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The Knot That Never Was

Samuel Ibn Tibbon was the first to notice an apparent contradiction, or knot, in Maimonides' *Guide*. In three different passages Maimonides states that the heaven, or its motion, proves the existence of the deity (who, according to the second two passages, is also the mover and governor of the heaven), a conclusion, Ibn Tibbon naturally assumed, one thereby knows. The three passages are:¹

(A) For it is the greatest proof through which one can know the existence of the deity—I mean the revolution of the heaven—as I shall demonstrate. (1:70, p. 175)

(B) On account of this sense [i.e., grandeur], the heaven is called a “throne,” as indicating to those who have knowledge of them

¹ All English quotations are from *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963). Parenthetical citations are to part, chapter, and page in this edition. For the Arabic text of the *Guide*, see *Dalālat al-Hāq'irin*, ed. S. Munk and I. Joel (Jerusalem 1930/31). Henceforth I refer to this edition as the “received” Arabic text of the *Guide*; the term “received” is not intended to carry any normative weight. In addition to the passages cited and referred to, see Mishneh Torah, *Hilkot Yesodei ha-Torah* I, 5, 7.

and reflect upon them the greatness of Him who caused them to exist and to move, and who governs this lower world by means of the overflow of their bounty... That is, He says: the heaven indicates My existence, grandeur, and power. ... (1:9, pp. 34–5) (C) ... The heaven proves to us the existence of the deity, who is its mover and governor, as we shall explain. We shall make it clear that there is no proof indicating to us the existence of the Maker, according to our opinion, like the indication, deriving from the heaven. The latter also proves, as we have mentioned, according to the opinion of the philosophers, the existence of the Mover of the heaven and His not being either a body or a force subsisting in a body. (2:18, p. 302)

In all three of these passages Maimonides speaks in his own voice. In addition, as Maimonides alludes in (C), the first of the philosophers' "speculations" in 2:1 (pp. 243–46) claims to "demonstrate" the existence of the first mover from the eternal unceasing motion of the sphere, grasp of which, again, presumably qualifies as knowledge.

On the other hand, toward the end of *Guide* 2:24 (according to the 'received' Arabic text) Maimonides appears to contradict (A)–(C). In Pines' translation the passage reads as follows (I italicize the critical, and controversial, sentence):

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.* (p. 327)

Ibn Tibbon was rightly bothered by this apparent contradiction. In a

marginal note to his translation, he suggested an emendation of the text to resolve the contradiction, filling in what he believed were missing words that were later incorporated into his own Hebrew translation. On Ibn Tibbon's version, the controversial sentence reads (in English translation, with the interpolated words in angle brackets):

And the general inference from them is that they indicate for us their Mover, <but other matters concerning them are something> that human intellects cannot know.²

Both Salomon Munk and Shlomo Pines, in their respective translations, base themselves on the "received" Arabic text, while noting Ibn Tibbon's variant reading in a footnote.³ In his Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, R. Joseph Kafih offers yet another reading of the "received" Arabic text in an attempt to avoid the contradiction.⁴ And in recent years, three distinguished contemporary Maimonides scholars, Joel Kraemer, W. Z. Harvey, and Herbert Davidson, have entered the debate, each with a proposal for untying this Maimonidean knot. Kraemer follows Ibn

² *Sefer Moreh ha-nevukim la-Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon be-ha'ataqat Šemuel Ibn Tibbon*, ed. Y. Even-Shmuel (Jerusalem 1959 [1981]), p. 285. On Samuel Ibn Tibbon's emendation and a critical edition of his note, see Carlos Fraenkel, *From Maimonides to Samuel ibn Tibbon: The Transformation of the Dalalat al-Ha'irin into the Moreh ha-Nevukhim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), esp. pp. 201–204 and 339. On Ibn Tibbon's own view that the existence of the deity can indeed be proven demonstratively from the eternal motion of the sphere(s), see now Gad Freudenthal, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Theory of an Eternal World," elsewhere in this number of *Aleph*.

³ *Le Guide des égarés*, ed. and trans. S. Munk. (Paris, 1856–66 [1960]), vol. 2, pp. 194–95

⁴ *Sefer Moreh Nevukim*, trans. J. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1972).

