

# The Many Faces of Maimonides

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# The Many Faces of Maimonides

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SCHWARTZ

Translated  
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BOSTON  
2018

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

**Names:** Schwartz, Dov, author. | Stein, Batya, translator.

**Title:** The many faces of Maimonides / Dov Schwartz ; translated by Batya Stein.

**Description:** Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2018.

**Series:** Emunot, Jewish philosophy and kabbalah | Collection of essays (some originally published in Hebrew). | Includes bibliographical references and index.

**Identifiers:** LCCN 2018006997 | ISBN 9781618117809 (hardcover)

**Subjects:** LCSH: Maimonides, Moses, 1135-1204. Dalāalat al-ḥāa\*irāin. | Judaism. | Jewish philosophy. | Philosophy, Medieval.

**Classification:** LCC B759.M34 S34 2018 | DDC 296.1/81—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018006997>

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ISBN 978-1-61811-780-9 (hardback)

ISBN 978-1-61811-781-6 (electronic)

**Book design by Kryon Publishing Services (P) Ltd.**

[www.kryonpublishing.com](http://www.kryonpublishing.com)

Cover design by Ivan Grave

**Published by Academic Studies Press in 2018**

28 Montfern Avenue

Brighton, MA 02135, USA

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[www.academicstudiespress.com](http://www.academicstudiespress.com)

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# Introduction

The present book will address mainly philosophical dimensions in Maimonides' thought, focusing on a new reading of several issues in *The Guide of the Perplexed*. A figure like Maimonides would obviously have a variety of interests and goals and his writing will certainly be diverse and multifaceted. Even an esoteric interest or political and religious goals and motives do not exhaust the pursuits of Maimonides, who both transcended and included all of these. I do not accept mystic explanations of his endeavor, and can only study his genius.

Medieval Jewish thought can be clearly split into two eras—before and after the appearance of *The Guide of the Perplexed*. No other philosophical treatise has ever evoked so many discussions, neither in the rabbinic nor in the scholarly literature, and no other work of Jewish philosophy has ever given rise to such polarized interpretations. *The Guide of the Perplexed* also had an essential influence on medieval (Christian) scholastic thought and, through it, on Western culture in general. My attempt in this introduction is to offer a brief outline of various reasons for this phenomenon.

*The Guide of the Perplexed*, which was completed in 1191, turned into a popular volume that, over centuries, gained acceptance not only among thinkers and scholars but also among the general public. This book's popularity is an impressive and paradoxical event, given that it absolutely contradicts its writer's original intention. At the end of his Introduction, Maimonides set a criterion—his book would please one in ten thousand readers:

To sum up: 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.<sup>1</sup>

Maimonides knew that most people in the Jewish community would not understand the claims of the *Guide*, and wrote the book with this purpose in mind. Indeed, he actively tried to distance ordinary readers from his book and therefore wrote it using deliberate contradictions, as he admitted in the introduction. Maimonides thus adopted all possible means to ensure the book would *not* be popular but to no avail.

The paradox of the book’s acceptance is evident in the fact that it was written for a specific student, R. Joseph b. Judah. Contrary to Maimonides’ previous large treatises, *Commentary to the Mishnah* and *Mishneh Torah*, which were written for the Jewish community in general, the *Guide* was tailored for Joseph: a scholar, interested in various scientific and philosophical fields, who had become perplexed. In the “Introduction to the First Part,” Maimonides clarified that the work had been designed for one who is knowledgeable in Torah as well as in the theoretical and philosophical<sup>2</sup> sciences but has difficulty reconciling them. The rabbi’s personal guidance to his student thus opened up possibilities of deeper knowledge to many. In this book, I focus mainly on the *Guide* and only in Chapters Three and Five consider his other writings.

Structure

Before attempting to consider the general principles of the *Guide*, I will briefly present its structure and its main conceptual approaches in the table below:

Part	Chapters	Content
I	1-49	<i>Negating corporeality</i> : lexicographical discussions, focusing on the negation of corporeality. Almost every chapter interprets biblical attributes of God in non-corporeal terms.
	50-70	<i>Attributes</i> : Denying any attributes to God, who is entirely indescribable. <sup>3</sup>
	71-76	<i>Dispute</i> : Polemic with Muslim theologians.

1

Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 16. All further English citations of this work are from this translation (henceforth and throughout this book, *Guide*).

