

## Why is Two Better Than One?

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In this lovely book, Zena Hitz underscores the importance of person-to-person learning, as contrasted with the non-relationship of a university professor teaching to hundreds of students facts to be parroted.<sup>1</sup> I think that this is likely to resonate with many readers, especially those who have had the privilege of experiencing person-to-person learning and know what students who go through a more factory-like experience are missing. One thing was not clear to me though: is person-to-person learning ultimately valuable because it is the best way to teach or because the participants in such an interaction are less alone because of it? The answer to this question might become clearer if we could answer another: why exactly is person-to-person learning more effective? Even if we acknowledge the disadvantages of having *too many* students at once, isn't it possible for a single motivated person to hole up in their bedroom without a teacher and to read voraciously? To read well and to understand?<sup>2</sup> Hitz offers us examples of people who did just that and found, in different kinds of isolation, an escape from distractions that enabled them to learn more effectively, sometimes making important breakthroughs in research.<sup>3</sup>

I would like to offer a possible explanation for why person-to-person learning gives us something that we can't get in isolation, by means of a detour through another book that I thought about as I read Hitz: *The Guide of the Perplexed*. I started reading this masterpiece of medieval philosophy just a few years after I finished at St. John's College (where I was Hitz's classmate). The *Guide* opens with an epistle from Maimonides to a student, in which the Instructive Master recounts their experience studying together and says that he is composing the book for the benefit of this student and those like him.<sup>4</sup> For some reason, my first association when I read that letter was the famous passage from W.E.B. Du Bois that Hitz discusses in her book ("I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not...").<sup>5</sup> Perhaps I flattered myself that Maimonides was thinking of someone like me, and thus speaking to me indirectly, like Du Bois's imagined conversation with Shakespeare.

Maimonides may be writing in the form of an address to a single student out of respect for a rabbinic injunction that a scholar restrict teaching of certain subjects to small groups of students: "It is not permitted to expound upon forbidden relations in the presence of three, nor upon the account of the creation in the presence of two, nor upon the account of the chariot in the presence of one, unless he be wise and understand by his own faculty."<sup>6</sup> Consistent with his general claim that the ancient Jewish community possessed all the same sciences as the ancient Greeks,<sup>7</sup> Maimonides identifies the aforementioned account of creation with the Aristotelian science of physics and the account of the chariot (i.e. the vision of Ezekiel) with the Aristotelian science of metaphysics. There is also the third secretive

discipline mentioned in that dictum over which Maimonides skips: “forbidden relations” (*‘arayōt*), the teaching of which is prohibited in the presence of three or more students.<sup>8</sup> It is sometimes argued that such omissions on the part of Maimonides are more significant than the things that he says explicitly,<sup>9</sup> and so we are left to wonder which Aristotelian science corresponds to the teaching of forbidden relations. One possibility is the science of ethics, which takes as its subject the “commonly accepted notions” (*mašhūrāt*), such as the rule that people must wear clothes, which became apparent to humanity only after Adam’s rebellion.<sup>10</sup>

This hierarchy of secrecy<sup>11</sup> (“forbidden relations” = ethics[?], which can be taught to two students; “the account of creation” = physics, which can be taught to one student; “the account of the chariot” = metaphysics, which cannot be taught to any student unless the student is self-sufficient; or if we label them according to the number of participants including the teacher: 3, 2, 1) calls to mind a different classification of three Aristotelian sciences, which were stacked up by medieval philosophers in a similar way: rhetoric, dialectic, and demonstration. The Muslim philosopher al-Fārābī, whom Maimonides regarded as the definitive authority on Aristotle’s logical corpus, states that whereas rhetoric requires three participants (a questioner, a respondent, and a judge), dialectic requires only two people.<sup>12</sup> And then Maimonides’s contemporary Averroës, in his Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s *Topics*, states that while dialectic takes place between two (a questioner and respondent), apodictic demonstration is conducted “between a man and himself,”<sup>13</sup> (one person). If we combine the statements of al-Fārābī and Averroës, we end up with a hierarchy that mirrors the one found by Maimonides in the rabbis: rhetoric (three participants), dialectic (two participants), and demonstration (one participant).

