

Emes Translation Not Truth

Chapter 1: The Word That Doesn't Cross

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There is a word at the foundation of Jewish thought that English cannot hold.

The word is אֱמֶת. It appears in the opening chapters of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah, where it does the heaviest lifting in the entire work — describing what God is, how God knows, and why human knowledge is structurally different from divine knowledge. Every standard English translation renders it as “truth.” That rendering is not wrong in the way a misspelling is wrong. It is wrong in the way a compass pointing to magnetic north instead of true north is wrong: close enough to feel right, far enough to send you somewhere you didn't intend to go.

This book begins with a translation problem because Maimonides himself would have expected it to. He wrote about this exact problem — the problem of words that carry different meanings across contexts, and the catastrophic confusion that follows when those meanings are collapsed — in the opening pages of three different works. He considered it the first thing a reader needed to understand before encountering any serious text. The fact that his own most important word has been flattened in translation is not an irony he would have missed. It is the kind of error he built his entire theory of language to prevent.

Three Languages, Two Translations, One Word

Maimonides wrote in three registers. The Mishneh Torah — his comprehensive code of Jewish law — was written in Mishnaic Hebrew, a deliberate choice meant to make the work accessible to Jews across the Arabic-speaking world who had Hebrew literacy but varying levels of Arabic fluency. The Guide of the Perplexed, his philosophical masterwork, was

written in Judeo-Arabic — Arabic in Hebrew characters — the scholarly lingua franca of the medieval Islamic world. His Treatise on Logic (Millot ha-Higgayon), a brief introduction to logical terminology, was also written in Arabic, and was translated into Hebrew by multiple hands during his lifetime and shortly after.

The word **אמת** in the Mishneh Torah is Hebrew. But the conceptual framework within which Maimonides understood that word — his theory of what words do, how they carry meaning, and how they fail across contexts — was developed in Arabic, drawing on the Aristotelian logical tradition as filtered through Al-Farabi, Avicenna, and the Baghdad school. When an English reader encounters “truth” in a translation of the Mishneh Torah, that word has passed through at least two layers of translation: from the Hebrew text of the Mishneh Torah, back through the Arabic philosophical vocabulary that shaped Maimonides’ understanding of the terms he used, and then into English — a language that did not exist as a philosophical medium when any of these texts were written.

Each layer of translation introduces semantic drift. The drift here has been catastrophic, because English “truth” and Hebrew **אמת** do not occupy the same conceptual space. They overlap — but the overlap is partial, and the parts that don’t overlap are exactly the parts that matter.

What Maimonides Knew About Words

Before he wrote the Mishneh Torah or the Guide, Maimonides wrote a short treatise on logic. It was composed, likely in his youth, as a brief introduction to the technical vocabulary of Aristotelian logic for a reader who knew Islamic law and Arabic eloquence but not philosophy. The treatise is a glossary — terms defined in sequence, with examples, moving from the basic (subject, predicate, proposition) to the complex (syllogism, demonstration, the categories).

In Chapter 13, Maimonides arrives at the classification of words themselves. Words, he says, fall into three basic classes. When several words have the same meaning, they are synonyms — like *adam*, *ish*, and *enosh*, all meaning “man” in Hebrew. When one word has several meanings, it is a homonym — like *ayin*, meaning both “eye” and “spring.” When different words have different meanings, they are simply distinct.

The critical work is in the homonyms. Maimonides divides them into six classes, but the first three are the ones that matter for our purpose:

The absolute homonym is a word applied to two things that have nothing in common but the name. *Ayin* — “eye” and “spring of water” — share no essence. The word is purely equivocal. There is no underlying concept that connects them. They are, in Maimonides’ terminology, connected by name and nothing else.

The univocal term is a word applied to two or more things that share a constitutive essence. “Animal” applies to man, horse, scorpion, and fish because each possesses

life — the essential feature that makes them all animals. The meaning is the same in each case because the essence is the same.

The amphibolous term is the one between these extremes. It is a word applied to two or more things that share something — but what they share does not constitute the essence of either. Maimonides' example: the word "man" applied to Reuben (a living rational animal), to a dead man, and to a painting or carving of a man. All three share the figure and outline of a human. But the figure and outline do not constitute what a man *is*. The amphibolous term resembles the univocal because the objects share something real, and it resembles the absolute homonym because the essence of each is different from the others. It sits between the two.

