

The Maimonidean Parable, the Arabic *Poetics*, and the Garden of Eden

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The “tradition that casts philosophy and poetry as representing competing norms—of reasoned argument, generality, and objectivity on the one hand, and of expression, particularity, passion, and subjectivity, on the other”¹—originated with Plato and Aristotle. But not everyone in the Aristotelian tradition saw it that way. For the medieval Arabic Aristotelians, the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* belonged to the Organon, the logical works in the Aristotelian corpus that are the instruments of the sciences: *Categories*, *De Interpretatione*, *Topics*, and *Prior Analytics*, leading to the *Posterior Analytics*. Logic in this broad sense studies different forms of argumentation that fall in a hierarchy. At the top, the strongest demonstrative syllogisms of science yield necessary, certain, causally explained truths to which one is compelled to assent by reason. At the other end, weaker forms of persuasion like those found in poetry produce acquiescence based on images, mimetic representations, and imaginative analogies and comparisons. Although the *Poetics* and *Rhetoric* may not be suited for the pursuit of scientific truth, their classification in the Organon in the Arabic tradition gave them a logical coloring they lacked probably for Aristotle himself and almost certainly for us. This contextualization essentially connects them to reasoning, understanding, and the production of conviction, belief, and analogous cognitive states. Different figures within the Arabic tradition worked out the argumentative structure and function of poetry and poetic devices in different ways. For example, the great Arabic Aristotelians al-Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes each elaborated it (though in different

1. Here I quote from the letter of invitation to this volume.

ways) by means of what they called the “poetic (or rhetorical) syllogism” that yields not assent (*tasdiq*) due to the realization that things are as they are said to be, but an act of acquiescence of the imagination based on the arousal of wonder, awe, or delight.²

The Arabic Aristotelians also saw an important cognitive function for poetry and poetic devices, such as metaphor, analogy, and pictorially sensuous imaginative representations. Based on the Platonic model of the philosopher-ruler, they reconceived the idea of prophetic religion or law, and of the prophet or the law-giver of a (religious) community. The prophet is first and foremost a philosopher—that is, one who has mastered demonstrative science (at least in the ideal case) and who grasps abstract theoretical truths. But he is also a legislator, that is, a founder of a state (or, in their terms, a religion) who, using the power of his imaginative faculty, “translates” the abstract theoretical truths of which he has knowledge into concrete images, narratives, laws, and rituals that can be grasped by the community at large that cannot always understand theoretical truths as such. Thus the institutions of such a society are indirectly based on knowledge of theoretical truths, and their end is to inculcate belief in those truths and in their value among the members of the community. In this sense the Arabic Aristotelians conceived of religion (or the law that governs a society) as an “imitation” of philosophy, a kind of popular philosophy, using images, metaphors, and rituals, whose correct beliefs and values are based on pure demonstrative philosophy but are presented in a form that can be digested and absorbed by everyone in the community.³

Thus, poetry and imaginative images are used by the prophet or law-giver to disseminate abstract theoretical—philosophical and scientific—propositions. They have both a heuristic and a prophylactic function. On the one hand, they enable those unable to comprehend abstract truths as such to grasp them in a concrete way. They stimulate young philosophers to seek out their theoretical content. On the other hand, they also serve to withhold, or conceal, the content of the theoretical truths from those who are not prepared to grasp it, protecting both the audience (on the assumption that a little knowledge can be harmful) and the philosopher (who may be harmed out of misunderstanding.). Thus the very same poetic devices that enable the dissemination of knowledge control its accessibility.

All these functions of poetry and poetic or figurative representations assume that their content is more or less the same as that of the theoretical propositions of demonstrative science, physics and metaphysics. In contemporary semantic vocabulary religions and poetry differ from physics and metaphysics only in their “character,” the forms of their respective linguistic expressions or their modes of linguistic presentation of that “content.” In principle it ought to be possible to strip off the religious or poetic dressing and expose the philosophical content, exactly what is expressed in a demonstrative science, beneath it. To this degree, the poetic form itself is not cognitively significant.

2. On the Arabic tradition of the *Poetics*, see Black (1990), Kemal (1986, 1992, 2003), Heath (1992).

3. See, for example, al-Farabi (1970/2005), selection trans. in Khalidi (2005).

With this sketch of its philosophical background in place, let me turn to the topic of this essay: the Maimonidean parable. Moses Maimonides was the greatest Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages but his philosophical context was the Arabic Aristotelian, or Neo-Platonized Aristotelian, tradition and his philosophical mentors were figures like al-Farabi, Avicenna, ibn Bajja, and Averroes.⁴ His major philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, is a composition that has resisted neat, simple categorization since its “publication” in 1191.⁵ Although I have just now described the *Guide* as a “philosophical work,” in fact its genre is the subject of recurrent debate. Some read it as a more or less straightforward Aristotelian work; others as a work of polemical kalam, or apologetic theology, attacking the Aristotelians; yet others as a work primarily of scriptural exegesis, focused on the interpretation of Scripture and rabbinic texts. It is all of these, and none of them exclusively. Some read the book more or less at face value, others insist that it is an esoteric work which, on topics that matter, never means what it explicitly, or exoterically, states. Maimonides himself draws his reader’s attention to its perplexing, puzzle-like form: his use of allusions or “chapter titles” rather than full expositions, the fact that he divides up and scatters topics in parts throughout the book rather than presents them in a systematic, let alone axiomatic, manner; that he introduces ambiguous formulations, employs figurative expressions (including extended metaphors and the parable), and inserts deliberate contradictions in order to conceal “secrets,” and so on. Yet, more than 800 years after it was written, there is little agreement over the point of all this and, in particular, the relation of the form of the *Guide* to its philosophical subject matter.⁶

The interpretation of the *Guide* is further complicated by what is probably the most debated question in Maimonides scholarship in recent years: the question whether Maimonides also believes in limitations on the human intellectual capacity that preclude scientific knowledge of everything beyond sublunar physics. It is well-known that Maimonides takes intellectual or theoretical perfection to be the ideal and only true human perfection. One who achieves this state would have complete knowledge of the natural sciences including (sublunar) physics as well as cosmology and metaphysics, the two most sublime bodies of knowledge in the classical Neoplatonized Aristotelian scheme of things. This individual is also constantly, actively, uninterruptedly engaged in the act, or activity, of intellectually apprehending and reflecting on these truths. But if Maimonides also believes that

4. For general introductions to Maimonides, see now two recent intellectual biographies: Davidson (2005) and Kraemer (2008).

5. The *Guide of the Perplexed* was written in Arabic: *Dalalat al-hai'rin*, ed. Issachar Joel and Saloman Munk (Jerusalem: J. Junovitch 1930/31). The classic French translation is Maimonides (1856–66) and there is now an excellent modern Hebrew translation in Maimonides (2002). All translations in this essay are from Pines’s translation in Maimonides (1963). In-text parenthetical references are to part, chapter, and page in the Pines translation; for example, (I: 2: 45) is Part I, ch. 2, p. 45. The literature on the *Guide* is vast. For those with no prior familiarity, a good place to start now is with the various essays in Seeskin (2005). On Maimonides’ place in his philosophical context, and on ancient and medieval Islamic influences on him, the best introduction remains Pines’s (1963) introduction to his translation.

6. See, for example, Strauss (1952), Harvey (1980), Klein-Braslavy (1986a, 1988, 1996), Rosenberg (1981), Seeskin (1999, 2005).

there are limitations on the human intellectual capacity, then perfection of the intellect, which must perforce include knowledge of cosmology and metaphysics, would be a humanly *unrealizable* ideal.⁷ There are roughly two camps in this debate. Those who hold that Maimonides believes that it is humanly possible to achieve metaphysical knowledge, if not of all subjects, then of some and at least in part, I shall call, following Kant, “dogmatic” interpreters of the *Guide*. Those who challenge that assumption I shall call “skeptical” interpreters. My own view, to put my cards on the table, is on the side of the skeptical interpretation. More specifically, I hold (but shall not argue here) that Maimonides believes that (1) with respect to some claims in metaphysics and cosmology, there are *limitations* on the capacity of the human intellect that prevent it from achieving scientific knowledge; and (2) with respect to other claims, especially about the deity, it is *impossible* to achieve scientific knowledge.⁸

Maimonides’ turn to the parable, and his use of it as a way of “doing” philosophy, is, I will argue, a consequence of his skeptical stance toward the possibility of human knowledge of metaphysics. As a preliminary remark, let me say that by the term “parable,” I am translating Maimonides’ Arabic term “*mathal*,” the cognate of the Hebrew “*mashal*.” Some translate this as “allegory,” and in Arabic it can mean “simile,” “example,” “comparison,” and more. As we shall see, what Maimonides means by this term is quite specific and *sui generis*; it is nothing like our received idea of either a parable (which calls to mind those of the New Testament) or an allegory (which suggests something more symbolic and closer to the Latin *allegoresis*). I could leave the term untranslated, but I use “parable” to connect Maimonides’ device to the rabbinic parable (*mashal*) in whose tradition he also situates himself.

In order to understand the function Maimonides sees in the parable, it is also important to situate it in the same Arabic tradition that locates the *Poetics* in the *Organon*, and thus poetics in logic. Many readers may find this, my mention of Maimonides and the *Poetics* in one breath, surprising and even perplexing. Maimonides never mentions the *Poetics* and it is well known that he does not, on the face of it, have a good opinion of poetry. At the beginning of *Guide* I: 2, his interpretation of the parable of the Garden of Eden, he castigates a “learned man,” literally, “a man of the sciences,” for reading “the guide of the first and the last”—that is, the first *Guide*, the Torah—“as you would glance through a piece of poetry” (or a historical work). (See also III: 43: 573.) On the other hand, every reader of the *Guide* knows how interested Maimonides is in the language of poetry, figurative

7. The *locus classicus* for the current debate is Pines (1979), followed by his (1981, 1986, 1987). Pines’s view has generated a large literature, largely of resistance. See Altmann (1987), Davidson (1992–3), Harvey (1991), Ivry (1985, 1998), Kogan (1989), Kraemer (2000), Manekin (1990), Seeskin (1999). For a defense of Maimonidean skepticism, see Stern (1989, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008a, 2008b), and Stern (forthcoming).

8. Two qualifications should be emphasized. First, the skeptical challenges specifically concern *scientific* knowledge that would enable the human to achieve intellectual perfection or, more specifically, the status of an acquired intellect that either is in or leads to conjunction with the Active Intellect; they do not bear on weaker kinds of belief or their certainty. Second, Maimonides’ skeptical arguments are local, or mitigated, not global, directed specifically at knowledge of metaphysics and cosmology, not at the natural sciences, sublunar physics, or perceptual knowledge.

language, especially metaphors, transferred expressions, and the parable, insofar as they give rise to perplexity. And, like his Arabic predecessors, he places himself in a tradition that includes both the prophets and rabbis and “Plato and his predecessors,” all of whom employed figures and “similes” in order not to state “secrets” explicitly if only to avoid “the charge of corruption” (I: 17: 43).

Now, concealment in this sense—that is, withholding from public dissemination—is, as we have mentioned, one critical use that poetic and imaginative representations had for many in the Arabic Aristotelian tradition. Nonetheless, the functions that concern dissemination are, in my opinion, the less important ones for Maimonides. For him the more important function of the parable is to present subject matter “concealed” in the sense that its content—in particular, propositions of metaphysics—is not fully known *to* or explicitly articulated *by* the *knower*; it presents subject matter that is only incompletely apprehended or grasped by the prophet-philosopher himself. That is, because Maimonides believes (as the skeptical interpretation of the *Guide* holds) that there are serious obstacles in the way of the human’s attempt to gain knowledge of metaphysics and the heavens, then the human—including Maimonides himself—is left at most with a limited, partial understanding of those subjects. The *Guide* is an attempt to give expression to this incomplete apprehension—of God, the ultimate causes of nature, and the heavens. It is an articulation in words of Maimonides’ own limited intellectual achievements in his attempts to grasp the “secrets”—that is, enigmas or not fully understood truths—of metaphysics given his epistemic limitations. And Maimonides’ primary medium for the expression of this incomplete knowledge of metaphysics is the parable.⁹ We find, Maimonides believes, earlier attempts to articulate incompletely understood truths of metaphysics, or “secrets,” in parables found in ancient prophetic and rabbinic works. Hence, part of his project requires the interpretation of these classic texts of Judaism. But following this tradition, Maimonides also invents his own parables to articulate his own limited understanding of both the “secrets” themselves and of earlier attempts to grasp them. And by walking his reader through the interpretations of parables found in the *Guide*, Maimonides wishes to bring her, indeed train her, to undergo the same intellectual experiences in her attempt to understand metaphysical truths.

