

Maimonides: Seeking Truth And Speaking It

Let me begin by drawing attention to what I consider to be an important distinction between two kinds of injunctions, one *to learn the truth from whomsoever may speak it*, and the other *to speak the truth to whomsoever will hear it*. We may, in the first instance, associate the first with the likes of Al-Kindi and Maimonides –or seekers who reached out beyond their cultural borders in search of truth; while we may associate the second with the likes of Socrates or, to a far lesser extent, Spinoza – those for whom possessing the truth (or what they believed to be the truth) entailed a moral responsibility to *speak out*: whose conscience, we would say, did not allow them to refrain from ‘speaking truth to power’ – whether ‘the power’ was, as in the case of Socrates, the *demos*, or it was, as in the case of Spinoza, ‘the mob’ at the gates of the De Witt family. Then, somewhere in an intermediate region outlined for us by Leo Strauss, we might make room for the likes of al-Farabi, or truth-seekers who will prudentially weigh their words, or

omission thereof. These are not authority-lapping hypocrites, or intellectual cowards, but cold-blooded calculators of the social impact of words, or more generally, of Reason. This latter group, perhaps more than either of the first two, may be more intellectually representative of those truth-seekers for whom prudence has primacy over all other considerations. It is not that they lack a conscience –they certainly would deny that– or that they think less of truth. It is only that for them truth is so precious and fragile that it must be protected by the elite few, and the voice of conscience is better served by a long life rather than by volume.

But how could *we* inter-relate between truth, reason and conscience, or situate these three groups in a single map? At first sight, one might think that all three groups are in agreement on according a lofty place to truth, and a likewise lofty place to Reason as the assured path to it. If differences between them exist, one might argue these may consist –in the case of the first two groups– in that while they both agree on according primacy to truth over both conscience and reason, they part company on the

question of which of the two, reason or conscience, then comes in second place, with the first group arguing in favor of reason (by seeking truth wherever it may be found), and the second in favor of conscience (by speaking it, or speaking out). In contrast, the third group, it might be argued, accords primacy to reason over both conscience and truth. On second thoughts, however, one might discover or decide that these three classifications are misleading, in that the meanings of the three terms used are not exact, and each of them may mean something different to different people. Truth for Maimonides –entrenched as he was in his own Jewish tradition- might not have meant the same as ‘truth’ for al-Kindi. Furthermore, in spite of the association of figures such as al-Kindi and Maimonides with the first injunction, justified by the explicit references they both make for the need to study sources from outside of their respective traditions, one might nonetheless decide, on second thoughts, that one should rather view them as belonging to the third category of intellectuals- together perhaps with al-Farabi and Averroes- for whom, arguably in one sense- it is Reason (here meaning

prudence, often expressed by *silence*) that replaces truth as having first place or highest position on the value-scale, and as having precedence therefore over *speaking out* (which often means one form or another of an imposed blackout). Or one should simply assume that Maimonides, like al-Ghazzali, believed there to be a generic distinction between truths of science and truths of religion, leaving the door open for the free pursuit only of the former.

In drawing up an intellectual placement map here I am clearly not using the common dictionary -the philosophical lexicon- in use by the figures themselves I am referring to. None of them, for example, would consider *prudence* to cover the entire meaning of Reason. More commonly, Reason for them would have an Aristotelian meaning of sorts, with the emphasis being on its theoretical aspect. In this latter sense, of course, the injunction of seeking the truth wherever it may be found should sound very much like a call for according Reason the distinctive honor of being a truth-standard of final resort –that is, as being a final arbiter even for the

truth of beliefs shared by members of one's cultural or religious community. Truth here –as a borderless commodity- would retain its enthroned primacy, and Reason its pride of place as the means to it. And viewed from one angle, one might indeed think that that is precisely what the injunction meant for the likes of Maimonides. But this ideal frame will need to be quickly dropped were we to decide that Maimonides was above all guided by prudence, as this would mean that, in reality, it is the *practical* aspect of the rational calculative faculty that for him must have taken precedence. Reason's theoretical meaning may be what is paid lip service to, and may be what is enthroned in theory, but it would be its practical meaning that in reality would be King.

