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22. *On Generation and Corruption* 338a1–4, *Physics* 203b 29, *Metaphysics* 1050b8–15.
23. For more on Maimonides' skepticism about astronomy, see Kellner 1991b, 1993c, and Stern in press.
24. According to *GP* 2.11, p. 273, one thing that has been demonstrated is that the movement of the sun is inclined to the equator. For the lack of certainty in astronomy, also see *GP* 2.24. For Aristotle's own reservations about astronomy, see *De caelo* 286a4–7, 287b31–288a2, 291b25–8, 292a14–18; *Metaphysics* 1074a14–16.
25. *GP* 2.22, p. 317. For the history of this principle, see Plotinus *Enneads* 5.1.6 and 5.3.15. For further discussion, see Hyman 1992.
26. *GP* 1.74, pp. 218–19; 2.19, p. 303.
27. See *GP* 1.73, p. 202: "They assert that that when a man moves a pen, it is not the man who moves it; for the motion occurring in the pen is an accident created by God in the pen."
28. *GP* 2.25, p. 329; 2.26, pp. 330–1.
29. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.46.2. The closest Maimonides comes to Aquinas is *GP* 2.17, p. 294. I take this as a preliminary statement that is refined and extended by the chapters that follow.
30. *MT* 1, Principles of the Torah, 4.12.
31. Cf. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.12.1: "Since everything is knowable according as it is actual, God, who is pure act without any admixture of potentiality, is in Himself supremely knowable. But what is supremely knowable in itself may not be knowable to a particular intellect, because of the excess of the intelligible object above the intellect; as, for example, the sun, which is supremely visible, cannot be seen by a bat by reason of its excess of light."

## 4 Maimonides' Epistemology

There is nothing Maimonides values more than knowledge, especially knowledge of metaphysics or, in medieval terminology, "divine science." The *Mishneh Torah* opens with the basic metaphysical and scientific truths everyone is obligated to know and ends with a depiction of the messianic age as an era in which the whole world is engaged exclusively in the pursuit of knowledge. The *Guide of the Perplexed* opens and closes with two parables that depict the "true human perfection," not as the moral or ritual life but as "the acquisition of the rational virtues . . . true opinions concerning the divine things" (*GP* 3.54, p. 635f). And throughout the *Guide*, Maimonides reconstructs traditional religious concepts in epistemic terms: To love God is to know Him (*GP* 3.51, p. 621), and the worst form of idolatry is a cognitive error, "believing [God] to be different from what He really is" (*GP* 1.36, p. 84).

Yet Maimonides' philosophical corpus contains no systematic discussion of the concept of knowledge. One reason may be, as Maimonides says about the plan of the *Guide*, that his "purpose . . . was not to compose something on natural science, or to make an epitome of divine science," that is, to explain sub lunar physics, cosmology, or metaphysics. Writing within the context of Arabic Aristotelianism, Maimonides could take many theoretical notions for granted. Even where he must engage in its explication, he says his aim is never the idea itself but to give a "key to the understanding" of a parable or "secret" in the books of prophecy (*GP* 2.2, p. 254). To piece together a picture of Maimonides' epistemology, one must therefore look to his accounts of divine attributes, prophecy, divine

providence, and cosmology. Maimonides' comment also hints at a second possible reason: *Because* these topics are bound up with "secrets," he provides no explicit discussion of them. But in the case of knowledge, what could that secret be?

Although almost everyone acknowledges that Maimonides takes the ideal of human perfection to consist in knowledge including cosmology and metaphysics, the most contested arena in recent scholarship has centered on the question of whether he also believed in limitations on human intellectual capacity that preclude the same knowledge, making the ideal all but unrealizable. Although this chapter is not the place to settle the dispute, I set forth both sides of the argument because the issues take us to the core of his epistemology. In Section 4.1 I lay out the rudiments of Maimonides' general theory of the intellect, in Section 4.2 the controversy over metaphysical knowledge, and in Section 4.3 its implications.

Before I turn to the theory of intellect, some introductory words about the term "knowledge" will be helpful. In Greek and Arabic the term most often used for knowledge (*epistēmē* in Greek, *'ilm* in Arabic) can refer to the cognitive state of an individual or to a body of systematically organized truths about a particular domain—a science.<sup>1</sup> Most of Maimonides' examples of knowledge that refer to a cognitive state focus on the apprehension of essential forms or what he calls intelligibles. But he also tells us that the individual's ultimate perfection consists of "opinions toward which speculation has led and that investigation has rendered compulsory" (*GP* 3.27, p. 511), that is, what Aristotle calls *epistēmē* or scientific knowledge. Analogously, the question of whether it is possible for humans to have knowledge of metaphysics can be understood as either the question of whether an individual can apprehend the essences of immaterial beings (such as God or the separate intellects) or whether it is possible to produce a metaphysics that meets the standards of an Aristotelian science. Most of the *Guide* deals with the second question. In some chapters, Maimonides presents demonstrations of, say, the existence of God (*GP* 2.1–2); in others he attacks the claims of Aristotelian celestial physics (*GP* 2.19–24). However, he then draws conclusions from the evidence of the possibility or impossibility (as the case may be) of a science of metaphysics that addresses the first question of whether the human has the capacity to achieve the cognitive state.

#### 4.1. THE THEORY OF THE INTELLECT

Maimonides' idea of intellect is the product of considerations drawn both from his psychology, his account of the soul, and his cosmology and metaphysics, his account of the heavens and their immaterial causes. Both stories ultimately derive from Aristotle, although they reached Maimonides only after being filtered through centuries of Hellenistic and Arabic commentators who presented rich, detailed theories.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Maimonides presents only a brief overview of these ideas in *Eight Chapters* (*EC*) and in scattered remarks in the *Guide*. He assumes his reader is familiar with the Aristotelian repertoire of "intellects" and generally ignores differences among Aristotle and his commentators. In this section I situate Maimonides' sketchy and at times not totally consistent remarks in their broader philosophical contexts. I begin with his psychology, the range of powers that enable living things to engage in their characteristic activities, nutrition (for plants), perception (for animals), and thought (for humans).

Like Aristotle and most of his Arabic Aristotelian counterparts, Maimonides takes the soul to be the form of a body possessing life, without which the body would have only the potential for life. Unlike Plato, who took the soul to be a separate substance from the body, Maimonides takes it to be something inseparable from body in the way that form is inseparable from matter (*GP* 1.72, p. 192).<sup>3</sup> Although each soul of an individual possesses multiple powers, it is indivisible and specific to its species. From this Maimonides concludes that, say, human powers and actions are entirely different from those of other species so that even our words for those powers, for example, "appetitive," are completely equivocal (*EC* 1). Although it is not clear that it is valid, this reasoning is typical of his strategy to transform metaphysical distinctions into semantic ones.

Among the powers of the human soul, two are of special significance: the imaginative and the rational. The imagination is a power both to store "the impressions of sensibly perceived objects" when they are not currently perceived and to combine and separate these impressions into representations of things never perceived (*GP* 2.36, p. 370). This power has an ambiguous status. On the one hand, its images provide the input to intellectual processes and the imaginative faculty is also crucial for the activity of the prophet

who, using it, translates abstract philosophical truths into figurative representations that can be grasped by the community-at-large and laws on which the community can act (*GP* 2.36, p. 369ff.). On the other hand, Maimonides is suspicious of the interference of the imagination with reason. Its representations are always of composite particular things, never of the universals, essential or accidental, of which demonstrations are composed. Worse, its powers to combine and separate images are unconstrained by reality, so that what the imagination finds admissible or inadmissible conflicts with what the intellect determines to be possible and necessary. Finally, as a bodily faculty that cannot avoid representing things as bodies, the imagination misrepresents immaterial things like God (*GP* 1.73, pp. 206–12; 1.52, p. 114). For these reasons, Maimonides attacks the *kalam* for its reliance on the imagination and discovers the source of widespread error in the failure to distinguish the imagination from the intellect (*GP* 1.73, p. 209; 2.12, p. 280; 3.15, p. 460).

