

Divine Knowledge and Providence in the Guide of the Perplexed

Daniel Davies

Divine knowledge and providence are two central doctrines that Maimonides addresses in part three of the *Guide*. He declares his belief that God “has known all the things that are produced anew before they have come about and has known them perpetually,”¹ and that the source of all existent beings “apprehends all that is other than itself; that in all the things that exist, nothing whatever is hidden from it.”² His stated view is that God knows all things, including changing things and particulars. On the other hand, he argues that God’s providence extends to all created species but not to their individuals. In the case of humans, providence can extend to some individuals, in accordance with the perfection of their intellects.

In today’s scholarship, the question of how these two doctrines are related to one another constitutes a major difficulty.³ It is claimed that Maimonides’s account of God’s providence has consequences for his teaching about God’s knowledge, and that the two are inconsistent. With this supposed inconsistency, it is sometimes thought that he deliberately contradicts himself by presenting two different models of God’s knowledge. Moreover, in line with the popular view that Maimonides includes at least two different theological positions in the *Guide*, and that they are directed at different kinds of people, it has been argued that when he presents a view that God knows all things he is speaking to the masses, and that when he presents his doctrine of God’s providence, he is qualifying his teaching about God’s knowledge in a way that would be detected only by the elite.

¹ *Guide* iii.20, tr. Pines, p. 480. ² *Guide* iii.20, p. 482.

³ See, for example, T. Rudavsky, *Maimonides* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), p. 149; A. Even-Chen, “Of the Divine Knowledge and the Rational – Emotional Experience of the Known Single, Under Providence, and the Beloved in *The Guide of the Perplexed* [sic],” [Heb.] *Daat* 74–75 (2013), 105–134; and K. Seeskin’s contribution to this volume.

Accordingly, Maimonides's real opinion is that God's knowledge is limited.⁴

The claim that Maimonides's presentation of God's knowledge is incompatible with his account of divine providence has a distinguished history. For example, Gersonides criticized Maimonides for his presentation of divine omniscience while adopting central aspects of his theory of providence, which seems closer to his own.⁵ Furthermore, he states that "on Maimonides' theory of providence, divine knowledge does not extend to particulars as particulars."⁶ However, while such criticisms express a disagreement, Gersonides did not seem to think that Maimonides deliberately contradicted himself in order to hide his opinion, or even that any apparent contradiction was at all deliberate. Nevertheless, in an assessment that reflects the prevailing current attitudes, Maimonides's view of providence has recently been described as "one of the most impenetrable areas of his thought" and as a matter on which he is "unusually evasive."⁷ The main purpose of this chapter is to question the view that Maimonides's presentations are incoherent. It will distinguish Maimonides's account of God's knowledge from that of God's providence, in line with an observation made by Samuel Ibn Tibbon, thereby arguing that there is no conflict of the kind that should lead one to conclude that he hid his belief about either of these two theological doctrines.⁸ God's knowledge precedes creatures and is therefore not dependent on them, on this reading of Maimonides's

⁴ See, for example, A. Ivry, "Providence, Divine Omniscience and Possibility: The Case of Maimonides," in T. Rudavsky (ed.), *Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence in Medieval Philosophy: Islamic, Jewish and Christian Perspectives* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1985).

⁵ See S. Feldman, *Gersonides: Judaism within the Limits of Reason* (Oxford: The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2010), pp. 120–121. In his commentary on *Guide* iii.19, Falaquera seems to slide between talk of God's knowledge and providence and seems to hint that he disagrees with Maimonides, *Moreh ha-Moreh*, ed. Y. Shiffman (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2001) p. 317.

⁶ Gersonides, *The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 2, tr. S. Feldman (Philadelphia, New York, Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1987), p. 208.

⁷ R. Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 44. D. Schwartz outlines three competing early interpretations of Maimonides's teaching on providence in "The Debate over the Maimonidean Theory of Providence in Thirteenth-Century Jewish Philosophy," *Jewish Studies Quarterly*, 2 (1995), 185–196.

⁸ I characterize the issues I will discuss as theological, thereby disagreeing with L. Strauss's claim that everything after *Guide* iii.7 is purely political. "The Place of the Doctrine of Providence According to Maimonides," *Review of Metaphysics*, 57 (2004), 538. Strauss bases his argument on the fact that at the end of iii.7, p. 430, Maimonides tells his readers that he will have nothing more to say about *ma'ase merkava*. As is well known, Maimonides takes *ma'ase merkava* to mean "divine science," or metaphysics, which Strauss identifies with theology. Therefore, Strauss argues, there is no theology in the remainder of the *Guide*, which contains the sections about God's knowledge and providence. My opinion is that the referent in iii.7 is Ezekiel's vision of the chariot, also known as *ma'ase merkava*, because nothing needed to decode that vision appears thereafter.

account, whereas providence depends on the natures of created beings. If the argument in this chapter is correct, there is no need to view Maimonides's arguments about providence as evasive since they can be accepted at face value.⁹

