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The whole history of Jewish medieval thought revolves about the personality of Maimonides; with him one period comes to an end and another begins; he is its term of reference as Thomas Aquinas is for scholasticism, and it is no accident but rather the mark of a profound affinity that the latter so often cites Rabbi Moses. Both followers of Aristotle, each constructed a *summa* of religion and philosophy, a summation constantly opposed, but still remaining a source of inspiration for the faithful of the two religions.

Moses ben Maimon (also called Rambam, acronym of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) was born in 1135 at Cordoba, where his father was a rabbinical judge. In 1148 Maimon and his family, fleeing the religious persecutions that accompanied the conquest of the town by the Almohads, wandered from place to place in Spain, and perhaps in Provence, and came to Fez in 1160. According to Arab sources the family converted to Islam, but, as Saadiah Ibn Danan, a fifteenth-century philosopher, remarked, rumours of this kind became attached to the names of many Jewish savants. It was during his sojourn in Morocco that Maimon, Moses' father, wrote his *Letter of Consolation* to Jews who had been forced to convert to Islam. According to this Letter, it was enough to say one's prayers, however briefly, and to perform good actions, in order to remain Jewish. Moses ben Maimon himself also wrote a *Letter* (*Iggeret ha-Shemad*), concerning forced conversion, where he recommends emigration from countries where Jews are obliged to transgress the divine law. Towards 1165 the whole family abandoned Fez and took refuge in Acre; for six months Maimon and his children lived in the Land of Israel and travelled in it; then they removed to Cairo and settled at Fostat. Maimonides rapidly acquired a high social status in Egypt, perhaps with the assistance of his family alliances with local notables. It seems that his vigorous action in the matter of ransoming captives helped to make him known among remote communities. From 1171 he was recognized as the 'chief of the Jews' of Fostat, and remained in this post for five years. Ousted from this function for about twenty years, he was then again appointed to it, and exercised it until his death.

The family of Maimonides was engaged in maritime commerce with India; the shipwreck and death of his brother David brought about their ruin. Although he continued to take some part in business affairs, Maimonides from then on earned his livelihood by practising and teaching medicine, an
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art he had acquired in North Africa. His reputation attained its zenith in 1185, when he was chosen as one of the official doctors of Al Fadil, Salâh-al-Din's (Saladin's) vizier. During this time he re-married, and his only son, Abraham, was born. These were years of fruitful and intensive work; while practising his profession and composing his medical books, Maimonides completed his two major works, the Mishneh Torah in 1180 and the Guide of the Perplexed in 1190, and maintained a flourishing correspondence with numerous communities in Egypt and the rest of the world. His death in December 1204 gave rise to manifestations of public grief in all the Jewish communities.

Maimonides' celebrity rests chiefly on his works as a jurist; it was as such that he was known to the Jews of the Diaspora, and to the present day many Oriental Jewish communities follow his juridical and religious prescriptions.

I shall not list the texts dealing with medicine or jurisprudence, but only those that are entirely or in part philosophical.

(1) Book I of the first part of the juridical code Mishneh Torah, also called Yad ha-Hazakah (yad = 7 = 14, the number of the constituent books), which is entitled Sefer ha-Mada' (Book of Knowledge).

(2) In the Commentary on the Mishnah: the introduction to Avot (a treatise of the Mishnah, usually known as Pirkei Avot, the Sentences of the Fathers), called Shemonah Perakim (Eight Chapters), a brief summing-up of the psychology and morality; and the introduction to Perek Helek (Sanhedrin ii).

(3) Millot ha-Higgayon (Vocabulary of Logic), a short treatise written in Maimonides' youth.

(4) Several Letters, which in fact are short dissertations on contemporary problems or were written in response to questions posed by various persons: Iggeret ha-Shemad (or Kiddush ha-Shem) on forced conversion, or Sanctification of the Divine Name; Al-Risâla al-yamaniyya = Iggeret Telman (Letter to Yemen), on the emergence of a false prophet announcing the Messianic age; Maqâla fi Tehyat ha-metim = Iggeret Tehvat ha-metim (Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead), in which Maimonides replies to the accusation that he does not believe in the Resurrection; Iggeret le-Hakhmei Derom Tzarfat (Letter to the Sages of Southern France), It was the sages of Southern France and Provence who propounded the question of the legality and truth of astrology.

(5) Dalâlat al-Hâ'irîn (Moreh ha-nevukhim: The Guide of the Perplexed) (The English quotations in the pages that follow are taken from The Guide of the Perplexed, translated with an introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines, and from The Book of Knowledge, translated by M. Hyamson.)

Except for The Book of Knowledge all these works were written in Arabic. They were almost immediately translated into Hebrew. The Guide of the Perplexed was translated by Samuel Ibn Tibbon in 1204; a second, more literary and less accurate, translation was made by Judah al-Harizi some years later. This second translation was the basis for the Latin version that was used by the scholastics, especially St Thomas Aquinas.

Maimonides' works were not all addressed to the same public and cannot be studied on the same level; for this author, as for all medieval Arab and Jewish philosophers, men are not on the same level as regards their capacity to attain truth. In a parable contained in Book iii of the Guide, Maimonides describes the various classes of men in their relationship to knowledge, that is, the search for God.

I shall begin the discourse in this chapter with a parable that I shall compose for you. I say then: The ruler is in his palace, and all his subjects are partly within the city and partly outside the city. Of those who are within the city, some have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation, their faces being turned another way. Others seek to reach the ruler's habitation, turn towards it, and desire to enter it and to stand before him, but up to now they have not yet seen the wall of the habitation. Some of those who seek to reach it have come up to the habitation and walk around it searching for its gate. Some of them have entered the gate and walk about in the antechambers. Some of them have entered the inner court of the habitation and have come to be with the king, in one and the same place with him, namely, in the ruler's habitation. But their having come into the inner part of the habitation does not mean that they see the ruler or speak to him. For after their coming into the inner part of the habitation, it is indispensable that they make another effort; then they will be in the presence of the ruler, see him from afar or from nearby, or hear the ruler's speech or speak to him.

Now I shall interpret to you this parable that I have invented. I say then: Those who are outside the city are all human individuals who have no doctrinal belief, neither one based on speculation nor one that accepts the authority of tradition: such individuals as the furthermost Turks found in the remote North, the Negroes found in the remote South, and those who resemble them from among them that are with us in these climes. The status of those is like that of irrational animals. To my mind they do not have the rank of men, but have among the beings a rank lower than the rank of man but higher than the rank of the apes. For they have the external shape and lineaments of a man and a faculty of discernment that is superior to that of the apes.

Those who are within the city, but have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation, are people who have opinions and are engaged in speculation, but who have adopted incorrect opinions either because of some great error that befell them in the course of their speculation or because of their following the traditional authority of one who had fallen into error. Accordingly because of these opinions, the more these people walk, the greater is their distance from the ruler's habitation. And they are far worse than the first. They are those concerning whom necessity at certain times impels them to do something they should lead astray the ways of others.

Those who seek to reach the ruler's habitation and to enter it, but never see the ruler's habitation, are the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to the ignoramuses who observe the commandments.

Those who have come up to the habitation and walk around it are the jurists who believe true opinions on the basis of traditional authority and study the law
concerning the practices of divine service, but do not engage in speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion and make no inquiry whatever regarding the rectification of belief.

Those who have plunged into speculation concerning the fundamental principles of religion, have entered the ante-chambers. People there inductively have different ranks. He, however, who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that that is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it – has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habitation.

Know, my son, that as long as you are engaged in studying the mathematical sciences and the art of logic, you are one of those who walk around the house searching for its gate, as [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, have said resorting to a parable: Ben Zoma is still outside. If, however, you have understood the natural things, you have entered the habitation and are walking in the ante-chambers. If, however, you have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered in the ruler's place into the inner court and are with him in one habitation. This is the rank of the men of science; they, however, are of different grades of perfection.


The texts of the Mishneh Torah and the Commentary on the Mishnah are intended for simple men of faith, all Israel without distinction; for 'Those who seek to reach the ruler's habitation...the multitude of the adherents of the Law, I refer to the ignoramuses....'

The short treatises written in response to questions (or attacks) emanating from rabbis or heads of communities on specific questions (resurrection, conversion, the Messiah, astrology) were written for 'Those who have come up to the habitation...the jurists...and also for 'the ignoramuses who observe the commandments'.

The Guide of the Perplexed was addressed to a well-beloved pupil, Joseph ben Judah, of whom it is said in the dedicatory epistle:

I had a high opinion of you because of your strong desire for inquiry and because of what I had observed in your poems of your powerful longing for speculative matters. This was the case since your letters and compositions in rhymed prose came to me from Alexandria, before your grasp was put to the test. I said however: perhaps his longing is stronger than his grasp. When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the science of astronomy and prior to that texts dealing with mathematics, which is necessary as an introduction to astronomy, my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the quickness of your grasp. I saw that your longing for mathematics was great, and hence I let you train with mathematics, which is necessary as an introduction to astronomy, my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the quickness of your grasp. 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And again in the introduction: 'My speech in the present Treatise is directed, as I have mentioned, to one who has philosophized and has knowledge of the true sciences' (Guide, introd., p. 10).

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But for the learned, those who 'have entered in the ruler's place', Maimonides wrote nothing. In other words, he wrote no book of philosophy directed at philosophers, at erudite men of his own kind, to whom he could have spoken without dissembling his thoughts. A letter to Samuel Ibn Tibbon probably contains the only evidence of our author's opinions as he would have formulated them for the benefit of philosophers genuinely capable of understanding them.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon proposes visiting Maimonides in order to submit to him the Hebrew translation of the Guide. He also asks him which scientific books Maimonides would recommend him to read.

Maimonides replies, first, that he would be very happy to see Samuel, but his many occupations would probably not permit him to devote time to joint study. He then continues (I quote some passages):

The texts of the Guide of the Perplexed are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences. But they cannot be understood except with the help of commentaries, those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, those of Themistius, and those of Averroes.

I tell you: as for works on logic, one should only study the writings of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī. All his writings are faultlessly excellent. One ought to study and understand them. For he is a great man.

Though the works of Avicenna may give rise to objections and are not as [good] as those of Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, Abū Bakr al-Sā`īgh [Ibn Bājā] was also a great philosopher, and all his writings are of a high standard.

(Guide, introd., pp. lix, xl)

As we see, he had some reservations on the subject of Avicenna. But reading any philosophers other than these, Jewish or Arab, is a waste of time.

Furthermore, Maimonides states his opinion (which has proved to be correct) that two works attributed to Aristotle, the Book of the Apple and the Book of the Golden Palace, are pseudepigraphs.

He advises against studying the commentaries on Aristotle of the Christian authors al-Tayyib, Yahyā Ibn 'Adl, and Yahyā al-Brīṭīq. To read them would be a sheer waste of time.

He also states that he has no use for Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's Book of Divine Science and for Isaac Israel's Book of Definitions and Book of Elements. He regards both authors as mere physicians (and no philosophers).

(Guide, introd., pp. lix, lx)

This letter and its judgements on other philosophers is of the greatest importance for our understanding of Maimonides. If we recall that the only philosophers cited in the Guide of the Perplexed are Greek and Arab, the ideological climate to which Maimonides declares his adherence becomes clearly defined: it is that of the philosophers who have unequivocally separated science from religion.
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The Arab philosophers whom Maimonides admires or esteems are Al-Farabi, Ibn Bâjja, Averroes, and, up to a point, Avicenna. From this, to understand Maimonides as a philosopher as ‘extremist’ as Al-Farabi and Averroes, expressing his opinions only under cover of obscurity in the works he destined for the general public, and with deliberate vagueness in the Guide of the Perplexed, is only one step, and it is not a recent one, for it was thus that his fourteenth-century commentators interpreted him – Moses of Narbonne and Joseph Ibn Caspi, to mention only the most important; and it was thus that he was seen by most Jewish philosophers up to and including the nineteenth century, and L. Strauss and S. Pines in the twentieth. Maimonides thus seems to form part of a long tradition of philosophical esoterism that, starting with Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, continued with Spinoza and terminated (in democratic countries, at least, for it is still alive under totalitarian regimes) with Voltaire, Rousseau and perhaps Kant.

In this esoteric tradition the truths that can be comprehended by only a few men capable of receiving them must be communicated from master to disciple; when these truths cannot be communicated orally they may be written only between the lines, so that those worthy of them may discover them, while others remain unaware.

