

GUIDE 2:12 HOW DOES DIVINE EMANATION WORK?

“The time has come to define precisely what this *emanation* is...Through the true definition of this concept of *shefa* the barrier will fall that blocked the philosophers from attaining knowledge of the truth—that the world was created, as our Torah affirms, and not eternal as the philosophers claimed.” (R. Even-Shmuel, *Commentary to Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed* 2:11, III:160, my trans.)

Overview: How Do Things Come to Be?

Nothing causes itself. Every new thing in our world has a cause, which is either corporeal or incorporeal.

As we survey those things, we can tell one from another by its *form*. The cup before me is different from my other cups, yet I know it is a cup, not a glass. All cups, no matter their differences, share in the form of “cup-ness.” Those cups will change over time, but their incorporeal form is eternal.

There are either *direct* or *indirect* causes for physical changes. For example, when my hammer drives a nail *directly* into wood, the hammer does the work. But when I use a steel punch with the hammer to drive the nail precisely, the hammer is the *indirect* cause of the action.

These actions in our physical world follow the rules of space, time, and motion. Most cause *accidental changes*—alterations of existing substances, not new creations.

Physical changes are usually gradual. But as changes accumulate, we sometimes notice a qualitative change. A new substance comes to be. This is *formal change*. This chapter studies the *action of formal change*.

Why don’t new substances appear at every moment? The answer is that their underlying material composition has not yet changed sufficiently to receive a new form.

For example, a clump of earth will not sprout grass until its mix of dirt, seeds, water, and rotting matter is ready. When it is ready the grass grows. This is a formal change.

Where did this new form come from? It could not have come from the substance itself. Changes in the elemental mix do not create a new form, because forms are eternal and unchanging. Matter does not give the substance a new form. Only another form, a *form-giver*, can create a new form to replace an old one. That is because only an incorporeal thing can produce another incorporeal thing.

But where do those form-givers come from? Each form-giver must be brought into being by yet another form-giver higher in the causal chain.

This causal chain cannot extend infinitely. That is because *there can be no infinite magnitude or series*.

At the top of each causal chain is an *absolute* existence—the necessary being that ensures that all the other contingent beings exist. This is God, the cause and guarantor of their existence.

Thus, we see that meditation on these daily changes led us, step by step, to the recognition of the divine.

What can we call this process of change? To answer this, we need to mark its features. We see that the form-givers act *constantly* and *boundlessly*, unfettered by *time* or *space*.

To make this concept of divine change action easier to grasp, the Torah uses the metaphor of flowing water. The flow of a fountain is constant and unbounded, suggesting the continuous emanation of the divine forces of change. We call the process *shefa*, a word that can mean “flow” or “emanation.”

Metaphors have their limits. The divine flow is not water, and its Source is not a fountain. The “flow” is not physical at all.

We must not confuse imagination’s metaphoric productions with reality. The imagination only produces images. Maimonides called its unchecked pursuit the *yetzer ha-ra*, the evil inclination. Unbridled imagination can lead to thinking that the angels and other forces are gods.

The Bible never mistakes metaphor for reality. The Psalmist says, “With You is the fountain of life, in Your light we see light.” This “source” is obviously not a waterspout, nor is this a “light” that we can see.

1. THE NEWNESS OF EVERYTHING IN OUR WORLD

“IT is clear that whenever a thing is *created* an *efficient cause* must exist for the production of the thing *that has not existed previously*.”

(Guide 2:12, R. Friedlander trans., but he wrote “produced,” which I changed to “created.” All translations from the Guide are his unless otherwise identified. *Italics* throughout are added. “Created” is *m'khudash*; Judeo-Arabic-‘חֲדָשׁ, حدث , *newly originated*. “Efficient cause” is *gorem poel*, or *siba poelet*, see R. Kafih note *ad loc.*, J.A.-פלה סבב.)

Maimonides opened the chapter by insisting that there is something uniquely new about everything created in our world. In our modern scientific view of nature we miss this sense of wonder.

Hebrew translators correctly used *m'khudash* for “*created*.” English translators and some commentators preferred “generated” over “created.” Rabbi Friedlander used “*produced*...” which I altered to “*created*...” to match Maimonides’ original Judeo-Arabic term.

R. Even-Shmuel’s modern Hebrew commentary highlighted this sensitivity. He wrote this jagged paraphrase: “It is clear that whenever a thing is *generated* (*‘created’*)...” He clearly preferred the term “generated” but kept “created” *in parentheses*.

[“*barur ha-davar sh'kol ma sh'nithavah* (*‘m'khudash’*)...” Others also preferred indirect terms: Shlomo Pines says “produced,” while Goodman has “whatever comes to be”].

This sensitivity reflects the clash of Jewish *ex nihilo creation* with the Aristotelian hypothesis of *eternalism*, as well as with the Platonic idea that God eternally *generates* things from preexistent matter.

Even many creationists prefer to call the emergence of natural things *generation* rather than *creation*. Maimonides, however, is clear. *M'khudash*/‘חֲדָשׁ is, in his words, “The thing that has not existed previously.” He chose the term “created” to preserve our wonder at the appearance of the new form.

II. THE NEWNESS OF EVERYTHING LEADS US TO THEIR ULTIMATE AUTHOR

The wonder of nature. In our experience we have seen that changes in substances accumulate, and then a new substance appears. But even marginal changes reveal details *not seen before*.

We can explain some natural changes in a thing's composition, but we struggle to explain how the new comes from the old.

Still, all changes must have a cause. Nothing generates itself. Maimonides wrote "Whenever a thing is *created an efficient cause* must exist..." This *efficient cause* is the *last* in the chain of causes.

Maimonides introduced a distinction among those efficient causes: "This immediate *efficient cause* is either corporeal or incorporeal."

But even in the case of purely physical causes there are *formal* complications:

"A body, however, does not act through being a body; rather does it accomplish a particular act through being a *particular* body. I mean through its *form*." (Pines trans., p. 277)

He meant that even a *physical* change-agent is *specified* by its incorporeal form. Only by its *form* can we tell one substance from another. The hammer works because it is a hammer, not a hamster.

All matter is alike: it is uniform and inert. It cannot change anything. Form makes it a substance. A substance acts because it is a *specific* kind of substance. Form is the incorporeal principle of that agent's action.

[**Efficient Cause:** Aristotle's four causes are the *efficient* cause, the *material* cause, the *formal* cause, and the *final* cause or *purpose*. "**Corporeal or incorporeal**": Pines: 'a body or not a body,' R. Kafih: *guf o sh'aino guf*].

Causal Chains. That change-agent leads us to contemplate its ultimate creator, God. Here is why.

Whether the change-agent is a body or a form, it must have come from somewhere.

Maimonides insists that the agent that *created* the *created* thing was also *created*. This is a *causal chain*.

"This proximate agent, which *produces* ... the thing that is *produced* ..., may itself also be *produced* This, however, cannot go on to infinity."

(Pines trans. 277, *oto ha-poel ha-karov ha-m'khadesh et ha-davar ha-m'khudash, yesh sh'gam hu m'khudash*. Note in the passage the *three* italicized repetitions of what Pines called "produced," literally, *created*).

"The series of causes for a certain product must necessarily conclude with a First Cause, which is the true cause of that product, and whose existence is not due to another cause." (R. Friedlander trans.)

We have to ask, what change-agent created the prior change-agent? This is a classic *third-man* problem, i.e., there could always be another "third man" higher in the chain. The problem is one of infinite regress.

Maimonides replied that this causal chain cannot go on infinitely. He maintained there can be no real infinite series, either of bodies or of forms. As R. Shem Tov (15th C.) commented, "For every *first*, there must be a *last* – you must eventually arrive at the uncreated Creator of all causal chains," God.

We do see new things in our world. To explain where those new things came from we ascend the ladder of their proximate and remote causes. But we always arrive at their First Cause—the one *uncaused* cause.

God is the most remote indirect cause of that new thing we see. Maimonides will show that we can also correctly call Him its *efficient cause*, despite those many intervening intermediate change-agents.

