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Windows into the Unseen

the power of metaphor as revealed by Paul Ricoeur and Moses Maimonides

A Thesis

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the Faculty of the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences

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of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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ABSTRACT

Ambiguous language haunts countless fields of human inquiry. The solution to its confounding nature has repeatedly been to reduce language to its face-value, launching an endless search for the *right* meaning. This paper aims to examine two thinkers who reveal language to be a more complicated matter. Paul Ricoeur and Moses Maimonides demonstrate the importance of language's complexity through close examinations of metaphor. While we find different understandings of metaphor, reflecting different metaphysics within each author's study, both Ricoeur and Maimonides contribute to the notion that language's complexity is not to be eliminated through literal readings, but engaged to open up depths of understanding. For the lived religious experience, this means commitment to scripture as the word of God does not require a fundamentalist reading of it. Likewise, in the implementation of philosophical principles, the search for appropriate application need not require a search for and return to original meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

In our quest for knowledge, we grasp at the most ineffable of concepts with the brittle tools of language. With that has come confusion, miscommunication, and an endless search for the *right* meaning. Ambiguous language haunts countless fields of human inquiry. The solution to its confounding nature has repeatedly been to reduce language to its face-value. But what if the right understanding is not so simple? The issue of linguistic uncertainty is particularly consequential within the realms of religion and philosophy, in which the interpretation of scripture and theoretical work has tidal waves of repercussions as any conclusion derived can be implemented into daily lives, political ideologies, and societal institutions. How many declarations of war have been justified by the words of a text?

This paper aims to examine two thinkers who in distinct ways reveal language to be a complicated matter. Paul Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor* and Moses Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed* demonstrate language's complexity through close examinations of metaphor. While we find different understandings of metaphor, reflecting different metaphysics within each author's study, both Ricoeur and Maimonides contribute to the notion that language's complexity is not to be eliminated through literal readings, but engaged to open up depths of understanding. For the lived religious experience, this means commitment to scripture as the word of God does not require a fundamentalist reading of it. Likewise, in the implementation of philosophical

principles, the search for appropriate application need not require a search for and return to original meaning. We are able to take seriously the lessons found in scripture and philosophical treatises without fear of questioning oversimplified interpretations and engaging them beyond their surface level.

Chapter One will identify some preliminary definitions of concepts that are prevalent throughout the study, as well as provide background on the theoretical contexts of Ricoeur and Maimonides. This requires a brief overview of Aristotle's categories of being and foundational search for the space between univocity and equivocity. These Aristotelian concepts frame both thinkers' works. The chapter will then move into the introduction of Ricoeur's and Maimonides' contributions to the conversations of their respective eras as well as their works on which we will primarily focus. Chapter Two focuses on Ricoeur's theory of metaphor, its accounting for the creation of meaning, and the relationship he sees between language and reality. Chapter Three examines Maimonides' exegesis of metaphors used in the Bible, and their providing access to the secret workings of the Law, that is God's actions, and implications for our being in the world. The last chapter includes concluding thoughts and potential questions for future research.

CHAPTER ONE THEORETICAL FRAMING

We are entering a conversation on metaphor that transcends centuries and fields of study. With such a broad scope, some framing of Ricoeur's and Maimonides's points of entry will be helpful. We start with Aristotle, the man with whom it always seems to begin. Though we are unable to dive into all the ways the Greek philosopher underlies each's study, we do need to acknowledge his determination to expand the notion of homonymy beyond a random association of disjointed meanings and this effort's effects on the relationship between language and reality, as seen in his applying it to the categories of being. While he may not be the first and only thinker to approach such topics, both the works of Ricoeur and Maimonides respond to Aristotle's theories.

ARISTOTLE

Aristotle interwove his thoughts on metaphysics with those of language, particularly through the notions of synonyms and homonyms. The former, also known as univocal terms, are those that are always used with the same meaning. The latter, also called equivocal, multivocal or plurivocal, are the terms that maintain many different

meanings that are not interchangeable.¹ Aristotle challenges Plato's metaphysics of participation through the contrast of these two terms.² Where participation holds a univocity across all things deemed, say "good," Aristotle denies this by showing that "good" in one context (cake is good, i.e. delicious) does not mean the same thing as "good" in another (Socrates is good, i.e. virtuous).³

However, Aristotle still refuted an absolute scattering within plurivocity, especially when it concerned the relationship between his "categories of being." To find the space between these two extremes, Aristotle offered a third type of term, a "core-dependent homonym."⁴ Ambiguous, amphibolous, and analogous have also been used to signify the dynamic relationships of meaning.⁵ "Core-dependent homonyms exhibit a kind of order in multiplicity: although shy of univocity, because homonymous, such concepts do not devolve into patchwork family resemblances either."⁶ Aristotle applied

¹ E. Jennifer Ashworth, "Medieval Theories of Analogy," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), 1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2017/entries/analogy-medieval/>.

² Christopher Shields, "Aristotle," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), 31, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle/>.

³ I am using the same example as Shields. See *ibid.*, 30–31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ For an extensive look at the different uses of these three terms, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, "The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides," *The Harvard Theological Review* 31, no. 2 (1938): 151–73. For the sake of simplicity, I use them interchangeably to indicate the purpose behind their creation.

⁶ Shields, "Aristotle," 32.

this same method to the notion of *being* being “said in many different ways” (1003a33).⁷

Aristotle’s *Categories* offers ten types of being: substance, quantity, quality, relative, space, time, positioning, having, acting upon, and being affected.⁸

In *Metaphysics*, Aristotle also states that “not all knowledge is demonstrative” (1006a8).⁹ In isolation, Christopher Shields’ article “Aristotle” explains, the categories are not “truth-evaluable,” but become so once combined.¹⁰ That is, they are not demonstrable in themselves, but are still knowable through other means – namely, predication. Shields effectively summarizes the parallel between language and metaphysics:

the entities categorized by the categories are the sorts of basic beings that fall below the level of truth-makers, or facts. Such beings evidently contribute, so to speak, to the facticity of facts, just as, in their linguistic analogues, nouns and verbs, things said ‘without combination’, contribute to the truth-evaluability of simple assertions.¹¹

A noun and verb independently say nothing. They simply identify particular forms, that is, species, of a category, genus, of being. Continuing with Shields’ chosen examples, “man” indicates a species of the genus substance, and “run” indicates a species of the genus action. But when combined to form a sentence, they enter a relationship of

⁷ Ibid., 22. All references to Aristotle’s works are from Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, One-Volume Digital Edition*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 194, Bollingen Series (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2014).

⁸ Shields, “Aristotle,” 35.

⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 35–36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

predication, producing a statement that is then able to be evaluated as either true or false. Men run. Chairs do not run. Both of these claims are true. “Chairs run” is a false statement. This is an instance of demonstration.

But notice the first category, substance, is always present. It is an independent category of being where the rest depend upon it.¹² This uniquely required presence of substance in the predication of being fuels Aristotle’s search for the non-generic unity of being¹³ between the categories, specifically between substance and the rest. He resolves this by defining *being* as an amphibolous term, indicating a shared dependence on “the core instance of being, namely substance.”¹⁴ Linguistically, the emphasis on substance in the ambiguous relation of being has been used to give the noun, and therefore naming and denomination, an elevated place in communication. However, this is not the only notion of ambiguity. Aristotle lays out a variety of forms of core-dependent homonymy in *Topics* 1.15.

The notion of metaphor is intimately tied to the categories of being. Aristotle defines metaphor as “consist[ing] in giving a name that belongs to something else...” (*Poetics* 1475b6) but nevertheless based on some sort of likeness (*Topics* 140a7-13).¹⁵ It

¹² S. Marc Cohen, “Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), 5, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/aristotle-metaphysics/>.

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2006), 313–14.

¹⁴ Shields, “Aristotle,” 34.

¹⁵ Quoted in S. Theodorou, “Metaphor and Phenomenology,” in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed October 24, 2019, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/met-phen/#H3>.

is in the likeness, the resemblance, that we see the notion of ambiguity come through. This renaming entails a word's meaning being swapped out for another, *preexistent* meaning that may or may not have a lexicalized form.¹⁶ This movement, called *epiphora*, or the transferring or carrying over, has been identified in line with Aristotle's thought, as a "category mistake"¹⁷ and contributes to metaphor's being obscure (*Topics* 139b34). Aristotle states that a genus is predicated by its species in a literal sense. Therefore, a predication by a species outside of a genus's domain represents one of the category mistakes of metaphor. Aristotle demonstrates this by giving the example of harmony being predicated of temperance. Harmony becomes metaphorical because its ordinary operation within the categories only deals with musical notes (*Topics* 123a33-36).

In the temperance-harmony example, we are able to see Aristotle's claim that ambiguity does not enable something to both *be* and *not be* in fact, but only in name (*Metaphysics* 1006b19-22). This plays an important role in knowledge acquisition and the ways we are able to communicate truth claims. When it comes to evaluating a statement's truth-value, arguments are judged by their first principles, which are rooted in definitions. The most challenging definitions to assess, according to Aristotle, are the equivocal (not core-dependent homonyms) with the metaphorical impossible (*Topics* 158b10-15). In fact, nothing can be defined through metaphor (*Posterior Analytics* 97b37). This roots reference to reality firmly in the proper predication of being based on his ten categories.