There are two principal reasons for this necessity of concealing philosophical truths from the common run of men:

The first reason is political: on many points philosophy is in conflict with religion. Each of the formally constituted religions considered that it possessed the truth, an exclusive and necessarily intolerant truth. Only the philosophers’ truth transcended the barriers and established a different demarcation, itself not lacking in a certain, different, kind of intolerance. Those philosophers who regarded truth as independent and superior to the generally accepted religious laws were often persecuted by the partisans of the various faiths if they expressed their opinions too openly. It was thus that Averroes, it is related, was roughly handled by the populace in the mosque of Cordoba, and was forced to save his life by flight.

The second reason is founded on the philosophers’ conviction that truth is not good for every man. This conviction is part of a whole pedagogical and political concept.

Man and society can be considered in two different ways:

– Man is naturally good; left to himself he recognizes good and evil and chooses the good; this was Saadiah’s position; in this case the Revealed Law shows the right way and helps man to organize a society conforming to reason. The idea that the natural state is one of innocence, like that of Adam before the Fall, that contemporary society perverts this innocence and that primitive society was natural and reasonable, was maintained in Antiquity;

but it is hardly ever found among Jewish medieval philosophers. In the Renaissance it reappears with Abrabanel.

– Man is not really bad, properly speaking; but the individuals who make up the human race are so different that concord can prevail only with great difficulty. Contrary to other animals, men widely differ between themselves, and one man may be capable of killing his son in a fit of anger and another unable to squash a fly (cf. Guide ii, 40). However, society is not simply a dimension added to the human race; man by his nature has need of society. Human civilization, the survival of man, is only possible when its laws allow harmony to reign among these various individuals, compensating for what is defective and moderating what is excessive. The laws that regulate society may be of divine origin, that is, determined by the prophets (for Maimonides, the only truly Divine Law was that promulgated by Moses), or it may be humanly conceived; but, at any rate, these laws are conventional in the sense that they purport to establish a certain ‘convention’ among men. Now, the great majority of men are only potentially rational, for very few of them are capable of being active intellect in actuality, that is, among other things, of studying the sciences. Among the common masses are included children who have not reached the age of reason, women, primitive populations, and all men who will never be philosophers. These simple people cannot, as we have seen, endure the radiance of truth. When we speak of ‘political law’ or of ‘religion’ we are then no longer in the domain of scientific truth, but in that of political convention. This is in no way a matter of falsehood, but of two totally different orders of reality, each as necessary as the other. In referring to this political law, the best of political laws, namely the Torah and the commandments arising from it, Maimonides says at the end of chapter 4 of the Book of Knowledge: ‘They are the precious boon bestowed by God, to promote social well-being on earth, and enable men to obtain bliss in the life thereafter’ (Book of Knowledge, p. 40a).

The philosophers, in distinguishing the good suitable for the people from that proper to the philosopher, were convinced that they were following the divine example, and safeguarding not so much their own lives and liberties as the civilization established by God and the happiness of each member of society.

Is it absolutely necessary to dissimulate the philosophic truths, and is the welfare of the people so totally opposed to that of the philosophers, or can one venture to think of the possibility of gradually educating the people towards the level of the philosopher?

For Averroes, in his Decisive Treatise on the harmony between religion and philosophy, there is no possibility of such a progress. He who reveals philosophical interpretations to the common people, and to those who are not apt to receive them, is an ‘infidel’, for he turns them away from the Divine Law, and corrupts them. In effect, the Divine Legislator tends the soul’s health as the doctor looks after the body’s well-being. Now, the Legislator has prescribed the commandments that must be respected, for on

1 As in a passage by Maimonides: ‘Those... who have adopted incorrect opinions... They are those concerning whom necessity at certain times impels killing them and blotting out the traces of their opinions lest they should lead astray the ways of others’ (Guide, iii, 51, p. 619).
obedience to these practices depends the harmony of society in this world as much as beatitude in the after-life. In the same way, to be in good health men must observe their doctor’s prescriptions without necessarily understanding them. Philosophical interpretations, when they are not understood, awaken doubt in the minds of simple people, and they neglect God’s commandments, as they would disregard their doctor’s recommendations if they doubted his competence. It is entirely forbidden to unveil philosophical doctrines to the people, both when they are true and even more so, when they are false. It is because this principle has not been respected that sects have multiplied in Islam. Religious chiefs are duty-bound to forbid the reading of books on religious science, except by men of learning. The texts must be understood by the simple faithful in their literal sense alone.

In contrast to the Arab philosopher and judge, Maimonides contends in all his writings that the people must know and accept as authoritative the principles of the esoteric sense of the Torah: the divine unity and incorporeality. Not that one can ‘teach’ these matters to the vulgar folk:

The causes that prevent the commencement of instruction with divine science, the indication of things that ought to be indicated, and the presentation of this to the multitude, are five.

The first cause is the difficulty, subtlety, and obscurity of the matter in itself. Thus Scripture says: That which is far off and exceeding deep; who can find it out? And it is said: But wisdom, where shall it be found? Now it is not fitting in teaching to begin with what is most difficult and obscure for the understanding. One of the parables generally known in our community is that likening knowledge to water. Now the Sages, peace be on them, explained several notions by means of this parable; one of them being that he who knows how to swim brings up pearls from the bottom of the sea, whereas he who does not know, drowns. For this reason, no one should expose himself to the risks of swimming except he who has been trained in learning to swim.

The second cause is the insufficiency of the minds of all men at their beginnings. For man is not granted his ultimate perfection at the outset; for perfection exists in him only potentially, and in his beginnings he lacks this act. Accordingly it is said: And man is born a wild ass. Nor is it necessarily obligatory in the case of every individual who is endowed with some thing in potency, that this thing should become actual. Sometimes it remains in its defective state either because of certain obstacles or because of paucity of training in what transforms that potentiality into actuality. Accordingly it is clearly said: Not many are wise. The Sages too, may their memory be blessed, have said: I saw the people who have attained a high rank, and they were few. For the obstacles to perfection are very many, and the objects that distract from it abound. When should he be able to achieve the perfect preparation and the leisure required for training so that what subsists in a particular individual in potency should be transformed into actuality?

The third cause lies in the length of the preliminaries. For man has in his nature a desire to seek the ends; and he often finds preliminaries tedious and refuses to engage in them. Know, however, that if an end could be achieved without the preliminaries that precede it, the latter would not be preliminaries, but pure distractions and futilities.

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... You know that these matters are mutually connected; there being nothing in what exists besides God, may He be exalted, and the totality of the things He has made. For this totality includes everything comprised in what exists except only Him. There is, moreover, no way to apprehend Him except it be through the things He has made; for they are indicative of His existence and of what ought to be believed about Him, I mean to say, of what should be affirmed and denied with regard to Him. It is therefore indispensable to consider all beings as they really are so that we may obtain for all the kinds of beings true and certain premises that would be useful to us in our researches pertaining to the divine science.

The fourth cause is to be found in the natural aptitudes. For it has been explained, or rather demonstrated, that the moral virtues are a preparation for the rational virtues, it being impossible to achieve true, rational acts – I mean perfect rationality – unless it be by a man thoroughly trained with respect to his morals and endowed with the qualities of tranquility and quiet.

The fifth cause is to be found in the fact that men are occupied with the necessities of the bodies, which are the first perfection; and more particularly if, in addition, they are occupied with taking care of a wife and of children; and even more especially if there is in them, superadded to that, a demand for the superfluities of life, which becomes an established habitus as a result of a bad conduct of life and bad customs.

And he continues in the next chapter:

Do not think that all that we have laid down in the preceding chapters regarding the greatness and the hidden nature of the matter, the difficulty of apprehending it, and its having to be withheld from the multitude, refers also to the denial of the corporeality of God and to the denial of His being subject to affections. It is not so. For just as it behooves to bring up children in the belief, and to proclaim to the multitude, that God, may He be magnified and honored, is one and that none but He ought to be worshipped, so it behooves that they should be made to accept on traditional authority the belief that God is not a body; and that there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him; that His existence has no likeness to theirs; nor His life to the life of those among them who are alive; nor again His knowledge to the knowledge of those among them who are endowed with knowledge. They should be made to accept the belief that the difference between Him and them is not merely a difference of more and less, but one concerning the species of existence. I mean to say that it should be established in everybody’s mind that our knowledge or our power does not differ from His knowledge or His power in the latter being greater and stronger, the former less and weaker, or in other similar respects, inasmuch as the strong and the weak are necessarily alike with respect to their species, and one definition comprehends both of them. Similarly any relation can subsist only between two things belonging to one species. This likewise has been made clear in the natural sciences. Now everything that can be ascribed to God, may He be exalted, differs in every respect from our attributes, so that no definition can comprehend the one thing and the other. Similarly, as I shall make clear, the terms ‘existence’ can only be applied equivocally to His existence and to that of things other than He. This measure of knowledge will suffice for children and the multitude to establish in their minds that there is a perfect being, who is neither a body nor a force in a body, and that He is the deity, that no sort of deficiency and therefore no affection whatever can attain Him.
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What would ensue if men did not profess these central notions of the divine unity and incorporeality, even without really understanding them, is designated by Maimonides as 'perdition'; that is to say, such men will have no part in the world to come:

Accordingly if we never in any way acquired an opinion through following traditional authority and were not correctly conducted toward something by means of parables, but were obliged to achieve a perfect representation by means of essential possession of at least a minimum of true ideas in society and only have to fulfil their assigned roles, without being troubled and precise exposition of questions, wishing to give the Jewish people a legal memoire author declares that he composed the presents the entirety of the Oral Law mentioned lengthy preliminary studies - this state of affairs would lead to all people dying without having known whether there is a deity for the world, or whether there is not, much less whether a proposition should be affirmed with regard to Him or a defect denied. Nobody would ever be saved from this perdition except one of a city or two of a family.

(§uide 1, 34, p. 75)

Averroes in his Decisive Treatise has only political felicity in mind; to function well, the social body needs religious law, which establishes concord among men. These, whether ignorant or learned, have a well-defined place in society and only have to fulfil their assigned roles, without being troubled by doubts unfitting their state. Maimonides accepts this argument and adds a further one to it: survival in the world to come. This survival is linked to the possession of at least a minimum of true ideas - and it is, in part, to forestall the perdition of Israel that he wrote his 'popular' works.

In composing the Mishneh Torah Maimonides was undoubtedly convinced that he was contributing to the intellectual progress of Jewish and human society:

1) In causing harmony to reign among men and in giving them peace, thanks to a unified jurisprudence;
2) In allowing persons capable of displaying the necessary aptitude an initial taste of philosophy;
3) In stating in an authoritative way the essential truths concerning God and the world of the intellects.

The Mishneh Torah: its purpose and its place in Maimonides' work

This is Maimonides' most popular work; in a clear and rational form it presents the entirety of the Oral Law - the Mishnah and the Talmud. The author declares that he composed the Mishneh Torah primarily as an aide-mémoire for his old age, to spare himself lengthy searches in the talmudic literature. If he attempted to introduce a systematic order in the dense forest of the Talmud and the Responsa, this was certainly for reasons of convenience, but, apart from this, he undoubtedly set a high value on reason and the clear and precise exposition of questions, wishing to give the Jewish people a legal code where the laws could be found assembled in a unified and rational manner.

Further, he believed that the difficult political situation was causing a lowering of the level of halakhic as well as of philosophical study.

There is no opposition between Maimonides as philosopher and Maimonides as judge, and one of the most striking traits of his thought is precisely this consistency, which pervades his various works; those intended for the general public and those directed towards apprentice philosophers complement each other. According to the level aimed at, the same problem appears in a different shape and must be differently handled. Thus, in the Mishneh Torah and the other halakhic works, the exact manner of fulfilling certain commandments is studied and codified at considerable length. Each gesture necessary for their execution is very precisely fixed, for in order that the act may be easily performed by the simple faithful the frame of their conduct must be so clearly delimited that they will not be able to stray outside it. In the Guide of the Perplexed, on the other hand, which is intended for student-philosophers, who scrupulously carry out the commandments knowing their importance, the reasons accounting for them are revealed. It then becomes clear that the material aspect of the fulfillment of the commandments may be due to historical circumstances. Which, of course, in no way affects the binding nature of the law.

