*. Judaism is harmed by the vulgar belief that God literally has a physical hand. The rejection of Reason brings harm to *religion*! The rejection of Athens brings harm to Jerusalem! Thus, even at the beginning of his book, Maimonides makes clear that the “perplexity” under discussion cannot be reduced simply to the dichotomy of Jerusalem vs. Athens. What looked at first glance like a conflict between Jerusalem and Athens is ultimately one between Jerusalem and Jerusalem.

#### **IV. Perplexity in the Sciences**

In *Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 31, Maimonides discusses “perplexity” in the sciences. We thus see that he is not concerned only with perplexities involving Jerusalem. He explains that perplexity in the sciences arises when a person has a “great desire” to know something, but no ability to establish it demonstratively. He argues that wherever there is a demonstration (*burhān*), there is no room for disagreement (*ikhtilāf* = *mahaloqet*) or perplexity. He concludes: “The things about which there may be perplexity [*al-hayra*] are very numerous in metaphysical subjects, few in physical subjects, and nonexistent in mathematical subjects.”<sup>12)</sup> This is because metaphysics is largely non-demonstrative, physics partly non-demonstrative, and mathematics wholly demonstrative.

The perplexed scientist, therefore, has a great desire to know something, but is unable to know it. This inability may be because he or she has not studied sufficiently (as was the case with Joseph ben Judah), because a demonstration has not yet been found (as is often the case in physics), or because a demonstration is impossible (as is often the case in metaphysics).

## **V. Aristotle vs. Ptolemy**

In *Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 24, Maimonides makes reference to “the true perplexity.” This is the one place in the book in which he refers to “the true perplexity,” and so it is very important. This true perplexity does not seem to reflect the Jerusalem vs. Athens dichotomy, and, moreover, does not seem to have anything to do with the interpretation of Scripture. It is a perplexity in the sciences. It involves the conflict between Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic astronomy. It seems to be a conflict between Athens and Athens.

According to Maimonides’ exposition, Ptolemaic astronomy gives a precise mathematical description of the motions of the planets and stars, but makes no sense in terms of Aristotle’s physics. Aristotelian physics requires the motions of all the celestial bodies to be circular and around a fixed center. However, Ptolemaic astronomy succeeds in describing the celestial phenomena only when epicycles or eccentric orbits are posited, and such solutions involve motion that is not around a fixed center. If Aristotelian physics is true, Ptolemaic astronomy must be false, and vice versa. Maimonides writes:

Consider these great difficulties! If what Aristotle has stated about physics is true, there are no epicycles or eccentric orbs, and everything revolves around the center of the earth. In that case, how can the motions of the stars come about? ... Indeed, if one accepts everything stated by Ptolemy concerning the epicycle of the moon and its eccentricity,... what is calculated on this hypothesis is not in error even by a minute - as attested by the precision of the calculations of eclipses... Furthermore, how can one conceive retrograde motion of stars without assuming epicycles? But how can one imagine motion around a center that is not immobile? This is the true perplexity [*al-hayra bi'l-haqīqa*].<sup>13)</sup>

The “true perplexity” is thus not a result of a contradiction between the external meaning of a Biblical text and Reason, but rather it is the result of a clash between physics and astronomy. Medieval science was based on both Aristotle and Ptolemy, but Aristotle and Ptolemy now seem to be mutually exclusive. They seem to contradict each other. This contradiction between Aristotelian physics and Ptolemaic astronomy constituted a grave crisis in medieval science.<sup>14)</sup>

Indeed, no adequate physical model was provided for astronomy until the theories of Galileo (1564–1642) and Newton (1642–1727) more than four centuries after Maimonides. Even Copernicus (1473–1543) did not claim to provide a physical explanation for his heliocentric theory, but only a mathematical one.

Maimonides cites a question raised by Ibn Bājja (1080–1139), a philosopher he greatly respected: Was Aristotle aware of the conflict between his physics and astronomy? Maimonides answers the question thus:

Now, the truth is he was unaware... for in his time mathematics was imperfect. However, had he heard about it, he would have violently rejected it; and if it were proved true to him, he would have become perplexed [*tahayyara*] with a great perplexity [*ḥayra shadīda*] about all his assumptions...<sup>15)</sup>

In other words, Aristotle was saved from a “great perplexity” only because he did not have sufficient mathematics in order to comprehend the problem. He was too ignorant to be perplexed! Here we see clearly that perplexity requires knowledge. Ignorance is bliss. Philosophers are perplexed. Ignoramuses are not.

