On Glimpsing the Face of God in Maimonides: Wonder, "Hylomorphic Apophasis" and the Divine Prayer Shawl

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Abstract

It is common to interpret Maimonides as emphasizing the unknowability of God's essence. In this paper, Sarah Pessin asks us to supplement this interpretation with the additional sense that God's essence is also knowable for Maimonides. Analyzing Maimonides' treatment of Exodus 33-34 and his treatment of the various ways of knowing and not knowing "God's Face" and "God's Back," Pessin identifies "philosophical wonder" as a special state in which philosophers and prophets apprehend nature in such a way as to be filled with an awareness of God's presence in the universe. After presenting passages of the Guide of the Perplexed which beckon to God's knowability, she goes on to introduce "hylomorphic apophasis"—the idea that God, for Maimonides, is simultaneously manifest in and obscured by the materiality of nature. The essay ends with a

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consideration of Maimonides' analysis of a Rabbinic verse about God's wrapping himself in a prayer shawl.

Key words: Maimonides, God's essence, God's Face, God's Back, God's Glory, philosophical wonder, hylomorphic apophasis.

Resumen

Es común interpretetar que Maimonides enfatiza la imposibilidad de conocer la esencia de Dios. En este artículo, Sarah Pessin nos invita a complementar esta interpretación con la propuesta de que la esencia de Dios es también cognoscible para Maimonides. Analizando la interpretación de Maimonides del pasaje del Éxodo 33-34 y su interpretación de las varias maneras de conocer y no conocer "el rostro de Dios" y "la espalda de Dios", Pessin identifica el "asombro filosófico" como un estado especial en el que los filósofos y los profetas aprehenden la naturaleza de una manera en que llegan a sentirse llenos de una conciencia de la presencia de Dios en el universo. Después de presentar pasajes de la Guía de los perplejos, que apoyarían la cognoscibilidad de Dios, Pessin introduce la noción de "apófasis hilemórfica", la idea de que Dios, para Maimonides se encuentra simultáneamente manifiesto y oscurecido por la materialidad de la naturaleza. El artículo termina con una consideración del análisis de Maimonides a un verso rabínico acerca de que Dios se envuelve a sí mismo en un manto de oración.

Palabras clave: Maimonides, la esencia de Dios, el rostro de Dios, la espalda de Dios, la gloria de Dios, asombro filosófico, apófasis hilomórfica.

Maimonides is well known for a rather staunch grade of apophasis on which God's essence is completely unknowable. My paper begins by addressing this more well-rehearsed apophatic aspect of Maimonidean

theology, but then moves on to explore an additional kataphatic dimension to Maimonides' thought: In Maimonides, I will argue, we will find that the properly attuned philosopher is able to catch a glimpse of God's essence in the very folds of nature. I will introduce the idea of "hylomorphic apophasis" as a new way of thinking about the implications for God's essence of Maimonides' apophasis-with-kataphasis, and I will end by exploring some proof texts in support of God's knowability through nature, including Maimonides' own suggestion that the Face of God (signifying God's essence) can be seen in the Back of God (signifying nature), a point further borne out in a careful reading of Maimonides' own vexing interpretation of a Rabbinic teaching on the divine prayer shawl.

By advancing a kataphatic possibility within Maimonidean theology, my reading can also be seen as challenging overly-simplistic descriptions of Maimonides in the history of philosophy as a proponent of a staunch "*via negativa*." My reading emphasizes the extent (and the importance) of God's knowability in Maimonides which is often completely left out of accounts which solely (or, overly) characterize Maimonides (often in contrast to Aquinas' "*via analogia*") in terms of a robust and unwavering negative theology.

I. Maimonides' Unknowable God: Flying Underwater Elephants and "His Essence Cannot Be Grasped As It Really Is"

It is not my intention in this paper to suggest that Maimonides lacks a strongly apophatic sense of God's unknowability – I mean only to supplement this strong apophasis with an additional sense of God's knowability. Beginning with the unknowableness of God, we may turn to one of the most colorful examples of Maimonidean apophasis (and, arguably, a fine moment of humor at that) in which Maimonides likens anyone's claim to know something about God to the person who knows of an elephant that is an underwater flying fish with the face of a man:

> As for one who affirms an attribute of Him without knowing a thing about it except the mere term, it may be considered that the object to which he imagines the term applies is a nonexistent notion – an invention that is false; for he has, as it were, applied this term to a notion lacking existence, as nothing in existence is like that notion. An example is that of a man who has heard the term elephant and knows that it is an animal and demands to know its shape and true reality. Thereupon one who is himself mistaken or who misleads others tells him that it is an animal possessing one leg and three wings, inhabiting the depths of the sea, having a transparent body and a broad face like that of man in its form and shape, talking like a man, and sometimes flying in the air, while at other times swimming like a fish. I will not say that this representation of the elephant differs from what the latter really is, nor that the man in question falls short in his apprehension of the elephant. But I shall say that the thing that he has imagined as having these attributes is merely an invention and is false and that there is nothing in existence like that, but that it is a thing lacking existence to which a term signifying an existent thing has been applied – a thing like… a centaur and other imaginary forms of this kind…[1]

Examples of this kind of apophatic sensitivity can be found throughout the *Guide* (and these kinds of examples arguably help give rise to the many overly-simplistic descriptions of Maimonides as primarily (or solely) advocating *via negativa*). Turning along these same "unknowability" lines to Maimonides' treatment of God's disclosure to Moses at Exodus 33 and 34 (a disclosure, we will see below, which is described in terms God's hiding His Face and instead allowing Moses to see His Back), we learn of God's essence that it "cannot be grasped as it really is":

[1] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.60, p. 146.

> The answer to the two requests [viz. to see God's Glory and to see God's ways] that He, may He be exalted, gave him [Moses] consisted in His promising him to let him know all His attributes, making it known to him that they are His actions, and teaching him that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is. Yet He drew his attention to a subject of speculation through which he can apprehend to the furthest extent that is possible for man. For what has been apprehended by [Moses], peace be on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him.[2]

There is no doubt that Maimonides emphasizes the unknowabless of God – here more clearly described as the uknowableness of God's essence.

II. Divine Attributes of Action: Sensing God's Goodness[3] in the Order of Nature

Looking to Maimonides' further unpacking of Exodus 33 and 34 (which we will address in detail below), we find what at first blush seems like an embrace on Maimonides' part of at least one kind of divine knowability: after addressing God's unknowable essence, Maimonides addresses God's attributes, and talks about how claims about God's attributes are indeed meaningful. If taken, for example, on par with various Kalam conceptions of God's 99 names, or on par with Greek distinctions between God's unknowable essence (or *ousia*) and His knowable powers (or *dynameis*),[4] it might seem fair to imagine that, in his talk of the meaningfulness of claims about divine attributes, Maimonides is suggested that

[2]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 123.

[3]See note 14 for the sense in which "wisdom" and "goodness" are not divine "traits."

[4]For an overview of the "essence vs. powers" debate in a range of Greek and Patristic thinkers, see Reynolds "The Essence, Power and Presence of God."

God's attributes – even if not His essence – can be known. However, such a reading would be incorrect. Unlike the "divine powers" of other thinkers, divine attributes, for Maimonides, are not real; God, for Maimonides, does not actually have any attributes. Far from "corresponding" in any sense to divine attributes (or powers, or the like), a claim like "God is merciful" is meaningful for Maimonides for a more complex set of reasons having to do (as we will address below) with how humans are moved to talk about Gods' ways (or works) in the world. In essence, as we will see, "God is merciful" tells us nothing about God – it tells us, rather, something about the world. And so, nothing at all is yet revealed about divine knowability.

However, as I will argue below, a more careful consideration of Maimonides' treatment of God's so-called attributes can indeed reveal a genuine sense in which God – in His very essence – can be known.

Essence and Glory, Attributes and Ways: Maimonides Reads Exodus 33-34

Exodus 33 and 34 hold special interest for Maimonides. In these two chapters, the Bible speaks in confusing back and forth terms of God on the one hand speaking to Moses "face to face" while on the other hand denying to Moses a revelation of his Face, as it speaks too in confusing back and forth terms of Moses on the one hand asking to see God's ways, and on the other hand asking to see God's Glory (with the further sense, presumably, that asking to see God's Glory is a request to see God's Face), and in the mix, there is also God's hand and His Back. Turning to the text before turning to Maimonides' interpretation of it, we read at Exodus 33:11-23 and at Exodus 34:5-7:[5]