Maimonides's Account of God's Knowledge

Maimonides states that God knows all things. There is no individual, material particular of which God is ignorant.¹⁰ In Gersonides's terms, Maimonides's presentation involves the very strong claim that God "knows particular, contingent things insofar as they are particular."¹¹ One of the difficulties such a claim gives rise to is that it seems to be nonsense. It ought to be impossible for God to know material particulars because they are by nature unknowable.¹² Maimonides writes that "matter is a great veil preventing apprehension of the separate things as they truly are."¹³ Particulars in the sublunar world are material, and therefore cannot be apprehended "as they truly are." Knowledge is of essences abstracted from matter by the intellect, which means that it is of universals rather than particulars. On the question of the nature of universals, Maimonides seems to align himself with Avicenna when he states that "there is no existent species outside the mind, but the species and the other universals are mental notions, as you know, and that every existent outside the mind is only an individual or individuals."¹⁴ Objects that exist outside the mind, to which knowledge is related, differ from the knowledge itself, which is intellectual and involves abstractions from the particular matter.¹⁵ Avicenna discusses universals in relation to essences of things. The essence of a thing described is neither particular nor universal in its

⁹ There is a vast literature interpreting Maimonides's view of providence in ways that do not accord with the reading I offer here, which adopts a straightforward approach to Maimonides's philosophical views. I justify my methodology in *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides' Guide for the Perplexed* (New York: Oxford, 2011).

¹⁰ *Guide* iii.21, p. 485. ¹¹ Gersonides, *Wars*, Vol. 2, p. 91.

¹² This of course does not mean that it is impossible to make true judgments about particulars. Philosophical issues such as those pertaining to singular thoughts are beyond the scope of the present chapter.

¹³ *Guide* iii.9, p. 436. For the background of Maimonides's understanding of matter and form, see Ivry, "Providence, Divine Omniscience and Possibility," pp. 144–147.

¹⁴ *Guide* iii.18, p. 474. For further discussion on the Avicennian background of Maimonides's epistemology see B. Kogan, "What Can We Know and When Can We Know It?" Maimonides on the Active Intelligence and Human Cognition," in E. Ormsby (ed.) *Moses Maimonides and His Time* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 1989), pp. 121–137.

¹⁵ Matter as understood is not included in this discussion. For the distinction, see Ghazālī's *Intentions of the Philosophers*, ed. M. Bejou (Damascus: Maṭba'at al-Dabbāh, 2000) p. 63.

own right. An essence exists either as a particular, in which case it is instantiated in matter, or as a universal, in which case it is instantiated in an intellect. The essence can therefore only become a universal as a result of the mind's abstraction, which is possible because of the fact that the essence is predicable of multiple individual things.¹⁶

These difficulties lead to the following argument. Because knowledge of particulars is impossible, and because God cannot do what is impossible, God does not know particulars.¹⁷ In the *Guide*, Maimonides presents this opinion as that of the philosophers. His response is to emphasize the equivocal meanings that the two uses of the word "knowledge" have. Whereas it might be true to say that human knowledge is impeded by an object's materiality, the same might not be true of God's knowledge. Maimonides argues that the philosophers confuse God's knowledge with human knowledge, which Maimonides distinguishes in accord with his general explanation of divine predication, and charges them with inconsistency. The philosophers know that God is unlike any created thing because there is no multiplicity in God's essence, so they should realize that God's knowledge is unlike human knowledge. However, in order for their arguments to hold, there needs to be a certain similarity between divine and human knowledge. When they argue that God cannot know because knowledge derives from senses, or that God's knowledge must change when the objects of God's knowledge change, they argue on the basis of a position that they themselves ought to reject. By saying that God can know only universals they try to fit divine knowledge into some form of category that likens it to human

¹⁶ For further on Avicenna's view see M. Marmura, "Quiddity and Universality in Avicenna," *Neoplatonism and Islamic Philosophy* (1992), 77–88. By accepting the view that universals have only mental existence, Maimonides distances himself from the opinion that they are separate, independent forms, existing outside of both intellect and of any instantiation in a particular. Such a view was adopted by al-Kindi and his followers. See P. Adamson, *Al-Kindi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 109. On this view, Adamson has argued, not only strict, scientific knowledge of particulars would be denied to humans, but any knowledge whatsoever of particulars. Adamson writes that "Avicenna held that there is no such thing as knowledge of particulars." This form of knowledge is also applicable to God, says Avicenna, so that God knows particulars only inasmuch as they are subsumed under universals. See P. Adamson, "On Knowledge of Particulars," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 105 (2005), 274. Maimonides might also have been indicating his disagreement with Alfarabi and the Aristotelian school that followed him, who held that universals do have an extra-mental existence. See P. Adamson, "Knowledge of Universals and Particulars in the Baghdad School," *Documenti e Studi sulla Tradizione Filosofica Medievale*, 18 (2007), 141–164.

¹⁷ *Guide* iii.15, p. 459. That God cannot do what is logically impossible is explained further by Ivry, "Maimonides on Possibility," in Reinharr and Schwetschinski (eds.), *Mystics, Philosophers, and Politicians: Essays in Jewish Intellectual History in Honor of Alexander Altmann* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1982), pp. 67–84.

knowledge.¹⁸ But if God does not possess knowledge in the same sense as humans do, their objections do not hold and, conversely, if their objections do not hold, the two instances of “knowledge” have nothing in common. So in order to argue that it is plausible to posit knowledge of all things in God, Maimonides states that the word “knowledge” when applied to God’s knowledge of creatures has a totally different meaning than when it is applied to human knowledge of creatures. The two terms are absolutely equivocal.¹⁹

To express the absolute difference between them, Maimonides outlines five characteristics that pertain to God’s knowledge but not to human knowledge: God knows multiple species of things without that knowledge leading to plurality in the divine; God knows non-existent things; God knows infinities; God’s knowledge does not change when the things known change; God’s knowing a contingent thing does not make that thing necessary.²⁰ None of these can apply to human knowledge. Were they to do so, the person they are ascribed to would not possess something that is called knowledge. Take for example God’s knowledge of infinities, which are material particulars. Material things cannot be known because matter is unknowable in principle, so if knowledge of material things is posited, the word “knowledge” must have something other than its usual sense. These characteristics of God’s knowledge can therefore only be ascribed if the word “knowledge” is used by way of equivocation.

