

SOME REMARKS ON THE SOURCE OF MAIMONIDES' PLATO IN *Guide of the Perplexed* I.17

In *Guide of the Perplexed* I.17, Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) explains that people of the 'religious law', as well as 'philosophers and learned men of the various communities', should refrain as much as possible from teaching 'the multitude' not only divine science but also the 'greater part of natural science'.¹ When forced to discuss these subjects, he continues, whether to address the elite few or to transmit ideas to qualified students in the future,² philosophers and sages, and especially people of the law, ought to present difficult notions in an indirect manner, using 'riddles', 'metaphors', and 'similes'.³ As an example of this type of figurative representation, Maimonides refers to the image of matter as female and form as male, which he attributes to Plato and his predecessors: 'Thus Plato and his predecessors called matter [*al-mādda*] the female [*al-unthā*] and form the male [*al-dhakar*].'⁴

While Maimonides relates this literary figure in *Guide* I.17 to 'Plato and his predecessors', he himself uses it in several chapters of his work as well. In fact, it proved to be quite fruitful in his conceptualization of matter, which he considers passive, potential, deficient, and receptive of forms, the source of corporeal desire and the cause of pain, death, and

¹ I wish to thank Steven Harvey and Angela Jaffray for many helpful references, comments, and suggestions. See Moses Maimonides, *Dalālat al-Hā'irīn*, S. Munk, ed., with corrections and additions by I. Joel (Jerusalem 1930/31) 29; *The Guide of the Perplexed*, English trans. by S. Pines (Chicago 1963) 42. See also *Guide*, preface to part I, for the need to conceal natural science as well as divine science. For a discussion of Maimonides' esoteric method, in relation to the Greek and Arabic background, see most recently S. Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem 1996) [Hebrew], with full bibliography.

² Although this explanation of the need to write or teach philosophy is not stated explicitly in *Guide* I.17, it is implicit there and elsewhere, e.g. in *Guide*, preface to part I, I.31-34, I.71, preface to part III.

³ See again *Dalāla*, 29; *Guide*, 43f.

⁴ See again *Dalāla*, 29; *Guide*, 43. For the possible referent of 'predecessors', see below, n. 26.

destruction.⁵ The metaphor of matter and form plays an important role especially in his discussion of evil in *Guide* III.8-12, and is applied frequently in his explication of relevant biblical texts. Thus Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he explains, are symbols of form and matter; Adam was punished because, contrary to the purpose of creation, he was ruled by matter and the corporeal desires of matter.⁶ The evil woman in Proverbs, similarly, is a representation of matter, which 'is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a married woman who is never separated from a man and is never free'.⁷ But while the 'harlot who is also a married woman' is 'the cause' of all 'bodily pleasures',⁸ the 'woman of virtue', he explains, is 'good matter', for by satisfying basic material needs in an appropriate way she can help the human form to achieve its true perfection.⁹

Following the example of Maimonides, later Maimonidean philosophers and exegetes extended the metaphor and applied it in new ways, in exegesis as well as in literature.¹⁰ To give a few examples, David Qimchi (d. 1235) associates Eve in Genesis with the material intellect; Samuel ibn Tibbon (d. 1232) relates the woman 'more bitter than death' in Ecclesiastes to matter and the evils caused by matter; and Samuel's son Moses (fl. 1244-1274) provides a catalogue of five different male/female

⁵ See especially *Guide*, preface to part I, I.6, I.28, II.26, III.8-12. The misogynistic implications of his imagery have been discussed recently by M. Kellner, 'Philosophical Misogyny in the Middle Ages: Gersonides vs. Maimonides', in A. Ravitzky, ed., *From Rome to Jerusalem: Essays in Memory of Joseph Sermoneta* (Jerusalem 1998) 113-28 [Hebrew] and A. Melamed, 'Maimonides on Women: Formless Matter or Potential Prophet?' in A. Ivry, et al., eds, *Perspectives on Jewish Thought and Mysticism* (Harwood 1998) 99-134.

⁶ See *Dalāla*, 311; *Guide* III.8, p. 433, citing Gen 3:16. For the explication of the Garden of Eden in general, see *Guide*, preface to part I, I.1-2, I.6-7, I.17, II.30; and see S. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Stories of Man/Adam* (Jerusalem 1987) (Hebrew), with bibliography.