I already said truth and reason could mean different things for different people. This was clearly something of which people were well aware of at the time as they are today. A vivid example of this is that famous debate on truth reported by al-Tawhidi between Matta the logician and al-Sirafi the grammarian: in debating over whether

or not translating scientific works written in a foreign (i.e., non-Arabic) language is useful or not for the advancement of knowledge for Muslims, the very serious question is raised of *translatability* (or of whether there are universal truths that are expressible in different natural languages). While the logician is presented as a formalist, the grammarian is presented as a language-relativist. For the logician, to seek the truth meant to scan all available literatures, sifting out whatever truths that might happen to be found in one or another of them. For the grammarian, just like a contemporary philosopher of language, to seek the truth meant to burrow into one's own language uses, classifying meanings contextually. Truths for the logician are universal, and thus translatable. For the grammarian they are language-specific, and therefore non-translatable. In any case what is truth for one, as the grammarian argues in that debate, is not so for the other.

One is entitled to view this debate as a paradigmatic case where two alternative meanings of truth are posed and defended, a meaning attributing truth with a universal

value, and one attributing it with multiple, culture-specific values. If we now ask ourselves the question: ‘On which side of this debate would we find a Maimonides?’ not all of us may agree on one answer. But, viewing the debate in the black-and-white terms mentioned, perhaps most of us would not find it easy to claim we can find him on the universal truths side. Deeply entrenched in his cultural tradition, he simply enjoined members of his community to keep their ears out for any truth they might find in other traditions. Of course, one could argue it is unfair to see this debate in black-and-white terms in the first place. To propose the existence of such a divide in that context is to superimpose a generic distinction on what was merely a difference between which of two or more traditions to choose. The debate simply reflected a contest between traditionalists and internationalists over the possession of the “market-brand” of truth, the internationalists seeing it as a *foreign* commodity primarily captured by the Greek language, and the traditionalists as a language-relative commodity, which in *this instance* happens to be captured by the language of the Qur’an. Indeed, if

pressed further, traditionalists would claim that if universalism is to be held up at all, then it is primarily to be dug up from the language of the Qur'an, rather than from some foreign language.

The terms 'traditionalists' and 'internationalists' are used in this context purposely, since I do not think it is fair to describe the logicians as rationalists in contrast with the grammarians. For surely, and as explained, the internationalists were as much bound by a pre-existing philosophic frame of reference as the grammarians were by their Qur'anic framework. Strictly, neither held up the real banner of free thought, that is, of seeking truth *wherever that may lead*. Strictly, therefore, neither side could really be seen as representing what in retrospect one could describe as the precursor of an enlightened or free thinker, not only not considering oneself to be bound by anything but Reason, but also not being prepared not to declare what truth they found through such Reason, and to stand up for it. One could, of course, once again point out that the main body of the Jewish religion for Maimonides *was* the truth, so that he had (as an

exemplar) one foot in each side of the divide, but, like AL-GHAZZALI, not seeing any contradiction in his stance. Or again, he may have been aware of contradictions, but wished to hide them. In this case the term ‘prudence’ once again comes to mind, describing someone for whom the call to seek truth wherever it may be found may have been more an *apologia* for importing principles or ideas from another tradition into one’s own, rather than a genuine call to set free reign to one’s search. Consider in this context the almost pathetic justification Averroes uses to explain why he turned to the study of Aristotle- that he was asked to do this as a favor to the ruler.