Tibbon, arguing that the “received” Arabic text is faulty and contains a lacuna that must be filled in. He translates what he proposes was the intended (emended) Arabic text as:

For the causes of inferences regarding the heaven are inaccessible to us; for it is too distant from us and too high in place and rank. And the general inference from it is that it indicates for us its Mover, but other matters concerning it are indeed something which human intellects cannot know.⁵

Kraemer emphasizes that his reading is simply a “hypothesis.” Nonetheless he argues that it is “the most plausible” one among the available alternatives, *inter alia* because it avoids attributing a gratuitous contradiction to Maimonides. Harvey follows Pine’s adoption of the “received” Arabic text, arguing that the passage in 2:24 expresses Maimonides’ (for once, revealed) esoteric “true opinion” that “the proof from the heavens is beyond our ken.”⁶ Davidson also accepts the “received” Arabic text but proposes his own reading that avoids the contraction with (A)–(C):

The causes [i.e., the logical principles] from which proofs can be drawn up regarding [the nature of the] heavens are beyond our grasp. They [i.e., the heavens] are at a distance from us and exalted in place and in rank—the general [enterprise of] drawing up a proof from them consisting [solely] in this, that they show us [*or* prove to us] their mover—indeed they [i.e., the heavens] are something to which the knowledge of which human minds cannot attain.⁷

That is, Maimonides denies knowledge only of the heaven(s), allowing that the proof *from* the heaven(s) to the existence of the deity is something that can be known, consistent with (A)–(C).⁸

Although each of these proposals deserves sustained examination, here I will not directly discuss claims specific to any one of them. Instead I wish to challenge one assumption shared by all three authors and to work out a distinction in the text that all three ignore. Once these two points are made, it should be clear that, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, there never was a knot tied in the “received” text of 2:24 and (A)–(C).

Turning first to (A)–(C), in all three passages Maimonides states that “the heaven” or “the revolution of the heaven” proves the existence of the deity. Maimonides does not, however, tell us *what about* the heaven or its revolution proves it. Davidson, Harvey, and Kraemer all take the fact to which Maimonides is referring to be the eternal, or infinite, and

⁵ Joel L. Kraemer, “How (Not) to Read *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 32 (2006): 350–403, on p. 355; see also J. L. Kraemer, “Maimonides on Aristotle and Scientific Method,” pp. 53–88 in *Moses Maimonides and his Time*, ed. E. L. Ormsby (Washington D.C., 1989), esp. pp. 79–80.

⁶ W. Z. Harvey, “Maimonides’ First Commandment, Physics, and Doubt,” pp. 149–162 in Y. Elman and J. S. Gurock, eds., *Ḥazon Naḥum, Studies presented to Dr. Norman Lamm* (New York: Yeshiva University, 1997), on pp. 155–59. See also *idem*, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam, 1998), pp. 77–81; *idem*, “Hasday Crescas contra Maïmonide sur la preuve physique de l’existence de Dieu,” in T. Levy and R. Rashed, eds., *Maïmonide: Perspectives arabe, hébraïque, latine* (Louvain: Peeters, 2002); *idem*, “Les nœuds du *Guide des égarés*: Une critique de la lecture politique de Léo Strauss” (unpublished lecture).

⁷ Herbert A. Davidson, “Maimonides on Metaphysical Knowledge,” *Maimonidean Studies* 3 (1992–3): 49–103, on p. 103; see also *idem*, “Further on a Problematic Passage in *Guide for the Perplexed* 2.24,” *Maimonidean Studies* 4 (2000): 1–13.

⁸ I find it difficult, however, to understand how one could *know* the existence of the deity if, as Davidson proposes, His existence is proven from the heavens and the heavens themselves are *not known*.

unceasing revolution of the sphere.⁹ This claim about the sphere is, of course, the undemonstrated twenty-sixth of the philosophers' premises with which Maimonides opens Part II and it features in Maimonides' exposition of the philosophers' "speculations" or "demonstrative methods of proving the existence" of the deity in the opening chapter of Part II (p. 249), especially in the first argument for the first mover.

