

# Taking Maimonides personally: emotional reading of the Guide

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## Abstract

While most literature on Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed is written by professional scholars, most readers of the treatise are "laymen". The perspective of a reader from the latter category is typically different from that of the former. This division was expected by the author: the Guide addresses multiple categories of readers.

Traditionally the Guide is considered either as a philosophical text or as exegesis of difficult places in Scripture. My claim is that between long passages devoted to philosophy and interpretation of the Bible are interwoven short remarks of very different kind: aimed straight at the emotional center of a reader. These remarks are supposed to take a reader out of region of comfort and invoke strong emotional responses. Examples of such passages are given and discussed.

On the basis of these examples I suggest that Maimonides (roughly) divided educational development of a potential reader into three levels and the main educational purpose of the straightforward reading of the Guide in this context was the progression of a reader from level 1 to level 2, while "accomplished" individuals of level 3 are addressed by hints. This educational method of Maimonides is criticized.

## 1. Introduction

When it comes to deal with thinkers of the past, a common practice of academic journals is to publish papers by scholars that specialize in the thinker in question. Naturally the topics of these papers are of academic concern.<sup>1</sup> Most of works written many years ago are indeed have mostly historical importance and are studied mainly by relevant experts. However, there are exceptions – treatises that remain important beyond academic interest. These works bear *personal* relevance for private contemporary readers. Perspectives from which such readers approach the text are different from these of professional scholars, and so are the themes and problems of concern.

Thus, while an absolute majority of commentaries on such texts are written by academic experts, these authors belong to a minority, in some cases a small minority, of

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<sup>1</sup> Which goes in line with the general approach to "thought" interpreted as philosophy and viewed for the last several hundred years as an academic subject – purview of university professors.

the readers. Given experts' professional interests, the aspects that are important for the majority of readers – the laymen<sup>2</sup> – remain at the periphery of these commentaries.

A typical reader of Maimonides's "Guide for the Perplexed" is not someone on a tenure track in an academic institution: all along its more than 800 year history it was studied by generations of readers that viewed in as a companion in thought about conduct of *their* lives, it is also the case today. The present author is one such reader. For me relative importance of various problems and controversies invoked by the Guide is different from that seen from the perspective of a professional philosopher. To illustrate this point consider the following remark:

"It is no wonder that many of his philosophically qualified readers wrote commentaries or philosophical books of their own dealing with the unresolved perplexities of the *Guide*. Among these philosophical conundrums the following topics were especially vexing: (1) the appropriate language in speaking of God, (2) creation of the universe, (3) the nature of prophecy, (4) divine omniscience and providence, and (5) man's ultimate felicity."<sup>3</sup>

From the point of view of a professional philosopher these are just five topics, none of which is obviously more important than others. However for a reader that seeks practical guidance, their relative importance is incompatible:

Topic 3 has no practical relevance: as long as one accepts the authority of Scriptures, the question of specific means by which the prophets received their message thousands years ago deals with "technical details" that are irrelevant for an average reader.

Similarly topic 5 – thinking about Utopia – is far from practical interests of most people.

Topic 2, Maimonides' views on Creation vs. eternity of the Universe received most attention by commentators, both of the past and the present (this is my conclusion from experience of reading the secondary sources). Historically it was important in terms of religious dogma and development of scientific thought of Western civilization, since many philosophers and theologians of the past studied the Guide. Nowadays, this topic is of general interest for an educated reader, on par with popular books on cosmology (and many contemporary commentators make this comparison explicit). However, nothing will change in my life if someone would succeed in convincing me that Earth / the Solar

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<sup>2</sup> By this term I mean a "general" reader, someone who reads the text for personal reasons, neither being paid for his studies nor receiving an academic credit for it.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Feldman (2005), Maimonides – A Guide for Posterity, in Kenneth Seeskin (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, 324-360, Cambridge University Press, p.325.

system / the whole Universe exists for several thousands, several millions , several billions of years or is eternal.

I do not see how “stupefaction”<sup>4</sup> falls over a reader thinking about these matters.

