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Scepticism and Anti-Scepticism: The Case of Maimonides

The study of medieval scepticism, at least under that rubric, is relatively recent, and has gained less attention than that of ancient or modern scepticism.¹ Although one can find claims and arguments that are reminiscent of arguments associated with self-identified sceptics, “no thinker from the Middle Ages professed an active allegiance to a systematic philosophical scepticism.”² Moreover, neither ancient scepticism nor early modern scepticism seems to me to be a particularly appropriate lens with which to look at the medievals. While the ancient sceptics investigated the truth of beliefs (one translation of *skepsis* is investigation) and recommended suspension of belief wherever possible since those investigations often proved inconclusive, the early modern sceptics were more concerned to examine the grounds for our knowledge-claims, to see which of those claims were justified and which were not.³ Neither project seems particularly relevant to medieval philosophy, which has its own forms of scepticism, especially in regards to the claims of philosophy vs. religion.

While there is no systematic scepticism in the Middle Ages, sceptical arguments are occasionally employed to weaken or devalue particular positions in the service of theological concerns. Such arguments are often local and focus on a particular problem, which is the case with Maimonides, as we shall see. To be sure, there can be some interesting parallels between the philosophical moves taken by medievals and, say, their ancient and early modern counterparts. It is hard to read Avicenna’s Flying Man argument without thinking of Descartes, or al-Ghazālī’s arguments against causation without thinking of Hume. But attempts to trace direct or indirect lines of influence are rarely convincing. As Tanelli Kukkonen has written, “Pace Lovejoy, ideas are not units that would or indeed could be passed on from one thinker and culture to the next without a need for creative appropriation and transformation at the very core.”⁴ Kukkonen also points out that there is a danger of apologetics, i.e., that our medieval philosopher deserves to be recognized as a solitary genius because

¹ On this, see Henrik Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism: The Missing Medieval Background*, Studien Und Texte Zur Geistesgeschichte Des Mittelalters, (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 1–29.

² See Charles Bolyard, “Medieval Skepticism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2017 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2017/entries/skepticism-medieval/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Tanelli Kukkonen, “Al-Ghazālī’s Skepticism Revisited,” in Lagerlund, *Rethinking the History of Skepticism*, 29–59, esp. 30.

Note: I would like to acknowledge the helpful comments of both anonymous reviewers.

certain of their arguments sound to our ears like those of Descartes or Hume or Kant. Given the attraction of ancient and early modern scepticism for historians of philosophy in recent years, there is an understandable lure to find medieval counterparts. This is well and good, provided that the distinctiveness of the medieval scepticisms is recognized.

Let me illustrate this last point with a passage from al-Ghazālī's spiritual autobiography, *The Rescuer from Error*, which has often been seen as anticipating Descartes. I will then contrast this passage with something similar in Maimonides, setting off al-Ghazālī's scepticism with Maimonides' anti-scepticism. Al-Ghazālī informs us that it was within his God-given temperament to search for certain knowledge (*'ilm yaqīnī*) of the way things really are, but first he had to know of what certain knowledge consisted. "Certain knowledge," he writes, "is that in which what is known is laid bare in such a way as to leave no room for doubt, and is unaccompanied by the possibility of error or illusion, to the point that the mind cannot even suppose such a possibility."⁵ After examining his beliefs, al-Ghazālī posited that the only two candidates for certain beliefs were sensory beliefs and necessary beliefs, what we would call rational beliefs. But could he trust his senses? After all, vision looks at a celestial body and sees that it is small, but geometrical proofs indicate that it is far larger than the earth. Rational proofs undermine our belief in inferences from the senses, and so maybe only necessary beliefs are to be considered trustworthy. But Al-Ghazālī then informs us that he couldn't rule out the possibility that just as necessary beliefs had shaken his trust in sensory beliefs, so some unknown mode of cognition could shake his trust in necessary beliefs. He couldn't defeat this possibility with a proof, because that would involve relying on inference from first principles of knowledge, and precisely these he questioned. For two months, he embraced this sophisticated, i.e., sceptical creed, until he was illumined by a Divine light that allowed him to trust the necessary truths, which were not themselves susceptible of proof. Now it is possible to read Al-Ghazālī as saying merely that first principles are not susceptible of demonstration, which is, of course, what Aristotle himself says in the *Posterior Analytics*. But in referring to the Divine light, he clearly wishes to distinguish his approach from that of the philosophers, even in those areas of knowledge with which the philosophers provide certain knowledge, according to Al-Ghazālī, such as logic, mathematics, and astronomy. He wishes to emphasize that what relieved his bout with scepticism was his recognition of the Divine light within his soul. The emphasis is reminiscent of, yet differs from, Descartes, who demonstrates the existence of a non-deceiving deity in order to guarantee the certain knowledge (*scientia*) achieved through his clear and distinct perceptions.

5 Al-Ghazālī, *al-Munqidh min al-dalāl wa-al-muwaṣṣil ilā Dhī al-'alā wa-al-Jalāl*, eds Jamil Ṣalībā, and Kāmil 'Ayyād (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1967): 74. Translated in Muhammad Ali Khalidi. *Medieval Islamic Philosophical Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004): 61.

Now let us consider a passage in Maimonides' Introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah* that starts from the same question about the size of the heavenly bodies, in this case, the sun.⁶ Suppose, Maimonides says, that the following question is posed to a scholar who is well-versed in the sciences of medicine, arithmetic, and music, and proficient in the natural sciences, "quick-witted of mind, excellent in disposition" but ignorant of the sciences of geometry and astronomy: "What would you say to a man who says that the sun, which we see as a small disk in the sky is actually $166 \frac{3}{8}$ times the size of the earth?" Such a scholar, Maimonides informs us, would find no place in his mind to affirm that belief. This intellectual claim would appear at first to him as absurd. How can a man who occupies a tiny place on earth know the measure of the solar body, its circumference and area, to the extent that his mind encompasses it as if were a terrestrial body? How is it possible for a heavenly body so far away, which somebody on earth can barely look at, be measure to the precision of $\frac{3}{8}$? But when such a scholar delves into the books of measurement, learns what is appropriate for a spherical shape, and masters the *Almagest*, then this proposition would become for an *indubitable truth for which there is a demonstration* (*qaul ṣaḥiḥ lā shaqq fihī qad qāma alayhi al-burhān*). And the claim that the sun is of this size would be no different for him then the claim that it exists. Now, Maimonides, like Al-Ghazālī, holds that the science of astronomy provides certain knowledge. But unlike Al-Ghazālī, he makes no appeal to a Divine light to ground his first principles. And this is because, again, unlike Al-Ghazālī, he generally finds no need to distance himself from the philosophers with respect to their basic epistemological outlook.