As if I have not yet been provocative enough, let me here sharpen my point by spotlighting another group of thinkers hailing vaguely from that period, the very Muslim school of thought that Maimonides –though his *Guide* arguably used a style of argumentation similar to theirs- like al-Farabi, Averroes, and others, took to scoffing at –namely, the Mutakallimun. *Kalam* is generally –and for good reason- defined as an apologetic

theology, limiting itself to, and defending Islam's basic doctrines. One might suppose, in that case, the difference must be scant between them and someone, like Maimonides, whose intellectual home of verity was his inherited religion. Both, after all, would not stray too far in their rational forays after the truth. But consider *Kalam's* origins, and its early Mu'tazilite history and pre-history, reaching as far back as the martyrs of free will, such as Ma'bad al-Juhani (crucified and died 80A.H.) , Abu Ghaylan al-Dimashqi (hand and foot chopped off, then crucified as he wouldn't concur this was predestined, d. 105 A.H.) , al-Ja'd bin Darham (throat slit in Mosque by Caliph) and al-Jahm bin Safwan, d.128A.H.), among others, for all of whom, stunningly I believe, Reason really did *constitute the foundation of religious belief*, and truth meant, above all, being true *with* oneself. Theirs seems to have been an unapologetic and free rational theology, or a theology founded entirely on Reason. One can imagine theirs (and that of the school originating with al Hassan al Basri) to have been a situation where two separate spaces in their minds existed, one in which they came to be inspired by

the belief in God, and the other where they went about sculpting this belief in accordance with Reason, incorporating or designing what made sense to them, and rejecting everything else, whatever its source. Were one to point out that space in their minds which they would themselves identify as their intellectual home of verity, it would be their free reasoning space where movement could be determined by their own will, and not that unfathomable space that gave rise to their inspiration to start believing in God. This is by no means to undermine from the *spiritual weight* of that unfathomable space. But it is to treat it as a dimension that could only be given material form by means of functions and operators that are the tools of trade in the other space. No such spatial duality on the other hand existed in the religious community in which they began to appear. One could describe the disputational landscape which soon began to take shape here (before and after, but excluding the period when their teachings became political dogma) as one which contained single-spaced believers on the one hand for whom Reason from that moment became sourced in the received articles of faith –in the

transmitted traditions and texts; and a second group for whom the judgment scale for the articles of belief was Reason. For the latter group, for an article of faith to pass the test of becoming included in the religious system, it had to be vetted by common sense. A common quotation attributed to the afore-mentioned Jahm Bin Safwan (killed in 128 A.H.) is “Reason Before Transmission” (*al-Fikr qabla wurud al-Sam’*). This free-spirited and rationalist (but also fully transparent and daring) bent of mind would develop further, sprouting later what couldn’t but have been – in the Islamic context in particular- a truly audacious claim –what later still would understandably come to be called a blasphemy-concerning the Qur’an: that this only came into being with the Prophet, and is not, as current belief had it, the eternal word of God. This is not, as it might now seem to some, a merely metaphysical issue about the eternity of some ethereal substance. Quite the contrary, if one were to stop to think of it for a minute, one is bound to be awe-struck by the enormity of its earthly meaning and implications, especially today, when a once-live religion has come to be petrified by its followers, almost made

into an effigy or an idol –arguably the precise model of worship the Prophet of Islam led his rebellion against. If the text, written or memorized, and current among the believers, is not the so-called eternal Word of God, it immediately ceases to be regarded as being so sanctified as to defy questioning, or adjustment. One must quickly here point out that, as Maimonides explains, this matter was viewed totally differently from the Jewish perspective, or in the case of the Torah as the *spoken Word* of God, since –as he tells us- it is by virtue of its having been spoken to, and heard by Moses that it is already classified as a *created* act. But whether it was originally the matter of free will, or also later of the non-eternal nature of the written or vocal words of the Qur'an, or of the nature of good and evil, or of God's justice, Mu'tazilite thinkers simply took a free reign in deciding, based on their own reasoning, what was admissible into their Muslim system of beliefs and what was not. This wasn't simply the case of a Maimonides appropriating one or more pieces from a non-Semitic philosophic tradition to argue -against his own tradition- that the world (for example) could indeed continue to