On the other hand, topic 4 that deals with personal providence concerns one’s relations with God and is central for a typical layman reader. Thinking about this topic could be one important reason to read the Guide. Specific views on personal providence can influence critical decisions of “regular” individuals (i.e. persons who have no professional interest in philosophical or theological discussions). Language appropriate to talk about God (topic 1) is relevant for a general reader only as far as it is interwoven with the reader’s ability to establish personal relations with God (covered in topic 4).

It is remarkable that the question of faith, another important theme for many “commoner” readers, does not appear in the list at all.

It is not to say that Maimonides did not write also for professional philosophers, theologians and political scientists (using anachronistic terms), they just were not expected to be the only readers of the Guide. The Introduction to the Guide starts with quoting Psalm 143,8:

*Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk, For unto Thee have I lifted my soul.*

While the Guide considers many issues and is directed to large variety of readers, only topics of intimate personal importance could be associated with this verse. Thus, it seems to me that when Maimonides wrote his book he understood the differences in relative importance of various subjects discussed in the Guide for his readers and expected different reactions to his numerous claims. Some are of purely intellectual nature and are supposed to invoke more or less polite *public* arguing, others are of theological importance and can lead to strong *public* reaction from various self-styled “guardians of faith”. However, parts of the Guide that deal with one’s personal philosophy and provide directions for one’s life are supposed to arouse *emotional* response of *individual* readers. Traditional academic reaction, which considers the issue as one more topic for philosophic bickering, is inadequate in these cases (and can be viewed as a disrespect to the author who intended to provoke strong feelings in his readers).

Another difference in reading the Guide between an expert and a layman is that the former typically creates a general framework for his reading with the goal of being consistent in his

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<sup>4</sup> This is how a typical addressee of the Guide is described in Epistle Dedicatory (Pines’ translation).

reaction on various themes considered in the Guide. Halbertal<sup>5</sup> differentiates between four types of reading the Guide: the skeptical; the mystical; the conservative; the philosophical. A layman typically just reads the text and is not sufficiently sophisticated to associate himself with one of these categories of readers. When pressed I would characterize my reading closer to the conservative type (because, as I understand Halbertal, it is the simplest among the four), but I think that this characterization is irrelevant for a non-expert reader.

Traditionally the guide is considered either as a philosophical text or as exegesis of difficult places in Scripture. My claim (and the reason of writing this paper) is that between long passages devoted to philosophy and interpretation of the Bible are interwoven short remarks of very different kind: aimed straight at the emotional center of a reader. These remarks (I would call them “stabs”) are supposed to take a reader out of region of comfort and invoke strong emotional responses (in direct contradiction to stress on impassive intellect that is declared all along the Guide).

To substantiate my claim, I’ll eschew various philosophical and political problems that are in focus of most academic works on the Guide, but concentrate on a problem that concerned me personally during my study of the Guide. As it will be explained below, the problem has two layers. I found a solution for one, while another aspect of the problem remains open.

I believe that addressing classic texts from a non-professional perspective in academic environment would enliven study of eminent thinkers of the past and, also, may contribute to traditional academic research.

## 2. Formulation of the problem

Most chapters of the Guide are focused on problems of linguistics, physics and metaphysics. These subjects could vex a reader because of theological disagreements with the author, and at periods, when religious ideology is important, induce a public backlash, but I do not think that strong *personal* feelings could be hurt by these issues. There are, however, some relatively short remarks scattered between scholarly discussions, which I would characterize as arrows shot into a reader’s soul. These remarks concern the most intimate type of relations available to humans: personal relations with God. Below I will discuss two such cases: a couple of sentences in 1:50 concerning faith and in 3:18 concerning personal providence. What I am focused on is not a theoretical modelling

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<sup>5</sup> Moshe Halbertal (2013), *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, Princeton University Press.

(e.g. how personal providence works, if at all) but an attitude to faith and providence that could become critical for an individual in extreme situations.

My purpose is to find interpretation of Maimonides' approach that is consistent with what I see as a guidance given by Scripture:

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me (Psalm 23, 4).