¹⁶ Ibid., sec. 1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

PAUL RICOEUR

Ricoeur's work is saturated with dialectics, something he shares with Aristotle.¹⁸ He dedicated his mind to knowledge gained by holding seemingly conflicting poles in conversation with one another. We can already see the dynamism of his attempt to define the ambiguous relationship— a balance found in tension.¹⁹ His theory of metaphor is a focused application of this dialectic approach to account for meaning production and the experiential ways we understand reality. *The Rule of Metaphor* is the result of this work.

Aristotle's definition of metaphor forms the conventional,²⁰ and what Ricoeur referred to as substitution or denotative, theory.²¹ He claims it underlies structuralist linguistics and its related notions of truth:

the denotative theory has served in support of the referential function of language, one which *assumes a system of methodological connections* between language, sense perceptions, mental states, and the external world. The referential relation between language and its objects serves the correspondence theory of truth, in that the truth-bearing capacity of language corresponds to *valid perception and cognition of the external world*.²²

Ricoeur challenges this definition of metaphor as it denies the part of Aristotelian theory he seeks to uphold. Namely, not all knowledge is demonstratable, and dialectical methods

¹⁸ Shields, "Aristotle," 24–25.

¹⁹ Arguably, this also mirrors the balancing act of Aristotle's *mean* of virtuosity in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, such a parallel requires an examination beyond the scope of this paper.

²⁰ Theodorou, "Metaphor and Phenomenology," sec. 1.

²¹ *Ibid.*, sec. 1a.

²² *Ibid.* My emphasis.

enable apprehension of these non-demonstrable notions through the experience of predication. In overview, his critique of substitution theory, whose methods nonetheless serve an important, but not exclusive, role in interpreting metaphor, aims to shift from a sole focus on the word, the location of denotation, to include the frame of the sentence, the location of predication. “The metaphor is the tension between two terms in a *metaphorical utterance*.”²³

Ricoeur proposes instead a tension theory. He predominantly deals with an interaction theory found in the work of I.A. Richards,²⁴ but teases through this and many other thinkers’ works to reveal the ways substitution theory continues to permeate different examinations of metaphor. Ricoeur’s tension theory extends the work of metaphor not only from the level of the word to the sentence, but also to text and ultimately to language as discourse. With all these layers involved, Ricoeur outlines four applications of tension theory analysis: the tension within the statement, that is, a word that does not fit in its predicative context; the tension between a literal interpretation and a metaphorical interpretation of the statement; the referential function of “to be,” holding together both identity and difference as related to resemblance; and the existential function of “to be,” in which what is said metaphorically both *is* and *is not*.²⁵ This latter application is a direct rejection of Aristotle’s declaration that something cannot

²³ Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1976), 50. My emphasis.

²⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 292–96.

simultaneously *be* and *not be*. Through this tension theory, Ricoeur explores the ways language and reality reflect and express one another.

The tensional approach to metaphor relocates the movement of meaning from denomination to predication. The problem in the former for Ricoeur is that it denies the creation of new meaning.²⁶ Challenging the substitution theory is pressing for Ricoeur, as he finds its implications to transcend the confines of language. His work on metaphor specifically, and interpretation generally, contributes to his larger development of a phenomenological hermeneutics, “a battle field traversed by two opposing trends, the first tending toward a reductive explanation, the second tending toward a recollection or a retrieval of the original meaning.”²⁷ For him, language does not exist for its own sake, but as a result of our need to communicate about the world.²⁸ While he is not necessarily concerned with putting forth a static metaphysics *defining* reality, his appeal to a tensional notion of metaphor nonetheless reveals a relationship between language and reality that is accessed beyond literal meanings.

MOSES MAIMONIDES

Maimonides’ medieval context was likewise drenched in sorting out the ambiguous middle ground, as it had implications for the theological discourses put forth

²⁶ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 46.

²⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 376.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 257.

at the time.²⁹ The discussion involved extensive debate over how we can and should talk about God. In his article “The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides,” Harry Wolfson suggests five definitions, all rooted in Aristotle, of amphibolous predication utilized by Arabic philosophers during this era: things that have one end or proceed from one source; one term applied to a pair of contraries; terms conveying a primary and subsequent relationship between accidents of being; analogical or relative terms; relationships of priority and posteriority.³⁰ He highlights the particular definition found in Maimonides’ *Millot ha-Higgayon*, and likewise traces its roots to Aristotle. The Maimonidean definition of the ambiguous term is one that applies to a relationship between two or more objects that is not based on their essences but on their accidents, that is, their predications.³¹ This particular understanding of amphibolous language underpins Maimonides’ adherence to a negative theology as we will see later.

Maimonides was keenly aware of the issues ambiguous language could produce, especially as it related to the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.³² With this in mind, he wrote *The Guide of the Perplexed*.³³ The title immediately begs the question: who is “the perplexed?” He identifies such an individual as already educated in the physical sciences and thus

²⁹ Ashworth, “Medieval Theories of Analogy,” 2.

³⁰ Wolfson, “Amphibolous Terms,” 172–73.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 163–64.

³² I will use “Torah,” “Bible,” and “Hebrew Bible” interchangeably – that is, the Old Testament.

³³ From here on will be referred to as the Guide.

[t]he human intellect having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province, [he] must have felt distressed by the *externals* of the Law and by the meaning of the above-mentioned *equivocal, derivative, or amphibolous terms*, as he continued to understand them by himself or was made to understand them by others.³⁴

Leo Strauss's introduction to the Guide emphasizes the importance to Maimonides of writing this treatise. He summarizes one of the book's purposes as explaining biblical terms and similes that maintain a double layer of meaning, the literal interpretation of which produce the "gravest errors."³⁵ With such high stakes, Maimonides embeds in his tome warnings of an improper study's consequences and implemented methods to shield his speculations from the destructive reading of the unprepared.

Unlike Ricoeur, Maimonides' "theory of metaphor" is not an explicit theory put forth out of a philosophical investigation into language.³⁶ As Strauss puts it, "[o]ne begins to understand the Guide once one sees that it is not a philosophic book – a book written by a philosopher for philosophers – but a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews."³⁷ Maimonides believes in the God of the Torah – the latter, the linguistic manifestation of His Law. From such a position, we first note that Maimonides' understanding of metaphor and its connection to reality involves a preestablished

³⁴ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 5–6. My emphasis.

³⁵ Leo Strauss, "How To Begin To Study The Guide of the Perplexed," in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), xiv.

³⁶ It is worth noting that any time I make a reference to Maimonides' "theories," it is not to reflect a philosophical impetus behind his writings. I use "theory" to indicate the whole of his thought and the way I am organizing it.

³⁷ Strauss, "How To Begin To Study The Guide of the Perplexed," xiv.

metaphysics reflective of his theology. Then, we understand that the *correct*, but nonetheless beyond the literal, interpretation of the Torah is what teaches us about the world. We must therefore examine Maimonides' thinking on the way language works in scripture alongside the metaphysical and theological foundations found in his interpretation of the Bible. The second goal of the Guide that Strauss identifies – to explain the secrets of the *Account of the Beginning* and the *Account of the Chariot* – aids us in this process.

Maimonides' theology and metaphysics are rooted in a “Neo-Platonized Aristotelianism” that permeated the Islamic philosophical environment in which he lived.³⁸ Given this context, many expositions of the rabbi have included examination of his Greek predecessors – predominantly Aristotle, as Maimonides was a student of the Peripatetic school – and Islamic influences. The more significant of the Islamic influences include Abu Nasr al-Farabi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), al-Ghazali, and Ibn Rushd (Averroes).³⁹ I will focus on al-Farabi to help explain how Maimonides' version of emanation may be reflected in his theory of metaphor.⁴⁰

³⁸ Kenneth Seeskin, “Maimonides,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2017), 1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/maimonides/>.

³⁹ Sarah Pessin, “The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), 1, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/maimonides-islamic/>; see also Strauss, “How To Begin To Study The Guide of the Perplexed.”

⁴⁰ I follow Sarah Pessin's reasoning for al-Farabi's stronger influence as his being the earliest thinker and most often referenced by Maimonides in the Guide. See Pessin, “The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides,” 7.

CHAPTER TWO

PAUL RICOEUR

Paul Ricoeur challenges literal interpretation by both redefining the literal and using it to gain access to the metaphorical. As has been mentioned, he does so by raising a tension theory of metaphor against the substitutive theory grounded in Aristotle's definition of metaphor. His approach requires a challenge to our notions of reality itself, yet without necessarily denying the existence of any reality. While he does not set out an explicit metaphysical ordering to the universe, Ricoeur provides yet another tool for understanding the human experience through the metaphorical utterance.

This chapter begins with a look at Ricoeur's wider interpretation process to help understand how language generally, and metaphor specifically, contribute to knowledge acquisition. It then moves into the details of his tension theory of metaphor and its four applications. From there we move into the way metaphor engages our imagination to signal unseen parts of reality that cannot be observed, let alone literally referenced. From there, we see the implications such an approach to metaphor has for the Aristotelian ordering of being which the substitutive theory of metaphor supports.