However, this is not the only candidate in the running. A second candidate for the fact in question is the *different* speeds and directions of the different spheres and their motions. Maimonides gives this inference from the heaven(s) to the existence of the deity in the course of his critique of the Aristotelian causal explanation of spheric motion. After raising a barrage of objections to the Aristotelian causal account, Maimonides concludes that "all these things are necessary according to the purpose of one who purposes" (2:19, p. 310), for which he appropriates the kalam term "particularization," although he emphasizes that what he means by this term is not what the Mutakallimun mean (2:19, p. 303). Now, what Maimonides means by the term "particularizer" is itself a matter of scholarly controversy. Some hold that he intends to allow for uncaused, i.e., unexplained contingency in the world, or a deity characterized by will rather than wisdom.¹⁰ Elsewhere I have argued that what Maimonides means is what he sums up as follows: "All this has been produced for an object that we do not know and is not an aimless and fortuitous act" (2:19, p. 310); i.e., the different motions do have a (final) cause but we lack knowledge of it. In other words, he uses "particularizer" to baptize a first cause of which we have no understanding or knowledge.¹¹ Here I will not attempt to decide among these two alternatives, since it is not necessary for my present argument. Whatever we take the particularizer to be, Maimonides next adds:

To my mind, there is no proof of purpose stronger than the one founded upon the differences between the motions of the

spheres and upon the fact that the stars are fixed in the spheres. For this reason you will find that all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity's existing necessarily. Thus in the traditional story of Abraham, there occurs the tale, which is generally known, about his contemplation of the stars. Again Isaiah, calling attention to the conclusions to be drawn from the stars, says: "Lift up your eyes on high, and see: who hath created these? And so on." (Isa. 40:26) Jeremiah says similarly: "He made the heavens. Abraham says: The Lord, the God of the heavens." (Gen. 24:7) And the chief of the prophets says; "Who rideth upon the heaven" (Deut. 33:26), an expression we have explained. This is the correct proof, which is not exposed to doubt. (2:19, pp. 310–11)

This passage is striking in many respects. It is remarkable that this proof is attributed to Abraham, who is elsewhere characterized as the first *philosopher* to have proven the existence, unity, and incorporeality of the deity.¹² Furthermore, not only is the language of this passage reminiscent of the language of 1:70; the same verse (Deut. 33:26) is cited in 1:70 just before (A) to signify "He who makes the encompassing heaven revolve and who moves it in virtue of His power and His will"

⁹ Davidson, "Maimonides," pp. 78, 99–103; Harvey, "Maimonides' First Commandment," p. 159; Kraemer, "How (Not) to Read," pp. 365ff.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Charles H. Manekin, "Possible Sources of Maimonides' Theological Conservatism in His Later Writings," in *Maimonides: Between Tradition and Revolution*, ed. Jay Harris and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, MA, 2007); idem, "Divine Will in Maimonides' Later Writings," *Maimonidean Studies* (forthcoming).

¹¹ Josef Stern, "Maimonides on the Growth of Knowledge and the Limitations of the Intellect," pp. 143–191 in Levy and Rashed, *Maimonide*, on pp. 158–61.

¹² See Mishneh Torah, *Hilkot Avodah Zarah* I, 3; *Guide* 3:24 (p. 502).

(1:70, p. 175), suggesting that the “greatest proof” which he has in mind in that passage may not be the philosophers’ speculation of 2:1, but the argument for a purposer or particularizer of 2:19.¹³ Finally, note that in the verse from Isaiah this deity is described as the creator, a point to which we will return.

In fact, we need not choose between these two candidates, the Aristotelian first mover and (for lack of a better term) the Abrahamic particularizer. Maimonides’ *repeated* use of the deliberately vague phrase “the heaven” or “the revolution of the heaven” may have been intended to allow for *both* of these candidates for the “proof” from the heaven to the existence of the deity, i.e., the philosophers’ argument from the *unceasing* motion of the spheres *and* the Abrahamic argument from their *different* motions. He may have not wanted to *commit* himself to either one to the exclusion of the other and, instead, intended to leave the question open. Possibly this is what he is suggesting in (C), in which he juxtaposes the proof from the heaven for the “existence of the Maker,” a proof he labels “our opinion,” with the proof from the heaven for the Mover, which he labels “the opinion of the philosophers.” I will return to one reason why Maimonides might have wished not to commit himself to either alternative. First, however, in light of these remarks, I want to turn to Maimonides’ own method of proof for the existence of the deity, first described in 1:71 and then elaborated in 2:2.