## 2.1 Guide 1:50: the nature of belief in God

From the beginning the text aims to touch a reader personally appealing to his ambitions:

“If you belong to those who are satisfied with expressing in speech the opinions that are correct ... without ... believing them, and still less without seeking certain knowledge regarding them, you take a very easy road. In accordance with this, you will find many stupid people holding to beliefs to which, in their representation, they do not attach any meaning whatever.

If, however, you belong to those whose aspirations are directed toward ascending to that high rank which is the rank of speculation, and to gaining certain knowledge with regard to God's being One by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever is to be found in Him and no possibility of division in any way whatever—then you must know that He, may He be exalted, has in no way and in no mode any essential attribute, and that just as it is impossible that He should be a body, it is also impossible that He should possess an essential attribute.”<sup>6</sup>

In most cases various claims concerning God's essential attributes are matters of theoretical interest. Here, however, it is not the case. Denying “essential attributes” in this context one denies the possibility to have personal relations with “absolutely simple” God. Then it is further stressed that “a belief different from it is *in no way possible* [stress is mine] and that no starting point can be found in the mind for a rejection of this belief or for the supposition that a different belief is possible, there is certainty”.

In order to satisfy the criterion of correct belief the reader is encouraged to “cast off desires and habits”, which, as I understand it, means precisely that one has to halt

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<sup>6</sup> Pines, p.111. All quotes are from the translation by Pines.

personal appeals to God, because the possibility to “process” such appeals implies that God possess some relevant “attributes”.

Upon pondering over this text a reader, who seriously contemplates his faith, is expected to be shaken out of tranquility (typical for readers of philosophical treatises): the most precious part of belief in God is suddenly denied and one who cannot arise above his “desires and habits” is explicitly derided by the author.

In my search of secondary literature I have not found a discussion of this chapter of the Guide that considers a reaction similar to mine, so let me expound.

The certainty/uncertainty dichotomy in the context of personal relations with God may be the most complicated part of belief. Scriptures fully support this view: there are many stories in the Bible in which the lack of certainty exhibited in behavior of even the explicitly blessed by God. Just remember how Jacob came to meet Esau (Genesis 32: 7-9):

“And the messengers returned to Jacob, saying: 'We came to thy brother Esau, and moreover he cometh to meet thee, and four hundred men with him. Then Jacob was greatly afraid and was distressed. And he divided the people that was with him, and the flocks, and the herds, and the camels, into two camps. and he said: 'If Esau come to the one camp, and smite it, then the camp which is left shall escape'”;

or Genesis 20 that narrates about Abraham travelling with his wife: “and Abraham said of Sarah his wife: 'She is my sister'”;

or 1 Samuel how David run away from Saul.

The main point of these and numerous other biblical tales is lack of certainty, fear, which is an integral part of true belief. This fear is existential, i.e. it is not just (and even not mainly) fear of sinning and being punished: it was not the case in the events mentioned in the stories above. Fear of God, as it is experienced by an active individual, is a “built-in” part of complicated personal relations with God that rather than paralyzing one’s actions lead one to behave responsively in complex situations. Specific rules of behavior in human interactions with Deity differ from person to person, e.g. Abraham and Moses could argue with God, while it seems that it was not the case with David.

As a matter of fact Guide 1:50 is rarely mentioned in volumes that provide general guide to the Guide, and if mentioned the literal meaning of the text is reiterated in so many words. The main source of reference for this topic is a paper by Manekin<sup>7</sup>.

Manekin starts his discussion noting the vagueness of the concept of knowledge in the Guide: “Yet for all its centrality, the concept of knowledge is never explicitly defined, or even philosophically discussed, in Maimonides’ writings”. Then he notes that attempts to reconstruct this concept from the text only lead to diverging interpretation that demonstrate the speculative nature of such attempts. So, he concludes “that any attempt to come to grips with Maimonides’ concept of knowledge are doomed from the outset” (p.119). Knowledge as a concept is vague both in the human and divine context. Concerning the latter, just as an example, consider Guide 3:22, there God’s knowledge is explained in terms of knowledge of a human craftsman, while in other places it is stressed that no comparison between human and divine knowledge is possible.