Under reason, Maimonides includes both theoretical and practical powers by which one “perceives intelligibles, deliberates, acquires the sciences, and distinguishes between base and noble actions” (*EC* 1; see also *GP* 1.53, p. 121; 1.72, p. 191). Unlike most of his Arabic counterparts, Maimonides does not posit distinct intellects corresponding to these powers; in particular, he never explicitly refers to a practical intellect. Some think this is because Maimonides means to disassociate the practical from the intellect and to identify it with the appetites and imagination (as he suggests in *GP* 1.2). Others claim that the practical is a rational activity but, by omitting reference to a practical intellect, Maimonides underscores the unity of the intellect and the superiority of the theoretical.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the explanation, I am concerned with the theoretical power of the intellect whose stages of development Maimonides, following Aristotle, describes as different intellects corresponding to differences of potentiality and actuality.

Maimonides describes the initial stage of the rational faculty – which he also calls the “material,” “hylic,” or “potential” intellect – as “a faculty consisting in preparedness” (*GP* 1.70, p. 174): that is, a predisposition or capacity to apprehend intelligibles (See *GP* 1.72, p. 190; 1.68, p. 165; 1.72, p. 190; 2.4, p. 257).<sup>5</sup> In other words, the rational faculty is almost the pure potential to know. I say almost because Maimonides also holds that even this faculty, or potential

intellect, possesses first intelligibles, for example, that the whole is greater than a part or that two things equal to a third are equal to each other (*Logic*, Chapter 8).

Given its nearly unlimited potential to think, such an intellect becomes actual by abstracting individual forms, universal intelligible characteristics, from sensible images.<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, by abstraction and apprehension of all intelligible forms, and by demonstration of truths composed of intelligibles, the potential intellect becomes the fully actualized intellect, or “intellect in actu.” At its completely mature stage, the fully actualized intellect no longer needs the senses to abstract new forms; all its thinking is of forms that have already been acquired. Not only does it possess all forms in its repertoire, it is constantly engaged in apprehending them. At this stage, the Arabic Aristotelians introduce a term for yet a third intellect, the “acquired” intellect, although opinions vary over whether it is identical with the fully actual intellect or something yet higher. To work out this part of Maimonides' story, I turn now to the cosmological background.

To explain the eternal motion of heavenly bodies, Aristotle posited the existence of a first unmoved mover whom he characterizes as a divine intellect (*nous*) constantly thinking itself.<sup>7</sup> Because he initially assumed that the heavens are enclosed by one sphere, he also assumed that there is a unique prime mover. By the twelfth century, however, the received cosmology recognized a hierarchy of movers, or separate (i.e., immaterial) intellects, each the cause of the being and motion of one of ten spheres that was posited to account for the motions of planets. Each sphere, in turn, was thought to have its own embodied intellect by which it represents to itself the separate intellect associated with it. In addition to human intellects then there also exist these immaterial and spheric intellects. The main difference between them is that the human intellect changes, or undergoes motion.

Like all Aristotelian motion, that of the intellect is a matter of actualization of its potential and, for there to be motion, it must have an agent, or active cause. To play this role, Aristotle posited what came to be known as the active (or agent) intellect whose manner of functioning he compared to that of “light [that] makes potential colors into actual colors” (*De Anima* 3.430a10–15). However, in the Arabic Aristotelian tradition, following Alexander, the active

intellect was taken to be a transcendent rather than imminent being, the lowest of the separate intellects, and was given two roles. As Maimonides puts it, its

existence is indicated by the facts that our intellects pass from potentiality to actuality and that the forms of the existents that are subject to generation and corruption are actualized after they have been in their matter only in potentia. Now everything that passes from potentiality to actuality must have necessarily something that causes it to pass and that is outside it. And this cause must belong to the species of that which it causes to pass from potentiality to actuality. [GP 2.4, p. 257]

Here the active intellect has two functions: a cosmological one to explain why generated material substances have their actual forms and an epistemological one to explain how the human intellect actualizes its potential to apprehend intelligible concepts. Two competing models in Arabic Aristotelianism explained how the active intellect plays the epistemological role.

One model, defended by Alfarabi, is that the active intellect is or casts a kind of light (as in Aristotle's image) that simultaneously illuminates the material intellect and the sensible images stored in the imaginative faculty, thus enabling the intellect to discern and actualize intelligible characteristics found in sensible images. Here the active intellect functions as a general condition that enables the native human mind to abstract and apprehend universal features. By itself it donates no knowledge that the human intellect does not acquire on its own. On this model, the acquired intellect is simply the culmination of the fully actualized human intellect. To convey some weak sense of conjunction, Alfarabi sometimes describes the relations of both the acquired to actual intellect and of the active to potential intellect as form to matter.<sup>8</sup> In any case, although the acquired intellect directly apprehends the active intellect, even at this stage the latter does not seem to emanate any knowledge of forms that the human intellect has not already acquired on its own.

On the second model, whose main proponent is Avicenna, the human intellect can never abstract an intelligible form from sensible images by its own powers because intelligible forms must be truly universal, hence applicable to an infinite number of instances. But no finite human faculty can abstract an infinitely instantiable concept from the finite number of sensible images at its disposal. Instead it is

the active intellect that, in addition to emanating the material intellect with its first principles, is "the giver of forms," the real source, the continuous donor of each intelligible form apprehended by the material intellect. At each moment when an intelligible form is apprehended by the material intellect, the material intellect conjoins with the active intellect that emanates that form. The function of abstraction is merely to predispose the material intellect to receive the intelligible form emanated by the active intellect. In addition, Avicenna recognizes an advanced state of conjunction when the human intellect has acquired all or most of the intelligible forms that constitute the active intellect and enters into its company. But he denies that even at this stage the acquired intellect unites with the active intellect or has it as a direct object of thought.<sup>9</sup>

Which of these two views is Maimonides'? Not surprisingly, different passages in the *Guide* can be adduced in support of either position.<sup>10</sup> In support of Alfarabi's claim that the active intellect is simply a condition for the actualization of the human intellect, consider Maimonides' illustration of abstraction by the example of someone who "has intellectually cognized this piece of wood to which one can point, has stripped its form from its matter, and has represented to himself the pure form" [GP 1.68, pp. 163-4]. Elsewhere he elaborates on how the intellect operates in this process:

The intellect divides the composite [things] and differentiates their parts and makes abstractions of them, represents them to itself in their true reality and with their causes, and apprehends from one thing very many notions. [GP 1.73, p. 209]

Three points should be kept in mind. First, the intellect is described as abstracting forms directly from sensible objects, but in fact it operates on composite, particular "sensible forms" stored in memory or imagination that the senses deliver to the mind. Second, its functioning is divided into three steps: (1) abstraction of the forms that can be differentiated in each composite particular sensible form, (2) representation of those forms with their causes, that is, by articulating how the forms should be understood, and (3) apprehension of the abstracted and represented forms.