In engaging in philosophical scriptural exegesis, Maimonides’ aim is not, as many have claimed, to show how the Bible can be harmonized with Philosophy by reading it as—translating it into—Aristotle. Instead Maimonides’ project is to read the Torah as a philosophical work with its own distinctive philosophical position. Thus the Bible is not Aristotle (in any of his Arabic versions) but it emerged from a rich philosophical world that Maimonides believed existed in ancient Israel, with competing schools roughly parallel to those known in the Arabic philosophical tradition (See *Guide* I: 71: 175–76). The arguments found in the *Guide* are not borrowed to philosophically legitimate the Law, nor are they a key to decipher Scripture. Rather they provide a context for Maimonides’ own original philosophi-

9. The closest, perhaps only, parallel I have found to this Maimonidean use of the parable is Heath’s explanation of Avicenna’s use of allegory; see his (1992), 147–69. Cf. also Stroumsa (1992).

cal positions that he finds expressed, especially in parable form, by the biblical text, which he takes to be *the* exemplary text in the history of philosophy.

The outcome of interpreting one of these parables is not, for Maimonides, the kind of grasp or apprehension of a proposition that leads to assent to a truth of science; it is not the kind of intellectual state that constitutes scientific, explanatory knowledge of an intelligible or demonstrated proposition. After all, the function of parabolic expression is to articulate, as best a human can, the *incompletely* understood, only partially known “secrets” of metaphysics. Rather, like the imaginative representations treated in the *Poetics*, the content of a parable produces a cognitive affect that is a function of the imaginative faculty as much as the intellect, an act of acquiescence in a state of wonder, praise, or awe. At the same time, as I hope to show, the way in which the understanding of a parable, its activity of interpretation, produces this cognitive affect has the structure of an argument, not that of a syllogism, yet a clearly recognizable argumentative form.

Part I of this paper sketches Maimonides’ conception of a parable, first its semantic structure and then its cognitive role. In Parts II and III I work out in detail one example of a Maimonidean parable, his different interpretations of the story of Adam’s “fall” in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3). Finally, at the end of the paper I return to the cognitive affect of the parable.

For many readers of *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, this story, my texts, and their subject matter will be unfamiliar, even alien, surely exotic. One aim of this paper is to expose contemporary philosophers to this rich but largely unfamiliar philosophical tradition, however different it is from ours. In this tradition, poetics and philosophy were not competing norms. Rather, a certain kind of poetics and its interpretation, that is, the exegesis of Scripture, was a primary way of philosophizing, a distinctive genre of philosophy.

I. MAIMONIDES’ CONCEPTION OF A PHILOSOPHICAL PARABLE

Maimonides’ “introductory remarks” on the parable open with four verses from the Books of Hosea, Ezekiel, and Proverbs whose respective authors—the last of whom (according to the rabbinic tradition) is Solomon—describe their own writing as parables. To explain Solomon’s—and, by implication, his own—use of the parable, Maimonides offers three successive parables about parables. The first describes Solomon’s “discovery” of the significance of parabolic interpretation for the Jewish exegetical tradition:

To what were the words of the Torah to be compared before the advent of Solomon? To a well the waters of which are at a great depth and cool, yet no man could drink of them. Now what did one clever man do? He joined cord with cord and rope with rope and drew them up and drank. Thus did Solomon say one parable after another and speak one word after another until he understood the meaning of the words of the Torah.¹⁰

10. Midrash on the *Song of Songs* 1:1, cited in I: Intro.: 11.

According to this parable, Solomon's discovery was not simply that parables are instruments for understanding otherwise inaccessible knowledge. Nor was it that the more parables one can give, the better her understanding, like many short ropes knotted together to make a long one. Maimonides sees a deeper methodological moral for the explanation of parables. Solomon was the first to recognize that not only are the deepest truths of the Torah expressed in parables, but also that parables can only be understood and explicated through the medium of other parables. To draw up the water of Torah, one must "join cord with cord and rope with rope" for only by "saying one parable after another," that is, by interpreting one parable with the expressive resources of another, can one understand the meaning of the Torah, itself a parable.¹¹

We will return to the reason for this "parabolic circle," but this is exactly what Maimonides does in his exposition of the next two parables that constitute his interpretation, in turn, of the phrase "words of the Torah" in the previously quoted passage. I quote the passage at length (which I have broken into parts for ease of reference):

- (A) About [the understanding of obscure matters] it has been said: *Our Rabbis say: A man who loses a sela or a pearl in his house can find the pearl by lighting a taper worth an issar. In the same way this parable in itself is worth nothing, but by means of it you can understand the words of the Torah* (Midrash on the Song of Songs, 1:1) . . . Now consider the explicit affirmation of [the Sages] . . . that the internal meaning (*batin*) of the words of the Torah is a pearl whereas the external meaning (*zahir*) of all parables is worth nothing and their comparison of the concealment of a subject by its parable's external meaning (*zahir*) to a man who let drop a pearl in his house, which was dark and full of furniture. Now this pearl is there, but he does not see it and does not know where it is. It is as though it were no longer in his possession, as it is impossible for him to derive any benefit from it until . . . he lights a lamp—an act to which an understanding of the meaning of the parable corresponds.
- (B) The Sage has said: *A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings [maskiyyoth] of silver.* (Prov. 25: 11). Hear now an elucidation of the thought that he has set forth. The term *maskiyyoth* denotes filigree trceries; I mean to say trceries in which there are apertures with very small eyelets, like the handiwork of silversmiths. They are so called because a glance penetrates through them; for in the [Aramaic] *translation* of the Bible the Hebrew term *va-yashqeph*—meaning, he glanced—is translated *va-istekhe*. The Sage accordingly said that a

11. Cf. the commentary of Abarbanel, ad. loc. in Maimonides (1904/1960); Klein-Braslavy (1996), 157–61, and Rosenberg (1981), 129. On Maimonides' use of the figure of King Solomon, see further Klein-Braslavy (1996).

saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. Now see how marvellously this dictum describes a well-constructed parable. For he says that in a saying that has two meanings—he means an external (*zahir*) and an internal (*batin*) one—the external meaning (*zahir*) ought to be as beautiful as silver while its internal meaning (*batin*) ought to be more beautiful than the external one (*zahir*), the former being in comparison to the latter as gold is to silver.

- (C) Its external meaning (*zahir*) also ought to contain in it something that indicates to someone considering it what is to be found in its internal meaning (*batin*), as happens in the case of an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes. When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold. The parables of the prophets . . . are similar.
- (D) Their external meaning (*zahir*) contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning (*zahir*) of *Proverbs* and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning (*batin*), on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is. (I: Intro: 11–12)

Here Maimonides explains the phrase “the words of the Torah” by means of the rabbinic parable of the pearl (A) which he explains, in turn, through his own parabolic explanation of the Solomonic verse *Proverbs* 25: 11 in (B). There is much to discuss in this rich passage, but what immediately strikes the reader is the explicit contradiction in the two parables between their respective evaluations of “the external meaning” (*zahir*) of a parable. Maimonides interprets the phrase “the parable itself” in the parable of the pearl as “the external meaning of all parables” that “is worth nothing.” But on Maimonides’ own parabolic interpretation of Prov. 25: 11 in (B), its external meaning is “as beautiful as silver.” There is also a second difference. According to the parable of the pearl, the function of the external meaning is exclusively to conceal its internal meaning. In Maimonides’ own parabolic interpretation of *Proverbs*, the external meaning “indicates” the internal meaning, revealing as much as it conceals.

This contradiction calls out for resolution. It is too explicit to be one of the contradictions Maimonides claims to insert deliberately in the *Guide*. It is too obvious to have been inadvertently committed by an author as careful as Maimonides. Without reviewing other explanations that have been offered, I propose that Maimonides uses the term “external meaning” (*zahir*) equivocally; by openly juxtaposing the two uses, he wants his reader to recognize the ambiguity. In one sense, the external meaning of a parable is worthless and serves only to conceal; in the second sense, it is as valuable as silver because not only is it wisdom, it also indicates, or reveals, golden wisdom, the internal meaning. On this proposal, parables have three meanings. I shall call the first of these the “vulgar external

meaning,” the second the “parabolic external meaning,” and the third, the “parabolic inner meaning” (*batin*).^{12,13}

The first kind of external meaning is “vulgar” because it is how “the vulgar imagine” the text should be understood (II: 29: 346), and it is the only way they think it should be understood (I: 70: 174). By the “vulgar” Maimonides means not only the uneducated multitude but also the “learned man” of *Guide* I: 2 and all those who follow, or who are misled by, their imagination and its false and superstitious beliefs. Indeed a superb example of a vulgar external meaning of a parable is the learned man’s reading of Genesis 3 which reads it as a historical episode, or pagan myth, about a particular human being named “Adam” who was forbidden to eat the fruit of a particular tree, disobeyed, and as a consequence was seemingly rewarded with the knowledge of good and evil that distinguishes humans from animals—as if he “underwent a metamorphosis, becoming a star in heaven” (I: 2: 24). What is wrong with vulgar external interpretations like this is that they “contain such rubbish and such perverse imaginings as to make men laugh when they hear them . . . and weep when they consider that [they] are applied to God” (I: 59: 141; cf. II: 29: 347). In short, they lack all wisdom.¹⁴

One might think that it is wrong to read Scripture as if it were history or poetry because the vulgar external meaning implies that, if it is a historical narrative, then we are being told something purportedly veridical about actual individuals, events, and actions (e.g., Adam, a talking serpent, eating a fruit in Genesis 3) and that, if it is a poetic epic, then we are being told something fictive (about fictional beings). But in fact the text is a parable and none of these things existed or occurred either in reality or in fiction. That is, reading a text as history or poetry entails that it is veridical or fictive, respectively; parables presuppose neither.

This is *not*, I want to emphasize, an implication of Maimonides’ conception of a parable. To identify a passage as a parable is *not* to say or imply *anything*, pro or con, about the veracity or reality of what the passage says in its vulgar external meaning; the parabolic status of a passage is, we might say, *neutral* or *indifferent* with respect to the question of its extra-linguistic reality. The point of identifying a text as a parable is that its *significance*—the reason why it is included in the Torah—is that it expresses philosophical wisdom, that it is not mentioned in

12. The expressions “*zahir*” and “*batin*” translated into Hebrew as “*nigleh*” and “*nistar*” (or “*mashma’ut nisteret*”), as well as “*peshat*” and “*tokh*,” can also mean “revealed” and “concealed.” I discuss the relation between the parable and concealment briefly below; see also Stern (forthcoming) for detailed discussion. The literature on “*zahir*” and “*batin*” in Arabic philosophy is vast; see, for example, Bello (1989).

13. The vast majority of Maimonides’ uses in the *Guide* of the term “external meaning” (*zahir*) refer to vulgar external meaning, for example, I: 36: 85, I: 53: 119, II: 29:338, I: 31: 67, II: 19: 302, II: 27: 333. For examples of “external meaning” in the sense of parabolic external meaning, see III: 41: 567, III: 46: 590. In the Introduction we find the same equivocation over “external meaning” (*zahir*) between its vulgar and parabolic senses; see I: Introduction: 9–10. However, this terminological fact is counter-balanced by the strong inductive evidence that Maimonides presents three different meanings for almost all parables; see Stern (forthcoming).

14. A second and deeper fault with vulgar external meaning is its focus on the meanings of *words* which are not for Maimonides the subject of a science; see Stern (forthcoming).

Scripture in order to record historical or mythic information. The mistake of the “learned man” in Guide I: 2 is not that he takes the story about Adam to be historically or externally true, but that he takes that truth (if it is true) to be the point of the story. This is one important way in which the Maimonidean parable differs from our contemporary notion of a parable (or allegory).¹⁵

In addition to their vulgar external meaning, parables have two parabolic meanings, one external (or revealed) (*zahir*), the other inner (or concealed) (*batin*). As we will see, there are some respects in which these two meanings are really one, in others two. Both are wisdom, and both count as what the author means. Where they differ is only in their contents. This difference in content is qualified by the fact that our grasp of the parabolic inner meaning is only “through” the external meaning. Hence, they are ontologically distinct, but the one is epistemically dependent on the other.