I do not think that many believers consider their beliefs in terms of representation in the mind (advocated by Maimonides) or in any other terms for that matter. We do not understand how our consciousness works (neither in times of Maimonides nor nowadays) and so any explicit description just complicates the matter. The only thing one can do to satisfy Maimonides’s demands is to *declare* that “God’s knowledge” (as well as any other attribute assigned to God) is just a metaphor, and accept it as a guide for further contemplation.

It is stated in Maimonides’ introduction to the Guide that the book is addressed to “a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief”<sup>8</sup>. It seems to me that anybody who dealt seriously with his personal relation with God should be exasperated by this statement: read literally, instructions of Guide 1:50 concerning certainty can only undermine previously established belief rather than strengthen it. I do not think that Maimonides really intended to what he wrote about faith: Scriptures point against this direction and he did not reinterpret the passages of the Bible quoted above. Moreover, in Guide 3:9 (p.437) he explained that “a great veil” interposed between us and Him, there is thick clouds and darkness around Him. How can one talk about certainty?

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<sup>7</sup> Manekin, C. H. (1990). Belief, Certainty, and Divine Attributes in the Guide of the Perplexed. *Maimonidean Studies*, **1**, 117-141.

<sup>8</sup> Translation by Friedlander: The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law.

To conclude, intimate personal relations, such as belief in God, cannot be strictly defined in formal terms. Maimonides was aware of the vagueness of the concepts he used no less than contemporary commentators, and so, the claim that there is only one way to believe (whatever it may be), the condemnation of anyone who does not accept some standard position on this issue as unbeliever, and the association of true belief with certainty cannot be taken at face value. So my goal is to find a tenable interpretation of Maimonides' intentions.

## 2.2 Guide 3:18: Personal providence

The chapter begins with some scholarly remarks concerning species vs. individuals and then there is a “stab” intended to shake a reader (p.475):

“...it follows necessarily that ... His providence that watches over excellent and righteous men is proportionate to their excellence and righteousness. ... As for the ignorant and disobedient, ... they have been relegated to the rank of the individuals of all the other species of animals.... For this reason it is a light thing to kill them, and has been even enjoined because of its utility. This matter is one of the fundamental principles of the Law, which is built upon it, I mean to say upon the principle that providence watches over each human individual in the manner proper to him.

(p.476) ... the fact that some individuals are preserved from calamities, whereas those befall others, is due ... to their perfection and deficiency, I mean their nearness to, or remoteness from, God. For this reason, those who are near to Him are exceedingly well protected...; whereas those who are far from Him are given over to whatever may happen to befall them.”

A general statement that providence is differential and each individual receives what is proper to him can be considered (and even accepted) without a strong emotional impact, however, the quoted text brings forward two more specific claims:

- 1) Personal providence is absolutely associated with protection from calamities;
- 2) A level of protection totally depends on some vague qualities of excellence and righteousness: nothing bad can happen to excellent and righteous men, i.e. if something bad happened to you then you are not “excellent and righteous”.

It is straightforward that if one is killed in a war (be this a most justified war) he can blame only himself. Moreover, since providence is totally associated with personal safety there is no place for a heroic sacrifice of whatever kind. On the other hand, if someone,



like a Nazi criminal, managed to escape all attempts to catch him and died peacefully of old age, one cannot help but include him in the group of the protected, and so excellent and righteous men.

Consider a more mundane situation: one strolls along a sidewalk and is hit by a drunk driver who lost control over his car. Is it the case that intellectual development of the victim of this accident was not sufficient?

The statements are very clear, and I do not think that any amount of verbal equilibristic or clever dialectic could really change the conclusions. I cannot believe that Maimonides really meant it, and infer that the purpose of the text was to shock, and so I am shocked.

The shock provides a motivation to search for a more satisfactory interpretation of the Guide's view on personal providence. Actually Maimonides hints in this direction saying that great secrets are involved. I.e. Maimonides himself points to the obscurity of his presentation of this topic: only by ignoring this hint can one accept the straightforward interpretation of the text.

In Guide 3:51 (pp.624-5) the statement concerning personal providence quoted above is augmented:

“Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God. On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else ...

Hence it seems to me that all prophets or excellent and perfect men whom one of the evils of this world befell, had this evil happen to them during such a time of distraction, the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the duration of the period of distraction or to the vileness of the matter with which he was occupied.”