This classification is not a scholastic exercise. Maimonides opens the *Guide of the Perplexed* with it. The first two chapters of the Guide are devoted to demonstrating that the words "image" (zelem) and "likeness" (demut), when applied to God and to human beings, are **purely equivocal** — absolute homonyms. They share nothing but the name. When Genesis says "in the image of God created He him," it does not mean God has a shape that resembles human shape. The word "image" as applied to God and "image" as applied to a photograph are not the same word. They are the same sounds. Maimonides considered this point so foundational that he placed it at the very entrance of his most important work, as a gate the reader must pass through before encountering anything else.

Why? Because the failure to distinguish these classes of terms is, for Maimonides, the source of the worst errors in religious thought. When people treat an amphibolous term as univocal — when they assume that because the same word applies to God and to humans, the same *meaning* applies — they land in anthropomorphism. They conclude that God has a body, or emotions, or spatial location, because the words for those things appear in Scripture about God. The error is not theological recklessness. It is a failure of language. It is a reading error that produces a theological catastrophe.

The Translation Principle

Maimonides did not only theorize about translation. He practiced it, supervised it, and gave explicit instructions about how it should be done.

When Samuel ibn Tibbon completed his Hebrew translation of the Guide of the Perplexed — a translation Maimonides approved and praised — he wrote to Maimonides with questions about specific passages. Maimonides' reply, sent from Fustat in 1199, contains the most explicit statement of his translation philosophy in any of his surviving works:

Let me premise one canon. Whoever wishes to translate, and purposes to render each word literally, and at the same time to adhere slavishly to the order of the words and sentences in the original, will meet with much difficulty; his rendering will be faulty and untrustworthy. This is not the right method. The translator should first try to grasp the sense of the subject thoroughly, and then state the theme with perfect clearness in the other language. This, however,

can not be done without changing the order of the words, putting many words for one word, or *vice versa*, and adding or taking away words, so that the subject be perfectly intelligible in the language into which he translates.

The principle is clear: translation is not word substitution. A translator who maps each word in the source to a single word in the target, preserving order and syntax, produces something “faulty and untrustworthy.” The translator must grasp the sense — the meaning, the concept, the thing the text is actually saying — and then restate it clearly in the target language, even if that requires using many words where the original used one, or one where the original used many.

Ibn Tibbon took this seriously. His translation of the Guide was accompanied by a glossary — the *Perush ha-Millot ha-Zarot*, “Explanation of Foreign Terms” — in which he explained the technical philosophical vocabulary of the Guide for Hebrew readers. The glossary is itself a work of translation theory: it recognizes that philosophical terms do not have simple equivalents across languages, that each term must be explained rather than merely substituted, and that the reader needs to understand the *range* of a term’s meanings, not just one of them.

The problem with the English “truth” is that it does what Maimonides explicitly warned against. It renders each word literally. It maps the Hebrew אמת to the English “truth” and stops there, as if the two words occupied the same semantic space. They do not. And the distance between them is not a minor imprecision. It is the distance between two different conceptions of what the word is doing — between a word that describes the quality of genuine existence and a word that describes the accuracy of statements.

What “Truth” Means in English

In English, “truth” is primarily epistemic. It is a property of propositions. A statement is true when it corresponds to reality — when what the statement says matches what is the case. “The cat is on the mat” is true if and only if there is a cat and it is on a mat. Truth, in this framework, is a relationship between language and world. It is about the accuracy of representation.

This is not the only meaning of “truth” in English — the word has a longer history, and in older usage it carried connotations of faithfulness, reliability, and genuineness (as in “a true friend” or “true north”). But the dominant philosophical and everyday meaning in modern English is epistemic: truth is about statements being accurate.

When “truth” is applied to God in English — “God is truth” — the default reading is: God is the source of true propositions, or God never says anything false, or God’s statements correspond perfectly to reality. All of these are claims about God’s relationship to accurate representation. They are, in Maimonides’ terms, epistemic claims. They place God on the same continuum as human knowing — just without error.