After attacking the kalam for attempting to prove the existence of the deity exclusively from creation, Maimonides famously proposes his own method to prove the existence of the deity, an argument that takes the form of a “simple constructive dilemma,” as the Stoics called it.¹⁴ He argues as follows:

- 1 Either the world is eternal or it is created after not having existed.¹⁵
- 2 Suppose the world is created, i.e., (first) appears after not having existed.

3 Whatever (first) appears after not having existed cannot have created itself; its creator must be other than itself (First Intelligible).

- 13 In this passage Maimonides states that the evidence from the different motions of the spheres is proof “for the deity’s existing necessarily,” i.e., for a being that is necessarily existent—and, one might add—in itself. Elsewhere Maimonides sharply distinguishes the “the intellect that moves the highest sphere,” i.e., the first mover, from the “necessary of existence” (2:4, pp. 258–59). Furthermore, in 1:69 (p. 169), he repeatedly refers to the being that is necessarily existent in itself, and on whose existence every other being is contingent, as the “Creator.” In short, the particularizer deity proven to exist from the different motions of the spheres = the Necessary Existent in Itself = the Creator and ≠ the First Mover. (Since we have no understanding of the Necessary Existent in Itself, this identification makes especially good sense according to my epistemic reading of particularization.) Therefore, as I shall argue below, if we identify the two lemmas in Maimonides’ constructive dilemma (of 1:71 and 2:2)—Creation vs. Eternity—with the philosophers’ argument (from eternal motion) and the Abrahamic argument (from the different motions of the spheres), respectively, it will be true, as Kraemer states (“How (Not) to Read,” p. 365), that the two lemmas lead to different conceptions of the deity. However, unlike Kraemer’s claim that the two competing conceptions are that of the Bible and of the philosophers, I am suggesting that the rivals are the Avicennan necessarily existent being in virtue of itself/“particularizer” and the Aristotelian first mover.
- 14 In Stoic terminology, such an argument has the form: If the first, then the third; if the second, then the third; but either the first or the second; therefore in any case the third. See William Kneale and Martha Kneale, *The Development of Logic* (Oxford, 1978), p. 178. It is important to bear in mind that this is not an Aristotelian argumentative form, not a syllogism or demonstration.
- 15 Pines writes “created in time.” However, since time itself (whose measure is the motion of the created heavenly bodies) is created, what the phrase “created in time” means is either obscure or, according to some (such as Gad Freudenthal, personal communication), “meaningless and inappropriate.”

- 4 Therefore, if the world is created, i.e., (first) appears after not having existed, then there must exist a creator who created it.
- 5 Such a creator is the deity.
- 6 Therefore if the world is created, there exists the deity.
- 7 Suppose the world is eternal.
- 8 If the world is eternal, then there must exist a being different from anything in the world that is itself non-corporeal nor a force in a body, one, eternal, immutable, and uncaused that, in turn, is the first cause of the world. (This assumes premises 1, 3–11, 14–17, 26 in the introduction to Part II.)
- 9 Such a being is the deity.
- 10 Therefore if the world is eternal, there exists the deity.
- 11 But the world is either created or eternal.
- 12 Therefore, the deity exists.

Having sketched this constructive dilemma, Maimonides goes to great length to explain away the fact that in the Mishneh Torah he presents only the second lemma—the proof from eternity—which he considers superior to the proof from creation exclusively because it also enables us to prove the unity and non-corporeality of the deity.¹⁶ However, he emphasizes again and again that he does not himself “believe in the eternity of the world.” Furthermore, despite this advantage of the philosophers’ proof, Maimonides also emphasizes in the *Guide* that his *own* proof is identical to *none* of the philosophers’ four speculations. Thus at the end of 1:71, Maimonides describes the plan for the end of Part I and the beginning of Part II of the *Guide*:

I have already let you know that there exists nothing except God ... and this existent world and that there is no possible inference proving His existence ... except those deriving from this existent taken as a whole and from its details. ... For this

reason I judged that in the first place it behooves me to set down a chapter [namely, 1:72] in which I would explain to you that which exists as a whole by informing you of what is demonstrated and is indubitably correct. After that I shall set down for your benefit other chapters in which I shall mention the premises of the Mutakallimun ... [namely, 1:73–76]. After that I shall set down for your benefit other chapters in which I shall make clear to you the premises of the philosophers and their methods of inference with regard to these problems [namely, Part II, Introduction, 1]. After that I shall summarize for your benefit the method that I shall adopt [namely, in the first paragraph of 2:2], as I have already informed you, with regard to these four problems [namely, the existence, unity, incorporeality of the deity and the creation vs. eternity of the world]. (1:71, p. 183)