⁷ See *Dalāla*, 310; *Guide* III.8, p. 431. On this interpretation of Proverbs, see also *Guide*, preface to part I, as well as Maimonides' *Commentary on the Mishnah, Sanhedrin*, preface to chapter *Heleq*.

⁸ See *Dalāla*, 8; *Guide*, preface to part I, p. 13.

⁹ See *Dalāla*, 312; *Guide* III.8, p. 433f.

¹⁰ For the use of male/female images and allegories in Hebrew literature, a subject that deserves further research, see most recently M. Hus, *Don Vidal Benveniste's Melitzat 'Efer ve-Dinah* (Jerusalem 2003) (Hebrew), with bibliography.

analogies in the preface to his commentary on Song of Songs.¹¹ So popular was this image that Solomon ben Abraham ibn Adret (1235-1310), a legal authority who banned the study of philosophy in 1305, cited it to illustrate the pernicious effect of philosophy on Judaism. Expressing the fear that the allegorization of biblical narratives could lead not only to doubts about their historicity but to the undermining of biblical law, he complains about the preachers' philosophical sermons, in which they identify Abraham with form and Sarah with matter.¹²

The ultimate source of Maimonides' Plato was identified already by Salomon Munk in the notes to his 1856 French translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and his reference has been recited, with slight modifications, by later translators. To provide the exact source citations, Munk referred to Plato's *Timaeus* 49a ('a third kind ... that it should be the receptacle, and as it were the nurse, of all becoming').¹³ Shlomo Pines, in the preface to his English translation of the *Guide*, referred to *Timaeus* 51a ('Wherefore, let us not speak of her that is the mother and receptacle of this generated world, which is perceptible by sight and all the senses, by the name of earth, or air, or fire, or water'),¹⁴ whereas Michael Schwarz, in his new Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, refers to *Timaeus* 50d ('Moreover, it is proper to liken the recipient to the mother, the source to the father, and what is engendered between these two to the offspring').¹⁵ But it is clear, as it was to these translators, that Maimonides, who refers to 'male' and 'female' rather than 'father' and 'mother' and speaks of 'matter' rather than the 'receptacle', did not cite literally from Plato's work as he might have known it in an Arabic trans-

¹¹ See e.g. L. Finkelstein, ed., *The Commentary of David Kimbi on Isaiah* (New York 1926) appendix, lix; J. Robinson, *Samuel ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes* (Ph.D. thesis, Harvard 2002) par. 90, 629-654; Moses ibn Tibbon, *Commentary on Song of Songs*, ed. L. Silbermann, (Lyck 1874) 9.

¹² See *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, ed. H. Dimitrovsky (Jerusalem 1990) 412f.

¹³ See Munk, *Le Guide des Égarés* I (Paris 1856-66) 68, no. 4; Plato, *Timaeus*, R.G. Bury, trans. (Cambridge 1989) 112f.

¹⁴ See Pines, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Translators' Introduction, lxxvi; Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Bury, 118f.

¹⁵ See Schwarz, *Moreh Nevukhim le-Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon* (Tel-Aviv 1996) 35, no. 6; Plato, *Timaeus*, 116-119.

lation or summary.¹⁶ Nor did he cite indirectly from the Arabic rendering of Galen's synopsis of the *Timaeus*, the surviving Arabic of which likewise refers not to 'male' and 'female' but to 'father', 'mother' [*al-wālida*] and 'nurse' [*al-murdi*].¹⁷ Despite the source-seeking efforts of Munk, Pines, and Schwarz, therefore, the question remains open: what was the source of Maimonides' Plato in *Guide of the Perplexed* I.17?

