

Maimonides Following Ecclesiastes: How the Guide of the Perplexed Directs its Reader toward the Relief of Perplexity

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Abstract

An intertextual encounter between Maimonides' educational philosophy and Ecclesiastes surrounding the reasoned internalisation of metaphysics in the Guide of the Perplexed. Part III of the Guide instructs readers to refrain from a random perception of reality by internalising deterministic messages that attenuate doubt and non-belief. According to Maimonides, this random perception is the mother of all the negative emotions he seeks to prevent. Ecclesiastes' ostensible vagueness and scepticism, in turn, conveys a mostly determinist message. Both works therefore seek to correct their perplexed readers' thinking via the internalisation of a determinist message leading to a reasoned acceptance of reality.

Keywords: Maimonides, Ecclesiastes, Reason, Determinism, Perplexity.

INTRODUCTION

On the Background to a Reasoned Life

It is, to paraphrase Jane Austen, a truth (almost) universally acknowledged that the entire Maimonidean *oeuvre* conveys the messages of a teacher to his students and to seekers of knowledge and that it primarily addresses those perplexed students who are faced with complex existential quandaries, and who fear losing their way in life if these remain unaddressed. *The Guide of the Perplexed* begins by teaching concepts, with many of Part I's chapters being concerned with a detailed explanatory discussion of specific concepts. Furthermore, the work's discussion of the metaphysical questions addressed in later parts of the text are not meant for the witty debates of ivory tower academics but rather to serve the practical end of helping the perplexed student relieve her or his perplexity and advance toward a life of reasoned religious conduct.

The *Guide to the Perplexed's* encounter between scripture and philosophy is manifested in the work's Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic interpretation of scripture. In this respect, the Early-Medieval study of the relations between philosophical speculation and religious belief exposed the philosophical foundations of religion and grounded an approach whereby religious belief is a core belief which can be practiced in a reasoned fashion and without drawing conclusions from other beliefs.

Maimonides' Treatment of the "Diabolical" Refrainment from Maintaining a Reasoned Life

Maimonides often makes use of verbs which express a lack of reason, such as "...for he cannot refrain from anger..." or "...whenever a man finds himself inclining [...] toward lusts and pleasures or preferring anger and fury [...] he shall be at fault and stumble wherever he goes...". There are many such examples pertaining to anger and fury, hatred, jealousy, sadness, fear, mockery, etc. As Maimonides states elsewhere, "...the body is corrupted [...] thus cares and sorrows multiply, mutual envy, hatred, and strife aiming at taking away what the other has, multiply...". In *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides uses the work's metaphysical discussion to direct the student in the manner of using reason to neutralize these bad tendencies which harm the students themselves. The relation between the metaphysical discussion and the actual everyday life of a person who can hate, be angry, be jealous, be concerned, be sad, etc. is manifested in an understanding that everything present exists necessarily. Put differently, this means that everything that already exists, or anything that happens as the cause of these feelings of negation is not coincidental, but rather a necessary occurrence whose logical roots

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necessarily lead toward the first cause, which is God manifested as the reason of reasons. This can also be referred to with a single word, which is “determinism.”

The Rectification

Being educated to hold such a rational worldview means acknowledging the existence of a chain of causation behind every event, even those which we perceive as negative and which drive us away from conducting an informed life. Such an acknowledgement begins by passing through the *Guide of the Perplexed's* metaphysical discussion. The acquisition of such knowledge is thus capable of neutralizing all the negative and immoral urges we have listed above as being “diabolical.” As noted, these urges are more harmful to those that suffer from them than the object of the anger, jealousy, or hatred. As we proceed with our present discussion, we shall see that insofar as the perception, in an educational and ethical context, of all existence as being necessary, whether for better or for worse, is unequivocal in the Book of Ecclesiastes. Maimonides’ approach thus appears to be a little softer than Ecclesiastes’ view given its attitude toward individual providence and free will. In any case, a close reading of the *Guide's* text shall lead us to conclude that even an intelligent and enlightened person’s free will is contingent on an understanding of God’s determinist conduct as a first cause and cause of all causes. It is to this understanding in and of itself that Maimonides alludes in the *Guide* when he uses the term “individual providence” in Part II.

