Chapter 7 Maimonides: Supplementary Notes

19. Is Aristotle’s language of love and desire simply a simile? His medieval commentator Averroes, an important resource for our understanding of the Arabic Aristotelian tradition of which Maimonides is a part, at first seems to suggest that the language is metaphorical, but then goes on to describe this as an intellectual love. Averroes writes at 1606, "this first mover imparts motion, without being moved, to the first object moved by it, just as the beloved moves his lover without being moved itself. . . The first heaven is moved by this mover by means of its desire for it, I mean because it imitates it according to its ability as the lover is moved to [imitate] the beloved. All the other celestial bodies are moved by their desire for the motion of the first body."

One might interpret this passage as lending itself to a metaphorical reading. However note what Averroes says at 1597:

The words: "the first object of will is that which is beautiful" probably mean that the first thing willed is the absolutely beautiful; it is that towards which the celestial bodies are moved; he probably means that the first in the intellect as intellect is the beautiful. Therefore he says: "we desire it more because it is thought to be more especially (beautiful), but it is not thought (to be beautiful) because we desire it". He means: since whenever something is thought to be more beautiful the longing for it is the greater, for we desire a thing because we deem it beautiful, but we do not deem it beautiful because we desire it, then what is in itself more beautiful is more desirable. It is as if he meant that if the mover of the celestial bodies is more beautiful than everything else, then it is more desirable than everything else. By "but it is not thought (to be beautiful) because we desire it" he wants to establish a distinction between the longing of the intellect and that of the senses; only he in whom the longing of the senses is stronger than the intellect thinks that the desirable is good because it is desirable.

The general meaning of this passage is that since the longing of the celestial bodies is aroused by the intellect and the intellect desires only what is more beautiful than itself, then it follows necessarily that the celestial bodies desire in this motion that which is more beautiful than themselves, and since they are the most excellent and most beautiful sensible bodies, then the beautiful object which they desire is the most excellent being, in particular that which the whole heaven desires in its daily motion."

There is nothing in this passage that suggests to me that he thinks this is a simile. Averroes interprets this as a longing or desire of the intellect. The first mover is the object of love because it is that which is beautiful or desirable in itself. The intellect loves what is beautiful. Avicenna argues similarly is that the good is that which everything yearns for (yatashawagga). (Shifāʾ: Ilāhiyyāt 8:6:2-3). (Steven Harvey noted to me that Avicenna is citing here rather literally from the beginning of the Arabic translation of Aristotle’s Nicomachean.

38. Maimonides says explicitly that intellect is a bond between all humans and God (Guide 1.1, 3.51-52). To the extent that humans engage in thought, they receive understanding from the divine or participate in the divine Intelligence. This model does not deny that human beings may draw incorrect conclusions, nor does it suggest that every thought or insight is divinely inspired. It is the faculty of thinking (nous) that is of divine origin, not necessarily each of its products. For Maimonides, as for Aristotle, to think is to some extent to participate in divine activity.

Peter Adamson, writing about Plotinus and Avicenna, emphasizes that non-discursive thought need not be mystical. He suggests that mystical insight derives from the One, who is beyond Intellect, while natural knowledge derives from the realm of Intellect alone. According to this model, Maimonides understands all knowledge, including prophetic knowledge, as purely natural. Even Moses, the paradigm of the
prophet, receives knowledge through from the Active Intellect through the human intellect. In setting one’s thoughts on God, one doesn’t necessarily have direct knowledge “of” God or “from” God—the One or Necessary Existent, who is beyond all human thought. But human beings can develop their minds to achieve a more refined understanding of the divine, just as one can refine the capacity for appreciation of sublime music or poignant human experience. See Peter Adamson, “Non-Discursive Thought in Avicenna’s Commentary on the Theology of Aristotle,” in Interpreting Avicenna: Science and Philosophy in Medieval Islam: Proceedings of the Second Conference of the Avicenna Study Group, 87-111.