This new hierarchy is different from the one which Maimonides cites, because whereas the Mishnah gives a maximum number of participants in each kind of discussion, al-Fārābī and Averroës are giving minimums. Nonetheless, support for the possibility that Maimonides connected the two kinds of classification can be found in the fact that he states that the topic of creation does not admit of demonstration, thus making it a topic for dialectic (two participants).<sup>14</sup>

The requirement that rhetoric have a judge, in addition to the two disputants, reminds me of Hitz’s description of “the academic takedown,” a spectacle of humiliation in which one scholar publicly destroys the work of another (“a cutting book review, a devastating objection from the back of the lecture hall...”).<sup>15</sup> In such a competition, one need not actually attain the truth on a given topic. It is enough if one convinces the witnesses to the spectacle (the “judges,” so to speak) that one is right in order to achieve the desired humiliation.

Apodictic demonstration, on the other hand, aims precisely at attaining the truth. Built on premises the certainty of which no one would contest, such as “the whole is greater than the part,” there is no reason why a person would not be able to do it while living alone on an island. Consider Hitz’s example of Einstein, working alone in a patent office where “there were no

hotshot professors to impress, no university administrators to placate, no students to whom he had to justify his existence.”<sup>16</sup> Disengaged from these “judges,” he was able to consider the workings of the universe in purity.

And then dialectic uses “commonly accepted” premises that are not certain but are accepted by most people. The measure of such a premise’s acceptability, Maimonides says, is the degree to which it has been embraced by different nations.<sup>17</sup> An investigation based on such a standard could not be conducted by an isolated person on an island, cut off from society; and therefore the condition that there be two participants for dialectic makes sense.

But then wouldn’t demonstration be preferable to dialectic in any topic in which it was possible to use it? Demonstration works from certainty to achieve more certainty, whereas dialectic arguably works from folk wisdom to produce more folk wisdom.<sup>18</sup> I think that the advantage of dialectic may stem from the limitations of demonstration. The premises on which demonstration builds *seem* certain to us, but maybe they are just quirks of our human brains.<sup>19</sup> The closest that we come to proof that whatever is happening in our heads corresponds to external reality is the semi-democratic give and take of a conversation, in which any progress depends at least on the tentative acceptance of one speaker’s premises by their partner. Even if this does not guarantee that their inner world is like the outer world, it at minimum places them together in a shared world. And so I am brought back to the questions that I raised initially about Hitz’s book. Person-to-person learning (or “dialectic”) would seem to be effective because it requires a person not to be alone in their thoughts. One need not decide whether it is valuable because it is effective or because it makes people less lonely: it is effective by virtue of making people less alone.

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<sup>1</sup> Zena Hitz, *Lost in Thought: The Hidden Pleasures of an Intellectual Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), 17. Hitz compares her experience “lecturing to large classrooms” with her own experience as a student: “I had walked certain ways of reading, thinking, and feeling with my teachers, and had imitated them at close quarters.” While the experience she recalls as a student was positive, she also describes a discussion with her spiritual advisor, who advised against her own decision to join a particular community, where she admittedly thought she would be “miserable.” That conversation made her angry at the time, but in retrospect she calls it “kind advice” (Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 19). This serves to illustrate that the mechanisms of person-to-person tutelage can be constructive, even if they are interpreted as confrontational. Of course one could think of instances where such an interaction wouldn’t be constructive.

<sup>2</sup> Hitz hints at an explanation: without a human conduit, learning loses shared context: “It must be nurtured person to person or it will largely disappear from ordinary

human experience, surviving only in disfigured and marginal ways.” *Lost in Thought*, 23.