When discussing prophecy as a model of mental perfection in Part II of the *Guide*, Maimonides stresses its intellectual aspect and notes that the ethical ideal worth aspiring to passes through reason. Maimonides also stresses the limitations placed on us by our corporeal (material) condition, which, to him, prevents us from attaining the level of ethical perfection humans are capable of attaining. In this respect, he provides the example of Moses as the greatest prophet, who, in a moment of rage that clouded his sense of reason, struck the rock. As Maimonides explains, Moses’ rage pushed aside the calming rational and determinist perception of reality he held in his conscious mind.

The active kind of reason that emanates from God is what guides us through the logic of a world conducting itself through a chain of causation, and it is supposed to evoke humility, respect, and moderation in us according to the kind of middle ground targeted by Maimonides. Put differently, reason can be seen as joining people to God in the spirit of “...in thy light shall we see light...”.

The Key to Rectification: The Link Between Everyday Life and Metaphysical Necessity

Where does metaphysics meet an individual’s day-to-day existence?

If I am angry, jealous, full of hatred, or full of vengeance, then—once I internalize that the cause for this anger, jealousy, hatred, or sadness within me is part of a necessary chain of causation which leads to the cause of causes and to his manners of managing the universe— and as a student of both Ecclesiastes and Maimonides—understand that my anger is actually directed toward God, since God is the causes of causes, and as such gives rise to everything which happens in the world including the factors that led me to experience all of these negative emotions. It therefore follows that what is “diabolical” (a work of Satan) is not the things that occasionally happen to me in my day-to-day life, but rather, and only, my misunderstanding of the causal connection between the things which eventually lead to me from he who is their original cause (God). However, once I understand this, I shift from a state of idiocy, disbelief in, and the direction of grievances toward the creator of all things, to a state of belief grounded in reason and in the internalization of the fact that what happens around me and affects me occurs by necessity. In other words, I become part of the flow of naturalist logic that governs the universe as a whole. This understanding, in fact, is human beings’ true free will in the sense of “Everything is foreseen yet freedom of choice is granted”. This is also the manner in which the educational connection between the *Guide's* metaphysical discussion and its moral-behavioral discussion with respect to the perplexed reader/student becomes manifest.

The Intertextual Encounter between Maimonides and Ecclesiastes

The vagueness surrounding a reading of *The Guide of the Perplexed* as well as the many possible readings of the book of Ecclesiastes mean an especially close reading is required in both cases. De Souza (2021), for example,

states that it is possible to note two approaches in the *Guide's* text if it is read from a biblical-exegetical perspective: a conceptual approach, and a formal approach. According to de Souza, both dimensions allow scriptural exegesis from theological, psychological, and metaphysical perspectives. Maimonides can be seen as addressing each of these perspectives and thus marking a critical junction in the history of biblical exegesis.

Such a reading will also expose the work's—possibly deliberate—vague determinist skeleton as part of the kind of esoteric writing which also, to some extent, characterizes *The Guide to the Perplexed* as a whole. According to this worldview, everything is predetermined, absolute, and necessary. The external layer which hides the concealed skeleton from a superficial reader's eyes is thus revealed to the close reader who plows the work's conceptual depths and employs them to extract the meaning of human existence and/or a meaningful existence associated with the internalization of the predetermined order governing all things in the universe.