I do not think this addition helps, if anything, the perplexity is only exacerbated: on the one hand, one cannot expect from a real human being who encounters danger in the active mode (e.g. a soldier in a battle, or a traveler trying to save himself from robbers) not to be distracted from thoughts about God. On the other hand, what about victims of pogroms or of Nazi atrocities who could not actively resist their murderers, thought only about God and died with “Shema Yisrael” on their lips?

### 2.3 Guide 3:22-23: themes of belief and providence unified

These two chapters, devoted to Book of Job, unite the themes of belief and providence into one common topic. Similarly to what we observed above, these two chapters mainly contain various theoretical discussions into which short remarks, relevant to practical concerns of a reader, are embedded. Maimonides begins his discussion noting that “all reflecting people become perplexed” upon reading Job’s story.<sup>9</sup>

Then follows what I see as a personal message to a reader. Maimonides turns our attention (p.487) to the fact that “knowledge is not attributed in it to *Job*. He is not said to be a *wise* or a *comprehending* or an *intelligent man*. Only moral virtue and righteousness in action are ascribed to him.” He remarks that this fact is “the most marvelous and extraordinary thing about this story”, and concludes (with what I interpret as a “stab”): “For if he had been *wise*, his situation would not have been obscure for him.”

Next place that I take personally appears in the middle of chapter 23 (pp.492-3). After quoting harsh words said by Job towards God Maimonides wrote:

“But when he knew God with a certain knowledge, he admitted that true happiness, which is the knowledge of the deity, is guaranteed to all who know Him and that a human being cannot be troubled in it by any of all the misfortunes in question. While he had known God only through the traditional stories and not by the way of speculation, *Job* had imagined that the things thought to be happiness, such as health, wealth, and children, are the ultimate goal. For this reason he fell into such perplexity and said such things as he did.”

There is obvious difference between misfortunes of health and wealth on the one hand and death of the dear ones on the other: the latter is irreversible. Having new children is not a solution for death of “original” ones. Feeling the tragedy of one’s children death is not a sign of uneducated ignoramus, but an essential expectation from a morally competent human being. Maimonides certainly belonged to this category. As quoted by Halbertal (op.cit., p.59) Maimonides testified about *his* condition after the death of his brother: “For almost a year after receiving the sad news I lay on my couch stricken with fever, despair, and on the brink of destruction.” Are we supposed to think that the author of Mishneh Torah did not know God and publicly shared this fact with his readers?

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<sup>9</sup> The text of the Guide rarely refers to perplexed readers. It is remarkable that uses this term several times in Guide 3:22 and 3:23. Maybe this indicates the centrality of the topic discussed in these chapters for the treatise as a whole.

Further into chapter 23 (p.495) there appears another passage, which seems to me relevant to the theme of personal relations with God. Maimonides directs our attention to what the last speaker among Job's friends adds to the discussion:

“The notion added by *Elihu* and not mentioned by one of them is that which he expresses parabolically when he speaks of the intercession of an angel. For he says that it is an attested and well-known thing that when a man is ill to the point of death and when he is despaired of, if an angel intercedes for him - regardless of what angel- his intercession is accepted and he is raised from his fall. This invalid is accordingly saved and restored to the best of states. However, this does not continue always, there being no continuous intercession I going on forever, for it only takes place two or three times.”

There is no clue how to approach the “angel”, and it is stated explicitly that it (angel) should not be understood literally. It is left to a reader to solve this riddle.

### 3. Possible courses of response

One possible reaction to my perplexities is to discard the issue: just do not take Maimonides as a teacher. It is common knowledge that the Guide was never unanimously accepted. But criticism came either from philosophers that dislike the general framework of Maimonides' approach, or from rabbis that attacked various theological points of his teaching. This is not the case here: the question is not philosophical or theological, but practical: how to behave in critical situations – are personal prayers have an addressee. I think that the literal meaning of a “guide for the perplexed” includes attendance to this question. Moreover, the arguments against the attitudes presented in quotes cited in the previous section are so obvious that I do not believe that Maimonides was not aware of arguments similar to mine.