2

Today, the expertise of a “philosopher” is in a field entirely different from that of a “scientist,” who deals with order in the material world. In the Middle Ages, however, there was no significant distinction between a theoretical scientist and a philosopher.

3

Maimonidean scholarship has discussed the extent of Maimonides’ recourse to analogy in the description of God.

Part	Chapters	Content
II	1	<i>Demonstration</i> : A series of proofs of God's existence, unity, and non-corporeality.
	2-12	<i>The Spheres and the Angels</i> (separate intellects): The notion of emanation, which clarifies how the heavenly elements and the angels came into being.
	13-31	<i>Creation</i> : The impossibility of demonstrating scientifically either the creation or the eternity of the world. Reasons for preferring creation.
	32-48	<i>Prophecy</i> : Divine revelation is natural and subject to a set order. Its functions are political
III	1-7	<i>The Account of the Chariot</i> : A meteorological and physical interpretation of the biblical chapters on the chariot.
	8-24	<i>Providence and Knowledge</i> : God's providence protects only humans according to their level of knowledge. God knows the details from his knowledge of himself.
	25-50	<i>The Reasons for the Commandments</i> : Rational arguments for all the commandments
	51-54	<i>Perfection</i> : The ethos of worshipping the divine among those who attained perfection.

This division is only one way of presenting the contents of the *Guide*, but immediately raises questions about its structure and order, which have proven extremely controversial. For example, the polemic with the Muslim theologians is closer in its character and contents to the issue of creation than to the issue of negative attributes, but Maimonides nevertheless set it in Part I. Not only are the contents of the *Guide* puzzling, but so are the structure and order of the discussions. In the first two chapters of this book, I consider the structure and the order of two sets of chapters in the *Guide*, drawing lessons from them about Maimonides' philosophical writing in general.

## The Legitimation of Scientific Philosophical Pursuits

A fundamental principle of the Maimonidean approach that appears already in the introductions to the *Guide* is the equation of *ma'aseh bereshit* [the Account of the Beginning] with physics, and of *ma'aseh merkavah* [the Account of the Chariot] with metaphysics. What is revolutionary in this equation? *Ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah* reflect the most esoteric concerns of tannaitic thought—the former referring to the secrets of creation, and the latter, based on the visions of Isaiah and Ezekiel, to the supreme



revelations of prophecy. Maimonides, then, at one stroke, interpreted these two terms according to the Aristotelian science that he had come to know through the Arabic translations of the Greek philosopher and through the writings of Muslim philosophers—Alfārābī, Avicenna, Ibn Bājja, Ibn Ṭufail, and others.<sup>4</sup> To Maimonides, *ma'aseh bereshit* conveys the physical order of the material world—the laws of motion, time, meteorology, and so forth—whereas *ma'aseh merkavah* conveys the order of the heavenly world—the movement of the spheres and their movers. In this daring interpretation, Maimonides pivoted the most secret traditions of the Oral Law on the scientific laws of his time.

Furthermore, Maimonides adopted in the *Guide* (I:71) the approach that ancient Jews had displayed wondrous expertise and creativity in various sciences. When the Jewish people went into exile, Gentile nations learned these sciences from the Jews who, over the centuries, had forgotten them due to the hardships and persecutions afflicting them. With this explanation, Maimonides instantly legitimized the study of philosophy from the books of Muslim thinkers. The study of the great Muslim philosophers merely returns a lost item to its rightful owners. Maimonides tells the scholar, as it were, that learning about scientific problems from Arabic sources is, in fact, a return to the rabbis' esoteric tradition.

The acquisition of scientific knowledge as the supreme human purpose is an approach that Maimonides endorses in all his writings. This notion is already developed systematically in his Introduction to *Commentary to the Mishnah* and is the basis for the discussions in the *Guide*. Maimonides emphasized that the Torah and its commandments aim at “the welfare of the soul and the welfare of the body.”<sup>5</sup> By “welfare of the body” he meant imparting normative and ethical foundations for the existence of the society, and by “welfare of the soul”—the acquisition of general and proper scientific knowledge. For Maimonides, then, philosophical and religious ideals coalesce. The Torah is unique because it directs us to acquire knowledge and scientific learning.<sup>6</sup> Scientific knowledge, however, must be acquired from scientific sources, meaning Greek science through Muslim

4 Maimonides greatly respected Alfārābī, and L. V. Berman has even referred to Maimonides as Alfārābī's “disciple.” Currently, several scholars have pointed to various thinkers and philosophical traditions that have contributed to the shaping of the views in the *Guide*. See, for example, chapter 5 below.