In fact, the example that Maimonides gives is particularly interesting because he uses it to illustrate the fact that what may seem at first glance to be absurd can, after further study, be considered the absolute truth. He says this with reference to the *prima facie* strangeness of rabbinic aggadah. So unlike Al-Ghazālī, who appeals to the Divine light to defeat sophistry or scepticism, Maimonides uses an example from the *prima facie* unlikely science of astronomy to argue that rabbinic aggadah should not be dismissed, but rather should be interpreted whenever possible, and when not possible, the problem should be attributed not to the sages but to ourselves, just like the scholar in the story who could not understand how the size of the sun could be measured. Understanding astronomy resolves the perplexity of the man in the example, just as understanding geometry resolves the perplexity of one who is told that asymptotic lines becomes increasingly close to each other without ever meeting, something that the imagination is unable to conceive.⁷

⁶ See *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. Isaac Shailat (Jerusalem: Ma'aliyot, 1992): 53–54 (Hebrew), 450–451 (Arabic).

⁷ For this example, see *Guide* 1.73, trans. Shlomo Pines in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963): 210 [henceforth, trans. Pines]. Cf. Gad Freudenthal, "Maimonides's Philosophy of Science," in *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth M. Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 134–166, esp. 136–138.

Now in the Introduction to the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Maimonides does not call astronomy explicitly a certain science. But in Maimonides' *Letter to the Sages of Montpellier*, also known as the *Letter against Astrology*, which was composed after Maimonides wrote the *Guide*,⁸ the science of astronomy is referred to as a *ḥokhmah vada'it*, a "certain science," which appears to be the equivalent of the Arabic phrase, 'ilm yaqīnī. After listing the various subjects considered in astronomy he writes, "All this is true without a doubt."⁹ This positive appreciation of the science of astronomy, to which I will return later, conforms to what he wrote earlier in the *Code of Law*, that one can rely on the books of geometry and astronomy in the hands of the gentile sages, "since all these matters [are confirmed] through clear proofs that are unblemished and cannot be doubted."¹⁰ The term "clear proofs" in the *Code of Law* appears to be equivalent to the Arabic term *burhan*, "demonstration," in the *Guide*. So, provisionally, we can say that what makes astronomy a certain science is that it is confirmed through demonstrations that are indubitable. If this is the case, then, both before and after writing the *Guide*, Maimonides considered astronomy to be an 'ilm yaqīnī, a certain and demonstrable science.

But what of astronomy in the *Guide*? Does Maimonides consider it there to be a certain science, and, if he does, what are its scientific claims? And, more broadly, what are his views towards cosmology and celestial physics? Much has been written on the subject,¹¹ but it is still worth going over some of the main points.

First, it is important to emphasize that Maimonides regards the teachings of the philosophers, including those having to do with the configurations of the heavens, as in accordance, generally, with those of the Torah. This is clear from the beginning of the *Code of Law* and throughout the *Guide*, where Maimonides identifies the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation with metaphysics and physics, respectively. There are also explicit statements, notably in *Guide* 1.71, and *Guide* 2.3–13, that indicate that Maimonides considers key notions of Aristotelian cosmology as having

⁸ See *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. Isaac Shailat, 474–510. According to a personal communication to the editor, Joseph Kafih claimed that the letter was a forgery; see *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 476, n. 4. Shailat himself considers it genuine and that it was originally written in Hebrew, *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 476, n. 5, duly noting that in one of the manuscripts it is considered to be translated from an Arabic original by Moses ibn Tibbon. Herbert A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 497, considers there to be "strong, if not overwhelming" grounds for rejecting the letter as a forgery. These questions deserve greater study.

⁹ *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, 482.

¹⁰ Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning the Sanctification of the New Moon 17:24.

¹¹ On this see Gad Freudenthal, "'Instrumentalism' and 'Realism' as Categories in the History of Astronomy: Duhem vs. Popper, Maimonides vs. Gersonides," *Centaurus* 45 (2003): 227–248. Y. Tzvi Langermann, "The True Perplexity: The *Guide of the Perplexed* Part II, Chapter 24," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, edited by J. L. Kraemer (Oxford: Littman Library/Oxford University Press, 1991): 159–174, and Josef Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides' "Guide"* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013): 54–167.

been demonstrated, or as “clear upon reflection,” such as the existence of celestial orbs, their possessing souls, intellect, and desire, and their differing from one another regarding velocity and speed. Some of Aristotle’s speculations concerning the causes of the motions of the spheres are not demonstrated, but they occasion the smallest number of doubts and are the most fitting for being put into a coherent order – and they are in harmony with many sayings of the Law and the midrashim, another point in their favour.¹² True, Aristotle is not infallible: he mistakenly thought that every motion requires a separate orb, which subsequently was shown by astronomers to be false.¹³ But the evidence is considerable that Maimonides accepts the Aristotelian picture of the cosmos basically as true and considers it to agree with that of the Torah, as correctly interpreted. This is part of Maimonides’ general tendency to “bring together the Torah and the intelligible.”¹⁴

Yet in a half-dozen consecutive chapters of the *Guide*, Maimonides subjects Aristotle’s celestial science to a barrage of criticism, ending with the sweeping generalization that “everything that Aristotle expounds with regard to the orb of the moon, and that which is above it, is, except for certain things, a sort of intuition and conjecture,”¹⁵ that is to say, not necessarily true, much less demonstrated. Later he writes, “regarding all that is in the heavens, man grasps nothing but a small measure of what is mathematical [...] the deity alone fully knows the true reality, the nature, the substance, the form, the motions, and the causes of the heavens.”¹⁶

What are the implications of Maimonides’ criticism of Aristotelian celestial science for his anti-sceptical stance? Before answering we should first note that Maimonides provides two distinct considerations for limiting human knowledge of the heavens in the *Guide* – their remoteness and their being the product of divine particularization.

The “remoteness”-consideration says that because the heavens are “remote in distance and in rank” from us, we are unable *in principle* to have scientific knowledge of them. According to Aristotle, one has scientific knowledge (*epistēmē*) of something when one knows it through its necessitating causes/explanations.¹⁷ The sort of demonstrations that provide scientific knowledge or understanding require that the premises be explanatory of the conclusion. Now Maimonides claims that the causes of heavenly phenomena that would serve as premises for our inferences are inaccessible to us because the heavens are too remote in distance and in rank. Remoteness in distance seems to exclude making the observations necessary for scientific knowledge;

¹² *Guide* 1.3, 254.