(**Third man problem:** Plato, *Parmenides* 132a-b; Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 990b17, 1079a13, 1039a2-19; *Sophistic Refutations* 178b36 ff. **No real infinite series:** See Maimonides' *Infinity Propositions*, Propositions I-III, in *Guide 2:Introduction*. See also my chapter-essay on that chapter, on *Guide* 73-74, and especially 1:69, including Peter Kreeft's arguments supporting the ancient axiom that *an infinite cannot be traversed*, especially his "Book of Existence" argument. **R. Shem Tov:** *sh'im lo yimtz'a rishon, lo yematza akharon, im khen ee efshar m'bilti sh'nagia l'mekhudash kadmon bilti m'khudash hu asher khadsho.*)

III. WHY NOW?

"The question remains: *Why has this thing been produced now and not long before, since the cause has always been in existence?*"

We can trace the creation of a new thing to the eternal Creator. But that forces us to consider the question of *time*. If God exists always, why didn't He create this new thing before now?

The "Why now?" question is a double-edged challenge.

At the highest level, one intentionally avoided by Maimonides here (to be revisited in later chapters), the Aristotelian Eternalists threw down this challenge to religion: If God created the universe *from nothing* at some moment, as for instance, at 1:00 p.m. on Sunday, why didn't He create it at noon?

The argument is a *reductio ad absurdum*, designed to reduce the Creationist position to absurdity.

Maimonides could easily avoid that absurdity using Aristotle's own logic. Aristotle had defined *time* as the *number of the motion of a physical thing from here to there* (*Physics*, 4:11:219b1-2). But *with* God there are no physical things in motion; therefore, there can be *no time*. The Aristotelians must therefore explain why God, untouched by the space-time-motion continuum, must conform to its rules.

At our level, however, Maimonides approved the philosophers' answer to the "Why now" question:

"Now of necessity there can be no doubt that the *impossibility* [*meniat*, lit.: *impediment*] that the act ... could come about [previously] ... is due either: (1) to the absence of a *certain relation* [*yakhas m'suyam*] between the agent and the object of the action — if the agent *is a body* — or, (2) to the absence of the requisite *preparation* of matter — if the agent is *not a body*."

(*cf.* Prop. XVIII. Numbering supplied throughout.)

In 1) above, if the change-agent is *physical* the impediment to change was the absence of a "certain relationship" between the cause and its object. Maimonides was vague, but each time he used that phrase in this chapter, he had in mind a *proximity relation*. The change-agent was too far away to change the object.

Thus, if I can't nail boards it's because my neighbor has my hammer. As soon as I retrieve it, I can fasten them, but not the *moment before*. Physical change is impeded when the efficient cause is too far away.

In (2) above, however, if the change-agent is *incorporeal*, the impediment to change is that the old substance did not have the "requisite preparation" (*atud ha-khomer*). What he meant was that its *elemental composition* was not yet *disposed* to accept the new form. In the *moment after* the requisite mix (*mezeg*) has been reached, the change can take place, but not the *moment before*.

As with grass sprouting, there had been inert soil, which was a mixture of dirt, rotten vegetation, and seeds. Once the soil mix is sufficiently prepared, the grass appears.

Something wonderful but hard to explain occurs during the emergence of the new substance.

The grass comes from a causal chain that began with the uncreated Creator, God, who is the *sufficient reason* for the existence of all *contingent beings* in this great chain of being. (See Props. XIX and XX and Guide 2:10).

IV. TWO EXAMPLES OF PHYSICAL CHANGE AT A DISTANCE

To illustrate what he meant by *indirect* change, Maimonides proposed two examples of *change at a distance*. These involved the fundamental processes of thermodynamics and electromagnetism.

“For example, 1) a body that has been heated has either (a) been in *contact* with fire, or (b) the air that surrounds the body has been heated by the fire and has *communicated* the heat to the body, in which case the immediate cause of the heat in this body is the corporeal substance of the heated air. [Similarly,] 2) *a magnet* attracts iron from a distance through *a certain force communicated* [Pines: “spreading out”: *ha-mitpashat* / תַּנְבַּחַת] *to the air* around the iron. The magnet does therefore not act at all distances, just as fire does not act at every distance, but only as long as the air between the fire and the object is affected by the fire. When the air is no longer affected by the fire beneath a piece of wax, the wax does not melt. *The same is the case* [*kakh ha-matzav*] with magnetism. When an object that has previously not been warm has now become warm, the cause of its heat must now have been *created*: (1a) either some fire has been produced, or (1b) the distance of the fire from the object has been changed, and the altered relation between the fire and the object is the cause now created. In a similar manner, we find the causes of all changes in the Universe to be changes in the *combination of the elements* that act upon each other when one body *approaches* another or separates from it.”

The case of the fire and of the magnet involve both direct and indirect change. In the indirect case, where there is a *body of air* contiguous to the fire and the magnet, Maimonides treats the air as the intermediary agent producing the change. He said, “The same is the case with magnetism,” *ken ha-inyan b'ma sh'yimshokh*, confirming the parallel. Thus, even though it looked like the magnet attracted iron without intermediaries, Maimonides asserted that the air functioned as the intermediary just as in the case of fire.

He purposely did not explain *how* the air changes the wax and the iron. He chose to remain vague, stating only that there is a force “spreading out” in the air.

Maimonides wisely kept to description, not explanation. This spared him from having to anticipate what the scientific explanation of thermodynamic and electromagnetic processes would turn out to be. It is a key point: religious thinkers should avoid yoking divine action to the changing paradigms of science.

He tells us that physical action *dissipates over distance*. When the change-agent gets *beyond a certain effective area*, this force spreading out in the air no longer reaches the object to be changed. When the wax cooled because it was no longer heated by the column of air beneath it, the column of air was too large. It was too far to melt the wax. Similarly, “The magnet does therefore not act at all distances.”

The case of magnetic attraction and the melting wax are the same because they show that distance always limits the reach of *physical* change. That will not be true in formal change.

[Did Maimonides mean by “a force spreading through the air” a *force-field of form* (R. Even-Shmuel, R. Kafih) or *atoms* (Harry A. Wolfson)? Wolfson, in his early *Crescas* book, was then too bound to his atomistic interpretation of the always vague R. Crescas, here projecting it on Maimonides, though Maimonides constantly opposed atomism (see *Crescas' Critique*, pp. 563-564 (compl, 1918, publ. 1929, Harvard. See my essay “*Is the Universe One or Many?* (With a brief review of *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, by

Harry A. Wolfson),” https://www.maimonides-guide.com/files/ugd/a8eec7_53041656364548c48d81489ff9aba620.pdf. Wolfson claimed that atomism was “also followed by Maimonides.” For the correct view, see R. Even-Shmuel 3:164 note 3, and R. Kafih, note 9].

V. EVEN INDIRECT CHANGE IS DIVINE

“All this is in accordance with the teachings of *natural science*....In *physics*, it has been shown that a body in acting upon another body must either directly be in *contact*, or indirectly, through the medium of other bodies.”

[The first *italicized* formulation,— *ha-iyun ha-tivi* (J.A.: אלנט'ר אלטביעי) refers to the investigation of nature, which is a meditation. The second refers to Aristotelian natural science, *madai ha-teva* (J.A.: אלעלם אלטביעי), as in Aristotle’s works on the subject, incl. the *Physics*, and *On Generation and Corruption*, etc., as well as the works of his commentators. The third italicized term “contact” is *b'hafgasho* (J.A.: ילקי) i.e., more generally, the *encounter* with the other body.]

Having established that natural physical change in our world requires a *change-agent*, we now ask how this works. How does the change-agent change things? The answer is that there must be *contact* or *encounter*. This can occur *directly*, or it can happen *indirectly*, when that change-agent acts upon one or more other intermediaries in the causal chain. What is God’s role in the change?

We ascribe indirect change to God. God is the *efficient* cause of physical and formal change. Here is why.

Even in indirect physical change with multiple intermediaries, the will of God dominates the causal chain to such an extent that we correctly ascribe all those changes to Him as *efficient cause*.

“God, being incorporeal, and everything *being the work of Him as the efficient cause*, we say that the Universe has been created by the Divine [emanation], and that *all changes in the Universe emanate from Him*.” (v'nit'emet sh'ha-kol paalo...ne'emar ki ha-olam m'shefa ha-shem, v'sh'hu hashpia alav kol ma sh'yitkhadash bo...).

Maimonides meant that the intermediaries can be ignored when we assign responsibility for the result of the causal chain. He explained this in Guide 1:69, using *letters* for the members of the causal chain.

