

MAIMONIDEAN MARGINS

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Moses Maimonides is a central figure who would figure prominently in many accounts of normative Judaism. There are also ways in which he is marginal. He operated between different traditions of thought, placing him on the margins of each. His *Guide for the Perplexed* is a work that draws upon them all. It is sometimes thought to represent a non-normative Judaism which it hides behind a veneer of traditional belief. However, the reasons offered for this view should be put down to the fact that it was written in order to update the rabbinic tradition into a new idiom appropriate for a new time; Maimonides operated on the margins between different eras. Furthermore, despite his importance for Judaism his ideas have often been marginal to Judaism because they draw on universal philosophical ideas and thus allegedly encourage apostasy. Those who criticise him for practising philosophy fail to distinguish between universal philosophical norms and the ability of particular people to access those norms.

Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* lends itself to use as a springboard by later thinkers to advance their own theology. In this paper I will suggest that what makes the *Guide* receptive to such updated readings is its position near certain boundaries, and that engaging with it in a constructive manner today calls less for a normative belief than a certain attitude towards those boundaries, an attitude that is a reaction to stagnant norms and a challenge to a static Judaism. To take Maimonides as marginal, may seem strange. This is the same person who, it is often said, wrote the first list of dogmas for rabbinic Judaism, and one which seems to have gained acceptance amongst a large part of the Jewish community.¹ His law code is so important that there are notes referring to its relevant sections in the margins of the classic Bomberg editions of the Talmud, but that is not the only place where Maimonides can be found in the margins. There are those who wish to sideline philosophy and, with it, much of Maimonides' work. So the first of the ways in which Maimonides' *Guide* might be considered marginal arises from those who object to it as philosophy, raising the question of whether or not it could even be considered part of a normative Judaism at all.

Maimonides had many critics and amongst them was the fifteenth century Shem-Tob̄ ibn Shem-Tob̄. He faced up to them during his own lifetime and, shortly after his death, the so called 'Maimonidean controversy' erupted, focussing on his alleged heresy.² Even within this context Shem Tob̄'s attack stands out in articulating many of the reasons why people felt uncomfortable with what they thought philosophy teaches. For example, he explains what he

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¹ Marc Shapiro points out that they are not the first principles, though they are the best known. *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Oxford, Portland Oregon: The Litman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2004), 4.

² See Idit Dobbs-Weinstein, 'The Maimonidean Controversy', *History of Jewish Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), 331–349.

takes to be the philosophers' position regarding the world to come.³ He reports that they make eternal life dependent upon intellectual knowledge, rather than on fulfilling commands. Consequently, argues Shem-Toḥ, the wicked person who perfects his intellect is assured a place in their afterlife, while the saintly but ignorant God-fearing Jew is excluded. But the philosophers go further. They interpret the prophecies and the deepest secrets of the Torah as if scripture teaches nothing more than Greek science. What is worse is that they argue that a philosopher is superior to a prophet, since the philosopher says clearly what the prophet says in riddles. Furthermore, they say that the prophets made mistakes since science had not been perfected in their times.⁴ Shem-Toḥ writes as follows: 'when I investigated their words, as far as I was able, a mighty flame burned within me because a malignant leprosy has flowered amongst the children of Israel.' He goes on to blame the decline in his own community on the philosophers. They 'twisted the tabernacle, and burst through its fences. The people followed them until our bones had dried out and our hope was lost, since they concluded that there is no judgement nor accounting over good and evil.'⁵

But the *Guide* evinces disparate attitudes in its readers, so that others consider its author to be the epitome of mainstream Jewish thought. For example, Shem-Toḥ's grandson was a staunch Maimonidean who is now best known for an extensive commentary on the *Guide for the Perplexed*. Shem-Toḥ ben Joseph ben Shem-Toḥ ibn Shem-Toḥ appended two highly allusive poems to his introduction, the first of which reads as follows:⁶

למורה כמורה עלי עץ ודשא וממי מרי מש מתי שוא ותשי
והוא ראש ובן ראש עדי ראש ואחי והוא רב ובן רב עדי רב ואשי
והגביר בריתו וכפר בדתו עונות עדתו בקרן ואשה
למענו חרנונו אלוהי מעונו יעורר ודינו יהי עז וקשה
ויאמר לצריו ושורפי ספריו אני קם ולא א חריש עוד ואחשה
בשומכם לשונכם בנביא וכי לא יראתם לדבר בעבדי במשה

The *Guide* refreshing as first autumn rains, beyond lakes of suspicion of the worthless and weak
A leader and head adorns heads and my kin, a rabbi whose line sees Rav and Ashi bejeweled
He strengthened God's pact through his religion atoned like sacrificial fire his congregation's
misdeeds

For his sake the God of his support will kindle his wrath judging mighty and harsh
He will say to his foes who are burning his books *I arise and will no longer keep quiet*
When you sharpen your tongues to slander the prophet and fear not to speak of my servant Moshe.