exist indefinitely. It was rather the case of a believer in a newly-born religion whose traditions have not yet properly settled or become finally formed, who still retained the freshness of mind to think it absolutely appropriate to infuse his new religion with his own beliefs as to what tenets it should have. Nor did their rational judgments of their religious system of beliefs touch only on matters of the after-life: on the contrary, even when it came to the matter of the *imamate*, or whether a polity (the state) should by transmitted religious injunction have a religious form, the Mu'tazilite thinkers insisted that this was a matter to be decided by reason, not by the Qur'an. One can easily imagine how daring these early thinkers were when one considers how still predominant the politicization of Islam is today, expressing itself in, amongst other things, the present divisive predicament of the Palestinian people.

But this 'free reign' of the Mu'tazilites would go even farther: it wasn't only that certain tenets in the received tradition, whether originating in the Book, or in the *sunnah*, or which boasted consensus, that were claimed

to still be in need of passing the test of Reason before being admitted into their system of faith: this entire system could only be sustained, at its foundations, and as I already said, by Reason. Contrast in this matter how the famed symbol of free thought amongst contemporary secularists and rationalists in the Muslim World, Maimonides's Cordoba alter-ego, Averroes, for example, in his *Decisive Treatise*, presents his supposedly enlightened defense of Reason in the face of Faith, circuitously and carefully moving step after step in his argument, not one step being taken without citing some Qur'anic text to establish his point, with the following account a Mu'tazilite would use to describe the school of thought he belonged to:

“Reason (al-‘Aql) is the first principle for both life and faith, because it is through Reason that what is good can be distinguished from what is bad, and it is through Reason that the Book (al-Kitab) can come to be known as a Truth, and likewise tradition and consensus (al-sunnah wal ijma’). Maybe some people would find this surprising, and might believe that the proofs only lie in

the Book, the tradition, and in consensus. But this is not the case, as God Almighty did not address Himself except to the people of Reason.”

It is enlightening just to contrast the philosopher’s need to cite the Qur’an to establish his point, with the theologian’s brazen upholding of Reason –the philosopher’s supposed banner. Indeed, Maimonides (in contrast with someone like Averroes) was forwardly clear in his criticism of *Kalam*’s project to prove the existence of God as a logical step that would follow upon the rational proof of the world’s creation. He believed this Reason-based project to be misled, and misleading, though he does state that the one (and only) tenet of belief that is common to Jews, Christians and Muslims is precisely that the world is created. This *ambiguity* with regard to the use of Reason in this context (and here it is not clear how serious he is about the proof he does come up with for the proof of God) compels one to question the sincerity of his criticism of *Kalam*’s methodology or of the injunction to seek truth wherever it may be found.¹

¹ Professor Stroumsa’s presentation earlier today in which she describes how Maimonides imagined Abraham as a child contemplating the stars and extrapolating

At the same time, the injunction itself fits in well with that tradition of Muslim-World philosophers like al-Kindi, al-Farabi and Averroes- men spoken well of by Maimonides- who generally sought to defend their adoption of new ideas and their pursuit of the foreign sciences once by invoking Qur'anic passages and once by invoking the respect people naturally have for the truth. Significantly, in contrast, and though Maimonides accuses them too of importing their ideas from pre-Islamic sources, the Mu'tazilites proved to be the real torch-bearers both of truth and of Reason by sticking their necks out in defense of their rationally developed views about their religious beliefs, thus presenting us with a true model of an enlightened thinker. Neither did they feel the need to justify their innovative thoughts by deferring to the Qur'an, nor by referring to and acknowledging pre-Qur'anic sciences Maimonides claims they more or less simply copied.

from there the existence of God encourages one to think that his 'proof' in the *Guide* is meant to be different from that of the *Kalam* br virtue of the former being presented as an empirically-based rather than a rationally-based approach: The starting point in the *Kalam* argument is a purely *logical* principle (something that is, is either caused or not)....etc.