“If the letter *aleph* be moved by *bet*, *bet* by *gimel*, *gimel* by *dalet*, and *dalet* by *hei* [...A, B, G, D, H, – א, ב, ג, ד, ה – the correct Hebrew alphabetical order] –and as the series does not extend to infinity, let us stop at *hei* – there is no doubt that the *hei* moves the letters *aleph*, *bet*, *gimel*, and *dalet*, and we say correctly that the *aleph* is moved by *hei*. In that sense, everything occurring in the universe, although directly produced by certain nearer causes, is *ascribed* (*mityakheset*) to the Creator...”

He explained his idea further in Guide 2:1, in the Second Proof of God’s existence.

“Aristotle continues thus: We notice many objects consisting of a motor and a *motum* [i.e., the thing moved], that is, objects which set other things in motion, and whilst doing so are themselves set in motion by other things; such is clearly the case *as regards all the middle members of a series of things in motion*. We also see a thing that is moved, but does not itself move anything, viz., *the last member of the series*: consequently, a motor must exist without being at the same time a *motum* [moved], and that is the Prime Motor, which not being subject to motion, is indivisible, incorporeal, and independent of time, as has been shown in the preceding argument.”

I explained this complicated statement in my chapter-essay to Guide 2:1:

“That causal chain has three components: a) the First Mover, b) the intermediate instrumental movers, and c) the last moved thing. The intermediate instrumental movers share a *necessary reciprocal connection*, which cannot be disentangled. That is because the intermediate mover is “moved while it moves” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072a 24-25). But the Prime Mover and the last moved thing are not instrumentalities of motion. They have *no* necessary reciprocal connection.



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“An example of the *necessary relation of the intermediate movers* is the executive toy known as the Newton’s Cradle. Five steel balls hang suspended, each touching the other. Pull back ball 1 so that it hits ball 2. Balls 2, 3, and 4 remain *unmoved*, but ball 5 swings out. Since this is a pendulum, it will swing back, hit ball 4, and repeat the action in the other direction. The three intermediate balls are intermediate instrumental movers that maintain a *necessary reciprocal connection*.

“The example aptly illustrates the role of the intermediaries, but *not* the First and last members, which we explain as follows.

“Since the *last object* moved had been unmoving, independent, and separate from the composite chain of intermediate movers, then the *other* non-moving component must be separate from the composite of intermediary movers. We know that there must be a *First Mover* because *no causal chain could be infinite* (Guide 2: Introduction, Prop. II). Since the last thing moved starts out *unmoved* and exists outside the *composite* of the motion of the causal chain, the First must also be *unmoved*, though it can inspire the motion of other things. It is the *prime unmoved mover*, God.

“Since there is this final moved object which is not a component of the chain, it makes sense that the First Mover would not be a component either. Both exist outside of the composite because neither is an instrument of motion.”

Before the process of change began, neither the First nor the last was in motion, but even after the change, the First remains unchanged. If there is a last, there must be a First, and if there is a First, there must be a last. The last and the First have a different ontological status than the intermediaries.

Maimonides did not use the example of the “Newton’s cradle,” but he used the alphabet to similar effect. He could overlook the middle members of even lengthy causal chains specifically because of their *reciprocal interdependence*, and *attribute* all their action directly to God. He called God not just the indirect cause but the “*efficient cause*” of everything caused by the causal chain, no matter how long it was.

Maimonides wrote “Everything ...*being the work of Him as the efficient cause*,” ascribing to God the role of the efficient cause and change-agent of every individual thing in our universe. For the Islamic Kalām theologians, God was the miraculous creator of each thing in the universe (see Guide 1:71-76). Maimonides, unlike the Kalām, accomplished their desired result without destroying *nature*.

In the last chapter of Volume II of the Guide, he summarized the results of his doctrine:

“IT is clear that everything produced must have an immediate cause which produced it; that cause had again a cause, and so on, till the First Cause, viz., the will and decree of God is reached. The prophets therefore omit sometimes the intermediate causes and ascribe (*u’myakhasim*) the production of an individual thing directly to God, saying that God has made it. This method is well known, and we,

as well as others of those who seek the truth, have explained it; it is the belief of our co-religionists.”
(Guide 2:48)

What Does This Have to Do with the Creation of the World? The foregoing was Maimonides’ *Preface* to his explanation of *emanation*. He insisted here that his physics aligned with the then-current natural science of Aristotle and his successors.

“All this is in accordance with the teachings of natural science. We ignore, for the present, the question whether to assume the Eternity of the Universe or Creation *ex nihilo*. We do not intend to discuss the question here.”

Since this account asserted the existence of the Creator of this world of causal chains, the question of the *origin* of that world naturally arose.

Maimonides postponed this question, as he had for the last eleven chapters of the Guide. Instead, he tried to show how far he could pursue Aristotelian philosophic inquiry before debating its Eternalism.

When he said that “We do not intend to discuss the question here,” he engaged in sly subterfuge since he did, in fact, design this chapter to undermine the philosophers’ Eternalism. They had ignored the logical results of their own physical science. They expected God to obey the laws of time. But why must God, who *transcends* time, conform to its rules? How could they demand that God answer the “Why now” question?

Thus, despite Maimonides’ insistence that he did not “discuss” creation here, these mutually agreed natural science premises had already resolved a key challenge in that debate, the “Why Now” provocation.

The Moment of Change. But what happens when substantial change occurs, between the moment before and the moment after? Maimonides wrote, significantly:

“And so, we find that the cause of any change in existence that has changed will have as its cause change in the *elemental composition*, i.e., the interaction of these elemental bodies acting upon each other and reacting to each other, i.e., by the approach and retreat of these bodies. But changes that are not produced by that composition, formal changes, require a change-agent, i.e., the incorporeal form-giver, since only an incorporeal form changes form.” (My trans.)

R. Even-Shmuel commented, “Every new mixture produces a new substance,” *kol mezega hadasha molida guf hadash*.

The ensemble of physical changes led to a moment when the substance became *disposed* to substantial change. The new *suddenly* appears.

It is “creation” because *something that was not there before is there now*. R. Even-Shmuel said that every new mixture produces a new substance. But this is not precisely true. The *mixture* does not create a new substance. Since “only form changes form,” *poel ha-tzura tzura*, the incorporeal change-agent, *not the mixture*, caused the formal change. The mixture merely disposed the substance to accept the new form.

The point is that no change in the state of matter affects form. No mixture, no variation, and no alteration can alter the form. The form either *is* or *is not*. Matter always changes: form is eternal and unchangeable. Whatever *kind* of cup is before me, I always know I am looking at a cup, not a saucer. The *form* is more enduringly real than the particular transient cup on the table.

VI. WHAT IS FORMAL CHANGE?

“There are, however, changes which are not connected with the combination (*mezegot*) of the elements, but concern *only* the forms of the things; they require likewise an *efficient cause*: there must exist a force, [I mean the form-giver, *k'lomar noten ha-tzura*] that produces the various forms. This cause is incorporeal, for *that which produces form must itself be form....* The following may, in addition, serve to illustrate it: All combinations of the elements are subject to increase and decrease, and this change takes place gradually. It is different with forms: they do not change gradually and are therefore *without motion*: they appear and disappear [*in no time, lo b'zman*], and are consequently *not the result of the combination of corporeal elements*. This combination merely prepares matter for receiving a certain form. The efficient cause which produces the form is *indivisible* because *it is of the same kind as the thing produced*. Hence, it may be concluded that the agent that has produced a certain form, or given it to a certain substance, must itself be an [incorporeal] form.”

Introduction to Formal Change. Formal change is something we recognize, though we do not understand it. We tend to doubt the existence of change-agents that are not physical.

Shakespeare dramatically portrayed the experience of formal change. Hamlet has just killed Polonius by accident, hoping to kill King Claudius instead. He dumps the body unceremoniously at the top of the stairs. Claudius, who does not yet know that his advisor is dead, asks Hamlet where Polonius is.

“KING: Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?

HAMLET: At supper.

KING: At supper where?

HAMLET: Not where he eats, but where he is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e'en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes but to one table. That's the end.

KING: Alas, alas!

HAMLET: A man may fish with the worm that hath eat of a king and eat of the fish that hath fed of that worm.

KING: What dost thou mean by this?

HAMLET: Nothing but to show you how a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar.”

(Act 4 Scene 3)

Physical change is a process, sometimes rapid, sometimes slow. It explains the changes in a substance. But it does not explain how a new substance with a new form comes to be. It cannot explain morphological change. The process of “supper” does not entirely explain how the matter of a king becomes a maggot, the maggot becomes a worm, the worm a fish, and the fish a beggar, even though it is the same underlying matter.