> **Exodus Chapter 33**
>
> **11 And the Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend**…12 And Moses said to

[5]Revised English translation from online JTS text; bold-faced indicates key passages; underlined bold-faced indicates most key moments in the text as they relate to Maimonides' treatment.

the Lord: 'See, You say to me: Bring up this people; and You haven't let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You've said: I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight. **13 Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your ways, that I may know You, to the end that I may find grace in Your sight; and consider that this nation is Your people.' 14 And He said: 'My presence shall go with you, and I will give you rest.'** 15 And he said unto Him: 'If Your presence go not with me, carry us not up hence. 16 For wherein now shall it be known that I have found grace in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not in that You go with us, so that we are distinguished, I and Your people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth?' 17 And the Lord said to Moses: 'I will do this thing also that you have spoken, for you have found grace in My sight, and I know you by name.' **18 And he said: 'Show me, I pray Thee, Your glory.' 19 And He said: 'I will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy.' 20 And He said: 'You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.' 21 And The Lord said: 'Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand upon the rock. 22 And it shall come to pass, while My glory passes by, that I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and will cover you with My hand until I have passed by. 23 And I will take away My hand, and you shall see My back; but My face shall not be seen.'**

Exodus Chapter 34

5 And the Lord descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. **6 And**

> **the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed: 'The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; 7 keeping mercy unto the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and unto the fourth generation.'**

While the Biblical text, and rabbinic interpretations of the text,[6] describe Moses as having made three requests of God, for Maimonides, there are two Mosaic requests:

> One request consisted in him asking Him, may He be exalted, to let him know His essence and true reality. The

[6]Berakhot 7a:"… R. Johanan further said in the name of R. Jose: Three things did Moses ask of the Holy One, blessed be He, and they were granted to him. He asked that the Divine Presence should rest upon Israel, and it was granted to him. For it is said: is it not in that Thou goest with us [so that we are distinguished, I and Thy people, from all the people that are upon the face of the earth]. 22 He asked that the Divine Presence should not rest upon the idolaters, and it was granted to him. For it is said: 'So that we are distinguished, I and Thy people'. He asked that He should show him the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, and it was granted to him. For it is said: show me now Thy ways. 23 Moses said before Him: Lord of the Universe, why is it that some righteous men prosper and others are in adversity, some wicked men prosper and others are in adversity? He replied to him: Moses, the righteous man who prospers is the righteous man the son of a righteous man; the righteous man who is in adversity is a righteous man the son of a wicked man…Now this [saying of R. Johanan] 26 (That all the three requests of Moses were granted.) is in opposition to the saying of R. Meir. For R. Meir said: only two [requests] were granted to him, and one was not granted to him. For it is said: and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, although he may not deserve it, and I will show mercy on whom I will show mercy, 27 although he may not deserve it. 28 (And God's ways therefore cannot be known)."

> second request, which he put first, was that He should let him know His attributes.[7]

Before moving to Maimonides' commentary (and our own interpretation of Maimonides' commentary), let us summarize the Biblical text and schematically pull out what Maimonides identifies as Moses' two requests, and God's two answers:

- Moses' request #1: Moses asks to see "God's ways" (Exodus 33:13)
- Moses' request #2: Moses asks to see "God's Glory (*kavôd*)" (Exodus 33:18)
- God's reply to request #1:
  - Promise, part 1: God promises to make all His goodness pass before Moses (Exodus 33:19)
  - Promise, part 2: God promises to proclaim the name of the Lord before him (Exodus 33:19)
  - Act, part 1: God "passes by before him" (34:6)
  - Act, part 2: God proclaims 13 names and / or descriptions of Himself (Exodus 34:6-7)[8]
- God's reply to request #2:
  - "You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20)
  - God explains that His Glory (*kavôd*) will pass by Moses, but that He will cover him with His hand until He passes (Exodus 33:22)

[7]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 123

[8]As Maimonides reminds us, these are what the Jewish Sages refer to as God's "13 *Midot*" or "13 attributes" of mercy.

