

**The Dedicatory Epistle to Moses Maimonides's *The Guide of the Perplexed*:  
The portal to pedagogy**

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Maimonides's dedicatory epistle to *The Guide of the Perplexed*<sup>1</sup> is unique. Typically, a dedicatory epistle is a more or less formulaic and formal plea or tribute to an actual or potential patron or promoter. The epistle to the *Guide* is antipodal to that. It is an invocation to the targeted audience of the *Guide*, and as such, "some importance should be attached to the description, given in the text" (Pines 3, fn. 1). It is that importance that is the subject of this essay.

Since the epistle is the first substantive statement that the reader encounters, it sets the tone for what follows. It may even influence whether or not the reader will go on to read the rest of the work. Therefore, one must pay particularly close attention to what Maimonides says in it. It bears, as it were, the burden of proving that the effort of reading the *Guide* is justifiable and worthwhile.

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<sup>1</sup> All references to the text are to Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Translated with introduction and notes by Shlomo Pines With an introductory essay by Leo Strauss (Chicago, U. Press, 1963) [Hereafter cited as "Pines"].

## The Text

[Bracketed numbers have been added to indicate the sections of the epistle as they will be discussed in what follows.]

[1] My honored pupil *Rabbi Joseph, may the Rock guard you, son of Rabbi Judah, may his repose be in Paradise*. When you came to me, having conceived the intention of journeying from the country farthest away in order to read texts under my guidance, I had a high opinion of you because of your strong desire for inquiry and because of what I had observed in your poems of your powerful longing for speculative matters. This was the case since your letters and compositions in rhymed prose came to me from Alexandria, before your grasp was put to the test. I said however: perhaps his longing is stronger than his grasp. [2] When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the science of astronomy and prior to that texts dealing with mathematics, which is necessary as an introduction to astronomy, my joy in you increased because of the excellence of your mind and the quickness of your grasp. I saw that your longing for mathematics was great, and hence I let you train yourself in that science, knowing where you would end. When thereupon you read under my guidance texts dealing with the art of logic, my hopes fastened upon you, and I saw that you are one worthy to have the secrets of the prophetic books revealed to you so that you would consider in them that which perfect men ought to consider. [3] Thereupon I began to let you see certain flashes and to give you certain indications. Then I saw that you demanded of me additional knowledge | and asked me to make clear to you certain things pertaining to divine matters, to inform you [4] of the intentions of the Mutakallimun in this respect, and to let you know whether their methods were demonstrative and, if not, to what art they belonged. As I also saw, you had already acquired some smattering of this subject from people other than myself; you were perplexed, as stupefaction had come over you; your noble soul demanded of you to *find out acceptable words*. [5] Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident. Whenever during your association with me a [biblical] *verse* or some text of the *Sages* was mentioned in which there was a pointer to some strange notion, I did not refrain from explaining it to you. Then when God decreed our separation and you betook yourself elsewhere, these meetings aroused in me a resolution that had slackened. Your absence moved me to compose this Treatise, which I have composed for you and for those like you, however few they are. I have set it down in dispersed chapters. All of them that are written down will reach you where you are, one after the other. Be in good health. (Pines, 3-4)

Maimonides immediately identifies his addressee/dedicatee as his pupil Rabbi Joseph, son of Rabbi Judah, i.e., a rabbi in a line of rabbis, someone imbued with and committed to the tradition in which he has grown up. At first glance, one would not expect such a person to be perplexed enough to need a guide. Yet apparently he is. The question that must be at least implicitly addressed in what follows is why such a person would experience perplexity and what the meaning of such perplexity might be. This much one may conjecture immediately, namely that Rabbi Joseph is not simply the product of his lineage. He possesses characteristics of intellect that lead him, if not to abandon that tradition, at least to want to examine it with sufficient care that aspects of it make him wonder and experience puzzlement. One wonders what those characteristics are that lead Rabbi Joseph to perplexity.

That is why Maimonides proceeds forthwith to describe Rabbi Joseph's intellectual characteristics. Maimonides recognizes what question the first sentence of the epistle should raise, and he does not shirk from providing an answer to that question. This is deliberate on Maimonides's part, not only for the narrow purpose of elucidating the nature of Rabbi Joseph, but also for the following wider purpose. Inasmuch as Joseph is presented as the designated reader of the book, so too—as is indicated toward the end of the epistle—his described characteristics provide a sketch of the characteristics of all the most proper readers of the book.