5 *Guide*, III:27, 510.

6 Several scholars hold that Maimonides was a skeptic and an agnostic and, therefore, preferred political pursuits to the acquisition of metaphysical knowledge, but this approach has proved controversial and is not the one accepted in Maimonidean scholarship.

mediation, not from the Torah. In the following chapters, I consider the Muslim sources of the *Guide* and, specifically, the notion of idolatry as mediation that is manifest in Maimonides' attitude to astral magic and in his conception on the immortality of the intellect.

Maimonides was aware that many in the rabbinic world did not agree with the rationalist version he upheld. Indeed, toward the end of his life, a bitter polemic had already erupted regarding his thought, which would persist long after his death.

## Scientific Truth *versus* Religious Truth

For Maimonides, as noted, the authoritative scientific sources were the writings of Muslim philosophers from Alfārābī onward. What about the two centuries of Jewish philosophizing that had preceded his birth? Systematic theological and philosophical treatises had been written before the appearance of the *Guide*—Saadia Gaon's *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, Bahya ibn Paquda's *The Duties of the Heart*, and Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *The Fountain of Life*. Maimonides did not flinch from controversy with his predecessors, and this matter requires an understanding of his view on the contrast between scientific and religious truth.

Maimonides sharply distinguished theologians, who focus on proving religious truths at any price, from philosophers, who seek scientific objective truth. Specifically, Maimonides addressed a phenomenon widespread in the Muslim world—the Kalām. The term “Kalām”—meaning thought, speech, logic, and so forth—denotes Muslim theological schools that strove to offer the truth of Islam in rational terms. These theologians used polemical and dialectic arguments to prove that reason supports Muslim religion. Since existing sciences did not meet the aims of the Kalām supporters (known as Mutakallimūn), they created an alternative science. The natural science of the Mutakallimūn relied on elements (atomism, the existence of a vacuum), which Maimonides strongly opposed. Interestingly, modern science accepts these elements, but the dominant paradigm in Maimonides' times was Aristotelian science, which negated them. Maimonides viewed Muslim theologians—and theologians in general—as self-serving and uninterested in objective truth, concerned only with the verification of their approach at any cost.<sup>7</sup> He argued that they first made presumptions

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7 *Guide*, I:71. See chapter 6 below.

and only then turned to explain the reality facing them. By contrast, true scientists observe reality as is and then approach it to determine its laws.

A question could be raised—Maimonides is, after all, a religious man and he too wishes to verify the assumptions of religion. Theologians devoted their efforts to the endorsement of approaches such as creation and divine omnipotence, which were important to Maimonides himself. Why, then, not endorse the view of the Kalām theologians? Maimonides would answer that objective truth is the supreme value and, as such, does not contradict religious existence. He did not shy away from stating that not every religious belief can be scientifically proven. Given his fearless adherence to truth, he never hesitated to criticize his forebears, pointing out mistakes by talmudic sages who had claimed that heavenly elements make sounds in their motion.<sup>8</sup> He also criticized a group of thinkers whom he respected as halakhists and talmudists—the geonim. Maimonides noted that, when the geonim deal with conceptual and theological matters, they adopt the arguments of Muslim theologians (Mutakallimūn). Similarly, he was critical of Karaite thinkers because some of them had endorsed the Kalām natural science.<sup>9</sup> He had praise only for “Andalusian” thinkers, that is, for philosophers who lived in his own surroundings. Unfortunately, we have no way of identifying who these “Andalusians” were.

Maimonides, then, recognized the existence of an objective scientific truth and thereby displayed intellectual integrity. The implication, however, is not that Maimonides blindly followed the determinations of the scientists. He held that it is definitely possible to criticize assumptions adopted by scientists when these assumptions cannot be demonstrated and are merely intuitions. Because he clung to scientific truth, Maimonides turned directly to the scientific writings of his time, which were not Jewish sources. It is thus clear why, generally, he did not relate to the Jewish philosophical tradition that had preceded him.

The present book seeks to contribute to the understanding of modes of thought adopted mostly in the writing of *The Guide of the Perplexed* and to the knowledge of its sources. The last chapter acts as a summary, presenting

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8 Ibid., II:8. See chapter 2 below.