The terms “external meaning” (*zahir*) and “inner meaning” (*batin*) have a long pre-Maimonidean history, but in (D) Maimonides gives us an *explicit* statement of what he takes their difference to be. These “definitions” are notable both for what they say and what they don’t. They distinguish the two meanings by their respective kinds of wisdom, their content. They do not distinguish them by their modes of presentation or literary style. They do not mark the external/inner distinction in terms of their respective intended audiences or readers: The external is not said to be addressed to or written for the multitude, community at large, or “general run of humankind.” The inner is not said to be for the philosophical elite or for “those who are able to understand for themselves”—contra, say, Averroes in his *Decisive Treatise* or more recent authors.¹⁶ If they are both kinds of *wisdom*, then both convey content that ought to be believed. Maimonides does not suggest that the inner is what the author himself “really” believes, while the external is what he mouths for public consumption or as a political stratagem or noble lie.¹⁷ As “wisdom,” both might be called “philosophy,” although one is practical wisdom, the other theoretical.¹⁸ There is no suggestion that the external and the inner contradict one another or stand in tension.¹⁹ For all these reasons, we should not identify the distinction between parabolic external and internal meaning with the widely

15. Of course, even if the parable in its vulgar external sense is veridical, what occurred need not conform in *every* detail to the passage. See I: Introduction: 14 on the dangers of over-interpretation of parables, some details of which may be no more than textual artifacts. For further discussion of the veridicality of parables, see Stern, *The Unbinding of Isaac: Maimonides on the Aqedah*, Gruss Lectures 2003, The University of Pennsylvania Law School (unpublished manuscript).

16. Averroes (1961); Strauss (1952), 94.

17. The *vulgar* external meaning might be said to be addressed to the multitude, but insofar as even it educationally guides them to correct beliefs (or was originally written with this meaning in order to begin to educate the audience in its original context), there is no implication of authorial insincerity.

18. On the term “wisdom,” see *Guide* III: 54: 632–34 where Maimonides distinguishes four senses of the term, and claims that “the Law in its true sense is called wise in two respects,” because it contains rational virtues and moral virtues. As we shall see, this distinction is *not* identical to the external/inner meaning distinction.

19. See Strauss (1952), Ravitzky (1981, 1990). This is not to deny that there may turn out to be individual points of tension between them, but there is no systematic incompatibility.

mentioned distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric. But rather than discuss that controversial distinction, let's take a closer look at the two definitions.

The external meaning of a parable "contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies." Maimonides does not specify the "many useful respects," but elsewhere he explains that he uses "welfare" in contrast to the term "perfection."²⁰ "Welfare" designates the happy state of a *community*; "perfection," the best possible condition of an *individual*. Second, Maimonides distinguishes between two kinds of communal "welfare" which correspond to two kinds of individual "perfection." The first, and lower, of the two is "the welfare of the body," which consists in material, economic, political, and moral well-being. The second, and higher, of the two is "the welfare of the soul" of the community which consists in the multitude or the members of the community acquiring correct opinions, in other words, the right beliefs and values. Analogously, individuals attain two kinds of perfection: of the body, which consists in their health, and of the soul, which consists in the full actualization of the intellect. So, welfare is communal but not just material or practical; it is also theoretical—the inculcation of correct beliefs and values.

The inner meaning of a parable "contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is." This formulation is qualified and prolix. It does not say that inner meaning is wisdom that consists either in true beliefs or in knowledge of what is true or of reality or of true reality. The beliefs are "concerned with" or *about* truth or reality and the wisdom is, in turn, "useful for these beliefs." This awkward formulation may itself reflect Maimonides' epistemology. If parabolic external meaning is concerned with communal welfare, then it would be reasonable to think that parabolic inner meaning concerns the perfection of the individual, namely, his intellectual perfection, the condition of a fully actualized intellect that has apprehended, and constantly reflects on, all physical and metaphysical intelligibles and truths, the state in which the human intellect conjoins with the Active Intellect. If Maimonides has reservations about the human realizability of this state, those worries may lie behind this awkward formulation.

Thus the contents of the wisdoms contained in the parabolic external and inner meanings are distinct, aiming at different ends. But in the parable of the apple of gold in silver filigree Maimonides also emphasizes their epistemic interdependence. According to his description (C) of the cognitive experience of grasping the external and inner parabolic meanings, the content of the external meaning "indicates" that there is an inner meaning and what its content is. Contrary to what the interpreter thinks "from a distance" and "with imperfect attention," when he "looks" at the external meaning with "keen sight" and "full attention," its golden inner meaning "becomes clear to him." What Maimonides is describing here is the epistemic dependence of our understanding of the inner meaning on the external meaning. It is by working through the external meaning, by focusing on its implications and presuppositions, by examining and probing it, and *only* in this way, that one grasps *that* there is more to the content of the parable than its external meaning and, to the degree to which he grasps it, *what* that inner content is. The

20. See III: 27: 510–13; Galston (1978).

image of the apple of gold peeking through the silver-filigree, visible only in parts, never in whole or completely, and only when one attends to it, is Maimonides' way of describing the partial, incomplete, unsustained character of the understanding that is distinctive of parabolic inner meaning whose wisdom is indirectly grasped by way of the external meaning. This is the epistemic sense in which the one is "contained" in the other. But not only is this a description of how one grasps the inner meaning *qua inner meaning* "through" the lattice of external meaning. As Maimonides' image of lightning flashes (to which we will now turn) also suggests, this is his view of the character of our grasp of metaphysical knowledge in general. What insight we have of metaphysics is partial, incomplete, not explicitly expressible like a science. Instead it is inferred, conjectured, explored, and supposed, starting from the claims of external parabolic meaning, wisdom concerning beliefs and values that may be correct but are nonetheless not science.²¹

Maimonides' fullest description of the cognitive or expressive function of a parable—that is, its function as an expression or articulation of the character of the philosopher's own *apprehension* of certain truths as opposed to his *dissemination* of those truths to others—is the culmination of his description of the intellectual experience of grasping metaphysical truths in the Introduction to the *Guide*:

- (A) You should not think that these great *secrets* are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think that it is day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets . . . Among them there is one to whom the lightning flashes only once in the whole of his night. . . . There are others between whose lightning flashes there are greater and shorter intervals. Thereafter comes he who does not attain a degree in which his darkness is illumined by any lightning flash. It is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind, stones or something else that give light in the darkness of the night. And even this small light that shines over us is not always there, but flashes and is hidden again, as if it were the *flaming sword which turned every way* (Gen. 3: 24). It is in accord with these states that the degrees of the perfect vary. As for those who never even once see a light, but grope about in their night, . . . the truth, in spite of the strength of its manifestation, is entirely hidden from them. They are the vulgar among the people . . .

21. I am indebted here to discussions with Jonathan Malino. In certain respects, this simply parallels Aristotle's movement from the conventionally accepted opinions that constitute dialectic to the scientific knowledge achieved through demonstrations.

- (B) Know that whenever one of the perfect wishes to mention, either orally or in writing, something that he understands of these secrets, according to the degree of his perfection, he is unable to explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion that he has apprehended, as he could do with the other sciences whose teaching is generally recognized. Rather there will befall him when teaching another that which he had undergone when learning himself. I mean to say that the subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again as though this were the nature of this subject matter, be there much or little of it.
- (C) For this reason, all the Sages possessing knowledge of God the Lord, knowers of the truth, when they aimed at teaching something of this subject matter, spoke of it only in parables and riddles . . . The situation is such that the exposition of one who wishes to teach without recourse to parables and riddles is so obscure and brief as to make obscurity and brevity serve in place of parables and riddles (I: Intro: pp. 7–8).

(A) describes the intellectual experiences of different individuals engaged in apprehension, or cognition, of the “secrets” of the Torah, the “Account of the Beginning” and the “Account of the Chariot,” which Maimonides identifies as Aristotelian natural science and divine science, or metaphysics, respectively. Using the imagery of lightning flashes, Maimonides distinguishes among individuals’ experiences according to their frequency, the lengths of the intervening intervals of darkness, and whether the flash is direct or reflected.²² However, all these flashes, or intellectual experiences, are momentary, instantaneous, unsustained: They stand for fragmentary, incomplete epistemic states whose contents are not fully explicit propositions of the sort that would constitute the premises of a science.

Maimonides’ opening sentence sets the tone for what follows: Do “not think that these great *secrets* are fully and completely known to *anyone among us*” (my emphasis), that is, *no human* has “full and complete” knowledge of these metaphysical “secrets.” This sense of “secret”—and a similar remark would apply to the terms “mystery” or “hidden subject,” and the verb “conceal”—is not the sense of that which is deliberately withheld from dissemination, from being made known to others. Instead it is that which is not known or known fully by the philosopher or prophet, because, by its very nature, it is not revealed or revealable—that is, apprehensible with the kind of understanding required for scientific knowledge. This notion of concealment is a constraint on apprehension.

Thus even the “great one among the prophets,” the “one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again,” was “always, *as it were*, in unceasing light” (my emphasis)—“as it were” but not really. Although there are differences of

22. On the light and lightning imagery in this passage, and its Avicennian roots, see Pines (1979), 89–90; for an alternative interpretation, see Davidson (1992–3), 68–70, whose “most natural” reading of the passage “as a depiction of different degrees of metaphysical illumination, not as a repudiation of such illumination” ignores the consistently restrictive character of the passage, for example, the opening sentence. I agree, however, contra Pines, that the text does not support a distinction between prophetic and non-prophetic knowledge, or between empirical and non-empirical knowledge.

degree among individuals, the bottom line is that none of “these great *secrets* are fully and completely known *to anyone among us*” (my emphasis), including the most perfect. The obstacle to the prophet’s or philosopher’s full and complete knowledge is, Maimonides says, that he is a creature of matter and habit, a body with an imagination.

In (B) and (C) Maimonides describes the parable as the literary product, or verbally articulated expression, of this very same intellectual experience. He begins by telling us that when “one of the perfect” tries to teach another “there will befall him . . . that which he had undergone when learning himself.” The “perfect individual” cannot “explain with complete clarity and coherence even the portion”—the limited amount—that he himself apprehended “as he could do with the other sciences that are generally recognized.” Instead he again finds himself subject to an intellectual experience whose “subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again.” Maimonides uses the scenario of teaching here, but his point is to make explicit, or to articulate, the incapacity that infects the individual’s own apprehension. What accounts for the lack of coherence and clarity is what is common to the teaching and apprehension: their shared content. “The subject matter will appear, flash, and then be hidden again *as though this were the nature of this subject matter*” (my emphasis).

Maimonides gives us a glimpse of “the lack of coherence and clarity” he has in mind in his description of the seventh kind of contradiction, one of the kinds of contradiction which he says is found in the *Guide* and possibly—it is “a matter of speculative study and investigation”—in prophetic books.²³ When “speaking about very obscure [i.e. profound] matters,”

Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. (I: Introduction: 18)

Maimonides does not identify the “necessities” but what he seems to have in mind is that “obscure matters,” that is, deep and not evident subjects require, or rest on, incompatible premises. For example (though this is David Hume’s, *not* Maimonides’ example), religions require gods who are awesome and worthy of worship; hence, the more unfamiliar and remote they are, the more godly. But they also require gods who are approachable and accessible; hence, the more person-like and familiar, the more godly. This incoherence or incompatibility is built into—as it were, as premises of—the very idea of a god. The subject matter of parables, “secrets” (in the epistemic sense), suffer from a similar lack of coherence or tension: They rest on incompatible premises, like an antinomy. Now, with the seventh contradiction, Maimonides also goes on to say that it is crucial that “the vulgar not be aware of the contradiction”; hence, it must be “concealed”—in the first sense of not be disseminated or not be made known. In the next section, we shall give one example of a contradiction of this seventh kind that is built into

23. On Maimonides’ contradictions, see now Lorberbaum 2000; for a deflationary reading, see Kreisel (1992).

Maimonides' interpretation of a particular parable. Note for now that its concealment—in the not-to-be-disseminated sense—is a consequence, or reaction, to the existence of a secret or something concealed in the epistemic sense. That it is not to be disseminated is not the explanation of why the parable harbors a (epistemic) “secret.”