Of course, once the book is published, anyone who wants to read it—even non-proper readers—will be able to do so, and Maimonides knows that. Those non-proper readers presumably could misunderstand the book, possibly even could consider it a dangerous and harmful book, and hence they could pose a threat to the survival both of the book and of Maimonides himself. How Maimonides deals with this is discussed in the introduction that follows this epistle.<sup>2</sup>

The first thing that one learns about Joseph as a person before he was a pupil of Maimonides is that he comes “from the country farthest away”, i.e., from absolutely the opposite end of the world from where Maimonides is. This implies two things: first, Joseph will go literally to the ends of the earth in his search for learning and knowledge; second, Maimonides has a worldwide reputation as a pre-eminent teacher.

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<sup>2</sup> I plan to follow this essay with a sequel or sequels in which that introduction is analyzed in some detail.

What does Maimonides teach? According to his own statement, he teaches students “to read texts.” This may seem like a modest and limited area of expertise, until one understands—as the sequel will indicate—what this means in its fullness.

Maimonides has “a high opinion” of Joseph. The basis for that opinion is Maimonides’s having discerned in Joseph’s poems two parallel, possibly identical mental tendencies: (1) a “strong desire for inquiry;” (2) a “powerful longing for speculative matters.” In other words, Joseph has an ardor, a deep and far-reaching passion, for speculative inquiry, i.e., for theoretical inquiry, as opposed to practical inquiry.

Again, Maimonides has concluded this on the basis of Joseph’s “poems.” What precisely does he mean by “poems”? He does not mean poetry in our sense. Rather he means didactic writings in meter. That is, he means letters and compositions that have been poeticized. The ancient difference between poetry and prose has to do with its content rather than with its form, as Aristotle indicates in his *Poetics* (1451b1-4, tr. mine):

For the skilled-inquirer/historian [*historikos*] and the poet [*poietes*] do not differ by the one’s speaking in meter and the one’s not-in-meter, for the things of Herodotus might be put into meters, and it would no less be some inquiry/history [*historia*] with meters than without meters....

This is the reason that Lucretius’s *De rerum natura* is considered as much a work of natural philosophy as Aristotle’s *Physics* is.

So, in his didactic poems, Joseph has revealed a powerful desire to learn. However, desire or longing is not enough, because it is possible that Joseph’s “longing is stronger than his grasp.” In other words, Joseph’s desire to learn may be greater than his ability to learn. Therefore, Joseph’s grasp must be put to the test. One wonders of what Maimonides’s testing of Joseph will consist.

Maimonides's testing of Joseph consists of reading texts under Maimonides's guidance. First, they read texts on mathematics, and next they read texts on astronomy.

However, in describing the initial phase of this course of study, although the actual sequence is mathematics first and astronomy second, Maimonides mentions astronomy first and mathematics second. Why? Presumably because even though the study of numbers is a necessary precondition or prerequisite for the study of the heavens, the study of the heavens is more important and higher in dignity than the study of numbers alone.

In addition, from our prevailing contemporary point of view, there is something peculiar in the way in which Maimonides describes the study of both mathematics and astronomy. We do not think of these as subject matters that are taught primarily by reading texts. We think that one studies mathematics by doing mathematics problems, and that one studies astronomy by looking at the sky either with the unaided eye or with a telescope. We do not see reading as anything more than secondary in these subjects, whereas Maimonides sees reading as essential. Maimonides would see problem solving and stargazing as secondary. From Maimonides's point of view, there would be something strange about what we do. He might accuse us of failing to realize that mathematics and astronomy are languages, the one the language of numbers and the one the language of heavenly motions. He might further accuse us of failing to see the language-based unity of the whole, because methodologically we have specialized and separated things that are actually part of a unified whole.

In the course of their study of texts, Maimonides has observed the excellence of Joseph's mind, i.e., the quickness of his understanding ("grasp"). Maimonides came to see that at least in mathematics and astronomy, Joseph's ability matched his desire. Therefore, Maimonides left Joseph to study those subjects alone, and he moved on to the next stage of mental testing.