¹³ *Guide* 1.4, 257.

¹⁴ The phrase is from the *Treatise on the Resurrection of the Dead* in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. I. Shai-lat, 330 (Arabic), 461 (Hebrew).

¹⁵ *Guide* 2.23, 319–320.

¹⁶ *Guide* 2.24, 327.

¹⁷ Posterior Analytics 1.2, 71b10–15.

remoteness in rank seems to exclude the possibility of any knowledge of the *essence* of the heavens. The “remoteness”-consideration poses an insurmountable obstacle for any theory of celestial science that wishes to fulfil the criteria of Aristotelian *epistēmē*.

But, as Deborah Black has shown, when Aristotle’s *Posterior Analytics* was translated into Arabic, the term *epistēmē* was rendered by the term *yaqīn*, “certainty.”¹⁸ The Arabic Aristotelians, basing themselves on Aristotle’s distinction between knowing the fact of the matter (*to hoti*) and knowing the explanation of the matter (*to dioti*),¹⁹ distinguish two types of demonstrations, explanatory demonstrations (*burhān lima*) and factual demonstrations (*burhān inna* or *anna*). Al-Fārābī and Avicenna both hold that factual demonstrations yield *ilm yaqīnī*, and Avicenna expressly disputes with an unnamed predecessor who claims that there is no certainty when the cause is unknown.²⁰ Since only explanatory demonstrations proceed from causal premises, only they appear to be definitively excluded by the “remoteness”-consideration. Factual demonstrations, i.e., reasoning from effects to causes, are not thereby excluded. And since Maimonides *does* hold that some facts about the heavens are demonstrated, it seems that these demonstrations are factual and not explanatory. Maimonides read Aristotle in Arabic and with the Arabic commentators. There is no reason to suspect that Aristotle’s notion of *epistēmē* played a role in his own epistemology.

When the remoteness of the heavens is understood as one of rank, then the remoteness-consideration in the *Guide* is reminiscent of Maimonides’ view in his *Code of Law* that entities occupying a certain rank in the hierarchy of being are not able to know entities occupying a higher rank as they really are, or fully, but they are able to know them. Thus, angels are said to know/apprehend their creator but not fully. Even the first rank [of intellect] cannot apprehend the truth of the Creator as He is; rather, its knowledge is unable to apprehend and to know [Him], but it apprehends and knows more than what the form below it apprehends and knows. All the intellects know God but none know Him as He knows Himself. Maimonides adds that all the stars and planets, which possess intellect and souls, know God, each according to its rank, like the angels, but not as He knows himself. Their knowledge is less than

18 Deborah Black, “Knowledge (‘Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī’s Epistemology,” *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*. 16 (2006): 11–45, esp. 13–15.

19 *Posterior Analytics* 1.13, 78a23–29.

20 Charles H. Manekin, “Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology,” in *Beyond Religious Borders: Interaction and Intellectual Exchange in the Medieval Islamic World*, ed. David M. Freidenreich and Miriam Goldstein (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012): 78–91, 192–197, esp. 85 where Avicenna states that the position of his opponent “implies that there will be no certainty with respect to the Creator, may His name be Exalted, because there is no cause of His existence! We must inform him that he has lost his way in the pursuit of science, for he lacks the thing for the sake of which wisdom is sought, namely, certainty with respect to the Creator, may His highness be Exalted.”

that of the angels and greater than that of human beings.²¹ Each rank in the hierarchy knows itself as the effect of the superior cause, and so it reasons from itself as effect to its cause. It cannot know the higher rank “as it truly is,” i.e., through its cause. There is nothing particularly sceptical in itself about this medieval Aristotelian limitation on human knowledge.

The “Divine particularization” -consideration limiting our knowledge of the heavens appears in *Guide* 2.24, where Maimonides argues that world is the product of Divine will and particularization rather than natural necessity. His task in that chapter is to describe to the reader “the grave doubts that would affect whoever thinks that man has acquired knowledge as to the motions of the spheres and as to their being natural things going on *according to the law of necessity*, things whose order and arrangement are clear.”²² The grave doubts arise when one thinks that the motions of the spheres proceed *according to the law of* [natural] necessity, and not according to the Divine will. This is what Maimonides wants to avoid, because it implies *inter alia* that God is unable to suspend even temporarily the natures of things, a consequence that Maimonides labels “disgraceful.”²³

That Maimonides’ goal in *Guide* 2.24 is the modest one of weakening the Aristotelian case for necessity rather than reflecting a broad epistemological scepticism can be seen in what he accepts of Aristotelian cosmology in the very chapter in which it is attacked. For example, he holds that the uniform motion of the orb around the centre of the earth “has been made clear to those who use reasoning,” but that thesis is incompatible with the existence of epicycles and eccentrics. One could reject the existence of the latter, but then the problem of accounting for planetary motion, the “true perplexity,” would remain unsolved. Had Aristotle later become convinced of the existence of epicycles and eccentrics – and Maimonides raises this possibility hypothetically – he would himself have been perplexed. Seeing no way out of the perplexity, Maimonides invokes the “remoteness”-consideration and concludes that these matters cannot be grasped by human reasoning but only via prophetic revelation. But his target at the end of the chapter is still very much the theologically problematic picture of the Aristotelians. Take away the problem of the world proceeding necessarily from a God who could not choose otherwise; make your goal understanding God’s wisdom to the best of your ability; utilize the best insights of Torah and philosophy to learn about the cosmos, and it appears that we can get very far in our inquiries about the heavens.

But how far can we go in our inquiries, given that the “divine particularization”-consideration seems to posit an unbridgeable ontological chasm between phenomena that exist because of Divine will and those that exist because of natural

²¹ Cf. Laws concerning the Foundation of the Torah, 2.8, 10; 3.9.

²² *Guide* 2.23, 222.