This question, although difficult to answer with any certainty, is of some importance, for it pertains not only to Maimonides' sources but to the larger problem of the transmission of Plato in Arabic. In contrast to Aristotle, whose writings were translated literally into Arabic and explicated line by line, Plato was treated less systematically: his work disseminated not in complete editions and commentaries but in second-hand references, doxographical summaries, and pseudepigraphical sayings.¹⁸ Although there are medieval references to Arabic translations of Plato, even if they refer to complete renderings rather than summaries or epitomes, these translations were rare already in the tenth century and are completely nonexistent today.¹⁹ Because of this diffuseness in the Arabic Plato, Maimonides could conceivably have drawn from any number of sources; and until all relevant texts in the Arabic tradition have been examined, it will be impossible to say with complete confi-

¹⁶ See e.g. Pines, Translator's Introduction, lxxv-lxxvi. Ibn al-Nadīm, trans. B. Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm* (New York 1970) 593, refers to a translation by Ibn al-Bitrīq and a retranslation or revision by Hunayn b. Ishāq, as well as a translation of Plutarch's commentary 'according to [what is written in] the handwriting of Yahyā [Ibn 'Adī]'; at p. 706, moreover, he refers to a commentary by al-Rāzī 'on Plutarch's book commenting on the book *Timaeus*'. But, as will be discussed below, the translations were likely summaries or abridgments, and there is no trace of the Arabic version of Plutarch or al-Rāzī's commentary thereon.

¹⁷ See *Galenī Compendium Timaei Platonis*, eds P. Kraus and R. Walzer (London 1951) 13 (Arabic section): 'Then he continued describing this and spoke about the way in which earth, fire, water, and air change into one another; and he called that thing which encompasses all of them together and which perdures during the process of change the 'mother' [*al-wālida*] and 'nurse of becoming' [*al-murdi li-l-kaun*] ... he likened it to the father insofar as the world is created and engendered from matter [*al-mādda*] and form.'

¹⁸ This has been shown by the many studies of Plato Arabus over the last sixty years; see most recently J. Walbridge, *The Leaven of the Ancients: Suhrawardī and the Heritage of the Greeks* (Albany 2000) 83-126, with extensive bibliography.

¹⁹ See above, n. 16-18.

dence from where Maimonides drew his image.²⁰ Nevertheless, there are three sources that seem to be of particular importance, two of which have been mentioned in connection with *Guide* I.17 by previous scholars and one which will be introduced here for the first time. I refer to Aristotle's critique of Plato in *Physics* I.9, al-Fārābī's (c. 870-950) reference to Plato in his Summary of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*, and Averroes' (1126-1198) reference to Plato in his Epitome of Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.²¹ A brief description of these three texts is given here.

1) In his discussion of the principles of existence in *Timaeus*, Plato does not refer to 'matter' but only to 'receptacle', 'mould', 'place', and 'space'. In fact, the idea that matter is the ultimate substrate of all existence is introduced not by Plato but by Aristotle. But following the example of Aristotle, later Platonists and Neoplatonists generally identify Plato's receptacle or space with Aristotle's matter, in many cases producing a real synthesis of Platonic and Aristotelian doctrines.²² Aristotle himself makes this identification in several places in his writings, but most important for our purposes is the critique of Plato at *Physics* I.9.²³ For here we find the key images and associations used in later sources: matter is described as 'female' and 'male' rather than 'mother' and 'father', and the material substrate, moreover, is said to 'yearn' for form in the way

²⁰ What I can say now is that the image is not found in Plato's name in the following collections: Pseudo-Plutarch, *Aetius Arabus: Die Vorsokratiker in arabischer Überlieferung*, ed. H. Daiber (Wiesbaden 1980); Pseudo-Ammonius, *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios: Ein Beitrag zur neuplatonischen Überlieferung in Islam*, ed. and trans. by U. Rudolph (Wiesbaden 1989); H. b. Ishāq, *Nawādir al-Falāsifa/Adāb al-Falāsifa*, ed. A. Badawi (Kuwait 1985); al-Mubashshir Ibn Fātik, *Mukhtār al-Hikam*, ed. A. Badawi (Madrid 1958); Miskawayh, *Al-Hikma al-Khālida*, ed. A. Badawi (Cairo 1952); D. Gutas, *Greek Wisdom Literature in Arabic Translation* (New Haven 1975). The one pertinent remark found in these works is attributed not to Plato but to Thales; see below, n. 26.

²¹ Y. Even-Shemuel, ed., *Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem 1987) 38, n. 1, refers to *Physics* I.8, presumably meaning *Physics* I.9; Munk, *Le Guide des Égarés* I, 68, n. 4, refers to Averroes' Epitome. Al-Fārābī, on the other hand, is introduced here in this context for the first time.

