



Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides'
Guide for the Perplexed



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Daniel Davies

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Introduction

Moses Maimonides' *Guide for the Perplexed* is often considered the high point of medieval Jewish Aristotelianism. Its influence was so great that post-Maimonidean medieval Jewish philosophy was almost always written with reference to the "Master of the *Guide*," whether the later author supported or opposed his views. Ever since the *Guide* appeared toward the end of the twelfth century, there have been competing interpretations of its meaning. The work abounds with unnamed references and allusions, inchoate ideas, and laconic explanations. Apparent or real contradictions confront the reader in numerous places, and solutions to the many difficulties in interpreting the work are still debated today. Such debates are apparent in the scholarly discussions of Maimonides' true metaphysical opinions. Metaphysics encompasses several themes that are central to the *Guide*, but there is no consensus about what Maimonides' real beliefs about them were or about how he expressed them. The overarching theme of this book is Maimonides' multiple methods of communication, which I consider through novel readings of key issues in the *Guide*: creation, God's existence, God's attributes, divine knowledge, biblical exegesis. In studies of Maimonides, these topics are often considered in isolation from one another. I argue that they are interrelated and that in order to understand Maimonides' arguments, we must consider them together, within the context of the *Guide* as a whole. Doing so throws light on the way in which Maimonides wrote the *Guide* and on the arguments he advances.

One of the terms commonly used to refer to metaphysics is "divine science" (*'ilm al-ilāhi*), a name that reflects its perceived exalted status among the different branches of philosophy. Rational thought builds toward metaphysics and there reaches its peak. For various reasons, though, it is not the subject that Maimonides, or, indeed, other medieval thinkers, would have used to introduce philosophy. There are preparatory sciences that train the prospective

metaphysician's mind, such as mathematics, logic, and astronomy. Only after mastering these disciplines was a student considered qualified to progress to more difficult subjects. The same point is made by the rabbinic tradition of which Maimonides is a part: there are matters that can only be understood by those who undertake the requisite training.

For someone who is trying to provide a commentary on the most important teachings of the rabbinic tradition, particularly if he considers such teachings to be those taught by metaphysics, this didactic program causes problems. An author needs to take into account both the proper interpretations of the texts, as he sees them, and the appropriate way to display those interpretations to the public, some members of which will be on different rungs of the educational ladder from others. This is the situation Maimonides finds himself in when setting out to write the *Guide*. He states that his aim is to comment on texts that are written in parables. But he thinks that they are written in parables for a reason. In his commentary, then, he needs to explain the deeper meaning of scripture in a way that opens it out to the kinds of people who in earlier times would have been able to uncover it without his help. However, he needs to do so in a way that does not reveal too much to those unprepared and to whom the parabolic nature of scripture is intended to communicate a surface meaning only. Effectively, he tries to imitate the Torah and the rabbinic tradition by communicating through this one book to people of numerous different levels. If he succeeds, what he takes to be the message of the Torah and the rabbinic tradition is transformed into an idiom that is useful in Maimonides' own age. As he writes in his introduction, "my goal is that the truth should flash out and then be concealed so as not to oppose the divine goal, which one cannot possibly oppose, which placed those truths particular to knowledge of God, beyond the general populace, as is said 'the Lord's secret is for the Godfearing.'¹

Part of the aim of this book is to explain how Maimonides goes about achieving his goal. The *Guide* is a multilayered commentary on a multilayered text. It is written with multiple levels of meaning and using a variety of registers of discourse, because Maimonides thinks that both the Bible and rabbinic literature are also written in such a way. He attempts to duplicate the different levels in his own work, because he thinks that scripture is written with all of those meanings in mind. After all, the sages teach that "there are seventy aspects to the Torah."² From the point of view of the aims of the *Guide*, what is important is less the inner meaning of the *Guide* than the inner meaning of scripture, and Maimonides attempts to express to the worthy what he takes that inner meaning to be.

