

AN INSTANCE OF THE 7TH KIND OF CONTRADICTION IN THE MOREH NEVUCHIM

The Rambam's seventh kind of contradictionⁱ is often flouted as a declaration that in the Guide he will purposely profess opinions one place that stealthily contradict opinions he professes elsewhere. (And some--the Strausian school--even assert that he does this for sinister reasons, involving surreptitious detraction from orthodox views.)

Two observations regarding this.

1. The Rambam ascribes this kind of contradiction to the Midrashim and Aggados (but not the halachic Talmud) as well. Would the Strausian school claim he thought the Aggados and Midrashim were "likewise" secretly promulgating heretical ideas?

2. The Rambam is explicitly speaking of contradicting *premises* used to give evidence for a point, not contradicting *points*. Meaning, among the premises which the Rambam builds upon in order to illustrate or bring evidence for a point, may at times be a premise he himself disagrees with, as long as the audience considers it acceptable. In talmudic terminology, this is called speaking לשיטתך. When such a method is exercised in the Talmud, it is openly disclosed. And the Rambam himself openly discloses in the Moreh that he used such a technique in the Mishneh Torah when he proved G-d's existence accepting the premise that the world existed eternally, a premise he vociferously denies. But in the Aggados and Midrashim, contradictory premises fly about without indication. Nevertheless, the concluding points being made are all true, and do not contradict (if not in cases where one of the other reasons for contradictions apply).

I assume that the Rambam's insistence that one must not let on, to the unsophisticated, the contradictory nature of the premises, is similar to one of the reasons he gives for why the Aggados convey lofty concepts in a literary form that if taken literally is absurd. If the unsophisticated are let on to the contradictions, they would mock or at least not value highly enough the lessons meant to be taught.

Finding instances of this kind of contradiction in the Moreh Nevuchim is not

easy. But I believe I have found one.

In II:6, the Rambam is making the point that while no doubt angels are real spiritual entities, the term “מלאך” is also used for the instinct in animals that causes them to move one way or another, when that movement is desired by G-d. The Rambam illustrates this with the account of Bilaam’s donkey, who, because it was blocked by a מלאך, refused to obey Bilaam’s instructions to travel further.

Before I go on, some introductory matter:

Ramban, like the Rambam, holds that since angels are none-physical entities, they cannot ordinarily be perceived by a person’s physical senses.ⁱⁱ Ordinarily, “seeing” an angel is a spiritual endeavor capable by a human, but not by an animal. So, Ramban, explains, when the Torah says that Bilaam’s donkey “saw” the angel blocking its way, it cannot mean it in its literal sense. It means that the donkey was controlled by an instinct of fear that prevented it from moving, without having any awareness of the angel that caused it.

So now, back to the Rambam. Later in the *Moreh Nevuchim*, II:

פרק מב כבר בארנו (נפרק בקודם) כי כל מקום שנוכר בו ראיית מלאך או דבורו, שזה אמנם הוא בכרואה הנבואה או בהלום, יבאר בהם או לא יבאר, הכל שוה, כמו שקדם, א ודע זה והבינהו מאד, ואין הפרש בין שיכתוב תחלה שהוא ראה המלאך, או יהיה הנראה מן המאמר תחלה שהוא חשבו איש מכני אדם ואחר כן בסוף הענין התבאר לו שהוא מלאך, אחר שתמצא סוף הענין כי זה אשר ראה ודבר היה מלאך תדע ותתאמת שמתחלת הענין היה כרואה הנבואה או הלום של נבואה, וזה שבכרואה הנבואה או בהלום של נבואה ב פעמים יראה הנביא

וכן ענין בלעם בלו בדרך ודברי האתון הכל בכרואה הנבואה, אחר שהתבאר באהריות הענין דבור מלאך השם לו, וכן אמר בכרואה יהושע, וישא עיניו וירא והנה איש עומד לנגדו, שהוא בכרואה הנבואה,

The Rambam did not subscribe to the Ramban’s assertion that angels can be turned into physical beings. Therefore, the entire episode of Bilaam’s donkey, which involved the donkey and Bilaam seeing an angel and speaking with it, could only have been an experience that happened to Bilaam on a spiritual plane, not a physical one. It was a vision.

So: there was no movement by the donkey caused by its instinct, called an angel or not.

In chapter 6, in the account of Bilaam, the Rambam was using the Ramban’s premise or one similar to it--that the account of Bilaam was something that happened in the material world--as one illustration of his point that Scripture

uses the term “angel” to describe G-d instilling a force into an animal that causes it to move or refuse to move.