This poem seems to be an appropriate introduction since it recalls in several ways the *Guide's* own introduction. First, when he writes that it is an embellishment adorning Rav and Ashi, the heads of the Geonic academies at Sura and Pumbedita, Shem Toḥ connects the the *Guide* and the Talmud. The last line of the poem is even clearer: any who speak against Maimonides speak against 'Moses our master', so on this reading the *Guide* is very much a

³ Shem Toḥ ibn Shem Toḥ, *Sefer Emunot* (Ferrara: Abraham ibn Ushki, 1556), 4r. Herbert Davidson briefly discusses Shem Toḥ's attack in *Moses Maimonides: The Man and his Works* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 414–415.

⁴ On this point see Charles Touati's 'Le problème de l'inerrance prophétique dans la théologie juive du Moyen Age', *Revue de L'Histoire des Religions* 174 (1968), 169–187.

⁵ *Sefer Emunot*, 4r.

⁶ Shem Toḥ's commentary often appears alongside Ibn Tibbon's translation. I have used R. Mosis Maimonidis *More Nebuchim (Doctor Perplexorum) ex versione Samuelis Tibbonidae cum commentariis Ephodaei, Schemtoh, Ibn Crescas, nec non Don Isaci Abravanel asjectis summariis et indicibus* (Berlin: Adolf Cohn Verlag und Antiquariat, 1875). The poem is on 2v.

part of the Mosaic tradition. Secondly, Shem Tob mentions the decline of his own community, which Maimonides is opposing in God's name. For Shem-Tob, then, there is nothing marginal about the *Guide*. Nevertheless, these aspects of Maimonides' introduction reveal other ways in which he could be said to inhabit margins, especially those between changing eras and between various traditions.

Even a cursory look at the introduction to the *Guide* reveals that Maimonides is conscious of standing within a tradition and also of the need to update it. He argues that the rabbis presented their views in particular ways that were appropriate for their audience, or, rather, their multiple audiences.⁷ However, Maimonides thought that the situation had changed since the time that the midrash and talmud were compiled and another manner of expression was required in order to render the texts into an idiom appropriate for his time. To justify such action he uses two proof-texts: 'it is time to act for the Lord';⁸ 'let all your actions be for the sake of heaven'.⁹ Maimonides' use of these sentiments calls to mind Jonathan ben Uzziel's defence against a divine accusation. When Jonathan translated the prophets into Aramaic 'the land of Israel shook over 400 square parasangs and a heavenly voice said 'Who is this who has revealed my secrets to humankind?' Jonathan replies as follows: 'It is I who revealed your secrets to humankind, but it is revealed and known to you that I did not do so for my own honour, nor for my family's honour, but I did it for your honour, so that arguments among Israelites would not multiply.'¹⁰ Whether or not Maimonides has this passage in mind, the implication is that he considers himself to be on the threshold of a new era requiring a new kind of access to the tradition. Like Jonathan, he translates for the requirement of a new time and his motives are pure.

For the *Guide* to work as a commentary it needs to be treated as part of the tradition of sacred texts on which it is commenting, and so it needs to be treated with respect and sympathy. Maimonides explicitly asks the reader to approach his *Guide* in such a way as to consider it a genuine and honest attempt to understand rather than merely an attempt to impose alien ideas. So he asks those who receive no benefit from the book to pretend it was never written. He asks his reader not to be overly hasty in objecting to his words 'for that which he understood might be contrary to my intention'.¹¹ Whoever believes that there is a mistake in the *Guide* should adopt a charitable view and, quoting the Mishnah, Maimonides adjures him to judge favourably.¹² He then states his belief that all who read the *Guide* will find in it something of use. Given the earlier request to ignore it altogether if there is nothing useful, perhaps Maimonides wishes to refer here to people who adopt his advice. This advice describes an attitude necessary for using the *Guide* for the purpose Maimonides wrote it. He is trying to tell us that it needs to be approached in the same way as one approaches the Torah and other traditional texts. They are all supposed to be grappled with and understood in a charitable way. If one fails to see the point of a certain text or parable, it shouldn't

⁷ *Guide* 5 (15–18), 9.