The equivocation is further emphasized when Maimonides says that, unlike humans, God knows existing things as their cause. In making this statement he is not necessarily characterizing God’s knowledge entirely as creative. A distinction can be drawn between how God knows those things that exist, as their cause, and God’s knowledge per se. One consequence of this distinction is that God’s knowledge need not be limited to those things that exist at some time. The view that God’s knowledge can extend to possible things that never exist makes sense of some of his comments about God’s ability to act. For example, he insists that God is able to “lengthen a fly’s wing or to shorten a worm’s foot,”²¹ a statement that can only be true if God’s “creative” knowledge is not restricted only to what God actually creates. If it is acceptable to extend God’s knowledge to unactualized possibilities, God would be able to create a world different from that

¹⁸ *Guide* iii.20, p. 482. ¹⁹ *Guide* iii.20, p. 483.

²⁰ These five differences are explained in iii.20. For a medieval defense of Maimonides’s view, see C. Manekin, “Maimonides on Divine Knowledge – Moses of Narbonne’s Averroist Reading,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 76 (2002), 51–74.

²¹ *Guide* ii.22, p. 319.

which is actually created and, similarly, if God's knowledge is not inherently creative, it follows that God might be able not to create a world at all.²² These statements warrant the view that Maimonides does not consider God's knowledge to be limited by existing particulars when he says that God knows existents as their cause. God's knowledge encompasses everything that is within God's power to create, but not everything that God wills into existence.²³ If everything that is willed is created, some might prefer to think of God's will as an attribute of action, when used in this sense, indicating that everything that God creates has a purpose, therefore preserving final causality and the truth of Aristotelian science.²⁴

In summary, material things are distinguished from one another and made individual instantiations of a form by virtue of their bodies. Matter is the principle of individuation, while form is the principle of intelligibility. In the case of human knowledge, matter is a barrier to understanding. God is not prevented from knowing by the unknowability of matter, however, because God's knowledge is the cause of matter. Again, this solution requires Maimonides to insist that the word knowledge must be absolutely equivocal when used of both human knowledge of material objects and God's knowledge of material objects.²⁵

One might well ask, in that case, whether Maimonides is justified in using the word knowledge at all. In what way could God's knowledge be considered knowledge? It seems that what Maimonides attributes to God is not knowledge, because knowledge, in the strong sense, cannot be of

²² See Manekin's observation that will follows wisdom in every instance in which Maimonides mentions them together. "Divine Will in Maimonides' Later Writings," *Maimonidean Studies*, 5 (2008), 216. Everything that is willed by God must be known by God, but it does not follow that everything that is known by God is also willed by God. Therefore, when Maimonides says that everything that exists can be attributed to God's will or to God's wisdom, it does not follow that he is equating them or negating one or the other.

²³ Maimonides also states that things that never exist are "not an object of God's knowledge." *Guide* iii.20, p. 481. However, this is no counter evidence if, as I have suggested, he is there considering kinds of things. When this is combined with a principle of plenitude, the conclusion follows that such things are not possible, and connects with his claim that God creates everything that can be created. See *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides*, p. 184, n. 28.

²⁴ I discuss an example of an interpretation that interprets Maimonides's different statements about God's willed actions in various ways. See "Reason, Will, and Purpose: What's at Stake for Maimonides and His Followers in the Doctrine of Creation," in *Creation ex Nihilo: Origins, Development, Contemporary Challenges* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), pp. 213–231.

²⁵ Maimonides does not explicitly go as far as Averroes, who argues that God's knowledge, while all-encompassing, is neither particular nor universal, since both are modes of human perception rather than of God's causative, and therefore equivocal, knowledge. See C. Belo, "Averroes on God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 17 (2006), 177–199. Nevertheless, this statement is not obviously incompatible with Maimonides's view.

material particulars, matter being unknowable. Gersonides criticizes Maimonides for this reason, and claims that God's knowledge encompasses particulars only inasmuch as they are knowable. As members of an ordered, and therefore intelligible, whole, particulars can be known, and God knows them in such a way. But to deny that God knows them in the respect in which they are not part of an ordered, intelligible whole is not to say that God is ignorant of anything, since there is nothing aside from the order to be known.²⁶ Perhaps Maimonides could have responded by arguing that Gersonides does not appreciate how deeply the equivocation is rooted in the idea that God's apprehension of existing things is connected to God's creative ability. God's knowledge is not an instance of knowledge, but neither is it ignorance. To which Gersonides could have reasserted his response that Maimonides is not entitled to use the word in such a way. God's knowledge must be a perfect instance of knowledge, which only God is able to possess. He may also have added that such an absolute creation of matter is not possible since matter itself must in some sense be uncreated. If so, there must be some sense in which matter is unknown even to God, as creator. As prime matter, and therefore possessing some form, it is knowable inasmuch as it is informed, but as the formless matter out of which the world was created, it is not.²⁷ In Gersonides's view, matter is therefore inaccessible to God's knowledge, even though God is the creator, as it is to human knowledge.