²³ *Guide* 2.22, 319.

necessity? According to Gad Freudenthal, “the action of the Deity is visible in ‘pockets’ of contingency or indeterminacy existing within natural necessity.”²⁴ If this is the correct description of such pockets, then they are unknowable. Yet there is nothing indeterminate or contingent in phenomena such as the direction of the movements of the heavenly bodies, or the position of the planets, certainly not in the sense of arbitrary, nor is there an ontological chasm between willed and naturally necessitated phenomena. Maimonides believes that all of creation, *including* the sublunar realm, is ultimately the result of divine particularization, purpose, and will, just as he believes that all of creation, including the celestial realm, operates the way it does because of the natures that God has implanted within it. The movements of the heavens are as necessary, i.e., determined by God to act in a uniform manner, as are the movements of sublunar elements. Perhaps we can say that, according to Maimonides, God wills the world to come to be in such a way that certain phenomena – the sublunar and, perhaps, some celestial ones – can be understood as the naturally necessitated effects of some other phenomena, which are the direct result of God’s voluntary agency. Thus, while all phenomena are purposed to exist, one can only have explanations of sublunar phenomena because they are necessitated from the celestial phenomena, i.e., the phenomena that are determined by God’s will consequent upon his wisdom. There is no need to posit an ontological chasm between the different sorts of phenomena.

If there are celestial phenomena that are the direct result of purposeful particularization, and Maimonides says that they are, then they cannot be scientifically known, i.e., explained, in the strict Aristotelian sense of science. Shouldn’t the “Divine purpose”-consideration be an even stronger limitation on human knowledge than the “remoteness”-consideration? In principle, perhaps; in practice, no, and that for two reasons: First, Maimonides does not have an independent argument for considering certain celestial phenomena to be the result of divine particularization; he only arrives at that conclusion after he has rejected as implausible the alternatives, which are either that a naturalistic explanation exists at present or that it can be achieved after further study. Second, all of Maimonides’ examples of particularization are in the celestial realm, which we cannot know with explanatory knowledge *in any event* because of the “remoteness” consideration. Once again, the “Divine purpose” consideration does not really limit our knowledge; we are still able to ascertain, with certainty and near-certainty, elements of Divine wisdom. Aristotle’s inadequacies are emphasized here to preserve the world as the product of Divine choice.

Is the *Guide’s* “scepticism” regarding knowledge of the heavens Maimonides’ last word on the subject? Let us return to the *Letter against Astrology*:

²⁴ Gad Freudenthal, “Maimonides’ Philosophy of Science,” in the *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, ed. Kenneth M. Seeskin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005): 134–166, esp. 141.

Know, my masters, that the science of the stars that is a certain science is knowledge of the form of the spheres, their number, their measure, the course they follow, each one's period of revolution, their declination to the north or to the south, their revolving to the east or to the west, and the orbit of every star and what its course is. This is an exceedingly glorious science. On all this and the like, the wise men of Greece, Persia, and India wrote compositions. By means of it, the onset of the eclipses of luminaries may be known and when they will be eclipsed at any given place; by means of it there may be known the cause for the moon's appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full, and then gradually waning; by means of it there may be known when the moon will or will not be seen; and the reason why one day will be long and another day short; and the reason why two stars will rise as one, but not set together; and the reason why a given day at a given place is thirteen hours long and in another place fifteen or sixteen or twenty hours long, yet being a single day [...] How many wondrous matters are known by this science, all of which are undoubtedly true.²⁵

While some of this description may be accounted for by the “instrumentalist” view taken of astronomy in the *Guide*, which states that astronomers posit heavenly motions in order simply to account for our observations, “regardless of whether or not things are thus in fact,”²⁶ phrases like “knowledge of the *form* of the spheres, their number, the course they follow [...] their revolving to the east or the west [...] the *cause* of the moon's appearing just like a bow, then waxing great until it is full and then gradually waning,” etc., and calling many of the propositions of astronomy to be “undoubtedly true” suggest none of the doubts that Maimonides alluded to concerning the heavens in the chapters on creation in the *Guide*. And he makes no mention of the “instrumentalist” view familiar from the *Guide*.

Of course, we could reconcile the *Guide* and the *Letter Against Astrology* by saying that, when Maimonides considers astronomy to be a certain science in the *Letter*, he is referring to a very small part of it, i.e., to mathematical astronomy, which is of no value in determining how things really are, but only how they appear to us. We could also rightly point out that the *Letter* emphasizes the scientific value of astronomy to contrast it with a pseudo-science like astrology.²⁷ But a more likely explanation for the discrepancy is simply that Maimonides emphasizes the difficulties of celestial science in the context of his argument for a Divine particularizer who creates the world after absolute nothingness. This suggestion was put forth by Shlomo Pines in his introduction to his translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*:

It is not impossible that in this second part [of the *Guide*] Maimonides gave a rather exaggerated expression to whatever qualms he may have had about the science of astronomy of his time. This overemphasis may be explained by his wishing to shake the confidence of a certain category of

²⁵ In *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. I. Shailat, 482.

²⁶ *Guide* 2.24, 326.

²⁷ One mistake would be to classify the *Letter Against Astrology*, if genuine, as a popular letter, written for the run of the mill rabbinic scholars, and therefore not to be taken seriously as representative of Maimonides' own teachings. Maimonides considered the sages of Lunel a target audience for the *Guide of the Perplexed*, since he authorized a Hebrew translation for that group.

readers in the philosophic doctrine of the eternity of the world, a confidence that was certainly connected with belief in the trustworthiness of Greek science in general. In 1.72, where he sums up the main points of physical science and astronomy, he seems to accept the Ptolemaic system and gives the reader no hint that he regards it as dubious.²⁸

Not only in 1.72 but elsewhere in Part Two of the *Guide*, Maimonides accepts fundamental elements of Arabic Aristotelian cosmology, and, as we have seen, even where he concedes that Aristotle lacks demonstrations for some of his opinions – such as the causes of the motions of the spheres – he argues that it is reasonable to accept them because they occasion the smallest number of doubts compared to alternative explanations, especially when they accord with the sayings of the Laws and the interpretations of the Midrashim. Emphasizing the inadequacies of Aristotle’s explanation appears solely to refute the thesis that the world proceeds necessarily from the Divine nature.