The Enlightenment era's reduction of *form* to *shape* gave science extraordinary predictive power by rejecting the older view of form as the inner source of definition and purpose. Explanation shifted from inner *actuality* to external *description*, from what a thing *is* to merely what it looks like.

In classical philosophy, form was the intelligible principle which made a thing what it is. Modern science reduced this principle to mathematical structure and statistical regularity. What was understood as a thing's intrinsic *formal* activity became instead *calculable* pattern and a *probable* outcome.

Well before the quantum revolution, physics had moved toward *models* of distributions rather than the expression of interior principles. As Werner Heisenberg observed, science is about measurable relations rather than the inner being of things. In this shift, action falls within predicted ranges. The language of divine *will* gives way to the language of *prediction*—not a denial of order, but its translation to a calculus of likelihood, a kind of intellectual wager about what will occur.

(Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy*, 1958, 53-55, 78, and esp. 42–44, on the probability function describing possibilities or “*potentia*” rather than actual events. Thus, science in the quantum era rediscovers Aristotelian potentiality and actualization.)

Substantial Change Differs from Physical Change. Maimonides brilliantly depicted the suddenness of formal change, which is so unlike the gradualism of physical change.

“This also can be made clear to you through the fact that every mixture of elements is capable of receiving an increase and a decrease and is produced gradually, whereas the forms are not like this, for they are not produced gradually. Accordingly, there is *no motion in them* (*ayn tenuat behan*). They invariably are produced or pass away *in no time* (*lo b'zman*)” (Pines trans., 278)

Even rocks change as they hold on against the buffeting wind and rain. The erosion of a rock and the rise of sand on the seashore occur over stretches of *time*. Those physical changes arise through *motion*.

Accidental changes in people, plants, and even politic worms occur as *motion in time*, as the action of element upon element. These chemical and biological changes translate to either growth or dissipation.

But gradualism and elemental mix have nothing to do with forms. Physical processes change a thing’s *shape*, but its form stays the same. Old cats and young ones are still identifiably cats. Their form is either here or it is not. Time, space and, especially, *motion*, are irrelevant to the forms and to *formal change*.

How do we tell motion from change?

Every Motion is a Change, but is Every Change a Motion? The distinction between *motion* and *change* eludes most philosophers.

By “change” we mean simply that something is *now* actual which was not actual before. *Change* is the replacement of potentiality by actuality. This change can occur in many ways.

By “motion” we mean a type of change that unfolds *over time* through stages. *Motion* takes time because it is always incomplete. It is always going somewhere. It is a physical process.

Aristotle, however, defined *motion* as the *actualization of what is potential insofar as it is potential*. (Insofar as—Latin: *qua*, Gr.: ἣ).

Motion, then, is also a *type of change* since all changes are actualizations. But not all changes are motions.

[The distinction is in Aristotle’s “insofar.” Only physical things *harbor potentialities*. They are, therefore, potential *insofar* as they are potential. Forms do not qualify since they are always what they are. That is why forms are not subject to motion.]

Formal change is one of several types of change. It is *change of substance*, from one substance to another substance: the coming to be of one and the passing away of another. This is not a physical change.

Physical change, by contrast, changes the *state* of a substance, making it *ready* to assume a new form. Physical changes qualify as motions, including *Quantitative Change* (*i.e.*, growth or decrease); and *Change of Place*. All motions are changes, but only these last two changes are motions. (See Proposition IV).

Maimonides' Aristotelian Proposition V therefore defined motion: “*Every motion is change, and is the transition from potentiality to actuality.*” (*sh'kol tenua shinui v'yetzia min ha-koakh el ha-poel*).

Question: Is this Proposition *reversible*? In other words, if every motion is change, is every change a motion?

Some people thought so. The *answer*, as we have seen, is that *formal* change is not a motion: it is *change without motion*. The term “motion” cannot be applied to formal changes. The proposition is not reversible.

In our chapter, Maimonides confirmed: “Forms do not change gradually, and are, therefore, *without motion*,” (*ayn tenua behan*). He also clarified that the term “*Motion* does not apply to incorporeal beings, namely to God and to the intelligences, or to the angels.”

Conclusion: Every motion is a change, but not every change is a motion.

What causes the manifestation of a form? Maimonides had explained that there must be a *cause for any change* in our experience: What is the cause of this new form in matter?

His answer was that there must be a “form-giver.” But he refrained from giving it a name.

“Hence it is clear that the agent that produces a form — I mean to say its giver (*k'lomar noten ha-tzura*) — must of necessity be a form, namely, one that is separate (*nivdal-incorporeal*).”
(Pines trans., p. 278)

The form-giver that he had in mind was the Active Intellect, the tenth of the separate intellects in the cosmological system responsible for the changes that occur on earth. James Diamond explained the role of Active Intellect as well as anyone has:

“There remains one intellect who does not preside over a sphere but funnels all the forces of the superior intellects down into the sublunar realm — the Active Intellect. Because it is responsible for sublunar matter, form, and human rational activity (including prophecy), it is the most relevant for men. The fact that it is, as Davidson characterizes it, ‘An eternal cosmic transmitter, broadcasting an undifferentiated range of forms as well as the substratum that can receive them,’ renders it the mirror of all being for men. This angel constitutes that extra third which is the conduit between the higher elusive intellects and ultimately God [see Guide 2:6]. In its capacity as the conveyor of thought, form, and governance, by way of being the final outlet for divine overflow [emanation] to the world of man, it enhances man’s ability to glimpse into the divine realm. At the same time, it defines the limits of human thought and maintains the distance required so that any conceptualization of the deity remains free of anthropomorphic corruption.” (James Diamond, in *Maimonides on the Hermeneutics of Concealment*, 116, chapter 5, “The Seven Units of Jacob’s Ladder and Their Message.” Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes on the Intellect*, 124. Goodman translation of the Guide, 207 note 96.)

In Guide 2:6, Maimonides wrote: “All forms are the result of the influence of the Active Intellect, and the latter is the angel, the Prince of the World (*saru shel olam*), frequently mentioned by our Sages...” Maimonides discussed the Active Intellect previously in Guide 2:4. It was the Tenth Intellect emanated by God in the creation of the spheres. It completes the cosmic system. There were two types of forms that need

it for their actualization: the human mind and potential new substances on earth. Since those forms cannot actualize themselves, they require the Active Intellect to realize their existence.

The most important of these forms is our mind. There must be an agent that actualizes our *potential intellect*.

This means that though we have the *ability* to know, actual cognition requires stimulation from outside through education, through the intervention of a teacher, the absorption of ideas from a book, *etc.* By using his power of thought, which had been only a potentiality, we *actualized* our “Acquired Intellect.” There is then *conjunction* between our intellect and the form, which is its source and principle, the Active Intellect.

Similarly, the Active Intellect realizes the potentialities in material substances.

This is also how God emanates prophecy to the prophets: “In the same sense we say that He caused wisdom to emanate ... upon the prophets.”

[cf. Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, *Ysodei* 2:7. **Active intellect**: Aristotle, *De Anima* III.5, 430a10–430a25, as *nous poetikos*; Alexander of Aphrodisias (2d C. CE) *De Intellectu*, §§84–90, 106.19–107.33 (Bruns edition); Al-Farabi (10th C.), as *al-‘aql al-fa‘āl*, العقل الفعّال, in *Risāla fī al-‘Aql*, ed. Maurice Bouyges, Beirut, 1938, especially §§32–35; Avicenna (11th C.), *Kitāb al-Shifā’*: *De Anima* (*Kitāb al-Nafs*), esp. V.5, V.6; in Latin, *intellectus agens*, directly from the Arabic phrase *al-‘aql al-fa‘āl* in the translations associated with Dominicus Gundissalinus (12th C.), and in Hebrew השכל הפועל.)

The Doctrine of Unity of Mind. This form-giver is *indivisible*.

“This cause is incorporeal, for that which produces form must itself be [incorporeal] form....The efficient cause which produces the form is *indivisible*, because it *is of the same kind as the thing produced*,” *u’foel ha-tzura dvar sh’einu sovel khaluka, ki pe’ulato meminu.*

This form is *indivisible* “Because it is of the same kind as the thing produced.” This difficult formulation reflects developments in Islamic philosophy just before Maimonides’ time.