We read in Part III of the Guide (26, pp. 508-9):

The generalities of the commandments necessarily have a cause and have been given because of a certain utility; their details are that in regard to which it was said of the commandments that they were given merely for the sake of commanding something. For instance the killing of animals because of the necessity of having good food is manifestly useful, as we shall make clear. But the prescription that they should be killed through having the upper and not the lower part of their throat cut, and having their esophagus and windpipe severed at one particular place is, like other prescriptions of the same kind, imposed with a view to purifying the people. The same thing is made clear to you through their example: Slaughtered by cutting their neck in front or in the back. I have mentioned this example to you merely because one finds in their text, may their memory be blessed: Slaughtered by cutting their neck in front or in the back. However, if one studies the truth of the matter, one finds it to be as follows: As necessity occasions the eating of animals, the commandment was intended to bring about the easiest death in an easy manner. For beheading would only be possible with the help of a sword or something similar, whereas a throat can be cut with anything. In order that death should come about

1 Maimonides was acting in conformity with the contemporary Islamic tendency to elaborate an official theology. In his youth he had seen the Almohads impose the opinions of their sect, and to an orderly man, a people united, even by force, was an impressive spectacle. Halakhic critique of the Mishneh Torah, especially that of Abraham ben David of Posquières, immediately pointed out that the very existence of a code endangers critical study. Not only does Maimonides not quote his sources (this is a further argument of the critics), but above all the student finds decisions already taken by another man, who is certainly very learned, but whose preoccupations are different from his own. It thus becomes unnecessary to search the multiplicity of the texts and to hope to chance on original ideas in the course of one's careful reading; it is useless to reflect; all is already written, ready to be put to use.
more easily, the condition was imposed that the knife should be sharp. The true
reality of particulars of commandments is illustrated by the sacrifices. The offering
of sacrifices has in itself a great and manifest utility, as I shall make clear. But no
cause will ever be found for the fact that one particular sacrifice consists in a lamb
and another in a ram and that the number of the victims should be one particular
number. Accordingly, in my opinion, all those who occupy themselves with finding
causes for something of these particulars are stricken with a prolonged madness in
the course of which they do not put an end to an incongruity, but rather increase
the number of incongruities. Those who imagine that a cause may be found for
suchlike things are as far from truth as those who imagine that the generalities of a
commandment are not designed with a view to some real utility.

The precept of offering sacrifices is in effect explained further on:
For a sudden transition from one opposite to another is impossible. And therefore
man, according to his nature, is not capable of abandoning suddenly all to which
he was accustomed. As therefore God sent Moses our Master to make out of us a
kingdom of priests and a holy nation – through the knowledge of Him, may He be
exalted, accordingly to what He has explained, saying: Unto thee it was shown that
thou mightiest know, and so on; Know this day, and lay it to thy heart, and so on – so
that we should devote ourselves to His worship according to what He said: And
to serve Him with all your heart, and: And ye shall serve the Lord your God, and:
And Him shall ye serve; and as at that time the way of life generally accepted and
customary in the whole world and the universal service upon which we were
brought up consisted in offering various species of living beings in the temples in
which images were set up, in worshipping the latter, and in burning incense before
them – the pious ones and the ascetics being at that time, as we have explained,
the people who were devoted to the service of the temples consecrated to the stars –:
His wisdom, may He be exalted, and His gracious ruse, which is manifest in regard
to all His creatures, did not require that He give us a Law prescribing the rejection,
abandonment, and abolition of all these kinds of worship. For one could not then
conceive the acceptance of [such a Law], considering the nature of man, which
always likes that to which it is accustomed. At that time this would have been
similar to the appearance of a prophet in these times who, calling upon the people
to worship God, would say: ‘God has given you a Law forbidding you to pray to
Him, to fast, to call upon Him for help in misfortune. Your worship should consist
solely in meditation without any works at all.’ Therefore He, may He be exalted,
suffered the above-mentioned kinds of worship to remain, but transferred them
from created or imaginary and unreal things to His own name, may He be exalted,
commanding us to practice them with regard to Him, may He be exalted.

I know that on thinking about this at first your soul will necessarily have a
feeling of repugnance toward this notion and will feel aggrieved because of it; and
you will ask me in your heart and say to me: How is it possible that none of the
commandments, prohibitions, and great actions – which are very precisely set forth
and prescribed for fixed seasons – should be intended for its own sake, but for the
sake of something else, as if this were a ruse invented for our benefit by God in
order to achieve His first intention? What was there to prevent Him, may He be
exalted, from giving us a Law in accordance with His first intention and from
procuring us the capacity to accept this? In this way there would have been no
need for the things that you consider to be due to a second intention. Hear then
the reply to your question that will put an end to this sickness in your heart and
reveal to you the true reality of that to which I have drawn your attention. It is to
the effect that the text of the Torah tells a quite similar story, namely, in its dictum:
God led them not by the way of the land of the Philistines, although it was near, and
so on. But God led the people about, by the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea.
Just as God perplexed them in anticipation of what their bodies were naturally
incapable of bearing – turning them away from the high road toward which they
had been going, toward another road so that the first intention should be achieved
– so did He in anticipation of what the soul is naturally incapable of receiving,
prescribe the laws that we have mentioned so that the first intention should be
achieved, namely, the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and the rejection of
idolatry.

(Guide III, 32, pp. 526–7)

Maimonides, as a legal codifier and jurist, only imitated the divine proceeding,
by guiding men on the road of knowledge through making ‘opinions, moral qualities and political civil actions’ clearer, simpler and more rational.

For ‘God does not change at all the nature of human individuals by means of
miracles . . . It is because of this that there are commandments and prohibitions, rewards and punishments’ (Guide III, 32, p. 529). Further, for
Maimonides, as jurist, law qua law must be respected by all men, the ignorant
as well as the philosophers. Whatever the motivation of the divine commandments,
these commandments must be carried out to the letter. As for abrogating
the Law of Moses in favour of another political law that would be less the outcome of historical circumstances, such a supposition cannot even
be entertained, for Maimonides, elevating Moses above all prophets and
legislators (in the seventh ‘Principle’, and at length in the Guide) declares
the Law of Moses to be the only Divine Law.

It is therefore not surprising that Maimonides devoted long discussions
to the laws of sacrifice and of Levitic purity. These laws are necessary, for
they form part of the best of all possible laws, and the fact that they cannot
be put into practice because of the destruction of the Temple does not in any
way modify this essential fact.¹

Through all Maimonides’ halakhic works runs the motif of the intellectual
perfectibility of man, and all the commandments in reality have one ultimate
goal: to teach man to know God. In the last chapter of the Guide, he enumerates the ‘perfections’ as men have defined them:

(1) Wealth, the possession of material goods; this is a purely imaginary
perfection;

(2) Beauty, strength and physical health; but on this point man is inferior
to the animals;

(3) The perfection of moral qualities; most of the commandments of the
Torah have no other aim than to make us attain this perfection, which in fact
is only a preparation for the true perfection;

¹ It should be noted, besides, that Maimonides’ juridical decisions are far from indulgent, and
that he is one of the rare jurists to advocate the sentence of death for certain crimes, such as the
lack of respect for a rabbi.
Maimonides

(4) . . . The fourth species is the true human perfection; it consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues - I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. This is in true reality the ultimate end; this is what gives the individual true perfection, a perfection belonging to him alone; and it gives him permanent perdurance; through it man is man.

(Guide III, 54, p. 635)

With this theme of intellectual perfectibility is associated that of survival in the world to come; the Mishnah says 'All Israel has a right to the world to come', and Maimonides has explained that only those who have accepted the thirteen principles, which he discusses in detail further on, may be considered as belonging to Israel. As for the world to come, this is the immortality of the soul.

The traditional texts contain three expressions used in connection with man's fate after death: the world to come, the Days of the Messiah, and the Resurrection of the Dead. These terms are sometimes interchangeable, and what they designate is not constant. Further, descriptions of corporeal delights can be found in the texts of the Midrash, side by side with conceptions of a purely abstract happiness beyond the tomb. Maimonides did not at any stage modify his position on this subject, which he repeats in greater detail but without any real additions in his last work - the Letter on the Resurrection of the Dead. This short work was composed in reply to the objections raised by Samuel ben Ali, the Gaon of Baghdad, who attacked Maimonides on the subject of his theories concerning the future world accusing him of not having mentioned the resurrection of the body or the individual survival of the human soul.

With frequently ferocious irony Maimonides again repeats what he has written elsewhere:

(1) The world to come is the immortality of the soul, which survives when it has attained perfection, that is, when it has become intellect, since to have a permanent existence after death it has to be detached from the body during life. Maimonides does not make it altogether clear if he is thinking of an individual survival of souls in the world of the intellects, as does Avicenna, or if, like Averroes, he believes that the human soul merges with the Active Intellect. Samuel ben Ali accuses him of not admitting the individual immortality of the soul, and cites Avicenna and Abu-l-Barakât, as philosophers who did accept it. And, in effect, it seems that, if no Maimonidean text states his position without ambivalence, this was because he inclined towards the solution of non-individual survival, a conclusion that he could not postulate openly in writing.

(2) The Days of the Messiah: this to Maimonides meant the political independence of Israel and the return to the Land of Israel. The Messiah will be recognized without difficulty, for his coming will coincide with a new peace of history, a period totally differing from that of the Diaspora.

The 'Mishneh Torah'

(3) Corporeal resurrection. This is not necessary from the scientific point of view, but neither is it theoretically impossible; if one believes in divine omnipotence, it is within the domain of the possible. It is evident that the Rambam did not attach capital importance to this resurrection, which, he asserts, would be followed by a second death of the body. But, respectful of tradition, he admitted the possibility of corporeal resurrection, recognizing the psychological importance of this for the people. This is undoubtedly the reason for its inclusion in the Thirteen Principles. For him, what is really important is the world to come, and not to be admitted to it is perdition.

In order to safeguard Israel from the perdition described in the religious tradition, Maimonides in his Commentary on the Mishnah codified the truths that the people should accept, and classified them in Thirteen Principles, which, versified in the fourteenth century, were introduced into the daily ritual of all communities except those of the Ashkenazic rite. These Principles include a certain number of articles of faith that were then far from having achieved unanimous adherence in the Jewish community; but Maimonides turned them into dogma, and the sine qua non of appertenance to the people of Israel.

When a man has accepted these principles and truly believes in them, he forms part of the community of Israel; and it is incumbent upon us to love him, to care for him and behave towards him as God has ordered us to do: to love and comfort him; if he sins because of his corporeal desires or his bad instincts, he will receive the punishment proportioned to his crime, and he may [afterwards] have the part [that belongs to him in the world to come], he is a sinner within the community of Israel. But if someone casts doubt on one of these principles, he has forewarned his faith, he is a renegade, a heretic, an unbeliever, he has rebelled against God and it is a duty to hate him and to cause him to perish.

(Introduction to the Commentary on the Mishnah, Perek Helek, pp. 148–9)

These are the Principles:

(1) The existence of the Creator;
(2) His unity;
(3) The negation of His corporeality;
(4) Eternity, which Maimonides explains thus:

The Fourth Principle is God's precedence [or 'priority'], to wit, that this One who has just been described is He Who precedes [everything] absolutely. No other being has precedence with respect to Him. There are many verses attesting to this in Scriptures. The verse attesting to it [best] is: 'the God of eternity is a dwelling place' [Deuteronomy 33: 27].

(Trans. D. R. Blumenthal, The Commentary of R. Höjer, p. 91)

(5) God alone (to the exclusion of every inferior being - angel, star, etc.) should be served and praised; one must proclaim His glory only, and only His commandments should be observed.
Maimonides

(6) 'Prophecy', which is defined as follows:

The Sixth Principle is [the belief in] prophecy; to wit, it should be known that, within the species of humanity, there are individuals who have a greatly superior disposition and a great measure of perfection. And if their souls are prepared so that they receive the form of the intellect, then that human intellect will unite with the Agent Intelligence which will cause a great emanation to flow to it. (Ibid. p. 114)

(7) Moses is superior to all the prophets who have preceded or will follow him.

(8) The Torah in its entirety, written or oral, was given to Moses by God, by the instrumentality of what is allegorically called his Word.

(9) The Torah, written and oral, coming from God, is absolutely unalterable; one cannot add to it or subtract from it.

(10) God knows the actions of men and has not abandoned the world.

(11) God rewards whose who observe the commandments of the Torah and punishes those who transgress them. The highest reward is the world to come, and the punishment most greatly to be feared is exclusion from it.

(12) The belief in the coming of the Messiah, which announces the national restoration of Israel.

(13) The Resurrection of the Dead. While all the other Principles are explained at some length, this one is simply noted, without any further detail.

These Thirteen Principles can be divided into three groups:

(1) The first five concern God, unique and incorporeal;
(2) The next four deal with prophecy and the Law;
(3) The last four deal with reward and punishment, the Days of the Messiah and the Resurrection of the Dead.