Maimonides’ stress on the doubts that accompany the eternity thesis fits nicely into what he terms his “rhetorical mode of speech” in his argument against Aristotle, for which he seeks indulgence from the readers of the *Guide*.²⁹ When he uses the phrase, he specifically refers to his practice of citing authorities, but he also seeks indulgence elsewhere for setting out the doubts that accompany Aristotle’s opinion.³⁰ And that “rhetorical mode of speech” is on full display when he claims that “even the general conclusion that may be drawn from [the heavens], namely that they prove the existence of their Mover, is a matter the knowledge of which cannot be reached by human intellects.”³¹ This claim has puzzled readers of the *Guide* since the time of Samuel Ibn Tibbon.³² Does Maimonides mean that the existence of the heavens does not prove the existence of God? What of his claim that “all the prophets used the stars and the spheres as proofs for the deity’s existing necessarily”? Yet, *within the rhetoric of the argument against the Aristotelian doctrine of eternity*, the passage makes perfect sense. The Aristotelians may have a “cogent argument” for the existence of the Deity, but it rests on a premise – the eternal motion of the sphere – that implies a disgraceful conclusion for the Deity: that the world proceeds necessarily from Him and not as a result of His will. Given the remoteness of the heavens in place and in rank and our inability to adequately account for certain celestial phenomena through demonstration, we cannot rely on that premise to prove the existence of a First Mover *in the manner of the Aristotelians*. But this does not call into question either Maimonides’ own “constructive dilemma” proof for the existence of God, nor that of the prophets,

²⁸ Pines, “Translator’s Introduction,” in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, cxi, n. 89.

²⁹ *Guide* 2.24, 322.

³⁰ *Guide* 2.22, 320.

³¹ *Guide* 2.24, 327.

³² For a recent symposium on the passage, see the contributions in *Aleph* 8 (2008): 151–358

neither of which are based on an adequate grasp of celestial natures.³³ And it does not close the door to advancing in our knowledge of the heavens.³⁴

Limitations on human knowledge elsewhere in the *Guide*

In other places in the *Guide* where Maimonides emphasizes the limitation of human knowledge we should continue to look for local, contextual explanation rather than evidence of a general sceptical tendency. In recognizing the limitations of human knowledge Maimonides believes that he is squarely within the tradition of the philosophers:

Do not think that what we have said with regard to the insufficiency of the human intellect and its having a limit at which it stops is a statement made in order to conform to Law. For it is something that has already been said and truly grasped by the philosophers without their having concern for a particular doctrine or opinion. And it is a true thing that cannot be doubted except by an individual ignorant of what has already been demonstrated.³⁵

The philosophers, in this case, the Arabic Aristotelians, teach that the human intellect is limited, and that the failure to appreciate these limits may indeed be the cause of holding false beliefs or beliefs without sufficient warrant. With the exception of the doctrines of creation, prophecy, providence, and divine knowledge of particulars, all issues of importance for the foundations of the Law, Maimonides generally sides with the Arabic Aristotelians, as he understands them.³⁶

³³ It is instructive to compare Maimonides' inference from the limitations on human knowledge with that of Kant. For Kant, the question of creation vs. eternity is an antinomy of human reason, one for which there are of necessity cogent arguments on both sides, and hence, undecidable. In a very un-Kantian manner, Maimonides employs the opposing cogent arguments for his own "constructive dilemma" demonstration for the existence of God.

³⁴ On this see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "My Truest Perplexities," *Aleph: Historical Studies in Science and Judaism*, 8 (2008): 301–317.

³⁵ *Guide* 1.31, 67.

³⁶ Cf. his important, if somewhat obscure, statement in *Guide* 1.71, 177: "As for the Andalusians among the people of our nation, all of them cling to the affirmations of the philosophers and incline to their opinions, in so far as these do not ruin the foundation of the Law. You will not find them in any way taking the paths of the Mutakallimum. In many things concerning the scanty matter of which the later ones among them had knowledge, they have therefore approximately the same doctrine that we set forth in this Treatise." It is not clear to whom Maimonides refers, and, certainly, as Kraemer points out, his characterisation is not true of all Andalusian Jewish thinkers. (See Joel Kraemer, "Maimonides and the Spanish Aristotelianism School," in *Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Medieval and Early Modern Spain: Interaction and Cultural Change*, eds. Mark D. Meyerson and Edward D. English [Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999], 40–68, esp. 41.) But what is important is that

That includes, by the way, his doctrine of the attributes, which is close to that of Avicenna.³⁷ There is no evidence that he believes that his doctrine of attributes deviates from those of the philosophers; his criticisms are directed against the Kalam, especially the Mu‘tazila³⁸ who identified God’s attributes with His essence. We saw above that Maimonides holds that the denial of essential attributes to God is a primary intelligible that needs to be proved by the “men of science” only when people have committed errors or have some other end in view. That God cannot be defined is “well-known among all people engaged in speculation.”³⁹ And “all the philosophers” say, “We are dazzled by His beauty, and He is hidden from us because of the intensity with which he becomes manifest, just as the sun is hidden to eyes that are too weak to apprehend it”?⁴⁰ At least within his self-perception, Maimonides comes down squarely on the side of the philosophers on the question of the Divine attributes.⁴¹

Maimonides also emphasizes that humans are limited in their ability to know the secrets of Divine science by virtue of their corporeality: “Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is.”⁴² Matter here refers to *all* matter, including the incorruptible and everlasting matter of

Maimonides views himself as following an Andalusian Jewish tradition of accepting the philosophers’ views when they do not ruin the foundations of the law. As one of the readers of this paper pointed out, Maimonides and the philosophers share much in common on the question of prophecy. **37** Cf. Avicenna, *The Metaphysics of the Healing* trans., introd. and annot., Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2005): 8.4.13, 276: “The First, hence, has no quiddity [...] He is pure existence with the condition of negating privation and all other descriptions of him.”

38 Like Maimonides (*Guide* 1.60 and 1.68) Avicenna holds *both* that all descriptions are negated of the First, *and* that the First is an intellect, an intellecting subject, and an intelligible, without that implying multiplicity. (*Guide*, 8.6. secs.7–8, 285). These two positions are compatible. For a different reading of Avicenna and Maimonides, see Pines, Translator’s Introduction, xcvi. Maimonides’ cites the latter position as “generally admitted” by the philosophers; there is no indication that he disagrees with the philosophers, and in the Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah 2:10 he states it outright. **39** *Guide* 1.52, 115.

40 *Guide* 1.59, 139.

41 Harry Austryn Wolfson argued that Maimonides parts company with the “generality” of Arabic philosophers on the question of divine attributes: according to Maimonides they are to be taken as equivocal terms; according to the Arabic philosophers, they are to be taken as ambiguous. See “Maimonides and Gersonides on Divine Attributes as Ambiguous Terms,” rept. in Harry A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977): 231–246, esp. 235. In fact, Arabic philosophers like Avicenna and Averroes do consider terms like “intellect” and “knowledge” to be equivocal with respect to God and others, and it is not at all clear whether Maimonides would have rejected their interpretation of *per prius et posterius* ambiguous attributes, since he does not consider that interpretation, certainly not directly. Scholars who attempt to portray Maimonides’ theory of attributes as more “radical” or “neoplatonic” than his Aristotelian predecessors rarely confront the fact that he often adopts their doctrines (e.g., the view that God is intellecter, intellection, and intelligible, that He is cause of the world, that through knowing Himself He knows things external to himself) without directing his criticism against their treatment of attributes.