A doctrine arose in the Andalusian philosophical milieu of the twelfth century, especially in the work of Ibn Bājja (d. 1138) and, in more literary form, Ibn Ṭufayl, in his famous early 12th century philosophical fable *Hayy ibn Yaqzan* (Eng. trans. and comm. by Lenn Evan Goodman). This was the doctrine of the *unity of mind*, by which intelligible forms, minds, and souls constitute a non-numerical *unity*. Their apparent plurality is merely an assumption and a projection of our imagination, which only knows of things that are divisible.

What drove thinkers to the idea of the *unity of mind* was that divisibility, difference, and differentiation are all aspects of *numerability*. Every time you speak of a certain number of things, you really mean *physical* things, things that can be cut up. This does not describe the noetic world.

Thus, the *multiplicity* of “forms” is only something *we say*. Mind, in its pure state, perceives *formal* content as simple and non-composite. There is unity rather than numerous intermediary forms and ontic strata. Apparent differentiation comes from our habituation to the physical world.

Some commentators, like R. Even-Shmuel, R. Shem Tov, and Harry Wolfson, ignored this concept of noetic unity, positing entities between the Active Intellect and in-formed matter, including such products of medieval scholasticism as *corporeal form*, *elemental form*, and various other secondary and tertial forms. They thought that they needed those entities to explain change.

R. Even-Shmuel (v. III, 167), for example, argued that the Active Intellect created multiple forms to “connect with” material substances. But this hypothesis was unnecessary. The Active Intellect needs nothing more than its own actualizing cognition to realize everything. *It knows things to realize them.*

The tendency of those commentators to multiply intermediate formal entities risked unnecessarily reifying what should be better understood as gradations in intellectual apprehension.

Maimonides, by contrast, consistently preferred a restrained ontological framework: he acknowledged a *limited* hierarchy of separate intellects to move the cosmos. But he also admitted that there were real differences in the perfection of some human minds and souls, such that individuality would survive separation from the body. Though he admired the *unity of mind* doctrine, he never completely accepted it. He preserved both the unity of intelligible form and the genuine differentiation of perfected individuals—allowing for differences between the souls and minds of greater and lesser sages after death.

Apart from those exceptions, he resisted the unnecessary increase of mediating forms between mind and matter, including scholasticism’s scheme of formal agents below Active Intellect.

When Maimonides said that form produces form “because it is of the same kind (*min*) as the thing produced,” he meant that they are alike in that they all act in according to the same principle. We can treat them all as one. Thus, he seemed to have accepted the *unity doctrine* as applied to the world of the forms.

A rough physical analogy is the operation of DNA. DNA, considered merely as chemical mechanism, acts uniformly. The differentiating factor lies in the arrangement and coding of the alleles: that is, in the intelligible order communicated through them. But intelligence itself is incorporeal.

In formal change the Active Intellect *itself*, as *nivdal*, an entirely *separate* agent, acts in the arena of forms, *alone*. We recognize the many results of its action through the flow of new things and new aspects of things that flood our consciousness.

[**Unity of Mind.** On the Andalusian Aristotelian doctrine that perfected intellect transcends ordinary numerical plurality, see especially Ibn Bajja, *Risālat al-Ittiṣāl* and *Tadbīr al-Mutawaḥḥid*; Ibn Tufayl, *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, esp. the concluding contemplative ascent; and most explicitly Averroes, *Long Commentary on De Anima* III.5, where individuation is tied to matter, but intellect in actuality tends toward unity. The doctrine rests on the Aristotelian principle that intellect and intelligible are one in actuality, *De Anima* III.4–5, 429b30–430a25). **Corporeal form?** Maimonides never suggested that the Active Intellect needs any specially designed secondary forms. R. Even-Shmuel (1886-1976) assumed, to the contrary, that this form-giver must create secondary forms which are latent in matter to enable formal change in material substance. Rabbi Shem Tov (fl. c. 1461), at massive length, denied that an Active Intellect is needed at all. He argued that no outside form was required: “All this is vanity and utter falsehood!... Forms *do not* come from *outside*; rather, they exist in potentiality *in* what is coming-to-be,” and “These actions *do* appear at *particular* times and places, not just with anything that is ready, but on *particular* substances, produced by these *corporeal change agents* (*ha-poalim ha-gashmiim*).” His doctrine of *corporeal form* was un-Maimonidean. He rejected Maimonides’ rule that nothing creates itself, and that formal actualization is constant and non-specific in its flow. R. Shem Tov contributed to the Enlightenment project by removing the Active Intellect as a separate intellect, relocating it *into* matter as *latent structure* that only needs to be drawn out by another *material* agent. This would eliminate any external actualizer, letting matter actualize itself. This was part of the historical attack on Aristotelian causality. But R. Shem Tov did not convincingly eliminate the need for an illuminating external agent in formal changes, when a new substance replaces an old one. It is also important to note that his version of *corporeal form* differed vastly from scholasticism’s modest idea of it as precursor to elemental form.]

Divisibility. Maimonides returned to these questions as he collected *markers* to distinguish formal from physical action. How should we convey the idea of formal action to people? *The first marker is divisibility.*

Physical things increase and decrease gradually in *space* over *time* as they *move* through their existence. But this is never the case with formal change and incorporeal action, the work of God and the angels. There is no *motion* in them. They are also not subject to *time*, which Aristotle called *the number of motion*, i.e., the metric quantifying the *motion* of any physical object going *from here to there*.

Each part of that definition is an element of the time-space-motion continuum. It is a continuum because each element of that triad is *divisible*: when one element is divided, all the others divide in the same ratio. (See, Aristotle, *Physics* VI, 232b20-234a5.)

Conclusion: all physical things are divisible, but forms are not.

Divisibility for Maimonides, as for the ancients, was the single universal *mark* of matter. Any physical entity or action could potentially be divided infinitely. The “potential infinite” was one of the few kinds of infinity that Maimonides accepted. (See Kalām Proposition XI in Guide 1:73).

Maimonides also wrote that it would be “false,” i.e., absurd, to think of formal action in terms of *time* or *distance*. That is because its flow is *unbounded*, not subject to *direction* or *distance*. It is more a broadcast than a fixed ray. The Active Intellect sheds its conceptual “light” upon every part of the universe. This was his *second marker: omnipresence*.

Regarding *time*, substance will be changed any *time* its elemental composition is *ready*. The form-giver does not, so to speak, “wait” for it to accept the form. The new form is available whether the substance is or is not ready. “*No time is any better than any other time.*” This, then was his *third marker: constancy*.

(*Lo b'et ken u'b'et lo*—see R. Kafih note 24 *ad loc.* This difficult Judeo-Arabic statement, ולא פי וקה דון וקה, lit. “Not in one time except another time,” i.e., not in this time as opposed to that time. A clearer restatement would be “God does not act in a privileged moment rather than another moment”—because no such temporal distinction exists for Him).

Maimonides’ investigation thus established that the three marks of incorporeal action are its *indivisibility*, *unboundedness*, and *constancy*. They led him to the term he sought: “flow” – *emanation* – *shefa*.

VII. THE METAPHOR OF EMANATION

“Considering that the effects produced by the *separate intellect* (*ha-sekheh ha-nivdal*) are clear and manifest (*nikheret u'vrura*) in that which exists — being everything that is produced anew, but does not result solely from the mixture of elements itself— it is necessarily known that this agent does not act either through immediate contact or at some particular distance, for it is not a body. Hence, the action of the separate intellect is always designated as an *overflow* (*shefa*), being likened to a source of water that overflows in *all directions* and does not have one particular direction from which it draws while giving its bounty to others. For it springs forth from all directions and *constantly* irrigates all the directions nearby and afar. Similarly, the intellect in question may not be reached by a force coming from a certain direction ... or at one particular time rather than another. For its action is *constant*, as long as something has been prepared, so that it is receptive of the permanently existing action, which has been interpreted as an *overflow*.”

[Pines trans., 279. Friedlander instead has for the last term ‘emanation.’ Pines always translates *shefa* as “overflow,” although “flow” would have been sufficient. We approve R. Friedlander’s “emanation.” The term “separate intellect” (*ha-sekheh ha-nivdal*) means that this intellect is *separate* from matter, i.e., incorporeal.]