These Principles are presented in the Book of Precepts as well as in the Mishneh Torah. They are again discussed in the Guide. Two notable traits emerge in the first group:

(1) Inacceptance of the negation of the divine incorporeality, that is to say, understanding the verses of the Bible in their literal sense, in that which they are interpreted in many passages of the Talmud and the Midrash, implies exclusion from the community of Israel. This was an extreme position, for divine incorporeality was not admitted by all Jewish thinkers, whether philosophers or rabbis. In the thirteenth century Moses ben Ḥasdai Taku designated Saadiah, Bahya Ibn Paquda, Maimonides and the Ashkenazi pietists as heretics because, in refusing to admit the divine corporeality, they refused an important part of the written and oral Law.
(2) The creation of the world ex nihilo is not mentioned, only the absolute eternity of God.

The second group of Principles describes the attributes of God,

As for the discussion concerning attributes and the way they should be negated with regard to Him; and as for the meaning of the attributes that may be ascribed to Him, as well as the discussion concerning His creation of that which He created, the character of His governance of the world, the 'how' of His providence with respect to what is other than He, the notion of His will, His apprehension, and His knowledge of all that He knows; and likewise as for the notion of prophecy and the 'how' of its various degrees, and the notion of His names, though they are many, being indicative of one and the same thing— it should be considered that all these are obscure matters. In fact, they are truly the mysteries of the Torah and the secrets constantly mentioned in the books of the prophets and in the dicta of the Sages.

GUIDE I, 35, p. 80

The Third Principle is the belief in God as the First Mover through the eternal movement of the sphere.

This being is the God of the Universe, the Lord of all the Earth. And He it is, who controls the Sphere (of the Universe) with a power that is without end or limit; with a power that is never intermitted. For the Sphere is always revolving; and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone making it revolve. God, blessed be He, it is, who, without hand or body, causes it to revolve.

(Book of Knowledge, pp. 34a–34b)

The exposition continues by showing that this is indeed the veritable conception of God, the Law and the prophets, and that all the biblical expressions implying corporeality must be interpreted allegorically:

That the Holy One, blessed be He, is not a physical body, is explicitly set forth in the Pentateuch and in the Prophets, as it is said 'Know therefore' (Deut. 4: 32); 'Do what is in the Lord's heart' (Deut. 31: 18); 'The hand of God' (Ex. 9: 2); 'The eyes of God' (Gen. 38: 7); 'The ears of God' (Num. 11: 1); and similar phrases? All these expressions are adapted to the mental capacity of the majority of mankind who have a clear perception of physical bodies only. The Torah speaks in the language of men. All these phrases are metaphorical.

(Book of Knowledge, p. 34b)
Maimonides

with images – a theory of which I have already spoken in connection with Abraham Ibn Daud. Finally, he affirms that Moses is – and will always be – the man who received a revelation from God superior to that vouchsafed to other prophets.

Chapter 2 describes the world of the ten immaterial Intellects, which the Bible calls angels.

Chapter 3 describes the spheres, beginning from our world and rising to the ninth sphere. The spheres are endowed with a soul; they know God, and without being as close to the knowledge of God as are the Intellects, they are superior to men, for their matter, delicate and subtle, is not subject to generation and corruption. The four elements that constitute our world are, contrary to the spheres, dead bodies, the movement of which is natural and subject to forces that they do not perceive or know.

Chapter 4 describes the four elements and their properties. These elements, which are matter, are not without form; although this form is not visible to the naked eye. Through the movement of the spheres the elements mix, and are ready to receive forms imparted by the Active Intellect: mineral, animal and finally human, that is, intellecting, form, the only one to subsist after the decay of the human mixture at the death of the body.

At the end of chapter 4 Maimonides himself explains what this introduction to the Law represents:

The topics connected with these five precepts, treated in the above four chapters, are what our wise men called Pardes (Paradise), as in the passage ‘Four went into Pardes’ [cf. Bab. Talmud Hagiga 14b, relating the entry into the Divine Garden of the Four Sages, Rabbi Aqiba, Ben Azai, Ben Zoma and Aber]. And although those four were great men of Israel and great sages, they did not all possess the capacity to know and grasp these subjects clearly. Therefore, I say that it is not proper to dally in Pardes till one has first filled oneself with bread and meat; by which I mean knowledge of what is permitted and what forbidden, and similar distinctions in other classes of precepts. Although these last subjects were called by the sages ‘a small thing’ (when they say ‘A great thing, Maaseh Mercabah; a small thing, the discussion of Abaye and Rava’), still they should have the precedence. For the knowledge of these things gives primarily composure to the mind. They are the precious boon bestowed by God, to promote social well-being on earth, and enable men to obtain bliss in the life hereafter. Moreover, the knowledge of them is within the reach of all, young and old, men and women; those gifted with great intellectual capacity as well as those whose intelligence is limited.

(Book of Knowledge, pp. 39b-40a)

By the Story of the Chariot (Maaseh Mercabah) Maimonides alludes to the prophetic visions of Isaiah (chapter 6), Ezekiel (chapter 1), and Zechariah (chapter 3), describing the divine chariot, the divine throne and the angelic world. Elsewhere he also alludes to the Story of Creation (Maaseh Bereshit), by which he means the beginning of the Book of Genesis. From the talmudic period onwards these biblical passages were considered to conceal great mysteries. Maimonides interprets these terms as designating the two principal parts of science: the Story of the Chariot is metaphysics, the Story of Creation is physics, the Discussion of Abaye and of Rava is the Talmud, that is, the whole of the Law, written and oral.

Maimonides has here presented the essential verities of metaphysics. These verities should serve as an introduction to the study of the Law, written and oral, which is open to all, whatever their level of intelligence.

This exposition of the principles of metaphysics and physics begins with the most elevated – God – and concludes with the lowest on the scale of beings – the elements. But when we are not receiving them from on high, but are studying these principles, we must start from the lowest – physics – in order to rise towards the most difficult – metaphysics.

The really important subject is the Story of the Chariot, the knowledge of God, metaphysics. This does not alter the fact that the study of the commandments of the Law is indispensable before one engages in any scientific study, first because it is an introduction to science and then because it leads to happiness in this world and to eternal life. It is therefore indispensable for everybody, whatever his intellectual level. We are in the domain of political law, as Maimonides makes clear in the Guide (iii, chapter 31, p. 524): ‘Thus, all [the Commandments] are bound up with three things: opinions, moral qualities and political civil actions.’

When man has had his fill of bread and meat, and if he has a suitable disposition, he will be able to begin to study mathematics and physics and to read the Guide of the Perplexed.

The Guide of the Perplexed

The Guide of the Perplexed has given rise to a great number of interpretations; this is not at all surprising, for it is a deliberately ambiguous work. Its importance in Jewish thought will emerge more fully in the next chapter.

We have said that the composition of the Mishneh Torah displays clarity and system; both are traits characteristic of Maimonides. The scheme of the Guide, on the other hand, is at first disordered. Topics that are well ordered in Greek and Arab philosophical works are taken up several times in different contexts, with relatively little modification. The plan of the book itself is difficult to grasp. The first half of Book 1, broadly speaking, deals with the expressions of the Bible and the Talmud that one cannot accept in their literal sense; the second half of this book describes the divine attributes, attacking the Mutakallimun and, among them, Saadiah. Book II deals with philosophical doctrines, then with prophecy. Book III begins with an allegorical explanation of the Story of the Chariot, then discusses various questions: providence, the end of the world; it gives a psychological explanation of the Book of Job, then a historical account of religions and rites, and touches on religious precepts. This confusion is deliberately intended by Maimonides and he explicitly says so in his introduction:
Maimonides

If you wish to grasp the totality of what this Treatise contains, so that nothing of it will escape you, then you must connect its chapters one with another; and when reading a given chapter, your intention must be not only to understand the totality of the subject of that chapter, but also to grasp each word that occurs in it in the course of the speech, even if that word does not belong to the intention of the chapter. For the dictation of this Treatise has not been chosen at haphazard, but with great exactness and exceeding precision, and with care to avoid failing to explain any obscure point. And nothing has been mentioned out of its place, save with a view to explaining some matter in its proper place. (Guide, introd., p. 15)

The book begins with a dedicatory address to his pupil Joseph ben Judah. He relates how the latter, after having studied mathematics, astronomy and logic, seemed to him worthy to receive the principles of metaphysical knowledge, but Joseph ben Judah was obliged to leave him, so he composed this book for him and for those like him, even if they are far from numerous. This decision awakened an old project, that of writing a book on prophecy and a book on the talmudic homilies, the literal sense of which is very far removed from truth and even from reason; but he renounced this project for reasons he gives a little further on in this introduction: if the explanations given were in the form of allegory, in such a way as not to reveal the secrets, this would only replace one allegory with another, so that to 'an ignoramus among the multitude of Rabbanites' reading this book, this second allegory would be no more plausible than the first, for he would understand neither one nor the other; if, on the contrary, a 'perfect man', that is, a philosopher, were to read it, he might take the allegory in its literal sense and judge unfavourably of the author; or else, he might look for the esoteric sense and perhaps find it, or again he might be induced into error.

If the secrets were unveiled, that is, if the explanations were openly given, this would not be desirable for the vulgar reader.

It is therefore necessary to explain without really explaining, to introduce to this knowledge only those who are worthy of it, without misleading others. In deciding to write the Guide, Maimonides wished to achieve these two contrary aims, that is, to reveal the secrets and not reveal them. Let us return to the beginning of the introduction:

The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy. Some of these terms are equivocal; hence the ignorant attribute to them only one or some of the meanings in which the term in question is used. Others are derivative terms; hence they attribute to them only the original meaning from which the other meaning is derived. Others are amphibolous terms, so that at times they are believed to be univocal and at other times equivocal. It is not the purpose of this Treatise to make its totality understandable 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 - I mean the legalistic study of the Law. For the purpose of this Treatise and of all those like it is the science of Law in its true sense. Or rather its purpose is to give indications to a religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief - such a man being perfect in his religion and character, and having studied the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify. The human intellect having drawn him on and led him to dwell within its province, he must have felt distressed by the externals of the Law and by the meanings of the above-mentioned equivocal, derivative, or amphibolous terms, as he continued to understand them by himself or was made to understand them by others. Hence he would remain in a state of perplexity and confusion as to whether he should follow his intellect, renounce what he knew concerning the terms in question, and consequently consider that he has renounced the foundations of the Law. Or he should hold fast to his understanding of these terms and not let himself be drawn on together with his intellect, rather turning his back on it and moving away from it, while at the same time perceiving that he had brought loss to himself and harm to his religion. He would be left with those imaginary beliefs to which he owes his fear and difficulty and would not cease to suffer from heartache and great perplexity.

(Guide, introd., pp. 5-6)

The Guide will provide the basis of the method permitting us to unveil divine alllegory:

Know that the key to the understanding of all that the prophets, peace be on them, have said, and to the knowledge of its truth, is an understanding of the parables, of their import, and of the meaning of the words occurring in them. You know what God, may He be exalted, has said: And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes [Hosea 12: 10]. (Guide, introd., pp. 10-11)

The allegory that follows this remark is the example that Maimonides proposes to decipher and to imitate in the Guide:

The Sage has said: A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings (maskiyyoth) of silver [Proverbs 25: 11]. Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth. The term maskiyyoth denotes filigree traceries; I mean to say traceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the [Aramaic] translation of the Bible the Hebrew term va-yasheq - meaning, he glanced – is translated va-istekhe. The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. Now see how marvellously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable.

For he says that in a saying that has two meanings - he means an external and an internal one - the external meaning ought to be as beautiful as silver, while its internal meaning ought to be more beautiful than the external one, the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver. Its external meaning also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what it is to be found in its internal meaning, as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets, peace be on them, are similar. Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of Proverbs and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.

(Guide, introd., pp. 11-12)
Maimonides

The problem that the Guide sets out to resolve is that of the double character of the Law: sometimes, as in the example just cited, the exterior sense leads to the interior, and helps us to discover it. Sometimes the exterior sense prevents us from attaining ‘the knowledge of the Law in its reality’ and is contrary to reason. However, only those who have already studied the sciences can feel and be perplexed by the conflict between reason and the apparent sense of the Bible. The book is then not intended for the vulgar or for Talmudists, as were other books by Maimonides, but only for those who are already attracted by human reason and have had a taste of philosophy. In reality, there is no real opposition: the sciences are treated in a different way in revelation and in philosophical books; and here lies the reason for the confusion.