The word translated in these passages as "representation" (and sometimes as "mental representation") is the Arabic term *tasawwur*, which can also be translated as [either the act or object of] conception

or conceptualization. Although there is considerable debate about its origin, *tasawwur* refers in its basic case to the formation or grasp of simple concepts as wholes, typically essences. Its most distinctive feature arises from its contrast with *tasdiq*, which refers to (either the act or object) of assenting to or judging something as true. Thus *tasawwur* is any cognitive act that does not involve the actual assignment of a truth value. In contemporary terms, it is closer to what we think of as grasping a meaning or entertaining a proposition. I return to this notion in the next section, but it should be noted that such representation involves a further dimension beyond the passive reception by the intellect of the abstracted form.<sup>11</sup>

Third, and most important, despite their lack of detail, the descriptions of abstraction and apprehension in these passages are entirely in terms of the native powers of the human intellect, with no mention of an emanation from the active intellect. Maimonides' silence cannot be dismissed by saying that these passages are preliminary versions of the more complicated Avicennan picture because the claim that it is the native human intellect that is the generator of the apprehended form is required for the argument of 1.68. It is precisely because the abstraction and representation of the form of the piece of wood "is the action of the intellect," that is, the subject's human intellect, that the

intellect in actu is nothing but that which has been intellectually cognized, and the thing by means of which the form of wood was intellectually cognized and made abstract, that thing being the intellectually cognizing subject, is also indubitably identical with the intellect realized in actu. (GP 1.68, p. 164)

If, as Avicenna claims, the acts of abstraction and representation are merely predispositions for the emanation of forms by the active intellect, and if the material intellect is a mere recipient of those forms, there would be a difference between the "intellectually cognizing subject" and its acts of abstraction and thinking, on the one hand, and the intellectually cognized object, the emanated form, on the other. This state is not the identity that results when the abstracted intelligible form *is* the action of the intellect.

Nonetheless this account cannot be the whole story. First, the forms apprehended in the passages in Chapters 1.68 and 73 are material intelligibles because they are abstracted from sensible images

of composite material things. This raises the question of how one comes to apprehend immaterial forms like those of God or the separate intellects.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it is arguable that it is not only immaterial forms that the intellect cannot abstract and apprehend if all its concepts must be derived from sense impressions. In the example of 1.68 Maimonides says that the intellect "strips" its form from the particular piece of wood, implying that the form (conjoined with matter) already exists "in" the composite material object. Elsewhere he seems to contradict this:

It is known that no species exists outside the mind, but that the species and the other universals are . . . mental notions and that every existent outside the mind is an individual or a group of individuals. (GP 3.18, p. 474)

If the form of the substance wood does not exist outside the mind, it cannot be perceived and abstracted.<sup>13</sup> Indeed it is not clear how we can ever abstract a substantial form like that of wood from sensible forms (like colors or textures) that are the proper objects of sense perception. Some scholars therefore propose that Aristotle introduces the active intellect precisely to account for the intellectual apprehension of such forms.<sup>14</sup>

For similar reasons, one might argue that when Maimonides introduces the active intellect, it is an Avicennan active intellect. Because the forms of composite material substances cannot be explained simply as a mixture of their constituent elements, Maimonides posits the active intellect as their external cause, which he designates by the Avicennan title "giver of forms" (GP 2.12, p. 278). In another passage, after explaining that it is the form in the mind of an artisan that causes an artifact to have a particular form and causes that form to be actualized in the artifact, Maimonides concludes, "the giver of a form is indubitably a separate form, and that which brings intellect into existence is an intellect, the active intellect" (GP 2.4, p. 258). What Maimonides is arguing here is that the active intellect is what brings the human actualized intellect into existence, but the only way it can do this is by emanating a form whose apprehension by the human intellect constitutes its actualization. This is again Avicenna's model of the active intellect that itself emanates forms. Finally, Maimonides concludes this passage by comparing the human actualized intellect to the embodied intellects of the spheres. Just as the latter derive their being by emanation

from their respective separate intellects, so the human actualized intellect derives its being from an emanation of a form from the active intellect, "through which we apprehend the active intellect" (*GP* 2.4, p. 258; cf. 3.8, p. 432). Here, again, the active intellect is the source from which the being of the human intellect derives, not simply a condition for its existence.

In sum, Maimonides' theory of intellect needs something that works like an Avicennian active intellect, and a number of his descriptions fit that model.<sup>15</sup> It should be noted, however, that the passages in question fall in Maimonides' exposition of the "opinion of the later philosophers" about cosmology and about the separate intellects in Part II of the *Guide*. He does not explicitly disavow the views he presents in the philosophers' name but (as we will see in Section 4.2) he subjects their celestial physics and metaphysics to so much criticism that it is hard to think that he commits himself to their whole theory. Furthermore, by emphasizing the parallels between the active intellect and other separate intellects, Maimonides seems to imply that the two accounts hang or fall together. It remains an open question, then, of whether and to what degree Maimonides detaches the Avicennian conception of the active intellect from his critique of the theory of separate intellects as a whole.

A similar remark applies to Maimonides' stance toward the acquired intellect. He takes the ultimate perfection of a human being to consist in being a totally actualized intellect "knowing everything concerning all the beings that it is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection" (*GP* 3.27, p. 511). Only in one passage does he explicitly refer to the acquired intellect, which is "not a faculty in the body but is truly separate from the organic body and overflows toward it" (*GP* 1.72, p. 193; cf. *EC*, Chapter 2). But whether and how he distinguishes it from a fully actual intellect is not clear. By saying that it is "separate from the organic body" he may mean that as a fully actual intellect that has abstracted all the material forms there are to be apprehended, it no longer needs the bodily senses. However, Maimonides also seems to endow the acquired intellect with emanational powers of its own, suggesting that this state results from a conjunction or union with the active intellect. Thus he describes "the end of man *qua* man" as undisturbed "mental representation of the intelligibles" that culminates in "union [*ittisād*] with the divine [i.e., active] intellect, which

lets overflow toward them that *through which* that form exists" (*GP* 3.8, p. 432, my emphasis). Although he does not explicitly say so, this is a description of an acquired intellect, which includes apprehension of the active intellect characterized in Avicennian terms.

Nonetheless, although it may be the ideal, Maimonides also seems to question whether the state of the acquired intellect is attainable. At the end of the *Guide*, he describes the Patriarchs and Moses as if they were living acquired intellects, in a state of Avicennian "union of their intellects through apprehension of Him" (3.51, p. 623). But after depicting their state of apprehension, he adds, "[their] rank is not a rank that, with a view to the attainment of which, someone like myself may aspire for guidance" (*GP* 3.54, p. 624). That is, Maimonides first presents their state as a regulative ideal by which people should orient their lives. But then he states that no one like him – namely, any human being – may be able to realize that ideal. Unfortunately he gives no reason why this is so. In the next section, I suggest some possible reasons.

#### 4.2. LIMITATIONS OF KNOWLEDGE

No topic in contemporary Maimonidean scholarship has elicited as much controversy as the the question of whether Maimonides believed in the possibility of human knowledge of metaphysics. The "traditional" interpretation of the *Guide* holds that he did believe in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge; what I call the "skeptical" interpretation challenges that assumption.<sup>16</sup> The controversy revolves around three poles. The first concerns sources for a skeptical interpretation in writings of Alfarabi and Ibn Bājja. Because this involves textual issues that go beyond the purview of this volume, I do not pursue them here. The second consists of individual passages in the *Guide* that have been adduced in support of one or the other of these positions. Because of Maimonides' ambiguous manner of writing, each of these lends itself to either interpretation. The moral is that, although these passages cannot be ignored, neither can they be read apart from sustained arguments that furnish a context.