Perhaps inevitably, there are many competing interpretations of the *Guide*, a variety of which are often called esoteric. Much of the impetus for the different esoteric readings of the *Guide* stems from the work itself and from this attempt to imitate the rabbinic tradition. A number of statements appear to

support the view that Maimonides has something to hide. Furthermore, at the end of the introduction to part one, he states that he intends to contradict himself in two different ways and that the contradictions should not be easy to detect. These contradictions and the way in which Maimonides intends his treatise to be used as a companion and teacher to the tradition, rather than a summation of knowledge found in it, will be explained in greater detail in chapter 1 of this book. In this context, I will also consider the different ways in which the *Guide* has been read and the various messages it is said to possess. Because the secondary literature on Maimonides is vast, the writings about individual metaphysical doctrines will be considered along with the doctrines themselves, rather than in the first chapter.

Over the course of recent decades, scholars have come to a greater appreciation of the role that dialectic plays in the *Guide*. Nevertheless, disagreements over how exactly it is used and what the consequences are for Maimonides' position remain. It is clear that some of the discussions in the *Guide* proceed in dialectical fashion, but how much that recognition explains is debated. In the first chapter, besides discussing the different ways in which Maimonides has been interpreted, I pay attention to the ways in which dialectic has been said to play a role in the *Guide*. I argue that it accounts for some of the perceived esotericism. Maimonides places strict limits on the ability of reason to demonstrate that certain beliefs are true or false. In these situations, he uses dialectic to support a particular position. In chapter 2, I show how such an aspect of dialectic is apparent in the discussion of creation. In this case, contradictions can be explained as results of dialectical methods of writing and arguments, rather than evidence that the author holds an esoteric view opposed to his apparent view. Chapter 3 expands on some of the issues raised and addresses the dialectical evidence that Maimonides offers for his position.

But that is not the only reason for perceived inconsistencies. Another is the pedagogical way of writing that Maimonides uses in order to prod his students into progressing at an appropriate pace. From discussions in which this is apparent, some have concluded that Maimonides holds some positions that are opposed to others that he also holds. In opposition to these interpreters, I think that Maimonides would have considered coherence to be a necessary condition of truth, although on its own, it would not be a sufficient condition. Indeed, this is what allows him to assert the truth of the law's view regarding a number of issues. The position that Maimonides advances is in itself coherent, although sometimes it is difficult to see how. The student is left to think the matter through on the basis of Maimonides' hints and pointers. This accounts for some apparent contradictions and aids Maimonides' effort to imitate the tradition by teaching according to the needs of a student. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 consider an issue in which Maimonides leaves much work for the reader to do. Specifically, when he discusses the divine nature, he does not go into as much detail as he might. I suggest a way to reconcile supposed

contradictions so that the apparent meaning of the *Guide* can be preserved. The positions that Maimonides puts forward are interconnected and implied by his arguments for creation. They are therefore connected to the discussion in chapters 2 and 3.

The philosophical positions that Maimonides espouses are his own. He ought to be taken at face value when he says that he believes in doctrines such as creation. However, he ought also to be taken at face value when he says that there are matters he wishes to hide and ways in which he contradicts himself. It seems, then, that to take Maimonides at his word would entail a rejection of his word, and that is something that requires some explanation. Some scholars have emphasized that the *Guide* is first and foremost a commentary on scripture. The discussions mentioned so far do not obviously fit into this mold. In chapters 7 and 8, I explain how Maimonides interpreted the “account of the chariot” (*ma’aseh merkabah*) at the beginning of Ezekiel. Ezekiel’s narrative is crucial, since it is traditionally taken to be the deepest of all “secrets of the Torah.” Furthermore, *ma’aseh merkabah* is a term that Maimonides uses to refer to metaphysical speculation. These chapters also illustrate the way in which Maimonides uses hints and pointers to interpret parts of scripture. Recognizing that in explanations of passages like this Maimonides employs one of the contradictions mentioned in his introduction facilitates a new reading of the *Guide*. The *Guide* is a book with a number of different “inner” meanings, reflecting the multiple “inner” meanings of scripture itself. There are contradictions between different explanations of scripture because the messages of those parts of scripture are not all equal.