<sup>3</sup> Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 50–112, especially the examples of Albert Einstein (*Lost in Thought*, 63–66), André Weil (*Lost in Thought*, 66–68), and Antonio Gramsci (*Lost in Thought*, 68–69).

<sup>4</sup> *Guide*, Epistle Dedicatory. The experience that a reader will have with such a book is something of a hybrid between independent learning and person-to-person learning; indeed, many of the examples that Hitz provides of solitary learning are in fact readings of the writings of others. See for instance the descriptions of the solitary readers in the film, *The Hedgehog* (Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 54–58). But there are other instances, for instance Einstein’s work, which represent an individual human reflecting on the world, although none of the examples that the author mentions represent complete isolation. Maimonides (*Guide* 2:17) appears to conjure up an instance of such pure isolation, when he posits the existence of a person who grew up alone on an island, and whose mother died after nursing him. But Maimonides then imagines the dialogue that would ensue when this isolated person comes in contact with someone from the outside.

<sup>5</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co., 1903), 114; Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 104.

<sup>6</sup> Mishnah Ḥagigah 2:1 [my translation].

<sup>7</sup> See for instance *Guide* 1:71.

<sup>8</sup> In his Commentary on the Mishnah for this passage, Maimonides does give a rationale for the limit of teaching the doctrine of forbidden relations to fewer than three students, but he does not connect it with a particular Aristotelian science the way that he does for the other two doctrines. For places where he completely ignores “forbidden relations” while identifying the other sciences with their Aristotelian counterparts, see Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 14:10-13 and *Guide*, Introduction to the First Part and 1:34. Maimonides references the discussion on this mishnah in the Gemara (BT Ḥagigah 11a and 13b).

<sup>9</sup> Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1988 [New York: Free Press, 1952]), 75.

<sup>10</sup> See *Guide* 1:2 (Judeo-Arabic edition prepared by Issachar Joel [Jerusalem: Azriel Press, 1929], 16) [my translation].

<sup>11</sup> See Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 28, 55, and 127 on secrecy.

<sup>12</sup> al-Fārābī, *Kitab al-Jadal*, par. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Averroës, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Topics*, section 3, ed. Charles E. Butterworth and Ahmad Abd al-Magid Haridi (Cairo: The American Research Center in Egypt, 1979), 199 [my translation] (and see Butterworth’s introduction, pp. 44–45); Joel Kraemer, “Maimonides’ Use of (Aristotelian) Logic,” in Robert Cohen and Hillel Levine, eds., *Maimonides and the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer

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Academic Publishers, 2000), 122. I also consulted the Hebrew translation by Qalonymos ben Qalonymos in MS Paris BN 933, fol. 73v.

<sup>14</sup> Maimonides (*Guide* 2:23) actually apologizes for using rhetoric in his discussion of creation, with the excuse that Aristotle did so as well. Note that in the *Timaeus* Socrates begins his discussion of creation by counting the number of people present (he has three interlocutors; a fourth one had fallen ill and couldn't make it).

<sup>15</sup> Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> Hitz, *Lost in Thought*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Maimonides, *Treatise on Logic*, chapter 8.

<sup>18</sup> To return once again to Einstein, I am reminded of the sentiment ascribed to him by Lincoln Barnett, *The Universe and Dr. Einstein* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1949), 49: "as Einstein has pointed out, common sense is actually nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind prior to the age of eighteen." (It is ironic that this aphorism, which Einstein *is said* to have uttered, in effect belongs to the category of "traditions" which Maimonides says in the *Treatise on Logic* are the basis not for demonstration or even dialectic, but rather rhetoric.)

<sup>19</sup> Barnett goes on, in the passage cited above, and says: "Every new idea one encounters must combat this accretion of 'self-evident' concepts" (*The Universe and Dr. Einstein*, 49). The scare quotes suggest that these certainties are only apparent certainties. But how exactly could one know that a concept thought to be self-evident was *not* the product of social conditioning or a fallible human nature?