Ecclesiastes' Response

When he states that "...all is vanity...". Ecclesiastes adopts a seemingly antinomial approach, since it contradicts the requirement to do good and avoid evil. What is the point of making an effort if everything is predetermined? This way of thinking undermines the assumption of human free will. After all, if everything is predetermined, then any act a person "chooses" to do has been determined in advance. Ecclesiastes goes even further and claims that even a person's belief in God is predetermined, a position seemingly opposed to the prevailing opinion, which the sages formulated as "...Everything is in the hands of heaven, except for fear of Heaven...". In other words, and while God predetermines the course of history, is it still possible for human beings to change it with the power of their faith? Put differently, we might state that, as opposed to corporeality, thought is not deterministic since it cannot be forced and is thus an expression of free will.

Ecclesiastes is a difficult book to read on account of the contradictions and oppositions presented in the course of its narrative upon a superficial reading. Proposing that it be read like a journal or logbook written at random intervals removes this vagueness and provides the reader with an awareness that any event described in the first person is not required to bear a logical connection to the one before or after it. Accordingly, and after the reader's expectations of a logical narrative order are neutralised, the reader will more clearly identify the work's deterministic messages.

The Logical Flow of Ecclesiastes' Timeline

In his logbook/journal written entirely in the first person, Ecclesiastes leads us to pedagogical conclusions which lead to the provision of instruction in a reasoned conduct which accords with reality as it is. This reasoned pedagogy, in turn, is the key to the intertextual discourse between Ecclesiastes and Maimonides.

In his logbook, Ecclesiastes notes that "...Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour [...] One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh: but the earth abideth for ever...". The word 'vanity' appears 38 times in Ecclesiastes. The sentences in which it appears express the gap between a thing of value and a vanity. A vanity is seen as a thing which is the opposite of value. In metaphorical terms, vanity is like the water vapour which leaves the mouth in freezing weather and evaporates in a second (the original Hebrew word for 'vanity' is *hevel*, which also means 'vapour' in modern Hebrew)—a thing utterly devoid of value.

Ecclesiastes' logbook attempts to predict what he should expect along the course of his voyage. He does not perceive any change when he states that "...The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun...", or "...the earth abideth for ever..." (1:4 [KJV]), or "...All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again...", or "...that there is one event unto all...", etc. This is what 'Captain Ecclesiastes' sees from his vessel as he gazes toward the horizon, and thus—as the vessel sails on and the horizon changes—the view remains the same. In other words, Ecclesiastes' voyage has no destination, but the determinist message conveyed by the aforementioned statements makes the difference between the perception that the voyage has no destination (that it is a

‘vanity’), which is a random perception and a “work of Satan” according to Maimonides, and the understanding that the road itself is both the voyage’s objective as well as its destination.

Determinism, Logic, Time, and Eternity

Ecclesiastes’ determinist statements make it clear that the temporal dimension he invokes is also indeterminate. However, its coherence with the text as a whole renders it perennially relevant. The temporal dimension (the ‘duration’ known to any living human as a small part of the timeline of eternity) appears from the opening statement of Chapter 3: “...A time to be born, and a time to die; a time to plant, and a time to pluck up that which is planted; A time to kill, and a time to heal...”. The reader will identify twenty-eight verbs pertaining to human actions across the entire duration of human life in the sense of “...freedom of choice is granted...”, which end with an unequivocal determinist statement arguing that “...He hath made every thing beautiful in his time...”. We are therefore witnesses to a concept which does not reside in the temporal scope of human actions described above, but which applies beyond the temporal dimension we are familiar with to all time and for eternity. Specifically, we are concerned with a third person verb referring to a constitutive entity hidden from the reader’s view, yet one who came to the writer’s mind and to which he ascribes all the actions described above. This nebulous entity has “made everything beautiful in his time” and its actions are “beautiful” at any time (beyond human duration and without a specific temporal designation).