⁸ *Guide* 10 (29), 16. References to the *Guide* are to page and line numbers of Munk's Judaeo-Arabic edition (Jerusalem: Azriel, 1929) followed by the page number in Pines' translation (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1963). For an account of the way in which this saying is used in rabbinic literature to explain suspending particular laws see Eliezer Berkovits's *Not in Heaven: The Nature and Function of Halakha* (New York: KTAV, 1983), 64–70.

⁹ *Guide* 11 (1), 16.

¹⁰ BT Megillah, 3a.

¹¹ *Guide* 10 (9), 15.

¹² *Guide* 10 (13), 15.

simply be dismissed. Rather, one should offer it the benefit of the doubt and continue thinking about what the deeper message might be. This is a model of how sacred works are read, and also what Maimonides asks of his own readers.

Another thing Maimonides asks of his prospective students is that they ‘learn everything that ought to be learned and constantly study this Treatise. For it will then elucidate for you most of the obscurities of the law.’¹³ The only way to benefit fully from the *Guide* is to read other works alongside it, including rabbinic texts as well as the scientific writings of the Arabs. He alludes to all kinds of works, including many dealing with scientific issues. Indeed, on several occasions he reminds the readers not to expect the *Guide* to act as a scientific work, since his purpose is not to write such a work.¹⁴ Rather, his purpose is to write a commentary on scripture and the rabbis. Maimonides hints that certain passages of the *Guide*, and consequently of scripture, can be understood through ideas in other books to which he alludes by providing ‘pointers’ and ‘reminders’ to writers as diverse as Avicenna, who was associated with an Aristotelian movement, and the Brethren of Purity, who were authors of anonymous treatises professing very different doctrines.¹⁵ So the sages’ advice to ‘turn it and turn it, for everything is in it’¹⁶ can apply to the *Guide* as well. Only by reading it alongside all of those other works, and constantly thinking about them in relation to one another, can one hope to reap its full rewards: only thus can it be used as a true *Guide* ‘refreshing’ tradition as the rains refresh the withered grass, to return to Shem Tob’s poem.

Furthermore, the advice is necessary because Maimonides aims to provide a text that imitates the tradition, updating it into an idiom appropriate for his own time. As part of this update the *Guide* attempts to imitate oral teaching, which is the kind of instruction the rabbinic texts advocate when one is teaching difficult matters.¹⁷ There are certain advantages to teaching someone in person. When faced by a pupil, a teacher can assess the pupil’s level and decide accordingly what to say and how to say it. The teacher can also respond to individual needs. So an aim of the *Guide* must be to enable it to work in the same fashion as oral instruction when all the above advice for how to approach it correctly is heeded. But the update involves more than imitating oral teaching. Maimonides also needs to imitate the way in which the rabbis’ ideas are written up. So the *Guide* is a multi-layered commentary on a multi-layered text. It is written with multiple levels of meaning and using a variety of registers of discourse that reflect both the Bible and the rabbinic literature. Maimonides attempts to duplicate the different levels in his own work because he thinks that scripture is written with all those meanings in mind. From the point of view of the aims of the *Guide*, then, what is important is less the inner meaning of the *Guide* itself than the inner meaning of scripture, even though Maimonides presumably would consider them to be the same.

¹³ *Guide* 10 (3–4), 15.

¹⁴ *Guide* 176 (3), 253.

¹⁵ Avicenna’s work is present in much of the *Guide*. Alexander Altmann explains a particularly famous example in ‘Essence and Existence in Maimonides’ in Buijs, ed., *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 148–165. A probable allusion to the Pure Brethren is mentioned by Langermann in ‘Maimonides’ Repudiation of Astrology’, *Maimonidean Studies* 2 (1991), 148.

¹⁶ *Abot* 5:27

¹⁷ See the first chapter of José Faur’s *Homo Mysticus: A Guide to Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998) for examples of similar attitudes in the rabbinic tradition, which Maimonides attempts to imitate.

Requiring the reader to think independently and read widely, connecting outside study to learning the *Guide*, ensures that the student will be able to progress as far as is merited. That is one way in which the tradition is updated for the needs of the hour. For the most part, the outside texts that Maimonides would expect the student to read are philosophical and scientific. There is nothing innovative in Maimonides' reading philosophy into sacred texts nor in his expecting the student to work at deciphering a text. It may be the case, though, that Maimonides' *Guide* is the supreme example of both of these together in the Jewish tradition. Nevertheless, despite Maimonides' own disavowal of scientific originality, he needs to find a new way of expressing certain interpretations of the tradition. Famously, Maimonides lists seven different causes of contradictions in his introduction, and explains that any contradictions occurring in the *Guide* result from the fifth or the seventh.¹⁸ The fifth is used by other philosophers and has a didactic function, Maimonides explains, but the seventh is used only in the *Guide*. This seventh contradiction sets Maimonides' *Guide* apart from preceding works, and is one cause of the variety of interpretations, though not the only one. Maimonides says that it results from an author's need to conceal something from the masses, for which purpose a device is used. So there is something that Maimonides wants to hide from most people. A common view that there is a conflict between religion and philosophy is therefore taken to be indicated by the seventh contradiction.¹⁹