The next (third) phase is studying the art of logic. As Maimonides presents it, this is the crucial test. After all, logic is the art of reasoning as such, the study of the language of thinking. When Joseph passed this test, Maimonides's "hopes fastened upon" him.

Therefore, on the basis of the successful completion of that crucial test, Maimonides discerned that Joseph was deserving of moving on to the penultimate (fourth) study, the study of the prophetic books of the Bible. Since these books contain “that which perfect men ought to consider,” the understanding of these books is the steppingstone to human perfection. However, these books are not easy: they contain the “secrets,” the hidden teaching, that can and should be grasped only by perfect humans.

### 3

The study of the secret teaching of the prophets cannot be carried out in as straightforward a manner as other subjects can. Rather, it is taught by hints and clues (“flashes and...indications”). Joseph was sufficiently enticed by these hints and clues that he asked for “additional knowledge.” In particular, Joseph realized that the study of the prophetic books was the gateway to the study of “divine matters,” the ultimate study.

Studying “divine matters” not only involves studying orthodox and accepted opinions, but also involves studying heterodox and possibly heretical opinions (such as those of the Mutakallimun). If such studying is not carried out properly between the correct teacher and the correct student, the student may become perplexed in a negative sense, i.e., the student may become stupefied or confused. That is what had happened to Joseph with his previous teachers, but now—under the influence of Maimonides—the nobility of Joseph’s soul has emerged, and he seeks to discover—in the words of Koheleth (12: 10)—“*acceptable words*.” What are acceptable words? According to the rest of the verse from Koheleth, the part that Maimonides omits from his citation, acceptable words are “upright words...of truth” (KJV). Both components are crucial: righteousness and truthfulness.

### 4

The cause of Joseph’s “stupefaction” seems to have been that the urgency of his soul’s demand for acceptable words led him to proceed hastily, impatiently, unmethodically, and in a disorderly way. Maimonides does not see this as disqualifying Joseph for the pursuit of the divine. Rather, he sees it as a predictable phase for which

he has to administer the corrective of “enjoining upon [Joseph] to approach matters in an orderly manner.” According to Maimonides, “the proper methods” must be followed. One must be careful not to stumble about blindly, hitting things “by accident,” because accidentally hit certainty is not true or lasting certainty.

In order to achieve true certainty, Joseph must trust his teacher, a trust that is justified by Maimonides’s track record as a teacher: he never has refused Joseph an explanation of anything in the Bible or the commentaries (“some text of the *Sages*”), no matter how “strange.” Without Maimonides’s guidance, Joseph’s learning would be precarious.

## 5

Therefore, when Joseph has to leave Maimonides, Maimonides feels compelled finally to complete a project that he had resolved to complete before, namely the composition of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. He is compelled to do so because only in writing can he continue to provide the guidance that Joseph—as gifted as he may be—still needs, even at a distance.

Furthermore, in case there are other Josephs (“those like you”) in the world, Josephs who cannot study directly with Maimonides—and if there are, there are only a few—Maimonides wants to provide a guide (*The Guide*) for them.

## Conclusion

The dedicatory epistle to *The Guide of the Perplexed* performs a number of important functions.

First, it emphasizes the centrality for learning of the guided, close study of texts. For Maimonides, then, the notion of the Jewish people as the people of the book is not an idle notion. Rather, it is a guidepost to the preservation of Judaism in a world where Jews are widely dispersed.

This points to the second function, namely the heightening of the awareness of the precariousness of Judaism and Jewish learning among Diaspora Jews, among Jews living in exile (*galuth*).

Third, the epistle contains a sketch of what Maimonides regards as the fundamental pre-theological educational curriculum: language leading to mathematics (the language of numbers), then to astronomy (the language of heavenly motions), and then to logic (the language of thinking).

Fourth, it contains an outline of the characteristics of the ideal learner or student.

This leads to the fifth and final function of the epistle, namely making a case for the importance and centrality of the teacher in the educational process as knowledgeable and authoritative guide and exhorter.

In addition, there is yet one more function that the epistle performs. It provides an exercise in the reading of a manageable text. As such, it is a test of the reader's suitability to read the rest of the book. In this brief text, Maimonides has conveyed considerable meaning. The care and concentration with which Maimonides has written it is a small mirror image of the care and concentration with which the book as a whole is written.

If one passes the dedicatory test, one is ready at least to approach *The Guide of the Perplexed* itself.