Ecclesiastes explains that if we internalise that anything done by human beings necessarily depends on the cause of causes, and any human labour is associated with the same entity, then we will be able to perceive the distinct transition from what we know from our sensory and physical experience to an intellectual and rational dimension on the metaphysical plane. In this respect, it is this distinction offered by Ecclesiastes that is Maimonides’ objective in Part III of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. After twenty-eight verbs noting human actions at various times, Ecclesiastes ends by stating that “...He hath made every thing beautiful in his time...”. This is an unquestionably determinist statement suggesting that beauty is not limited to things done or made, and that our measures of what is beautiful and ugly, good or evil, bear no weight and seem to be a vanity from an earthly perspective. However, from a rational perspective—which we are directed towards by the writer—they were made or done necessarily and by an omnipotent and omniscient entity who made them “in his time,” in the correct time. This metaphysical view, however, is not a vanity. In other words, and in the spirit of Maimonides’ pedagogy, the rational view of “...in thy light shall we see light...” is what also leads us to conduct an informed and rational life in the moral sense.

Event and Vanity

Ecclesiastes’ logbook depicts an empirical picture suggesting that one event applies to all, and thus that one vanity applies to all too (to the wise and to the foolish, to the righteous and to the wicked, to the good, to the pure and profane etc.) If everything is random, then it follows that everything is vanity. If we follow Ecclesiastes’ use of the Hebrew stem for ‘happen’ (*krb*), we can see he uses it nine times in various conjugations and declensions such as in “...there is one event unto all...”. By doing so, he can be seen as processing sensory data and logging his thoughts, cogitations, and conclusions in the first person and noting that the viewing of events as coincidental is a vanity in and of itself. On the other hand, the determinist perception of reality is reasoned knowledge and the clear and distinctive view of coincidence as foolishness. As Ecclesiastes phrases it, “...The wise man’s eyes are in his head; but the fool walketh in darkness...”. This is the advantage offered by wisdom. Verses 4:13, 5:5, 5:13, 7:5, 7:9, 7:11, 7:12, 7:19, 8:1, 8:5, 9:10, 9:13, 9:15-9:18, 10:1, 10:2, 10:10, and 12:11 [all KJV] should also be noted in this respect. What we are concerned with is thus a reflective and critical knowledge above the vanities of fools which are viewed with sensory and superficial eyes, and which remain uncriticized and unprocessed.

In his discussion of the “great power of prophets” in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Zeev Harvey (1996) notes the homiletical exegesis (*drash*) of Ecclesiastes’ statement in 2:21 [KJV]: “...For there is a man whose labour is in wisdom, and in knowledge, and in equity; yet to a man that hath not laboured therein shall he leave it for his portion. This also is vanity and a great evil...”. According to Harvey, the superficial exegesis (*psbat*) of this verse depicts human existence as absurd and seemingly implies a criticism of God. This intertextual encounter between the two works, however, turns the superficial exegesis concerning God on its head by using an

argument suggesting that, by virtue of their power of abstraction, prophets use the word “human” (*adam*) to describe God and thus make the superficial exegesis praise the God who created a world by wisdom, knowledge, and skill, where the ungrateful sinner, who perceives the world randomly, is the source of evil who should be censured.

Maimonides: Knowing God is Recognizing that Nothing in the World is Coincidental

“...that individual [the knower] can never be afflicted with evil of any kind. For he is with God and God is with him. When, however, he abandons Him, may He be exalted, and is thus separated from God and God separated from him, he becomes in consequence of this a target for every evil that may happen to befall him. For the thing that necessarily brings about providence and deliverance from the sea of chance consists in that intellectual overflow...”

This statement directed by Maimonides toward the perplexed student forms the peak of the discussion in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. It comes in the chapter which follows the metaphorical/picturesque description of the parable of the palace: those who may approach it, those who may enter the courtyard, those who may enter the antechamber, those who may approach the door of the habitation, for whom the door will open, who may approach the king, and—consequently—who the king is close to. We are thus concerned with a rational product where we partake of that which is “omnipotent and omniscient”. In this respect, Rudavsky (2021) claims that Maimonides’ position in the *Guide* opposes the approach adopted by the medieval Islamic philosopher Al-Ghazali, who is opposed to laws of cause and effect, and who argues for the exceptionality of miracles with respect to the laws of nature. According to Rudavsky, the intertextual encounter between the scientific and biblical approaches in the *Guide* reflects a strict determinism.