42 *Guide* 3.9, 436.

the celestial orbs. And if the matter of the orbs prevents the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is, *a fortiori* the corruptible matter of humans. Even the prophets, whose matter is the purest possible in the sublunar realm,⁴³ are subject to its limitations and its vagaries. Moses, after his moral and intellectual virtues had been perfected, was unable to apprehend God in His true reality because he was a living human, i.e., “an intellect belonging to matter,” an “inseparable human intellect.” He was unable to truly able to apprehend God, i.e., “to acquire of the truth of [God’s] existence in his soul that which other existing things do not share with this Existent so that [God’s] existence would be in his soul firm and separate from what existed in his soul of other existing things.”⁴⁴ Moses could understand “a little less than this,” namely, all of God’s actions and creation.⁴⁵ That would appear to include, for Moses, the celestial as well as the sublunar realm, including some of those celestial phenomena that were unsatisfactorily explained by the Aristotelians.

However, holding that human knowledge is *limited in scope* does not rule out considerable knowledge of the celestial bodies and the separate intellects, of which knowledge there are various degrees, as we have just seen. To be sure, there are some things that corporeal beings cannot know, but there are also limits on the knowledge of the separate intellects and the spheres, as we saw above. That doesn’t get in the way of their immortality.⁴⁶

Certain knowledge and the danger of doubt

Despite their limitations, humans can have *‘ilm yaqīnī*, according to Maimonides. What precisely does he mean by this phrase, and what role does it play in his epistemology? To my knowledge, the phrase *‘ilm yaqīnī* appears in the *Guide* twice,⁴⁷ but *yaqīn* occurs several times with *‘-l-m* (“knows”), and is a key term in Maimonides’ theory of knowledge. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, following his father Judah, translates *yaqīn* as *emet*,

⁴³ *Guide* 2.36, 369.

⁴⁴ Eight Chapters, ch. 7, in *Haqdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, ed. Isaac Shailat, 391 (Arabic), 142 (Hebrew). Cf. Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah, 1:10.

⁴⁵ *Guide* 1.21, and 1.38, 87.

⁴⁶ There is a further argument against the possibility of human intellects becoming immortal and that is that the intelligibles they acquire are derived from sense images, which does not apply for celestial beings. For an answer to this, see Herbert A. Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2015), 173–211, esp. 206–210.

⁴⁷ *Guide* 2:46, 407, where once it becomes clear that a prophetic communication is a parable, one can have certain knowledge that it occurred in a vision of prophecy. The “parable condition” explains why Maimonides asserts in *Guide* 3.24 that the binding of Isaac actually occurred. For this issue see Howard T. Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2001), 284–285. Another occurrence is in *Guide* 3.23, 492, when Job is said to know God with certain knowledge.

which, though not entirely adequate, at least captures the notion of truth. Maimonides occasionally brings truth and certainty together in the phrase *haqq yaqīn*, “truth and certainty.” The philosophers’ assertion that the spheres are living and rational is also *haqq yaqīn* from the standpoint of the Law.⁴⁸ A man should study obscure matters only after he has acquired true and certain premises and knows them.⁴⁹

Certain knowledge is associated by Maimonides in some passages with knowledge achieved through demonstration (*burhān*): In *Guide* 1.59, he writes that “a man sometimes labors for many years in order to understand some science and to know truly its propositions until he grasps them with certainty.” Note that the goal of scientific endeavour is to know truly the propositions of science *with certainty*. In *Guide* 3.51, he writes that among those who have

plunged into speculation concerning the fundamentals of religion [...] [there is one] [a] who has achieved demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated, and [b] who has known for certain in divine matters, to the extent that it is possible, everything that may be known for certain, and [c] who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it.⁵⁰

It is possible to read [b] as a gloss on [a], but it is more likely an independent condition, since there are ways of achieving certain knowledge without demonstration, such as intuitive understanding of first principles. As we just saw, the denial of essential attributes to God is a primary intelligible, as is the existence of motion and the nonexistence of atoms. Were it not for the strange opinions and errors of those who assert the opposite, there would be no need to prove these positions. But in any case, demonstration appears to be a sufficient condition of certain knowledge.

As we shall see below, certain knowledge is not the only species of certainty. Maimonides allows for the certainty of the senses, for example, but sense-experience does not on its own provide the intellect with the intelligible. If the context is one of acquiring intelligibles, then Maimonides uses “certainty” or “certain belief” indistinguishably from “certain knowledge.” For example, in *Guide* 1.50, Maimonides distinguishes between (merely) professing correct opinions, actually believing them, and believing them with certainty: Belief is not the notion that is uttered, but rather, “the affirmation that what has been represented is outside the mind just as it has been represented in the mind.” A belief is certain when “together with this belief, it is realized that a belief different from it is in no way possible, and that no starting point can be found in the mind for a rejection of this belief.” And Maimonides promises his reader that, when he casts off desires and habits, becomes endowed with understanding (*fahm*), and reflects on what Maimonides will say in the following chapters with

⁴⁸ *Guide* 2.5, 259.

⁴⁹ *Guide* 1.5, 29.

⁵⁰ *Guide* 3.51, 619, with some alterations.

respect to distancing attributes from God, then he will of necessity achieve certainty regarding God's unity. And then, Maimonides continues, "you shall be one of those who represent to themselves God's unity [...] one of those who represent the Truth and apprehends it." Here, the context is knowledge of a foundation of the law, not the objects of our senses. So "certainty" in this context may be taken as synonymous with "certain knowledge."⁵¹

Elsewhere, I have compared Maimonides' characterization of certainty in the *Guide* to Al-Fārābī's *On the Conditions of Certainty* and his *Book of Demonstration*.⁵² According to Deborah Black, Al-Fārābī presents six conditions for certain knowledge: that a subject *S* believes a proposition *p*, that *p* is true, that *S* knows that *p* is true, that it is impossible that *p* not be true, that there is no time at which *p* can be false, and, finally, that these conditions hold essentially, not accidentally.⁵³ It is the latter condition, the non-accidentally condition, that I wish to consider briefly here.