9 Ibid., I:71. See chapter 6 below.

Maimonides as a “philosophical theologian” according to a model of his own design.<sup>10</sup>

Thanks to the translator and editor of this book, Batya Stein, whose involvement was crucial to the clarification of my thinking. She is a permanent partner to my thought and my work, and I am grateful for the opportunity of enjoying her collaboration.

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10 Chapters 1 and 6 were written originally for this volume. Previous versions of chapters 2 to 5, translated from the Hebrew by Edward Levin, the late David Louvish, and Batya Stein appeared as “Sources of Maimonides’ Concept of Idolatry as Mediation,” with Eliezer Schossberg, *The Annual of Rabbinic Judaism* 1 (1998): 119-128; “The Separate Intellects and Maimonides’ Argumentation,” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010): 59-92; “Avicenna and Maimonides on Immortality: A Comparative Study,” in *Medieval and Modern Perspectives on Muslim-Jewish Relations*, ed. Ronald Nettler, 185-197 (Oxford: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995).

## Chapter 1

# The Passion for Metaphysics

The present chapter focuses on *Guide of the Perplexed* I:31-35. These five chapters, though constituting a unit apart, are still part of the discussion unfolding in the *Guide* and share its literary features. Dealing mainly with an educational and didactic question, this unit is concerned with the proper approach to the study of metaphysics as manifest in four aspects:

- (1) The scientific aspect: The study of metaphysics must be preceded by the study of sciences (logic, mathematics, physics, and astronomy).
- (2) The methodological aspect: Proper rules of thought must be preserved, proceeding cautiously and constantly examining the arguments.
- (3) The ethical aspect: All attention must be focused on the study of these sciences, keeping away from material concerns.
- (4) The political aspect: The multitudes must be attended to from both a negative and a positive perspective—from a negative perspective, ensuring they do not exceed the limited boundaries of their comprehension, and from a positive one, by providing them only a minimum of metaphysical assumptions.

The chapters in this unit thus consider the implications of this approach for the education of the multitude; in many respects, the discussion in them may be viewed as shifting from study to political conduct. Ultimately, the metaphysical formulations delivered to the public outline the manner of study suited to the perfect person.

Some of the *Guide*'s commentators and scholars have suggested adding Chapters 30 and 36 to this unit, speculating that they were connected to its topics. In literary and philosophical terms, however, attaching them to Chapters 31 to 35, which have their own thematic and stylistic foundation, does not seem inherently justified.

I will argue that, in this unit, Maimonides relies mainly on the profound emotional need, the almost uncontrollable urge, to reach the summits of knowledge. When issuing his complicated instructions for acquiring knowledge, Maimonides is guided by the principle of passion for metaphysics. I will further argue that Maimonides turned the passion for metaphysics into a powerful element, political as well as theological. The conclusion of the discussion will be that this unit is one of the most concentrated expressions of Maimonidean rationalism.

## Introduction

In the *Guide*, we find several questions that appear recurrently. For example, almost every analysis of a specific conception raises the issue of Maimonides' aim in writing the book. Every one of these analyses sort exposes Maimonides' attitude toward science and its connection to revelation on the one hand, and toward biblical exegesis and rabbinic sources on the other. Additional questions touch on the character of the book (an exegetical work, a philosophical one, a polemic with the Kalām), the reason for the order of its chapters, the techniques of concealment, the identification of esoteric ideas, and so forth. One issue that raises many of these questions to the surface is the proper attitude toward the study of metaphysics.

### *Metaphysics in the Guide of the Perplexed*

The widespread term for metaphysics in the Middle Ages was *elohiyot* or *hokhmah elohit* [divine wisdom]. In many respects, the *Guide of the Perplexed* was meant to pave the way for the intellectual to acquire metaphysical knowledge. Metaphysics was clearly an esoteric realm for Maimonides, and he held that the rabbis had referred to it as *ma'aseh merkavah* [the account of the Chariot] and, in some sense, also as *sitrei Torah* [mysteries of the Torah]. In the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides wrote that physics too, *ma'aseh bereshit* [the account of the Beginning], is included among the esoteric bodies of knowledge but, from the outset, concealment is naturally intended for metaphysics. For medieval scholars, metaphysics comprised mainly the discussion about the separate intellects and the divine attributes. Although this was the framework that Maimonides adopted concerning the contents of metaphysics, in the chapters dealing with the *merkavah* (*Guide* III:1-7), *ma'aseh merkavah* hardly relates to the separate intellects.