“...but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth Me...”

Maimonides’ response to this is that proximity to the king is contingent on each person’s level of belief and observance, but that the greatest proximity is attained by the knower. As such, it is mutual, as God is also close to those who know him. The knower “of abundant reason” knows how to escape chance rationally. But what is this chance or coincidence Maimonides speaks of?

Some interpret the words of Maimonides according to a superficial exegesis (*psbat*), which states that the knower is wise enough to avoid or to escape from unpleasant and bad events (Ha’Efodi). Crescas explains that the person with abundant reason is ready for the evils that may pass her or his way. The question is how she or he is ready and what she or he needs to prepare to this end? Crescas replies that “the ordering of this matter is between them and their creator,” that is to say that by knowing that there is no such thing as coincidence and that everything happens necessarily due to the governance of her or his creator (the cause of causes), she or he accepts any event—whether good or bad—by understanding its context with respect to the cause of causes. In this respect, this interpretation too leads us to witness a clearly deterministic expression. Maimonides also stresses the wisdom of Solomon as a testament to the divine force of the intellect in his commentary on the Mishnah. Langermann, in turn perceives the essence of the wisdom of Solomon as a cosmological view of things, as an acceptance of reality as a product of reason, and as a rejection of a random view of reality.

HaShem Tov Ben Yosef Shem Tov II (an exiled Spanish Jew, mid-15th century CE), who declared that in interpreting the *Guide* he did everything he could to adhere to Maimonides’ intention and choice of language, offers an eminently abstract interpretation in this case. After all, we are not concerned with matter (a physical event), but with thoughts, knowledge, spirit, and mind. According to him: “Human beings, joyful for what they managed to attain [by reason], cannot suffer any kind of evil, because this kind of mind cannot be controlled by Satan [...] [why?] because they are with God and God is with them, but once their mind moves away from God, they become separated from him [far from the king in the parable of the palace] and they are then ready for any evil that may pass their way, since [conversely] that which gives rise to providence and to an escape from coincidence is the abundance of reason.” (my translation).

When we read Ben Yosef's interpretation above, it is quite easy to see that it clearly accords with Ecclesiastes' distinction between the vanity of a fool, who views the world in a random fashion, and the vanity of the wise who know the fool's view of reality is the actual vanity. When we turn to the abstract plane of discussion which characterizes Maimonides in the third part of the *Guide* (unlike the first two parts), this statement by Shem-Tov Ben Yosef concerning the view of things as coincidental being a mental defect and a "work of Satan" which disconnects a person from her or his creator thus refers positively to some of the most supreme human intellectual capacities, those described by Maimonides in the previous chapter (the parable of the palace) as those practiced by the person who enters the habitation and is with the king and the kind is with her or him on account of the verb "know." What we are concerned with, then, is a clearly mental state of resulting from an encounter between belief and understanding. Coincidence is impossible in such a state, since if a thing is decreed from the heavens, then it is not a coincidence but a necessity, and—if this is the case—it is not possible that the heavens will decree evil since "the person who knows God should not fear evil" (my translation). In other words, anything decreed by God is good since it lies beyond our measures of good and evil. What we are concerned with, therefore, is Ecclesiastes' statement that "...He hath made every thing beautiful in his time...." after listing 28 human labours and predicaments. This is the proximity of "the known" and "...understandeth and knoweth me..." which Maimonides is meticulous about quoting from the prophet Jeremiah.