The third pole consists of Maimonides' arguments for one position over the other. The skeptical interpreter's basic argument is that if all apprehension of forms must be abstracted from sensible images, there can be no apprehension of the forms of purely immaterial

beings, such as the active intellect or God (or even the spheres of which we have no sensible experience [*GP* 1.58, pp. 136–7]).<sup>17</sup> Traditional interpreters counter that, although true, this argument is incomplete. Although we cannot directly apprehend the form of God or of another immaterial being, this does not preclude the possibility of metaphysical knowledge by inference.

Suppose one apprehends first principles and, by abstraction, acquires the forms of material things. From these intelligibles and certain logical notions (e.g. the derivation of a privation from an affirmative attribute), one can form more general intelligibles such *unity, cause, corporeal, simple, and incorporeal*. One can then combine them into propositions, from the propositions build syllogisms, from the syllogisms a science, and begin to demonstrate general propositions, say, that exactly one simple, incorporeal, first cause exists. Without directly apprehending the form of God, one can still demonstrate propositions that assert the existence of a thing under a description that refers to God. Although many details of this story are obscure, the general outline is clear enough.

To buttress their position, traditional interpreters offer two supporting considerations. First, if, as Maimonides says many times, knowledge of metaphysics is needed for human perfection, it would be “bizarre” if he believed it is unattainable. Second, Maimonides gives demonstrations of metaphysical propositions such as the existence, incorporeality, and unity of God. If the skeptical interpretation is right, how could he do this and why would he take credit for it?<sup>18</sup>

In response to the traditional interpretation, skeptical interpreters face two tasks. They must show that Maimonides’ metaphysical demonstrations do not meet Aristotelian standards of scientific knowledge and reconcile that lack of knowledge with Maimonides’ view of theoretical contemplation as human perfection. To address the first task, I review four arguments in the skeptical interpreter’s arsenal; in the next section, I address the second task. For the present, three preliminary comments are in order.

1. Maimonides’ skeptical arguments are directed exclusively at claims of knowledge of metaphysics (including cosmology), not at claims of empirical knowledge. He attacks the *mutakallimūn* who, using classical skeptical objections, attempt to show “that the senses do not always procure certain knowledge” (*GP* 1.73, p. 213) and

repeatedly states that everything Aristotle has said about the sublunar sphere “is indubitably correct” (*GP* 2.22, p. 319; cf. 2.24, p. 326).<sup>19</sup> Indeed Maimonides’ skeptical arguments about metaphysics and cosmology presuppose knowledge of the sublunar realm. Thus one of his objections to Aristotelian astronomy is that the same principle by which we *successfully* explain why sublunar things have different attributes despite their common matter cannot also explain the different motions and velocities of the heavenly spheres that share a common matter.<sup>20</sup> Borrowing a term from the *kalām*, Maimonides concludes that God “particularizes” the motions of the spheres by which he means that the motions have a cause but we do not know it (*GP* 2.19, pp. 310–12). Just as God responds to Moses’ request to know His essence by revealing His divine actions, that is, the lawful processes of the sublunar world (*GP* 1.54, pp. 124–5), so Maimonides’ skepticism is not meant to “close the gate of speculation” and “deprive the intellect of the apprehension of things that it is possible to apprehend.” Rather it redirects the “intellect [to] move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp,” namely, the sublunar world, and shows “that the intellects of human beings have a limit at which they stop” (*GP* 1.32, pp. 69–70).<sup>21</sup>

2. Maimonides’ skeptical arguments are directed against claims of scientific knowledge (in particular domains like metaphysics) of the caliber that would enable one to become an acquired intellect and conjoin with the active intellect. They are not directed against weaker cognitive states such as belief, which Maimonides defines as the (mental) “affirmation that what has been represented is outside of the mind just as it has been represented in the mind,” nor against beliefs held with certainty, that is, an affirmation one realizes cannot possibly be false (*GP* 1.50, p. 111). Unlike later types of skepticism, Maimonides’ arguments do not undertake to show that it is possible to doubt the purported knowledge claim in order to unseat it.<sup>22</sup> Instead the model for Maimonides’ idea of scientific knowledge and the target for his skepticism are truths meeting Aristotle’s standards for demonstration, that is, truths derived from premises that are certain, primary or nondemonstrable, immediate, before, and causes of their conclusions.

As examples of the claim that demonstrative premises be primary or nondemonstrable, Maimonides offers perceptual judgments or first intelligibles. By contrast, the generally accepted opinions that



serve as premisses of dialectical syllogisms, and their implications, are excluded from scientific knowledge.<sup>23</sup> This is important because, following the lead of recent scholars who have argued that Aristotle's scientific practice employs dialectical argument more than demonstration, some traditional interpreters have argued that Maimonides does the same.<sup>24</sup> Even if one cannot demonstrate metaphysical propositions, one can dialectically prove them – which also yields knowledge. In response, suffice it to say that even if Maimonides gives dialectical argument greater cognitive status in the practice of science, it cannot yield the caliber of apprehension required for an acquired intellect and conjunction with the active intellect. For Maimonides it is this desideratum that must be satisfied by the knowledge that the traditional interpretation requires.

The most important requirement for the caliber of demonstrative knowledge Maimonides seeks, and what his skeptical arguments aim to show is not delivered, is given in the condition that the premisses must contain the cause of the conclusion, in which “a cause” means an answer to this question: Why? For in order to have scientific knowledge, one must understand the claim and “we only understand when we know the explanation” (*Post An.* I, 2, 70b.30–1), that is, the cause. Recall here that, in order to apprehend intelligibles, the intellect must represent them “*in their true reality and with their causes*” (*GP* I.73, p. 209, my emphasis). Therefore only when we have knowledge of causes are we in a position to grasp the phenomena according to their “true reality” rather than as they sensibly appear or according to common opinion.<sup>25</sup> Because this is the standard Maimonides demands, his skeptical project will succeed if he can show that purported demonstrations do not meet it.

3. In his image of intellectual illumination as lightning flashes of different frequencies and intensities, Maimonides asserts that the secrets of the Law are not “fully and completely known to anyone among us” because, even when the truth “flashes out,” “matter and habit in their various forms conceal it” (*GP* I. Introduction, p. 7). Again, “Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is... [namely,] the deity or one of the intellects” (*GP* 3.9, pp. 436–7).<sup>26</sup> Matter, then, is the culprit and can block the acquisition of complete knowledge in two ways: as an obstruction either to *concentration* on God and contemplation of divine science or to *apprehension* of the divine. Matter

prevents concentration through its demands to satisfy one's bodily needs and desires. When they are excessive, matter is also a source of moral imperfection. But even where its demands are minimal, any attention to basic needs is an obstacle to the total concentration required for intellectual perfection. And because it is not possible for there to be form without matter (*GP* 3.8), or intellect without body, the absolute concentration necessary for the complete knowledge of an actualized or acquired intellect is hardly possible.

Matter also serves as a veil obstructing apprehension of the content of the knowledge claim. Among the subjects about which Maimonides makes this claim, we can distinguish two types of argument. The first delineates *limitations* of the human intellect, subjects that do not admit of demonstration but only of a weaker kind of proof, for example, certain claims in astronomy. The second type, which involves antinomies that follow from purported demonstrations, leads to the conclusion that it is humanly *impossible* to have such knowledge, not simply that there are limitations on our intellectual capacity. For the rest of this section, I set out these two types of arguments with examples of each.