And true to his promise, after presenting the philosophers’ “methods of inference” in 2:1, Maimonides gives his own method, the constructive dilemma, in the opening paragraph of 2:2. It is instructive to compare the version sketched in 1:71 with the later version:

- 1 The fifth body, i.e., the sphere, hence, its motion, must either be or not be subject to generation and corruption.
- 2 Anything that exists after having been nonexistent cannot have brought itself into existence, hence, of necessity must have been brought into existence by something else (First Intelligible).
- 3 Therefore, if the sphere is subject to generation and

¹⁶ Notice that this consideration needs to be balanced against Maimonides’ reasons for “choosing” creation in 2:25.

corruption, there must be something else that brought it into existence after having been nonexistent.

- 4 That being is the deity.
- 5 Therefore if the sphere is subject to generation and corruption, the deity exists.
- 6 If the sphere has always and never will cease to be moved in a perpetual and eternal movement, i.e., if it is not subject to generation and corruption, then the mover that causes it to move in this eternal motion is not a body or a force in a body. (This assumes premises 1, 3–11, 14–17, 26 in the introduction to Part II.)
- 7 Such a mover is the deity.
- 8 Therefore if the sphere is not subject to generation and corruption, the deity exists.
- 9 But the world has either come into existence after having been nonexistent (i.e., is subject to generation and corruption) or it has not.
- 10 Therefore, the deity exists.
- 11 This deity is (also) the being that is necessarily existent in virtue of its own essence.

Comparing the two versions, there are at least two apparent differences between them. First, “to be created” in 1:71 corresponds to “being subject to generation and corruption” in 2:2. This would entail that the separate intellects, which are never supposed to be subject to generation and corruption, are not created even though they are emanated. The second difference is, in step 11, Maimonides’ introduction of the description of the deity as the Avicennan being that is necessarily existent in virtue of its own essence. Now, things that are subject to generation and corruption are only possibly existent with respect to their own essence. Hence, the world that is subject to generation and corruption, and is (only) possible of existence in virtue of itself,

must be caused to exist, and on pain of an impossibility, by a being that necessarily exists in virtue of itself. Although Maimonides only introduces this characterization at the end of the proof, it applies to the deity that is proven to exist in the first lemma as well as in the second. And indeed he states this explicitly in his presentation of the third speculation in 2:1.¹⁷ Furthermore, in 1:69 Maimonides three times calls the deity—who is depicted there as the ultimate form of the world subject to generation and corruption, as necessarily existent in virtue of itself, and as the cause for the existence of the world—the “Creator,” again suggesting that the deity of the first lemma, according to which the world is created, is also necessarily existent in virtue of itself.¹⁸ Finally, recall that in 2:19, where Maimonides presents the Abrahamic particularizer, he states that because “there is no proof of purpose stronger than the one founded upon the differences between the motions of the spheres, ... all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity’s *existing necessarily*” (my emphasis). Here, again, Maimonides identifies the divine particularizer and the being necessarily existent in itself.

¹⁷ See Josef Stern, “Maimonides’ Demonstrations: Principles and Practice,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 10 (2001): 47–84, on p. 69

¹⁸ See: W. Z. Harvey, “A Third Approach to Maimonides’ Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle,” *Harvard Theological Review* 74 (1981): 287–301, on p. 296; Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*, forthcoming. In 1:69 he does not use the explicit Avicennan formula “being that is necessary in virtue of its own essence,” but his description of the deity as the ultimate form is blatantly Avicennan. It should also be noted that in neither 1:71 nor 2:2 does Maimonides refer to the deity who is the cause of an eternal world as a mover, although that would presumably be one way of working out its causal role. Maimonides’ silence may also be deliberate since later in the *Guide* (2:4) he writes that “it cannot be true that the intellect that moves the highest sphere should be identical with the necessary of existence” (pp. 258–59).

In sum, the Creator of the first lemma of 1:71 is the necessarily existent being in virtue of itself of 2:2, who in turn is identified with the Abrahamic particularizer.¹⁹ How does this affect the interpretation of Maimonides' argument based on the simple constructive dilemma? First, although Maimonides' presentation of his own method follows his critique of the kalam argument from creation for the existence of the deity, it should now be clear that the "creation lemma" of his own argument does not employ the kalam notion of creation, nor is it the Creator of the Quran or Torah.²⁰ Instead, the Creator is the Abrahamic particularizer who is, at the same time, the being necessarily existent in virtue of its own essence.