This statement by Maimonides narrows down the extensive metaphysical discussion in the second part of the *Guide* which is concerned with the question of whether the world was created *ex nihilo* or renewed. The same is true for the question of general and individual providence. At the end of the day, the entire metaphysical discussion in Part II flows like honey into a funnel which becomes progressively narrower until the point it focuses on the principle determining the difference between the happy person who is close to the creator "who is with God and God is with him" (see Shem-Tov above, my translation) and the bitter, sad, jealous, angry, and vengeful person who is far from God and under the influence of Satan and God's hidden face. By foregoing bitterness and internalizing the rational and faith-laden fact that all that is necessary and that nothing coincidental is possible (since it would lie beyond God's providence), a person is reborn, first and foremost, as a "knower." Later on in the chapter, Maimonides explains that this is a state of integrating with eternity during a human's lifetime, and provides examples of such integration when he discusses Moses, Aaron, Miriam, and the patriarchs.

From the Encounter between Faith and Understanding to the Peak of Close Proximity to God in the Verb "Knoweth"

This verse is subjected to an in-depth discussion in Part III, Chapter 54 of the *Guide*, a discussion which ends this work as a whole. As Maimonides phrases it, "...For when explaining in this verse the noblest ends, he does not limit them only to the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted..." This is similar to the verse which ends the book of Ecclesiastes: "...Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man..."

Faith, like reason, is fundamentally nurtured by the internalization that everything which exists or happens arises from the necessity of God's presence and by the power of God's divine actions.

The encounter at the triple apex of the two traits drawing from the absolutely determinist perceptions of Ecclesiastes and Maimonides thus reflect a student's shift from a "perplexed" (passive) state to a new (active) state of "knowing" God. In this respect, we shall presently suffice ourselves with a few words about the verb "knoweth" in the scriptures, which the exegetical literature has extensively discussed as reflecting the greatest possible closeness between fellow human beings, between life partners (such as husband and wife), and—with the necessary adjustments—the greatest possible closeness to God.

Such a state, as Shem-Tov Ben Yosef phrases it, occurs when "he is with God and God is with him."

Chapter 33 of the book of Exodus describes the closest possible proximity between a human being and God, that being God's revelation to Moses. The verb "know" appears five times at key points in this event: "...I know thee by name...", "...shew me now thy way...", "...that I may know thee...", "...For wherein shall it be

known here...”, and “...Yet thou hast said, I know thee by name, and thou hast also found grace in my sight....”

Other examples include “...And Adam knew Eve his wife...”, “...For the Lord knoweth the way of the righteous...”, “...that he understandeth and knoweth me...”, “...I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord...”, “...whom the Lord knew face to face...”, etc. Over and above these, the reader is also referred to a similar discussion in Buber (1968)’s seminal work on stylistic patterns in the bible.

Maimonides often makes use of negative verbs, such as “...for he cannot refrain from anger...”, or “...whenever a man finds himself inclining [...] toward lusts and pleasures or preferring anger and fury [...] he shall be at fault and stumble wherever he goes...”, etc. Anger and fury, hatred, jealousy, sadness, fear, mockery, etc. As Maimonides states elsewhere: “...the body is corrupted [...] thus cares and sorrows multiply, mutual envy, hatred, and strife aiming at taking away what the other has, multiply....”

Afterword

Following Ecclesiastes, Maimonides’ remedy also lies in internal awareness: once we know (in the metaphysical sense) that God is the reason for our sadness, then we can no longer be sad, angry, jealous, vengeful, afraid, etc. since we understand our negative emotions in their determinist context. As Maimonides phrases it, the wise person as “knower” will not be controlled by a “work of Satan.”

Both thinkers lead the perplexed person who doubts and views the world from a perspective suggesting that “...all is vanity...” through the pathways of reasoned knowledge in a determinist metaphysical context. When we observe our own supreme capacity to understand this type of knowledge, we immediately shift from a state of sadness and doubt concerning the ordering of the universe to a state of knowledge which links us to the first cause by way of logic. As Shem-Tov Ben Yosef phrases it: “...He is with God and God is with him.”

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