To prevent misunderstandings regarding the importance of metaphysics, Maimonides opens the *Guide* with a discussion of the divine attributes—first he validates the negation of anthropomorphism in the lexicographical chapters and then deals directly with the doctrine of the attributes. The *Guide* is thus built as an inverse pyramid regarding the quality of the sciences and the extent of their concealment: it opens with the most secret issues (attributes) and considers their substantive and hermeneutical aspects, and slowly descends into more “revealed” issues, from creation and prophecy to the reasons for the commandments and the practical conduct of the perfect human. This structure is meant to clarify the importance of metaphysics. Maimonides painstakingly explained that metaphysics cannot be approached as any other body of knowledge. He notes that analytical ability does not suffice to lay the foundations for theology or metaphysics and devotes considerable efforts to the conditions and the background required for its acquisition.

Within the lexicographical chapters in Part I of the *Guide*, therefore, Maimonides embedded a unit of five chapters dealing with a quasi-educational, ethical, and pedagogical preparation for the doctrine of divine attributes. In his view, one embarking on the study of this doctrine faces a kind of paradox: the doctrine of divine attributes is, on the one hand, the apex of the sciences. Were we asked to place this doctrine within a philosophical realm, the natural choice would be metaphysics that, for Maimonides, represents the summit of scientific thought. On the other hand, this doctrine leads to the negation of the attributes. Ultimately, God cannot be described in human thought through human language. The tension in the complex discussion of negative knowledge requires the student to acquire what in modern language is called “consciousness,” that is, to be cognizant of the structure and traits of the personality and adapt them to the task of learning the doctrine of the attributes. The cognitive effort per se, however, is not enough. The dialectic of affirmation and negation of the divine attributes requires restraint and caution, as shown below, and it is for this purpose that Chapters 31 to 35 were included in Part I of the *Guide*.

The location of some of the chapters units in the *Guide* is not self-evident. One example is the unit in II:2-12, which deals with the separate intellects and their connection to earthly existence, which is placed between the proofs of the existence of God based on the eternity of the world and the chapters that refute eternity and assume creation. Commentators and scholars have dealt with the location of this unit,

straining to connect it to the surrounding chapters.<sup>1</sup> Another example is the unit of the *merkavah* chapters in *Guide* III:1-7.<sup>2</sup> The unit in I:31-35 is also found between various lexicographical chapters and could have been placed right before or after them.

### ***The Scholarly Research***

Medieval interpretation was already aware of *Guide* I:31-35 as a freestanding unit. R. Moshe Narboni, for example, argued that these chapters are a kind of allegorical and personal interpretation of the Sinai epiphany. This interpretation also influenced the commentaries on these chapters by R. Shem Tov b. Isaac ibn Shem Tov and R. Mordekhai Komtiyano.

In many classic studies from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, the question of *Guide* I:31-35 was conflated with the discussion of the divine attributes. This decision seems understandable: the unit does not belong directly to the strong rejection of anthropomorphism in the lexicographic chapters, which attracted the attention of scholars engaged in biblical exegesis and, in particular, in philosophical biblical exegesis. Nor is the unit an integral part of the divine attributes doctrine, which attracted the interest of classic scholars such as David Kaufmann, Harry Austryn Wolfson, and Julius Guttman. Other scholars who composed monographs on Maimonides, such as Fritz Bamberger, did not relate to this unit. The interim generation, which began publishing studies in the mid-twentieth century—including Shlomo Pines, L. V. Berman, and Herbert A. Davidson—discussed these chapters only incidentally.

Over time, however, research on Maimonides has expanded and, more recently, scholars have examined aspects of the chapters in this unit. A few examples follow: Joel Kraemer discusses the relation between Maimonides’

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1 See Dov Schwartz, “The Separate Intellects and Maimonides’ Argumentation,” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides*, ed. Ephraim Kanarfogel and Moshe Sokolow (New York: Yeshiva University Press, 2010), 59-62. For an extended and revised version of this study, see Chapter 2 below.