– God explains that He will then take away His hand and that Moses will then see "God's Back," but not "God's Face" (Exodus 33:23)

Already just from the text, we can see the following correlations (correlations which, in any case, become key for Maimonides):

God's Ways, All of God's Goodness, the "name/s" of God, God's Back vs. God's Glory (*kavôd*), God's Face

Turning to Maimonides' interpretation (an interpretation that in many ways runs throughout the entire *Guide of the Perplexed*, with special emphasis at *Guide* 1.21, 1.37, and 1.54), we can start with a few basic premises:

1) Maimonides identifies the 2nd request, to see God's Glory, as the more important of the two requests, and for that reason he addresses it first, and

2) Maimonides introduces the philosophical distinction between God's "essence and true reality" and his "attributes of action".

These two points in mind, we may revise our above chart as follows:

GOD'S ESSENCE (AND TRUE REALITY) = God's Glory (*kavôd*), God's Face vs. GOD'S "ATTRIBUTES OF ACTION" = God's Ways, All of God's Goodness, the "name/s" of God, God's Back

Looking to Maimonides' follow-up treatment of God's Essence and of the "attributes of action," scholars open the door to what we have above identified as staunchly apophatic readings of Maimonides which rule out any knowledge of God. On such readings of Maimonides, God's Essence will turn out to be completely unknowable (mirroring in this

sense the Biblical claim at Exodus 33:20 that one cannot see God's Face). As for the positive "attributes of action," these too continue to support the strongly apophatic reading of Maimonides as denying any true knowledge of God; for, deviating (at least on its face) from the Biblical sense that Moses does come to know God in knowing these attributes, Maimonides teaches that God does not have any attributes, and that the claim, for example, that "God is merciful" in the end tells us nothing about God. So far, we have nothing but support for a staunchly apophatic reading of Maimonides.

I suggest, though, that a more careful consideration of Maimonides' account of such claims as "God is merciful" will reveal a critical sense in which God – in his true essence[9] – is knowable through nature. Let us begin by considering in more detail Maimonides' analysis of God's attributes as "God's ways."

God's Ways: The Manifesting of Divine Wisdom in the Order of Nature

Reflecting at least in part on the Bible's own move from Moses' request to see "God's ways" to God's response (at Exodus 34: 6-7) in the form of a list of divine names and descriptions (God's "13 attributes"), Maimonides emphasizes that God does not actually have attributes,[10] and that the list of divine names and descriptions refer, rather, to the works [or "ways"] of God, which is to say, the manifestation of God's

[9]In suggesting that Maimonides' God is knowable, I am suggesting that "God's essence" is knowable, since there is, on Maimonides's conception of God, nothing other than God's essential unity-in-Wisdom.

[10]As we will see, Maimonides takes pains to emphasize of all so-called divine attributes that they are not actually attributes "possessed" by God: "The meaning here is not that [God] possesses moral qualities, but that He performs actions resembling the actions that in us proceed from moral qualities – I mean from aptitudes of the soul…" (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, bottom of p. 124). We will return below to the sense in which such claims as "God is merciful" stem from our own human approaches (as we will see, our own human approaches to nature).

wisdom in the order of nature. In this sense, claims such as "God is merciful" refer us not to God, but to God's goodness as evidenced in the laws of nature. In way of emphasizing that God's works are in this way related to the lawful order of nature, Maimonides notes that Moses was shown God's works so that he might apprehend the way they are "mutually connected"[11] and so that "he will know how [God] governs them in general and in detail."[12] Making the link between God's so-called attributes and the order of nature, Maimonides notes that (a) God answers the request to see His "ways" not only by listing a list of so-called attributes, but by doing so in the context of stating "I will make all My goodness pass before you" (Exodus 33:19), and he notes further that (b) "all [God's] goodness" refers to the order of nature as evidenced by the Genesis verse "And God saw everything He had made, and behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:31). For Maimonides, when Moses asks to see God's ways, He is shown the entirety of the created universe. Herein lies the connection between God's attributes (now as God's "ways") and the order of nature.

Consider, in this light, Maimonides' analysis of the meaningfulness of the expression "God is merciful": this claim is meaningful, Maimonides explains, not by referring to "attributes of God" (again: God has no attributes for Maimonides), but by expressing something true about our experience of the order of nature which, furthermore, leads us to think, from our own human perspectives, of the trait of "mercy" in the form of the following kind of sentiment: "Were I the author of this particularly well-ordered system with these kinds of outcomes, it would be the result of various traits of my own, including: mercy". Consider Maimonides on the order to be found in a consideration of an embryo:

> For instance, one apprehends the kindness of His governance in the production of the embryos of living beings, the bringing of various faculties to existence in them and in them who rear them after birth – faculties that preserve

[11] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 124.