Second, because Maimonides explicitly distinguishes his own position from that of the philosophers (as well as from that of the kalam), it is clear that, whatever turns out to be the relation between (A), (B), and (C) and 2:24, there is no reason to think that there is a knot tied from 2:24 and 2:1, in particular, the first speculation for a first mover. In other words, it is completely implausible to think that the "proof from (the revolution of) the heaven" referred to in (A), (B), and (C), is any of the speculations of 2:1 and, in particular, the first argument for a first mover.

What, then, is the "proof from (the revolution of) the heaven" referred to in (A), (B), and (C)? I propose that it is nothing but the constructive dilemma sketched in 1:72 and spelled out in 2:2. In 1:71 Maimonides repeatedly refers to the constructive dilemma as a "method of demonstration about which there can be no doubt" (p. 180), a "method [by which] the demonstration becomes valid and perfect certainty is obtained" (p. 181), a "perfect" demonstration (p. 182), and "a demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any respect" (*ibid.*). Given this praise, what proof other than the constructive dilemma could he be referring to as the "greatest proof" in (A)? And it is precisely because he wants to leave open both lemmas in the proof that he uses the deliberately vague phrase "the heaven" in

(A)–(C).²¹ But this still leaves us with the question whether Maimonides' endorsement of the constructive dilemma proof is incompatible with the claim made in 2:24 that the inference does not yield a conclusion that counts as knowledge. I now turn to that question.

According to the received (Arabic) text of 2:24—and Ibn Tibbon's proposed emended text—there are two inferences in question: one inference (presumably from the appearances or phenomena) *to* "the heaven" and one inference *from* "the heaven" to the existence of its mover. According to the received text, Maimonides concludes that the conclusion of the second inference, the existence of the mover, is knowledge that cannot be attained by the human intellect.²² But if those inferences are valid, and indeed if the second inference is the constructive dilemma which Maimonides calls "valid," "perfect," "certain," and indisputable, why doesn't its conclusion count as knowledge? What is missing that disqualifies it as human knowledge? To answer this question, we need to know more about Maimonides' standard for knowledge and why the inferences fail to meet that

¹⁹ This, of course, is further support for my own proposal that particularization does deny causation, but only knowledge of it.

²⁰ Compare Harvey, "Maimonides' First Commandment," p. 153; Kraemer, "How (Not) to Read," p. 17.

²¹ For further discussion, see Stern, "Growth of Knowledge" and "Maimonides' Demonstrations." In those papers, however, I mistakenly identify the "inference" in question with the philosophers' first speculation in 2:1 for a first mover; at the time I did not sufficiently appreciate Maimonides' sharp distinction between the philosophers' demonstrative methods and his own.

²² This claim should true even on the reading, according to which knowledge is explicitly denied of the heaven(s). Surely, if we cannot have knowledge of the heavens, then we cannot have knowledge of the existence of its mover. This again would tie the knot.

standard. For that, let us return to the context of our passage in 2:24.

Guide 2:24 is a chapter devoted to various incompatibilities between Ptolemaic astronomy and Aristotelian celestial physics by means of which Maimonides motivates what he calls “the true perplexity”: various epistemic implications that challenge Aristotelian celestial physics. Toward the end of the chapter, and immediately preceding our problematic passage, Maimonides concludes that “regarding all that is in the heavens, man grasps nothing but a small measure of what is mathematical” (2:24, p. 326). Instead

(D) 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 of which he himself is a part. This is the truth.

Next follows our problematic passage:

(E) 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.

Following which Maimonides continues:

(F) Let us then stop at a point that is within our capacity, and let us give over the things that cannot be grasped by reasoning

(*qiyās*) to him who was reached by the mighty divine overflow so that it could be fittingly said of him: “With him do I speak mouth to mouth” (Num. 12:8). That is the end of what I have to say about this question. 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. ... (2:24: 327)

Connecting these three passages, the “points starting from which conclusions may be drawn about the heavens” to which humans cannot “accede” (in the first sentence of (E)) are identical to what (in (D)) “the deity alone fully knows,” i.e., “the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens.” These are also what (in (F)) are identified as “the true reality” “that cannot be grasped by reasoning” but that someone else might reveal through a “demonstration.” These claims are, I propose, the key to what is missing from Maimonides’ constructive dilemma that excludes it as knowledge even though it is “the greatest proof.” What is missing is what distinguishes two classic kinds of Aristotelian demonstrations.