In sum: “for this reason”—that is, their incomplete, limited understanding—the sages adopted parables and riddles when they wished to teach, or to express, *their* apprehension of the secrets of physics and metaphysics, the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot.²⁴ This is the full force of the image of the apple of gold that can only be glimpsed through the very small holes in the silver filigree. The glimpses of gold are analogous to the momentary flashes of lightning in the darkness of night. Both are figures for our incomplete, partial grasp of the “secrets” of natural and divine science that constitutes the wisdom contained in the (parabolic) inner meaning, the apple of gold. The parable is the literary articulation of the human's partial, incomplete knowledge—where the paradigm of complete, fully explicit knowledge would be knowledge of these subjects “as they really are” (I: Intro. 9), that is, as science would express and explain them. Maimonides' idea is *not* that the parable “expresses metaphysical matters [that] cannot be expressed through language, so that all we can do is hint at them through symbols,” that the parable is “a symbol . . . that points and directs us to what cannot be expressed directly through concepts”²⁵—or that the parable functions as a non-discursive device to symbolize ideas or truths that cannot be stated discursively or propositionally. For Maimonides, the ideal, what is truly known, is scientific knowledge, “the truth as it is”—nothing higher and nothing else. The truth that flashes out in the lightning bursts, and that peeks through the apertures in the silver filigree, is the same truth which, if not for the obstacles that block its apprehension, would be apprehended like the truths of any science. There is no evidence in any of these passages of some supra-intellectual truth, or Neo-Platonic realm beyond intellect and being, that can only be non-discursively shown. Rather than showing, or giving us access to, some higher truth beyond what can be said, the Maimonidean parable only shows us the bits and pieces, and thereby the limits, of what can be said.

What are the obstacles that prevent the complete, full human apprehension of metaphysics (and the ultimate causes of physics)? Maimonides' answer in two words: “matter and habit.”²⁶ In the Introduction he only mentions these two causes, like chapter headings. However, much of the remainder of the *Guide* is dedicated to working out the arguments that complete the chapters under these headings. There are two general ways in which “matter and habit in their various forms” are obstacles to complete, sustained, human knowledge of God, divine science, and metaphysics. They can be obstacles either to the *representation* and, hence, *appre-*

24. See also Maimonides (1968), 72–75 on the *impossibility* of teaching metaphysics and the need for “hints” which he then identifies with parables; II: 29: 347 where he uses “flashes” in place of “parables”; I: Introduction: 9 (note the same proof text, Eccles. 7, 24, cited in I: 34: 73); and Stern (1998).

25. Halbertal (2007), 56–57; cf. also Lorberbaum (2003).

26. On habit, see also I: 31: 66–67; but compare its positive role in Maimonides' explanation of the commandments in III: 32: 525–31.

hension of God (and of other metaphysical subjects) or to *concentration* on God (and metaphysics or divine science).²⁷ In the second case, the human's bodily desires and needs prevent him from fully, uninterruptedly, and exclusively concentrating on and attending to contemplation about the deity, divine science, or metaphysics. In the first case, the bodily faculties of sensation and, more important, imagination prevent the human from representing purely immaterial, absolutely simple beings, such as the deity, and enable him to perceive only some but not other phenomena. In some cases, matter and habit render apprehension literally *impossible*; in others, they impose *limitations* on human knowledge. In both cases, Maimonides uses the form of the parable to *show* us the obstacles that stand in the way of knowledge.²⁸

II. MAIMONIDES ON THE PARABLE OF ADAM IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN: ITS EXTERNAL MEANINGS

The second chapter of the *Guide* (I: 2: 23–6) begins with two readings of Genesis 3, the story of Adam's sin.²⁹ The first is that of the "learned man,"³⁰ a reading based on the "clear sense" of the biblical text. Maimonides presents it as a "challenge" and "curious objection"—as if it were meant to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of the wisdom of the Torah. On this reading, the "biblical text" says that God's original intention in creating man was that he be, like an animal, "devoid of intellect." The intellect, according to the learned man, is the "capacity" to distinguish good from evil. Only as "punishment" for disobeying God's commandment does man acquire the "noblest of his characteristics," what makes man the substance he is, his intellect. This, the learned man would have us believe, is as absurd as the "story told by somebody" about a "certain man" who sins and, as reward for having disobeyed, undergoes a "metamorphosis becoming a star in Heaven." What is absurd is that crime pays.

The second reading, Maimonides' response, turns the "challenge" on its head. He criticizes the "learned man" for reading the Torah as if it were history or a poetic myth, at his leisure when he "leaves off drinking and copulating." Maimonides depicts the "learned man" as one of the vulgar whose reading is nothing but the external vulgar meaning of the Torah. Rather, the Torah is the "book that is the guide of the first and last men": a parable whose wisdom presents us with the human ideal, a state of intellectual perfection to which we should aspire. To say that man was "created" as such-and-such is to say that such-and-such is his distinctive perfected state: to be a fully actualized intellect constantly and exclusively engaged

27. I am indebted for the terminology for this distinction to David Shatz (pers. comm.; see also Shatz 1991).

28. Cf. Stern (1989, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2005), and Stern (forthcoming).

29. My interpretation of chs. I: 1–2 is indebted to Harvey (1988, 1993, 1997), the starting places for any analysis of these chapters. Cf. Klein-Braslavy (1986a).

30. Pines's translation "learned man" follows Ibn Tibbon. However, as Joel Kraemer (pers. comm.) notes, the Arabic original (*rajul 'ulumiyy*) is a rare expression that means something like "man of the sciences," that is, a scientist. In the Graeco-Arabic translation literature, the same Arabic term is used to translate the Greek term for mathematician. See also Langermann (1994), n. 40.

in knowing all truths and distinguishing truth from falsehood. Contrary to the learned man, it is not the task of the intellect to distinguish good or fine from bad or ugly; “generally accepted” or conventional moral “knowledge” of this sort is grasped by the imagination, the faculty that stores and manipulates the sensible images by means of which we negotiate our bodily needs and desires. When God commands, or instructs, man *not* to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and bad, what that means is that, in Adam-kind’s “created,” perfected state, one should not attend to his bodily needs and desires or faculties such as the imagination. The result of disobeying *by* attending to those bodily needs and desires is ipso facto loss of—ceasing to be engaged in—the true perfection, the constant activity of intellectual apprehension. Instead man “descends” to the level of a ruler, or judge, engaged in the imaginative practical activity of “judging things to be bad or fine” (I: 2: 24–25). In sum, the result of Adam’s transgression is, contrary to the learned man, a true “loss” and “deprivation.”

To delineate the differences between the two readings, we can distinguish them along three dimensions: linguistic, exegetical, and philosophical or theological.

The Learned Man’s (L) Interpretation of Genesis 3:

I: 2: L1. The *linguistic* claim: Among the three meanings of the equivocal term “Elohim” in Hebrew, its linguistic meaning in Gen. 3: 5 (“And you shall be as Elohim, knowing good and evil”) is God or the deity.

I: 2: L2. The *exegetical* claim: Genesis 3 is a “story” (like a historical account or poetic myth) of a certain person (Adam, presumably the first member of humanity) who was originally created, like other animals, with no intellect and, only as a result of disobeying God’s command, was given the capacity, an intellect, to distinguish good and evil, the moral knowledge that governs action.

I: 2: L3. The *philosophical* claim: The intellect is the faculty that distinguishes between good and evil; this faculty, or capacity, is the noblest human possession in virtue of which humans are the kind of substance that they are.

Maimonides, speaking in the first person plural “We” (W), replies with three correlative theses:

I: 2: W1. The *linguistic* claim: Among the three meanings of the equivocal term “Elohim” in Hebrew, Maimonides cites approvingly the interpretation of the ancient Aramaic translator of the Torah, Onqelos, that its meaning in Gen. 3: 5 is “the rulers governing the cities.”

I: 2: W2. The *exegetical* claim: Genesis 3 is not a “story” about an actual or mythical someone, it is a parable about Adam-kind, mankind, the species humanity (I: 14: 40). The state in which Adam-kind was created in virtue of which it is said to be in “the divine image” is the human’s ultimate perfection: a fully actualized intellect actively, exclusively, and constantly engaged in the activity of knowledge, apprehension of intelligibles and demonstrable truths. In this perfect state the human is, in effect, “disembodied”: he does not attend to the satisfaction of any bodily needs and desires. And being indifferent to his body, he has no need for conventional

moral notions of good and bad, for what one desires for oneself (or desires to avoid). When, however, man inclines toward, attends to, or becomes absorbed in, his desires and imagination (“eating of the Tree of Knowledge”), he becomes concerned with his imaginative faculty that apprehends the generally accepted notions of good and bad. And insofar as mankind is actually engaged in imagining and desiring, he ipso facto ceases to be a purely, exclusively actualized intellect. Thus, by becoming “endowed” with—by actualizing—his bodily faculty, the human “loses,” or ceases to be (identical with, nothing but) a purely actualized intellect.³¹ The moral of *Guide* I: 2 is that the perfect, ideal human condition is purely intellectual, a state of exclusive and exhaustive contemplation of theoretical truth, disengaged from all bodily activity and, hence, the apprehension of moral or practical wisdom. Contrary to the learned man, acquiring knowledge of good and evil is not a perfection but a decline from the highest perfection: the intellectual apprehension of truth.

I: 2: W3. The *philosophical* claim: The intellect is the faculty that distinguishes between the (necessarily) true and (necessarily) false. Good and evil (fine and bad) are objects of the bodily faculty of desire or the imagination that apprehends generally accepted opinions, that is, Aristotle’s *endoxa*, or conventional beliefs. In other words, conventional moral good (bad) is what is good (bad) *for me* (or what I imagine is good (bad) for me)—what I (imagine I) want or desire (to avoid). The relevant desires are not perhaps each individual’s personal desires, but the collective, conventionally arbitrated desires of the larger community. None the less they are desires or imagined desires.

Maimonides’ reply inverts the “learned man’s” objection. But it is not the end of chapter I: 2. Following the reply, Maimonides turns to the exegesis of Gen. 3:7 and then to that of Job 14,20. I will return to Maimonides’ exegesis of these two verses in a minute. First I want to raise a question: Let’s suppose that Gen. 3 is a parable. It is plausible to think that the Learned Man’s interpretation is its vulgar external meaning. It reads the text as a narrative, with a story and plot, and hews to the meanings of the words—and clearly its understanding of the text is vulgar! But is Maimonides’ “We” interpretation its parabolic external meaning or its inner meaning? If it is the latter, then it conveys “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.” If it is the parabolic external meaning, then the wisdom it conveys is useful for beliefs concerning communal welfare. In either case, if the “We” interpretation is only one of the two kinds of parabolic meaning, what is the *other* meaning? And what is its relation to the last part of the chapter, the exegesis especially of Job 14,20?

The answer to these questions rests on two assumptions of the “We” reply. The first assumption is that Adam’s, or humanity’s, “created” state “in the image of God” should be understood to be his (its) state of perfection, the fulfillment or actualization of what it is to be a human being—in Aristotelian terms: the human specific form. The second is that the human’s “ultimate perfection” is to be “the intellect that God made overflow unto man,” that is, a fully actualized intellect

31. On the opposition between truth/falsehood and good/bad, see Pines (1990).

engaged exclusively in apprehension of (necessary) truths, disengaged from all bodily needs and desires, hence, from all knowledge of conventional moral notions. These assumptions are the burden of the first chapter of the *Guide*. However, a close look at that chapter shows that, while these beliefs should be held, they are not the whole truth.

I: 1 also presents two explicit positions, each of which we can characterize in terms of the same three theses we found in ch. I: 2: linguistic, exegetical, and philosophical or theological. Following the *Guide*, I shall refer to the first position as the “People’s” view (P) and to Maimonides’ explicit reply, which he explicitly advocates in the first person, as the “I” view (I).

I: 1: P1: The *linguistic* claim: The word *tzelem* (“image”) in the Hebrew language designates corporeal shape or configuration.

I: 1: P2: The *exegetical* claim: The verses Gen. 1: 26 (“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”) and 1: 27 (“In the image of God created He him”) mean that man was created in the physical or bodily shape or configuration of God, hence, that “God has a man’s form I mean his shape and configuration.”

I: 1: P3: The *theological/philosophical* claim: The “pure doctrine of the corporeality of God,” the doctrine that God has the “shape and configuration” of humans but is simply “bigger and more resplendent.” People accept this doctrine for two reasons. First, if not for the belief that the divine image is corporeal shape, they think they “would give the lie to the biblical text.” Second, they believe that only bodies exist, therefore, if God were not a body, He would “be nothing at all” (cf. I: 26: 56).

