

One Word that Guides us to the Philosophy: A Response to Warren Zev Harvey

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Textbooks on the history of philosophy often state that the word “perplexity” in the title of *Guide* means the dilemma faced by medieval Jewish philosophers, or specifically, met personally by Maimonides’ disciple (Rabbi Joseph) whose thoughts were torn between Aristotelian philosophy and Jewish religious teachings. So we teach the class, and make notes in the margins of our papers.

Due partly to this well-penetrated textbook *cliché*, Professor Harvey’s lecture at the CISMOR workshop brought us a strong sense of awakening. The “perplexity” in *Guide* was not a mere discomfiture or the mother of dissatisfactory compromises, but rather, according to Professor Harvey, the very locus where philosophical thinking takes shape with that adherent emotion of wonder to which the Greek masters pointed. This positive function that “perplexity” plays in *Guide* cannot be overemphasized, as our understanding of the word defines the key in which we read the text from the very first note.

In addition, Professor Harvey’s approach in his paper, i.e., a lexical analysis of the term “*hayra*” or *aporia*, in *Guide*, well demonstrates that just a single word, when carefully chosen, can illustrate the overall nature of an opus magnum. His study elucidates how Maimonides understood the essential mission of philosophy and prerequisite of knowledge at large.

As Professor Harvey enumerates, *Guide* refers to different types of “*hayra*.”

[Type A] *Aporia* caused by disregarding the adequate developmental order of learning

1) Given as personal advice to Rabbi Joseph

[Type B] Hermeneutic *aporia* caused by the revelation-reason conflict

2) On Lexical level

3) On Anecdotal level

- Maimonides gives them as the account of the treatise title
- on Non-Corporeality, he rules out literal interpretations for the sake of religion, on the bases of reason (cf., #3 of the 13 Principles)

[Type C] *Aporia* within critical science proper, due to the reason-reason conflict

4) Deficiency in argument repudiated by the advocate (Aristotle)

- e.g. Ptolemaic model necessitating an amendment to Aristotelian Physics
- 5) Deficiency in argument admitted by the advocate (Maimonides)
- Historical progress of scientific knowledge assumed

Now, it is obvious that the aforementioned textbook account of the treatise title only delineates the *aporia* of Types B. As the solution of this type of “*hayra*” there also arises his well-known advocacy of “allegorical interpretation.” Then, if we can point out some characteristics in *aporias* of Type A and C, we may find some knots Maimonides tried to unravel, and which modern readers often overlook.

Aporia Type A that Maimonides found in young Rabbi Joseph’s question is related to a kind of abuse of knowledge. Knowledge, given prematurely or to the wrong person, can hamper improvement of the learner’s reason to the highest achievable level. Such an idea sharply opposes the doctrine of enlightenment that the truth should be indiscriminately accessible. In the well-known allegory of the Palace (*Guide*, 3:51), Maimonides seems to relate this intellectual order to the ascension of faith toward its perfection.

Aporias Type C do not come up incidentally in the discussion of astronomy. The *aporias* await man at where we somehow forget this critical, open-ended nature of knowledge qua knowledge, and Maimonides dares to pronounce Aristotle guilty in this context. Maimonides, on the other hand, candidly confesses that a greater scientist in the future might present the proof that he himself could not. When we claim that *I know* a dogma in which we merely believe just as we have been taught, we abuse the concept of “knowledge.” Knowledge at the front end of exact sciences must be hypothetical, or must often take the shape of more than two conflicting hypotheses. Maimonides here seems to stand pretty close to historians and philosophers of science today. Some of our contemporaries may remember Karl Popper’s well-known remark that what makes a claim scientific is not its inalterability, but “falsifiability.”

The primary feature I find in *aporias* of Type A and C is Maimonides’ prudence in the use of knowledge or reason. As far as we contemplate, we always face these epistemological impasses as Rabbi Joseph, Maimonides, and their great master did. The impasses of these types, compared to those hermeneutic “*hayra*” caused by the revelation-reason conflict, may be more significant to our secular contemporaries.

Helped by Professor Harvey’s lecture, we can now see Maimonides as a philosopher who well knows that our reason can err in so many various ways. Here we may remember such names of astute readers of Maimonides as Baruch Spinoza and Leo Strauss. I can hardly say that the seventh

chapter of *Theologico-Political Treatise*, or earlier writings of Strauss, showed their readers this prudent face of Maimonides.

The centrality of the revelation-reason conflict in *Guide* now seems to have been relativized more or less, although all the five instances of “*hayra*” are closely related segments of that huge question, “What is philosophy?” or “What is knowledge?” Although the problem of Scripture interpretation is a definitive focus of the work, this focus can be penultimate. Professor Harvey’s lecture seems to teach us that *Guide of the Perplexed* is an excellent guide for serious seekers of knowledge even in our days.

To close this brief comment, I would like to point out one trivial instance that may suggest how Professor Harvey views Maimonides historically. In the letter to Rabbi Joseph, Maimonides chides the young disciple’s hasty question concerning whether the arguments of speculative theologians are demonstrative or not. In Professor Harvey’s paraphrase, Rabbi Joseph asks if their arguments are “demonstrative, dialectical or rhetorical.” These three types of arguments actually do not appear all at once in the text of *Guide*, nor in the few opening chapters of Aristotle’s *Rhetorike*, which are apparently what Maimonides had in mind when giving his advice. In *Fasl al-Maqal (Decisive Treatise)* by Ibn Rushd (Averroes), however, this triad appears in a few instances exactly as the paraphrase states. Professor Harvey suggests that Averroes may, in certain places, state clearly what Maimonides meant. I would also advocate this view. The two coeval Cordobans echo each other beautifully, when they share Arabic corpus Aristotelicum as their intertexts.