The overall message I wish to present concerns the way in which Maimonides’ *Guide* should be read. My reading argues that a coherent metaphysical view emerges from the pages of the *Guide* and that all of the various doctrines treated need to be considered together as a whole. Independent study is necessary because Maimonides considers it important that students work through the issues he discusses on their own. Only then can they be considered worthy of the knowledge he imparts. That is one reason the *Guide* is written in a manner that makes it difficult to understand, but the presence of dialectical and pedagogical techniques is not the only way in which the *Guide* is esoteric. Maimonides also states that there are times when discussions proceed on the basis of different premises. I wish to show that these discussions reflect the different views present in scripture according to Maimonides’ interpretation of the sacred texts. Scripture contains a variety of worldviews, which begin from different starting points, although each one might be coherent in itself. In order to reflect the different views of scripture, Maimonides’ own explanations will be varied.

CHAPTER 1



Interpreting Maimonides in His Multiple Contexts

1.1 MAIMONIDES' LIFE

Moses Maimonides was born in Córdoba in the Hebrew year 4898 (1137/1138). For the most part, “Sefarad” was a place in which Jews lived comfortably among the Muslim and Christian majorities and produced many important works. There was an increase in Hebrew literature, including the development of great poetry, and contact with the Arabic tradition facilitated philosophical activity. Córdoba had been under Almoravid rule since 1085. They afforded the Jews some security and toleration, though less than previous dynasties had granted. In 1148, both their rule and the toleration came to an end when the city was conquered by the more fanatical Almohad group from Morocco. Maimonides then left Córdoba and fled with his family to Fez, after a period wandering around Andalusia. Eventually, Maimonides settled in Egypt, where he spent most of his life. There he became an important figure, revered through much of the Jewish world and influential outside it, too, an influence apparent in the role he played in helping free captives held in Jerusalem by the Crusaders. From the corpus of medical works he wrote, it is clear that Maimonides was an important doctor. He was the royal physician in Saladin’s court and also taught medicine. Maimonides remained in Egypt, where he served as “head of the Jews,” until his death in 1204.¹

1.2 THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS WORKS

Maimonides’ literary output was substantial. In 1168, he completed his first major work, a running commentary on the Mishnah (CM) designed to open up the discussions of the Tannaim to the wider Jewish population by explaining

their meaning in Judeo-Arabic.² Although it is chiefly concerned with *halakic* matters, CM contains explicitly philosophical sections, including the “Eight Chapters on Ethics,” which is Maimonides’ introduction to Ethics of the Fathers, and the famous thirteen principles which were influential on later Jewish doctrines and an abridged version of which are now included in the prayer book.³

Within the Jewish community, the most famous and influential of Maimonides’ works is the Mishneh Torah (MT), a compendium of *halakah* comprising fourteen books. This work was innovative in a number of ways. Maimonides attempted to encompass the entire *halakah* within it in clear Hebrew, thereby making laws previously available only to Talmudic scholars accessible to all and allowing people to learn them more easily.⁴ MT also includes occasional brief philosophical sections, most notably the very first section, “Laws of the Foundations of the Torah.”⁵

Maimonides also wrote the *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalālat al-Ḥā’irīn*), completed around 1190, during this period. The *Guide* is often considered his major philosophical work, and it is the book for which he is best known outside the Jewish community.⁶ Since its publication, the *Guide* has been the subject of much controversy. This can partially be explained by the author’s reputation, indicated by the famous elegy “From Moses until Moses there were none like Moses,” as a result of which he is often quoted approvingly by thinkers with very different beliefs, thinkers as diverse as the ḥasid Shneur Zalman of Liadi on the one hand and Moses Mendelssohn on the other.⁷ Later strands of Judaism often want to claim Maimonides the philosopher as their own hero and interpret him in the necessary manner.⁸ When a thinker perceives opinions with which he or she disagrees in the *Guide*, explanations are offered.⁹ Reluctance to accept that such an authoritative figure adopted a stance contrary to that which the interpreter adheres to gave rise to differing interpretations. For example, in order to explain Maimonides’ writing the *Guide*, many kabbalists say that he changed his mind after its completion.¹⁰ Alternatively, it may be asserted that similarities between the Zohar and Maimonides’ own works indicate that he was familiar with kabbalah. If the traditional date of the Zohar’s origin, which places it in the second century, is accepted, such evidence may be considered persuasive. However, scholars consider the Zohar to be post-Maimonidean, and in that case, the influence would have occurred in the other direction.¹¹ Maimonides was aware of earlier protokabbalistic ideas that would have influenced the Zohar and often opposed them.¹²