1. In 2.24 of the *Guide*, Maimonides sketches the “crisis” over Ptolemaic astronomy and Aristotelian cosmology that raged in twelfth-century Spain.<sup>27</sup> Ptolemaic astronomy posits epicycles and eccentrics that enable the astronomer to make precise predictions of planetary motions. By contrast, Aristotelian cosmology requires all heavenly motion to be uniform, circular, and about the center of the earth. Because of these incompatibilities, some of Maimonides' near-contemporaries rejected Ptolemaic astronomy and some tried to construct alternative theories. Maimonides, by contrast, exploits the conflict in order to motivate “the true perplexity” of Aristotelian cosmology, that is, the irresolvable disagreement that is symptomatic of the lack of demonstrative knowledge and hence the limitations of the intellect (*GP* I.31, p. 66):

regarding all that is in the heavens, man grasps nothing but a small measure of what is mathematical, ... [T]he 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 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 and too high in place and in rank. [GP 2.24, p. 327]

The barrier to our knowledge of cosmology is not a deep metaphysical fact but rather that we are limited by our place – on earth “far away” from the heavens – and “rank,” as creatures of “low and turbid” matter compared with the “noblest and purest matter” of the spheres (GP 3.9, p. 436). The moral Maimonides draws is not to cease all inquiry but to master the science God *has* enabled man to have, namely sublunar physics. Nor do these limitations absolutely rule out the possibility of scientific knowledge of cosmology. Maimonides concludes his discussion of the true perplexity by saying that “it is possible that someone else may find a demonstration by means of which the true reality of what is obscure for me will become clear to him” [GP 2.24, p. 327].<sup>28</sup>

2. Maimonides argues that astronomy is immune to the doubts that apply to Aristotelian cosmology because it does not attempt to produce “cogent demonstrations” (sing. *burhān qāṭiʿ*; literally: “a cutting demonstration”) but only possible hypotheses consistent with general cosmological truths that “agree with what is observed” (GP 2.11, pp. 273–4). Here Maimonides assumes an Aristotelian distinction between two types of demonstration based on the condition that the premises must contain the cause, or explanation, of the conclusion. Demonstrations that meet this condition are, in Aristotle’s terminology, “of the reason why” [*to dioti*] and, in scholastic terminology, demonstrations *propter quid*. In contrast, syllogistic deductions that argue from effects to the existence of possible causes merely establish *that* the conclusion is true, knowledge of the fact [*to hoti*; in scholastic terminology: *quia*], not *why* it is.<sup>29</sup>

This distinction was developed in various directions by Aristotle’s successors. Of particular importance is that Alexander of Aphrodisias and Avicenna both argued that only a demonstration *propter quid* is a real demonstration; a demonstration *quia* constitutes only weaker evidence or proof [*dalil*] and does not furnish the stuff of scientific knowledge. In contrast Aquinas draws the distinction in order to legitimate demonstrations *quia* as scientific demonstrations.<sup>30</sup> Although Maimonides nowhere explicitly draws the *propter quid/quia* distinction and uses the term “demonstration” in multiple senses, his medieval commentator Moses of Narbonne

understood the phrase *burhān qāṭiʿ* as a “demonstration of the cause and the fact,” that is, a demonstration *propter quid*.<sup>31</sup> Maimonides also seems to follow Avicenna in denying that *quia* arguments are demonstrations, that is, the stuff of scientific knowledge. Thus the astronomer draws his inferences from effects, namely the observed motions of the stars, to possible hypotheses as to their causes “regardless of whether or not things are thus in fact” (GP 2.24, p. 326). This is what Maimonides means when he says that the astronomer does not provide a “cogent demonstration”; *quia* proofs that do not give “a precise account of the true reality” (GP 2.11, p. 274) are sufficient for his predictive purposes.

The *propter quid/quia* distinction also has implications for the status of metaphysical propositions such as the existence of God. All of the philosophers’ demonstrations of the existence of God (GP 2.1–2), as well as Maimonides’ own dilemma argument (GP 1.71, 2.2), begin from observations of empirical effects; likewise, the arguments for, or “indications” of, the existence of the active intellect (in GP 2.4, p. 257, cited in the previous section) reason from effects. None of these, even the ones he calls demonstrations (meaning demonstrations *quia*) furnish the stuff of scientific knowledge.

Furthermore, Maimonides’ own statements about these proofs indicate that he saw a difference between them and the scientific knowledge supplied by a demonstration *propter quid*. In two chapters he distinguishes between “guidance leading to the existence of a thing and an investigation of the true reality of the essence and substance of that thing” (GP 1.46, p. 97). The “immense difference” (GP 1.46, p. 97) between these is not between existence and essence but between “guidance” and “investigation of the true reality” of the thing. “Guidance” can come from parables and traditions (GP 1.33, p. 71) or “through the accidents of the thing or through its acts or through a relation – which may be very remote from the thing” (GP 1.46, p. 97) – that is, from effects. By contrast, “investigation of the true reality” is a scientific inquiry that would uncover the explanation as well as the fact. Maimonides illustrates the distinction by a parable about different ways in which we can make known the existence of a ruler – either through his effects (e.g., law and order in his realm) or through his essence and true reality. The ruler prefigures “the deity who moves the highest heaven” (GP 1.70, p. 175) whose existence is proven in the first argument of *Guide* 2.1. Maimonides’

point in calling these arguments "guidance" is that demonstrations *quia* do not constitute scientific knowledge.

A similar point applies to a controversial remark Maimonides makes at *Guide* 2.24 (cited earlier): "And even the general conclusion that may be drawn from [the heavens], namely, that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects" (*GP* 2.24, p. 327).<sup>32</sup> This is puzzling because it seems to contradict his statements elsewhere in the *Guide* that the "revolution of the heaven" is "the greatest proof through which one can know the existence of the deity" (*GP* 1.70, p. 175; 1.9, pp. 34–5; 2.18, p. 302). However, once we distinguish between *propter quid* and *quia* demonstrations, it is evident that the proof for the existence of the deity from the revolution of the sphere is a demonstration *quia* and does not furnish an explanation of God's existence even if it guides us to what we ought to believe (*GP* 1.34, p. 74). Hence it is not scientific knowledge.

I now turn to two arguments for the stronger claim that it is impossible to have knowledge of certain metaphysical propositions. This type of argument focuses on representations of God in speech and thought and the relation between the intellect and imagination in forming these representations.

### 3. According to Maimonides, it is demonstrable (*quia*) that

(1) God is one

meaning that He is not only numerically single but an absolute unity who is simple and incomposite. This follows from the Avicennian conception of the deity as the being who is necessarily existent in itself and causally independent of any other being. If such a being were composed of attributes, its existence would be dependent on them. Hence, any such being must have no parts and no attributes. To this Maimonides adds that not only must God *be* incomposite, our knowledge must *represent* Him so. There can be no true representations of God in which He is represented compositely: as a subject with attributes or a substratum for forms. With this constraint in place, Maimonides argues that there can be no representation of God by which we can know that (1) is true.