The idea that philosophy is outside of religious norms made its way into studies of Maimonides. It is often thought that he could not really have been both a philosopher and an advocate of Judaism. His influence is felt in this regard in twentieth century scholarship of Islamic philosophy as well, though through a circuitous route. Dimitri Gutas identifies three major strands of interpretations of Arabic philosophy that are distorted through an Orientalist lens. All three have their analogues in Maimonidean studies, and one in particular seems to take its cue from Maimonides, or, rather, a particular interpretation of Maimonides. It is often labelled 'Straussian' because it builds upon Leo Strauss' insistence that there is an irreconcilable conflict between religion and philosophy.²⁰ A major concern of philosophers, then, is to hide their philosophical tendencies behind a veneer of traditional religious belief. Sometimes the impression given by this approach is that 'medieval Arabic philosophy was in fact nothing else but a continuous squabble through and across the centuries about the relative truth values of religion and philosophy.'²¹ Gutas argues that the Straussian school of Maimonidean interpretation is an expression of an Orientalist mindset that read its own conflict between religion and reason back into the mediaeval Islamic thinkers.²²

The Straussian view is based on an assumption that there was a fear of philosophy, which Gutas seems to suggest never existed. Strauss argues that philosophers hide their opinions for fear of the persecution that would follow. His assumption that philosophy and religion

¹⁸ The fifth is caused by a teacher's need to explain something in different ways at different stages of a pupil's education. *Guide* 11 (20), 17. The seventh is the result of the need to conceal something from the masses. *Guide* 12 (7), 18.

¹⁹ Leo Strauss is the most famous example of this school of thought. See his *Persecution and the Arts of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

²⁰ For the purposes of this paper, there is no need to enter into a discussion of the relative merits or problems with Strauss, Straussianisms, or the question of how far they accord with one another. For a sympathetic and sensible appraisal see Steven Smith's *Reading Leo Strauss* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006).

²¹ 'The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 29 (2002), 9.

²² Gutas, 10.

oppose each other is based on that of Shem-Tob̄ ibn Shem-Tob̄ so, whilst it is not necessarily Maimonides' or the Arabs', it predates the enlightenment and the Orientalists.²³ Even if philosophers in the Islamicate were not persecuted because they practised philosophy, there is no doubt that there were Jews in Christian Europe who were suspicious of philosophy. Scholars of Maimonides, even some who claim to be followers of Maimonides, then, have taken on board the anti-Maimonidean tendency to oppose philosophy to religion. This view in turn influenced attitudes to Islamic thought. In that case the Straussian school is influenced less by Maimonides than by the anti-Maimonideans. Philosophy is marginalised through the actions of its opponents, and then its advocates too seem to have taken on board the view that philosophy is opposed to Judaism.

The seventh cause of contradictions is the reason why Gutas locates Strauss' inspiration in the *Guide*, at least in part correctly, and the reason why Gutas may be too hasty in dismissing any methodical innovation at all on the part of Maimonides. I agree that Maimonides does not use the seventh cause of contradictions to hide a philosophical position that opposes the religion of the common people. Philosophy might not be for everyone, but it does not therefore follow that philosophy and religion really do conflict. Rather, as I argue extensively elsewhere, the seventh contradiction is a function of Maimonides' commentary on scripture.²⁴ There are conflicts and contradictions between the inner meanings of different parts of scripture since, as mentioned above, there are multiple voices in scripture. If Shem Tob̄ ibn Shem Tob̄'s claim that the philosophers think that the prophets made mistakes is true, a claim mentioned above, one of the things being hidden might be that there are times when Maimonides is less charitable towards the prophets than he asks his readers to be towards himself. The seventh contradiction is a signal of the need to serve different eras with the same rabbinic tradition, rather than a signal of a rupture between philosophy and religion. It needs to be seen as part of this update.

One Muslim thinker whose image may have suffered from a tendency to draw stark divisions between philosophy and religion is al-Ghazālī. The work he is most famous for in the West is *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, though he exerted far more influence on the Muslim tradition through others. At the beginning of the *Incoherence* Ghazālī writes as follows:

I have seen a group who, believing themselves in possession of a distinctiveness from companion and peer by virtue of a superior quick wit and intelligence, have rejected the Islamic duties . . .