Nevertheless, reaction to the “great eagle” has not always been positive. During his lifetime, Maimonides was forced to defend himself from a charge that he did not hold a belief that was considered by some, including, at least ostensibly, Maimonides himself, to be an essential dogma of Judaism: the resurrection of the dead.¹³ Resurrection is the last of the thirteen principles of faith outlined in CM. However, it is the one principle that he does not explain in detail when he

lists them; he simply states that it has already been explained. Earlier, he says that resurrection is for the righteous alone, who, even when dead, are called living. By contrast, the wicked are considered dead even when alive. The only other time Maimonides repeats this idea is when he explains the term *life* in the *Guide*, where it is given an allegorical interpretation, and he uses the same rabbinic prooftext. Some draw the conclusion that resurrection is to be understood allegorically.¹⁴ This particular problem exploded in the 1230s, around the same time as the *Guide* was burned in Montpellier.¹⁵ Ever since, his views have aroused controversy at one time or another. At one point, it seems that a rumor circulated alleging that he was reincarnated in the body of a worm as punishment for his rationalism.¹⁶ In the nineteenth century, Luzzato went as far as questioning whether Maimonides had indeed written the *Guide*.¹⁷ Clearly, interpretations of Maimonides often depend on the religious stance of the interpreter.

1.2.1 Relationship between the *Guide* and Maimonides' Earlier Works

One of the issues that has puzzled commentators is the relationship between the *Guide* and the previous works. Some have argued that the *Guide* presents a philosophical system so opposed to the *halakic* Judaism contained in MT that the views Maimonides presents in the respective works must be distinguished from one another. Different impressions given by those works of what his philosophical views are have sometimes been partially explained by discriminating between the aims of his early, popular works, intended for all, and the later, "esoteric" *Guide*, aimed at the elite.

Following Leo Strauss, a number of interpreters assert that there is an unbridgeable gap between Judaism and philosophy.¹⁸ According to this view, each represents a coherent system, but they cannot be honestly reconciled. It is then argued that Maimonides could not have tried to reconcile the two, since he was a great philosopher and must have realized that such a task was impossible. Consequently, an interpreter may construct different positions from different parts of the *Guide*, characterize one as religious and another as philosophical, and assert the presence of inconsistencies and contradictions.¹⁹ Maimonides is then presumed to have affirmed only one of the two contradictory positions, usually that which the scholar deems more radical and therefore more in need of concealment. It is tempting to put the sharp division between religion and philosophy down to a modern enlightenment ideology, which was a reaction against religious authority and obscurantism in favor of rational thought and empirical investigation, and argue that it is read back into Maimonides.²⁰ However, a similar way of reading the *Guide* has a long history among Hebrew commentators, which predates the enlightenment and stretches back to the thirteenth century.²¹

There is no simple division between MT and the *Guide* along these lines, though, so the perceived conflict does not explain the differences between them, at least not immediately. On the contrary, there is evidence that Maimonides presents his philosophical views in MT, though without explaining them fully. Furthermore, the philosophical notions in MT are presented in such a way as to be acceptable to a number of different audiences. Despite the apparent radical nature of some of the doctrines presented, traditional believers would consider those doctrines traditional because of the vocabulary and style in which Maimonides expresses them in MT. The wise, however, would understand the true meaning of the doctrines.²² Nevertheless, it is worth dwelling briefly on the relationship between the philosophy in the earlier and later works as an introduction to consideration of the *Guide* itself.²³