Since the bounty from God and His angels, the real forces in the universe, is *continuous, omnipresent, and constant*, Scripture *likened* it to the flow of water, as though from a spring or a waterspout; the flow of *shefa*.

Flow. The Bible gave us this special name for the action of “flow,” although it, too, describes our experience of the physical world. More than any other metaphor, flow, *shefa*, has those marks that bring us closer to the concept of incorporeal action. A spring of water *flows* unceasingly on all sides, capturing the notions of undivided, unbounded, and constant action.

The early Muslim philosopher (b. 850) Abu Netzer Alfarabi, in his volume *The Origin of Existence*, instead chose the metaphor of light, which, as we will see, Maimonides also used.

“The relation of the Active Intellect to man is like the relation of the sun to sight, – just as the sun lets you see light and restores sight, so the sun enables vision for one who has only potential sight. Apprehending this light, he recognizes the *sun* itself, which produced his actualized vision. Similarly, the human soul apprehends the Active Intellect. Sunlight restores to *actual* sight those things that were only *potentially* visible. Thus, vision is restored which was only potential. The relation of Active Intellect to the human soul is like this relation of light to sight.”

(Alfarabi as quoted in the *Amudei Kesef* comm. of R. Yosef Kaspi, c. 1279 – c. 1340, *ad loc.*, in my translation, from the new Zvi Goldstein edition of the Guide with six ancient commentaries, of the *Makhon Hagot v’Daat Yisrael*, 2026.)

The flow of light, like the flow of water, is constant, undivided, and unbounded, just as the action of the Active Intellect in realizing all potential forms is constant, undivided, and unbounded.

We use the term *shefa* in a different sense when we apply it to God as the *efficient cause* of everything in existence, in addition to His being the *formal* and the *final cause* of all things.

God also emanates prophecy to the minds of the prophets:

“In the same sense we say that He caused [His] wisdom to emanate ... upon the prophets.”

This flow reaches its apex in the phenomenon of prophecy. We have maintained that the highest purpose of the Guide of the Perplexed was to study prophetic illumination and train prophets. The ready application of the term *shefa* to such inspiration confirms its flexibility and usefulness.

Imagination. The prophets used metaphors to spread their vision, because the language of men cannot portray divine reality. Men cannot grasp incorporeal reality without training. The reason we find it difficult to perceive such abstract ideas is that we expect things to exist in time and place. That is why we need metaphor. But metaphors come from the imagination.

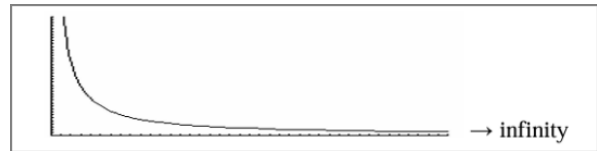
“There is no better way of describing the action of an incorporeal being than by this analogy; and no term can be found that would accurately describe it. For it is as difficult to form an idea of that *action* as to form an idea of incorporeal *being* itself. As we imagine only bodies or forces residing in bodies, so we only imagine actions possible when the agent is near, at a certain distance, and on a particular side.”

The imagination, not the intellect, largely rules our thought. Imagination governs even most intellectuals (*hem rov ha-maynim*, Guide 1:49). Some even said that only the things that they could imagine could be real.

While it is true that the incorporeal cannot be *imaged*, it is, nonetheless, real.

Maimonides' critique of the imagination targeted the anti-scientific Muslim *Kalām* theologians and their few Jewish imitators, who took imagination as their touchstone, rejecting reality if it conflicted with what they could imagine (see Guide 1:71-76). In Guide 1:73, he proved that they were wrong:

”Similarly, it has been proved, in the second chapter of the book on *Conic Sections*, that two lines, which at first are at a certain distance from each other, may approach each other in the same proportion as they are produced further, and yet would never meet, even if they were produced to infinity, although they are observed to be constantly converging. This is a fact which cannot easily be conceived, and which *does not come within the scope of imagination*. Of these two lines, one is straight, the other curved, as stated in the aforementioned book. It has consequently been proved that things which cannot be perceived or imagined, and which would *be found impossible if tested solely by imagination*, are nevertheless in real existence.”



The asymptote

[Guide 1:73. The *asymptote* of Appolonius of Perga, c. 262 - c. 190 BCE, is a “potential infinite.” Maimonides cites his famous book, the *Conic Sections* by name (*Conic Sections* 2:13, p. 53 in T.L Heath’s trans., Cambridge, 1896). His curve also aptly portrayed the Maimonidean concept of man’s relation to God. As the good soul “attains its form” by acquiring intellect, it “approaches” infinitely close to God but never touches Him.]

Maimonides, in our chapter, portrayed the grave danger in the ungoverned pursuit of the imagination.

“There are, therefore, persons who, on learning that God is incorporeal, or that He does not *approach* (*maga*, J.A.: جسمًا ג' סמא *jisma*) the object of His action, believe that He gives commands to angels, and that the latter carry them out by *approach* (lit. “contact,” *u'b'maga*, J.A.: במאמבאשרה *mubāshara*) or *direct contact* (*ha-paulot b'ofen yashir*), as is the case when we produce something. These persons thus imagine also the angels as bodies. Some of them, further, believe that God commands an action in *words* consisting, like ours, of *letters and sound*, and that thereby the action is done. All this is the work of the imagination, which is, in fact, identical with the *evil inclination* (*yetzer ha-ra*). For all our defects in speech or in character are either the direct or the indirect work of imagination.”

We should not misread this as a condemnation of the belief in angels, or a denial that God gives them commands to carry out. Everything we have seen in Maimonides' writing about angels, especially, Guide 2:6-7, shows that he did not regard the proper belief in angels as superstition.

The quoted passage was about whether incorporeal action involved divine bodily contact. Maimonides' actual Arabic terminology, *jisma* and *mubāshara*, sharpened the point. *Jisma* is philosophically more corporeal; *mubāshara* is rhetorically more scandalous. *Jisma*, physical action, implies that God is a “body”—*mubāshara* makes you imagine what bodies *do*. Shlomo Pines explicitly noted that *mubāshara* can mean both “an act accomplished through contact” and “sexual intercourse.” In the Qur'an, the same word is used for conjugal relations. (Guide 1:46, Pines' translation, n. 8; *Qur'an* 2:187).

The crux issue is bodily contact. Divine and angelic emanation, including the emanations of the Active Intellect and the Separate Intellects, all take place in the plane of thought, the noetic dimension. So long as we understand that God and his deputized emissaries do not live in this physical world, that they do not physically approach or touch the objects of change, we have not violated this understanding.

Ignorance. The drift of Maimonides' thought in the previous quotation was historical. He had, in the last chapter, identified a religiously prehistoric ignorance in which gods and angels bestrode the earth. Later, many realized that God could not be a physical body. Some enlightened individuals also recognized that the angels could not be embodied, but many did not. "These persons thus imagine also the angels as bodies."

This was a weakness in human psychology because "It is as difficult to form an idea of incorporeal action as to form an idea of [one who is separate from matter]." It was far easier to just make the angels corporeal.

In *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides explained why the pagan imagination made angels into stone images: What began as people honoring God by honoring his *emissaries* degenerated into making idols of them.

(*Mishneh Torah, Avoda Zara, 1:1. Psychology:* Friedlander trans., amended in brackets: *ki tsior pa'ulat ha-nivdal kashei meod, k'mo kushi tsior mitsiot ha-nivdal*. Compare Guide 1:49, "The angels also are not endowed with bodies, but are intellects separate from matter...But you already know that the *apprehension* that is free of matter, devoid.....of physicality completely, is very difficult for mankind." **Age of ignorance.** We discussed this historical era of idolatrous ignorance in the last chapter, using Maimonides' Arabic term, *jāhiliyya, q.v.*).

Word. At a loftier but still dangerous level, even when people understood that the angels were incorporeal, they made the "Word" of God physical, a word of consonants and vowels that people could hear.

Harry Austryn Wolfson usefully distinguished the concept of an "uncreated creative word," from a "created creative word." This builds on the concept of *Logos*, the Word of God, conceptualized by Philo Judaeus (c. 20 BCE-c. 50 CE) as the long-sought location of Plato's "forms." Philo understood the *Logos* to be the *created* creative word, not a god or an eternal partner of God, but God's *creation*, i.e., the Torah. But in the opening of the *Gospel of John*, this *word* was incarnated in flesh in the familiar Christian fashion, as the *uncreated* creative word that was "with God."