[12] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 124.

> them from destruction and annihilation and protect them against harm and are useful to them in all the doings that are necessary to them. Now actions of this kind proceed from us only after we feel a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of mercy. God, may He be exalted, is said to be merciful…It is not that He, may He be exalted, is affected and has compassion. But an action similar to that which proceeds from a father in respect to his child and that is attached to compassion, pity, and an absolute passion, proceeds from Him, may He be exalted, in reference to His holy ones, not because of a passion or a change…[13]

For Maimonides, "God is merciful" means that there is something about the world – a world that is invested with and manifests God's Wisdom – which reveals a kind of orderliness which attentive humans are moved to associate with "mercy" (again, in the sense that "if I were to have ordered something in this way, it would have been on account of my mercy"). Notice how this is a two-step move away from attributing to God the actual trait of "mercy": (1) we move from casting our gaze onto God per se to considering the impact of God on the world, and (2) even in considering the impact of God on the world, we recognize that "mercy" is a human concept that, for various human reasons, we are moved to invoke when we reflect on the world – e.g. when we are moved by (which, as we will see below, depends upon careful intellectual apprehension of) the details of, say, embryology and the overarching details of how embryology itself fits into the whole of the order of terrestrial and celestial nature.

In Pythagorean and Platonic fashion, we here enter into a sensibility about the microcosm (here, nature) revealing the order of a perfectly ordered macrocosm – that macrocosm here signifying the essential wisdom of God.[14] That an embryo has all the resources – both inside and

[13]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 125.

[14]In some important sense, the description of the order as "wise" would be subject to the same analysis as "merciful," with the exception that "God's

outside the womb – needed to fulfill its own reality is no coincidence but is, rather, a manifestation of God's own essential wisdom. The order of the microcosm of nature reveals the order of the divine Mind. And it is precisely this teaching that lies at the core of Maimonides' analysis of the claim that God is merciful: when we say "God is merciful" we are expressing something about our own perspective on the [God-derived] order of the natural world. "God is merciful" (a claim which technically is false if meant to denote that God has attributes) in this sense reveals two true claims 1) the world is well-ordered: for we assert "mercy" of God precisely in noticing the order of nature, which, in human terms, suggests a "merciful design," and relatedly, (2) this kind of order in nature is the manifestation of God's goodness.

In two senses, the above analysis does help us draw closer to God's essence: first, we are being reminded that the ordered world in which we live is in fact a manifestation of God's own wisdom and goodness. Second, in avoiding the error of ascribing "mercy" to God, we avoid further distancing ourselves from His true essence. For as Maimonides warns,

> Know that when you make an affirmation ascribing another thing to Him, you become more remote from Him in two respects: one of them is that everything you affirm is a perfection only with reference to us, and the other is that He does not possess a thing other than His essence…[15]

However, while reminding us of God's goodness in nature, and while preventing extra distance between ourselves and God's true essence, Mai-

Wisdom" does seem to advert to the reality (not our mere human talk of) God's essence as pure Intellect. While God does not have any attributes, God is in some important sense Wisdom (as Intellect), and so perhaps "wise" – while not an attribute, to be sure – in some sense points us to something essentially true about God. In other words, all other "positive attributes" would be pointing to the Wisdom of God manifest in nature; while God neither has "mercy" nor "wisdom" as attributes, he is Wisdom per se. [The same point might be made of God's "Goodness"].

[15]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.59, p. 139.

monides' analysis of "God is merciful" does *prima facie* further underscore God's uknowability. In Maimonides' above analysis of "God is merciful," we are firmly moved from the hope of knowing God to the hope of knowing only the world.

And yet, as we will explore below, a more careful consideration of this "knowing the world" can indeed lead us back to the elusive goal of knowing God in Maimonides.