The continuity between Maimonides' works has led scholars to use CM and MT as hermeneutic tools to interpret the *Guide*, an approach that holds immediate attraction, since the earlier works are clearer than the *Guide* on philosophical issues, even if their explanations are brief. However, contrasting conclusions are drawn from the attempt to interpret the *Guide* in the light of CM and MT. Neither of those conclusions considers the plain meaning of both Maimonides' early and later works to reflect his entire meaning. One argues that the position stated clearly in MT should be taken as Maimonides' true opinion. The other argues that it represents what Maimonides wished to teach the masses, rather than a full explanation of his own position, which is to be found in the *Guide*. On the one hand, then, Maimonides has been taken to present his own opinions in open fashion in his earlier works, while disguising them in the *Guide*. For example, there are times when Maimonides' openly stated positions in MT appear to be closer to those positions he associates with Aristotle in the *Guide* but which he himself rejects. According to Shlomo Pines, Maimonides reveals his true opinion in the *Guide* but only to those capable of understanding it, while he reveals that opinion openly in MT.²⁴ Pines uses the example of Maimonides' proof for God's existence. In MT, Maimonides offers the statement that "the sphere rotates eternally" (*ha-galgal sobeb tamid*) as a premise for his proof that there must be a Prime Mover. From this, Pines concludes that Maimonides presents Aristotle's version of the eternity of the world as his own. In the *Guide*, on the other hand, that view seems to be rejected, but in truth, according to Pines, it is accepted.²⁵ On the other hand, it has been argued that the earlier works represent a less sophisticated position that must be ultimately rejected, as becomes apparent to the student of the *Guide*. For example, Heidi Ravven applies this principle to show that Maimonides' presentation of the prophetic phenomenon in the *Guide* would be more difficult, and perhaps harmful, for the average believer than the position in MT.²⁶ This is so even though the position of CM and MT is closer to Aristotle's, as presented in the *Guide*, than it is to Maimonides' own position.

1.2.2 Differences between *Fiqh* and *Kalām*

The sparse character of Maimonides' explanations in MT and the contrasting sophistication of the *Guide* may be explained by the diverse natures of the two works. Lawrence Berman argues that the differences between the *Guide* and MT should be understood against the background of Alfarabi's account of religious work.²⁷ According to Berman, who elaborates on one of Strauss's observations, the *Guide* is a work of dialectical theology (*kalām*), while MT is a work of jurisprudence (*fiqh*). Both of these are examples of religious writings, which, in Alfarabi's system, are inferior to works of demonstrative philosophy. Philosophical knowledge represents truth as it is, and religious knowledge is part of a progression toward that truth. Because of the different functions that jurisprudence and theology play in a religious community, there are differences between the two works. It is therefore to be expected that the theological doctrines appearing in the *Guide* should be more sophisticated than those in MT. Berman successfully establishes that the *Guide* is a work of *kalām* and explains the meaning of such a statement within the context of Alfarabi's understanding of religion in general and of Maimonides' application of that to Judaism. Even so, when the idea is used as a key to understanding Maimonides' doctrines, the assertion has been interpreted in a number of ways, drawing various meanings from the *Guide*.

1.2.3 The *Guide* as *Kalām* and Esoteric Readings

One way that Berman's insight has been employed is in favor of the view that Maimonides applies Alfarabi's system because he accepts Alfarabi's thought as a whole. Some evidence for this approach may be taken from the fact that Maimonides wrote a letter to his translator, ibn Tibbon, in which he praises Alfarabi's works, saying that they are "faultlessly excellent."²⁸ This has been taken as an affirmation by Maimonides of Alfarabi's doctrines in general, as if Maimonides agrees with Alfarabi on all issues.²⁹ According to such a line of argument, because the *Guide* aims at strengthening adherence to religion, it must be written in a way that serves such a purpose. In this context, the distinction often made between two coherent overall positions, one of which is a traditional religious position while the other is closer to Aristotle's, is said to be present in the *Guide*. It is presumed that the hidden doctrine would be the position closer to the philosophers and farther from the sensibilities of average religious believers.³⁰ The writer needs to hide such positions in order to protect himself from charges of heresy and also in order to protect the simplistic belief of the masses.