What אמת Means in Maimonides

In the Mishneh Torah, Foundations of the Torah 1:4, Maimonides writes:

הָאֱמֶת לְבַדּוֹ הוּא — He alone is emes

and immediately glosses it:

מִלְבְּדוֹ אֱמֶת מְצוּי שֵׁם אֵין — there is no matzui emes aside from Him

The word מְצוּי means “existent.” Maimonides does not say “there is no other true thing.” He says “there is no existent emes aside from Him.” He equates אמת with מְצוּי — emes with existence itself. The claim is not that God is the most accurate speaker, or that God’s propositions correspond perfectly to reality. The claim is that God is genuine existence — the only being whose existence is not contingent, not borrowed, not derivative. Everything else exists, but its existence depends on Him. Only His existence is emes.

This is not an epistemic claim. It is an ontological one. It is not about what God knows or says. It is about what God *is*.

In 2:10, the point deepens. Maimonides says God “recognizes His emes” — אמתו מכיר. If emes means “truth,” this reads as “God recognizes His truth” — which sounds like God is aware of true propositions about Himself. But the entire argument of 2:10 is that God’s knowledge is identical with His essence: He is the Knower, the Known, and the Knowledge itself — all one. So “His emes” means His own reality, His own being. God knows His own existence. And because all other existence depends on Him, knowing His own being IS knowing everything.

The English “truth” cannot do this work. It cannot carry the ontological weight. When you read “God is truth,” you hear a claim about accuracy. When Maimonides wrote לְבַדּוֹ הוּא אֱמֶת, he was making a claim about the structure of reality.

The Category of the Error

Here is where Maimonides’ own theory of language turns back on the translation of his own text.

The word אמת as applied to God and as applied to human “truth,” is — in Maimonides’ own classification — at best amphibolous, and possibly purely equivocal.

If it is amphibolous, then “emes” as applied to God and “emes” as applied to a true human statement share something — perhaps the quality of genuineness, of being what something purports to be — but what they share does not constitute the essence of either. God’s emes is His non-contingent existence. Human emes (in the propositional sense) is the accuracy of a statement. They share a family resemblance — both involve something being genuinely what it claims to be — but the essence is different. Treating them as the same word with the same meaning is the amphibolous fallacy: assuming that because the same sounds apply, the same essence applies.

If it is purely equivocal — and there is a strong case that Maimonides would place it here — then “emes” as applied to God and “emes” as applied to human propositions share nothing but the name. God’s emes is ontological: genuine being. Human emes is epistemic: accurate representation. There is no shared essence. They are, like “eye” and “spring,” the same word pointing to two different things that happen to be called by the same name.

The English translation “truth” collapses this distinction entirely. It makes it seem as if God’s truth and human truth are the same kind of thing — the same essence, just at different scales. God is perfectly true; humans are sometimes true. God’s truth is absolute; human truth is approximate. Both are “truth.” The continuum is assumed.

But Maimonides’ framework says: they are not on a continuum. They are not the same kind of thing at all. God’s emes is what God *is*. Human emes is what a statement *does*. The word passes between them, but the meaning does not. To read “God is truth” as if it meant “God is the perfection of the same quality that makes a sentence true” is to commit exactly the error Maimonides warned against in Chapter 13 of the Treatise on Logic and spent the first two chapters of the Guide trying to prevent.

It is the error of treating a homonym as a univocal term.

Why This Book

The translation error is not a footnote. It is not a scholarly quibble to be acknowledged and then set aside. It is the foundation of a larger argument — an argument about the structure of human knowledge, the nature of disagreement, and the limits of what any person can claim to know.

If אֱמֶס means what Maimonides says it means — if it denotes God’s genuine, non-contingent existence, the existence that only God has — then no human being possesses emes. Not in the propositional sense, not in the ontological sense. Human knowledge is real, but it is derivative. Human truth-claims can be accurate, but they are not emes. The distance between the most brilliant human insight and emes is not a distance of degree. It is a distance of kind.

This book argues that the consequences of this distinction are vast. They extend from the most abstract questions of metaphysics to the most concrete questions of how Jews — and human beings generally — disagree with one another. If no one possesses emes, then every claim to absolute truth is not just arrogant. It is a category error. It asserts a kind of possession that is structurally impossible for a created being.

Maimonides gave us the tools to see this. He also, through no fault of his own, gave us a word that English has been systematically mistranslating for centuries. This book begins by correcting the word. Everything that follows depends on getting it right.

The word is אֱמֶס. It does not mean truth.