GUIDE 1:17
PHILOSOPHICAL PARABLES?

In this chapter, Maimonides briefly rehearses the history of philosophy, and provides a moral reason for the philosopher's use of parables. Here is the text of this short chapter:

> "Do not imagine that only Metaphysics (*mdai ha-elohut*: divine science) should be taught with reserve to the common people and to the uninitiated: for the same is also the case with the greater part of Natural Science (*mdai ha-teva*). In this sense we have repeatedly made use of the expression of the Sages, 'Do not expound the chapter on the Creation (*maaseh bereshit*) in the presence of two' (*vide* Introd.) (Talmud, *Hagigah* 11b). This principle was not peculiar to our Sages: ancient philosophers and scholars of other nations were likewise wont to treat of the *principia rerum* obscurely (*hayu mistirim ha-devarim b'maaseh bereshit*), and to use figurative language in discussing such subjects. Thus Plato and his predecessors called Substance [matter] the female, and Form the male. (You are aware that the *principia* [*rashit*] of all existing transient things are three, *viz*., Substance, Form, and Absence of a particular form [Privation] ; the last-named principle is always inherent in the substance, for otherwise the substance would be incapable of receiving a new form: and it is from this point of view that absence [of a particular form] is included among the *principia* [*ha-rashiot*]. As soon, then, as a substance has received a certain form, the privation of that form, namely, of that which has just been received, has ceased, and is replaced by the privation of another form, and so on with all possible forms, as is explained in treatises on natural philosophy.) – Now, if those philosophers who have nothing to fear from a lucid explanation of these [metaphysical] subjects still were in the habit of discussing them in figures and metaphors, how much more should we, having the interest of religion at heart, refrain from elucidating to the mass any subject that is beyond their comprehension, or that might be taken in a sense directly opposite to the one intended. This also deserves attention."

The pre-philosophic mind first encounters the world. It finds tables, chairs, cups, saucers, people, clothes, trees, and all the other clutter of existence. Some items resemble other items, for example; we do not just recognize a table, but that there are *tables*. In what do they resemble each other? We also notice some regularity, that all is not chaos. Why? Is there an unchanging truth in this?

THE PRE-SOCRATICS

The Pre-Socratics tried to answer these questions by concentrating on the physics of their environment, but it was not like physics we would recognize. They would identify one of the more pervasive items in this world, and ask whether it might be the hidden truth, the basic principle and constituent material of the universe: the *arche*. Thales (624-585 B.C.E.) focused on water. There is a great deal of it, and even dry things, like people and trees, are mostly composed of water. When you pour water on the ground plants grow. Without water, we die of thirst. Things seem to always change, and so does water, therefore we cannot step in the same river twice. Since water gives life, and preserves it, it is alive and ensouled. It is a god.

Or it could be the air, since it is everywhere and we need it to breathe. It is the spirit of life. On a higher plane, the air represents the unlimited from which all definite things come. Or it could be fire, which always rises and which changes even more than water: prompting the response that we cannot step in the same river even once (Cratylus *c*. 400). It is also the spirit of destruction, representing the process by which things are regularly consumed, die and pass away. Fire is represents contradiction, dispute, duality. (Air: Anaximenes, *c*. 550. Unlimited: Anaximander, *c*. 611-547. Fire: Heraclitus, 540-475).

We notice that things change. Since seeds become trees, apples become rotten, and friends die, it follows that there must be at least two principles behind everything and not just one: The before and the after; love and strife; attraction and repulsion (Empedocles, c. 490-430).

A question was raised. How can there be two principles? How can anything come from nothing? How can something come from something else? If it comes from something else, it is not the other thing, for A cannot produce B without creating something from nothing. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*. Something from nothing cannot be. (Parmenides, *c*. 515-450)

A response: Perhaps everything is made of many indestructible, eternal and tiny things combining, moving, and recombining to form the bigger things we see. They did not come from something else. When A seems to have come from B, rather, a lot of little bits of the four elements, earth/air/fire/water, condensed to form A, than came apart, and then recombined in a different way and became B. (Anaxagoras, c. 500-428. Democritus, c. 460-380).

PLATO

We come to the Athenian philosophers. Plato sympathizes with the motives of the other thinkers, but they have not focused high enough. At the highest level of abstraction is the Good. This is God (*theon*), perfect, unchanging and everlasting. There is also *being*. This is existence itself, understood as an incorporeal organism. It is called a *substance* because it needs no others to exist. Being as such is beyond time because it exists purely in the mind of the Good, the only true existent. Since it is incorporeal, despite being a substance, it is not differentiated from the Good. There is also *becoming*, a pregnant negativity, possibility, potentiality, which is, finally, a "receptacle" for *being*. The Good subjects the *receptacle* of *becoming* to *being* to produce the *copy*, which is our world. Our world is also an organic unity, but because it is a copy, it is less real, perfect or enduring, while more brute and physical than the pure being from which it is copied.