²³ Kraemer says that there is evidence that Maimonides feared persecution. 'How (not) to read the *Guide* of the Perplexed', *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006), 358. The evidence he adduces is from a letter Maimonides wrote in which he asked his student to be careful whom he shares certain sections of the *Guide* with, 'so that I am not harmed by the non-Jews or by the many wicked Israelites.' Baneth, ed., *Letters of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Mekize Nirdamim, 1946). Why Maimonides feared that he would come to harm is unclear from this statement, though. Kraemer argues that Suhrawardi's execution, probably in 1191, explains 'Maimonides's discretion in the *Guide*.' 'Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait', *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Library, 2005), 31. However, it is generally thought that Suhrawardi was killed for political reasons. If his ideas troubled the authorities, they would probably have done so because of their resemblance to Ismā'īlī notions held by the recently deposed Fātimid dynasty, rather than because they used philosophy. See John Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardi and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 201–210. Finally, the fact that Maimonides exhorts the recipient to be cautious indicates that if there is something for which he might be persecuted in the *Guide* that would be clear to whomever it reaches. Such persecution would not occur because of a secret, hidden doctrine that can be detected only by the initiates but, rather, because of something that can be understood from the text itself.

²⁴ See my *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide*, in the AAR series *Reflection and Theory in the Study of Religion* published by Oxford University Press.

they have entirely cast off the reins of religion through multifarious beliefs . . . [this is] an outcome of their stumbling over the tails of sophistical doubts that divert from the direction of truth . . . The source of their unbelief is their hearing high-sounding names such as Socrates, Hippocrates, Plato, Aristotle, and their likes, and the exaggeration and misguidedness of groups of their followers in describing their minds, the excellence of their principles, the exactitude of their geometrical, logical, natural, and metaphysical sciences and in [describing these as] being alone – by reason of excessive intelligence and acumen – [capable] of extracting these hidden things.²⁵

Here Ghazālī expresses an apparent opposition to philosophy, namely that it is opposed to religion because it encourages believers to diminish the importance they place on religious practice and even to abandon religious faith altogether. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly recognised that Ghazālī was no simple opponent of philosophy in the manner of Shem-Toḥ ibn Shem-Toḥ. What he criticised in the *Incoherence* is philosophers' excesses, as he saw them. Philosophy in itself, and correctly deployed, is not to be dismissed; Ghazālī himself makes considerable use of it in other contexts.²⁶ Like Maimonides, Ghazālī is an enigmatic figure who influenced later religious traditions enormously. Ebrahim Moosa argues that the reason he was able to exert such influence on later generations is his use of such a great variety of different and different kinds of thought which he wove together into an integrated whole.²⁷ He stood in the liminal space between different traditions and ideas, evaluating each on the basis of the ideas themselves rather than on the basis of their provenance, and incorporating those he accepted into a whole. This is a model of a way in which a great thinker can engage with tradition, attempting to respect that tradition's borders whilst using all resources, both from the tradition and an individual's own intellectual resources, in a creative way appropriate to a challenge facing a living community.

As explained above, in his introduction Maimonides advocates the same kind of approach. Like al-Ghazālī he inhabited a space between different intellectual traditions, rabbinic and philosophical. He too tried to engage honestly with all of them. His attitude could be summed up by the the poet Dunash ibn-Labrat's motto, 'let scripture be your Eden, and the Arabs' books your paradise grove'.²⁸ Maimonides weaves sections from diverse sources into the treatise. Often it is difficult to see how they fit together. Sometimes they almost certainly do not. He is not providing a philosophical system: that does not mean that he does not have one; it simply means that his purpose in the *Guide* is not to present it.²⁹ Instead, he is explaining scripture, and scripture speaks with many voices. Some of those voices are in conflict with each other. So Maimonides advances several different positions, drawing upon a variety of schools of thought and kinds of writings, creating conflicting accounts of how the world works. Some of the conflict, though, is presented in a way that makes it difficult to detect and is made more so by the use of 'devices' to hide the 'inner' meaning of the *Guide* and, therefore, of scripture. This method of drawing upon different traditions and different sources enables Maimonides to connect his *Guide* with the Jewish tradition since, as already

²⁵ Al Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. A parallel English-Arabic text translated, introduced and annotated by Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 2.

²⁶ Richard Frank has mapped some similarities between al-Ghazālī and one of his targets, Avicenna, in *Creation and the Cosmic System: Al-Ghazālī & Avicenna* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992).

²⁷ *Ghazālī and the Poetics of Imagination* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

²⁸ As translated in Peter Cole's *The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 24.