I realize I am here walking, in more than one sense, on very thin ice. On the one hand I am trying to take a bash at the likes of Maimonides and Averroes, for having undeserved acclaim as models of free and enlightened thought, when both were in fact entrenched in their received traditions, especially as we make the contrast with the Mu'tazilites; and I am trying on the other hand to call into question a claim –mentioned at the beginning- that Reason or free thought can be divorced, for all practical purposes, from conscience, or more generally from speaking out the truth as one beholds it. My position on both counts may seem tenuous. Take truth, for a start. Why assume that it is not in religion that truth lies, or that a Maimonides wouldn't sincerely believe that, and wouldn't therefore consider his religious home-base as the ultimate container of the truth, be it always in need of replenishment from other sources, religious or otherwise? If this was indeed the case, his call to seek the truth would be a genuine one, and not a mere *apologia* –whether to one's own religious community or to the sources to which one may turn for new ideas. To sharpen the focus on such an interpretation

of Maimonides, one may here draw attention by contrast to an example of yet a fourth category of people, namely, someone who lived almost contemporaneously with Maimonides, but in the eastern part of the Islamic World, Naseer Eddin al Tussi, who could apparently walk quite easily from one side of the political dais to the other, with Shi'ites and Ismailis and Mongols, and spend years in the legendary Alamut fortress producing alternative explanations to Ptolemy's epi-cyclic movements of the stars –the so-called Toussi couples- his passion for the truth clearly being to all intents and purposes de-coupled entirely from his religious or political beliefs. Unlike Maimonides, for whom religion was truth's main container, Toussi's truth and passion seemed to lie entirely in the hard sciences, for studying which he couldn't have strayed away from his truth home-base anyway, and didn't really need to appeal to any argument- including the argument that he was searching for the truth- in order to justify his pursuit. Significantly, by the way, it was specifically in the context of the study of Greek astronomy that that Maimonidean injunction to learn the truth occurred, in his case to encourage the

acceptance of certain facts that did not quite tally with traditional Jewish percepts. On this reading, it might be said, the religious-rootedness of the Maimonidean call for seeking the truth wherever it may be found simply reflected a perspective on truth different from that of Toussi, for whom the truth home-base was in any case the hard sciences and not religion, and who therefore didn't think he was obliged to explain his free-reigning study of the stars.

My second misgiving -about what might indifferently go under the name of diplomacy, or prudence, or the art of writing, and therefore about de-coupling truth and conscience, or de-coupling seeking the truth and speaking out –can similarly be shown to be unwarranted: for surely, it can be said, it is Plato after all that gave Socrates his voice, and who can question but that Plato considered truth a universal commodity? And was it not Plato who instituted the Academy, that very institution whose tradition and teachings, via a long and circuitous route, finally reached Baghdad, Cordoba, and Cairo, thus allowing Maimonides himself to lecture –apparently- in

the Euro-med's first university, al-Qarawiyyin, in modern-day Tunisia (which significantly by the way, was established by a woman)? Likewise, while it may be true that, excepting minor mishaps, neither Averroes nor Maimonides were sacrificed at the altar of truth like the Mu'tazilites, but lived their lives to the full, and did not die like heroes, is it not the case that it is, after all, these very figures who stand out as the forerunners of enlightened thought in the respective Jewish and Islamic traditions, leaving behind them an immeasurable intellectual wealth? Surely, it might be said, isn't all this a reason after all to separate seeking truth from speaking it, and to allow oneself to be guided by prudence?

There are all respectable-sounding arguments, to be sure. But one wonders whether the world wouldn't be a better place, and whether the cause of freedom and Reason wouldn't be better served, by keeping Truth and Reason aligned, never allowing any excuse, however sophisticated, to come between them.

This observation seems to be particularly poignant here and now: Standing in this museum in this city I cannot help recalling the reference to the Holocaust an Israeli former colleague of mine would make to that famous thought attributed to Edmund Burke, that ‘all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing’.

Sari Nusseibeh

Al-Quds University