Recall that, when describing the apprehension of intelligible forms, Maimonides distinguishes a stage in which the intellect makes a representation [*tasawwur*] of the form (*GP* 1.68, p. 73). Those

passages do not say how the representations differ (if they do) from forms themselves. However, elsewhere Maimonides characterizes these representations by using linguistic terms. For example, the representations of their respective separate intellects formed by the embodied intellects of the spheres constitute, according to Maimonides, an autonomous language to which the Psalmist *literally* refers when he writes, "The heavens tell of the glory of God" (Psalm 19:2, my emphasis); indeed, he continues, "the true praise" is the "very representation" whereas "speech of lip and tongue" serve merely to "instruct someone else" of, or to communicate externally, the mental representation (*GP* 2.5, p. 260; cf. 1.65). Similarly, in the opening chapter of his discussion of divine attributes, Maimonides draws a distinction between "the notion that is uttered" and "the notion represented in the soul" and then claims that what is believed and known with certainty is the latter (*GP* 1.50, p. 111). In both passages, Maimonides appears to be reading into the term "representation" [*tasawwur*] what, in his *Logic*, he calls "inner speech" as opposed to the utterances "of the lip and tongue" of external speech.<sup>33</sup> Although there remain many questions about Maimonides' use of this term, what is clear is that these representations, although distinct from external speech, constitute a language, the language of thought.

The most important linguistic dimension of the representations of Chapters 2.5 and 1.50, in contrast to those of Chapters 1.68 and 1.73 that were of simple forms, is that they are syntactically complex like the sentences of external speech. Their syntax is not the conventional grammar of external speech but a universal logical form, which Maimonides says is a more perspicuous structure that guides one to knowledge in the sciences.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, however superior they are to external speech, because the inner speech representations are composed of elements according to a syntax, Maimonides finds them problematic – especially when one claims to demonstrate the unity of God.

According to Maimonides, what we claim to know cannot be truly expressed by (1) for three reasons. First, it attributes to God the attribute of being one, whose meaning is "a perfection only with reference to us" (*GP* 1.59, p. 139). To solve this semantic problem, Maimonides proposes that we negate the meaning of the attribute, that is, treat the predicate as if it were completely equivocal (*GP* 1:56, p. 131). Yet even after having negated its content, a second

metaphysical problem remains: God "does not possess a thing other than His essence, which . . . is identical with His perfections" (GP 1.59, p. 139). If God has attributes that compose His essence, He would be dependent on them (GP 1.52, p. 115), which contradicts the assumption that He is necessarily existent in himself. Alternatively, if an affirmative attribute indicates "a part of the thing the knowledge of which is sought, that part being either a part of its substance or one of its accidents" (GP 1.58, p. 135, my emphasis), God must be composite rather than simple. Moreover, having parts, He is also divisible, hence, a body.

To solve this problem, Maimonides proposes to read the affirmative proposition (1) of external speech as the negation of a privation expressed in internal speech as

(2) Not (God is composite).

Furthermore, (2) should be understood as the denial not only of the privation of composition but of the categorial condition (Q) required to be either composite or one, that is, to fall under the category of quantity. Thus (2) is short for (3):

(3) Not (God is Q).

Here negative attributes avoid the metaphysical problem because they say nothing about the essence of the thing we seek to know (GP 1.58, p. 135), hence nothing about a part of the essence.<sup>35</sup>

Although better than (1), (2) and (3) nonetheless suffer from a third problem. Their subject–predicate syntax of *attribution* implies that there exists an attribute (signified by the predicate) that is structurally distinguishable from the substance (signified by the subject), and this division holds even if the attribute is privative and negated. As Maimonides emphasizes (GP 1.57–9), a privation is no less of an attribute than something affirmative. Put otherwise, privations signify something – even though it is not actually present – in a subject in which it ought to exist. Hence, they are attributes and require a substance to which they belong. But this very differentiation of substance and attribute entailed by the subject–predicate syntax of the representation compromises divine simplicity:

For there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplication of notions, but

one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it . . . , you will find that it is one . . . and you will not find therein any multiplicity either in the thing as it is outside of the mind or as it is in the mind. (GP 1.51, p. 113, my emphasis)

Maimonides' term for complexity, or composition, *tarḳīb*, is the same term used for the syntax, or mode of composition, of language. Thus the true oneness in the mental representation of God that Maimonides demands is breached by any representation that contains even the simplest syntactic structure (cf. GP 1.60, p. 145). In sum, negated privations avoid problems specific to affirmative attributes but they are subject to any problem of attribution *simpliciter*. Let's call this the syntactic problem of divine attributes.<sup>36</sup>

It follows that if we can demonstrate that God is one or, in inner speech, that God does not possess (the categorial condition) Q, it also follows from the syntactic form of the demonstrated proposition that He is composite. Hence, God is both composite and not. Thus how we represent what we know misrepresents what we know: God's unity. Contrary to those who take Maimonides to be an advocate of the *via negatīva*, it seems that neither affirmative nor negative attributions furnish knowledge about God. Negative attributes are "better" than affirmative ones, making fewer false presuppositions and "conducting" us in the right direction (GP 1.57, p. 133; 1.58, p. 135). But better is not good enough: Negative divine attributes are still false and descriptions formed from them fail to represent the deity. Indeed Maimonides argues that if one represents God in subject–predicate form, "if we say that this essence, which for the sake of example shall be called the deity, is an essence in which subsist many notions that are predicated of it, we apply this term to absolute nonexistence" (GP 1.58, p. 135). The speaker does not have a false belief about God, an "apprehension that is different from what He really is" (GP 1.60, p. 144); he has no belief about God, period. The position to which Maimonides' argument leads him is one in which we are prevented from ever forming true representations about God. This is an example not just of a limitation but of the complete impossibility of metaphysical knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

4. The root of the syntactic problem of divine attributes is that the intellects of composite substances (like humans or spheres) must apprehend God through representations that necessarily employ

subject-predicate syntax even in inner speech. Why *necessarily*? Because as embodied intellects, we can never free our representation of an existent from the influence of the body, forced by our "wish to preserve the conception of the imagination" (GP 1.51, p. 114). For Maimonides, the representational role of the imagination is a general obstacle to knowledge of immaterial beings. Not only God is conceived in corporeal terms as an essence with attributes (GP 1.51, p. 114), the separate intellects are said to "move" and from a "local position in relation to the spheres" (GP 1.49, p. 109; 2.12, pp. 279–80). Similar qualifications apply to the idea of emanation [*fiyud*] that Maimonides regards as the best available figure to express the causality of an immaterial being even though it is also inadequate to capture the true reality... For the mental representation of the action of one who is separate from matter is very difficult, in a way similar to the difficulty of the mental representation of the existence of one who is separate from matter (GP 2.12, p. 279)

Again, this is so difficult because the imagination cannot represent any existent except as a body or any action except as a spatiotemporal event. Maimonides' objection, however, is not simply, as Aristotle said (*De Anima* ii 7 431a16), that there is no thinking, or representation, without imagination but that, despite the need, we have no principled way to distinguish the two. For example, for there to be scientific knowledge based on demonstration, we must be able to distinguish between the necessary, the possible, and the impossible. But both the intellect and imagination claim to discern these modalities. Therefore we need a criterion "that would enable us to distinguish the things cognized intellectually from those imagined" (GP 1.73, p. 211). Yet, when he is pushed to produce it, Maimonides concedes that he knows no principle "that permits differentiation between the imaginative faculty and the intellect" (GP 3.15, p. 460). If there were one, would it be "something altogether outside both the intellect and the imagination, or is it by the intellect itself that one distinguishes between that which is cognized by the intellect and that which is imagined?" (GP 3.15, p. 461).<sup>38</sup> Of course, this conclusion is no surprise. If our matter prevents our intellects from apprehending the immaterial, it will prevent us from clearly distinguishing the actualized intellect from bodily faculties like the imagination. And without a principled method of differentiation, there can be no

principled scientific knowledge. Maimonides concludes, "these are points for investigation which may lead very far" (GP 3.15, p. 461), indeed *too far* for knowledge of metaphysics.