In Gersonides's view, Maimonides attempts to say that what for humans is confusion, error, or opinion is, in God's case, knowledge.²⁸ Gersonides suggests that Maimonides was motivated by his need to defend principles of the Torah, and argued only with that in view, so he sufficed himself with refuting the philosophers without making sure that his view was philosophically acceptable.²⁹ That God's knowledge is not an instance of knowledge is, as Gersonides recognizes, exactly Maimonides's point. It is sufficient to refute the philosophers, if it is true; God's knowledge is said to be totally different from any kind of knowledge with which humans are familiar and can therefore be complete, as the law teaches. His position can be summed up when he states that one ought "to believe that everything is

²⁶ There are competing interpretations of Gersonides's views. See T. Rudavsky, "Divine Omniscience and Future Contingents in Gersonides," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 21 (1983), 513–536. And see also C. Manekin, "Conservative Tendencies in Gersonides' Religious Philosophy," in D. Frank and O. Leaman (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 304–342.

²⁷ For an account of Gersonides on formless matter, see Feldman, *Gersonides*, pp. 53–55.

²⁸ Gersonides, *Wars*, vol. 2, p. 107. ²⁹ Gersonides, *Wars*, vol. 2, p. 98.

revealed to his knowledge, which is his essence, and that this kind of apprehension is impossible for us to know at all.”³⁰

On this reading, when Maimonides says that God knows all things he is making a theological statement that accords with his claims about religious language. He argues that people can know nothing of God’s essence and that all words must therefore be used of God, on the one hand, and of creatures, on the other, by way of absolute equivocation: A word must have one meaning when used of creatures and an entirely different meaning, one that humans cannot understand, when used of God.³¹ Ultimately, because words gain their meanings from the way people use them, they should not be used of God at all. In the case of knowledge, to say that God in a strict sense knows particulars secures this difference, since when humans know they do so through universals. The human intellect does not deal with individuals, but with abstract forms and judgments. It knows particulars only inasmuch as they are subsumed under the universal concept. Strictly speaking, humans do not know particulars: God does. We apprehend them by sensing them; God apprehends them as their creator.

Since our question regards the concord or otherwise between what Maimonides says about knowledge and providence, there is no need to examine further Gersonides’s own view. Nevertheless, one might ask why Maimonides would argue that God has knowledge of particulars, if to do so is in effect to predicate something of God that is not knowledge at all, as it includes that which is essentially unknowable. I contend that he considers this position to be implied by other of the law’s doctrines that are opposed to the philosophers and of which he is uncertain.³² Maimonides notes that neither his opinions on “these great and sublime notions” nor those of the philosophers are demonstrable. Although his view can only be asserted as the law’s opinion rather than as certainly true, it accords with the wider beliefs that the law entails.³³ “With regard to all problems with reference to which there is no demonstration, the method used by us with regard to this question – I mean the question of the deity’s knowledge of

³⁰ *Guide* iii.21, p. 485.

³¹ For further on Maimonides’s negative theology see C. Manekin, “Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes in the *Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Maimonidean Studies*, 1 (1990), 117–141.

³² This paragraph sums up an argument made in greater detail in *Method and Metaphysics*.

³³ *Guide* iii.21, p. 485. On the differences between doctrines affirmed with certainty, as a result of demonstration, and those affirmed to be true without certainty, on the basis of dialectical arguments, see A. Hyman, “Demonstrative, Dialectical and Sophistic Arguments,” in Ormsby (ed.), *Moses Maimonides and His Time* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1989), pp. 35–51, and J. Kraemer, “Maimonides’ Use of (Aristotelian) Dialectic,” in Cohen and Levine (eds.), *Maimonides and the Sciences* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2000), pp. 111–130.

what is other than He – ought to be followed.”³⁴ Of course, another such problem is creation *ex nihilo* and *de novo*, which Maimonides argues cannot be demonstrated but, rather, is a doctrine that can only be asserted on the basis of the law’s authority, with the support of rational arguments, and not as certainly true. God’s knowledge is inherently connected to the law’s view of creation, which posits an absolute beginning and, he argues, allows for the possibility of miracles. Maimonides states that miracles are created but not through a regular natural cause.³⁵ He argues that miracles occur when something happens to a particular thing that is apparently unnatural for that thing, but they do not permanently change its nature. If God causes all things through God’s knowledge, and God knows particulars, miracles are possible because God is able to cause each individual particular to be otherwise than it is. The Aristotelian view renders them impossible because it denies God knowledge of particulars.³⁶ So Maimonides presents the issues of God’s knowledge and the world’s creation as bound up with one another, and both can be asserted only on the basis of dialectical arguments, not as demonstrable truths.

Relationship between Knowledge and Providence

Notwithstanding Gersonides’s critique, he is clear that his own position differs from that of Maimonides. To say that Maimonides ought not to have made a particular claim is not to say that he did not in fact believe it to be true. However, that is the view taken by scholars today who have dealt with what Maimonides says about God’s providence. It is claimed that Maimonides indicated that he did not hold that God knows particulars by introducing an inconsistency into his account of God’s knowledge. While he extends God’s knowledge to particulars, he limits God’s providence in a way that seems to make it incompatible with God’s knowledge of particulars. Gersonides also seemed to find Maimonides’s view of providence more acceptable, although it is not exactly the same as his own, so the assumption that knowledge and providence are coextensive appears to be justified on philosophical grounds.³⁷ Recently, this difficulty has been forcefully stated by Alfred Ivry, who writes as follows: “God is not ignorant of anything, Maimonides says in a number of places, asserting that divine omniscience extends to all individual existents... Maimonides explicitly

³⁴ *Guide* iii.2, p. 485. ³⁵ *Guide* ii.29, p. 345.