Maimonides’ “I” replies to the People with three correlative theses:

I: 1: I: 1: The *linguistic* claim: (1) The word *tzelem* (“image”) designates the “natural” or “specific” form of a thing, in Aristotelian terms, its substantial form, or, in Maimonides’ words, “the notion in virtue of which a thing is constituted as a substance and becomes what it is” or “the true reality of the thing is so far as the latter is that particular being,” that is, its species-defining characteristics. In the case of man, it refers to “that from which [intellectual] apprehension derives,” that is, an actual (rather than potential/material/hylic) intellect. (2) At least at first Maimonides seems to hold that natural or specific form is not only *a* but the *only* meaning of *tzelem*. (3) The “proper term” in Hebrew for corporeal shape or configuration is “*to’ar*” (“*figure*”), a term never applied to God. (4) The term “likeness” signifies likeness in some but not necessarily all respects and not necessarily any particular respect, for example, in corporeal shape or some other sensible quality.

I: 1: I: 2: The *exegetical* claim: In verses like Gen. 1: 26–27, it is “on account of this intellectual apprehension,” not on account of corporeal shape or configuration, that man is said to be “in the divine image.”

I: 1: I: 3: The *theological/philosophical* claim: (1) God is absolutely non-corporeal (which is necessary if He is one, or a unity). (2) The natural or specific form of the human is his actual intellect or the activity of intellectual apprehension. (3)

Although it is very difficult to say exactly what this means, for the human to be “in the image of God” and “in His likeness” has something to do with intellectual apprehension, not with bodily shape or configuration.

The clearest difference between (P) and (I) is over the linguistic question whether the word “*tzelem*” (“image”) designates corporeal shape or the Aristotelian notion of natural or specific form.³² Maimonides’ main evidence for (I) is a brief foray into comparative linguistics, citing three scriptural uses of the term “*tzelem*” (“image”)—prima facie linguistic evidence—in its support. However, as Warren Zev Harvey (1988) has decisively shown, these verses undermine rather than support Maimonides’ claim—and Maimonides clearly knows this and intends his reader to recognize it.

What Maimonides needs to show is that the Hebrew word “*tzelem*” (“image”) means specifically natural form, which in the case of a human would be his intellect. But his first proof-text “Thou [i.e. God] contemnest their [referring to the wicked] image [*tsalmam*]” (Ps. 73, 20) only shows that what is meant by “*tzelem*” is whatever soul is the specific form of the wicked which presumably is the appetitive soul they have in common with animals rather than their intellect. (After all, how could God be contemptuous of an intellect, even of the wicked?) Thus, “image” in this verse may not refer to corporeal form, but nothing yet shows that it does mean specific form or intellect—the claim Maimonides needs. Likewise, his second purported linguistic evidence is that idols are called “images” [*tzelamim*] in Scripture because “what was sought in them was the notion that was deemed to subsist in them, and not their shape or configuration” (ibid.). Here, too, even if the power “deemed to subsist in” an idol is analogous to the intellect that subsists in the human body, this hardly shows that the word “image” means specific form or intellect. Again, at best the evidence is highly equivocal.

Maimonides’ third piece of purported linguistic evidence, and a humorous example, is the phrase “images of your emerods [hemorrhoids]” (I Sam. 6. 5) which refers to the gold figures that the Philistines sent as indemnity to the God of Israel when they returned the Ark to stem the plague of hemorrhoids and mice with which they had been inflicted. Maimonides glosses this proof-text: “what was intended by them was the notion of warding off the harm caused by, and not the shape of, the emerods” (I: 1: 22) —as if “images of your emerods” refers to an anti-emerod power invested in the emerod figure!³³ Of course, by now it is almost impossible to avoid the conclusion that what “images of your emerods” *linguistically* means is their *corporeal* shape. Therefore, Maimonides concedes that if his reader insists that the phrase means corporeal shape,

it would follow that image is an equivocal or amphibolous term applied to the specific form and also to the artificial form and to what is analogous to the two in the shapes and configurations of the natural bodies. That which was

32. Maimonides first tries to defuse (P) by appealing to (I: 1: iii). But obviously the fact that one word means X does not exclude the possibility that another term does too; witness synonyms. This first move is no more than a rhetorical diversion.

33. Harvey (1988), 9–10.

meant in the scriptural dictum “Let us make man in our image” was the specific form, which is intellectual apprehension, not the shape and configuration. (I: 2: 24)

Here Maimonides throws in the towel. He concedes that natural form (hence, for the human, intellect) is only one among a number of the meanings of *tzelem*—and that another is corporeal shape and configuration. Thus the three prooftexts, rather than supporting the linguistic claim that “*tzelem*” means (and only means) natural form, demonstrate its implausibility. Instead they demonstrate that the biblical term “*tzelem*” almost certainly means (exclusively) corporeal shape or form! Apart from Gen. 1:27, the very verse whose meaning is in question, Maimonides has *no* evidence for his claim that “*tzelem*” means natural form, only the philosophical *unacceptability* of the doctrine of the corporeality of God.

This subversive linguistic evidence for the linguistic claim about “*tzelem*” is not Maimonides’ only problem with the (I) view. Maimonides concludes the chapter with a *prima facie* characterization of negative “likeness” between God and humans: neither of them employs a “sense” or “part of the body” as an “instrument” in their “exercise” of intellectual apprehension. This anticipation of the *via negativa* is of a piece with (I)’s claim that humanity’s ideal, “created” state in the “image of God” is that of a pure, disembodied, totally actualized intellect—the second assumption we mentioned earlier. But in the same breath Maimonides immediately withdraws this negative similarity: “in reality [human apprehension] is not like the [apprehension of the deity], but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion,” thus implying that human apprehension, *unlike* God’s, does require the senses which, in turn, implies that human apprehension, *unlike* God’s, is never totally disembodied, separate from all matter, or free of all potentiality. Furthermore, there is a subtle change of language in the last sentence of the quoted passage:

It was because of this something, I mean because of *the divine intellect conjoined with man*, that it is said of the latter that he is in *the image of God and in His likeness*, not that God . . . is a body and possesses a shape.” (I: 1: 23; my emphasis)

The (I) view interprets “the image of God” as the human specific, or natural, form, his intellectual apprehension, or that from which it derives.³⁴ Although Maimonides says nothing explicit about God Himself, one might infer that, if this is the image of God, then He is also an intellect or intellect-like. But in our last sentence Maimonides interprets “*the image of God and in His likeness*” as meaning “*the divine intellect conjoined with man*.” One might take the italicized phrase to refer to the aforementioned “apprehension of the deity,” or that from which *it* derives, that is, God’s intellect. In which case, the ground for the image- and likeness-relation between God and man would be their conjunction. However, whenever Mai-

34. Assuming perhaps the identity of the act, object, and subject of intellection of I: 68.

monides or the philosophers speak of conjunction, it is with the Active Intellect, not with God. This in turn suggests that “the *divine intellect* conjoined with man” is not the intellect of God but the Active Intellect.³⁵ Even if this is a state in which the fully actualized human intellect, conjoining with the Active Intellect, achieves a divine-like status as close to a separate intellect as one can be, it severs the connection to God Himself that Maimonides’ perfection purports to have. And there may even be a stronger intended claim: If Maimonides’ apparent withdrawal of the likeness between Elohim and man now holds of the relation between the Active Intellect and man, then he may also be questioning the possibility of a human attaining the state in which his intellect can conjoin with the Active Intellect.

In either case, what conclusion does Maimonides want us to draw from his linguistic “evidence” and from these qualified comments about the exegesis of “*the image of God*”? Linguistically speaking, Maimonides guides us to the conclusion that the word *tzelem* (in biblical Hebrew) indeed means corporeal form, shape, or configuration. On his other theological or philosophical hand, Maimonides unequivocally repeats that God is incorporeal. Exegetically speaking, we know what Gen. 1: 27 does *not* mean but, tallying up all of Maimonides’ remarks, it is frustratingly difficult to formulate an unambiguous, explicit interpretation of what the verse positively means. We might sum all this up in the following (B) view (B, for reasons that will become clear):

I: 1B1 The *linguistic* claim: according to the linguistic evidence, at least one—and in some contexts the most, or even only, plausible—linguistic meaning of the word *tzelem* is corporeal shape, configuration, or form.

I: 1B2 The *exegetical* claim: Gen. 1: 26–27 should be understood as saying that there is a “divine intellect conjoined with man” (whatever this means).

I: 1B3 The *theological/philosophical* claim: (1) God is incorporeal. (2) Despite a superficial likeness between human and divine intellectual apprehension, “in reality,” or as science shows, there is no likeness between human intellectual apprehension and the deity’s (and perhaps even the Active Intellect’s).

When we compare the three views that emerge from Maimonides’ overall discussion in Guide I: 1, there are several surprising similarities. Both (P) and (B), in contrast to (I), agree over the linguistic claim that “*tzelem*” means, in at least one

35. At the beginning of ch. I: 2, Maimonides comments that the equivocal term “Elohim” can also refer to the angels, that is, separate intellects. Cf. also III: 8: 432 (“on union with the divine intellect, which lets overflow toward them that though which that form exists”), III: 18: 475; Munk on I: 1; al-Farabi (1983, 1985); Altmann (1987); Davidson (1992–3). A further significant detail may be Maimonides’ shift from the nominal form “apprehension of the deity” to the attributive or adjectival form, “divine intellect.” See Maimonides’ comments that by “divine”—in the adjectival form—what is meant is “natural”; for example, by “the divine actions—I mean to say the natural actions” (III: 32: 525), and by the phrase “the work of God” (Ex 32:16) Scripture “intends to signify . . . that this existence was natural and not artificial” (I: 66: 160). In this case, “*Elohim*” may really be functioning as an adjective modifying “*tzelem*” rather than as a nominal. If the phrase “divine F” means “natural F,” it would then mean that, because of the possibility of conjunction with the Active Intellect, in his state as an acquired intellect man is said to be “in the image of God and in His likeness.”

of its senses, corporeal shape or form. On the other hand, (P) and (B) completely disagree over the exegetical and philosophical/ theological morals they draw from the linguistic claim, while (B) and (I) agree that God is absolutely incorporeal and that His “image” is somehow related to intellect. Hence, (B) differs from *both* (P) and (I) in one important respect. (P) and (I) each adopt one coherent position, linguistically, exegetically, and philosophically. (B) lacks that coherence: the linguistic meaning of “*tzelem*” is corporeal shape and configuration (like [P]), but no one should ever believe that God is corporeal and no one should so interpret the Torah (like [I]). Seizing upon this contrast, the most important lesson of (B) seems to be methodological: The meanings of words, even of Scripture, should *never* be used to determine what one ought to believe. We might, then, add to (B3) the *meta-linguistic/philosophical* claim:

- (iii) The words of a text should never determine what you believe, and you should never believe something *only because* that is what certain words mean. Rather the intellect, and that alone, should determine belief.

The error of (P), according to (B), is not that the “People” have the linguistic meaning of “*tzelem*” wrong, but that they use it to determine their beliefs. The error of (I) is that, knowing what they should believe, they distort the meanings of certain words in order to make Scripture express that belief.

The triple of interpretations in *Guide* I: 1, two stated explicitly and the third inferred by reflecting on the second, suggests that, while the chapter is *about* the meanings of a single term, the first of Maimonides’ causes of perplexity, the structure of the chapter *itself* is something like a parable, the second of the sources of perplexity. The People’s view (P) is the vulgar (false) external meaning of Gen. 1: 26–27, based on the meanings of its words. (I) is the parabolic external meaning of the verse: It communicates wisdom concerning the correct beliefs and values that everyone in the community ought to hold. (B) is the “*batin*,” the parabolic inner meaning that expresses exactly what we would expect from Maimonides’ definition: “wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.” It does not state the truth, but it indicates where (I) falls short of capturing the qualifications and nuances of the truth and instead teaches an important methodological principle—“wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerning the truth.” Moreover, we grasp the insights of (B) only by looking “with full attention” at (I) through which we glimpse them, in bits and flashes, without being able to articulate them explicitly, coherently, and completely as we could a science—just like the apple of gold overlaid with a filigree of silver.