In the Mishneh Torah we have seen the identification that was to become traditional between physics, the Story of the Creation, and metaphysics, the Story of the Chariot. These subjects, physics and metaphysics, and especially metaphysics, are simultaneously glimpsed and withdrawn in the Law in order to conform to the divine design. It is not God’s wish that the truths should be revealed to the vulgar, for the impact of truth would endanger the continuance of human society, which subsists thanks to the traditional Laws. God himself has spoken by allegory through the lips of the prophets. If physics may not be expounded, this is because it touches on metaphysics. Maimonides is most probably here alluding to the proof of the existence of God by the Prime Mover, a proof included by Aristotle in his physics; as physics may not be expounded, this is because it touches on metaphysics. Maimonides does not suppress the fact that esoteric meaning is more eminent than the other:

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In describing the two meanings of the Bible – the exoteric and the esoteric – the duality that alone permits the reconciliation of science and revelation, Maimonides does not suppress the fact that esoteric meaning is more eminent than the other:

About this it has been said: Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a sela or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an issar. In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah. This too is literally what they say. Now consider the explicit affirmation of [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, that the internal meaning of the words of the Torah is a pearl whereas the external meaning of all parables is worth nothing, and their comparison of the concealment of a subject by its parable’s external meaning to a man who let drop a pearl in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until, as has been mentioned, he lights a lamp – an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds.

Further on, in the introduction, Maimonides expounds the seven causes of textual obscenity.

The Guide being constructed, like the Torah, the prophetic books, and the Aggadot of the Talmud, in such a way as to reveal the internal sense and at the same time to dissimulate it, its obscurity belongs to the seventh type of the seven causes.

The difficulty of the book’s plan, like the ambiguity of its writing, arises from the fifth of the causes of textual obscenity: the necessity of sometimes touching on a difficult question in order to explain a subject in itself easy to conceive, and also from:

The seventh cause. In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to disclose others. Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.

So that Maimonides himself recommends that one should not study the book chapter by chapter, but rather problem by problem; not embark on it with preconceived ideas, but study everything that should first be studied; and not explain this book to others.

The first part of the introduction concludes thus (pp. 16–17):

God, may He be exalted, knows that I have never ceased to be exceedingly apprehensive about setting down those things that I wish to set down in this Treatise.

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For they are concealed things; none of them has been set down in any book – written in the religious community in these times of Exile – the books composed in these times being in our hands. How then can I now innovate and set them down? However, I have relied on two premises, the one being [the Sages'] saying in a similar case, *It is time to do something for the Lord, and so on*; the second being their saying, *Let all thy acts be for the sake of Heaven.* Upon these two premises have I relied when setting down what I have composed in some of the chapters of this Treatise.

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. 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.

I shall follow the first part of Maimonides' counsels and present certain problems without following the chapter-order of the *Guide*. Obviously I cannot examine in detail all the ideas discussed, which are often of profound interest; however, I shall at least attempt to define certain central themes in Maimonides' thought.

I shall treat in succession:

1. God and his attributes;
2. Divine providence and the world to come;
3. The creation of the world;
4. Prophecy;
5. Human knowledge.

(i) GOD AND HIS ATTRIBUTES

The first seventy chapters of Book 1 are devoted to the interpretation of various biblical words, and especially those used regarding God. According to Maimonides, who is here in agreement with a neoplatonistic current and certain Mu'tazilites, one can only assign negative attributes to God. There are five classes of attributes (cf. *Guide* 1, 52):

An attribute predicated of any thing, of which thing it is accordingly said that it is such and such, must necessarily belong to one of the following five groups:

The first group is characterized by the thing having its definition predicated of it – as when it is predicated of man that he is a rational living being.

This means finding and defining the general species to which human belongs. This type of attribute cannot, obviously, be assigned to God, for He belongs to no species and He has no cause.

The second class is that where the thing has for attribute a part of its definition, as, for example, when one designates man by his quality of being animal, or by his reason. This is equally impossible in the case of God. If anything in God was inseparable from His essence without being His essence, His essence would be compound; however, God is One.

The attributes of quality (the third class), which are not part of the essence, like saying of a man that he is tall or short, also cannot be assigned to God, for He would then be what is left after the subtraction of changing accidents; such attributes are inapplicable to God:

Now when you consider all these attributes and what is akin to them, you will find that it is impossible to ascribe them to God. For He does not possess quantity so that there might pertain to Him a quality pertaining to quantity as such. Nor does He receive impressions and affections so that there might pertain to Him a quality belonging to the affections. Nor does He have dispositions so that there might be faculties and similar things pertaining to Him. Nor is He, may He be exalted, endowed with a soul, so that He might have a habitus pertaining to Him – such as clemency, modesty, and similar things – or have pertain to Him that which pertains to animate beings as such – for instance, health and illness. It is accordingly clear to you that no attribute that may be brought under the supreme genus of quality can subsist in Him, may He be exalted...

The fourth group of attributes is as follows. It is predicated of a thing that it has a relation to something other than itself. For instance, it is related to a time or to a place or to another individual, as, for instance when you predicate of Zayd that he is the father of a certain individual or the partner of a certain individual or an inhabitant of a certain place or one who was at a certain time. Now this kind of attribute does not necessarily entail either multiplicity or change in the essence of the thing of which it is predicated. For the Zayd who is referred to may be the partner of Umar, the father of Bakr, the master of Khâlid, a friend of Zayd, an inhabitant of such and such a dwelling place, and one who was born in such and such a year. Those notions of relation are not the essence of the thing or something subsisting in its essence, as do the qualities. At first thought it seems that it is permissible to predicate of God, may He be exalted, attributes of this kind. However, when one knows true reality and achieves greater exactness in speculation, the fact that this impossible becomes clear.

(5) Human knowledge.

(2) Divine providence and the world to come;

(3) The creation of the world;

(4) Prophecy;

(5) Human knowledge.

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In fact, every relation implies something in common between the two terms; now, there cannot be any relation between an entirely separate being and another that depends on all other things. Even existence is not common to them, for existence does not designate the same thing when one speaks of God and when one speaks of a created being, for the existence of God is necessary and the existence of a created being is possible.

The attributes of action (the fifth class) are the only ones that can be predicated of God, for they imply no change in the divine essence. Here again, the need to speak 'the language of men', that is, to address the ignorant multitude and not the elite, has led to confusion:

The reasons that led those who believe in the existence of attributes belonging to the Creator to this belief are akin to those that led those who believe in the doctrine of His corporeality to that belief. For he who believes in this doctrine was not led to it by intellectual speculation; he merely followed the external sense of the texts of the Scriptures. This is also the case with regard to the attributes. For inasmuch as the books of the prophets and the revealed books existed, which predicated attributive qualifications of Him, may He be exalted, these were taken in their
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For Moses, as for men in general, to know God signifies to know nothing of His essence, but to know His acts.

For Moses, peace be on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him. His request regarding the knowledge of God's attributes is conveyed in his saying: Show me now Thy ways, that I may know Thee, and so on [Exodus 33: 13].

And Maimonides cites with approval a talmudic anecdote (Bab. Berakhot 33b), where it is related that a believer lavished laudatory adjectives in his prayers. Rabbi Hanina pointed out to him that this language was unsuitable as praising a king for possessing pieces of silver while he had a treasure-house of gold. In fact, says Maimonides, if we depended on our reason alone, we would not require any of these adjectives; we employ them because men need images in order to understand, and even then only because the Torah uses them. Because they are written in the Torah, we have the right to read them as a biblical text; but as for using them in our prayers, we can only do this on the authority of the men of the Great Synod, for they have assumed responsibility for this. Verbal prayer is in fact a concession to man's weakness. (There is no need to emphasize the audacity of Maimonides' judgement on the liturgical cult.)

'To know the actions of God'. This is the second stage of the knowledge of God; first in knowing His creation we learn what we must deny of God; first in knowing His creation we learn what we must deny of God, and teaching him that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is. Yet He drew his attention to a subject of speculation through which he can apprehend to the furthest extent that is possible for man. For what has been apprehended by [Moses], peace be on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him.

The second request, which he put first, was that He should let him know His essence and true reality. The answer to the two requests that He, may He be exalted, gave him consisted in His promising him to let him know all His attributes, making it known to him that they are His actions, and teaching him that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is. Yet He drew his attention to a subject of speculation through which he can apprehend to the furthest extent that is possible for man. For what has been apprehended by [Moses], peace be on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him.

For with regard to every attribute that the believer in attributes considers to be essential in respect to God, may He be exalted, you will find that the notion of it is that of a quality, even if these people do not state it clearly; for they in fact liken the attribute in question to what they meet with in the various states of all bodies endowed with an animal soul. Of all this it is said: The Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man. (Guide 1, 53, pp. 120-1)

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knowledge of the sciences that leads to metaphysics also has a value in itself.

It is thus evident that the road leading towards God, that is to say, human perfection, the purpose for which man was created, is scientific knowledge: physics leads to metaphysics. But the preparatory studies—logic, mathematics—are long and wearisome, and few men are capable of going through the entire Aristotelian corpus; besides, tradition is there to teach us the minimum number of truths that one must believe to be a man, and as we have seen, this conviction was the reason for the composition of Maimonides' works of popularization.

To know the acts of God is to know the sciences. This is confirmed by the analysis of the unity in God of the cognizing subject, the cognized object and the intellectual cognition; or, in medieval terms, God is Intellect, Intellecting and Intelligible.

In chapter 68 of the first part of the Guide Maimonides grapples with this problem of divine and human thought. In God, he says, the cognition, the cognizing subject and the object cognized, come together for all eternity; if one does not understand this, one does not understand the unity of God, which is one of the fundamental principles of our religion. And here Maimonides, who had placed God at a great distance from the world and from man, who had made of Him a totally unknowable being, brings Him closer to man by comparing human thought and divine thought; for in explaining what is human thought we will come to understand the divine, and this, he says, is certain and demonstrated.

Before even understanding the process of cognition, man is potentially intelligent; that is, unlike the animals, there is something in him capable of becoming thought or intellect. When a man sees a tree, for example, a pine planted before his house, he sees the image of something that he recognizes as consisting of wood; this is a sensation followed by a judgement; but he has not yet 'thought' wood; for this, he has to extract the abstract form from matter, in order to formulate an intelligible notion. Here we are no longer on the level of the image, but on that of the abstract form divested of individual characteristics—that it is a pine, planted in front of the house. Of the ten Aristotelian categories that we have considered with Abraham Ibn Daud, one must retain only the first, the substance; and in this substance one must discard the matter and bear in mind only the form. At this moment, the thought of the form is the form itself, and the man cognizing this form is the same thing as the form; there is a real and absolute unity between these three things: the cognition, the object cognized and the subject cognizing. It is evidently not easy to conceptualize this thought from which all matter has been abstracted, and it is even more difficult for the modern than for the medieval reader.

Thus we have:

(i) A potential intellect;

(ii) An abstract form.

(iii) A specific substance.
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(2) The cognition of an abstract form causing man to become actively intelligent;
(3) The cognized being, the abstract form, the object;
(4) The act of cognition;
(5) The knowledge that arises from the act of cognition and is afterwards preserved, which is called acquired intellect.

But, to transform his potential intellect into an active one, man requires the aid of the separate intellect, this purely immaterial entity that presides over earthly destinies. This does not change the fact that during the act of cognition, when the cognizing intellect, the cognizer and cognized are one, in spite of the infinite difference of degree, we are like God:

Now when it is demonstrated that God, may He be held precious and magnified, is an intellect in actu and that there is absolutely no potentiality in Him – as is clear and shall be demonstrated – so that He is not by way of sometimes apprehending and sometimes not apprehending but is always an intellect in actu, it follows necessarily that He and the thing apprehended are one thing, which is His essence. Moreover, the act of apprehension owing to which He is said to be an intellectually cognizing subject is in itself the intellect, which is His essence. Accordingly He is always the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object. It is accordingly also clear that the numerical unity of the intellect, the intellectually cognizing subject, and the intellectually cognized object, does not hold good with reference to the Creator only, but also with reference to every intellect. Thus in us too, the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellect, and the intellectually cognized object, are one and the same thing wherever we have an intellect in actu. We, however, pass intellectually from potentiality to actuality only from time to time. And the separate intellect too, I mean the active intellect, sometimes gets an impediment that hinders its act – even if this impediment does not proceed from this intellect’s essence, but is extraneous to it – being a certain motion happening to it by accident.

