

Daniel Davies

Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

215 pages

\$65.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-976873-8)

Maimonides states in the introduction to his *Guide for the Perplexed* that although he will undertake to explain truths that must be concealed from the vulgar, he will do so in such a way that they remain hidden to most readers but revealed to the worthy in flashes (*Guide*, Part I: Introduction, 6–7 of Shlomo Pines' translation, University of Chicago Press, 1963). He goes on to recount seven reasons for contradictions to appear in a book (17–18) and to declare that the contradictions in the *Guide* stem from two of them. What those contradictions are and what Maimonides intends to conceal with them have been addressed by a broad range of scholars, and their notions of what is concealed range from Maimonides' rejection of central principles of Judaism to his endorsement of mystical, kabbalistic doctrines. Daniel Davies' *Method and Metaphysics* addresses this well-worn issue, Maimonides' esotericism, in a refreshingly reasonable, constructive, and original way.

In his first chapter, Davies argues that since the *Guide* is addressed to someone trying to reconcile the Bible with the metaphysics and natural science of his day, and since the *Guide* does not undertake to prove metaphysical or scientific truths, it can only reconcile these two by reinterpreting scriptures. Davies is right, but most readers have sought to know Maimonides' philosophy, and Davies himself focuses on it, for the most part. This book addresses three central issues: creation (chapters 2–3), divine knowledge (chapters 4–6), and Ezekiel's prophecy (chapters 7–8). Only the last of these is an exegetical issue, and it turns out to depend on a philosophical issue on Davies' account.

Maimonides is often thought to endorse the Aristotelian idea that the cosmos is not created but eternal, in contrast with the Bible's account of creation. The reason is that he gives a lengthy proof for the existence of God that is based on the assumption of the world's eternity. Davies points out that Maimonides assumes that there are two possibilities: the world was either created or uncreated. In the former case, it is obvious that a creator—God—existed prior to the world. The latter case is more difficult, which is why Maimonides devotes more attention to it. He argues that even if the cosmos is eternal, it requires a first cause, God. Hence, either way, God exists. Once the argument is seen as a whole, there is no reason to think Maimonides endorses the assumption that the world is uncreated. Even so, Maimonides' discussion of the eternity of the world distinguishes what amounts to a Platonic eternity from an Aristotelian eternity. In the former, only the matter of the cosmos is eternal; all else is created from it. In the latter, both the matter and the form of the cosmos are eternal. Maimonides identifies a third opinion, that of “all who believe in the law of Moses” (II.13): the entire world was created *ex nihilo*. Davies argues that Maimonides identifies the literal meaning of *Genesis* with the Platonic view. This literal account conveys that creation is an act of God's will that serves His purpose. However, it also assumes that some part of the cosmos is eternal and necessary and, thereby, beyond God's will and purpose, a consequence Maimonides denies. Moreover, the notion that what is in the world occurs by necessity undermines a foundation of Biblical commandments.

Hence, the scriptural/Platonic account is incompatible with the intention of the Bible and so, too, even more so, is the view espoused by Aristotle that the entire cosmos is eternal. There is, moreover, no compelling scientific reason to accept either sort of eternity, Maimonides claims. As Davies understands this account, Maimonides is rejecting the literal meaning of the Bible in order to affirm its deeper aim. This discussion (chapter 2) is the most plausible part of Davies' book.

In order that God act purposefully in the world, He must have knowledge of both the world as a whole and the particular individuals in it. However, to ascribe any knowledge to God would seem incompatible with Maimonides' negative theology, the view that no attributes can be ascribed to God. Moreover, the issue is complicated by *our* knowledge being only of what is universal and necessary. If God knew the world with same kind of knowledge we have, the world would have to be necessary and, thereby, determined. Thus, if God were to know individuals with the same sort of knowledge we have, those individuals would be entirely governed by universal and necessary causes. They would lack free will, and God could hardly reward or punish them for obeying or failing to obey Biblical commandments. On the other hand, if individuals do indeed have free will, then God could not, apparently, know them completely. It follows that God's knowledge cannot resemble human knowledge.

Davies argues that Maimonides does not deny perfection of God; instead, Maimonides holds that since the words we use to express perfection derive from our experience, they cannot apply to God (chapter 4). Davies goes on to argue that God is "unbound being," that is, being that is not delimited by having a particular essence, as all created beings are. In more standard terms, God's essence is simply to be. Lacking any restrictions, this being contains all perfections (chapter 5). With this conclusion, it is easy for Davies to argue in the following manner: for God to lack knowledge of particulars would be an imperfection; hence, God must know particulars. Furthermore, this knowledge of particulars is compatible with negative theology because God's knowledge is an "uncreated perfection" that is unbounded and "totally free." Since God's knowledge is totally unlike human knowledge, it can, Davies claims, be ascribed to God without compromising negative theology (chapter 6).