Recall now that we turned to *Guide* I: 1 in order to see whether the “We” (W) view of ch. I: 2 is the external or inner parabolic meaning of Gen. 3. Two assumptions of (W), we said, are (1) that what it means for Adam-kind to be “created in the image of God” is to be in the state of human perfection; and (2) that to be “in His image” is *not* to be corporeally or materially like God but to be a fully actualized, disembodied intellect. And Maimonides’ scriptural evidence for these assumptions is Gen. 1: 26–27. Now, however, we see that Maimonides may well have *not* thought that this is the actual meaning of the verse and he also questions in what sense mankind can

be God-like at all. Nonetheless, even if they are not scientifically true, these are the kinds of beliefs and ideals on which a divine community should be founded (I: 35). At the very least, everyone should believe that God is incorporeal (and not many or divisible) and that intellectual perfection is the proper human end. This suggests that the “We” interpretation is the parabolic external meaning of Gen. 3—beliefs concerned with communal welfare rather than scientific truth.

There is one more substantive philosophical argument for this interpretation. The reason why, at the end of ch. I: 1, Maimonides denies that “in reality” there is any likeness, even a negative one, between human and divine intellectual apprehension is not simply the absolute incomparability of God (I: 56). He has a more specific reason in waiting, concerning the relation between form and matter. It is a principle of Maimonides’ Aristotelian physics that there is no form-less matter and no matter-less form. In ch. III: 8, Maimonides restates this principle with a sharp ethical valence. Matter is identified with corruption, privation, bodily needs and desires, all evils, and with evil itself. Form—for the human, the intellect—is identified with perpetuity, being, virtue, knowledge of truth, all the goods. It follows that matter and form necessarily co-exist—they cannot exist independently of one another—but they co-exist only in tension, like a married couple who can live neither together nor apart. The reason, Maimonides adds, is that

it has been laid down by divine wisdom that it is impossible for matter to exist without form and for any of the forms in question to exist without matter, and . . . Consequently it was necessary that man’s very noble form, which, as we have explained is *the image of God and His likeness*, should be bound to earthy, turbid, and dark matter . . . ” (III: 8: 430)

There is much to say about this unhappy marriage of matter and form but what is striking in the present context is Maimonides’ citation of the scriptural verse “*the image of God and His likeness*.” The verse contributes no explanatory content or information to Maimonides’ argument in that context. Had he not inserted it, the argument would be unaffected. Hence, his citation of the verse for the argument of III: 8 is entirely gratuitous. However, it entirely changes our understanding of the verse Gen. 1, 27 and its use in ch. I: 1–2. If it is *necessary* both for form to be embodied in matter and for matter to possess a form, then it is (metaphysically) impossible for form as such—in the same sense of “form” that applies to creatures including humans—to be the form of God. The human form, the intellect (in act), must be embodied—contrary to God’s “intellect” that is necessarily disembodied (insofar as God is incorporeal). Maimonides’ gratuitous interjection of the verse in III: 8 can only serve as a reminder to the reader that, while “*tzelem elohim*” (“image of God”) may refer to the fully actualized human intellect—which is divine or natural in that this is its ideal state—we should not draw any further inference concerning the deity and His intellect. As Maimonides puts it elsewhere, the human embodied form/intellect and the divine matter-less form/intellect have nothing in common but the name.

More important, if there can be no form without matter, there can be no state of perfection, even before Adam “disobeys,” in which he is a purely disembodied,

fully actualized human intellect. For the same reason, the ideal of a perfection in which humans are disembodied fully actualized intellects (in conjunction with the Active Intellect) is a metaphysical impossibility or a metaphysical possibility that is not humanly realizable. Both of these implications deny the major assumptions of (W).

Another way to make this point is that Maimonides' use of the proof-text "*the image of God and His likeness*" in I: 2 to express the human ideal of a totally disembodied, perfectly actualized (or "acquired") intellect *contradicts* his use of the same verse in III: 8 to deny its possibility. This, I propose, is an example of the controversial seventh contradiction (to which I alluded earlier). Recall Maimonides' claim that "obscure"—that is, deep, profound—matters may turn out to harbor deep tensions or contradictions, in part due to the necessities of the different contexts in which those matters figure. The idea of the perfected intellect is one such matter that, by its very nature, rests on or involves incompatible premises, insights, and deep beliefs. Intellectual perfection, the possibility of achieving the state of a perfectly actualized or acquired intellect, is a human ideal. Yet, it is (paradoxically) humanly unrealizable. In these cases, Maimonides says, we must conceal the contradiction. Maimonides uses the repeated proof-text both to conceal the contradiction, which emerges only when we draw out its implications in its respective contexts, and to reveal that the subject rests on contradictions and tension by linking together the two contexts via the verse.

III. MAIMONIDES ON THE PARABLE OF ADAM IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN: ITS INNER MEANING

Let's return now to our original question: Is Maimonides' "We" (W) interpretation of Gen. 3 in *Guide* I: 2 its external or inner parabolic meaning? We have argued that (W) presupposes the possibility of a state in which the human is a purely disembodied actualized intellect, engaged exclusively and purely in knowing intelligibles and truths, with no bodily needs and desires. But that is to imagine the human as form without matter. According to III: 8, that state is not a metaphysical possibility. At the very least, then, (W) cannot be the whole truth about Gen. 3. Nonetheless the *community* should *aspire* to and *value* the perfection whose possibility it presupposes (even if no one achieves it). This is to say that (W) is the parabolic external meaning of Gen. 3, wisdom that concerns communal welfare, including the welfare of its soul, the correct beliefs and values the community should hold. But this leads to the next question: What could its *batin* be, or parabolic inner meaning?

To answer that question, we must turn to the closing passage of ch. I: 2 and Maimonides' "interpretation and explanation" of the verse "He changes his face (*panav*) and Thou sendest him forth" (*Job* 14, 20).³⁶ The antecedent for the subject pronoun "He" in its biblical context is "man that is born of woman" (*Job* 14, 1), that

36. Cf. Harvey (1988, 1997), and Klein-Braslavy (2005) who says that Maimonides "hints" by focusing on "eating" which she connects to I: 30; however, the "hints" can be interpreted in "several ways, . . . none of [which] provides a coherent interpretation of the story" (265).

is, all humanity *except* Adam.³⁷ But the rabbis *re-interpret* the pronoun to refer to the biblical Adam who is “sent forth” from Eden. Maimonides, in turn, interprets the rabbinic interpretation to make “Adam” refer to Adam-kind, or the species humanity; the verse describes the just punishment Adam-kind, humanity, undergoes when it sins, “measure for measure” (I: 2: 26).³⁸ Now, (W), you will recall, also took “Adam” in Gen. 3 to refer to Adam-kind. But this Jobian depiction of Adam-kind in Eden presents a very different conception of human perfection than (W). The Jobian Adam is not a disembodied, fully actualized intellect exclusively and purely engaged in contemplation. The picture is closer to human reality as we know it. The Jobian Adam originally “had been given license to eat good things and enjoy ease and tranquility”; that is, in his initial created state, the perfect, happy human has a body and satisfies his material needs and desires. What changes is Adam’s, or humanity’s, “direction” or “objective,” which is how Maimonides interprets the critical word “face” (*panav*, derived from *panim*) in Job 14, 20.³⁹

For *panim* is a term deriving from the verb *panoh* [to turn], since man turns his face toward the thing he wishes to take as his objective. The verse states accordingly that when man changed the direction to which he tended and took as his objective the very thing a previous commandment had bidden him not to aim at, he was driven out of the *Garden of Eden*. This was the punishment corresponding to his disobedience; it was *measure for measure*. He had been given license to eat good things and enjoy ease and tranquility. When, however, . . . he became greedy, followed his pleasures and his imaginings, and ate what he had been forbidden to eat, he was deprived of everything, and had to eat the meanest kinds of food, which he had not used as aliment before—and this only after toil and labor . . . And God reduced him, with respect to his food and most of his circumstances, to the level of the beast.

Maimonides does not say what Adam’s “original” Edenic direction had been, but we are told that it was greed that led him to “follow his pleasures and imagining,” implying that originally Adam must have acted or lived in moderation.

The consequence is Adam-kind’s reduction “to the level of the beast.” That is, Adam loses his specific form as a human. And with this loss, he also becomes subject to evils against which he had been protected by his intellect.⁴⁰ Thus, on this

37. Harvey (1997, 2000).

38. The rabbinic interpretation is found in the *Great Midrash (Bereshit Rabbah)*, Parshah 21, 4 (ed. Theodore-Albeck, 1965, 200). Cf. *Guide* I: 14; commentaries ad. loc. of Shem Tov, Ephodi, and Crescas in Maimonides (1904/1960); Klein-Braslavy (1988), 202; Harvey (2000).

39. Cf. I: 37: 85–87 where Maimonides does not mention this meaning of *panim*. However, it recalls Maimonides’ explanation of the meaning of the name “Satan” which he claims is derived from the verb “satah, . . . it derives from the notion of turning-away and going-away. For it is he who indubitably turns people away from the ways of truth and makes them perish in the ways of error” (III: 22: 489).

40. See Maimonides’ citation of Ps. 49: 13, a verse he uses in III: 18 to describe the lack of individual providence for “the ignorant and disobedient.”

third Jobian interpretation, the main concern of Gen. 3 is the problem of evil, divine providence and justice, and its source in the tension between excessive bodily appetites and (presumably) intellectually governed moderation.

Let's spell out this third Jobian (J) interpretation in our earlier format:

I: 2: J1. A *linguistic* claim: It is not said what "Elohim" in Gen. 3: 5 means. However, "knowing good and evil" does not mean knowing conventional moral notions, but rather knowing what leads to happiness and the good versus suffering and evil.

I: 2: J2. An *exegetical* claim: Genesis 3 is a parable about the tension between human objectives: the pursuit of one's appetites to excess as opposed to acting and living in moderation governed by one's intellect, and the consequences for human happiness and providence.

I: 2: J3. A *philosophical* claim: (1) The human is a substance necessarily composed of both form, or intellect, and matter, or body and its desires and imagination. While the human's form and matter cannot exist independently of each other, they are in constant tension with each other. (2) Happiness ("eating good things, ease, and tranquillity") results when the intellect sets the "direction" in which one (as a composite substance) lives in moderation. Evil and suffering result from "greed" and excessive pursuit of pleasure and the imagination. (3) Providence, and punishment, is desert and just, "measure for measure."

Of the three interpretations of Gen. 3 in ch. I: 2, (J) is the least developed; we are only given chapter headings. Is it the parabolic inner meaning of Gen. 3?

There are two difficulties taking (J) as the inner meaning of Job 14, 20 and, by implication, of Gen. 3. First, we said that the inner "golden" meaning of a parable is always glimpsed *as a result of* working out the (parabolic) external "silver" meaning. But the elements of Gen. 3 on which (J) focuses seem disjoint from those that figure in (W), the parabolic external meaning. Hence, we lack the organic relation between (W) and (J) that we need for the parabolic meanings. Either this is a potential problem for our theory of the parable or (J) is not the inner meaning of the passage.

Second, we are told that Adam is expelled from Eden and is deprived of "everything" simply because he "changes direction," and acts out of greed. We are also told that this punishment is deserved and just, "measure for measure." But could Adam deservedly or justly be made to lose *everything*—cease to be a human, become an animal—simply because of his greed? How can this be "measure for measure"?

To answer these questions, I want to follow Maimonides' directive that "our words are a key to *this* Treatise [and to others]" (I: 8: 34, my emphasis). That is, he tells us that his detailed explanations of the multiple meanings of words in Part I of the *Guide* should be used to understand his own use of those terms in the *Guide* as much as their occurrences in the prophetic and rabbinic texts that he cites. One example, in our passage, is the term "to eat" (and related words in the same semantic field, e.g. "food") which Maimonides mentions five times in the closing passage of ch. I: 2. In *Guide* I: 30, the lexicographic introduction to five chapters on the limitations of human knowledge and its educational and political implications

(I: 31–35), Maimonides tells us that the Hebrew word “to eat” [*akhol*] is “applied figuratively to knowledge, learning and, in general, the intellectual apprehensions through which the permanence of the human form endures in the most perfect of states” (63). Using this key, I propose that Maimonides’ own explication of the rabbinic interpretation of *Job* 14, 20 in ch. I: 2 is itself a parabolic text that exploits this figurative meaning of “to eat.” Its external meaning, as we have seen, concerns the tension between excessive appetites and moderation, providence, and evil. Its inner meaning, which turns on Maimonides’ figurative use of “eat,” is about human knowledge and its limits, a topic Maimonides elaborates in ch. I: 32 using yet another rabbinic story he interprets as a parable: the story of Pardes and its two protagonists, R. Aqiba and Elisha Aher. In sum, Maimonides explains the parable of Gen. 3 in terms of the parabolic *Job* 14, 20 (according to its rabbinic interpretation), which he explains in turn through the parable of Pardes.