When does certainty come about accidentally? According to Al-Fārābī, it happens when the first five conditions obtain, but either the person is unaware that they obtain, or they obtain through induction, or they obtain because of the renown and testimony of all people, or through the report of someone in whom the person has confidence, or simply because this opinion is favourable to the subject. In any of these cases, the subject thinks that he has proven this belief, but he has not. Only when the certainty arises because the subject has been led by a reliable process, i.e. a process that produces the subject's own vision of the truth, is there absolute certainty without qualification.⁵⁴

When Maimonides characterizes certainty in *Guide* 1.51, he does not mention what Al-Fārābī calls "accidental certainty." But he does mention it in the Dedicatory Epistle of the *Guide* when he writes to his student Joseph that he had never stopped urging him to approach matters in an orderly manner so that the truth should be established in his mind according to the proper methods, "and that certainty should not come to you by accident."⁵⁵ Only through an orderly, reliable process of education are beliefs acquired with absolute certainty, or what we may call *rational certainty*, i.e., certain knowledge.

Besides rational certainty, Maimonides speaks of two other kinds of certainty: sense-certainty and prophetic-certainty. With respect to sense-certainty, he holds that people cannot doubt what they have seen with their own eyes. The Law was given publicly at the Gathering of Sinai in order for the Israelites to acquire "certitude

⁵¹ Citations in this paragraph are from *Guide* 1.50, 111–112. Cf. Pines's translation of *tayaqqanta* as "you shall have certain knowledge."

⁵² Manekin, "Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology," 79–84.

⁵³ Black, "Knowledge ('Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī's Epistemology," 11–45.

⁵⁴ Black, 28–35.

⁵⁵ *Guide*, "Epistle Dedicatory," 4.

through sight.”⁵⁶ All miracles are certain in the case of one who sees them or their effects. Beliefs based on direct experience are true, but later traditional reports may be considered as untrue. The Torah had to enumerate the various stations where the Israelites encamped in order to fortify later generations’ acceptance of the story of the Miracle of the Manna.⁵⁷ Maimonides attributes the claim that the senses do not always bestow certainty and that they should not be trusted to the extent of adopting them as the principles of demonstration to the Kalam theologians; indeed, it is one of their principles.⁵⁸ His own view appears to be that the senses are generally trustworthy, although in some cases the testimony of the senses can be corrected or rejected on the basis of other knowledge, such as when a confirmed prophet claims to have been commanded by God to change the Law, which contradicts our certainty that the law is immutable, in which case we reject the prophetic claim and deem the prophet to be a false prophet, or when someone ill tastes the sweet as bitter and the bitter as sweet.

To say that certain knowledge is indubitable doesn’t mean that it is indubitable subjectively, i.e., only for the believer. It must be *objectively* indubitable because of the *rational nature* of the belief.⁵⁹ Thus, Maimonides prefaces his discussion in Part Three of the *Guide* with the claim that the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises he possesses, show him that his interpretation of the Account of the Chariot is, without a doubt, correct. But he concedes that things are possibly different, and that something else may be intended by scripture and the rabbis. After all, he has followed his conjecture and supposition without the benefit of divine revelation or a teacher. Here Maimonides is confident of his interpretation – he has no grounds to doubt it – but that is *not* the certainty to which he is referring in *Guide* 1.51, and, unsurprisingly, he doesn’t use the term “certainty” here. Nowhere is *rational* certainty mentioned in this discussion of scriptural hermeneutics, for obvious reasons. The fact that Maimonides has no reason to doubt his interpretation is not the same as saying that his interpretation represents, in his eyes, *ilm yaqīnī*. To say that a belief is indubitable but could possibly be false is simply to affirm a weaker sense of indubitability, one that has nothing to do with the indubitability of which Maimonides speaks in places like *Guide* 1.50.⁶⁰

Another passage may suggest that certainty received through prophecy is subjective, rather than objective. Maimonides states that Abraham’s receiving the message to sacrifice Isaac in a prophetic dream or vision teaches us the important lesson that

⁵⁶ *Guide* 3.24, 500.

⁵⁷ *Guide* 3.50, 615–616.

⁵⁸ *Guide* 1.73, 213–214.

⁵⁹ For objective certainty in Al-Fārābī and Maimonides, see Manekin, “Maimonides and the Arabic Aristotelian Tradition of Epistemology,” 79–81.

⁶⁰ For a different interpretation, which tends to epistemically devalue certainty, see Stern, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ “Guide,”* 143–148.

the prophet does not doubt the message conveyed, despite its having been obtained through the intermediary of the imaginative faculty; had he doubted its truth, he would not have been so ready to follow the Divine command.⁶¹ Maimonides' point, as I read him, is that only in the cases of prophets can certain knowledge be obtained *despite the admixture of the imaginative faculty*. Abraham qua philosopher could be expected to doubt what he received in a dream because of the involvement of the imaginative faculty in the communication of the message. But this is something unique to *prophetic* communication. Were Abraham to share his dream with others, he could not produce within them the certainty he has, unless he did so through the proper, i.e., rational methods. By the way, nowhere does Maimonides say that everything that the prophet interprets has the status of certain truth. On the contrary, some of his statements appear to suggest that prophets may make mistakes.⁶²

Aside from its importance in the Arabic Aristotelian epistemological tradition, why is this rational certainty emphasized by Maimonides? Part of the answer may be found in Al-Fārābī's explanation of his third condition for certainty, i.e., that the knower know that his belief is true. Al-Fārābī states that, for one who knows with certainty, "the state of the intellect with respect to the intelligibles [...] comes to be like the state of vision with respect to the visible at the time of perception."⁶³ In certainty, not only has the mind acquired an intelligible, it has a reflexive awareness of this acquisition and the necessity of the intelligible being true which prevents it from doubting or disbelieving it.

What privileges the state of certainty epistemically is that it eliminates doubt and perplexity. And here we get to the crux of the Maimonides' anti-scepticism, his quite negative evaluation of doubt. Although doubts sometimes have pedagogic value in spurring students on to find new answers that will relieve their doubts, the condition of doubt is on the whole quite bad. Doubts are bad because they can lead people astray. Thus, Maimonides warns in his *Code of Law* against speculating on the foundations of religion by those who are easily led astray by doubts and false beliefs:

For Man's intellect is limited, and not all intellects are able to apprehend truth fully; thus, if every man follows his own thoughts, he will destroy his world according to his limited intellect. How? Sometimes he will stray after idolatry and sometimes he will think concerning the Creator's oneness, perhaps it is the case, perhaps it is not [...] *He doesn't know the procedures (middot) according to which one knows the truth fully, and hence he becomes a heretic.*⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Guide* 3.24. Medieval commentators disagreed whether the binding of Isaac took place entirely within a prophetic dream or vision, according to Maimonides. Cf. *Guide* 2.46. This question is not of relevance to the question of prophetic certainty.