But the Rambam himself does not actually hold that this happened in the material world. **The premises in the two cases are contradictory. All the same, his points remain uncontradictory:** (a) Any scriptural passage describing a physical being having a physical perception of or physical interaction with an angel must be understood as a vision of things in the spiritual world, and not the material world, and (b) the term “angel” sometimes refers to a natural force. And a support for the latter point can be found for those who subscribe to the Ramban’s premise.

The Rambam kept the contradictory premises 40 chapters apart, making it hard to spot. I have not seen any commentary note this, and it took me several decades...

¹ Ibn Tibbon’s translation of Introduction to Moreh Nevuchim:

לא ימנה זה בכלל מי שיכנהו דבריו . והסבה הישכליעית , צורך הדברים בענינים עמוקים מאד יצטרך להעלים קצת עניניהם ולגלות קצתם , ¹ ובעמים יביא הצורך כפי האמירה אחת להמשיך הדברים בה , כפי הנחת הקדמה אחת , ויביא הכרה הצורך במקום אחר להמשיך הדברים בה לפי הקדמה סותרת לראשונה . וצריך שלא ירגישו ההמון כשום פנים בטקס הסתירה ביניהם , ושיעשה המחבר תחבולה להעלים אותו ככל צד .

וכן תמצא במדרשות והגדות סתירה... לפי הסבה השביעית. ואמנן אשר ימצא במאמר הזה מן החלופה הוא לפי הסבה החמישית והסבה השביעית.

R. Yosef Kapach’s translation:

והסיבה השביעית הכרת הדברים בענינים עמוקים מאוד, וצריך להסתיר מקצת עניניהם ולגלות מקצתן. ופעמים גורם הדוחק בדבר מסוים להמשיך את הדברים בו לפי הנחת הקדמה מסוימת, ויגרום הדוחק במקום אחר להמשיך הדברים בו לפי הנחת הקדמה הסותרת לראשונה. וצריך שלא ירגיש ההמון כלל את מקום הסתירה שביניהם. ויש שמערים המחבר להסתיר את הדבר בכל אופן.

...וכך ימצא במדרשות ובהגדות...סתירות כפי הסיבה השביעית.

אבל מה שימצא במאמר זה מן השנויים, הם כפי הסיבה החמישית והשביעית. דע את זה ודייק בו וזכרהו היטב, כדי שלא תהיה נבוך במקצת פרקיו

Here is Friedlander’s inaccurate translation:

Seventh cause: It is sometimes necessary to introduce such metaphysical matter as may partly be disclosed, but must partly be concealed: while, therefore, on one occasion the object which the author has in view may demand that the metaphysical problem be treated as solved in one way, it may be convenient on another occasion to treat it as solved in the opposite way.]

Pines’ translation is more accurate:

The seventh cause. In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose

others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means. The author must endeavor, by concealing the fact as much as possible, to prevent the uneducated reader from perceiving the contradiction

... **in the Midrash and the Agada** [y]ou may also notice ... contradictions due to the **seventh** cause. **Any inconsistency discovered in the present work will be found to arise in consequence of the fifth cause or the seventh.** Notice this, consider its truth, and remember it well, lest you misunderstand some of the chapters in this book.

My translation:

The seventh cause [of a contradiction to be found in a work]: The recognition that with very deep subjects, it is necessary to hide some of their elements and to reveal some of them. And sometimes necessity demands developing a given idea in one place following and accepting a certain premise, while elsewhere, to develop another idea, necessity demands accepting and following a premise contradictory to the first one. And it is necessary that the unsophisticated do not in any way sense the place where these two contradict, and that the author finds any schemes he can to totally conceal this.

... **in the Midrash and the Agada** [y]ou will also find ... **contradictions due to the seventh cause.** **Any inconsistency discovered in the present work will be found to arise in consequence of the fifth cause or the seventh.** Notice this, consider its truth, and remember it well, lest you misunderstand some of the chapters in this book.

ⁱⁱ “Ordinarily” is a key qualification, because the Ramban--contra the Rambam--holds that whenever an angel is also described as an “ish,” a “man” that someone saw and/or physically interacted with, it means that G-d “clothed” the angel with a physical semblance of a person. Such was the case, Ramban holds, contra Rambam, with the three angels who visited Avraham and saved Lot, and the angel who fought with Yaakov.