LANGUAGE AS DISCOURSE

“[A] metaphor does not exist in itself, but in and through an interpretation.”⁴¹ It is therefore helpful to examine Ricoeur’s wider theory of interpretation and metaphor’s place within it. His aptly titled work *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, a compilation of four essays, proves useful to such a venture. To begin, “[i]nterpretation is a particular case of understanding... applied to the written expressions of life.”⁴² Metaphor serves a unique role in fostering life’s expression, as we will see throughout this study. Discourse, as well as the semantic aims of various types of discourses, underpin Ricoeur’s rendering of the interpretation process and how metaphor fits within it.

Interpretation Theory begins with defining language as discourse. Discourse involves both the noun and the verb, a matter of predication and not simply denomination, or naming, and encompasses language *in use*.⁴³ It is this interaction of identification and predication that enables the production of meaning.⁴⁴ David Pellauer and Bernard Dauenhauer include in Ricoeur’s definition that “discourse always involves

⁴¹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 73.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

a speaker or writer and a hearer or reader as well as something said in some situation about some reality, ultimately a world that we might inhabit.”⁴⁵

Ricoeur proposes within discourse the dialectic of “event” and “meaning.” The event of discourse is twofold: the event that is being discussed as well as the event of its enunciation.⁴⁶ Ricoeur further explains that while experience cannot be transferred, meaning can. He thus proposes his axiom: “If all discourse is actualized as an event, all discourse is understood as meaning.”⁴⁷ And while the experiential events come and go, “the text remains for anyone who knows how to read. Hence it is the meaning of the text rather than the original author’s intention or the originating situation that becomes the object of interpretation.”⁴⁸

Yet we want to know if the meaning we find is true. So Ricoeur gives us yet another dialectic: that of sense and reference. “Only this dialectic says something about the relation between language and the ontological condition of being in the world.”⁴⁹ Only because there is *something* to be said, an experience that we want to share through meaning, do we speak.⁵⁰ Again, we see the dialectic of meaning and event at play in

⁴⁵ David Pellauer and Bernard Dauenhauer, “Paul Ricoeur,” in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016), 11, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/ricoeur/>.

⁴⁶ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 16.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Pellauer and Dauenhauer, “Paul Ricoeur,” 12.

⁴⁹ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 20.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 21.

sense and reference respectively. “In other words, the sense correlates the identification function and the predicative function within the sentence, and the reference relates language to the world. It is another name for discourse’s claim to be true.”⁵¹

There are many forms of discourse, including poetic, psychological, and speculative. Each maintains its own “semantic aim” and a code that ultimately “regulate[s] the praxis of the text,” that is, the particular works of written language, within the discourses.⁵² Each discourse has its meanings to be said and guides for how to say them. Metaphor proves to be a tool used by many of them. In dealing with reference to something beyond language, the tension of metaphor is felt. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Ricoeur focuses on the intersection between poetic⁵³ and speculative discourses at the point of metaphor. What this means is that both discourses utilize metaphor, but in a way that maintains their own semantic aims.

To begin, the poetic is not to be reduced to a decorative mode of expression achieved via substituting ornamental language for mundane. Poetic discourse carries its own purpose. It violates the “ordinary” semantic code, making a clear meaning elusive at first glance.⁵⁴ However, it does not simply strive to break the rules of conventional language. “Rather, it seems the goal of poetry is to establish a new *pertinence* by means

⁵¹ Ibid., 20.

⁵² Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 259.

⁵³ Poetic discourse is not limited to *poetry*, but rather refers to the use of non-descriptive, fictitious language (i.e. unlike the descriptive language of scientific discourses) more broadly. See Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 36.

⁵⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 178. My emphasis.

of an alteration in the language.”⁵⁵ That is, poetry offers a new sense of propriety, a new way to think about things, the expression of which does not (and in some cases cannot) fall into the established lexical order.

Poetic discourse uses metaphor to accomplish its semantic aims. “Metaphorical meaning . . . is not the enigma itself . . . but the solution of the enigma, the inauguration of the new semantic pertinence.”⁵⁶ However, deeming something metaphorical is not the same as explicating its meaning. “Interpretation is then a mode of discourse that functions at the intersection of two domains, metaphorical and speculative.”⁵⁷ Where the poetic’s use of metaphor uncovers potential meaning, the speculative proposes its actuality by articulating an explicit (but still hypothetical for Ricoeur) understanding of the metaphorical utterance.⁵⁸ In this way, interpretation is the process by which we produce our theoretical claims on truth within speculative discourse. However, these claims are challengeable. They can be met with yet another metaphorical proposition.

According to Pellauer and Dauenhauer’s reading of Ricoeur, religious discourse covers a wide array of both written and oral linguistic phenomena and is ultimately a subset of poetic discourse about “naming” God.⁵⁹ Stephanie Theodorou adds Ricoeur’s recognition of “the historical life of humans as apprehended in the study of the text (a

⁵⁵ Ibid., 182. My emphasis.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 254.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 358.

⁵⁸ Theodorou, “Metaphor and Phenomenology,” sec. 4.

⁵⁹ Pellauer and Dauenhauer, “Paul Ricoeur,” 15.

form of spirit), particularly those containing metaphors and narratives conveying a lived, concrete experience of religious life.”⁶⁰ In placing the religious under the poetic, Ricoeur is not diminishing its importance, but rather indicating that its language involves metaphor because it allows the communication of non-linguistically bound realities that are fundamental to the religious experience. We now move to exactly how metaphors accomplish communication of unseen, divine or otherwise, realities.

THE TENSION OF POLARITY

In the structuralists’ Aristotelian derived linguistics, words are classified according to categories. The classification consists of the words’ established meanings, or senses. One of Ricoeur’s adjustments comes in declaring that established meaning does not mean “proper” meaning, but simply what was understood prior to the metaphorical event, originally or otherwise.⁶¹ “[O]ne must dissociate the notion of literal meaning from that of proper meaning. Any lexical value whatsoever is a literal meaning.”⁶² However, it is the preestablished meanings that determine a “proper” ordering of predication in the sense that the relationships between words are indicative of and responsive to those recognized meanings. Therefore, when relationships of predication do not reflect the known meaning of the words, new meanings must be found to account for the new relationship. “[T]he metaphorical meaning is non-lexical: it is a value created by the

⁶⁰ Theodorou, “Metaphor and Phenomenology,” sec. 2b.

⁶¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 222.

⁶² *Ibid.*

context.”⁶³ Metaphors that are actually representing preestablished meanings are what Ricoeur deems “dead metaphors” and are not the same as those that induce meaning production.⁶⁴

The poetic discourse evokes images in the readers mind. Conventionally, images, as expressed in either a noun or a verb, represent both observable and conceptual phenomena. They serve as signs for those preestablished meanings. However, poetically formed images are nonsensical, plunging us into unknown waters. This unfamiliarity comes from the fact that the meanings attached to the signs individually no longer provide guidance to the meaning of their combination in the sentence, the predication of noun-verb. This is the location of tension theory’s first application, the tension *within* the statement.

Recall that Ricoeur argues the existence of metaphors within an interpretation process. He locates the conflict that gives rise to metaphor in the incongruity found in a literal interpretation of nonsensical words. That is, the literal sense as connected to a literal reference produces what he calls an “absurdity.”⁶⁵ This is the second application of Ricoeur’s theory, the tension between a literal and metaphorical interpretation. The resolution of the “absurdity” requires the literal to give way to the metaphorical.

Thus a metaphor does not exist in itself, but in and through an interpretation. The metaphorical interpretation presupposes a literal interpretation which self-destructs in a significant contradiction. It is this process of self-destruction or transformation which imposes a sort of twist on the words,

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 253. From this point on, I will use “metaphor” to indicate living metaphors, not those that are representing lexicalized notions.

⁶⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 50.

an extension of meaning thanks to which we can make sense where a literal interpretation would be literally nonsensical.⁶⁶

By rearranging lexicalized signs into new, nonsensical combinations, the metaphor uses the common code against itself. But in doing so, we are able to access new referents our previous ordering of notions had covered up. “To speak by means of metaphor is to say something different ‘through’ some literal meaning.”⁶⁷

In doing so, metaphor requires us to find “resemblances the previous classification kept us from seeing.”⁶⁸ That is, we must uncover a similarity the literal images hide. This entails an engagement of the imagination as “[n]othing is displayed in sensible images, therefore; everything, whether associations in the writer’s mind or in that of the reader, takes place within language.”⁶⁹ Resemblance is therefore understood as a product of construction rather than observation.⁷⁰ We do not find similarity in observation. We create it in reimagining. The third application of tension theory is found in the referential function of the verb *to be* in which “the conceptual structure of resemblance opposes and unites identity and difference.”⁷¹

The final application of tension theory is of the greatest interest for this study. In it, Ricoeur declares a split in reference to match that in sense.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 222.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 233.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 223.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 231.

⁷¹ Ibid., 232.