III. Turning to the Knowable God in Maimonides: Philosophical Wonder as Intellect's Encounter with God's Face

As is clear from the above account, a trace of God is, for Maimonides, at play in the order of nature. And this on its own does not yet suggest any genuinely kataphatic sensibility about knowing God's essence in the *Guide*:[16] The fact that God's goodness is manifest in the order of nature does not on its own entail that we can "know God's essence" through nature. We might, on this view, theorize "seeing nature" as in some sense a "sensing of God's goodness," but not a "knowing of God's essence." We might further, on this view, theorize the scientific study and understanding of nature as a much more robust case of "knowing God's goodness," but still not a case of "knowing God's essence." In looking closely at Maimonides, though, there is, I would argue, a third option for engaging with nature that does open the possibility of "knowing God." I have here in mind a special act of intellectual apprehension of nature (beyond "seeing" and beyond "scientific knowing") available to only the philosophers and prophets (symbolized most fully in the figure of Moses) that can indeed reveal a glimpse of God's essence.[17]

[16] Again, recall: knowing God's essence is the only option; there are no "divine attributes" to know as God has nothing superadded to his essence for Maimonides. The possibility of "knowing God" in Maimonides must only refer to "knowing God's essence" in some way.

[17] In this study, I remain neutral on the precise level or kind of apprehension in question (and on the vexing question related to *Guide* 2.24 of whether the

In way of emphasizing what I have in mind, consider Maimonides' account of God's presenting Moses with the entirety of nature: Far from suggesting that Moses is simply shown nature (e.g. that he sees it with his eyes), and suggesting even something beyond that Moses is led to understand nature (i.e. that he scientifically knows it, or "sees it" with his intellect), Maimonides takes pains to emphasize, rather, that Moses is made to know nature in a pretty unique way clearly related to a very exalted state of intellectual apprehension (beyond sensing and beyond science):

> [God] drew [Moses'] attention to a subject of speculation through which he can apprehend to the furthest extent that is possible for man. For what has been apprehended by [Moses], peace be on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him.[18]

Clearly the intellectual feat here described is no mere "seeing of nature" (and, relatedly, I would add, no mere quantitative feat of "seeing all of nature"), and no mere feat of scientific knowledge. Maimonides is here, I would argue, emphasizing a qualitative act of intellect which goes beyond a scientific understanding of the universe to a knowing – through the knowing of nature – of something in addition to nature. It is here, I suggest, that for Maimonides the philosopher encounters the "Face of God" and it is here, I suggest, that we can discern a genuinely kataphatic brush with God's essence in Maimonides.

What I have in mind here is no mere seeing of nature (which anyone can accomplish), but a two-fold intellectual feat of (1) comprehending nature's order (which any scientist can accomplish), but doing so in

heavens can be known – and if so, in what sense – according to Maimonides); on these debates, see for example: Ivry's "*Guide* 2.24," Langermann's "My Truest Perplexities," and "The True Perplexity"; see Kraemer "Is There a Text in this Class?," and "How [Not] To Read the *Guide*" for elaboration on types of knowing other than the knowing of demonstrative proof that are often critical to understanding Maimonides' sense of something's being known.

[18] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 123.

a way that one becomes (2) *struck by the order of nature into philosophical wonder*. This latter feat (which itself depends on the prior feat of scientific knowledge), is, I would argue, precisely the special kind of apprehension – available only to the Maimonidean philosopher (which would, of course, include prophets) – to which Maimonides refers when he describes Moses' moment of special apprehension of nature. And, it is this special and rare kind of philosophical moment that I suggest is indeed tied up with glimpsing God's essence.

While I will reserve a fuller treatment of this "moment of wonder" to another study, we may here consider the kind of arresting moment described in Plato's description of wonder (*thaumazein*) as the origin of philosophy (*Theatetus* 155d3), and also referred to in the *Timaeus* reflection on the path from astronomy to philosophy in terms of what Philo later describes as a "being smitten" by the contemplation of the celestial order.[19] Reflecting on these texts, and bearing in mind the gravity and mystery of the moment of "conversion" in a range of philosophical analyses as a transformational "being happened to," I invite us to demarcate in Maimonides a moment of "being smitten into a state of wonder" (seen in Maimonides' analysis of Moses above) that demarcates a unique transformational – and, for Maimonides, intellectual – moment (beyond mere seeing or scientific understanding), and which involves a true glimpse of God's essence (perhaps, we may say, through His essential wisdom) through an encounter with nature. Perhaps structurally comparable to the apprehension of the Form of the Good in Plato, the idea of "being struck into wonder" here takes on the decidedly theological implication of in some sense (and in the context of Maimonides, a particularly intellectual sense of) meeting God Face to Face.