We do not intend at present to explain this, our intention being to affirm that that which pertains solely to Him, may He be exalted, and which is specific to Him is His being constantly an intellect in actu and that there is no impediment either proceeding from His essence or from another that might hinder His apprehending. Accordingly it follows necessarily because of this that He is always and constantly an intellectually cognizing subject, an intellect, and an intellectually cognized object. Thus His essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect, as is also necessarily the case with regard to every intellect in actu.

(Guide 1, 68, pp. 165–6)

According to Aristotle, God intellects Himself eternally; since He intellects only Himself, He is totally autarchic and there lies His superiority, for, intellecting nothing but Himself, He in no way depends on any other thing. Qua Prime Immobile Mover, He moves the world without being concerned with it, for He is self-sufficient. When Maimonides compares the intellecting activity of man to divine intellecting, he juxtaposes two Aristotelian ideas that Aristotle himself did not juxtapose. Thus, the question arises: what is the object of the divine thought? Is it Himself uniquely, or is it an object other than Himself, as the chapter we have just cited indicates? According to Maimonides, God knows the world and its laws, not ex post facto, as we do who contemplate the world, but because He has established these laws, because He is the cause and the end of the world.

Such is the case with regard to that which exists taken as a whole in its relation to our knowledge and His knowledge, may He be exalted. For we know all that we know only through looking at the beings; therefore our knowledge does not grasp the future or the infinite. Our insights are renewed and multiplied according to the things from which we acquire the knowledge of them. He, may He be exalted, is not like that. I mean that His knowledge of things is not derived from them, so that there is multiplicity and renewal of knowledge. On the contrary, the things in question follow upon His knowledge, which preceded and established them as they are: either as the existence of what is separate from matter; or as the existence of a permanent individual endowed with matter; or as the existence of what is endowed with matter and has changing individuals, but follows on an incorruptible and immutable order. Hence, with regard to Him, may He be exalted, there is no multiplicity of insights and renewal and change of knowledge. For through knowing the true reality of His own immutable essence, He also knows the totality of what necessarily derives from all His acts.

(Guide III, 21, p. 485)

(2) Divine providence and the world to come

Divine providence is intimately linked to the idea of divine knowledge. We have said that God knows the world and its laws because He is their cause; but does He know each individual in this world? Does He know that at this moment Shimeon is asleep? That Reuben is walking along the road, that he will take a false step and a passing vehicle will break his leg? For medieval philosophers the problem of God’s knowledge of the individual was even more difficult to solve in view of the fact that in Aristotelian science everything that is particular arises from matter; only form, common to all individuals, is general, and it alone is intelligible. God, being pure intellect, evidently cannot understand material details, for there is nothing to ‘understand’ everything that is material being ‘unintelligible’. When Judah Halevi says that the God of the philosophers does not know individual human beings, he is, philosophically speaking, correct, although in fact the philosophers have always attempted to mitigate a theory so sharply in contradiction to religious faith. Maimonides enumerates five opinions on providence:

(1) Everything in this world is the effect of chance (the opinion of the Greek atomists).

(2) Divine providence is assimilated to the laws of nature (this was Aristotle’s opinion, opposed by Judah Halevi). In fact, Aristotle himself did not definitely state this view, but his commentator Alexander of Aphrodisias attributes it to him. Everything that is permanent or follows laws fixed from all eternity is said to arise from divine providence; this means the spheres and their movements and, depending on them, the terrestrial species, whose
preservation is ensured by the perpetual movement of the spheres. Certainly, in order that the species may be perpetuated, there must always be individuals constituting it; but which particular individual is of little importance.

To sum up, the basis of his opinion is as follows: Everything that, according to what he saw, subsisted continuously without any corruption or change of proceeding at all – as, for instance, the states of the spheres – or that observed a certain orderly course, only deviating from it in anomalous cases – as, for instance, the natural things – was said by him to subsist through governance; I mean to say that divine providence accompanied it. On the other hand, all that, according to what he saw, does not subsist continuously or adhere to a certain order – as, for instance, the circumstances of the individuals of every species of plants, animals, and man – are said by him to exist by chance and not through the governance of one who governs; he means thereby that they are not accompanied by divine providence, and he also holds that it is impossible that providence should accompany these circumstances. This is consequent upon his opinion concerning the eternity of the world and the impossibility of that which exists being in any respect different from what it is.

(3) The third opinion, that of the Asharites, professes that everything in the universe, the whole as well as the details, depends on will, therefore on the divine providence. All things, even the fall of a leaf, happen according to the decree of God. There are no laws of nature: God decides and acts in the world without being subject to what we call good and evil.

(4) The opinion of the Mu'tazilites (and of certain Geonim including Saadiah) admits laws which are fixed by the wisdom of God and to which He conforms; divine justice wishes each being to receive compensation in the world to come for the gratuitous sufferings inflicted on him in this world; not only men, but also animals, however lowly (Maimonides speaks of the louse and the flea) will have their reward in the world to come, for God knows all the acts of all the beings who are in the world.

The fifth opinion is our opinion, I mean the opinion of our Law. I shall let you know about it what has been literally stated in the books of our prophets and is believed by the multitude of our scholars; I shall also inform you of what is believed by some of our latter-day scholars; and I shall also let you know what I myself believe about this. I say then: It is a fundamental principle of the Law of Moses our Master, peace be on him, and of all those who follow it that man has an absolute ability to act; I mean to say that in virtue of his nature, his choice, and his will, he may do everything that it is within the capacity of man to do, and this without there being created for his benefit in any way any newly produced thing. Similarly all the species of animals move in virtue of their own will. And He has willed it so; I mean to say that it comes from His eternal volition in the eternity a parte ante that all animals should move in virtue of their will and that man should have the ability to do whatever he wills or chooses among the things concerning which he has the ability to act. This is a fundamental principle about which – praise be to God! – no disagreement has ever been heard within our religious community. It is likewise one of the fundamental principles of the Law of Moses our Master that it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted, should be unjust, and that all the calamities that befall men and the good things that come to men, be it a single individual or a group, are all of them determined according to the deserts of the men concerned through equitable judgment in which there is no injustice whatever.

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In spite of these affirmations of principles, Maimonides' own explanation considerably resembles that of Aristotle.

As for my own belief with regard to this fundamental principle, I mean divine providence, it is as I shall set it forth to you. In this belief that I shall set forth, I am not relying upon the conclusion to which demonstration has led me, but upon what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of our prophets. This opinion, which I believe, is less disgraceful than the preceding opinions and nearer than they to intellectual reasoning. For I for one believe that in his lowly world – I mean that which is beneath the sphere of the moon – divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species and that in this species alone all the circumstances of the individuals and the good and evil that befal them are consequent upon the deserts, just as it says: For all His ways are judgment [Deuteronomy 32: 4]. But regarding all the other animals and, all the more, the plants and other things, my opinion is that of Aristotle. For I do not by any means believe that this particular leaf has fallen because of a providence, watching over it; nor that this spider has devoured this fly because God has now decreed and willed something concerning individuals; nor that the spittle spat by Zayd has moved till it came down in one particular place upon a gnat and killed it by a divine decree and judgment; nor that when this fish snatched this worm from the face of the water, this happened in virtue of a divine volition concerning individuals. For all this is in my opinion due to pure chance, just as Aristotle holds. According to me, as I consider the matter, divine providence is consequent upon the divine overflow; and the species with which this intellectual overflow is united so that it became endowed with intellect and so that everything that is disclosed to a being endowed with the intellect was disclosed to it, is the one accompanied by divine providence, which appraises all its actions from the point of view of reward and punishment. If, as he states, the founding of a ship and the drowning of those who were in it and the falling-down of a roof upon those who were in the house, are due to pure chance, the fact that the people in the ship went on board and that the people in the house were sitting in it is, according to our opinion, not due to chance, but to divine will in accordance with the deserts of those people as determined in His judgments, the rule of which cannot be attained by our intellects.

Divine providence is thus identified with the laws of nature as far as the spheres are concerned; as for the particular events and beings in our lower world, Maimonides believes, as does Aristotle, that providence only extends to species and not to individuals, except for the human species, or, at least, to those individuals of the human species who fulfil man's destiny, that is, those who receive the outflow of the Intellect, those who participate in this Intellect, that is, the philosophers, and then only when their thoughts are turned to God. In effect, the Intellect does not constantly illuminate us; it is like a flash of lightning that blazes and disappears, and providence, being linked to the Intellect, is manifested in proportion to the different degrees
of connection with the Intellect. The light of the Intellect only illuminates one who has approached it, that is, one who knows God by His acts, who has studied the sciences; but this is not only a matter of intellectual knowledge; it has already been said several times that in the Middle Ages knowledge is also love of God, morality, abandonment of corporeal desires.

At the end of the third part, Maimonides again takes up the idea of providence and shows how his opinion in fact agrees with Aristotle's:

We have already explained in the chapters concerning providence that providence watches over everyone endowed with intellect proportionately to the measure of his intellect. Thus providence always watches over an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose intellect never ceases from being occupied with God. On the other hand, an individual endowed with perfect apprehension, whose thought sometimes for a certain time is emptied of God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied with something else. However, its withdrawal then is not like its withdrawal from those who have never had intellectual cognition. But in his case that providence merely decreases because that man of perfect apprehension has, while being occupied, no intellect in act; but that perfect man is at such times only apprehending potentially, though close to actuality. At such times he is like a skillful scribe at the time when he is not writing. On the other hand, he who has no intellectual cognition at all of God is like one who is in darkness and has never seen light, just as we have explained with regard to its dictum: The wicked shall be put to silence in darkness [1 Samuel 2:9].

(3) THE CREATION OF THE WORLD

The problem of the creation of the world is one of those that have caused a great deal of ink to flow, and opinions are always very divided. Maimonides' position is not easy to establish, for he has intentionally confused the issue.

In chapter 13 of the second part of the Guide (pp. 281ff) Maimonides cites three opinions regarding the creation or the eternity of the world:

(1) The first opinion, that of all those who accept the Law of Moses, is

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that of creation ex nihilo; God, at a moment of His choosing, created the world as He wished it, from nothingness.

(2) God created the world from the first matter co-eternal with Himself, but caused by Him. This is Plato's opinion.

(3) God is the eternal cause of the world, which necessarily arises from Him, without change and in all eternity, as Aristotle holds.

Most of the early commentators have affirmed that Maimonides believed in the eternity of the world and have invoked the logic of the Maimonidean system, in support of their argument. In effect, the very foundation of Maimonides' thought is the divine incorporeality, demonstrated in Aristotelian physics, which is based on the eternity of the world:

As to this my method, it is as I shall describe to you in a general way now. Namely, I shall say: the world cannot but be either eternal or created in time. If it is created in time, it undoubtedly has a creator who created it in time. For it is a first intelligible that what has appeared at a certain moment in time has not created itself in time and that its creator is other than itself. Accordingly the creator who created the world in time is the deity. If, however, the world is eternal, it follows necessarily because of this and that proof that there is an existent other than all the bodies to be found in the world; an existent who is not a body and not a force in a body and who is one, permanent, and sempiternal; who has no cause and whose becoming subject to change is impossible. Accordingly he is a deity. Thus it has become manifest to you that the proofs for the existence and the oneness of the deity and of His not being a body ought to be procured from the starting point afforded by the supposition of the eternity of the world, for in this way the demonstration will be perfect, both if the world is eternal and if it is created in time. For this reason you will always find that whenever, in what I have written in the books of jurisprudence, I happen to mention the foundations and start upon establishing the existence of the deity, I establish it by discourses that adopt the way of the doctrine of the eternity of the world.

To which Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera, thirteenth-century commentator, objected:

How can one demonstrate such an important subject by means of a dubious thing, and so much more so if this thing is not true? For if the premises of the demonstration are not true, how can the conclusion be true, and how with such premises can one form a demonstration which is not doubtful? . . . Most certainly, this could not have escaped our master, who has disposed all his words wisely.

(Moreh ha-Moreh, p. 43)

Other passages by Maimonides in favour of the theory of the creation of the world hardly suffice to confute the hypothesis of the eternity of the world: if one admits that Maimonides believes in this eternity, one must also admit that he considers that this truth, if it were revealed, would destroy the foundations of religion, which is indispensable to human society as desired by God, and in consequence it must be concealed from the people. But philosophers would know how to recognize it thanks to the allusions in the Guide
and especially thanks to the philosophical treatises of Aristotle and his commentators.

In speaking of the allegorical interpretation of the Bible, Maimonides remarks:

For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible of access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation. However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments.