If it is true that literal sense and metaphorical sense are distinguished and articulated within an interpretation, so too it is within an interpretation that a second-level reference, which is properly the metaphorical reference, is set free by means of the suspension of the first-level reference.⁷²

Does that mean language ceases to be related to any sense of reality, inaccessible to the reader? For Ricoeur, no. Rather, it makes the referential function ambiguous. This is the tension within the existential copula, between *is* and *is not*. We will return to the implications of such a declaration.

TEXTS AND METAPHORICAL NETWORKS

Ricoeur locates metaphorical meaning not only on the scale of the sentence, but also on that of the text.

Language is submitted to the rules of a kind of craftsmanship, which allows us to speak of production and of works of art, and by extension of works of discourse. Poems, narratives, and essays are such works of discourse. The generative devices, which we call literary genres, are the technical rules presiding over their production. And the style of a work is nothing else than the individual configuration of a singular product or work.⁷³

However, reference becomes more complicated at the level of texts, for the writer and reader do not share the same physical context. The exchange becomes “non-situational.”⁷⁴ Texts project worlds through being non-situational, liberating reference from the particular reference of the author.⁷⁵ For forms of written communication outside

⁷² Ibid., 261.

⁷³ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 33.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 35–36.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 36.

of literature, the author can provide enough descriptive language to project the “world” in which the text was written so that it becomes somewhat shared by the reader. This is done through ordinary language, given the writer and reader both adhere to it.⁷⁶ But metaphorical language adds another layer of complexity. Texts within the poetic discourse enable an abandoning of reference to the observable phenomena all together. However, Ricoeur maintains “discourse cannot fail to be about something.”⁷⁷

The poetic text functions by “bring[ing] an explicit and implicit meaning into relation.”⁷⁸ That is, a double meaning. “Hence the relationship between the literal meaning and the figurative meaning in a metaphor is like an abridged version within a single sentence of the complex interplay of significations that characterize the literary work as a whole.”⁷⁹ The counterpart to the metaphorical utterance is the metaphorical network.

Ricoeur developed his notion of metaphorical networks through his work on the symbolic function. The symbol, while operating similarly, is not the same as metaphor for Ricoeur. “It is a bound activity, and it is the task of many disciplines to reveal the lines that attach the symbolic function to this or that non-symbolic or pre-linguistic

⁷⁶ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

activity.”⁸⁰ Symbols do not have the inventive freedom that metaphors do.⁸¹ We can take his examination of the symbolic function in Mircea Eliade’s *Patterns in Comparative Religion* to help elucidate the notion of metaphorical networks.

The symbol as hierophany, manifestations of the Sacred, is found not only in language, but anything with form and structure. Furthermore, it roots religious discourse, including its non-verbal components such as ritual, in the materiality of life itself.⁸² “It is in this sense that symbols are bound within the sacred universe: the symbols only come to language to the extent that the elements of the world themselves become transparent.”⁸³ The symbol, in pointing to something bigger than itself, does so as part of that bigger reality.⁸⁴ It is this notion of the singular symbol rooted in a larger network that Ricoeur carries to his theory of metaphor.

Symbols remain “alive,” – that is, pointing to something bigger – due to their tie to the stability of life itself, transforming with the movement of time and space but never dying. Metaphors, to avoid death through lexicalization, similarly operate in a network that maintains their ambiguous functioning.⁸⁵ Metaphors work with and through each

⁸⁰ Ibid., 58.

⁸¹ Ibid., 61.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 294.

⁸⁵ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 64.

other. Before expanding further on the relationship between metaphor and symbol, we will review the depths of understanding found beyond the literal interpretation.

ACCESSING THE UNSEEN

Imagination plays a fundamental role in poetic discourse's projection, its "outline of a new way of being in the world."⁸⁶ Through reimagination, the poetic challenges the world as understood by the established ordinary language. However, what is discovered through the metaphor is not only unable to be fully captured by the bounds of ordinary (that is, the commonly used) language, but also escapes what we are able to observe.

[W]e investigate new referents only by describing them as precisely as possible. Thus the referential field can extend beyond the things we are able to show, and even beyond visible, perceptible things. Language lends itself to this by allowing the construction of complex referential expressions using abstract terms that are already understood . . . in order to explore a referential field that is not directly accessible, we use predicative expressions whose sense has already been mastered.⁸⁷

Ricoeur looks to art to help explain metaphor's role in understanding new, unseen parts of reality. While art, as we saw with poetic discourse, is often relegated to aesthetics, Ricoeur challenges aesthetics' singular tie to emotion and the implications of the latter's opposition to cognition. Recall the relationship between explicit and implicit meaning that poetic texts utilize. For this relationship to support Ricoeur's tension theory, it must be released from the dichotomy of denotation and connotation that parallel the disjunction between cognition and emotion – that is, connotation being related to

⁸⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁸⁷ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 352.

emotional experience, but not to knowledge acquisition. In relocating metaphor's meaning to predication, Ricoeur places cognition in both denotation and connotation, with metaphor's emphasis on the latter. "Metaphor has to do with semantics of the sentence before it concerns the semantics of a word."⁸⁸ Through this adjustment, the implicit, connotative meaning is found in the rearrangement of images that the poetic discourse entails.

The imaginative component of metaphor's workings utilizes, with adjustments, a notion of iconicity. "Poetic language is that language game . . . in which the aim of words is to evoke, to arouse images."⁸⁹ Ricoeur directly challenges Plato's *eikon* as "weaker and less real than living beings... a mere shadow of reality."⁹⁰ He offers instead a theory of iconicity as a *re-writing* of reality through aesthetic augmentation. "Constructivism is only the boundary case of a process of augmentation where the apparent denial of reality is the condition for the glorification of the non-figurative essence of things. Iconicity, then, means the revelation of a real more real than ordinary reality."⁹¹ Metaphor creates a "heuristic fiction" in its redescription, requiring the "eclips[ing] of ordinary language"⁹² to reveal the "real more real than ordinary reality." In this way, Ricoeur places

⁸⁸ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 49.

⁸⁹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 248.

⁹⁰ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 40.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹² Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 283.

metaphorical language before the descriptive of speculative discourse.⁹³ It therefore has the power to overthrow what is epistemologically established and offer new visions of the world around us. We can recall Aristotle's claim of the existence of non-demonstrative knowledge. However, with it now accessed through the abandonment of descriptive reality, Ricoeur challenges metaphor's inherent tie to the ten categories of being as fixed metaphysical realities. We return to this in the next section.

Another dimension to the iconic nature of metaphor is its use of limit to access the limitless. "This positive value of the material mediation by written signs may be ascribed, in writing as in painting, to the invention of notational systems presenting analytical properties: discreteness, finite number, combinatory power."⁹⁴ It is finitude that gives rise to the infinite variability of perspective. More still, it is through the engaging, rather than denying, and rearranging innumerable singularities that we are able to escape the tyranny of univocity. Thus goes the balancing act of ambiguity.

REWRITING BEING

Ricoeur developed the tension theory of metaphor to account for the creation of meaning, the location for different understandings of how the world works, that a substitution theory denied. "Metaphor, a figure of speech, presents in an *open* fashion, by means of conflict *between* identity and difference, the process that, in a *covert* manner,

⁹³ Theodorou, "Metaphor and Phenomenology."

⁹⁴ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 42.

generates semantic grids by fusion of differences *into* identity.”⁹⁵ There is a non-antagonistic relationship between creation and discovery in Ricoeur’s theory. In fact, he emphasizes the word *invent* as a union (but not fusion!) of both these actions.⁹⁶ The invention of metaphor entails the discovery of a new aspect of reality at the level of reference through the creation of “new, hitherto unnoticed, relation of meaning”⁹⁷ at the level of sense.

While Ricoeur stays somewhat within Aristotle’s metaphysics, he runs with Kant’s reidentifying the ten categories as structures of reasoning used to make sense of phenomenal experiences.⁹⁸ Further still, these “schemata” are objectively real,

meant as a distinctive set of mediating representations, rules, or operators in the mind which themselves display the universal and necessary characteristics of sensible objects; these characteristics are in turn synthesized and unified by the activity of the transcendental imagination.⁹⁹

For Ricoeur, metaphor related to reality in a similar way. Aristotle never resolved the aporia of being because he held on to the privileged, metaphysical status of his ten categories. Ricoeur seems to have overcome the issue of ambiguity not by offering a new *definition* of a non-generic unity of being. Rather, he put univocity and equivocity in conversation, in an act of predication, and accepted the reality of such a dialectic – the

⁹⁵ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 234. Emphasis in original.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.

⁹⁷ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 51.

⁹⁸ Theodorou, “Metaphor and Phenomenology,” sec. 3b.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

generation of new representations for understanding the world.¹⁰⁰ We can hear an agreement with Derrida's *White Mythology* that accuses Western philosophy of privileging its own metaphors. However, Ricoeur does not let go of Aristotle so easily. There are still categories, discourses, schema, and all the other words that have indicated the frames we used to understand the world we live in. Furthermore, those frameworks remain distinct. "The borders of meaning are transgressed, but not abolished."¹⁰¹

Generating new representations of being is not the same as generating reality for Ricoeur. Rather, it is the proposition of a new way of thinking about how it works. "Our words and deeds are intended to express the meaning of what exists, if only because they give meaning to things as they now stand. In this sense, our words and deeds get their significance from being responses to contexts not wholly of our own making."¹⁰² Our being in the world involves discovering those contexts by creating new ways of viewing them. But what are these contexts? Here we return to the relationship between metaphor and symbol.