2 See, for example, Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides on the Scope of Metaphysics *alias* *Ma’aseh Merkavah*: The Evolution of His Views,” in *Maimonides y su época*, ed. Carlos del Valle, Santiago García-Jalon, and Juan Pedro Monferrer (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal de Conmemoraciones Culturales, 2007), 221-30; idem, “Four Observations on Maimonides’ Four Celestial Globes (*Guide* II:9-10),” in *Maimonides: Conservatism, Originality, Revolution*, ed. Aviezer Ravitzky (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2008), 499-527 [Heb].



scientific method and the passion for metaphysics<sup>3</sup>; Sarah Stroumsa presented the Muslim model fitting the figure of Elisha ben Abuyah set forth in Chapter 32<sup>4</sup>; Amira Eran studied the connection between Chapters 33 and 34 and the concept of “artifice”<sup>5</sup>; Sara Klein-Braslavy examined key terms in the unit as part of a general discussion of the *Guide’s* esoteric methodology;<sup>6</sup> James Diamond explored the hermeneutical and conceptual background of Elisha ben Abuyah’s character in Chapter 32;<sup>7</sup> Menachem Kellner examined the connection between Chapters 32 and 33 and how Maimonides grappled with mysticism,<sup>8</sup> and Armand Maurer discussed the relationship between these chapters and the definition of metaphysics.<sup>9</sup>

### The Theses

I will seek to analyze and interpret Chapters I:31 to I:35 as a cohesive unit, examining its structure and leitmotifs. An initial look at these chapters reveals one formal characteristic of the unit—multiple numbered and unnumbered lists. An in-depth literary analysis of the chapters reveals additional lists. Almost in every chapter, Maimonides presented lists of factors, causes, and principles. Some of the lists are revealed while others are concealed, as follows:

- (1) In Chapter 31 are three factors for the limitation of human reason regarding metaphysics (concealed), four causes of dispute (revealed), and four types of harm that result from crossing the bounds of apprehension (concealed).
- (2) In Chapter 32 is a partial discussion of the four who entered the *pardes* [garden or orchard] (concealed).

3 Joel L. Kraemer, “Maimonides on Aristotle and Scientific Method,” in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. Eric L. Ormsby (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1989).

4 Sarah Stroumsa, “Elisha ben Abuyah and Muslim Heretics in Maimonides’ Writings,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992-1993): 175-183.

5 Amira Eran, “‘Artifice’ as a Device for the Study of the Divinity in the Writings of Maimonides and Averroes,” *Pe’amim* 61 (1995): 109-131 [Heb].

6 Sara Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1996), Part One [Heb].

7 James A. Diamond, “The Failed Theodicy of a Rabbinic Pariah: A Maimonidean Recasting of Elisha ben Abuyah,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9 (2003): 353-380.

8 Menachem M. Kellner, *Maimonides’ Confrontation with Mysticism* (Oxford: Littman Library, 2006).

9 Armand A. Maurer, “Maimonides and Aquinas on the Study of Metaphysics,” in *A Straight Path: Studies in Medieval Philosophy and Culture—Essays in Honor of Arthur Hyman*, ed. Ruth Link-Salinger (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 206-215.

- (3) In Chapter 34 are five causes that prevent beginning with the study of metaphysics (revealed).
- (4) In Chapter 35 are two dogmatic lists meant for the multitude (revealed and concealed), and one list of the “mysteries of the Torah” [*sitrei Torah*] for intellectuals (revealed).

Chapter 33 serves as a kind of transition from the discussion of educational and didactic aspects of metaphysical apprehension per se to the political discussion, which deals with imparting minimal truths to the multitude. Chapter 33 is, therefore, a transition from directives to the intellectual in the speculative sphere (who seeks intellectual perfection) to instructions to the intellectual in the political realm (the ruler).

The relationship between the chapters of the unit also touches on substantive motifs and on the dynamics of their disclosure. The Maimonidean discussion in these chapters (which are marked by a stable formal structure, as noted) is based on a number of concealed motifs that become revealed. The motifs relate to the human psyche (desires, cognitions, and the like) on the one hand, and to the proper political leadership on the other.

Turning now to the aspect that is distinctly conceptual, I will make the following arguments about the approach to the study of metaphysics that Maimonides conveys in the chapters of the unit:

- (1) The student of metaphysics confronts a series of obstacles.
- (2) The greatest and most dangerous obstacle is the passion for metaphysics, that is, the uncontrollable longing for universal knowledge.
- (3) Sexual desire most accurately clarifies the nature of the passion for metaphysics.
- (4) The passion for metaphysics characterizes all humans, by their very nature.<sup>10</sup>
- (5) Balancing the passion for metaphysics in broad sections of the public requires political ability.
- (6) The passion for metaphysics is the most accurate expression of Maimonidean rationalism.