²² For one of many examples, see Alcinoüs, *The Handbook of Platonism*, trans. J. Dillon (Oxford 1993) 15f., 89-92.

²³ See e.g. *De caelo* III.8, *De gen. et corr.* II.1, *De gen. an.* I.20, *Metaph.* I.6; and G.S. Claghorn, *Aristotle's Criticism of Plato's Timaeus* (The Hague 1954) 5-19.

that a woman yearns for a man.²⁴ The relevant Aristotelian text, according to the Arabic translation, reads as follows:

that there is one thing which is divine and good and yearned for, our suggestion is that there is one thing which is opposite to this, and another which is by nature such as to yearn and reach out for it in accordance with its own nature. They,²⁵ however, will find that the opposite is yearning for its own destruction. But it is not possible that the form yearn for itself, since it is in need of nothing, nor can its opposite yearn for it, since opposites are mutually destructive, but it is the matter [*al-hayūlā*] which does the yearning in the way that the female [*al-unthā*] yearns [*tashtāq*] for the male [*al-dhakar*] and the base yearns for the beautiful, although it does not yearn insofar as it is base in essence, but rather by accident, nor insofar as it is female in essence, but rather by accident.²⁶

2) Aristotle's criticism of Plato turns upon the latter's failure to distinguish matter from privation. For if matter and privation were identical, he argues, one would need to say that non-existence yearns to become existence, or that existing things come into existence from non-existence; but this, according to Aristotle, is impossible. It seems that it is this critique of the Platonic conception of the principles of nature that leads al-Fārābī to cite the image of matter and form as an example of sophistry

²⁴ Maimonides has matter yearn for form in the *Guide* as well, as does al-Fārābī in his Summary of *Sophistical Refutations*, as will be seen below.

²⁵ Aristotle does not specifically identify Plato as the object of his critique, but it is clear from the language he uses, as well as from the commentary tradition, that it is Plato he has in mind. But the fact that Aristotle uses the plural 'they' here might have suggested to Maimonides that he refers not only to Plato but to 'Plato and his predecessors', who might have included Thales, who is said in the Arabic tradition to have associated his principles of existence with male and female. See *Die Doxographie des Pseudo-Ammonios*, 49: '[Thales] mentioned furthermore that from the hardening of water comes earth and from its dissolution comes air and from the condensing of air comes fire, and water is male [*dhakar*] and earth female [*unthā*], and they exist below, and fire is male and air female, and they exist above.' For the availability of pre-Platonic sources in Arabic, see especially D. Gutas, 'Pre-Plotinian Philosophy in Arabic (Other than Platonism and Aristotelianism): A Review of the Sources', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* II.36.7 (Berlin 1994) 4939-4973, and Walbridge, *Leaven of the Ancients*, both of which have extensive bibliographies.

²⁶ See Aristotle, *Physics*, Ishāq b. Hunayn, trans., ed. A. Badawi (Cairo 1964) vol. I, 74. The English translation from the Greek by W. Charlton, *Aristotle's Physics, Books I and II* (Oxford 1992) 21, has served as the base for this rendering from the Arabic.

in his Summary of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations*, an example, it is worth adding, that is not found in the original text of Aristotle's logical work.²⁷ A brief description of al-Fārābī's book is given here, leading up to his reference to Plato.

In his short Summary of Aristotle's *Sophistical Refutations* (called in Arabic *Kitāb al-amkina al-mughlata*, literally, 'Book on Captious or Misleading Topics'), al-Fārābī enumerates and discusses not only fallacies in meaning, namely, the type of false arguments or sophistries that interested Aristotle, but also fallacies in language. In the latter category, he lists, explains, and provides illustrations of several basic literary devices and figures of speech, including homonymy, amphiboly, transferred terms, metaphor, combination, and various forms of change or substitution. As an example of metaphor, he refers to Plato: 'An example of metaphor [*al-ism al-musta'ār*] is what Plato says about matter [*al-mādda*], namely, that it is mother [*umm*] and the female [*al-unthā*]. He also calls it nurse [*al-hādina*], whereas he calls form the male [*al-dhakar*]; and [he says] that the female desires [*tashtāq*] the male.'²⁸