#### 4.3. INTELLECTUAL PERFECTION WITHOUT METAPHYSICS

A major consideration in support of the traditional interpretation is Maimonides' repeated affirmation of the ideal of a life of contemplation culminating with knowledge of metaphysics. By the same token the greatest challenge to the skeptical interpretation is to square Maimonides' commitment to this ideal with his view of the narrow limits of human understanding, limits that exclude knowledge of metaphysics.

One response to this challenge is to deny the ideal.<sup>39</sup> Because of the constraints on the intellect, some skeptical interpreters argue that, following Alfarabi, Maimonides abandons his earlier belief in the possibility of metaphysical knowledge and, like Kant, gives priority to the life of action over contemplation. Proponents of this view point out that, in the last sentences of the *Guide*, after saying that human perfection consists in apprehension of God, divine providence, and governance, Maimonides announces that "the way of life" of the perfected individual "will always have in view *loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment* through assimilation to His actions" (GP 3.54, p. 638) – apparently shifting the true perfection, a type of *imitatio Dei*, to the ethical and practical.

Traditional interpreters counter that in this passage Maimonides does not abandon his preference for the contemplative life. On the contrary, he says that "the perfection of man" *is* the apprehension of God, His providence, and governance; only afterward does he describe what this way of life leads to: dispassionate Godlike behavior (GP 1.54). This does not mean that the behavior is identical with the perfection, only that it accompanies or follows from it.<sup>40</sup> In fact, earlier in the chapter Maimonides explicitly identifies the practical as a lower, nonultimate perfection (GP 1.54). Yet there remains a difficulty if we agree that the traditional interpretation of this passage is correct: How can it be reconciled with Maimonides' skeptical arguments? To conclude this chapter, I therefore want to sketch some ways in which Maimonides endorses the

theoretical life that take into account his skepticism about metaphysical knowledge.

First, while circumscribing the boundaries of human knowledge, Maimonides redirects us to the teleological study of sublunar nature. In his parable of the palace, the perfected individuals in the inner chamber of the ruler are engaged in "an examination of [i'tibārā] the beings," that is, the study of natural science, with the aim of "drawing up proofs [i-i'stidhāl] about God" (GP 3.51, p. 620).<sup>41</sup> This is a contemplative ideal other than metaphysics that is nonetheless focused on God.

Second, in this passage Maimonides uses the verbal noun *istidlāl* [the drawing up of proofs], shifting the focus from the product, the proof, or its conclusion, to the process, the activity of proving it.<sup>42</sup> This shift is an instance of a general motif that finds the value of theoretical inquiry not in the truth demonstrated but in the "spiritual exercise" in which it engages the inquirer.<sup>43</sup> The idea is based on the theme that philosophy is not the exposition of a doctrine but a practically oriented way of life: a set of intellectual practices, including demonstration and dialectic, that aim to cultivate a set of attitudes that engage the individual's entire psychology with the goal of achieving his happiness or perfection. The practices vary. Some involve training that develops intellectual and emotional dispositions, skills, and abilities such as concentration, attention, or self-examination. Other exercises lead one through the investigation of nature to worship of God. Yet others aim to cure the sources of unhappiness. This conception of philosophy was common among Hellenistic schools, and Maimonides, I suggest, holds a similar view.<sup>44</sup>

Among the spiritual exercises, Maimonides includes cosmological and metaphysical inquiry. He transforms these traditional disciplines into routes one follows to perplexities induced by difficulties in their subject matter. In some cases, the perplexities issue in awe and praise of God as the inquirer recognizes his own intellectual inadequacy.<sup>45</sup> At other times, the individual's recognition of his intellectual limits is therapeutic, curing him of unobtainable intellectual passions that lead to unhappiness. Maimonides' example of this kind of intellectual sickness is the fact that we are anxiously driven by longings to have metaphysical and cosmological knowledge we cannot obtain (GP 1.31, p. 66). Through the rabbinic story

of Rabbi Akiva in *Pardes* (*Hagigah* 14b), Maimonides shows how study of the heavens can disabuse us of such unsatisfiable longing. By recognizing, and then respecting, the limitations of his intellect of which he becomes aware through cosmological inquiry, Rabbi Akiva ultimately ceases even to long for what he realizes it is not possible for him to know, freeing himself from his unobtainable epistemic passion. According to Maimonides, the tranquility, or peace of mind, he achieves by "refraining and holding back" at the limit of his intellect is the meaning of the talmudic statement that Akiva "entered in peace and went out in peace" (GP 1.32, pp. 68–70; cf. GP 2.30, p. 353).

Finally, Maimonides proposes that we employ parables as the appropriate verbal medium to express what we limited human inquirers can try to say about metaphysics, barred from scientific knowledge of the subject that would enable us to give an explicit literal discursive exposition.<sup>46</sup> In the Introduction to the *Guide* he explains that the Sages employed the parable to articulate their own intellectual experience of apprehending metaphysics because its allusive, figurative form matches the metaphysical subject matter that "appears, flashes, and then is hidden again" (GP 1, p. 8). In a similar way, through the practice of interpreting scriptural, rabbinic, and his own parables, Maimonides tries to guide his reader to and through the same kind of intellectual experience of metaphysics: "that the truths be glimpsed and then again be concealed" (GP 1. Introduction, pp. 6–7).

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#### NOTES

1. For the Aristotelian background, see Burnyeat 1981, Kahn 1981. Maimonides' use of *'ilm* for the cognitive state in GP 1.31, p. 65, can be contrasted with GP 2.12, p. 276, where it refers to a science; his other main term for knowledge, *ma'rifa*, usually refers to the cognitive state. On Maimonides' Hebrew terminology, see now Septimius 2001.

2. For Arabic theories of the intellect and Maimonides' place among them, see Davidson 1992-3, Altmann 1987, Kogan 1989.
3. Aristotle holds out the possibility that the actual intellect may be separable from the body, and this idea is seized upon by medieval thinkers in order to account for the immortality of the soul.
4. For the first position, see Pines 1990; for the second, Kreisel 1999, Altmann 1987.
5. Here Maimonides follows Alfarabi, rather than Avicenna, for whom the rational faculty is a substance.
6. Following Aristotle (*De Anima* 3, 4, 429b 6-10), Maimonides acknowledges an intermediate stage of the intellect, called the "habitual" intellect by Alexander, after it has apprehended an intelligible form but is not actively engaged in reflecting on it, a state he compares to "a skillful scribe at the time when he is not writing" (*GP* 3.51, p. 625). I argue (Stern forthcoming) that this notion is central to Maimonides' theory.
7. Aristotle uses the term "motion" to refer to all change, not only as it applies to the heavens and, as we use the term nowadays, to locomotion. For example, Alfarabi, *Risāla fi'l-'aql* ["Letter on the Intellect"], in Hyman and Walsh 1973, p. 217.
9. For detailed discussion of Avicenna's views, see Davidson 1992-3, pp. 83-94.
10. The two main parties in this controversy are as follows: for the Alfarabian conditionlike interpretation, Altmann 1987 and Pines 1979 and, for the Avicennian interpretation, Kogan 1989 and Davidson 1992-3.
11. On *tasawwur* and *tasdīq*, see Wolfson 1973, Sabra 1980, Manekin 1990, and Ivry 1998. For a parallel three-stage account in Alexander (in which the second stage is purely passive reception of the form), see Altmann 1987, p. 73.
12. For additional passages that attribute to the human intellect the ability to apprehend immaterial forms, see *CM*, *Avot* 3, 20; *GP* 1.62, p. 152; and *GP* 2.12, p. 280 (end), for passages that deny the ability, see *GP* 1.37, p. 86 (in contrast to *GP* 1.38, p. 87) and *GP* 3.9, pp. 436-7. For competing analyses of these passages, see Altmann 1987, pp. 76-7, 118; Davidson 1992-3, pp. 94-7; Kogan 1989; Stern forthcoming.
13. Kogan 1989.
14. Kahn 1981.
15. It remains unclear how, even on Avicenna's account, one apprehends immaterial forms for which there is no predisposing abstraction.
16. The main players in the controversy are, on the traditional side, Altmann 1987, Davidson 1992-3, Hyman 1989, Ivry 1998, Kellner 1990,