⁶² On this point, see Daniel Davies, *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 134–154.

⁶³ Cited in Black, "Knowledge ('Ilm) and Certitude (Yaqīn) in Al-Fārābī's Epistemology," 22.

⁶⁴ Mishneh Torah, Laws Concerning Idolatry 2:3.

Maimonides distinguishes between those who can apprehend the truth fully and those who cannot; the former lack the proper procedure according to which one comes to know the truth fully. Receiving doctrine on the basis of traditional teaching (*taqlid*) may be necessary for those who are at the beginning of their studies or who are not able to study, but, even if the tradition is correct, such beliefs are subject to doubt. Speculation concerning the foundations of religion is not just dangerous for the ignorant but also for the educated who engage in it. If they fall into error in the course of speculation or because they follow the authority of others who have fallen into error, they distance themselves from the truth, and it may be necessary to kill them and wipe out the traces of their opinion lest they not lead others astray. Learning the proper procedure is vital. Recall the passage in the Introduction that we noted earlier: “Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. *My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident.*” For Maimonides, then, certain knowledge, i.e., the knowledge that is established in the mind essentially and according to the proper methods, provides the *firm and rooted* experience of the intelligible, and that may be why the quest for certainty is an important part of Maimonides’ epistemological project.

It is not the *only* part of his project, since he allows for varying degrees of belief and epistemic appraisal, ranging from the possible to the near-certain and certain. In fact, what is most interesting to my mind about Maimonides’ epistemology is his acceptance of beliefs having to do with Divine science that are not demonstrated, those that occasion less grave doubts than do their opposing beliefs. Wisdom, according to Maimonides, is “the representation of truths as they really are, and the apprehension of all things that humans can apprehend.”⁶⁵ Now let us take the proposition “All things exist in virtue of the purpose of One who’s purposed.” Were Maimonides to limit wisdom to that which can be demonstrated or whose truth can be intuited, i.e., that which provides certain knowledge, then this proposition would be one of the things that cannot be known, except perhaps by virtue of prophetic tradition. If that were the case, one would expect, for example, Maimonides to end his discussion of the creation of the world in *Guide* 2.17, after he has argued that origin of the world – whether it is created or eternal – is a question that cannot be demonstrated, and that creation should be accepted on the basis of prophecy.⁶⁶ But he goes on to offer proofs

⁶⁵ *Haḳdamot ha-Rambam la-Mishnah*, 57 (Hebrew), 353 (Arabic)

⁶⁶ *Guide* 2.17, 294. Cf. Shem Tov ben Joseph ibn Shem Tov’s view that Maimonides’ doubts against Aristotle in *Guide* 2.19 are based on his (mis)identification of Aristotle’s views with those of Avicenna and Al-Fārābī, and that it would have been better had Maimonides just shown that neither the world’s eternity or its createdness can be demonstrated, that belief in creation is harmless, whereas belief in eternity destroys Divine omnipotence. See his commentary in Moses Maimonides, *Moreh Nevukhim* (Sabionetta: Foa, 1553), 49a. That Maimonides does not suspend his judgment, opting for a

approximating demonstrations on behalf of the purposer thesis.⁶⁷ These proofs do not produce certainty, but something close to it. The fact that Maimonides extends his epistemic approval to include things that can be known with near-certainty, such as the aforementioned proposition, *when the near-certainty is achieved by the proper method*, shows that he is actually more accepting of what can be known than those who limit knowledge to propositions that are in principle demonstrable. Of course, the proper method is important. The Kalām theologian believes that he has established the truth of Divine purpose, but his method is faulty because his proofs rest on false premises.⁶⁸

Not every intelligible can be demonstrated or known intuitively; at times one can only know things through prophetic revelation and buttress it with “strong arguments,” which I take to be the same as arguments approximating demonstration, which provide near certainty. But, as far as I know, the only proposition that Maimonides proves with arguments approximating demonstration is the aforementioned one about the purposer, i.e., the argument for creation. Maimonides’ willingness to lower the bar, as it were, for rational knowledge, may be directly connected to his desire to include a proposition that is a fundamental of the Law, second only to the belief in Divine unity.⁶⁹

A final thought: Can certain and near-certain knowledge be achieved by more than a tiny elite that includes Moses? After all, in the aforementioned passage, Maimonides appears to raise the bar rather high; he speaks of one who has achieved the demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of *everything* that may be demonstrated, and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that it is possible, *everything* that may be ascertained, etc. This is a question that I will leave for another time.⁷⁰ But I conclude here by noting that, after making that “bar-raising” statement, he goes on to say, “If, however, you have achieved perfection in the natural things and have understood divine science, you have entered in the ruler’s place *into the inner court* and are with him in one habitation. This is the rank of the men of science; they

theological position consistent with the Law, but rather offers “proofs approximating demonstration” for a Divine Particularizer, reveals the depths of his anti-scepticism.

⁶⁷ *Guide* 2.19, 302.

⁶⁸ An interesting question would be whether, according to Maimonides, the Kalam theologian can be said to know that the world is created. He neither uses a reliable method nor does he understand what creation after non-existence really is. Most likely he has a defective belief in the createdness of the world.

⁶⁹ *Guide* 2.13, 282.

⁷⁰ In the meantime, see Shlomo Pines, “The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Fārābī, Ibn Bājjā, and Maimonides,” in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979): 82–109; Alexander Altmann, “Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics,” in A. Altmann, *Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung—Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 60–129, and Davidson, *Maimonides the Rationalist*, 173–211, esp. 201–206.

however, are of different grades of perfection.” The “you” to which these words are addressed is Maimonides’ student Joseph, for whom he wrote the *Guide*. It is unlikely that Maimonides thought that Joseph could become a Moses. Rather, “achieving perfection” is, for him, a matter of degree. One need not be a Moses to be with the ruler in one habitation; it is sufficient to be a Joseph, albeit a Joseph who achieves a certain degree of perfection.

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Scepticism and Anti- Scepticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Thought

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