3) For the same reason that al-Fārābī cites the image of matter and form in his Summary of *Sophistical Refutations*, Averroes cites it in his Epitome of *Posterior Analytics*. It serves to illustrate why figurative language is inappropriate in scientific discourse. As in the case with al-Fārābī, moreover, the example is not cited by Aristotle himself in the original text of *Posterior Analytics*; it remains to see to what extent Averroes' use of the example was original. The image of male and female is referred to by Averroes near the end of his summary of Aristotle's work, the relevant section of which is briefly characterized here. In learning or instruction, he explains, one ought to strive to use demonstrative arguments and non-figurative language. Substitution, opposition, and definition can be used to clarify some issue and make it more understandable, but imitation, metaphor, or any type of poetic discourse should be avoided, for this type of discourse causes obscurity rather than clarity

²⁷ There are other interesting divergences in al-Fārābī's work as well; the work as a whole deserves an independent study.

²⁸ See al-Fārābī, *Kitāb al-amkina al-mughlata*, ed. R. al-'Ajam, in *al-Mantiq 'ind al-Fārābī* II (Beirut 1987) 134. See also Ibn Kaspi's Hebrew abridgment of al-Fārābī's work, ed. S. Rosenberg in *Iyyun* 32 (1983) 280.

and leads to error. He concludes his discussion with the image of Plato: ‘An example of this is Plato’s saying about matter [*al-māda*] that it is the female [*al-unthā*] and that form is the male [*al-dhakar*], for this statement is far from making the substance of matter understood.’²⁹

We return now to the question of Maimonides’ Plato. With respect to language and terminology, Maimonides is closest to Averroes, and it is possible that he drew directly from his older contemporary Cordoban.³⁰ But it is more likely that both Averroes and Maimonides had recourse to a shared source, which may very well have been al-Fārābī’s Summary of *Sophistical Refutations*. Al-Fārābī, on the other hand, seems to have drawn directly from Plato and Aristotle or indirectly from an Aristotelianized version of Plato.³¹ Now, that a logical work of al-Fārābī stands in the center of the history of this Platonic image is noteworthy; it reinforces his importance as the teacher not only of Maimonides but of the western Aristotelian tradition.³² But perhaps more interesting than the process of transmission itself are the different contexts in which the image is used. Aristotle discusses it in his critique of Plato’s physical doctrines. Al-Fārābī introduces it as an illustration of sophistry in a summary of Aristotle’s logical writings. Averroes cites it as an example of the type of figurative language that should be avoided in scientific discourse. Maimonides, on the other hand, refers to it in a positive rather than negative light, considering it a useful metaphor when speaking to the general public, when attempting to conceal philosophical ideas from the religious community. With Maimonides, that is, it is precisely this example of

²⁹ The relevant text is par. 84 of Ch. Butterworth’s unpublished edition and translation. I thank Professor Butterworth for providing me with a copy of the text and translation, which I have modified slightly to make the terminology consistent with the other texts cited above.

³⁰ This is possible chronologically; Averroes’ Epitome was written circa 1157, whereas Maimonides’ *Guide* was written in the 1180s and completed by 1191. But see Maimonides’ Letter to Joseph ben Judah (ed. and trans. by Shailat, *Epistles* I, 299, 313), where he indicates that he had not read Averroes’ works even after 1191. His recommendation to Samuel ibn Tibbon to study Aristotle with Averroes’ commentaries, moreover, was written still later; see Shailat, *Epistles* II, 553.

³¹ In light of the terminology that al-Fārābī uses, it is clear that he, like Maimonides, did not draw directly from Galen: while Galen uses *al-wāliḍa* and *al-murdi* for ‘mother’ and ‘nurse’, al-Fārābī uses *umm* and *al-hādina*.

³² There is an extensive literature regarding al-Fārābī’s influence on Maimonides, about which see in general Pines, Translator’s Introduction (1963) lxxviii–xcii.

sophistry and unscientific language that serves as the paradigm of esoteric writing and the key to the allegorical explication of biblical texts.

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