How can the philosopher communicate such an idea? The philosopher must turn to poetry and its metaphors (*Timaeus* 50). The perfumer requires a liquid base, which he subjects to his skunk, rat, or mink oils, and this base must be the most undistinguished and odorless "receptacle" achievable by the perfumer's art. Or the craftsman conceives of what his tool or figurine should look like. He prepares his clay, making it as smooth, undistinguished, and lacking in characteristic as possible through his craft. He imposes his vision on this base and creates a bowl or a Baal. Finally, a man joins with a woman, contributing his seed, and they produce offspring:

> "Moreover, it is proper to liken the Recipient to the Mother, the Source to the Father, and what is engendered between these two to the Offspring; and also to perceive that, if the stamped copy is to assume diverse appearances of all sorts, that substance wherein it is set and stamped could not possibly be suited to its purpose unless it were itself devoid of all those forms which it is about to receive from any quarter." (*Timaeus* 50d)

Plato's account does not seem to mention "matter" at all (matter: hyle: wood. See Pines, "Translator's Introduction" to the Guide, lxxvi.) The *Timaeus* does not speak of matter but of *receptacle* (*hupodoche*). Pines thinks that Maimonides got his reading from an Arabic paraphrase of Plato. (I note that Jowett's *Timaeus* also freely uses the translation "matter.") Plato comes to these poetic metaphors of "mother" and "father" to make the concept of being and becoming less indigestibly abstract to our reified consciousness.

ARISTOTLE

Finally, Aristotle reviews this history. He takes us back to the initial scene, where we confronted the clutter of everyday life and asked how the chair could emerge from nothing. He disapproves the answer that many little

indestructible things combine and recombine. For one thing, it begs the question. It does not tell us how the little chair things come from tree things. Nor does it explain how all those *atoms* (Greek: "uncuttables") can move around when nothing we see is really empty. Things would be too crowded with atoms to allow motion: there are no spaces. After you remove all the clutter, there remains air. Since the air would be composed of air atoms, there is no space for anything else to move.

Aristotle begins again, by returning to the history of this thought. First we thought that there must be *two* things, the before and the after. However, there really must be three. There must be the thing before, the thing after, and the thing acted upon. To accommodate the change there must be an underlying thing, a substrate. Between the before and the after there must remain the thing acted upon, the *matter*. The chair itself, its chair-ness, i.e., its shape, purpose and structure, are, so to speak, *in the chair*, and constitute its *form* imposed on the matter. But the chair comes from what is not a chair and will eventually become that which is not a chair. The matter adopts another form. Aristotle called this *generation* and *corruption.* However, form and matter are different from each other. One does not become the other, just as A does not become B. There must be a *third* principle beyond matter and form. That principle is the *potential* of the chair to become something else. This potential is pure negativity pregnant with potential to achieve subsequent form. He calls this principle *privation.* Privation is yoked to matter. Because the object contains it own *privation*, matter can achieve a new form, including a new potential for change: a new privation. This movement exhibits regularity and rhythm. Now we really have returned to the original question of what the underlying truth behind existence is, including its movement and change.

Abstracting from what we see before us there are therefore three principles (Hebrew: *rashiot*) in things: the *form*, the underlying *matter*, and the particular *privation.* Privation and form are opposites, and matter is the object of their action. None of these exists in and of itself, but only concurrently, correlatively. They are *principles* rather than *substances* because they do not exist independently.

The question then becomes whether these principles operate as causes. Privation is a principle and not a cause. Though it moves the substance from one possible form to another, it exists only as pure negativity bearing possibility. Negativity is nothing, and nothing causes nothing. We can regard the formal and material aspects of the chair as *causes*, but the privation, which actually moves the change, cannot be conceived as a cause, only as a principle (*Physics* 6-9).

These three principles are the subsisting reality behind the changing clutter. In this scheme, nothing comes from nothing, although nothingness (as *privation*) is one of the principles of change. The same unchanging everlasting substrate, matter, persists despite the wood's progress from chair to dust to another form. That substrate manifests itself as empty potentiality when considered apart from form.

This may be just a "likely story"; but even today, we do not think things are made of uncuttable everlasting "atoms." Instead, we also theorize a concatenation of basic forces, and consider this force field as the underlying reality of all things.

MAIMONIDES

Now back to Maimonides (we later ask how much of this he accepts). He begins by repeating his warning from the Introduction to the Guide that we must be careful teaching this material in public. Why? He says that people will either not understand it, or they will understand opposite to our purpose. Is this really so troubling?

We also have to question his account of Plato. He says that Plato uses the parable of male and female to conceal the principles of matter and form. Plato does this even though his audience was hardly in danger of having their nonexistent Torah learning weakened. Maimonides argues from Plato's reserve that teachers in the Torah

community should be even more careful than he was to conceal this learning. Still, what Maimonides tells of Plato is not true: Plato did not design his parable for concealment, but for revealing an overly abstract concept to our reified consciousness. Plato openly tells the truth of these things, *being* and *becoming*, and, only later, poetically, analogizes them to male and female. Plato is concerned that the public will not comprehend the truth since they are incapable of abstraction, but that is far from the concerns bothering Maimonides.