Ch. I: 31 of the *Guide* is concerned with different humans’ different powers of intellectual apprehension. But the bottom line is that there are some subjects that lie beyond absolute bounds on the human intellectual capacity. Among these subjects, Maimonides distinguishes two classes: those of which someone is “aware of the impossibility of [their] knowledge” and those of which she is unaware. Where she knows that something cannot be known, because she desires to know only what she believes it is possible for her to know, she won’t desire or long to know it. Hence, she “will not . . . long for knowledge of” (64–65) these things that lie beyond her intellectual power. However, those things in the second class which the subject does *not* know he cannot know will nonetheless be “things for which man has a great longing” even though they “do not lie within the power of the human intellect.” Hence, inquirers are repeatedly drawn into endless and irresolvable inquiries into these subjects that they do not know they cannot know. Maimonides concludes that “the things about which there is this perplexity” are numerous in divine science, or metaphysics, few in natural science, and non-existent in mathematics.

I will not go into Maimonides’ arguments about the bounds on human knowledge.⁴¹ Let me instead concentrate on the morals for ch. I: 2. Adopting Aristotle’s comparison of the intellect to the eye in *De Anima*, Maimonides goes on to describe what happens to inquirers who persistently attempt to know subjects that lie beyond their capacity.⁴² An eye that is forced to look at something beyond its capacity will not only fail to see it, it will also damage or destroy its ability to see things that originally lay within its capacity. Something similar will happen to “intellectual apprehensions in so far as they are attached to matter” (I: 32: 68), that is, either insofar as the intelligible to be apprehended must be abstracted from matter or insofar as the apprehension involves the actualization of the material intellect. If someone sets himself to apprehend something that lies beyond his capacity, and (over)exerts himself by giving it his full attention, not only will he still

41. See Stern (2000, 2001, 2002, 2005, 2008a,b), and Stern (forthcoming).

42. Aristotle, *De Anima* III, 4; the parallel is then constantly elaborated as part of the models of intellectual apprehension within the Arabic Aristotelian tradition. See, for example, Al-Farabi (1983).

fail to grasp it, he will also destroy his ability to understand even what should lie within his capacity. And to illustrate this point, Maimonides describes two opposite intellectual personality-types, Rabbi Akiva and Elisha Aher, in the well-known Talmudic story of four sages who entered a *pardes*, or garden, which Maimonides identifies with the “theoretical study of metaphysical matters.”⁴³ The original Talmudic text reads as follows:

Our Rabbis taught: Four entered the “Garden” [Pardes],⁴⁴ namely, Ben Azzai and Ben Zoma, [Elisha] Aher, and R. Akiba. R. Akiba said to them: “When you arrive at the stones of pure marble, say not: ‘Water, Water!’ For it is said: ‘He that speaks falsehood shall not be established before my eyes’” (Ps. 101, 7).⁴⁵ Ben Azzai cast a look and died. Of him Scripture says: “Precious in the sight of the lord is the death of his saints” (Ps. 141, 15). Ben Zoma looked and became demented. Of him Scripture says: “Have you found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for you, lest you be filled therewith and vomit it” (Prov. 29: 16). [Elisha] Aher mutilated the shoots. R. Aqiba departed in peace. (BT *Hagigah* 14b)⁴⁶

Alluding to this story, Maimonides writes in ch. I: 32:

[I]f you stay your progress because of a dubious point; if you do not deceive yourself into believing that there is a demonstration with regard to matters that have not been demonstrated; if you do not hasten to reject and categorically to pronounce false any assertions whose contradictories have not been demonstrated; if, finally, you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to apprehend—you will have achieved human perfection and attained the rank of Rabbi Aqiba . . . who entered in peace [*shalom*] and went out in peace [*shalom*] when engaged in the theoretical study of these metaphysical matters. If, on the other hand, you aspire to apprehend things that are beyond your apprehension; or if you hasten to pronounce false, assertions the contradictories of which have not been demonstrated or that

43. Pardes is first mentioned in Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah*, “Foundations of the Torah,” iv, 13, where Maimonides identifies it with the study *both* of metaphysics (*ma’aseh merkabah*) and natural science (*ma’aseh bereshit*).

44. The word “Pardes” originates in Persian and is the source for our term “paradise.” Scholars disagree whether “the Garden” [Pardes] refers to an actual garden and the story describes an actual historical event or whether is a euphemism for a theosophical or mystical or Gnostic school that met in a garden (like the Stoa or Academy or Peripatos). Maimonides understands it to refer to the study of (philosophical) metaphysics.

45. For discussion of this sentence, see *Guide* II: 30: 230; Klein-Braslavy (1988, 1996); Stroumsa (1992–93); and Langermann (1988), all of whom take the reference to water to be a reference to the firmament. In Stern (2002) I argue, based on I: 30: 64, that Maimonides takes “water” to refer to knowledge (in this case, of cosmology); R. Aqiba, the skeptic, warns that one who claims to have (scientific, *propter quid*) knowledge in these realms speaks falsely.

46. The same story appears in different variants in other rabbinic texts. Maimonides’ text seems to have concluded with the statement: “R. Aqiba entered in peace and departed in peace.”

are possible, though very remotely so—you will have joined Elisha Aher. That is, you will not only not be perfect, but will be the most deficient among the deficient; and it shall so fall out that you will be overcome by imaginings and by an inclination toward things defective, evil, and wicked—this resulting from the intellect's being preoccupied and its light's being extinguished. (I: 32: 68–69)

R. Aqiba and Elisha Aher are Maimonides' exemplars for the most perfect person and the most deficient one, respectively.⁴⁷ R. Aqiba assents to propositions when and only when he can actually demonstrate them; he rejects propositions when and only when he can refute them by demonstrating their contradictory. But Maimonides' characterization of R. Aqiba emphasizes more than token affirmations and denials. Maimonides has Aqiba curb and restrain character faults like self-deception and hastiness in rushing to judgment.⁴⁸ That is, Maimonides' aim is to describe (and thereby cultivate in his reader) an intellectual personality type for whom the difference between rejecting (merely) possibly false propositions and ones that have been demonstrably refuted makes a difference for one's perfection.⁴⁹ We see the same connection between intellectual personality traits and the demand for demonstration later in the same chapter:

When points appearing as dubious occur to him or the thing he seeks does not seem to him to be demonstrated, he should not deny and reject it, hastening to pronounce it false, but rather should persevere and thereby *have regard for the honor of his Creator*. He should refrain and hold back (I: 32: 70).⁵⁰

Here the prescription to “refrain and hold back” is reminiscent of the Pyrrhonist's *epoché*, suspension of belief, that follows upon the equipollence of

47. On the figure of Elisha Aher, see Klein-Braslavy (1988, 1996); Stroumsa (1992–93); Diamond (2002); and Stern (2002).

48. On haste as an intellectual vice, see I: 5: 29–30 where it is also contrasted with “awe and refrain[ing] and hold[ing] back.”

49. Contrast this Maimonidean standard for intellectual perfection with, for example, Descartes' in the First Meditation where mere possibility of falsehood is sufficient grounds to reject a proposition. Their different standards cultivate distinct intellectual character types.

50. Cf. also I: 5: 29. On the expression “hold back” (Ar.: *yaqif*; Heb: *ya'amod*), see Saadiah Gaon (1970–71), 69–72, whose twelfth cosmological theory, quite clearly Pyrrhonism, is described as holding that man “should suspend judgement [*yaqif*; trans. Qafih: *yehedal*; Judah ibn Tibbon: *ya'amod*] and not believe-true any opinion, for inquiry is full of doubt and we see the truth only like a flash of lightning which cannot be grasped and does not allow apprehension”—language strongly reminiscent of Maimonides' “Introduction,” 7. The Hebrew “*ya'amod*,” used by the Tibbonite translators for Arab. “*yaqif*,” occurs with the same meaning in Solomon ibn Gabirol (1998) §26, 53/42–43 (Gad Freudenthal, pers. comm.). Maimonides or his translator may have had this verse in mind, or the use of the verb in this philosophical-skeptical sense may also have been established by then. On these skeptical themes, see also Wolfson (1979), 160–62; Altmann, notes to his edition of Saadiah Gaon (1974), 63.

opposed propositions of equal strength, *isostheneia*.⁵¹ What Maimonides means by “refrain and hold back” is not a deliberate occurrent act that one executes, but a state one achieves in which the person “does not *aspire* to apprehend that which [he] is unable to apprehend” (my emphasis), the final state R. Aqiba is said to obtain. Like the Pyrrhonist’s *epoché*, to refrain and hold back is not simply to abstain from a particular judgment; it is to detach oneself from, or to give up, the desire, longing, yearning, or drive to achieve scientific knowledge of “true reality.” R. Aqiba has surrendered *concern* with the real truth about metaphysics; it does not *matter* to him because repeated attempts to discover the “true reality” have only led to irresolvable contradictions and disagreements.

R. Aqiba is engaged in “the theoretical study of metaphysics” when he enters and goes out in *shalom* (lit.: peace, tranquility), but it is evident in the context of I: 32 that this *shalom* is not achieved by *acquiring* positive metaphysical knowledge. Rather it is achieved in the absence of positive metaphysical knowledge. He recognizes “that the intellects of human beings have a limit at which they stop” and thereby ceases to “aspire,” or to seek, to know what he cannot know. By surrendering the very desire or concern that leads one to endlessly seek to know what one cannot know, one also frees oneself from the constant anxiety, worry, and insecurity that accompanies such seeking. So, just as the Pyrrhonist’s *epoché* leads him to *ataraxia*, a state of tranquility, or freedom from trouble or anxiety, a state he equates with happiness, so Maimonides’ R. Aqiba achieves not just perfection but *shalom*, or peace, when he reaches the point when he has thrown off the very desire or “aspiration” to know what he cannot. R. Aqiba’s *shalom*, like the Pyrrhonist’s tranquility, is not the outcome of an act he performs, but a condition that happens to him, in which he finds himself, as a result of throwing off the desire to know. This is the tranquility or, if you will, peace of mind that results after one has freed oneself from the anxiety of unceasing uncertainty, from the endless drive to find answers to questions that admit no definite, demonstrable answer.

Elisha Aher is not only R. Aqiba’s opposite but also Maimonides’ foil. He aspires to know what cannot be humanly known and, to achieve that goal, “hastens” to deny what has not yet been refuted by demonstration. Driven to know what he can’t, he cannot control himself to conduct himself correctly, as science demands, even within the realm of things he *can* know. Out of haste, he assents to claims that may well be true but without the entitlement of demonstration. This fault is not merely intellectual. He is victim to a deep character vice, “overcome by imaginings and by an inclination toward things defective, evil, and wicked,” just as those who “persist in looking at brilliant or minute objects” end up with “various species of delusive imaginings.” The opposite of R. Aqiba, Elisha is subject to radical self-deception and delusion. Following the rabbis’ interpretation of Prov. 25: 16—“Hast thou found honey? Eat so much as is sufficient for thee, lest thou be filled therewith and vomit it”—which he applies to Elisha,⁵² Maimonides comments:

51. Ar: *takafu’ al-adilla*. Cf. Klein-Braslavy (1986b).

52. See BT Hagigah 15a, where this verse is applied to Ben Zoma rather than Elisha, and discussion in Stroumsa (1992–93), Klein Braslavy (1996), and Diamond (2002).

How marvelous is this parable, inasmuch as it likens knowledge to eating . . . It also mentions the most delicious of foods, namely, honey. Now, according to its nature, honey, if eaten to excess upsets the stomach and causes vomiting. Accordingly Scripture says . . . that in spite of its sublimity, greatness, and what it has of perfection, the nature of the [intellectual] apprehension in question [of metaphysics]—if not made to stop at its proper limit and not conducted with circumspection—may be perverted into a defect, just as the eating of honey may. *For whereas the individual eating in moderation is nourished and takes pleasure in it, it all goes if there is too much of it.* (I: 32: 69, my emphasis)

Recall now Adam whose greed causes him “to be deprived of *everything*,” reducing him to the “level of the beast” (I: 2: 26, my emphasis). Similarly Elisha. Because of his failure “to stop at his intellect’s proper limit” and to “conduct himself with circumspection,” his excessive intellectual desire to achieve knowledge of metaphysics is “perverted into a defect” and completely “vomited”: “it *all* goes if there is too much of it” (my emphasis). We asked earlier: why Adam’s *total* loss? Elsewhere Maimonides explains the full rabbinic statement whose first half (see above) he cites in the *Guide* I: 32: 70: “And whoever does not have regard for the honor of his *Creator* it would be fitting if he had not come into this world.” According to Maimonides, the phrase “honor of his Creator” refers to the intellect “because the intellect is the honor of God.”⁵³ The sense in which it would have been better had this person “not been born” is that “because he does not know the value of [his intellect], he is a wanton in the hands of his passions and no better than a beast.”⁵⁴ That is, someone who does not care about what he believes, who exercises no control over his intellect, letting it investigate things for which it is not prepared and allowing it to wander without protecting it from the corrupting influence of his imagination—this person is no better than an irrational animal, hardly a human being, that is, the bearer of a potential intellect. Such a person loses his very form as a human.