According to Aristotle, the premises of a full, strict Aristotelian demonstration are certainly and/or necessarily true, primary and nondemonstrable (e.g., definitions), immediate, better known than and prior to their conclusions, and the “causes” of their conclusions.²³ What this last causal condition says is that a demonstration in the full sense not only establishes the truth of its conclusion; it also furnishes an *explanation* of the demonstrated proposition inasmuch as the middle term of the deduction is a cause of the conclusion. Full-fledged demonstrations of this kind, from actual causes to effects, both establish the fact *that* and explain *why* the conclusion is true. In Aristotle’s language, they are “demonstrations of the reason why”

²³ *Post. An.* 71^b21–23.

(*to diotti*); in scholastic terminology, they are demonstrations *propter quid*. In contrast, syllogistic deductions of the second kind argue from effects to the existence of possible causes; they merely establish *that* the conclusion is true, knowledge of the fact (*to hoti*), not *why* it is. Deductions of this kind are, in scholastic terminology, demonstrations *quia* (“demonstrations of the fact”).

This distinction was developed in various directions by Aristotle’s successors. For Alexander of Aphrodisias only demonstrations from causes deserve to be called demonstrations.²⁴ Avicenna holds a similar view; hence, he argues that because it is plainly impossible to give causes for the necessarily existent being in virtue of itself, no argument for its existence will be a demonstration (*burhān*), only a proof (*dalil*).²⁵ Aquinas, on the other hand, held that demonstrations *quia*, from effects, are demonstrations.²⁶

Maimonides seems to follow Avicenna rather than the tradition followed by Aquinas. But, unfortunately, his use of the term “demonstration” (*burhān*) is not a reliable guide to the kind of proof in question in a given context. As Samuel Ibn Tibbon already noted, Maimonides uses the term *burhān* in multiple, stronger and weaker, senses. Ibn Tibbon accordingly translates *burhān* as *mofet*, and *dalil* (the Arabic term used for a weaker kind of proof or indication) as *re’ayah*. But in his glossary (*Peruś ha-millot ha-zarot*) to his Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, he writes: “The proofs [*re’ayot*] about things are of two types: strong proof about whose truth there is no doubt and proof lower than it with respect to its truth. I reserved the name *mofet* (demonstration) for the strong proof ... and the other I gave the generic name *re’ayah*. But sometimes the second kind of [weaker] proof is called *mofet* (demonstration) by way of transfer (*ha’avarah*) or extension (*harhavah*)”—i.e., loosely.²⁷ It should be acknowledged that Maimonides himself nowhere explicitly draws the *propter quid/quia* distinction, but the distinction was so standard in Aristotelian logic and epistemology that it is impossible to believe that Maimonides did

not know and employ it. In their writings on the *Guide*, Ibn Tibbon and Moses of Narbonne use the Hebrew terms *mofet hoteḳ* and *mofet re’ayah* to mark this distinction.²⁸

To return now to our passage, both the inference *to* the motion of the heaven—either to its eternity or to the different velocities and directions of the spheres—from the observable appearances of the stars and the inference *from* the motion of the heaven to the existence of the deity, whether He is a mover or a purposer/particularizer, are inferences *quia*, from effects. Therefore, even if they are indubitable and indisputable, at most they establish *that* the deity exists; they do not also *explain* their conclusions and in particular the existence of

²⁴ Alexander of Aphrodisias (*On Aristotle’s Metaphysics 1*, trans. W. E. Dooley [Ithaca, N.Y., 1989]) flatly states that “there is no demonstration through what is posterior” (13:30, p. 34). For further discussion, see: Pines, “Translator’s Introduction,” p. lxix; Herbert Davidson, *Proofs for the Eternity, Creation, and the Existence of God in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 298–99 and references therein. A classic source is *Liber de Causis*, trans. Dennis J. Brand (Milwaukee, 1984), 5:57–63, pp. 24–25.