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10 The passion for metaphysics is indeed stronger in the consciousness of the religious person, who longs to know God at any cost. Unlike the classic philosopher, such as Aristotle, for whom God is an element of the system, meaning the assurance of the heavenly movement, for religious individuals in the Middle Ages, God is not only an object of knowledge but the source of the revealed commandment, intensifying this passion in their existence.

- (7) To illustrate the dangers of the passion for metaphysics, Maimonides presented a partial and tendentious description of the sources of tal-mudic mysticism.

But why does the discussion of metaphysics in this chapter of the *Guide* not revolve entirely around content and hermeneutical considerations dealing with the divine attributes and the immaterial substances? Why address issues pertaining to human nature, such as the order of study, proper education, and so forth? If we take into account that the *Guide* was written for R. Joseph b. Judah, we will understand that he was a “perplexed” individual who had threatened to be disappointed by philosophy and favor theology instead (Kalām).<sup>11</sup> Maimonides wrote as follows about the nature of his relationship with R. Joseph (I have split the quote into four):

- (1) “Thereupon I began to let you see certain flashes and to give you certain indications [*ishārāt*].”
- (2) “Then I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters [= metaphysics],”
- (3) “to inform you of the intentions of the Mutakallimūn in this respect, and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art [*sinā’a*] they belonged.”
- (4) “As I also saw, you had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were perplexed, as stupefaction had come over you.”<sup>12</sup>

The purpose of the book, as Maimonides himself attests, is to dispel speculative doubts rather than provide educational, moral, or political guidance.<sup>13</sup> The discussion of the educational conditions for the study of metaphysics is thus seemingly superfluous. Maimonides apparently wanted to indicate to the reader that the speculative obstacle is sometimes due to causes that are in no way speculative. We may occasionally search for errors

11 On the letter accompanying the *Guide*, see below, Summary.

12 See Genesis 33:13. Citations are from *Guide*, 3-4. The source is Moses Maimonides, *Epistles*, ed. David Hartwig Baneth (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985), 8 [Heb]. See also S. Rawidowitz, “The Structure of the ‘Moreh Nebuchim,’” *Tarbiz* 6, 3 (*The Maimonides Book*) (1935), 45 [Heb] (= *Likkutei Tarbiz* 5V: *Studies in Maimonides* [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1985]; identical pagination). I discuss this content of the accompanying letter in Chapter 6 below.

13 See below, n. 16.

in the wrong place, looking for them in the realm of learning and in the material we are grappling with, when the reasons are to be found in psychological, ethical, and political realms.

I will argue that the central reason for error in metaphysics is psychological and hinges on the passion for metaphysics. For Maimonides, then, the human psyche bears the “blame” for the error.

The following arguments relate to the unit’s literary aspects:

- (1) An esoteric reading of the chapters in this unit will enable us to trace the concealed motifs, which grow increasingly stronger until they are fully revealed.
- (2) These chapters convey Maimonides’ hermeneutical approach to the sources of talmudic mysticism.
- (3) Various aspects of R. Saadia Gaon’s approach are challenged throughout the unit.

These literary aspects show that the study of metaphysics is a topic incorporating characteristics of the *Guide* as a whole and involving esoteric, hermeneutical (from both Scripture and Aggadah), and polemical dimensions.

Finally, note that commentators and thinkers in late medieval Spain and Provence devoted much attention to the issue at the center of the moral and pedagogical chapters—the proper attitude to metaphysics and to the “mysteries of the Torah.”<sup>14</sup> This concern is quite understandable given that, for this era’s rationalist, the proper approach to metaphysics was a momentous question. By contrast, modern scholarship has shown less interest in this matter than in other topics in Maimonidean thought. I turn now to the discussion of this unit of chapters.

## The Limits of Apprehension

The first phase of Maimonides’ discussion on the proper approach to the study of metaphysics is negative: the boundaries of the human intellect are impenetrable. Such a fundamental assumption must be a leitmotif

14 See Dov Schwartz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2002), 218–257 [Heb]. Maimonides prescribed a rigorous order of study beginning with logic and culminating in metaphysics (221–222). Interestingly, for R. Judah Halevi, physics, psychology, and the theory of intellect sufficed (“matter and form”; “elements”; “nature”; “soul”; “intellect”; “metaphysics in general”). See Judah Halevi, *The Kuzari*, trans. Hartwig Hirschfeld (New York: Schocken, 1964), 5:2, 249. Halevi mixed together Aristotelian sciences and the Kalām, a matter deserving separate discussion.