³⁶ The connection between miracles and the law is made in *Guide* ii.25, p. 329.

³⁷ See Feldman, *Gersonides*, p. 107.

qualifies this position, however, as soon as he develops his theory of providence.”³⁸

The assumption behind this position must be that all that is known by God is also subject to God’s providence, and Maimonides does indeed write that “everything that is governed is also known.”³⁹ However, it is not obvious that this statement can be converted so that the claim that everything that is known is also governed, or provided for, would therefore hold true. It would be possible for Maimonides to deny that claim, as Ibn Tibbon does when he asserts that God’s knowledge is wider in scope than God’s providence.⁴⁰ Ibn Tibbon saw no inconsistency between Maimonides’s presentations of these doctrines. Separating them in this way allowed him to preserve Maimonides’s explicit positions alongside his previous claim that the discussions about them are connected. In an exposition of Psalm 73, Ibn Tibbon distinguishes “empirical proofs” for God’s lack of knowledge from “speculative” or “intellectual” proofs. He then follows Maimonides in claiming that the initial motivation for denying God’s knowledge of particulars was the lack of order in human affairs, specifically, the problem of apparent injustice when the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper.⁴¹ Maimonides explains that since “everyone who knows a certain matter must necessarily either exercise care in the governance of what he knows, or neglect it,”⁴² the philosophers argue that God cannot be ordering the lives of those who do not receive their just rewards. Nevertheless, God is good and therefore cannot be said to neglect what God knows. Now if God does not provide for all things but, being good, provides for all things God knows, God does not know all things.⁴³

Maimonides denies that these arguments have any bearing at all on the question of God’s knowledge. The “intellectual proofs” are those that

³⁸ Ivry, “Providence, Divine Omniscience and Possibility,” p. 149. Ivry’s explanations of Maimonides on God’s knowledge seem to me to be closer to Gersonides than to anything found in Maimonides. The same is true of his accounts of Maimonides on creation, and his assertion that the existence of matter is somehow independent of God’s creative activity. See, for example, *Maimonides’ Guide for the Perplexed: A Philosophical Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), pp. 181–183. Ivry states that “Gersonides makes explicit that which I have given as Maimonides’ esoteric view.” It seems to me that these ideas are connected. If one argues that Maimonides thought that there was an uncreated, formless matter, it makes sense to say that God knows only the order that God can impose upon that matter. As Gersonides argues, God’s knowledge can then be said to be of the same kind as human knowledge. Since Maimonides does not make such claims about either matter or God’s knowledge, they can only be presented as esoteric views.

³⁹ *Guide* iii.17, p. 466.

⁴⁰ Samuel Ibn Tibbon, *Ma’amar Yiqqavu ha-Mayim* (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmidt, 1837), p. 82.

⁴¹ *Guide* iii.16, p. 461, and *Yiqqavu ha-Mayim*, p. 86. ⁴² *Guide* iii.16, p. 462.

⁴³ This can be stated similar to what is now known as the classical formulation of the problem of evil. Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, p. 143.

Maimonides responds to by explaining that God knows existents as their cause, and include the arguments mentioned above. He states that these arguments were driven by the need to justify the claim that God is ignorant of human affairs, in light of the disorder they detect.⁴⁴ At the end of the chapter, in which Maimonides summarizes the philosophers' opinion, he states that "the discourses about knowledge and about providence are connected with one another."⁴⁵ In the subsequent two chapters, he explains providence in a way that responds to the "empirical proofs," effectively claiming that the philosophers' confusion is in the way that they connect knowledge with providence. They would have been justified in drawing the conclusion that God's providence does not extend to particulars but err when they make that claim about God's knowledge as well: Those who deny God's knowledge of particulars ought to deny God's providence over particulars.

The Account of Providence

In light of this connection between the two issues, Maimonides next discusses the different ways in which providence is usually understood. He divides the opinions into five, and adds his own interpretation.⁴⁶ His own view, he states, is similar to Aristotle's, but with some qualifications that bring it into line with "what has clearly appeared as the intention of the book of God and of the books of our prophets," although not into line with many of those who have previously expounded the law's view, namely "the multitude of our scholars" and "some of our latter-day scholars."⁴⁷ Aristotle's opinion, he writes, "is the opinion of those who hold that providence watches over some things and that these are [as they are] through the governance of one who governs and the ordering of one who orders, whereas other things are left to chance."⁴⁸ Aristotle's position can be divided into two parts. One concerns providence over superlunar affairs; the other is his view of providence in the sublunar world. In the superlunar world, providence extends to all individuals, while in the sublunar world it extends only to the species and to individuals inasmuch as they contribute to the permanence of the species. Since Maimonides agrees entirely with Aristotle's position regarding the superlunar realm, and with the general outlines of Aristotle's view about the sublunar realm, it is

⁴⁴ *Guide* iii.16, p. 463. ⁴⁵ *Guide* iii.16, p. 464.

⁴⁶ The various positions have been well summarized in previous studies, so there is no need to rehearse them here. See, for example, Rudavsky, *Maimonides*, p. 144.

⁴⁷ *Guide* iii.17, p. 469. ⁴⁸ *Guide* iii.17, p. 464.

worth outlining how he explains Aristotle. Ultimately, I will suggest, there is no difference between providence in the two realms. Both superlunar and sublunar creatures are governed by providence inasmuch as they are unchanging and fulfilling a constant goal.