According to Wolfson, the repercussion of that move in Islam was the uncreated creative word *kun!* meaning *be!* understood as the *eternal* but nonetheless *written* Qur'an, especially in the *bi-lā kayfa* ("without asking how") literalism of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780 – 855 CE) and his followers. Wolfson cleverly termed this repercussion of Christian *incarnation* as "*inlibration*."

Thus, when Maimonides wrote: "Some of them, further, believe that God commands an action in *words* consisting, like ours, *of letters and sound*, and that thereby the action is done," he registered his disgust at making a word the physical partner of God.

(Cf. "vayehi" in Hebrew, and R. Saadia Gaon's hypothesis that sounds were pronounced in the air at creation—see his *Commentary to Sefer Yetzira, e.g.*, sec. VII: "By way of this second, tenuous, but created air, which is in the world as life is in man, the *created word* heard by Moses in the visible air has been produced along with the *Decalogue* heard by our fathers. This has been called: *The Voice of the Lord our God*, at Deut 5:23." Eng. trans. S. Thompson and D. Marson, San Francisco, 1985, p. 17, <https://www.themathesontrust.org/papers/judaism/saadia.pdf>, Hebrew at *Sefaria.com*. Maimonides' statement above was a veiled thrust at R. Saadia's "Jewish Kalām." And see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam*, Harvard, 1976, 63-64, 121, 141-147, and Ch. III on "The Koran," 235-303; on 246, where he coined "inlibration," followed by a long discussion. Also see Wolfson's *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*, 85-113, Harvard, 1979, for the full discussion of the "*uncreated creative word*," and variations on that theme.)

Astrology. Not stopping there, Maimonides pointed to another case of unbridled imagination. According to Maimonides, the emanations of the separate intellects move the cosmic spheres (Guide 2:4). Some thought this meant that the spheres controlled fate, committing the intellectual's sin of Astrology.

“The term [*shefa*/emanation] is also applied to the forces of the spheres in their effects upon the earth; and we speak of the ...[emanations/*shofaim*] of the spheres, although the spheres are corporeal, and the stars, being corporeal, only act at certain distances, i.e., at a smaller or a greater distance from the centre [of the earth], or at a definite distance from each other, a circumstance which led to Astrology [lit. “the judgments of the stars” *l'mishpatei ha-kokhavim*, i.e., *Judicial Astrology*].”

Maimonides had famously condemned all forms of astrology. *Judicial Astrology* was the worst since its horoscopic “judgments” allegedly prescribed the specific fates of men and nations. He complained that there was no scientific basis for those judgments. He scoffed at the astrologers’ vaunted charts. Why, they had even claimed that the stars foretold that Moses would fail to free the Jews from Egypt!

(Maimonides’ Opposition to Astrology. Mishneh Torah, *Teshuva* 8:2-4. The *Epistle to Yemen*, was the source for his statement about Egyptian astrologers. Also see his letter to the Provençal rabbis of Lunel, also known as the *Letter on Astrology*. Incredibly, R. Moshe Narboni, (14th C.), *ad loc.*, insisted on reading the quoted paragraph as Maimonides’ *endorsement* of Astrology!)

Good and Evil. All these follies stem from imagining that divine action is physical:

“All this is the work of the imagination, which is, in fact, identical with the *evil inclination* (*yetzer ha-ra*). For all our defects in speech or in character are either the direct or the indirect work of imagination.”

The Rabbis had divided the imagination into the “good inclination,” the *yetzer ha-tov*, and the “evil inclination,” *yetzer ha-ra*.

The imagination misleads those who do not exercise critical thought. The imagination may even tell us that good is evil and evil good (R. Even-Shmuel). Just as all perfection comes from the intellect, so all “defects in speech or in character are the direct or the indirect work of the imagination.”

The best product of the work of the good imagination is prophecy:

“In the same sense we say that He caused wisdom to emanate from Him and to come upon the prophets” (Friedlander translation)

“This term, I mean “overflow,” is sometimes also applied [by the prophets] in Hebrew to God, may He be exalted, with a view to likening Him to an overflowing spring of water, as we have mentioned..” (Pines trans., 279.)

Metaphor. The metaphor of *emanation* encapsulated the process by which divine action *recognizes* and *realizes* the potential conceptual structures of things, through its *continuous, unbounded, and constant action*.

“Hence, the action of the separate intellect is always designated as an *overflow* (*shefa*), being likened to a source of water that overflows in all directions and does not have one particular direction from which it draws while giving its bounty to others. For it springs forth from *all directions* and constantly irrigates all the directions nearby and afar....*Nor* does the force of that intellect reach that which is other than itself from one particular direction, at one particular distance, or at one particular time rather than another. For its action is *constant*, as long as something has been prepared, so that it is receptive of the permanently existing action, which has been interpreted as...*flow*.” (Pines trans., modified)

“The term ‘influence’ (flow) has been considered applicable to the Creator on account of the similarity between His actions and those of a spring. There is no better way of describing the action of an incorporeal being than by this analogy; and no term can be found that would accurately describe it.” (R. Friedlander trans.)

Nonetheless, just as electrical “current” does not really “flow,” but transfers energy in the electromagnetic fields of its circuit, so *shefa* is not a flow of water; it symbolizes the action of an immaterial cause upon a prepared recipient. It is a purely abstract concept: it is the ordered actualization of a substance by an incorporeal agent.

VIII. SCRIPTURAL SUPPORT FOR MAIMONIDES’ THEORY OF EMANATION

“This term, I mean ...*flow*, is sometimes also applied in Hebrew (*ha-lashon ha-ivri*) to God...with a view to likening Him to an overflowing spring of water, as we have mentioned.” (Pines’ trans. modified)

“As to our assertion that Scripture (*b’sifrei ha-navua*, lit.: *in the books of prophecy*) applies the notion of ‘emanation’ to God, compare ‘*They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters*’ (Jer. 2:13), *i.e.*, the Divine emanation that gives life or existence, for the two [life and existence] are undoubtedly identical. Further, ‘*For with Thee is the fountain of life...*’ (Ps. 36:10), *i.e.*, the Divine emanation that gives existence. The concluding words of this verse, ‘*...In Thy light we see light,*’ express exactly what we said, namely, that by the [emanation] of the intellect which emanates from God, we become wise, by it we are guided and enabled to comprehend the Active Intellect. Note this.” (R. Friedlander trans.)

Maimonides claimed scriptural support for his theory of emanation.

The *first and only use* of *shefa* in Torah revealed the *undetermined* character of this unique term:

“And of Zevulun he said: Rejoice, Zevulun, in thy going out, And, Issachar, in thy tents. They shall call peoples unto the mountain; There shall they offer sacrifices of righteousness; For they shall drink the *shefa* of the seas, And the hidden treasures of the sand” (Deut. 33:18-19).

The sons of the patriarch Jacob, Zevulun and Issachar, represent commerce (“... going out...[*i.e.*, to the seas],”) and scholarship (“... In thy tents”), indeed, the Zevulunites’ commerce supports the scholarship of the Issachars, just as Maimonides’ merchant brother David supported his scholarship. That potent combination of trade and erudition “calls peoples unto the mountain” of the Temple in Jerusalem. Their righteous sacrifices merited the *emanation* of the seas of Torah and the accumulation of commercial wealth.

Maimonides’ quote-shard from Jeremiah 2:13 is in greyscale, below. Here is the context.

Jer. 2:11-13: “Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? But My people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For My people have committed two evils; **they have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters** (*mekor mayim khaim*), and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.”

Maimonides comments that the *fountain of living waters* is “The emanation of *life*, meaning *existence*, for the two [*i.e.*, life and existence, *ha-khaim* and *ha-mtziut*] are undoubtedly identical.” Rashi explained that God is

a fountain of living waters, while the broken cisterns which they have preferred to Him are the idols, “which are likened to cisterns of stored up water that are broken and cracked.”

But God is not a waterspout, and He should not be compared to an idol.

Which is why Maimonides turns to Psalms 36:10, which he divided to make his point:

“For with Thee is the *fountain of life* (*mekor khaim*, source of life);
In Thy light shall we see light.”