²⁹ *Guide* 176 (3–7), 253.

noted, it requires an approach that is religious in attitude; it requires one to continue meditating on the material presented and judge it in a positive light. If one is to conclude that an idea is worthless, one ought to abandon it, at least temporarily, or presume that there is something more to it that is not yet understood, and continue to seek out its value. Aside from a traditional, Jewish attitude, this is also a perfect example of what has been called ‘a fundamental philosophical attitude, combining humility with realism.’³⁰ Philosophy demands humility and patience. Far from religion and philosophy opposing each other, then, thinkers like Maimonides and Ghazālī present them as in concord, but only when the limits of human understanding are properly drawn.

Could the anti-Maimonidean movement that Shem-Tob̄ represents be a reaction to ‘radical’ interpretations of Maimonides rather than to Maimonides himself, just as Ghazālī’s difficulty was with what he perceived to be the abuse of philosophy, rather than the very use of it? In that case, if philosophy is to be taken in an appropriate and ‘religious’ way, there would be no need to object to it.³¹ But Shem-Tob̄’s opposition goes deeper than this. He disagrees with Maimonides’ very claim that reason and philosophy can enhance one’s understanding of Judaism. So in Shem-Tob̄’s opinion, the problem is not that the philosophers go too far, but the very practice of philosophy. He expresses his surprise at Maimonides for justifying ‘most of the commandments by way of the philosophers’ characteristics (מדות) and the rest on backward nations (עמים נופלים) so that none are intended in their own right.’³² Here he objects to explanations of the commandments that make them dependent upon a goal, referring to two in particular. The first explains that certain commandments are means by which characteristics can be trained and virtues instilled in a person. The second explains that others were established in order to lead people away from idolatrous practices that were common at the time. The practices are not good in themselves, only insofar as they serve a good purpose. So, for example, Maimonides argues that the laws about sacrifices were commanded because the people lived in an environment in which sacrifices were widely practised as a form of worship. They were adapted to the service of God.³³ Once again, however, the practise of sacrificing is not good in itself; it is only good inasmuch as it brings about a good outcome. That is why Shem-Tob̄ thinks it follows from the philosophers’ position that there is no judgement, and that is why he blames Maimonides in particular whose ‘books and claims were the reasons for the Israelites’ denial of the God of their fathers.’³⁴

Neglect of the law’s importance is a strange charge to level at philosophers. They are concerned with living ethical lives and with the consequences of their actions. They are concerned with the negative influence any excesses may have upon their characters. The law is a very important way to avoid these negative influences and to encourage growth and improvement in physical habits, moral characteristics and intellectual-spiritual abilities. This

³⁰ Marcel Dubois *Temps et l’instant Selon Aristote* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1967), 370. I am grateful to David Burrell for pointing me to this source.

³¹ This is the import of some of Isaac Abrabanel’s writings. For example, he defends Maimonides’ view of creation from some who distort it but claim to represent it faithfully, thus reclaiming the master from his purported disciples. See Seymour Feldman’s *Philosophy in a time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abrabanel, Defender of the Faith* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 40–66.

³² *Sefer Emunot*, 15v.

³³ *Guide* 384 (19), 526.

³⁴ *Sefer Emunot*, 15v.

is certainly Maimonides' view. It is also Aristotle's view; although he didn't have the Mosaic law, law is the way in which he thought that people ought to regulate themselves in order to facilitate their own perfection.³⁵ So Shem Toḥ's disagreement cannot be based on the idea that the philosophers ignore the law's importance but on their practise of offering rationales for the commandments. Maimonides is absolutely opposed to the view that reasons in principle intelligible to all should not be offered for the commandments. He claims that refusing the existence of rational explanations diminishes rather than augments their importance. Unlike Shem-Toḥ, he says that the commandments have a purpose beyond themselves, so they are not ends in their own right. Simple observance is too easy and insufficient.³⁶ To worship God properly requires intellectual effort that goes far beyond practice alone.³⁷