A reader who is aware of how demonstrations work will be able to understand that demonstrative philosophy is true and that the dialectical arguments are inferior. On this account, while the *Guide* may use dialectical arguments, the

educated reader will know that they are not meant to replace demonstrations. Therefore, the doctrines advanced in the *Guide* would then be representative of a certain level of truth but not of the ultimate level, and Maimonides' real position may then be seen to be in accord with that of Alfarabi. When he appears to adopt positions contrary to those adopted with certainty (*yaqīn*) by Alfarabi, the reason is to be found in the nature and aim of a work of *kalām*. Maimonides' true position would then accord with that represented by the higher level of knowledge gained through demonstrations.³¹ However, the evidence from the letter to ibn Tibbon is not unequivocal, and his comment there does not necessitate such a view. Even though Maimonides praises Alfarabi's work with such a glowing reference, his own arguments, and the positions he adopts, should not be ignored. Maimonides must be allowed to speak for himself.³²

In light of the description of the *Guide* as a work of *kalām*, some interpreters attempt to allow Maimonides to do exactly that, while preserving his "true" affinity with the views of the *falāsifa*. This way of interpretation could accept that the *Guide* exhibits many dialectical traits while identifying hints, which show that Maimonides accepts a view closer to demonstrative philosophy.³³ Given that *kalām* is supposed to lead to increasingly certain knowledge, Maimonides would have written a book that intends not only to represent the dialectical position but also to lead the reader to a greater philosophical understanding, ultimately in agreement with demonstration. In order to detect what is behind the explicit "exoteric" opinion and penetrate toward the perceived inner, philosophical depths of the *Guide*, a number of sophisticated literary methods of identifying hints toward such deeper positions are expounded. For example, sometimes Maimonides is said to have distinguished between a "we" position, which is what he attributed to the community as a whole, and a more sophisticated "I" position. In this case, they may both be different from the "philosopher's" position, but Maimonides' own opinion still remains obscure unless the reader pays close attention to the author's style.³⁴

Another popular approach is to focus on the lists in the *Guide*. For example, Leonard Kravitz argues that the list of seven contradictions that Maimonides outlines in his introduction hints at the importance of lists in the *Guide* in general.³⁵ Maimonides presents the contradictions as a method of explaining things that should not be explained to everyone. Because there are things that must remain hidden, the contradictions cannot exhaust the instruction that is revealed to the careful reader, since Maimonides openly states to all his readers that they are a key. Kravitz concludes that their presence in a list is what Maimonides reveals. Furthermore, he argues, the fact that the relevant contradictions are the antepenultimate and the final members of the list indicates that the reader should pay special attention to the antepenultimate and the final members of all lists in the *Guide*.³⁶ Kravitz uses other types of hints, which, he believes, facilitates a reading of the *Guide* that portrays Maimonides as an adherent of positions he ostensibly rejects.

A similar, influential, literary method of reading the *Guide* is advanced by Abraham Nuriel. He focuses on the individual words that Maimonides uses, considers the context in which certain key words appear, and argues that the use and context of such words reveal Maimonides' true opinion. This opinion is often contrary to that which is openly stated.³⁷ In Maimonides' instruction to pay careful attention to every word used in the *Guide* and his statement that no word appears out of place, Nuriel's method may find clear support from within the *Guide* itself.³⁸ Nuriel points out the importance of paying attention to Maimonides' terminology. However, such attention should not compromise that given to understanding the arguments involved. In response, one may focus instead on the coherence of the positions that Maimonides advances, and attention should be paid to the arguments and how they are made.³⁹ In this vein, much recent work has explained Maimonides' use of *kalām* in such a way that it explains perceived inconsistencies rather than generating them.

If an interpreter propounds an esoteric reading of the *Guide*, the attitude that must be taken toward the claim that it is *kalām* is expressed by Warren Zev Harvey: "In Berman's view the *Guide* is kalamic with regard to the vulgar reader, but philosophic with regard to the elite reader. If this is Berman's view, I have no quarrel with it."⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Harvey seems to presume that Maimonides thought that philosophy is capable of reaching demonstrations regarding every important metaphysical issue. Harvey's assertion is too bold, since he divorces *kalām* from philosophy rather than seeing it as a part of philosophical discourse. In response to such assertions as this, scholars have explained that greater understanding of the role of dialectical theology in Maimonides' work explains the issues that are raised by esoteric readings. A feature of *kalām* works is that they use dialectic (*jadaliya*), which is less certain than demonstrative philosophy (*burhāniya*). Harvey's opposition of *kalām* and philosophy presumably distinguishes between dialectic and demonstrative philosophy. While he is right to say that dialectic is considered inferior to demonstration, his account diminishes the important role dialectic plays in philosophical discourse, particularly in the *Guide*. Maimonides was happy to use dialectic, although he took the dialectical theologians (*mutakallimūn*) to task for misusing it.⁴¹