He says that the first half, the *mekor khaim*, is “the Divine emanation that gives *existence*.” Note the difference from the Jeremiah’s *mekor mayim khaim*. The Psalmist sharpened the spiritual meaning of the emanation by removing “water,” *mayim*. Maimonides went on to explain that the “light” in the second part,

“Has the selfsame meaning — namely, that through the ...flow of the intellect that has flowed from Thee, we intellectually cognize, and, consequently, we receive correct guidance, we draw inferences, and we apprehend the intellect. Understand this.”

(Pines, 280. *Hu inyan atzmo, ki b'shefa ha-sekheil, naskil, v'az nukhshar v'nilmad v'nasig ha-sekheil. v'lakhen haven oto.*)

Thus, since *shefa* can stand for such different things as flowing water, light, life, and mind, it stands for *none* of them. It uniquely evokes divine creative action. No better word exists.

[***Shefa in Deut. 33:19***: see Rashi, and Ibn Ezra. The JPS 2023 translation has “riches of the seas.” KJV, JPS 1917, and R. Isaac Leeser: “abundance of the seas.” *Shefa* appears in the same sense in Isaiah 60:5. R. Ibn Ezra relates the term to *shifat*, caravan, as in *shifat gamalim*, a caravan of camels, which does receive some support from Jastrow, 1903, p. 1619: “marching troop” and “stamping, trot” with sources. Klein’s *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary*, 1987, p. 676, does not support *caravan* but does relate that *shefa* in Aramaic is “poured forth, overflowed, rose as a river in a flood, abounded,” and the similar Arabic *sabagha* also means to abound. Klein notes the idea of “influence” in the form *shafaat*, perhaps because the influence of the stars was thought to cause *influenza*. ***Emanation***: R. Israel Efros’ *Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, 1924, page 118, has for *shefa* the correct philosophical term “emanation.” He called it “a spiritual influence emanating from God and the Intelligence,” which he says is the “*sekel ha-poel*,” i.e., the Active Intellect, but remarks that it is “An influence as baffling to the human mind as the source whence it comes; overflowing constantly without any particular goal into all directions, ‘informing’ hylc substances and hylc minds, and imparting prophecy to the one prepared to receive it.... It does not work by contact nor through any contiguous medium,” specifically citing our chapter. He connected it to the Judeo-Arabic original אַלְפִּיךָ. R. Even-Shmuel’s brilliant early *English-Hebrew Dictionary*, 1929, at *Internet Archive* [under the name Dr. Judah Ibn-Shmuel Kaufman] p. 231, gives *shefa* as the first definition of “Emanation” and notes that it is used “In philosophy, as the idea that the world is a thing divine, a flow flowing from God. *Shefa* is not created matter. It is a principle of incorporeality and divinity,” (my translation from Hebrew).]

Why Do We Need this Metaphor? Since much of the chapter is about a single word—*shefa*—it may help to stop and ask some questions. What is the point? What is really at stake in this word? Why does it carry so much freight? Why do we need metaphor? If the Torah’s Author is, as we should assume, philosophically literate, why not just talk about the *incorporeal bestowal of mind* from the start? If we want to express the ineffability of divine creativity, why not just say so? Why turn from clarity to coded metaphor?

The answer is that *shefa* functions less as definition than as a meditation. You dwell on it, and it suggests to your mind something like flow or transmission. As you reflect further, those images fall away. What remains is not a picture but an insight: that divine action is everywhere constant, unbounded, and continuous.

You cannot navigate *shefa* with a compass or cut it with a knife, and no moment contains it. Torah could have said “incorporeal bestowal,” but that would sit in the mind as mere formula. *Shefa*, by contrast, leads the imagination beyond itself; it trains you to sense a causality that is real yet not mechanical, present yet not

moving. It is the most fitting term precisely because it holds together those marks— continuity, limitlessness, and constancy—while quietly dissolving every corporeal image it first evoked.

IX. R. YOSEF KASPI'S EXPLANATION OF THE CHAPTER'S CONCLUDING STATEMENT

Perhaps the best way to understand the final statement of the chapter, especially its last phrase, “*Understand this!*” (*v'lakhen havein oto*), alluding the mystery of divine providence, is by exposing it to the powerful, if overstated, remarks of the early commentator R. Yosef ibn Kaspi (c. 1279 – c. 1340) in his *Maskiyot Kesef* commentary:

“*For through the emanation of mind that flows from You, we become wise and are set aright and are thus enabled to attain Mind. Understand this.*”

This alludes to the mystery of providence (*sod ha-hashgakha*)...For it is correct to say that God creates everything in the world, just as one may say of Him that He ignited this coal before us, since we *do* pronounce Him its remote cause. We also correctly say that God voluntarily chose to create everything that is created. This is even more correct with respect to individual human beings. It is even more true to say that He chose mankind over other creatures since man possesses mind. That mind emanates from God, by the Active Intellect created by God, for between God and mind, there is, so to speak, no difference but of cause and effect. Accordingly, this mind within us flows from the divine source, for there it exists as actuality [i.e., not as potentiality]. Therefore, when we bring our mind into actuality, we bring God, so to speak, *into our heads* (*b'tokh rasheinu*), *for Mind is God and God is Mind* (*ki ha-sekhel hu ha-el v'ha-el hu ha-sekhel*). And that individual personal mind in our heads, as actualized by each and every one of us, enlightens and guides us in the details of our occasions and affairs. It guides us in the best way, until the most perfect among us reaches the rank of Moses our Master, peace be upon him. That is why we call Moses ‘*divine*,’ (*elohi*) as it says, ‘*Moses, the man of God*,’ (Deut. 33:1, *moshe ish ha-elokim*), as he always kept God in mind (lit., “in his head”), in the most perfect way possible. This is the *power of God*. For there is no difference between saying “God” and “the power of God,” *since that power is Mind and God is Mind* (*akher sh'oto ha-koakh hu ha-sekhel, v'ha-el hu sekhel*). Therefore, we say that God exercises providence over each person, and that providence is more or less complete according to the *extent* of that person’s *consciousness* (*shiur sikhlo*). *This is a great ascent*: by means of that divine power found in solitary meditation, we attain God through our mind, and He guides us in all our ways and undertakings. This is the meaning of “In Your light we see light” (Ps. 36:10), and likewise, “The Lord is with you” (Judg. 6:12, regarding Gideon), as well as “David prospered in all his ways, and the Lord was with him” (1 Sam. 18:14), *for God is absolute mind* (*ki ha-shem hu sekhel gamur*). More than this: He is likened to water flowing from its source - He is its water, He is its Mind, and It is He.”

(My translation from *Maskiyot Kesef*, *ad loc.*, in the Zvi Goldstein edition, *op. cit.* R. Kaspi wrote two commentaries on the Guide, the exoteric *Amudei Kesef*, and the esoteric *Maskiyot Kesef*).

If we grant R. Kaspi that his readers would have understood phrases like “in our heads” as “in our minds,” then much of what he says can be seen as a bold but intelligent unpacking of implications already present in Maimonides. He rightly saw that the chapter points beyond physical causation, toward the actualization of intellect by an incorporeal source. He recognized that Providence, in the Maimonidean sense, correlates to the degree to which a human being lives in *Actual Intellect*, and that God’s being “with” a person means his constant conscious adherence to God. (Guide 3:18)

He also understood, better than most, that Maimonides’ doctrine tends toward the *unity of mind* doctrine, specifically regarding forms, though Maimonides never completely accepted it. R. Kaspi was aware that

Maimonides left room in his concept of mental unity for *distinctions* among minds: between cause and effect, between the Separate Intellects, between the divine source and the intellect actualized in man, and even between some human beings of unequal intellectual and moral perfections.

Maimonides, however, would have objected to R. Kaspi's overstated conclusions, which turned Maimonides' contemplative and guarded teaching into slogans that erase the transcendence of God. R. Kaspi said too much, too directly, and with too few safeguards against misunderstanding. Formulas such as "Mind is God and God is Mind" press past the disciplined caution of Maimonidean language and risk collapsing likeness, derivation, and causal dependence into *identity*.

Maimonides could accept that the actualized human mind stands in the closest possible relation to the divine source but not any formulation that obscured the absolute difference with Divine Mind.

For precisely this reason, Maimonides preserved distinctions of cause and effect, of rank, and of attained perfection. The *world to come* is not a featureless fusion of souls in an undifferentiated noetic mass.

His conclusion cannot be improved. He wanted us to contemplate it deeply to internalize its meaning.

"For through the emanation of mind that flows from You, we become wise and are set aright, and we are enabled to attain mind. Understand this."