The point between metaphor and symbol is the "root metaphor." The root metaphor grounds other metaphors in metaphorical networks. They both "assemble and scatter. They assemble subordinate images together, and they scatter concepts at a higher level."¹⁰³ They reach towards symbols in that they

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., sec. 3a.

¹⁰¹ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 253.

¹⁰² Pellauer and Dauenhauer, "Paul Ricoeur," 8.

¹⁰³ Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 64.

are so radical that they seem to haunt all human discourse . . . these metaphors . . . become indistinguishable from the symbolic paradigms Eliade studies . . . So it appears as though certain fundamental human experiences make up an immediate symbolism that presides over the most primitive metaphorical order.¹⁰⁴

Ricoeur in these works never explicitly maps out how the universe operates. Perhaps he simply was not concerned with such an endeavor. He is, after all, a phenomenologist; he focuses on the ways we talk about existences and the meanings we create for what we experience. Nevertheless, he ties metaphorical communication to the expression of human understanding rooted in experiences larger than the words used to describe them, reflecting their transcendence across time and space.

Ricoeur proposes a tensional theory of metaphor, in which meaning is not found in preestablished, literal senses, but created by finding similarity where there was once difference. This requires us not to eliminate the complexity of equivocity, but to partake in its infinite expansion. Without proposing a replacement, Ricoeur challenges an inherent metaphysical structure behind the functioning of metaphor. By releasing metaphor from the denominational substitutive theory rooted in Aristotle's categories of being, he liberates metaphor's innovative capacity and accounts for the phenomenon of meaning production. He views metaphor's play with the complexity of equivocity as enabling a deepening to our understanding of the human experience, especially those realities that escape the grasp of language.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 65.

CHAPTER THREE MOSES MAIMONIDES

Maimonides's *Guide*¹⁰⁵ proves a fascinating case study on the complex workings of language because 1) while not the *Mishnah Torah*, it is nonetheless a work of exegesis¹⁰⁶ as it seeks to explain the meaning of the Bible; 2) in its dealing with the “secrets of the Torah,” the *Guide* ties metaphor to unseen realities; 3) in doing so, it specifically addresses the biblical use of metaphor; 4) and does so by itself using metaphor. Maimonides sees the metaphors of the Torah as key to understanding the truths of the world we live in. These truths are not found in the literal reading of scripture. Rather the reader must engage equivocity in order to find the correct meaning the literal veils. However, the particular words of the Torah still serve a more practical purpose.

MAIMONIDES' WARNING

With the revelation at Mount Sinai and the prophet Moses both in the past, what we have left is the text of the Bible to interpret and transfer the meaning of those

¹⁰⁵ All non-biblical in-text citations for this chapter are from Shlomo Pines' translation of the *Guide*. They include the section, chapter number, and pages for Pines' translation. See Maimonides, *Guide*.

¹⁰⁶ Exegesis is technically any critical interpretation process, not necessarily only related to religious texts. For the sake of simplicity, I use it to reference scriptural interpretation exclusively.

experiences. However, for Maimonides, the Bible is a dynamic book that addresses different people in different ways. This is particularly important for the topics on which the Guide focuses: the words describing God and the divine secrets behind the *Account of the Beginning* and the *Account of the Chariot*.

That which is said about all this is in equivocal¹⁰⁷ terms so that the multitude might comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man, who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise. (Guide 1, p. 9)

We can identify two ideas in this perspective. The first is that there is more than one way to understand the meanings behind the words of the Torah. The second is that there seems to be a hierarchy between the layers of meaning, including there being correct opinions within each layer. Maimonides identifies correct opinions as those that uphold God's unity and incorporeality.¹⁰⁸ We will expand on this through Maimonides' metaphor for the dual layering of the Torah. We must first examine the parameters he places on the exegesis process as it is reflective of the relationship between language and reality found in his understanding of metaphor.

With accuracy as the end goal, Maimonides makes clear, if anything, that the implicit messages of the Torah are not accessed by just anyone, nor without a vigilant approach (Guide 1.5). He advises that there are particular steps to be taken in one's grappling with the true meaning of the text (Guide 1, p. 8). He bases this argument on the meaning and placement of the *Account of the Beginning* (i.e. Genesis). Maimonides

¹⁰⁷ At times, it seems Maimonides uses equivocal to encompass amphibolous and derivative terms. This is one such instance to my understanding.

¹⁰⁸ Seeskin, "Maimonides," 5.

believes this section of the Bible to concern the physical laws of nature on which sciences such as physics, astronomy, biology, and the like are based (Guide 1, p. 9). Moreover, given that the Torah opens with this account, he interprets that when one approaches the path of knowledge, one must start with the physical sciences. Once we have mastered these, we may move on to the metaphysics – the divine sciences – that are found in the *Account of the Chariot*. Only after we have mastered the physical, followed by the divine sciences, is the path to apprehending God opened (Guide 1, pp. 8-9). However, as we will see later on, this last apprehension is in reality, impossible. Nevertheless, by neglecting the appropriate method, the religious individual risks losing his or her faith all together (Guide 1.33, p. 71).

A second, and inverse, component to Maimonides' warning is that the explanation of these mysterious components mirrors the challenge of understanding them. That is, we are never able to fully articulate the secrets of the Torah. This contributes to the danger Maimonides sees in teaching these topics to the masses. Due to this view, scholars have often placed Maimonides within an esoteric tradition, requiring that the secrets of the Torah be taught only within *spoken* lessons to one individual (Guide 3, p. 415). Yet, he *wrote* the Guide, accessible to all, fearing that without it he would be “robbing one who deserves the truth of the truth” (Guide 3, p. 416).¹⁰⁹

Walking the fine line between aiding the perplexed, but nonetheless learned individual, and harming the common, unlearned one requires perhaps one of the most

¹⁰⁹ The “one who deserves the truth” is in this case a particular pupil to whom the Guide is ultimately addressed. See pages 3-4 of Maimonides' introduction to the first part of the Guide for the full dedication.

puzzling characteristics of the Guide: Maimonides' mimicry of the language he seeks to clarify. He does this to uphold the very reason behind the ambiguous language of the Torah.

For my purpose is that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed, so as not to oppose that divine purpose which one cannot possibly oppose and which has concealed from the vulgar among the people those truths especially requisite for His apprehension. As He has said: *The Secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him* [Psalm 25:14]. (Guide 1, pp. 6-7)

Maimonides thus falls in line with the Sages, or philosophers (Guide 1.53, p. 116),¹¹⁰ that came before him: they also “spoke of it [the meaning behind the accounts] only in parables and riddles” (Guide 1, p. 8). The use of such a counterintuitive structure emphasizes the need to abandon literal interpretation when accessing and communicating unseen realities, namely, God and the truth of His Law. It is in the depths of metaphor that our knowledge of reality expands.

DUAL LAYERING OF THE TORAH

Unpacking the secrets of the Torah requires a delicate interpretation and articulation process, as we have seen in Maimonides' warnings. The Guide lays out an exegesis utilizing the same rhetorical methods it explains. We therefore come to one of his own uses of metaphor to explain the Torah's secret workings.

The entirety of Maimonides' thought is elegantly enclosed in his comparison of the Torah to a golden apple covered in silver filigree. The image is based on Proverbs

¹¹⁰ See note 3.

25:11, which states, “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver.”¹¹¹ Maimonides draws particular attention to the Hebrew word “maskiyyoth,” translated above as “setting,” and instead opts for the word “filigree,” “in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them” (Guide 1, p. 11). With this specified translation, Maimonides asked the reader to “see how marvelously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable” (Guide 1, pp. 11-12) enabling the reader to grasp two meanings, an external and an internal. While the external is still valuable, the internal is more beautiful, mirroring the relationship between silver and gold. This is the idea behind the entirety of the Hebrew Bible.

The parables of the prophets, peace be upon them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of *Proverbs* and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is. (Guide 1, p. 12)

The Torah’s stories, poems, wisdoms and otherwise directly deliver guidance to a religious community while simultaneously serving as the means to an internal depth of divinely ordained truths, glimpsed through the eyelets of metaphor. We will return to the practical function of the silver filigree later on.

In the actual exegetical component of the Guide, Maimonides demonstrates how to access the golden core of the Torah by moving beyond the silver filigree. At times the

¹¹¹ Biblical references are from Michael David Coogan et al., eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha*, Fifth (Oxford University Press, 2018).

internal meanings are found by viewing the composition of a text¹¹² as a whole, while for others, we must look at, and through, each word. Therefore, Maimonides begins the Guide by addressing particular derivative, equivocal, or amphibolous words. In doing so, he systematically lays out the metaphorical network of the Torah. Further still, his Guide requires referencing its various chapters on particular words to understand others on more extensive metaphors, such as the *Account of the Chariot*. This mirrors what he believes to be the way to approach the Torah, looking at the various senses in which a word is used throughout the entirety of the Bible in order to access a deeper understanding.