Jose Faur objects to the claim that philosophy and Judaism are opposed to one another. He also objects to Shem-Toḥ ibn Shem-Toḥ's assertion that a rise in philosophy was to blame for the decline of the Jewish community and for mass apostasy. Rather, in Faur's view, the anti-Maimonideans are to blame for the decline of the Jewish community.³⁸ He points out that many of the apostates were not philosophers, but products of the school that opposed philosophy. Furthermore, in those places where Maimonides became the main authority, such as in Yemen, there was no such mass defection.³⁹ Faur explains that the kind of Judaism that the anti-Maimonideans opposed is one which is in full accord with philosophy. It is one in which, in the halakhic realm, decisions can be based upon arguments and evidence. Consequently the reasons for any particular ruling are transparent to all who train their intellects correctly. The ruling is open to challenges and objections from any who might think that it is based upon unsound reasoning or false principles. Training in intellectual discipline is necessary in order to assess them, but it is clear what the rules of debate are. By contrast, a characteristic of those who oppose philosophy is to base their rulings on obscure origins, often on the inscrutable whim of a powerful individual. Faur documents the methods used by the anti-Maimonideans to sideline such discussion by preventing the opposing view from receiving a fair hearing.⁴⁰ Often they took the form of threats. These methods are repugnant to Judaism, in Faur's view. The Palestinian Talmud also tells of an occasion when such a technique was used, resulting in a fatal dispute. Rabbi Joshua Onayya reported that students of Bet Shammai killed students of Bet Hillel. While six students of Bet Shammai went to discuss rulings in an upper chamber, the rest remained below with swords and spears, presumably to prevent students of Bet Hillel from having their say. That day was said to be as bad for Israel as the day the golden calf was built.⁴¹ God is said to have wanted to destroy the Israelites when they made the calf, so the passage presents an extremely strong condemnation of violence as a means of asserting authority (Exod. 32 and Deut. 9). Faur offers an attractive account of authentic Jewish ways of reading texts, based upon logical and philosophical rigour. It may be an idealised version. The kind

³⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics* X, 9.

³⁶ This is clear from *Guide* 84 (3), 123.

³⁷ Kenneth Seeskin explains why a focus on obedience to the exclusion of understanding is too easy in *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (West Orange: Behrman House, 1991), 122–124.

³⁸ Jose Faur, 'Anti-Maimonidean Demons', *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 6 (2003).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–14.

⁴¹ PT Shabbat 1.4.

of interpretation that he explains seems close to the method of *ḥayyun* that arose after the expulsion and drew on Islamic philosophy.⁴² In any case, what is important is that the kind of discussion such a method of study opens up is intelligible and logical; whether or not it is historically accurate, the point still stands. Philosophy is in principle a discipline open to anyone who has the opportunity and the patience to study it.⁴³ The reason anti-Maimonideans are responsible for the decline of Iberian Jewry is, in Faur's view, that they shifted the basis of authority from knowledge and argumentation to individual intuition.⁴⁴ The basis of authority thereby became both arbitrary and incontestable.

Another way to express the difference in attitude towards authority is suggested by the work of another scholar of Maimonides, Menachem Kellner. He locates a key in the doctrine of the pre-existence of the Torah, which has several ramifications.⁴⁵ For example, Maimonides assessed the scientific views of the prophets and the rabbis in exactly the same way as he assessed any other scientific views. If scientific evidence indicates that the sages were mistaken about something he sides with the scientific evidence, not with the sages or even the prophets.⁴⁶ As mentioned above, that is exactly one of the things to which Shem-Tob̄ ibn Shem-Tob̄ objected. The Mishnah states that the Torah is a *כלי שבו נברא העולם*, a 'blueprint for creation'.⁴⁷ Kellner points out that if the world is created through a pre-existent Torah, it can be inferred that the world should be understood by way of the Torah. Therefore, anything perceived as coming from outside it is unimportant and should be, at best, subordinated to the Torah.⁴⁸ However, those who reject the idea, Maimonides among them, are not entitled to draw such a conclusion. Rather, for them the reverse is true: the way to understand the world is to investigate the world itself. The Torah can only be understood against the background of the world in which it was revealed, a world which pre-existed the Torah. As mentioned above, the kind of understanding and reading of texts the *Guide* requires, because of the way it is written and the ideals it encourages, accords with the idea that the Torah must be understood by a thoughtful person who reads whatever is worthwhile, no matter where such writings are found or who wrote them. This is also the kind of reading and understanding that Faur considers more authentic to the Jewish tradition, a tradition which is open to understanding and encourages spiritual and intellectual development, just like the *Guide* and the philosophers.⁴⁹ Faur in effect argues that the attempt to inhabit such a marginal space is a normative, authentic, Jewish attitude, although inhabiting the margins has been pushed out to the margins.

Both Kellner and Faur are in favour of the respective aspects of Maimonides' attitude towards authority upon which they elaborate. They both argue that Maimonides' opponents have had a damaging effect upon Jewish life. Furthermore, I think that Kellner's ideas can provide a way of explaining the kind of attitude towards authority that Faur objects to.

⁴² See Daniel Boyarin's *Sephardi Speculation: A Study in Methods of Talmudic Interpretation* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1989).

⁴³ This is clear from the third of the causes that Maimonides says account for the difficulty in studying metaphysics: the length of the preliminary studies. *Guide* 49 (20), 73.