Maimonides describes Aristotle's view of providence over the spheres as follows. "He holds that God, exalted, takes care of the spheres and of what is in them and that for this reason their individuals remain permanently as they are. Alexander has formulated this, saying that in Aristotle's opinion God's providence ends at the sphere of the moon."⁴⁹ Because God's providence extends to the spheres, everything in the superlunar realm is unchanging. This quotation implies that whatever is covered by God's providence does not change. And regarding the spheres, "whose individuals are permanent, and what is in them, providence regarding them means that they remain permanent in a changeless state."⁵⁰ In the sublunar world, where particulars are generated and corrupted, the situation is different. Only the species as a whole is said to be watched over by providence, while the individuals are not permanent. "To sum up, the basis of his opinion is as follows: Everything that, according to what he saw, subsisted continuously without any corruption or change of proceeding at all – as, for instance, the states of the spheres – or that observed a certain orderly course, only deviating from it in anomalous cases – as, for instance, the natural things – was said by him to subsist through governance; I mean to say that divine providence accompanied it."⁵¹ The particulars of the superlunar realm are ordered to a particular end, and they are always fulfilling that end. Therefore, providence extends to them permanently. However, Maimonides goes on to explain that, in Aristotle's view, providence also watches over the species of the sublunar realm because they too are unchanging. When stating that providence watches only over generalities, Maimonides's Aristotle expresses a belief that God's providence involves the perpetuation of each species but not of the concrete individuals belonging to the species. Although Maimonides adopts the Avicennian view that species exist only in the mind, as stated above, species nevertheless have a basis in external reality. In the mind the species exists as a universal, which can be predicated of multiple things, and in external reality, the species can be predicated of many. As Avicenna explains, "the universal, inasmuch as it is universal, is not specifically in this [particular instance] but not in that."⁵² Rather, permanent

⁴⁹ *Guide* iii.17, p. 465. ⁵⁰ *Guide* iii.17, p. 465. ⁵¹ *Guide* iii.17, p. 466.

⁵² *Avicenna's De Anima: Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā'*, Fazlur Rahman, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 207: 2.

providence over the species is satisfied because there are always individuals of which the species is predicable.

One of the reasons it is *prima facie* tempting to say that providence and knowledge are equivalent is that the way that he explains Aristotle sounds close to Maimonides's explanation of some of the philosophers' opinions about God's knowledge: "some said that he knows only the species and not the individuals whereas others said that he knows nothing at all outside himself."⁵³ And one of the motivations for these opinions is the belief that that since God does not change, what God knows cannot change. If providence can only be attached to that which does not change, and therefore, in the sublunar world, only to species, it seems to be equivalent to knowledge. If providence and knowledge are equivalent to one another, in both the superlunar and sublunar spheres, the kind of providence exercised is the same, in that it is providence over the species of things. The difference between the two realms is simply that sublunar species contain more than a single individual. But in the sublunar sphere, God's providence, like God's knowledge, is unchanging and concerns only that which is ordered and unchanging. Furthermore, in the case of the spheres, God can be said to know all the particulars of the superlunar realm without introducing plurality into God's knowledge, because each one of those individuals constitutes an entire species, being the lone instantiation of the species. And if God is said to know particulars in the sublunar realm in a universal way, the philosophers' claim that God's knowledge cannot extend to particulars since that would entail multiplicity in God's knowledge can also be answered.⁵⁴ So when Maimonides states his broad agreement with Aristotle's view of providence, he could be indicating his agreement with the philosophers' account of God's knowledge.

However, it is still possible to distinguish the account of providence from the philosophers' position on God's knowledge. In theory, more than one member of a species could be watched over by providence if there are multiple individuals that are unchanging, but that might not be true of God's knowledge. God's knowledge was said by the philosophers to extend only to those individuals that are singular in their species. In the case of providence, what is important is not whether there is a single member of a species, so that God's providence could not be prevented from covering distinct individuals because of their plurality, but the relationship between

⁵³ *Guide* iii.16, p. 463.

⁵⁴ See M. Marmura, "Some Aspects of Avicenna's Theory of God's Knowledge of Particulars," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 82 (1962), 299–312.

the purpose of the individuals and the permanence of the species. This follows from Maimonides's explanation that providence, in Aristotle's view, watches over what is permanent. So even according to the philosophers' theory, in which God's providence and knowledge seem to be equal in extent, the two doctrines seem to have a different meaning. Knowledge concerns the order that is bestowed on created beings; providence concerns the degree to which an individual thing is constantly fulfilling its function.

In the positions that Maimonides espouses, the two doctrines are even further apart. If God's knowledge of created beings is connected with God's creative ability, as I have argued, and providence is connected with permanent aspects of a species, viz. the fulfillment of the formal and final causes, which do not change as the material particulars change, the two doctrines should not be equated. That providence follows the fulfillment of the final cause, not God's creativity, can be seen in the way in which Maimonides accounts for providence over human beings.

Providence over the Human Species

Maimonides brings Aristotle's account of providence into line with what he considers to be the requirements of the Law by distinguishing providence over the human species from providence over all other sublunar things.⁵⁵ There are two fundamental ideas that Maimonides wishes to preserve. The first is that humans have free choice; the second is that people receive providence to the extent that they deserve. Whereas the first is not necessarily opposed by the philosophers' account of God's providence, the second seems to be. In order to uphold the belief that reward is just, Maimonides qualifies Aristotle's view by stating that individual humans can receive divine providence in accordance with the perfection of their intellects.