For a believer the problem of faith in general and of individual providence in particular is not an academic problem – it is a practical question essential for many thoughtful individuals (especially young people) pondering over their life. This group is an important addressee of the Guide. I think, Maimonides was fully aware of unsatisfactory straightforward interpretation, as discussed in the previous section, and my purpose is to suggest a solution. Strangely, I have not found an attempt to solve this problem in academic commentaries I happened to read. Chapters dealing with providence (in contrast to Guide 1:50 ) are discussed by many authors, however they typically just reiterated what

is said by Maimonides using quotes or their own words, Discussions are in regular academic style: no emotions are involved.

In difference to general equanimity of contemporary commentators Maimonides' first translator (into Hebrew) and commentator Samuel ibn Tibbon had reservations concerning his views on individual providence.<sup>10</sup> In ibn Tibbon's view, misfortunes befell perfected people in the same way as others, and God did not intervene to free them from poverty, illness, or travail. But because they adhere to the proper goal of apprehending the intelligibles, which assures them eternal life, they do not regard these events as troubles.

Since I do not feel that an escape into "eternal life" is a valid the strategy to solve the issue, I cannot stop here.

#### 4. The proposed solution

The key to my solution I found in Guide 1:35. There Maimonides explained that the children and the multitudes should be educated that God is one, that He is not a body, and that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him. Then he concludes:

"This measure of knowledge will suffice for children and the multitude to establish in their minds that there is a perfect being, who is neither a body nor a force in a body, and that He is the deity, that no sort of deficiency and therefore no affection whatever can attain Him."

Apparently, this implies inaccessibility of God for humans in terms of establishing personal relations, since such relations, as they are understood on the basis of relations between humans, include affections.

It is usually assumed that that the reason why the above message is addressed only to the "children and multitude" is that more advanced – intelligent – individuals understand this fact as obvious and, thus, there is no need to inculcate them concerning these matters. However, consider what follows:

As for the discussion concerning ... the "how" of His providence with respect to what is other than He, the notion of His will, His apprehension, and His knowledge of all that He knows... – it should be considered that all these are obscure matters. In fact, they are truly *the mysteries of the Torah*. ... They are the matters that ought not to be spoken of

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<sup>10</sup> We know about it from a letter on providence that he sent to Maimonides (and that Maimonides never answered). See Halbertal, op.cit., in the subchapter on providence in the Guide.

except *in chapter headings*, as we have mentioned, and only with an individual such as has been described.

It seems to me that this remark intended to indicate a different line of thought (otherwise there is no need for it here). This alternative would be that intellectually advanced individuals, who are able to turn to God without an anthropomorphic “model” are not bound by what is demanded from the non-educated, namely, that those who belong to this group may have personal relations with God, and, in particular, that there is an addressee for their prayers.

At the end of the chapter Maimonides returns once more to distinguish between advanced and naïve believers, noting that the correct interpretation is understood by “men of knowledge”. If the matter were ended with a simple demand to accept that God is one, incorporeal and has no affection, all these multiple statements how to educate “children and multitude” and the stress on the need to distinguish between them and more advanced individuals would be unnecessary. (One would not distinguish between advanced and non-advanced in the context of claiming that  $2+2=4$ : it is accepted by everybody, period!)

The main point of the Guide as proclaimed by its author is to inculcate in Jews incorporeality of God. The problem is that personal God, as it is conceived by naïve people, who cannot think abstractly, typically has an anthropomorphic image, kind of white-bearded grandpa on a cloud. On the other hand, personal relations of more sophisticated individuals with their God do not include any image (anthropomorphic or not). Such believers are aware of the contradiction between the abstract and personal perspectives in their thinking about God, and each believer finds his own solution to this problem.

It is true that relations with an abstract entity demand sufficient level of intellectual education. So, as I understand it, Maimonides believed that to have personal relations with God one has to reach a sufficient ability of abstract thought, and this is a “wonderful secret” he hints on. These personal relations include understanding concerning individual providence, which is not identical with physical safety, but include wide range of issues, unique for each person.