(‘Guide II, 25, pp. 327-8)

And he continues:

On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless—by God!—one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists; this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.

If, however, one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained—which is the opinion of Plato—according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law and would be followed not by the lie being given to miracles, but by their becoming admissible. It would also be possible to interpret figuratively the texts in accordance with this opinion. And many obscure passages can be found in the texts of the Torah and others with which this opinion could be connected or rather by means of which it could be proved. However, no necessity could impel us to do this unless this opinion were demonstrated. In view of the fact that it has not been demonstrated, we shall not favor this opinion, nor shall we at all heed that other opinion.

(‘Guide II, 25, pp. 328-9)

Thus, the texts can be interpreted according to Aristotle—which would be contrary to religion—but also according to Plato—which would not be contrary to it. The real problem is therefore not to bring revelation into agreement with one or the other of these opinions, but to know if the eternity of the world can be considered as scientifically demonstrated or whether this is one of the questions that human knowledge cannot resolve. Certain passages of the Guide seem to indicate that Maimonides held that we cannot either prove or invalidate the creation or the eternity of the world, and he adduces several significant arguments in support of this position:

Aristotle’s physics are true in everything that concerns this lower world, but extremely dubious as far as celestial physics are concerned; in fact, even in his own time there was a strong awareness of the contradiction between the Aristotelian astronomical system, in which all the spheres revolved around an immobile centre—the earth—and the system of Ptolemy, which made the explanation of observed phenomena possible, but postulated eccentric spheres and epicycles of which the numerous centres were not the fixed and motionless earth. Further, Maimonides speaks of attempts made in Spain to find a more adequate explanation of the solar system.

What was even more disturbing: it is not certain that celestial physics and the metaphysics of Aristotle are anything more than conjecture, and Maimonides casts doubt on the very possibility of knowing anything of the celestial world:

On the other hand, everything that Aristotle expounds with regard to the sphere of the moon and that which is above it, is, except for certain things, something analogous to guessing and conjecturing. All the more does this apply to what he says about the order of the intellects and to some of the opinions regarding the divine that he believes; for the latter contain grave incongruities and perversities that manifestly and clearly appear as such to all the nations, that propagate evil, and that he cannot demonstrate.

(‘Guide II, 22, pp. 319-20)

A question of method also arises: our proofs for or against creation rest on what we apprehend of the world as it is now; however:

In the case of everything produced in time, which is generated after not having existed—even in those cases in which the matter of the thing was already existent and in the course of the production of the thing had merely put off one and put on another form—the nature of that particular thing after it has been produced in time, has attained its final state, and achieved stability, is different from its nature when it is being generated and is beginning to pass from potentiality to actuality. It is also different from the nature the thing had before it had moved so as to pass from potentiality to actuality.

(‘Guide II, 17, p. 294)

Another argument, this time theological, is often pleaded by our author and was to be frequently repeated after him:

Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish. Thus it might be said: Why did God give prophetic revelation to this one and not to that? Why did God give this Law to this particular nation, and, why did He not legislate to the others? Why did He legislate at this particular time, and why did He not legislate before it or after? Why did He impose these commandments and these prohibitions? Why did He privilege the prophet with the miracles mentioned in relation to him and not with some others? What was God’s aim in
giving this Law? Why did He not, if such was His purpose, put the accomplishment of the commandments and the nontransgression of the prohibitions into our nature? If this were said, the answer to all these questions would be that it would be said: He wanted it this way; or His wisdom required it this way. And just as He brought the world into existence, having the form it has, when He wanted to, without our knowing His will with regard to this or in what respect there was His particularizing the forms of the world and the time of its creation – in the same way we do not know His will or the exigency of His wisdom that caused all the matters, about which questions have been posed above, to be particularized. If, however, someone says that the world is as it is in virtue of necessity, it would be a necessary obligation to ask all those questions; and there would be no way out of them except through a recourse to unanswerable answers in which there would be combined the giving the lie to, and the annulment of, all the external meanings of the Law with regard to which no intelligent man has any doubt that they are to be taken in their external meanings. It is then because of this that this opinion is shunned and that the lives of virtuous men have been and will be spent in investigating this question. For if creation in time were demonstrated – if only as Plato understands creation – all the obstacles claimed made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void, and a shift to other opinions would take place. I have thus explained to you that everything is bound up with this problem. Know this.

(Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed)

The problem of miracle and its possibility is again taken up by Maimonides when he discusses prophecy. He enumerates three opinions concerning this phenomenon; the first one is Saadiah’s:

The first opinion – that of the multitude of those among the Pagans who considered prophecy as true and also believed by some of the common people professing our Law – is that God, may He be exalted, chooses whom He wishes from among men, turns him into a prophet, and sends him with a mission. According to them it makes no difference whether this individual is a man of knowledge or ignorant, aged or young. However, they also posit as a condition his having a certain goodness and sound morality.

The second opinion is that of the philosophers. It affirms that prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man. This perfection is not achieved in any individual from among men except after a training that makes what exists in the potentiality of the species pass into actuality, provided an obstacle due to temperament or to some external cause does not hinder this, as is the case with regard to every perfection whose existence is possible in a certain species. For the existence of that perfection in its extreme and ultimate form in every individual of that species is not possible. It must, however, exist necessarily in at least one particular individual; if, in order to be achieved, this perfection requires something that actualizes it, that something necessarily exists. According to this opinion, it is not possible that an ignoramus should turn into a prophet; nor can a man not be a prophet on a certain evening and be a prophet on the following morning, as though he had made some find. Things are rather as follows: When, in the case of a superior individual who is perfect with respect to his rational and moral qualities,
The remote cause of prophecy is God, and the immediate cause is the Active Intellect. The receiver is the rational faculty, which in its turn overflows into the imaginative.

The rational faculty, which is accordingly the direct recipient of the divine overflow, must therefore be without any imperfection. Several conditions are necessary for this: the formation of the brain must be entirely perfect; the individual must have acquired knowledge and mastered all the degrees of physics and metaphysics; his morals must be good, his thought altogether occupied with God; he must be entirely detached from all sensual desire and all vain ambition. A man whose rational faculty fulfills all these conditions, undoubtedly receives the influx of the Active Intellect; he belongs to the class of men of knowledge. When the influx is superabundant, this man diffuses knowledge; otherwise, he is satisfied with perfecting himself.

When to this rational perfection is added the perfection of the imaginative faculty and those of the faculties of divination and intrepidity, then this man is a prophet.

Maimonides describes the imaginative faculty in the terms employed by Avicenna, which we have already encountered in Abraham Ibn Daud. "You know, too, the actions of the imaginative faculty that are in its nature, such as retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them" (Guide ii, 36, p. 370). He thus includes in the imaginative faculty the two functions of preservation of images and of combination of forms.

The author of the Guide also defines the faculty of divination: "You will find among people a man whose conjecturing and divination are very strong and habitually hit the mark, so that he hardly imagines that a thing comes to pass without its happening wholly or in part as he imagines it" (Guide ii, 38, p. 376).

As for the faculty of boldness, this is a faculty of the soul that has a function similar to that of the expulsive among the physical faculties. This is one of the motor faculties, and it is rejected only when it is used for harmful and is enabled to face great dangers (cf. Moses before Pharaoh). The three faculties, which should combine with the rational so that prophecy will ensue, are corporeal, and when the overflow of God reaches over these corporeal faculties only, we find men belonging to the classes of statesmen, legislators, diviners, and augurs.

Prophets, like legislators, are able to receive an influx abundant enough to suffice not only for their own perfecting, but also for allowing their contemporaries to benefit from this perfection.

According to this theory, all prophets are accomplished philosophers, but in reality only one prophet-philosopher exists for Maimonides, namely Moses.

This is evident from the arrangement of the chapters of the first part of the Guide: chapter 38 describes the prophet and shows that he is above all perfect in his rational faculty; chapters 39 and 40 present political considerations: only the Law of Moses is perfect, men need a law, for they are too different from each other to live in community without its help. And when Maimonides returns to prophecy and gives a classification of the biblical prophets, he concludes with these words:

... our principle states that all prophets hear speech only through the intermediary of an angel, the sole exception being Moses our Master, of whom it is said: With him do I speak mouth to mouth. Know then that this is in fact so, and that in these cases the intermediary is the imaginative faculty. For a prophet can hear only in a dream of prophecy that God has spoken to him. Moses our Master, on the other hand, heard Him from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim.

(Guide ii, 45, p. 409)

These two 'cherubim' have been variously interpreted by the commentators, but they all agree in recognizing in the 'ark-cover' the Active Intellect, and in the two cherubim the human faculties, of which one is the rational. It is clear that if Moses was alone in not having prophesied through the intermediary of the imaginative faculty, he is thus also the only one who fills the role of prophet-philosopher that Maimonides outlines in chapter 38. Moses heard God speak directly (he was very close to the Active Intellect, as is shown by the image of the cherubim and the ark-cover), in a waking state, without experiencing any uneasiness, and whenever he wished to do so.

Having thus shown that Moses is the prophet-philosopher par excellence, Maimonides examines the other prophets, and we see that they are inferior. These prophets prophesied through the intermediary of the imaginative faculty. This faculty has two functions: to preserve images and to recombine them. The material that it habitually uses is the product of the senses. During sleep, and sometimes also in a waking state, the senses cease to function and the imaginative faculty, freed from the continuous distraction of the perceptions, can give itself over to its own proper activities and reveal its true capabilities.

The process of perception is normally: the five senses → the sensus communis → the imaginative faculty; when the imaginative faculty is freed from the external world, cut off from the world of the senses, it turns towards itself and retrieves the images that it has stored while man is awake. 'This signifies that the imaginative faculty achieves so great a perfection of action that it sees the thing as if it were outside, and that the thing whose origin is due to it appears to have come to it by the way of external sensation' (Guide ii, 36, p. 370).

In the case of visions, the imaginative faculty is under the influence of the rational faculty, and we have: the Intellect → the imaginative faculty → the sensus communis → the five senses → the sensus communis → the imaginative faculty.

However, Maimonides does not describe the psychological process in detail. One can only infer from his words that he believed in a purely internal vision, like Avicenna, and not in an external phenomenon provoked by the
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senses themselves, like Al-Fārābī. This imaginative faculty is a corporeal faculty, exercised on images. It is not surprising that the fact of receiving entirely abstract ideas from the rational faculty provokes certain disturbances, since it is not in the nature of the imaginative faculty to conceive of anything other than forms clothed in matter:

The overflow in question comes to the rational faculty and overflows from it to the imaginative faculty so that the latter becomes perfect and performs its function. Prophetic revelation begins sometimes with a vision of prophecy. Thereupon the terror and the strong affection consequent upon the perfection of the action of the imaginative faculty become intensified and then prophetic revelation comes.

(‘Guide ii, 41, p. 385)

From this definition of prophecy it appears that whenever one finds in the Scriptures the words ‘God spoke’, ‘an angel spoke’, it is this kind of vision that is meant, whatever the words and expressions used to express it.

There are eleven degrees of prophecy, and they are grouped on three principal levels:

(1) The two lowest degrees are those of the Holy Spirit: a divine inspiration, a divine succour, which are purely interior and which one can compare to that profound conviction that Abraham bar Ḥiyya calls the first degree of prophecy.

(2) The third to seventh degrees contain all the varieties of dream and vision, the hearing of God or the angels. These five degrees are characterized by the phantasmagoria of the imaginative faculty, which constructs images unrelated to reality, such as the representation of the divine word or the vision of God himself. All the prophecies of Isaiah, Ezekiel, Zechariah, were dreams.

(3) From the eighth to the eleventh degree the intellectual perception becomes increasingly refined; from parable, prophecy passes to the hearing of words without knowing their origin (ninth degree), these words are pronounced by an undefined personage (tenth degree), finally by an angel, which is the highest degree, for the prophet has recognized the very essence of prophecy: overflow of the Active Intellect into his rational faculty, through the intermediary of the imaginative faculty; this whole group of prophetic visions takes place in the state of mar'a: vision in the state of wakefulness.

One could also say that every vision in which you find the prophet hearing speech was in its beginning a vision, but ended in a state of submersion [in sleep] and became a dream... All speech that is heard, whatever the way may be in which it is heard, is heard only in a dream... On the other hand, in a vision of prophecy only parables or intellectual unifications are apprehended that give actual cognition of scientific matters similar to those, knowledge of which is obtained through speculation.