For Davies to speak of God's perfections is to assimilate Maimonides to Thomas Aquinas. The account of being he ascribes to Maimonides derives from Avicenna, though the version he gives is closer to Aquinas's. It is Aquinas who insists that being and knowledge are perfections of God and, through Him, belong imperfectly to us. As I understand him, Maimonides speaks of God's not having a deficiency, rather than being perfect. Any characteristic that is intrinsically connected with corporeality must be denied of God, but there are other characteristics that, Maimonides claims, we cannot deny of God, characteristics such as life, power, being and knowledge (I.58). To deny these characteristics is to deny that there is a God. Ascribing these characteristics to God is compatible with negative theology as long as Maimonides is careful to avoid giving them any positive content, and he avoids content by identifying them as the sources of the divine acts in the world that we can know. Even so, he has to contend with some problems, among which are the following: (a) multiple attributes would seem to make God many; (b) divine power requires a divine agency to be exercised; (c) knowledge presupposes a knower and a distinct object of knowledge. Maimonides skirts these issues by claiming that the attributes which it is necessary to ascribe to God are identical in their

essences; that God's power is not an actualization of His agency but the manifestation of unceasing act; and that God knows by being one with His object, namely, Himself, and with His act of knowing. In this last respect, God's knowledge is like ours (I.68). However, Maimonides is not saying that we understand Divine knowledge. His point is that God *can* have knowledge without becoming a plurality. Just as we know by our mind's coming to be the essential nature of the object it knows, that is, by our becoming one with an object, God's knowing an object does not require that God be distinct from that object, particularly if the object He knows is himself. Moreover, in knowing Himself, God knows everything else because He is the first cause of everything. It follows that God *can* know particulars without becoming a plurality. So understood, Maimonides does not give a positive account of God's knowledge but an account that shows how objections to God's knowledge can be answered. In contrast, Davies argues that Maimonides *does* have a positive account of Divine perfection that explains Divine knowledge. Davies understands Maimonides to rely on this positive account when he argues that God would not be perfect if he lacked knowledge of particulars. As I said, Maimonides is more plausibly understood simply to deny deficiency of God than to assert perfection. When Davies does try to draw on his positive account of perfection, he does not get very far. Thus, he finds himself unable to decide between multiple solutions to reconciling negative theology with Maimonides identity of knower, object known, and act of knowing (103–5).

Davies' final issue is how Maimonides understands Ezekiel's vision of the chariot in the book that bears the prophet's name. This is explicitly a matter of the interpretation of a Biblical text, rather than a philosophical issue, and Davies gives us a close exegesis of Ezekiel's text. The difficulty Maimonides and his readers face is that the oral tradition specifically forbids teaching the secrets contained in Ezekiel's account, even to those who are worthy of receiving them. Maimonides therefore makes a point of the necessity for concealment, and yet he gives a seemingly straightforward account. Maimonides explains the vision as a bit of cosmology. The four faces are the four heavenly spheres or, rather, the four groups of heavenly spheres, each group governing the movements of one of the four elements. Davies notes that Maimonides introduces this correlation as his own insight, even though he "disclaims any scientific originality in the *Guide*" (142). For Davies, this contradiction signals Maimonides' rejection of the doctrine he himself espouses. Since Maimonides roots this doctrine in Ezekiel's vision, Maimonides is rejecting this prophecy. Maimonides sees it as based upon a Pythagorean numerology that encourages the idea that man can influence the spheres, a doctrine akin to idolatry. In short, Davies argues that Maimonides painstakingly conceals not Ezekiel's teaching, but his own rejection of that teaching on the ground that it stems from a false, Neoplatonic worldview that Maimonides sees as incompatible with the Bible.

This is a highly original and interesting interpretation. However, it clearly strikes a major blow at Jewish tradition, and it raises questions about Maimonides' own account of prophecy, according to which Ezekiel would have had to reach a level of intellectual perfection before receiving prophecy. To me, the decisive objection to Davies' interpretation is that it would leave Maimonides without any account of how God exercises agency in the physical world. Throughout the *Guide*, Maimonides assumes that the motions of the heavens cause events in the world, and he needs some such account if God is to act through nature.

In sum, Davies examines three issues that have been loci for discussions of Maimonides' esotericism, and he argues that the *Guide* can be understood consistently in each. The first of his treatments seems to me most correct. His accounts of the other two, though original and interesting, are less plausible. Nonetheless, the book is well worth reading. Davies poses the issues concisely, he surveys the extensive literature carefully, and he advances interpretations worth thinking about. He considers sources, such as the Muslim Brethren of Purity and Moses of Narbonne, that are not often discussed; and he uses these authors to elucidate individual details of Ezekiel's prophecy and of Maimonides' text. One need not be convinced of Davies' conclusions to learn a lot from this book.

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