Maimonides’ comments also contain a severe criticism of Aristotle. Had Aristotle heard about the mathematical evidence against his physical theories, Maimonides conjectures, his first reaction would have been to reject it violently. This is not the proper behavior of a philosopher. A philosopher is not interested in maintaining his or her theories no matter what, but is interested in discovering the Truth - whether or not it conforms to what one had supposed. Aristotle, as Maimonides portrays him, was more interested in defending his own opinions than in uncovering Truth. As Maimonides writes in the *Guide*, II, 23, the desire to defend one’s own opinions blinds one from seeing the Truth.<sup>16)</sup>

In concluding his discussion of the crisis in science, Maimonides candidly remarks:

It is possible someone else may find a proof by means of which the true reality of what is obscure for me will become clear to him. The extreme predilection I have for investigating the truth is evidenced by the fact that I have explicitly stated and reported my perplexity [*ḥayratī*]...<sup>17)</sup>

Maimonides admits that he cannot give a demonstrative physical explanation for the motions of the heavenly bodies, but says that perhaps someone in the future will be able to do so. However, he continues, his extreme dedication to the truth is manifest in his reaction to his perplexity. He does not “violently reject” the evidence, but calmly acknowledges his perplexity. Acknowledging one’s perplexity is the first step toward resolving it, *for no one can unravel a knot he or she does not see*.

## VI. Who is the “Perplexed”?

We have seen five different examples of “perplexity.” The *first* example of perplexity was that of Joseph ben Judah, the young addressee of the *Guide*, who was perplexed because he impatiently sought to understand metaphysics before physics. The *second* example of perplexity was that of the reader who did not know that certain words in Scripture are figurative and not to be taken literally. The *third* example of perplexity was that of the reader who did not know that certain stories in Scripture are allegories and not to be taken literally. The *fourth* example of perplexity was that attributed hypothetically to Aristotle, who would have been perplexed about the contradiction between his physics and astronomy, were he to have been informed of the relevant mathematical proofs. The *fifth* example of perplexity was that of Maimonides himself, who admits that he cannot resolve the crisis in science caused by the conflict between physics and astronomy.

We are now ready to answer the question posed at the beginning of our discussion. Who is the *perplexed* for whom Maimonides has written his *Guide*? The simple answer is of course: Joseph ben Judah. He was perplexed and Maimonides wrote the *Guide* for him and those like him. This is undeniable. However, there are also other answers. One might say, for example, that the *perplexed* for whom Maimonides wrote the *Guide* are readers of Scripture who have not yet learned how to interpret its metaphors and allegories; or accomplished philosophers, including Aristotle, the Philosopher par excellence, who sometimes find themselves in a state of grave perplexity; or, indeed, Maimonides himself, the guide of the perplexed, who admitted his own serious perplexity. Can we say that he wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed* for himself—or at least partly for himself?

Plato and Aristotle taught that philosophy begins with perplexity. Maimonides went further. He teaches that philosophy not only begins with perplexity, but also continues with it *ad perpetuum*. The philosopher never frees himself or herself from perplexity. The beginning philosophy student Joseph ben Judah is perplexed, but so is his teacher, the veteran philosopher Maimonides. The life of the philosopher is a life of perplexity. As soon as a philosopher resolves one perplexity, a new and more difficult one jumps up in its place. Perplexity follows perplexity, knot follows knot, *aporía* follows *aporía*. To be a philosopher means to be continually perplexed—continually confronted with new and ever more challenging perplexities. The *Guide of the Perplexed* is simply the Guide of the Philosophers.

Let me conclude homiletically. “The Guide of the Perplexed” is a *Guide of the Perplexed* in two senses. It is a Guide written *for* the Perplexed and it is a Guide written *by* the Perplexed. In other words, it is a Guide written for a philosopher, by a philosopher, and about philosophy.