Maimonides' first problem lies in what the *Timaeus* teaches about divinity. After telling us that the Good created the world, Plato tells us the world is a god (34b). In other words, God (*theon*) created a god (*theon*): "Such was the whole plan of the eternal God about the god that was to be." A god is timeless in some sense. Being, becoming, form, matter, and privation, are by their nature everlasting principles. They are true, enduring, and, therefore, perhaps, "with" God. But that suggests the heresy of "partnership," (*shituf* in Hebrew, *shirk* in Arabic). The idea is that polytheism flows from the suggestion that anything is eternal *with* God. We cannot let the perplexed deal unguided with the possibility that our principles led us to polytheism, at least without a proper explanation why these are not gods. Hence, the underground, private nature of this entire course of study. That principles are not gods is difficult to explain, see, e.g., Guide chapters 1:51-1:60.

Maimonides is also concerned with the effect of the prurient nature of Plato's metaphors upon young and unsophisticated readers. That these notions are prurient becomes clear when we read this chapter with Guide 3:8:

> "Transient bodies are only subject to destruction through their matter (I substituted "matter" in three places where Friedlander translates "substance") and not through their form, nor can the essence of their form be destroyed: in this respect they are permanent. The generic forms, as you know, are all permanent and stable (*sh'kol ha-tzurot ha-miniot tamidiot v'kayamot*). Form can only be destroyed accidentally, i.e., on account of its connexion with matter (*aval hasig ha-hefsed et hatzura b'mikra, k'lomar makhmat tzamiduta la'khomer*), the true nature of which consists in the property of never being without a disposition to receive form (*v'teva ha-khomer v'amitato sh'laolam lo yishtakhrer min ha-tzmidot l'heder. Ha-tzmidot l'heder* lit. means "yoked to privation"). This is the reason why no form remains permanently in matter; a constant change takes place, one form is taken off and another is put on. How wonderfully wise is the simile of King Solomon, in which he compares matter to a faithless wife (Pines: 'married harlot,' *l'eshet ish zona*, cf. Proverbs 6:26, 7:6-27): for matter is never found without form, and is therefore always like such a wife who is never without a husband, never single; and yet, though being wedded, constantly seeks another man in the place of her husband: she entices and attracts him in every possible manner till he obtains from her what her husband has obtained. The same is the case with matter. Whatever form it has, it is disposed to receive another form; it never leaves off moving and casting off the form which it has in order to receive another. The same takes place when this second form is received. It is therefore clear that all corruption, destruction, or defect comes from matter."

The Married Harlot is an adulteress. Adultery is clearly a forbidden sexual union in the Torah. It is part of the subject of *gilui arayot* (*sitre arayot*) those sexual matters not to be taught in public. The same Mishna that proscribes the public teaching of *gilui arayot* also limits the public teaching of *Maaseh Bereshit* and *Maaseh Merkava* (Talmud *Hagigah* 11b. See my treatment, Introduction I, near the end, and Introduction II, beginning; Idel, Moshe, "*Sitre Arayot* in Maimonides' Thought," pp. 79-91, *Maimonides and Philosophy*, ed., Pines and Yovel, M. Nijhoff Publ., 1986). Maimonides also says in Guide 3:8 that he is concerned about the sense of touch, the subject of the next lexical chapter, 1:18:

> "Some consider, as we just said, all wants of the body as shame, disgrace, and defect to which they are compelled to attend: this is chiefly the case with the sense of touch, which is a disgrace to us according to Aristotle (*Nichomachean Ethics* 3:10 1118b 1-4), and which is the cause of our desire for eating, drinking, and sensuality (*v'ha-tashmish*—literally: sex)."

The prurience of these metaphors and concern about their open transmission to immature students (who have not yet learned to sublimate) becomes the second reason for the underground nature of this study.

PARABLES AND POETRY

Our chapter 1:17 interrupts the flow of the lexical chapters of the Guide. The next chapter, chapter 18, is about *touch*. All the terms we have considered, with the exception of Man, Woman, and Adam, are terms of physical spatial location. Thus, we have seen a series of terms involving the masculine concept of *erectness*, for example, stand, stand erect, rock, etc. Our chapter is a bridge to a group of terms suggesting feminine receptivity by *touching* and *filling*.

The metaphors of male and female come from the realm of poetry to explain the abstract movement of being into becoming. This reification of the purely abstract imposition of form in matter, though necessary, necessarily produces conflict (i.e., perplexity) between the poetic and the real understanding. Poetry is concerned with the beautiful, not the true, with the imagination, not the intellect. Our imagination creates good, evil, and idolatry; but our purpose is to return to the intellect, and to truth.

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