²⁵ Avicenna, ‘*Uyun al-masa’il*, ed. M. Cruz Hernández, *Archives d’Histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Age* 25–26 (1950–51): 303–23; repr. and trans. in George Hourani, “Ibn Sina on Necessary and Possible Existence,” *Philosophical Forum* 4 (1972): 74–86, on p. 76.

²⁶ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 2, 2.

²⁷ Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Peruś ha-millot ha-zarot*, in *Sefer Moreh ha-nevuḳim*, ed. Y. Even-Shemuel (Jerusalem, 1987).

²⁸ *Mofet hoteḳ* translates the Arabic *burhān qat’i*, literally a “cutting” (i.e., decisive or, as Pines translates [e.g., 1:71, p. 180], “cogent”) demonstration. A *mofet re’ayah* is a nondemonstrative syllogism *quia* which argues from posterior effects. For detailed discussion of the distinction and terminology, see Stern, “Maimonides’ Demonstrations” and “Growth of Knowledge.”

the deity.²⁹ In order to *explain* the conclusion that the deity exists, the premises of the inference would have to contain “the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens.” But only the deity knows this; no human does. And, as Aristotle says, without a cause, there is no explanation and, without an explanation, no understanding; hence, no scientific knowledge.

In sum, the inference in question—the constructive dilemma—may be “the greatest proof” there is of the existence of the deity, i.e., the best that humans can do, the proof no better than which is known by us. It may be a proof that is beyond disagreement and doubt, one that is absolutely certain, and, because its two lemmas are exhaustive, even necessary. But it is not the stuff of scientific knowledge (*episteme*), a demonstration *propter quid*, because it lacks an explanation that would yield understanding. It is for this reason that Maimonides states (according to the received text of 2:24) that “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.” What is demonstrated from effects is not demonstrated according to the standard required for knowledge, i.e., scientific knowledge—even if it is indubitable, certain, indisputable, and necessary!

Nonetheless, Maimonides leaves open the possibility “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,” i.e., a demonstration *propter quid*. To borrow Professor Kraemer’s closing sentence, “there should be no illusion of finality to anything we say”—or, I would add, that we think we either know or do not know. What Maimonides emphasizes is a limitation due to our capacity for reasoning (*qiyās*), i.e., inference including demonstration. This he contrasts both with the way in which God “knows” the true reality and explanation of the motions of the spheres and with Moses’ purely intellectual apprehension alluded to in the proof text Numbers 12:8.³⁰ Maimonides never states that the knowledge in question is humanly impossible.³¹ The general epistemic

moral to be drawn from this passage is that there are certain truths—e.g., the existence of the deity—for which we do possess subjectively certain—indisputable, indubitable, even necessary—grounds even though we lack for them the kind of explanatory understanding that is necessary for scientific knowledge. But if the ideal of human intellectual perfection—the kind of fully actualized intellect that could engage in union or conjunction with the Active Intellect—requires scientific knowledge of all truths, then that ideal remains to be realized.

If this note is on the right track, there never was a knot that needs to be untied in Maimonides’ statements in *Guide* 2:24 and (A)–(C), notwithstanding the concerns of Ibn Tibbon and contemporary scholars. Close analysis shows that there is no logical incompatibility among these passages. Professor Kraemer emphasizes that we are at great risk if we fail to employ the methods of the historian and philologist in the interpretation of Maimonides. We run the same danger if we do not also closely attend to rigorous analysis of his arguments and distinctions.³²

²⁹ See the Introduction to Part III (p. 416), where Maimonides allows that some things may be “indubitable” even though “it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended”—i.e., one might find some purported truth to be indubitable but mistaken.

³⁰ According to *Guide* 2:25 (p. 403) and *Mishneh Torah Yesodei ha-Torah* VII, 6, Moses engaged in apprehension purely by way of his intellect, without the intermediation of the imagination. Presumably this is the direct apprehension by *nous* of first principles, definitions, and essences.

³¹ On the distinction between limitations on the human intellect and the impossibility of certain kinds of knowledge of God, see Stern, “Growth of Knowledge,” “Maimonides’ Demonstrations,” “Maimonides’ Epistemology,” and *Matter and Form*.

³² I want to thank Herbert Davidson, Gad Freudenthal, Warren Zev Harvey, Y. Tzvi Langermann, Charles Manekin, and Kenneth Seeskin for discussion of and/or comments on an earlier draft of this note.