1.2.4 The *Guide* as *Kalām*: A Response to Esotericism

This book supports the opinion that recognizing that dialectic is used extensively in the *Guide* does not entail the view that Maimonides hides an esoteric doctrine but, on the contrary, explains some problems in Maimonides scholarship that may otherwise be seen to indicate the presence of such a doctrine. Such a view has been argued by a number of scholars, though with different emphases. In opposition to esoteric readings, Joel Kraemer argues that lack of appreciation of the nature of Aristotelian dialectic has led scholars to raise

“false issues” concerning Maimonides’ “true” opinion.⁴² Dialectic is not the exclusive property of the theologians. The reasons any thinker may use it need to be considered.

Dialectical examination of arguments helps assess the worth of the arguments. Nevertheless, dialectical argument is inferior to demonstration. When dialectical arguments are used in the *Guide*, the positions that Maimonides argues for are often supported by evidence that has a dialectical level of certainty. In these cases, Maimonides does not assent to the position in question with as much certainty as when he thinks that a demonstration is available. A dialectical argument may be distinguished from a demonstrative argument according to the type of premises it employs. Whereas a demonstration is based on apodictic premises, a dialectical argument is based on acceptable premises.⁴³ In Maimonides’ opinion, such premises are available either as generally accepted opinions (*mašhūrāt*) or as premises based on the authority of tradition (*taqlīd*), so they are beliefs based on the consensus of the wise or the wider community, or beliefs received from trusted sources.⁴⁴ When he openly states that no demonstration is available, he uses evidence based on acceptable premises. In some discussions, he begins by clarifying the different possibilities and considering their conclusions. He then offers evidence from other doctrines to support one of them.

In Maimonides’ scheme, as with those of other medieval Arabic philosophers, dialectical arguments perform an important philosophical role. He explicitly uses dialectical manners of argument on a number of occasions. One of the ways in which a dialectical discussion may proceed is by examining different positions in order to establish what follows from their premises. The premises can then be judged according to what they necessarily entail. Furthermore, if the truth value of the premises is unknown, different positions can be compared according to their conclusions and their consistency with other positions. This is particularly useful when there is a reason to accept or reject those other positions, since it provides a criterion for accepting or rejecting the premises being considered.

A feature of the *Guide* that indicates its dialectical nature is the presence of discussions that proceed in dialectical fashion. During these discussions, the different options are presented and then examined. Maimonides then assents to one of the positions on the basis of evidence that possesses a dialectical level of certainty. Although he does not present his conclusions as being as certain as those based on demonstrative premises, he accepts the positions that are supported by the most important dialectical evidence.⁴⁵ Since there are areas in which no demonstration is available, dialectical evidence has an important role to play in deciding what is accepted as true.⁴⁶

The reason Maimonides uses dialectical methods is disputed. Even among those who do not believe that Maimonides hides a metaphysical doctrine from the masses, different explanations are given for the presence of dialectic and

its consequences for understanding the *Guide*. Different positions will be discussed in greater detail during the course of this book. I will argue that Maimonides uses dialectical methods of expressing his opinions for a number of reasons. In addition to the need to use dialectical premises when no demonstration is available, then, Maimonides employs dialectic for further reasons. An examination of the introduction to the *Guide* will help to clarify them.

1.3 THE INTRODUCTION TO THE *GUIDE FOR THE PERPLEXED*

I noted above that Maimonides' status has contributed to the proliferation of different explanations of his meaning. Lack of understanding of dialectical writing has also caused confusion. The *Guide* lends itself to diverse interpretations because of the way it is written. Esoteric accounts such as those outlined above often take their cue from Maimonides' introduction, so I now turn to an examination of the introduction itself.