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**Notes**

- 1) E.g., Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VII, 2, 1145b 21, 1146a 23, 1146b 6, 8; IX, 2, 1164b 22; IX, 8, 1168a 28, 1168b 10–11; IX, 11, 1171a 30. The 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century Arabic translation attributed to Ishāq ibn Hunayn reads: *tahayyur* (or other forms of the word). Herman the German’s 13<sup>th</sup>–century Latin translation of Averroes’ Commentary reads: *haesitatio*, *dubitatio*, or *exercitatio*. Rabbi Samuel ben Judah of Marseille’s independent 14<sup>th</sup>–century translation of the Commentary reads: *mebukhah* or *safeq*. See A.A. Akasoy & A. Fidora (eds.), *The Arabic Version of the Nicomachean Ethics* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 373, 375, 377, 487, 509, 511, 521. See also L. Berman (ed.), *Averroes’ Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics in the Hebrew Version of Samuel ben Judah* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), 28, 227, 230–231, 248, 294, 308–309, 316, 389, 399, 402. See Berman’s note on the meaning of the title “The Guide of the Perplexed” (p. 227, l. 49). See also Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, I, 9, 993a 4, III, 4, 1001a 4, 1001b 2; VIII, 6, 1045a 7, XII, 9, 1075a 5. Usthath’s 9<sup>th</sup>–century Arabic translation and Averroes’ Commentary read: *hayra* (or other forms of the word). Michael Scot’s 13<sup>th</sup>–century Latin translation of Averroes’ Commentary reads: *ambigue*. The 14<sup>th</sup>–century Hebrew translation of the Commentary, made in the Qalonimos school, reads: *mebukhah* (or other forms of the word). See Maurice Bouyges Averroès (ed.), *Grand commentaire sur la Métaphysique* (three volumes, Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1942), 158–159, 441, 443, 447, 451, 1089, 1091, 1693, 1703.
- 2) E.g., Plato, *Meno* 84a–c, *Theaetetus* 155c–d; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* I, 2, 982b 12–13, et al.
- 3) Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed* (translated by S. Pines; Chicago 1963), 253. Arabic text: S. Munk & I. Joel, Jerusalem: Junovitch, 1931, p. 176.
- 4) *Alfarabi’s Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, translated with an introduction by Muhsin Mahdi (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962), Part III, sec. 13, p. 90. Arabic text: *Falsafat Aristūṭālīs*, (ed. Mahdi, Beirut: Dār Majallat Shi’r, 1961), 81–82.
- 5) *Guide*, pp. 3–4 (Arabic, p. 1).
- 6) *Ibid.*
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 4 (Arabic, p. 1): “for you and for those like you.”
- 8) *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6 (Arabic, p. 2).
- 9) *Ibid.*, Scholars have found similar phrases in previous Arabic literature, e.g., Algazali’s use of “*dalīl al-mutahayyirīn*.” See Avner Giladi, “A Short Note on the Possible Origin of the Title *Moreh ha-Nevukhim*” *Tarbīz* 48 (1979), 346–347 [Hebrew]; English version, *Le Muséon* 97 (1984), pp. 159–161.
- 10) Maimonides, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Introduction to *Sanhedrin*, ch. 10 (“Pereq Heleq”), ed. J. Qafih, p. 211.
- 11) *Guide*, pp. 5–6 (Arabic, p. 2).
- 12) *Guide*, p. 66 (Arabic, p. 44). Maimonides explains elsewhere that there is disagreement in subjects of law because legal argument is not apodictic. In his *Logic*, ch. 7, he describes legal argumentation as “*qiyās fiqhī*” and in the Introduction to his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, he describes it as

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“*qiyās jadālī*.”

13) *Guide*, pp. 325–326 (Arabic, p. 228).

14) Cf. Pines, Translator’s Introduction to *Guide*, p. lxiii: “the fact that the Ptolemaic system... was incompatible with Aristotelian physics was a *skandalon* of science.”

15) *Guide*, p. 326 (Arabic, p. 228).

16) *Ibid.*, p. 321 (Arabic, p. 224).

17) *Ibid.*, p. 327 (Arabic, p. 229).