AMPHIBOLOUS TERMS

Maimonides begins the Guide by elaborating the multiple meanings behind key terms in the Bible. These include those of an equivocal nature as well as those of a derivative – that is, words formed through the alteration of another. When a word is used in relation to God, it becomes an amphibolous term, showing a connection that is not related to a referent's essence. In applying this definition of ambiguous language, Maimonides is able to account for the seemingly corporeal and compositional notions of God found in the Bible.

Maimonides immediately addresses the words “image” and “likeness,” as their use in the verse Genesis 1:26 is perhaps the epitome of biblical language that implies a corporeality to God. The part in question reads, “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.’” Beginning with “image,”

¹¹² While the Torah is itself a text, here I mean the individual components that comprise the Bible as a whole.

Maimonides explains that when used in reference to God, it does not pertain to the “shape and configuration of a thing,” which would imply He has a form, but rather to the

notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is. It is the true reality of a thing in so far as the latter is that particular being. In man that notion is that from which human apprehension derives. (Guide 1.1, p. 22)¹¹³

In this context, “image” is an amphibolous term to indicate there is a true reality, an essence, that is God, but “image” says nothing *about* that essence. Therefore, “let us make humankind in our image” for Maimonides means that God has an essence that makes Him utterly unique, and that humans likewise have an essence, that makes us utterly unique. It is not the literal sense of the word “image,” but a metaphorical one that conveys the true understanding of this statement that upholds God’s incorporeality.

“Likeness” in relation to God is similarly a matter of notion and not form.

Humans’ likeness to God is in the operation of intellectual apprehension.

In the exercise of this, no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used; and therefore this apprehension was likened unto the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument, although in reality it is not like the latter apprehension, but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion. (Guide 1.1, p. 23)

In other words, what is (somewhat) alike between us and God is the *act* of intellectual apprehension rather than our quiddities. To be alike in essence is to be of the same species (Guide 1.56, p. 130). Accordingly, there is a *relation* between things that are essentially alike as they share placement under a higher genus. That nothing is higher

¹¹³ My emphasis.

than God, and innumerable existences are higher than us,¹¹⁴ serve as two of the myriad reasons we in no way share a relation to God.

Know that likeness is a certain relation between two things and that in cases where no relation can be supposed to exist between two things, no likeness between them can be represented to oneself. Similarly in all cases in which there is no likeness between two things, there is no relation between them. (Guide 1.56, p. 130)

To repeat, the likeness between ourselves and God is not a matter of being alike in our essence: rather there seems to be a similarity found in our actions, which indicates nothing of how our quiddities might compare.

We also see a suggestion of the limits amphibolous language places on knowledge of God at the end of the quotation that reads: “but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion.” The first stirrings of opinion – a literal reading – is what implies any similarity between us and God. But this would also imply an attribute of God, which for Maimonides is nowhere to be found in the true understanding God. What such phrases in the Bible actually teach us will be discussed in the section on negative theology. It is helpful to first detour through the metaphysical notions underlying Maimonides’ exegetical processes.

EMANATION AND PROPHECY

To understand the metaphysics behind Maimonides’ concept of metaphor, we can look to his predecessor, Abu Nasr al-Farabi, who provides a useful (and decidedly clearer) outline of the Neoplatonic metaphysics that the Guide more or less reflects. In a

¹¹⁴ See next section.

crude summary, al-Farabi's *On the Perfect State* takes us step by step through divinity's path from the First Cause (i.e. God) down through the heavenly (supralunar) spheres, each ruled by an intellect (angel), and eventually into the material (sublunar) world in which we live, bridged by the Active Intellect (the messenger angel, Gabriel).¹¹⁵

Maimonides identifies the movement from sphere to sphere as "divine overflow."¹¹⁶

Al-Farabi addresses humanity's place within emanation and access to its higher spheres in his discussion of the faculties of the soul. These faculties likewise comprise a hierarchy, beginning at the bottom with the nutritive faculty (how we acquire nourishment), followed by the faculty of sense (perception of sensibles), then the appetitive faculty (the location of desire and from where the will arises) and lastly, the two of greatest interest, the faculty of representation and the rational faculty.¹¹⁷ The faculty of representation enables us to recall sensory input once the stimuli are no longer present.¹¹⁸ In essence, it is our imaginative capacity. With the rational faculty, "[man] is able to know the intelligibles and by it he distinguishes good and evil and by it he grasps the arts and sciences. An appetite towards the objects of reasoning is joined with this

¹¹⁵ Abū Nasr al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State: Mabādi' Ārā' Ahl al-Madīnat al-Fāḍilah*, trans. Richard Walzer ([S.l.]: Chicago, IL: Great Books of the Islamic World; Distributed by KAZI Publications, 1998), chaps. 1–9; Pessin, "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides."

¹¹⁶ Pessin, "The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides," 27.

¹¹⁷ al-Fārābī, *On the Perfect State*, 165.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

faculty as well.”¹¹⁹ Each faculty provides the material for the one above it, knowledge being acquired by means of the highest three.¹²⁰

The role of symbolism comes in when the mind is grasping at concepts beyond the material world.

It [the mind] thus imitates the intelligibles of utmost perfection, like the First Cause, the immaterial things and the heavens, with the most excellent and most perfect sensibles, like things beautiful to look at; and the defective intelligibles with the most inferior and defective sensibles like things ugly to look at.¹²¹

In other words, the imagination deals with objects that do not have form by using the forms it knows.

The interplay between the faculty of imagination and reason is particularly important in what al-Farabi called “true visions” and “divination.” These are instances in which images arrive in the imagination that were not a result of conscious deliberation but rather of direct intervention of the Active Intellect:

It is for this reason that such things can also be present in the faculty of representation without having been discovered by deliberation, and so true visions will arise from the particulars which the Active Intellect gives to the faculty of representations in dreams. But divinations concerning things divine will arise from the intelligibles provided by the Active Intellect, which it receives by taking their imitations instead.¹²²

This is the meeting of the prophets and Gabriel. The existence of prophesy proves fundamental to the workings of metaphorical language in the Bible.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 171–75.

¹²¹ Ibid., 219.

¹²² Ibid., 221.

For Maimonides, prophets communicate the intelligibles of visions in the two kinds of parables mentioned in the previous section on the dual layers of the Torah. The first is through those that constitute a meaning as a whole and the other through utilizing particular words that are either derivative or equivocal. “In [the latter] case the action of the imaginative faculty consists in occasioning the appearance of a thing designated by an equivocal term, through one of whose meanings another can be indicated” (Guide 2.43, p. 392).¹²³

Visions of prophesy can take on awe-inspiring forms that resemble nothing of the natural world. This is because they deal with the intelligibles only approximated by human conceptualization. We can see this in one of the more famous instances of these visionary experiences, prophet Ezekiel’s *Account of the Chariot*. It is a parable that requires each word to be looked at carefully. Maimonides’ explanation of the derivative, equivocal, and amphibolous words reveal the same theory of emanation found in al-Farabi. However, it requires us to recall interpretations learned in previous chapters of the Guide, as the complete elucidation of the vision is not contained in the seven chapters that address it directly. The vision’s full description in the Bible extends throughout the book of Ezekiel, but the verses Maimonides addresses come predominantly from chapters one and ten.

Maimonides explains in Guide 1.4 the verbs to see, to look at, and to vision, as relating both to the objective activity of the eyes and the figurative notion of “the grasp of

¹²³ There is another way to indicate alternate meaning to the literal through the comparison of two words that maintain the same but rearranged letters. I do not get into this as it does not appear as frequently as the other two and requires a deeper study of the Hebrew language that is beyond the scope of this paper. See Guide 2.43, p. 391.

the intellect” (p. 27). To see God is to intellectually apprehend Him; to look at Him is to focus one’s attention upon Him; and to vision Him is to apprehend Him with the heart (Guide 1.4). Heart is equivocal including reference to intellect (Guide 1.39). Thus prophetic visions are intellectual apprehensions. In the *Account of the Chariot*, we are dealing with three visions (Guide 3.5, p. 425).

The first involves living creatures with four faces, including the likeness of a human, an eagle, a lion, and an ox (Guide 3.1, p. 417; 3.3, p. 422). Later the face of an ox is replaced by a cherub, another term for angel (Guide 3.3, p. 422). “Likeness” here is in terms of notion. We can understand from the “likeness of humans” what is meant is intellect, as we saw in Maimonides’ explanation of the term “likeness” (Guide 1.1, p. 23) and that which makes humans unique being our intellectual apprehension. These angelic intellects control wheels below them (Guide 3.2, p. 421), which Maimonides identifies as equivocal for spheres (Guide 3.3, p. 422) – as in the heavenly spheres (Guide 3.4, p. 423) – in accordance with divine purpose (Guide 3.2, p. 419).

The wheels are the second vision. Once again, “likeness” appears in describing the relationship of the living creatures to one another and the same between the wheels (Guide 3.3, p. 423). However, now it is not in an amphibolous relationship as the creatures and wheels relate in *essence*, meaning they are members of one species of being.