1.3.1 Imitating Oral Discussion: Teaching and Withholding

The *Guide* begins with a personal address to a student, Joseph ibn Judah.⁴⁷ Maimonides writes that he intends the work as a whole to be a continuation of the study that Joseph has already begun, indicating that it is supposed to replace personal instruction. As Kraemer points out, the “literary genre and rhetorical style” of the work are indications of its dialectical character and indicate a reason that Maimonides employs a dialectical writing style.⁴⁸ Specifically, one of the advantages oral teaching has over written instruction, particularly when it is directed toward an individual student, is that the teacher may choose what to tell the student and in how much detail. Given the choice, Maimonides would prefer to adopt such a method, but he is aware that it is impossible. His student is no longer in close proximity, nor are others whom the *Guide* may help. Nevertheless, he attempts to write the *Guide* in a way that imitates oral instruction by explaining its contents to each reader according to the reader’s own ability. Accordingly, Maimonides states that he does not intend to explain the full contents of the work to all of its readers: “It is not the purpose of this treatise to make its totality intelligible to the vulgar or to beginners in speculation, nor to teach those who have not engaged in any study other than the science of the law [*ilm al-ṣari'a*]—I mean the legalistic study of the law [*fīqh*].”⁴⁹ The reason for this is that it deals with subject matter that is inappropriate for such people to learn: “the purpose of this treatise and of all those like it is the science of the law in its true sense [*ilm al-ṣari'a 'ala al-haqīqa*].”⁵⁰ Although Maimonides never explicitly states what the “science of the law in its true sense” is, that it is physics and metaphysics is the “almost inescapable conclusion.”⁵¹

Despite the constraints, Maimonides feels it is necessary to address those who are worthy of learning, even with the risks of putting his instruction in writing:

I am the man who when the concern pressed him and his way was straitened and he could find no other device by which to teach a demonstrated truth other than by giving satisfaction to a single virtuous man while displeasing ten thousand ignoramuses—I am he who prefers to address that single man by himself, and I do not heed the blame of those many creatures. For I claim to liberate that virtuous one from that into which he has sunk, and I shall *Guide* him in his perplexity until he becomes perfect and he finds rest.⁵²

However, Maimonides is careful enough to write in a certain level of code in order to ensure that only those who are worthy succeed in understanding the full message of the *Guide*. He offers instruction concerning how to understand the meaning of the treatise to the few for whom he writes: “If you wish to grasp the entirety of this treatise so that none of its details escape you, you must connect its chapters with each other.”⁵³ Reading an individual chapter will never be sufficient to understand the entire intention behind that chapter. Furthermore, reading the entire *Guide* is also insufficient to understand the intention behind the treatise as a whole: “You ought rather to learn everything that ought to be learned and constantly study this Treatise. For it will then elucidate for you most of the obscurities of the law.”⁵⁴ The *Guide* provides pointers to a correct understanding of the law but also assumes knowledge on the part of the reader. In order for it to “elucidate most of the obscurities of the law,” the pupil “ought to learn everything that ought to be learned.” Furthermore, the reader is expected to continue to “constantly study this treatise” so that mentions of, or allusions toward, knowledge that is gained elsewhere may be identified and applied to an understanding of Maimonides’ meaning. Maimonides is indicating that he explains his teaching using dialectic and maieutic. The *Guide* thus adopts certain premises that a pupil familiar with philosophy would identify more easily and uses arguments that such a student understands from previous studies.⁵⁵

Dialectic is practiced during arguments between two opponents. One of the methods of a dialectician is to draw out the conclusions of an adversary’s stated premises. By doing so, the dialectician is able to show that an opponent holds inconsistent views about the matter under discussion and thereby try to persuade the adversary that his premises are false. As Aristotle explains, “the job of the questioner is to lead the argument so as to make the answerer state the most unacceptable of the consequences made necessary as a result of the thesis.”⁵⁶ The *Guide* is not a dispute taking place between two people. Nevertheless, since Maimonides intends to replicate oral teaching, this aspect of dialectical discourse is present. As mentioned above, there are a number of