So, Maimonides’ claims concerning the terms of personal belief and rigid association of personal providence with intellectual development are meant to be just a temporary stage in student’s spiritual growth. At more advanced stages there is more flexibility, and the

level of this flexibility depends on individual ability of abstraction of one's "representation" of God. This seems to me is a solution that both satisfies intuitive understanding of belief and personal providence and is tenable in the light of the text of the Guide.

In light of this solution, we can understand Maimonides's reactions to his personal tragedies: both natural and fully justified.

In terms of types of contradictions that could be found in the text of the Guide as listed by Maimonides this case squarely falls under the 7<sup>th</sup> kind (Introduction, p.18):

"In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means."

The "vulgar" have to be convinced in the incorporeality of God and, since for the unsophisticated any personal relations with God imply His corporality, the premise that there is no contactable agent "up there" to apply to is introduced. Thus, the possibility of building personal relations with Deity is sacrificed for what Maimonides saw as a worthy cause.

## 5. Conclusions and an open problem

The main point concerning education of children and other non-educated individuals, as it emerges from the above discussion is that Maimonides' educational method includes an intermediate stage: to reach the ability of abstract thought about God one has to pass the stage at which there is no possibility of personal relations with Him. This is in contrast to an alternative: a gradual transition from an anthropomorphic to an abstract perception of personal God.

To summarize, according to Maimonides there are three stages in human-God interaction from the side of a human: relations with a corporate image of God, no relation at all, relations with imageless – abstract entity.

I could end my enquiry at this point, being completely satisfied. However, it seems to me that the method Maimonides used for his purposes is merciless, if not plainly cruel. I

can imagine many youths, ambitious to follow the right path in faith, being deterred in their attempts after reading Guide 1:50. Such students would admit their inability to reach certainty of faith in terms demanded by Maimonides. Upon realization that one cannot satisfy high standards put forward by Maimonides, he stands before the dilemma of either accepting the existential loneliness by sacrificing personal relations with God or acknowledge one's "unworthiness". Many tragedies would naturally follow. Even more Guide's readers were brought to misery deprived of personal providence upon understanding that their relations with God are just a childish illusion, which should be replaced by some ephemeral development of intellectual abilities.

In Guide 3:22 (p.488) Maimonides wrote:

"All 'vulgar' men glorify God with their tongues and attribute to Him justice and beneficence when they are happy and prosperous or even when they are in a state of enduring suffering. However, when the misfortunes mentioned in *Job* befall them, some of them become unbelievers."

I think that his own educational approach is more dangerous: it can easily frustrate and divert from belief most valuable young individuals without being faced by misfortunes similar to Job's (after all Job's is a rare case). Moreover, from the purely educational-psychological point of view Maimonides' statement that he prefers "giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses"<sup>11</sup> and the implied simple dichotomy: either you accept what I am saying or you are stupid, produces an effect contrary to the intended one: a typical reaction of a youth having sincere ambitions to dedicate his life to high ideals of being a servant of God to this dilemma is to accuse oneself of wrong thinking and accept the judgement of being an "ignoramus" failure, while a real ignoramus, for whom matters of status rather than of inner faith are important, would accept whatever Maimonides states as correct and happily claim to be that "single virtuous man", and as a result reach an influential position in his community.

I feel (it is a spontaneous response, I cannot claim it being "objective") it is unethical for a teacher of Maimonides' status to put such a dilemma in any case, but especially taking into account extremely convoluted text of the Guide. It may be weird to accuse an author who wrote more than 800 years ago of unethical behavior towards his students, but, in contrast to physical and even metaphysical vision of Reality, the basics of teacher-student relations do not change with years: a teacher, whatever are his reasons, should not

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<sup>11</sup> Instruction to the Treatise (p.16).

let his students down. And the teacher here is not just a teacher: writing his Guide Maimonides intended to be the teacher of generations to come.

In his Instruction to the Treatise (p.15) Maimonides wrote:

“If anything in it, according to his way of thinking, appears to be in some way harmful, he should interpret it, even if in a farfetched way, in order to *pass a favorable judgment.*”

I do not know how to justify Maimonides lack of empathy towards his readers, do you have an answer?