- Kogan 1989, Kraemer 1989, Kreisel 1999, and Manekin 1990; on the skeptical side, Pines 1979, Seeskin 2000, and Stern 2000, 2001, 2004, and forthcoming; and, on specific issues, Harrey 1990, 1997, and Klein-Braslav 1986a. It should be noted that Pines characterized Maimonides as a critical philosopher in the Kantian sense; Stern 2004 and forthcoming attempts to highlight parallels between Maimonides' position and classical and Humean skepticism. It should also be noted that Pines' critical reading was part of a broader esotericist interpretive stance, often associated with Leo Strauss, that reads all ancient and medieval philosophy through political lenses. The intensity of some responses to Pines' thesis may be directed against this larger program with which, at least in their minds, it is associated.
17. See Pines 1979.
18. For the most detailed presentation of the traditional interpretation see Davidson 1992-3, pp. 54, 86-7. For the expression in quotes, see p. 54.
19. Maimonides' skepticism does not touch mathematics, where the "perplexity" symptomatic of the limitations of knowledge is "nonexistent" (*GP* 1.31, p. 66). Significantly (and remarkably for his time), Maimonides recognizes certain mathematical notions, for example, the exact value of pi, which will never be known, not because of a "deficiency of knowledge on our part," but because they are "unknown by [their] own nature" (*CM Erruvin* 1.5; cf. *CM Erruvin* 2.5 on irrational numbers). Because not even God could know the exact value of pi, the fact that humans do not entails nothing for the scope of human knowledge. See Langermann 1991a.
20. I am indebted here to Joshua Schwartz.
21. On the importance of knowledge of nature for knowledge of God, see Ivry 1998, Kraemer 2001a.
22. This, despite the fact that certainty is a condition for the premises of a demonstration. That mere dubitability is not sufficient grounds for skepticism is clear from Maimonides' use of Alexander's rules (*GP* 2.3, p. 254; 2.23, p. 321) for accepting belief according to least doubt. On doubt in Maimonides, see Langermann 2002 and on skepticism in Islam in general, van Ess 1968.
23. See *Logic*, Chapter VIII, 48; Hyman 1989; Stern 2000.
24. Kraemer 1989, 2000; cf. also Hyman 1989, Ivry 1998. On Aristotle, see, e.g., Owen 1961 and Nussbaum 1982. Note that it is Aristotelian dialectic that is in question, as opposed to *kalam* dialectic, which Maimonides rejects.
25. The Arabic term *haqiqā*, translated here by Pines as "true reality," is sometimes synonymous or interchangeable with Arabic *dhāt*,

- "essence" and sometimes means the reality (including the existence of something) established and explained by a scientific inquiry. A philosophical examination of the term remains to be done.
26. On the image of the veil, see *EC* 7; on habit, *GP* 1.31, p. 67.
  27. Pines 1963, pp. cix–cxii; Sabra 1984; Langermann, 1999, pp. 199–202; see also the chapter in this volume by G. Freudenthal.
  28. Langermann (1991a). It should also be noted that Maimonides depicts Aristotle not only as the successful scientist of the sublunar realm, but as the cautious doubter who recognized the limitations of his intellect with respect to cosmology; see, e.g., Maimonides' interpretation of *De Caelo* 2.12, cited in 2.19, p. 307ff (and with a different interpretation in 1.5, p. 29). On this image of Aristotle, see Stern in press and Langermann 2002.
  29. *Post. An.* I, 13, 78<sup>b</sup>22–79<sup>a</sup>15; on the distinction, see Wallace 1972; Freudenthal 2003; Stern 2001, 2004.
  30. Alexander (1989) flatly states that "there is no demonstration through what is posterior" (13.30, p. 34); Avicenna 1972, p. 76; Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 2, 2; Pines 1963, p. lxixf; Almann 1987, p. 116; Davidson 1987b, pp. 298–9 and references therein.
  31. Narbonne 1852, 15b–16a. On Maimonides' ambiguous use of the term "demonstration" [*burhān*], see the entry in the glossary of his Hebrew translator, Samuel Ibn Tibhon, 1987. Other uses of the term *burhān qāi'* (e.g., in *GP* 2.15, p. 290 and in 2.2, p. 252) require further investigation.
  12. On the controversy over this passage, see Kraemer 1989; Davidson 1992–3, 2000; Harvey 1997; Stern 2001, 2004. See also *MT* 1, Principles of the Torah, 1.5, p. 7 for further *quid* demonstrations of the existence, incommensurability, and unity of God.
  31. Maimonides, *Logic*, Chapter 14.1–2. On the term "notion [represented in the soul]," see Michael Blaustein 1986 for possible influence of Ibn Bajja on Maimonides.
  34. *Logic*, Chapter 14. On Alfarabi's influence on Maimonides' conception of logic here, see Stern 1989, 2000, and for the Alfarabian background, the superb introduction in Zimmermann 1981.
  35. On Maimonides' general theory of divine attributes, see the chapter in this volume by K. Seeskin.
  36. In Chapters 1.61–3 Maimonides attempts to find names of God (e.g., the Tetragrammaton and "I am that I am") whose *syntax* circumvents the duality of subject and predicate; syntax and its metaphysical implications; but even these names do not allow us to form propositions about God. For detailed discussion, see Stern 1989, 2000.

37. For another example of the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge, see the antinomy on *GP* 1.72, p. 193.
38. Fackenheim 1946/7, p. 60, n. 61.
39. Pines 1979.
40. Davidson 1992–3.
41. On the term *ʿitibār*, which is used by Averroes with the same meaning in his *Decisive Treatise [Kitāb faṣl al-maqāl]* see Harvey 1998a.
42. On the term *istidlāl* and its importance for key passages in the *Guide*, see Davidson 2000.
43. Hadot 1995.
44. Stern 2001, in press, forthcoming; Maimonides describes the commandments as exercises of this kind in *GP* 3.51, p. 622.
45. See, e.g., the expressions of awe, dazzlement, glory, and praise in the following contexts: *GP* 1.2, p. 26; 1.58, p. 137; 1.59, p. 139; 1.72, p. 193; and Harvey 1990, 1997; Stern forthcoming.
46. On Maimonides' use of parable, see Stern 1998, forthcoming, and Y. Lorberbaum 2001.