For the most part scholars have concentrated on the limits Maimonides draws to God's providence over humans, but it is important to ask about what it means for other creatures as well. God's providence extends to them also, if only in a general way. What is it about the difference between humans and, for example, dogs, that means that individual dogs are not provided for but individual humans can be? The same question can be asked of oak trees and applies to all other natural species. When individuals of such natural kinds achieve their good by fulfilling their goal they do not become permanent. They can, however, reproduce and perpetuate the

⁵⁵ *Guide* iii.17, p. 469.

species. Through their reproduction, they fulfill their function and the species is perpetually ordered.

The providential distinction follows from the specific difference of humans and, therefore, the nature of the human goal.⁵⁶ If the human goal is to know the final causes of all natural kinds, it differs essentially from that of all other sublunar creatures. Maimonides distinguishes other natural kinds from humans who have achieved a level of particularly human perfection. The examples that he uses when he rejects Aristotle's view are telling. He explains that Aristotle's opinion requires believing that there is no difference between the death of an ant and the death of a prophet, or the death of perfect people worshipping.⁵⁷ With regard to providence, it is relevant that Maimonides distinguishes ants from perfect people, not from all people. Humans do not endure by perpetuating the species in the same way as other animals, but by perfecting their intellect. So Maimonides distinguishes between non-human sublunar species and people who have reached a degree of perfection. Both worshippers and prophets have perfected themselves in a way that renders them meaningfully different from ants, and from the multitude. God's providence watches over those who have attained a degree of perfection because they have actualized their intellects to some extent. By contrast, someone who has not reached such perfection is like "a beast having the shape and configuration of a human being,"⁵⁸ and can only engender the continuation of the animal part of her nature. If such a person reproduces, what endures is animal, not specifically human. The specifically human form, the intellect, does not survive through reproduction of the animal part of human nature. Moreover, when a person actualizes the specifically human aspect of her nature, that aspect can be said to be permanent. Theoretical, contemplative knowledge, which is the goal of the human intellect, involves apprehending the nature of existing beings in an abstract way.

At the end of the *Guide*, Maimonides returns to clarify providence. He introduces the subject with the remark that "a most amazing insight has now occurred to me through which doubts are dissolved and divine secrets uncovered."⁵⁹ He then proceeds to say that that a person would be protected from all evil as long as she is engaged in the intellectual activity that activates

⁵⁶ *Guide* iii.17, p. 474. ⁵⁷ *Guide* iii.17, p. 466. ⁵⁸ *Guide* iii.8, p. 433 and iii.51, p. 618.

⁵⁹ *Guide* iii.51, p. 624. I use "insight" to translate *wajh nazar*, literally "aspect of an insight." *Nazar* can also be "speculation." Pines translates the construct as "speculation," which could give the impression of linguistic support to the notion that Maimonides is presenting an entirely different account of divine providence to that which appears earlier. Such a difference is not warranted by the Arabic, although it cannot be definitively ruled out solely on a linguistic basis.

divine providence: “if someone’s thought is free from distraction, and he apprehends God, exalted, in the right way and rejoices in what he apprehends, that individual can never be afflicted with evil of any kind, for he is with God and God is with him.”⁶⁰ Ibn Tibbon asked whether there were two different accounts of providence in the *Guide*, and wondered whether that which appears at the *Guide’s* end is miraculous.⁶¹ Maimonides seems to argue that there is some sort of special providence that protects the virtuous from suffering any evil whatsoever. Such providence involves “the safeguard and the protection from all bodily ills, both the general ones and those that concern one individual rather than another, so that neither those that are consequences upon the nature of being nor those that are due to the plotting of man would occur.”⁶² Scholars continue to argue that Ibn Tibbon successfully identified a different version of providence opposed to that explained in the *Guide’s* earlier chapters, but Ibn Tibbon himself appears to have thought that there is no miraculous form of providence, although he continued to ponder the passage.⁶³ He points out that had Maimonides been introducing a new, miraculous form of providence, he should not have stated that “the secret with regard to this has been explained even according to the requirements of their [the philosophers’] opinions.”⁶⁴ Maimonides’s entire account fits with Aristotle’s view of the way the world works, indicating that there is nothing supernatural in what Maimonides says about providence. Intellect works the way that Aristotle says, but humans who do not fulfill their potential do not lead to the permanence of the human species qua human. The statement appearing at the end of the *Guide* is therefore merely a refinement of his previous position. He is simply expanding on the consequences of the theory he set out earlier on, in which he stated that providence is graded according to the perfection of the individual provided for.⁶⁵

The substance of the insight is as follows: “An individual of perfect apprehension whose thought sometimes, for a certain time, is emptied of

⁶⁰ *Guide* iii.51, p. 625.

⁶¹ Z. Diesendruck published the letter in which Ibn Tibbon asks this question. “Samuel and Moses Ibn Tibbon on Maimonides’ Theory of Providence,” *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 11 (1936), 341–366.

⁶² *Guide* iii.51, p. 626.

⁶³ See, for example, C. Touati, “Les Deux Théories de Maïmonide sur la Providence,” in *Studies in Religious and Intellectual History* (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1979), p. 340. For Ibn Tibbon’s comment, see *Yiqqavu ha-Mayim*, p. 98.

⁶⁴ *Guide* iii.51, p. 625. For a statement by Avicenna that the divine emanation is cut off from the human intellect when the soul turns away from seeking forms, see *Avicenna’s De Anima*, p. 245. For Ibn Tibbon’s comment, see Diesendruck, “Providence,” pp. 358–359.