⁴⁴ Faur, 'Anti-Maimonidean Demons', 40–45.

⁴⁵ Menachem Kellner, 'An Ante-Mundane Torah – A Maimonidean Study', *Da'at* 61 (2007).

⁴⁶ For examples see chapter four of Kellner's *Maimonides on the Decline of the Generations and the Nature of Rabbinic Authority* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996).

⁴⁷ *Abot* 3, 17.

⁴⁸ Kellner, 'An Ante-Mundane Torah?', 91.

⁴⁹ See his 'One Dimensional Jew, Zero Dimensional Judaism', *Annual of Rabbinic Judaism* 2 (1999).

Among the targets of both Kellner's and Faur's work are anti-rationalist world-views. According to Kellner they insist on not paying attention to universal reason and science but, rather, supporting opinions by looking for them in traditional sources. According to Faur they undermine the nature of the traditional sources by elevating the role of an individual's intuition in halakhic rulings above more normative methods of decision making, methods that rely upon discussion intelligible to other sages and *posqim* rather than on an individual's whim. In both cases the authority is sought in something not in principle universally accessible. Similarly, the difference between Maimonides, on the one hand, and the anti-Maimonideans, on the other, lies according to both scholars in the tools with which one ought to interpret the tradition: should they be norms intelligible to other trained wise people, and therefore, in principle, universal, as Maimonides and his followers would claim, or should tradition be filtered through the few who are uniquely qualified to interpret it, a qualification deriving solely from their 'intuitive' ability to converse, or somehow communicate, with a supernatural realm?⁵⁰

Different attitudes towards reasoned debate go a long way to explaining the difference between the positions of the Maimonideans and their opponents. Those who opposed philosophy considered it to be an expression of human arrogance, since it presumes to be able to explain things for which explanations ought not to be sought. For its supporters, on the other hand, philosophy is the model of humility and patience, so long as its limits are recognised. This is the humility and patience with which Maimonides asks his readers to approach the *Guide* when he tells them they should constantly read the treatise. The difference between the philosophers' account of philosophy's scope and purpose, on the one hand, and the account of the opponents of philosophy, on the other, is crucial. Indeed, whether or not Maimonides' own account of Aristotle is accurate, he presents Aristotle in a similar way, as an honest seeker after truth who was perfectly aware of his own intellectual limitations and the limitations of his methodology. Maimonides attributes his differences of opinion to the fact that Aristotle is not part of the Abrahamic prophetic tradition, not to an intellectual hubris.⁵¹ The philosophers try to carry out a committed search for truth, a search which takes place in the margins, even though it has been marginalised. Such a search requires one to think honestly and charitably about ideas.

The nature of the *Guide* is such that understanding it requires one to interact and to think creatively. From this perspective, the teacher – Maimonides – would be more concerned that the pupils – the readers of the *Guide* – think matters through for themselves rather than accept Maimonides' 'true' opinion. Maimonides is less concerned with revealing his 'hidden' view to the elite while concealing it from the vulgar than with encouraging the student to develop and work out the truth. That is why the *Guide* is written in a way that is so challenging to read. It is not simple because it is a *Guide* to a way of thought, and even a way of life, that is not simple. Without effort on the part of those who undertake the journey, there can be no journey. The ability to inhabit the margins is crucial. As a way of life it is creative and

⁵⁰ According to Kellner, Maimonides battled against a majority view and had very little success; his opponents remain in the majority. Indeed, Kellner believes that Maimonides unwittingly strengthened them as he explains in *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2006). According to Faur, he and, more importantly, his methods were marginalised because ideas taken from popular religion became authoritative.

⁵¹ During the course of several chapters in which he argues that Aristotle was aware of the weaknesses of this own position, Maimonides claims the support of Moses and Abraham. See, for example, *Guide* 225 (8), 322.

dynamic; it is uncertain and therefore challenges any absolutes and idolatry. According to Faur, this understanding represents also an authentic way by which one ought to live Jewish texts.⁵² When taken in such a way Maimonides' *Guide* points towards the conclusion that those who consider philosophy alien to Judaism because of its universal nature fail to distinguish between unqualified universal norms, and such norms as accessed by someone from within a living tradition. Although one gains access to universal norms through a particular gateway, they are nonetheless universal. For in fact, anyone's access can only come through a tradition in which she is steeped, and with which she contends in a constructive manner. The model of the *Guide* shows how struggling and growing in conversation with one's tradition can illuminate universal norms as well.

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⁵² As well as the pieces mentioned above, see his 'On Cultural Intimidation and other *Miscellanea*: Bar Sheshakh vs. Raba', *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5 (2002).

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