The third vision is of a divided man: “Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins saw something that looked like fire, and there was splendor all around” (Ezek. 1:27). Maimonides directs our attention to the

order in which the visions are presented. First the living creatures, followed by the wheels, and then the divided man. “The reason for this lies in the fact that the first two apprehensions necessarily precede the third apprehension in the order of knowledge, the latter being inferred with the help of the other two” (Guide 3.5, p. 426). Recall the path of study of the secrets of the Torah, beginning with the natural sciences and then moving on to the divine. The divine sciences are indicated here as the angels and their respective spheres, as we saw in the supralunar emanations outlined by al-Farabi. After understanding metaphysics, that is the divine sciences, are we able to glimpse what is indicated by the divided man. Permission to teach this last apprehension was debated among the Sages. We can, tentatively, infer that the divided man is some sort of reference to God. However, Maimonides does not venture to explain what the image in Ezekiel’s vision implies (at least overtly). Nevertheless, we again run into a boundary between the knowable and God, only peered across through inference.

The dual layering of the Torah is reflective of Maimonides’ understanding of the way the universe is ordered. The physical, sublunar realm is what we learn about from the *Account of the Beginning*, indicated previously in Maimonides’ instruction to begin with the physical sciences in one’s study. The metaphysical, supralunar realm, is found in the *Account of the Chariot*, reflecting a Neoplatonic theory of emanation. However, understanding the truths in themselves, held within these accounts, requires one to move past their literal forms. The next section expands the parallel between material and immaterial existences and literal and metaphorical meaning.

ACCESSING THE IMMATERIAL

We can look to an article by Sarah Pessin, “Matter, Metaphor, and Private Pointing: Maimonides on the Complexity of Human Being,” to help us understand the way this divine overflow interacts with human (notably, not prophetic) nature. Pessin’s explication of Maimonides’ metaphorical treatment of matter as both a “married harlot” and a “woman of valor” (images taken from Proverbs 7:6-27) presents an interplay between the material and the immaterial that can help us further understand that between the literal and metaphorical interpretation of the Torah.

The first image, that of the married harlot, speaks to matter as a “corporeal instability in which one form gives way to the next in an unending series of faithless rifts.”¹²⁴ The image of a harlot reflects the changing nature of time and space. If something is always changing, it cannot be the Divine Law itself, let alone God. For laws to work, they must be consistent and reliable. The material world then is not to be taken as the Law, but the perishable fruits of its workings. Focusing on the material, as a harlot supposedly does on pleasure, therefore, undermines the “marriage” of human understanding with the “intelligible abstractness of universal truths.”¹²⁵ But that does not make the material insignificant. Here enters the woman of valor.

Pessin argues that the pairing of a woman of valor with a married harlot gives space to the complexity of the human soul – “its simultaneous limited and limitless

¹²⁴ Sarah Pessin, “Matter, Metaphor, and Private Pointing: Maimonides on the Complexity of Human Being,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (2002): 78.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 78–80.

nature, and its dual instantiation as actually fallen and potentially angelic.”¹²⁶ This is due to the fact that it is only through the material that the human is able to realize such angelic potential. She explains, “the soul's interaction with images – and with the particularities of the material world whence these images arise – is a key stepping-stone towards the sought-after noetic development that lies at the heart of a perfected human essence.”¹²⁷

Pessin further identifies metaphor as the embodiment of using the material world to access the Divine, “ideas that are themselves too abstract to be grasped directly.”¹²⁸ “For metaphor-together with poetry, parable, and allegorical construction – is a case in point of how the concrete images derived from the materially particular sensory world can be used as effective aids in the journey towards knowledge.”¹²⁹ While we are not to stop before the literal interpretation, we must nevertheless go through it. This explanation is aligned with Maimonides’ path of correct study, beginning with the physical laws of nature, the material, before moving on to the more refined, divine sciences of metaphysics found in the heavens. In uncovering the layers of metaphorical language, we ascend back up the spheres of divine emanation.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 82.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 85.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 84.

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Maimonides provides a specific reason for metaphorical communication in the Bible. The parables and metaphors are products of the perfected faculties of imagination and reason found in prophets to teach us indirectly how to live according to the wisdoms only they were able to receive (somewhat) directly.

[B]ecause of the greatness and importance of the subject and because our capacity falls short of apprehending the greatest of the subjects as it really is, we are told about those profound matters – which divine wisdom has deemed necessary to convey to us – in parables and riddle and in very obscure words. (Guide 1, p. 9)

However, Maimonides' reasoning emphasizes human limited capacity as well as the inaccessible nature of the matter at hand (Guide 1.31). We cannot know everything.

An overview of Maimonides' perspective on describing God can be seen in Guide 1.60, in which he produces yet another of his own metaphorical explanations. He offers an analysis of a failed, if not utterly ridiculous, representation of an elephant. In describing something that both flies and swims, dwells in a transparent body with three wings, and other absurd physical descriptions, one has not only failed to describe an elephant, but has failed to describe anything in existence (Guide 1.60, p. 146). Similarly, "one who affirms an attribute of Him [God] without knowing a thing about it except the mere term, it may be considered that the object to which he imagines the term applies is a nonexistent notion – an invention that is false" (Guide 1.60, p. 146). What does this say about God's existence? Nothing. Which is the point. However, this does not deny God's existence but that "God, as subject, transcends the normal parameters of language and

conceptualization.”¹³⁰ Yet we talk about God. Continuously. In the face of such a reality, Maimonides follows a negative theology, declaring the correct way to talk about God is in negation (Guide 1.58, p. 134). For example, “the meaning of our saying that He is not powerless is to exemplify that His existence suffices for the bringing into existence of things other than He” (Guide 1.58, p. 136). More drastically, in using affirmative language concerning God, one has not merely failed to understand Him properly, but “has abolished his belief in the existence of the deity without being aware of it” (Guide 1.60, p. 145). In other words, the religious individual has undermined their own monotheistic faith. To affirm any attribute of God actually denies His unity.¹³¹ By saying God is anything, we imply a multiplicity within Him. If we call God both just and merciful, then we imply that there is a point where His mercy ends and justice begins. For Maimonides, this denies God’s utter unity.

However, negations are still attributes, in that they particularize to a certain extent what they predicate, although indirectly through the inference of what is not excluded (Guide 1.58, pp. 134-135). They are nonetheless different than affirmations:

The attributes of affirmation, even if they do not particularize, indicate a part of the thing the knowledge of which is sought, that part being either a part of its substance or one of its accidents; whereas the attributes of negation do not give us knowledge in any respect whatever of the essence the knowledge of which is sought, unless this happens by accident (Guide 1.58, p. 135)

¹³⁰ Pessin, “The Influence of Islamic Thought on Maimonides,” 9.

¹³¹ A full discussion on how this works is beyond the scope of this paper, but see Guide 1.55, p. 128 for Maimonides’ explanation.

Negations are ambiguous. Furthermore, they are necessary to lead us to the correct opinions, “that which must be believed with regard to Him” (Guide 1.58, p. 135), namely, His incorporeality and unity. We do so because the more we learn of what He is not, the closer we come to apprehension, but never actually reach it (Guide 1.60, p. 144).

God does not fit into Aristotle’s categories of being. Here enters a key feature of Neoplatonic influence. God, unlike Aristotle’s primary substances, most notably being itself, does not actually enter into relationships of predication according to Maimonides. This applies to all attributes professed of God. What makes a primary substance unique, its “oneness,” is not the same notion that applies to God’s unity. When we say God *is* something, it is simply to indicate what He *is not* (Guide 1.58, p. 134). We saw what seems to be something similar in Ricoeur’s final application of his tension theory, the existential copula that declares something both *is* and *is not*. However, unlike Ricoeur, we do not create a new understanding of God’s essence: we depart from talking about it all together.

Yet the Bible uses affirmative language. However, remember the golden apple covered in silver filigree. The one who believes the Bible to say anything about God, especially implying a corporeality and multiplicity, “was not led to it by intellectual speculation; he merely followed the external sense of the texts of the Scriptures” (Guide 1.53, p. 119). Maimonides states that the attributes in the Bible “are mentioned only to direct the mind toward nothing but His perfection, may He be exalted, or that they are attributes referring to actions proceeding from Him, as we have made clear” (Guide 1.61, p. 147).

But what does it mean to talk about God's actions? Another article by Pessin, "On Glimpsing the Face of God in Maimonides: Wonder, 'Hylomorphic Apophasis' and the Divine Shawl," helps us to understand Maimonides' explanation of descriptions of God found in the book that he believes to declare God's essence inaccessible.

Unlike the "divine powers" of other thinkers, divine attributes, for Maimonides, are not real; God, for Maimonides, does not actually have any attributes. Far from "corresponding" in any sense to divine attributes (or powers, or the like), a claim like "God is merciful" . . . tells us nothing about God – it tells us, rather, something about the world.¹³²

Statements about God are statements about His actions that we in turn are able to experience. On our path to learning the Torah's secrets, we will in fact learn nothing of God save the implications of His existence.