⁶⁵ The proof texts Maimonides uses in iii.51 would imply a miraculous form of providence if they were taken literally, but he does not indicate that they should be so understood.

God, is watched over by providence only during the time when he thinks of God; providence withdraws from him during the time when he is occupied [with something else].”⁶⁶ Maimonides then says that this is similar to the case of a skilled scribe who is not engaged in writing. The image evokes Aristotle’s explanation of first and second entelechy, or perfection.⁶⁷ Aristotle says that there are two levels of perfections in this context, the first of which is like possessing knowledge, and the second of which is like using that knowledge. The scribe who possesses a skill but is not using it, possesses a first level of perfection. One who is employing that skill possesses a second level, which is an actuality, or use, of the skill. So Maimonides seems to be saying that individual providence is a perfectly natural occurrence that pertains when someone who already possesses the knowledge necessary for speculation on truth is exercising that knowledge. She is thereby fulfilling the final cause of humans by actualizing that aspect of herself in virtue of which she is a human rather than a non-rational animal. However, providence does not watch over someone who possesses the knowledge to engage in speculative worship of God but is not exercising it. Maimonides then explains that evils occur to someone who is perfect only when they are not using their potential to be watched over by providence or, in other words, are not actualizing their capacity for speculative thought: “the greatness of the calamity being proportionate to the duration of the distraction or to the vileness of the matter with which he is engaged.”⁶⁸

Maimonides’s new insight explains the connection between evil and the withdrawal of providence. He argues that providence over individual humans ceases when they stop actively engaging in reason, that faculty which makes them properly human. Evil does not have the same effect on a perfect person who is actively engaged in contemplation as it would on another animal. Providence is not affected by, for example, a sheep stepping on a broken bottle and injuring its foot. Providence has nothing to do with any harm or evil that occurs to a particular sheep, but is concerning the permanence of the species as a whole; pain does not prevent it from

⁶⁶ *Guide* iii.51, p. 625.

⁶⁷ *De Anima* 412a. On the Arabic reception of the word as “perfection” in this passage (*tamām* or *kamāl*) see R. Wisnovsky, *Avicenna’s Metaphysics in Context* (London: Duckworth, 2003), pp. 21–24.

⁶⁸ *Guide* iii.51, p. 625. The metaphor used to describe the person enjoying the ultimate in God’s providence, one whom the sun shines on, is similar to that which Maimonides uses in his introduction to the *Guide* when he describes prophetic knowledge, which is likened to lightning flashes on a dark night. *Guide* i.int, p. 7. Prophecy is also natural, in Maimonides’s view, and the result of human perfection. See A. Altman, “Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy?” *AJS Review*, 3 (1978), 1–19.

being a sheep. However, a person who steps on a broken bottle and is forced to divert her attention from thinking about truth towards treating the injury will no longer be watched over by providence. The difference between them is that if the person had been engaged in speculative thought, thereby to some degree fulfilling the purpose of her rational faculty, she is affected by a withdrawal of the kind of providence that depends on her intellect. Since she is no longer engaged in the specifically human activity of reasoning, but in dealing with something that depends on her animal nature, i.e. pain, providence does not attach to what is permanent about her nature. Now, however, Maimonides is still able to differentiate between her and the sheep on the basis that the specifically human aspect of providence remains available to her, even if it is not fully engaged at that moment. To an extent, what is important is not the pain itself but the distraction. Should somebody not be distracted, the damage would not be an evil in itself from the point of view of the effect it has on the human species. However, inasmuch as a bodily evil is distracting, it is an evil to the human nature of the individual. Should evil happen to an individual who is cut off from individual providence, that person would be “left to chance,” as Aristotle stated.⁶⁹ A plausible way to understand being subject to chance is that it indicates that such things are not properly ordered. God’s purposive agency is connected to science and, therefore, final causes. Everything that is created has a purpose. Individuals that are not equivalent to the purpose can be said to be left to chance, as they do not exist in the way that they are “intended” by completing their final causes. Their goal is to know God as far as possible and to know God’s governing of creatures. That is, humans are perfect inasmuch as they know the order of existing things and their final causes and inasmuch as their own souls are ruled by their intellects.⁷⁰ This is the perfection of humans because things are perfected when they realize their goal, and the human goal is to know.

Conclusion

If the argument in this chapter is correct, Maimonides’s professed belief about both God’s knowledge and God’s providence can be accepted together. There is no conflict between them since they are different doctrines. God’s knowledge of created beings is not limited by matter because it causes them, and so it is of a different sort to human knowledge.

⁶⁹ See above (note 48). ⁷⁰ *Avicenna’s De Anima*, p. 50.

God's providence is said to attach only to the ultimate goods of creatures, which are in themselves unchanging. The way Maimonides explains providence connects it with the nature of created beings. "Providence also extends over the earth in the way that corresponds to what the latter is, just as providence extends over the heavens in the way that corresponds to what they are."⁷¹ In the case of human nature, the ultimate goal involves perfecting theoretical reason. The perfection of the individual is what makes the animal a human animal, and it is this that endows the species "human" with permanence. This is also of a different sort of providence to that which humans might exercise over other creatures, which does not involve purely contemplation of natural kinds. Additionally, Maimonides's views about providence itself, as it appears in the middle and end of part three of the *Guide*, can be accepted as a coherent whole rather than two distinct doctrines. If such conclusions are acceptable, there is no need to claim that Maimonides contradicts himself in order to hide his real opinion about either God's knowledge or God's providence.

⁷¹ *Guide* iii.54, p. 637.