(‘Guide ii, 45, pp. 402-3)

For Maimonides the intelligible vision is evidently superior to the imaginative. In fact, the four particular characteristics of Moses' prophecy are due solely to the non-intervention of the imaginative faculty:

(1) Moses prophesied in a state of wakefulness, for he had no need to free his imagination from the weight of sensory images;

(2) He experienced no uneasiness, for only the imaginative faculty is troubled by the divine influx;

(3) The prophetic state could be achieved at any moment, for Moses was not using this 'corporeal faculty which sometimes grows tired, is weakened, and is troubled, and at other times is in a healthy state' (‘Guide ii, 36, p. 372);

(4) Moses' prophecy was without an intermediary, without requiring the imaginative faculty; Moses' intellect drew its knowledge directly from the Active Intellect.

For all other prophets the key and the explanation of their writings is the comprehension of the nature of the imaginative faculty and of what it imposes, and of what necessarily accompanies it - dreams, visions, images, metaphors.

Maimonides cites a verse from Numbers 12: 6 at least twelve times: 'I the Lord will make myself known unto him in a vision and will speak unto him in a dream.' The vision is the state during which God makes Himself known; in dream, He speaks with His voice or through an angel. There is no third way between these two kinds of revelation, dream and vision: the first kind is encumbered with images close to matter, while the other tends towards pure intelligibility.

The superiority of the vision that introduces intelligible notions similar to those of speculative thought is often stressed by our author. Only Moses is to be found at the highest level of prophecy, where philosopher and prophet meet.

We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said: But as for thee, stand thou here by Me [Deuteronomy 5: 28], and of whom it was said: that the skin of his face sent forth beams, and so on [Exodus 34: 29].

(‘Guide i, introd. p. 7)

There is one further point to consider concerning Maimonides' theory of visions: his explication of the revelation on Mount Sinai.

The Israelites had not attained any of the prophetic degrees, not even the level of the Divine Spirit. However, the text affirms that they heard God speaking to them. How can this text be brought into conformity with the theory of the interior visions? First of all, Maimonides affirms that Moses alone heard the divine words distinctly, while the other onlookers only perceived a terrifying noise, and they asked Moses to advance towards God; then they heard and saw voices and lights, which are the meteorological phenomena thunder and lightning. The scene on Sinai can be resolved into three acts:

(1) The hearing of a terrifying noise by all the people: this was a Voice created by God;

(2) He experienced no uneasiness, for only the imaginative faculty is troubled by the divine influx;

(3) The prophetic state could be achieved at any moment, for Moses was not using this 'corporeal faculty which sometimes grows tired, is weakened, and is troubled, and at other times is in a healthy state' (‘Guide ii, 36, p. 372);

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(1) The hearing of a terrifying noise by all the people: this was a Voice created by God;
In two recent studies S. Pines has treated these contradictions and proposes to resolve them by showing that another level of thought existed in Maimonides, superior to those I have expounded. These hypotheses concerning his 'epistemological' thought are based on a comparison with texts by Al-Farabi and Ibn Bajja, and we know that Maimonides held them to be 'true' philosophers.

As said before, Maimonides wrote no book explicitly intended for philosophers; can one divine his intimate opinions in the Guide, a work designed for apprentice philosophers? If Maimonides did indeed express his personal opinion, it was only by allusion and by contradiction. We thus find ourselves on unstable ground where the dynamic of the thought relies on signs necessarily contradicted by other, more visible signs. A passage in the Guide (I, 31) seems to lend force to the notion that one must attribute considerable weight to Maimonides' prudence:

The things about which there is this perplexity are very numerous in divine matters few in matters pertaining to natural science, and nonexistent in matters pertaining to mathematics.

Alexander of Aphrodisias says that there are three causes of disagreement about things. One of them is love of domination and love of strife, both of which turn man aside from the apprehension of truth as it is. The second cause is the subtlety and the obscurity of the object of apprehension in itself and the difficulty of apprehending it. And the third cause is the ignorance of him who apprehends and his inability to grasp things that it is possible to apprehend. That is what Alexander mentioned. However, in our times there is a fourth cause that he did not mention because it did not exist among them. It is habit and upbringing. For man has in his nature a love of, and an inclination for, that to which he is habituated.

(Guide 1, 31, pp. 66–7)

This fourth cause of confusion is based on a passage in Aristotle (Metaphysics 11, 3, 995a), and would suggest that in Maimonides' opinion 'our time', that is to say the period dominated by the revealed religions, is less propitious for the study of the truth than was the pagan epoch, that of Alexander of Aphrodisias.

Of the internal contradictions of the Guide of the Perplexed, two points appear to be fundamental and deserve more detailed examination:

1) Metaphysics, or divine science, is the ultimate aim of human life. Although Maimonides gives no definitions of metaphysics, one may suppose that he alludes to it in the Guide (III, 51, p. 619):

He, however, who has achieved demonstration to the extent that that is possible, of every thing that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it—has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habitation.

This distinction between the things in metaphysics that one can know with certainty and those that one can only approach recalls Al-Farabi's definition of metaphysics, which comprises the study of the principles of the particular
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sciences (or laws of nature) and that of God and the separate intellects, this last domain being of course the more important. However, in these two domains Maimonides considerably restricts the possible achievement of human knowledge.

Maimonides often reiterates that God cannot be known in His essence, and human ignorance regarding the essence of God and the intellects extends to the world of the spheres:

I have promised you a chapter in which I shall expound to you the grave doubts that would affect whoever thinks that man has acquired knowledge as to the arrangement of the motions of the sphere and as to their being natural things going on according to the law of necessity, things whose order and arrangement are clear. I shall now explain this to you.

(Guide II, 23, p. 322)

And again:

I mean thereby that the deity alone fully knows the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens. But He has enabled man to have knowledge of what is beneath the heavens, for that is his world and his dwelling-place in which he has been placed and of which he himself is a part. This is the truth. For it is impossible for us to accede to the points starting from which conclusions may be drawn about the heavens; for the latter are too far away from us and too high in place and in rank. And even the general conclusion that may be drawn from them, namely, that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects.

(Guide II, 24, p. 331)

Maimonides' ideas on the limits of human knowledge may perhaps be summed up in this way:

1. Man may truly know the laws of the sublunar world;
2. He does not know the laws of the celestial world and can only make unverifiable hypotheses on the subject;
3. He is totally ignorant of God and of the intellects and can only advance negative hypotheses about them.

2. If we admit that for Maimonides nothing can be known of God, evidently His mode of intellection also cannot be known. Numerous passages support this hypothesis, and, in particular, that in which God, replying to Moses, denies him the possibility of knowing Him otherwise than by His attributes of action, which do not provide information concerning His essence.

Two causes of this ignorance may exist: either God is unknowable per se, and no one, whether man or intellect, is capable of conceiving His divinity (and several passages in the Guide support this possibility); or else man, because of matter, cannot apprehend God or the intellects. Thus Maimonides writes:

Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is. It does this even if it is the noblest and purest matter, I mean to say even if it is the matter of the heavenly spheres. All the more is this true for

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the dark and turbid matter that is ours. Hence whenever our intellect aspires to apprehend the deity or one of the intellects, there subsists this great veil interposed between the two. This is alluded to in all the books of the prophets; namely, that we are separated by a veil from God and that He is hidden from us by a heavy cloud, or by darkness or by a mist or by an enveloping cloud, and similar allusions to our incapacity to apprehend Him because of matter. (Guide III, 9, pp. 436-7)

However, while Moses could know nothing of the divine essence and could only have known Him by His actions, since the only attributes predicated of God, even the attribute of His existence, are negative, Maimonides writes (I, 68, p. 165): 'It is accordingly also clear that the numerical unity of the intellect, the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object does not hold good with reference to the Creator only, but also with reference to every intellect.'

Another indication is offered by the beginning of chapter 68 of Book I of the Guide (p. 163):

You already know that the following dictum of the philosophers with reference to God, may He be exalted, is generally admitted: the dictum being that He is the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object, and that those three notions form in Him, may He be exalted, one single notion in which there is no multiplicity.

This opinion, which is accepted by the philosophers, is not necessarily true for Maimonides: he by no means always admits the philosophers' propositions. If this opinion is not true, the similarity between the divine intellect and the human intellect would become no more than one of those hypotheses which are neither self-evident verities nor scientific demonstrations.

It seems that there is no way of resolving this contradiction between the positive affirmation of the identity of the divine and human intellects, and the far more numerous passages where Maimonides declares that there is no possibility of a positive knowledge of God and His intellects.

A solution could be that propounded by S. Pines:

It would thus seem that to Maimonides' mind the so-called Aristotelian philosophical doctrine would be divided into two strata: intellectually cognized notions whose truth is absolute, and which form a coherent system, namely terrestrial physics; a much more comprehensive and ambitious system, namely celestial physics and metaphysics which is concerned with the higher being. However the conceptions and propositions which make up this system cannot be cognized by the human intellect. They are in the best case merely probable. It is, however, possible, but there is no explicit Maimonidean warrant for this hypothesis, that they provide the philosophers with a system of beliefs, somewhat analogous, as far as the truth function is concerned, to the religious beliefs of lesser mortals. It is, however, significant that the thesis concerning the Deity set forth in Guide I, 68 is also propounded - as Maimonides quite correctly points out at the beginning of the chapter - in Mishneh Torah [II, 9]. In both works, the thesis in question forms a part of a theological system, which may be believed, but cannot be proved to be true. In passages in which this critical (in the Kantian sense) attitude is expounded,

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Maimonides refers to his sources; he may also have had sources which he does not mention. ('The Limitations of Human Knowledge', p. 94)

Since the only mode of existence that man can cognize is that of the objects of the senses, men can have no knowledge of immaterial beings and the only 'happiness', the ultimate aim of human existence, is political happiness. A passage of the Guide clearly supports this interpretation:

It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this Treatise.

(Guidi III, 54, p. 638)

If accepted, this interpretation would deny the permanence of the intellect after the death of the body for 'since man is incapable of intellecting abstract forms, his intellect cannot be transmuted into a perdurable substance; nothing in man escapes death' (Pines, 'Limitations', p. 88).

Other passages of the Guide, however, seem to demonstrate that Maimonides perceived as true the opinion accepted by the philosophers, that the intellect is the same in God and in us. If this is so, the numerous allusions to the world hereafter that we find in his popular writings do, in fact, correspond to his intimate opinion, as he expresses it in the Guide III, 51:

And there may be a human individual who, through his apprehension of the true realities and his joy in what he has apprehended, achieves a state in which he talks with people and is occupied with his bodily necessities while his intellect is wholly turned toward Him, may He be exalted, so that in his heart he is always in His presence, may He be exalted, while outwardly he is with people, in the sort of way described by the poetical parables that have been invented for these notions: I sleep, but my heart waketh; it is the voice of my beloved that knocketh, and so on. I do not say that this rank is that of all the prophets; but I do say that this is the rank of Moses our Master... This was also the rank of the Patriarchs... For in those four, I mean the Patriarchs and Moses our Master, union with God - I mean apprehension of Him and love of Him - became manifest, as the texts testify... Withal they were occupied with governing people, increasing their fortune, and endeavouring to acquire property. Now this is to my mind a proof that they performed these actions with their limbs only, while their intellects were constantly in His presence, may He be exalted.

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the intelligibles that lead to passionate love of Him, may He be exalted. For it is impossible that it should be achieved while the bodily humors are in effervescence. Yet in the measure in which the faculties of the body are weakened and the fire of the desires is quenched, the intellect is strengthened, its lights achieve a wider extension, its apprehension is purified, and it rejoices in what it apprehends. The result is that when a perfect man is stricken

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with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure... After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, that intellect remains in one and the same state, the impediment that sometimes screened him off having been removed. And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure, which does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures.

(Guidi III, 51, pp. 623-8)

The traditional interpretation attributes to Maimonides the survival of the intellect, and it was the one agreed upon by most medieval commentators. Many questions arise concerning the quiddity of this intellect; they were generally resolved through Averroes' unambiguous confirmation of the possibility of conjunction with the Active Intellect. In consequence, the Guide has been read in the light of Averroes by most commentators from the thirteenth century until the present day, and it is in this tradition that Maimonides has been presented in this chapter. S. Pines, while remarking that the texts allow a choice between the possible interpretations, seems to prefer Maimonides' first interpretation. It is certainly the most interesting and the least in conformity with the traditional exegesis of the Guide of the Perplexed. Perhaps the veritable Maimonides, like the Al-Fārābī of the Commentary on the Nicomachaeon Ethics, was a philosopher despairing of ever knowing anything but this corruptible world and looking for a reason to continue the struggle to understand and to hope?