71. She writes that the affinities between Maimonides and al-Ghazālī show “how much closer Maimonides is to that Sufic-mystic love, than is generally presumed,” given that “both thinkers—although belonging to different schools, or at least so characterized—display in the center of their theory a concept of love which combines affection with devotion, and pleasure with attraction.” See Amira Eran,, “Al-Ghazālī and Maimonides on the World to Come and Spiritual Pleasures,” Jewish Studies Quarterly 8, no 2, 137-166, at 166.

76. His translator, Samuel Ibn Tibbon addressed him a letter noting that in the chapters on Job (Guide 3.17-18, 3:23), Maimonides taught that providence reaches a person according to the degree of his or her intellect; by contrast, in Guide 3.51, Maimonides seems to suggest that people are actually protected from physical harm, as long as they maintain conjunction with the Active Intellect. Samuel Ibn Tibbon sees a contradiction between the “philosophical” view in Guide 3.17-18 and 3.23, and the “religious” or supernatural view that seems to be expressed in 3.51. His son, Moses Ibn Tibbon attempts to harmonize the two views. He offers two approaches. First, a person who has perfected his or her practical intellect will know to avoid dangers. Second, those who have completely developed the intellect receive a prophetic influence from the divine that does miraculously guide them out of harm’s way. Shem Tov Ibn Falaquera (ca 1225-1295) rejects the supernatural view, suggesting that providence gives one the practical intelligence to avoid danger. Moshe Narboni in the fourteenth century offers the most radical view, suggesting that in the state of conjunction, even though one’s body does, one’s real self is not harmed, and thus one is protected through complete identification with the immortal intellect. Such a person has been raised above the sub-lunar world of decay and death. See Zvi Diesendruck, “Samuel and Moses ibn Tibbon on Maimonides’ Theory of Providence,” in Hebrew Union College Annual, Vol. XI, 341-365; Shem Tov ibn Falaqua, Moreh ha-Moreh, ed. Mordechai Bislichs, 146-47; ed. Yair Schiffman, 338-340; Moshe Narboni, Commentary to the Guide of the Perplexed, ed. J. Goldenthal, 65; Aviezri Ravitzky, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the Guide of the Perplexed,” Association for Jewish Studies Review 8, 87-123, at 94-100; Charles Raffel, “Providence as Consequent upon the Intellect: Maimonides’ Theory of Providence,” Association for Jewish Studies Review Volume 12, No. 1, 25-7, especially 30-35; Raphael Jospe, Philosophy in the Middle Ages, 507-510.

88. Farid al-Din ‘Attar, Tadhkirāt al-awliyā’, Vol. I, pp. 126-127 (tr. by Wheeler Thackston and Gregory White). Maimonides here echoes both the Jewish thinker Bahya Ibn Paqûda and his Sufi and Neoplatonic sources. We find the following quotations in Abī l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, Risāla fi-l-taṣawwuf, ed. A. Maḥmūd and M. ibn al-Sharīf, p. 605, 583, 585:
1. The farthest limit of knowledge (ma’rifā) consists in two things: bewilderment (dahsh) and perplexity (hayra).

2. “When the intellects of rational beings (‘uqūl al-‘uqalā’) reach (tanāhat ilā) the farthest limit of unity (tawḥīd), they reach perplexity (hayra).”

3. “Glorified is he who made no way for his creation to know him other than being unable to know him (bi-l-‘ajzi ‘an ma’rifatihi).

We also find in al-Ghazālī, Ḥiyā-’ulūm al-dīn (Egypt, 1352/1934-44), Volume IV, 262:“

4. [true] apprehension is the inability to apprehend (al-‘ajzu ‘an darki’ l-īdrāki īdrāk). Glorified is he who made no way for his creation to know him other than being unable to know him.” See Lobel A Sufi-Jewish Dialogue, 38-39; idem, “On the Lookout: a Sufi Riddle in al-Sulami, al-Qushayri, and Bahya ibn Paqūda,” Studies in Islamic and Arabic Culture, Volume II. Edited by Binyamin Abrahamov, 87-120, at 92-94.