In sum, the moral to be drawn from the examples of R. Aqiba and Elisha is that there is a domain of knowledge in which one can and should engage but there are also intellectual limits beyond which one should not venture. Maimonides instructs his reader: “let your intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp” (I: 32: 69, on BT Hagigah 13a). His point is two-fold: man’s perfection and happiness does lie in “eating,” the pursuit of knowledge, “the most delicious of foods,” but the pursuit of knowledge, like eating, also requires moderation and “circumspection” within its proper limits.

Let’s return now to *Guide* I: 2: the inner meaning of Maimonides’ parabolic explication of the rabbinic interpretation of *Job* 14, 20 which, in turn, is the parabolic inner meaning of Gen. 3.

53. Maimonides (1968), M. Hagigah 2, 1, 378. Cf. also the commentaries of Moses of Narbonne, Shem Tob, and Efodi in Maimonides (1904/60), who identify *kevod qono* with *kevod qinyano*, this is, the honor of his acquired intellect (*sekhel haniqneh*).

54. Ibid.

Recall that the external meaning of *Job* 14, 20, read through the rabbis' lens, concerns the tension between excessive human appetites and intellectually moderated desire and its implications for human happiness and providence. Its inner meaning, I propose, turns on understanding Maimonides' use of the expressions "eat" and "food" as referring to knowledge. The scriptural parable of the Garden of Eden is to be interpreted in light of the parable of Pardes interpreted as the garden of the "theoretical study of metaphysical matters." Genesis 3 is a parable about the proper limits of human knowledge and the necessity to "obey" the dictates, or commandments, that govern those limits. Adam was originally "given license to eat good things and to enjoy ease and tranquility," like R. Aqiba who "let his intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp." Fully engaged within that permissible domain, R. Aqiba held back from going beyond those limits. By training himself not even to *desire* to know what he cannot know—thereby circumventing one kind of epistemic greed—he achieved for himself tranquility and peace of mind, the same states Adam initially enjoyed. But when Adam became "greedy, followed his pleasures and his imaginings, ate what he had been forbidden to eat, he was deprived of everything," and "reduced . . . to the level of the beast." Like Elisha Aher, he did not (and eventually could not) control his epistemic desires, he "aspired to apprehend things beyond [his] apprehension," did not "stop at the proper limit," did not exercise moderation, and as a result "was overcome by imaginings" and lost the very light of the intellect. What Maimonides wants us to understand here is how intellectual excess can lead to total loss of cognitive power—just as an eye that strains itself to see things too subtle or too remote loses the capacity to see even objects that originally were within its power. Elisha, who lets his desires and imagination determine his beliefs without intellectual warrant, not only does not actualize his potential intellect. He also corrupts the potential or power itself. Similarly, Adam is "reduced . . . to the level of a beast." Not only is he not the actualized intellect he initially was; he corrupts and thereby loses his *potential* intellect, becoming nothing more than an intellect-less beast, in particular with respect to his "food," that is, with respect to objects of knowledge. The moral of the parable of Eden, like Pardes, is not to give up intellectual inquiry upon the realization that one cannot know everything, but to respect its limits. R. Aqiba and Elisha are, as it were, the two "faces" (*panim*)—or directions—of Adam, before and after his intellectual sin.

There is one additional important difference between the parabolic inner meaning of Gen. 3 and its parabolic external meaning, the "We" (W) interpretation. On the latter view, true human perfection, the state in which Adam was "created in the image of God," is to be a fully actualized, effectively bodiless intellect, engaged exclusively and exhaustively in the apprehension of all intelligibles and truths, including those of metaphysics, free of material desires and the imagination. Maimonides repeats this conception of human perfection throughout the *Guide*, for example:

[The human's] ultimate perfection is to become rational in actu, I mean to have an intellect in actu; this would consist in his knowing everything

concerning all the beings that is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection. (III: 27: 511)

The true human perfection consists in the acquisition of the rational virtues—I refer to the conception of intelligibles, which teach true opinions concerning the divine things. (III: 54: 635)

This ideal of human intellectual perfection shapes Maimonides' goals for education and the wisdom he believes brings about communal well-being. However, the parable of Pardes, R. Aqiba, and the Jobian interpretation of Eden present a very different conception of human perfection. As we have observed, it is clear from the context of I: 32 that the perfection R. Aqiba achieves is not a function of having acquired positive knowledge of metaphysics. Nonetheless, his perfection, and the happiness that accompanies it, is also not practical, civic, or political. It is intellectual, though entirely different from the perfection of the "We" interpretation. The "human perfection you will have achieved" when you reach "the rank of Rabbi Aqiba" is the state in which you do not assent when something is dubious, when you do not fool yourself into thinking that something not demonstrated has been demonstrated, when you do not rashly or hastily accept or reject a claim, and finally, when "you do not aspire to apprehend that which you are unable to apprehend." This kind of intellectual perfection is entirely compatible with having a *not* fully actualized intellect, lacking knowledge of metaphysics and of the deity. It involves self-knowledge but not the self-contemplating state of the fully actualized intellect that contemplates itself in contemplating all the possible intelligibles that it has grasped that constitute it and with which it is identical. R. Aqiba's self-knowledge is that of one who knows what he knows and knows what he does not, who recognizes what lies within his intellectual powers and what lies beyond them. For Maimonides, this state, no less than that of a perfectly actualized intellect, is a state of perfection.⁵⁵ Since the subject has apprehended everything within his domain of knowledge, there is nothing he does not yet know that he could know. And more important, because he has surrendered the desire to know what he cannot know, there is nothing he desires to know that he does not already know. Freed of the desire to know more than he can apprehend, he *lacks* nothing; his knowledge is completely satisfied, hence, perfect. Nonetheless, this conception of intellectual perfection, expressed in the inner meaning of the parable of Eden, is entirely different from the idealized notion of the fully actualized intellect that is expressed in the parable's external meaning. For the skeptical interpretation of the *Guide*, R. Aqiba's intellectual perfection within the limitations of the intellect is Maimonides' alternative conception of human perfection and of happiness as tranquility.

55. Note also that in the passage (quoted earlier) from the Introduction to the *Guide* describing the lightning flashes, which begins by denying that the "great secrets" are "fully and completely known to anyone among us," Maimonides concludes that it is "in accord with these states that the *degrees of the perfect* vary" (6–7). Thus even those that do not have complete knowledge of the secrets of metaphysics are "perfect," and those who are perfect do not know everything.

IV. THE COGNITIVE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MAIMONIDEAN PARABLE

Let me briefly review my storyline. We have uncovered four interpretations of Gen. 3. The first three are explicitly laid out in *Guide* I: 2: the learned man's (L) vulgar external meaning, Maimonides' "We" (W) interpretation, and the rabbinic Jobian (J) interpretation. We proposed that (W) is the parabolic *external* meaning of the scriptural text, that is, it communicates wisdom that is useful for the intellectual and practical welfare of a divine community. But we also argued that (W) does not express the truth because it rests on a number of assumptions, revolving around the term "*tzelem*" ("image") which Maimonides calls into question in the first chapter of the *Guide*.

Ch. I: 1 also, we saw, has the semantic structure of a parable with multiple levels of meaning centered on the meaning of the word "*tzelem*" ("image"). There is the People's interpretation (P), the vulgar external meaning of "image"; the "I" (I) interpretation of "image" as specific form that we argued is the parabolic external meaning; and there is (B) which is the parabolic inner meaning and undermines the *truth* of the "We" interpretation of ch. I: 2.

What then is the parabolic inner meaning, or *batin*, of Gen. 3? We turned next to Maimonides' exposition of the rabbinic interpretation of Job 14, 20 according to which Gen. 3 is an account of the tension between human appetites, often excessive, and moderation as directed by the human intellect. However, this was still not the end of our story. Following Maimonides' directive, we further argued that that same passage in *Guide* I: 2, elaborating Gen. 3 in light of Job 14, 20, has a *batin*, or inner meaning, which Maimonides in turn articulates in his explanation of the parable of *Pardes* and the different personality-types of R. Aqiba and Elisha Aher (I: 31–32). Thus, the inner meaning of the parable of Gen. 3 turns out to be given by a parable (*Pardes*) that itself articulates the inner meaning of Maimonides' exposition of the rabbinic interpretation of Job 14, 20, a verse he presents (through rabbinic lenses) as a parabolic interpretation of Genesis.

This complicated, convoluted story is striking in many ways: the systematicity of its interpretations; their complementariness; their epistemic interdependence—how, by reflecting on one interpretation, one is led to glimpses of another; the shared epistemological assumptions; the sense of a tradition of parabolic interpretation; and the methodological lessons of "wisdom" that emerge.

What is still more important is that by working through the external and inner meanings of these parables, I have tried to reenact for you the intellectual experience of incomplete understanding, the lightning flashes of partial insights, that Maimonides describes in the Introduction to the *Guide*. One begins with a vulgar understanding that must be rejected to make way for a philosophically respectable interpretation, the parabolic external meaning of the parable. But the more closely one examines that external meaning, the more problematic are the assumptions, implications, and presuppositions one uncovers. When one interpretation leads to an insoluble problem or mystery, one goes back to the text, returning to the communal wisdom of its external meaning, probing it for flashes of insight. Where does all this lead? The climax of the interpretation of the parable of the

Garden of Eden that extends through ch. I: 2 is Maimonides' closing exclamation: "Praise be to the Master of the Will whose aims and wisdom cannot be apprehended!" This statement is not a literary flourish or formulaic ending, but an expressive coda intimately related to the cognitive function of a parable. I began this paper by drawing your attention to the Arabic Aristotelian contextualization of poetics within the logical *Organon*. For Maimonides' Arabic counterparts, the poetic or rhetorical syllogism culminates in a cognitive/imaginative act of wonder, awe, or delight that parallels the *tasdiq*, or assent, which a dialectical or demonstrative syllogism is meant to induce. Maimonides proposes the parable as an analogous device to the poetic syllogism. The parable, and its interpretation, also serves to produce a cognitive affect (not distinct from an imaginative one), a state of wonder, praise, or awe. The "argument" of the parable, and of its interpretation, compels one to *express* divine praise, wonder, or awe in grasping its partially understood contents, just as a demonstrative argument compels one to assent to the truth of the conclusion. Each of awe, wonder, and delight is a mode of acquiescence to the content of the parable. Dazzled by the flashes of enlightenment projected by the inner meaning of the parables he has been interpreting, Maimonides has put himself into a state in which he cannot but exclaim his praise of God.⁵⁶

The process of parabolic interpretation that ends in this expressive act of praise is, in Pierre Hadot's terms, a spiritual exercise in which Maimonides is engaged while he composes the *Guide* and in which he intends to engage his reader in the course of interpreting the *Guide*.⁵⁷ The understanding, however incomplete, that one reveals and grasps through the interpretation of parables culminates in worship of the deity, awe and praise, a cognitive state which the parable induces in its reader no different from the assent to which a demonstration necessarily leads one. This is the full cognitive function of the Maimonidean parable.⁵⁸

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56. The phrase "Master of the will" may also allude to the Hebrew "kevod kono" of I: 32; God is the *koneh* of the heavens because He "has dominion over them just as a master has over his slaves" (II: 30: 358).

57. Hadot (1995). For an example of a spiritual exercise based on our passage about R. Aqiba, see Stern (2002), 180–82 and Stern (forthcoming).

58. This paper is based on chs. 2 and 3 of Stern (forthcoming). An earlier version was presented to the Workshop on the History of Poetics at the Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem, March 2009. I wish to thank participants in the workshop and Jonathan Malino for comments, and the American Council of Learned Societies for a fellowship in 2007–08 when much of this material was composed.

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