Ultimately language is insufficient, but this results from our own inability to apprehend God, for only God apprehends Himself.

all men, those of the past and those of the future, affirm clearly that God, may He be exalted, cannot be apprehended by the intellects, and that none but He Himself can apprehend what He is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him. (Guide 1.59, p. 139)

What is in our power to apprehend is only done through negation and is ultimately not reflective of the true reality of the referent – only what that referent's existence means for us (Guide 1.59, p. 139). Language is but a means to order our life according to our experience of the Laws set by the One we cannot understand (Guide 1.54, p. 125).

¹³² Sarah Pessin, "On Glimpsing the Face of God in Maimonides: Wonder, 'Hylomorphic Apophasis' and the Divine Prayer Shawl," *Tópicos* 42, no. 1 (2013): 80, <https://doi.org/10.21555/top.v42i1.62>.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

When examining Maimonides's theory, a natural question arises: what can the "common" individual, the one who will inevitably follow the literal understanding, find in the Torah? We return to the carefully crafted silver filigree. The words of the Torah are not solely there to safeguard us from the full beholding of God's Glory. Ultimately,

The Law as a whole aims at two things: the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body. As for the welfare of the soul, it consists in the multitude's acquiring correct opinions corresponding to their respective capacity. Therefore some of them (namely, the opinions) are set forth explicitly and some of them are set forth in parables. For it is not within the nature of the common multitude that its capacity should suffice for apprehending that subject matter as it is. As for the welfare of the body, it comes about by the improvement of their ways of living one with another. (Guide 3.27, p. 510)

Human welfare involves the realm of religion as praxis, embodied in the commandments that direct us on how to live together. God gave Moses the Law so that humans may acquire both perfections, "the welfare of the states of people in their relations with one another through the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing and through the acquisition of a noble and excellent character" (Guide 3.27, p. 511). Not all the commandments are communicated through metaphors, but the answer Maimonides gives in his explanation of accessing the reasoning behind seemingly arbitrary ones will sound familiar.

The perplexed individual must not seek a reason in the minutiae, but the divine law from which the commandments extend.

Accordingly, in my opinion, all those who occupy themselves with finding causes for something of these particulars are stricken with a prolonged madness in the course of which they do not put an end to an incongruity, but rather increase the number of incongruities. Those who imagine that a cause may be found for suchlike things are as far from truth as those who imagine that the generalities of a *commandment* are not designed with a view to some real utility. (Guide 3.26, p. 509)

Take Maimonides' example of sacrifice: the purposes behind the sacrifice are not to be found in the type of animal or number to be sacrificed, but in the general notion that sacrifice is good for the perfection of the body and soul. "The constant statements of [the Sages] to the effect that there are causes for all the commandments... have in view the utility of a given commandment in a general way, not an examination of its particulars" (Guide 3.26, p. 509). The particulars could be any particular as long as they serve the purpose found at a higher level of apprehension.

This is a similar relationship to the one we saw previously between the seen and the unseen. The welfare of the soul is achieved through that of the body (Guide 3.27, p. 510). The first meanings any individual will encounter from the Torah are the practical and physical ways to order one's life. The religious discourse, unlike Ricoeur's naming God, is concerned with prescribing a virtuous life in understandable terms for the common individual. It moves us to action without assigning reason beyond that God said so. Further still, the production of virtuous action occurs *without* any interaction with the speculative. By acting these out, the individual is able to attain the benefits of living according to God's Law without needing to understand the hidden layers of meaning. We can recall Maimonides' path of study that started with the physical sciences before moving on to the divine. Only after the prescribed religious practices have been mastered will we be able to understand the truth "as it is." We see more clearly the ways that Maimonides' approach to the interpretation of the metaphors that cloak the secrets of the Torah mirrors the Neoplatonic notion of emanation. The visible realm of the body, while lower than, is nevertheless an extension of and point of access to the invisible realm of

the soul. We can hear the echoing metaphor of matter as a married harlot and woman of valor.

The speculative, in this case, the exegesis of scripture,¹³³ explicates meanings rooted in the unseen realms. Maimonides places the Guide in the speculative as seen in his stating “that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters, I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such... it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended” (Guide 3, p. 416). While for Maimonides there certainly is a correct understanding of the internal and external layers of the Torah, he does not claim to have reached a point of full apprehension of the former. In fact, “[y]ou should not think that these great *secrets* are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not” (Guide 1, p. 7). Maimonides nonetheless believes striving for correct understandings to be an essential component to inquisitive existence. With this Maimonides draws a connection not only between language and reality generally, but language and the thriving of human nature specifically.

Moses Maimonides, despite being a deeply religious man, does not find the truth of his scripture in its literal interpretation. In fact, he argues that the Torah has been powerfully constructed to both provide access to the truth dwelling on a deeper level and comprehensible guidance. The key, according to Maimonides, is metaphor – language that functions with a dual layering to achieve both of those goals. While he holds the

¹³³ It is worth noting that in the Guide Maimonides does not address the speculative discourses of those who do not believe in God. Therefore, all the critiques he makes of different theories put forth are also under the presupposition that God exists and that there is some order to the world. He, like everyone else, aims for the correct understanding.

interpretation of the Bible's metaphorical language to be important, Maimonides does not believe such a process is for just anyone, much less something to be made available to the masses. With this in mind, he provides extensive warning and guidance for exegesis of the Torah in his Guide. Both his interpretation and its instruction reflect a structuring of the Bible's language that matches the metaphysical chain of emanation Maimonides believes the universe to hold. However, access to these deeper truths requires us to abandon our notion that the literal interpretation of scripture reveals the truth "as it is."

CONCLUSION

Humans have the unique capacity to organize through our use of language. Narratives, written or oral, are able to transcend time and space, bringing us into conversation with one another as we negotiate the meaning and application of our binding stories. The written word perhaps has added a new dimension as it can be received by a lone individual who then brings a new understanding to a tradition's interpretation and application of its history. Nevertheless, the stories we share contribute to our cooperation and well-being as humans.

Narratives that bind us together have long come out of what we recognize as religious traditions. However, philosophical doctrine has likewise taken its hold on public consciousness. While texts have served to unite peoples, they have simultaneously been a root cause of our disunity. Not only do narratives compete with one another, consequently bringing communities into conflict with one another, but they also provoke disputes *within* communities. These inevitably come with the search for *the* true meaning behind words.

It is possible to believe in the truth of a text without holding to a straightforward interpretation of it. Language, like the human experience, is dynamic and complex, requiring an active engagement of the equivocity that often incites anxiety. Paul Ricoeur and Moses Maimonides demonstrate the longstanding notion that there is more to

language than meets the eye. In fact, each finds the reduction of language to its simplest rendering denies fundamental components to the human experience and workings of the world. Metaphor proves the perfect phenomenon to expose this.

For Ricoeur, language not only holds a multiplicity of meaning in its words, but it also involved the creation of new meaning. In his reworking of the foundations set by Aristotle, Ricoeur argues that the metaphorical statement is the location of meaning production. While it does not hold inherent metaphysical parallels, metaphor provides a tool for our proposing the workings of the world. This involves making visible what has not been thought of before through the reimagination of the meanings we have previously acquired.¹³⁴ While he does not provide a particular case of interpretation and a subsequent correct meaning behind a text, Ricoeur nonetheless insists that lexicalized meanings come after the metaphorical utterance and are thus created as new parts of reality are discovered and communicated. In such a reversing of the metaphorical and speculative, we are able to revive the ambiguous nature words hold in their core and give new life to words we long thought semantically settled.

Maimonides, while adhering to a metaphysical theory of emanation and a set of correct meanings to be acquired, argues that the truth of scripture, the secret workings of God's Law, are not housed in the literal interpretations of the Torah. In fact, believing those to be the location of truth prevents the religious individual from remaining within his or her belief. However, the search for the meaning of the Torah is no easy feat. Hence

¹³⁴ Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 352–53.

why Maimonides has been placed in a line of esoteric traditions, in which an individual must be deemed ready before they are to be taught the truth.

In looking at these two thinkers, some questions arise for further research on both Ricoeur and Maimonides. For Maimonides there is a particular way the world operates and therefore truth revealed in language is reflective of this ordering, including a limit on human understanding in reference to God: does Ricoeur's theory of metaphor deny an absolute truth, even if a single individual never comes to know it? Does he set a limit to humans' knowledge capacity, making room for an unknowable God? Additionally, Maimonides assigned a practical role to the particular metaphors chosen in the Torah: does Ricoeur discuss the implications of the chosen words in meaning production? Ricoeur sought to liberate metaphor's potential in describing the world as we perceive it: do Maimonides' metaphysical and theological foundations allow for redescription? Is the gleaming amber and fiery splendor enfolding the divided man a testament to the infinitude of our experiencing and describing God's actions above and below?

It remains to be seen if humans will ever eliminate the challenges that come with language's complexity. However, what if they are not meant to be eradicated to begin with? Ricoeur's and Maimonides' studies of metaphor seem to imply another solution. Perhaps we overcome the challenges of communication by engaging ambiguity rather than subduing it through literal reading.

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