[19]"…[E]ach man should follow, and correct the courses of the head which were corrupted at our birth, and by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the universe, should assimilate the thinking being to the thought, renewing his original nature, and having assimilated them should attain to that perfect life which the gods have set before mankind, both for the present and the future…"; see too Philo on "being smitten" by the contemplation of these heavenly rotations (Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, pp. 61 – 63).

Turning back to the analysis of "God is merciful," consider the unique implications that these words have when uttered by the smitten philosopher in particular: intellectually struck into a state of "wonder" in her encounter with the order of nature (and not merely intellectually arriving at a state of scientific understanding of nature), the philosopher utters the words "God is merciful" – a move on her part which suggests that she has encountered more than nature in her encounter with nature. For the philosopher certainly knows that God does not have the attribute of mercy. And so, her nonetheless uttering "God is merciful" (or any other example of divine predication) is a sign of her being moved in a moment of wonder – a moment which suggests that there has occurred something more than simply sensing and even more than simply knowing the order the world. It is, I argue, a moment precipitated by the Face of God being glimpsed from the folds of nature which so moves the philosopher to become "struck with wonder" – a moment which manifests in her calling out "God is merciful" (here mirroring what Exodus 34 describes as God's own activity of calling out his names).

And so, we find in the philosopher's moment of wonder an encounter with God's essence, and in this sense, we arrive at a knowable (or at least, glimpse-able) God in Maimonides.

In what follows, we will consider a number of texts in support of this divine "knowability" in Maimonides. In particular, we will emphasize texts alluding to Moses' indeed glimpsing the Face of God and/or the Glory of God *per se* (contrary to the Exodus suggestion that he can only see God's Back). Since for Maimonides God's Face and Glory refer to His essence, texts suggesting Moses' encounter with God's Face or Glory will help support the possibility of divine "knowability" (at least in the sense of His essence being able to be in some sense glimpsed in nature).

1) Support 1: Emphasizing the "Yes"

Consider the relevance in this regard of Maimonides, in his analysis of Exodus chapters 33 and 34, not focusing on the answer to Moses' request to see God's Face as being "no". In fact, Maimonides simply cites

the relevant passage and gives it no further attention – and he doesn't even quote the whole (rather dramatic) verse; Maimonides simply at one point in his overall analysis of the Exodus story notes:

> In answer to [Moses'] second demand, he was told "You cannot see my face," and so on.[20]

Maimonides literally tucks this sentence into a paragraph devoted to Moses' other request, viz. his request to "see God's ways" to which God provides an affirmative "yes" response. While Maimonides does elsewhere refer to God's negative response to the request to see His Glory or essence (though nowhere at length), in the context of his in-depth commentary on Exodus 33 and 34, Maimonides' entire treatment of God's saying "no" to the request to see His Glory consists in the above one sentence (in which he doesn't even quote the key part of the verse, viz. the part about "one cannot see My face and live"). To address God's apparent *denying* Moses' request to see His Glory or essence, Maimonides provides nothing more than a short throw-away sentence that he sandwiches in between two other sentences about knowing God's ways, and God's affirmative "yes" answer to Moses' request for the knowledge of His ways.

I am led to conclude that Maimonides' lack of emphasis on God's saying "no" to the request to see His essence is precisely related to the fact that, in the end, Maimonides does not really think that God's answer to the request to see His essence was a "no." In fact, further supporting this, consider Maimonides' revealing locution in claiming

> …that God, may He be exalted, is known through His attributive qualifications; for when he would know the ways, he would know Him.[21]

Maimonides is here basically describing the final outcome of the story as Moses in fact coming to "know God" – a state which, as we

[20] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 124.

[21] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.54, p. 123.

have seen earlier, he further correlates to a certain unique and exalted mode of apprehension, one moreover related, as we have seen, to a certain encounter with the order of nature. Maimonides here invites us to describe that state of "knowing God's ways" as "knowing God."

Maimonides does not want us to focus on God's answer to the request to see His Glory and essence as being a "no"; on the contrary, Maimonides wants us to come to understand the very real sense in which God's showing Moses the entire sweep of existing things (which, as we have seen, will lead the properly attuned philosopher to cry out, like "God is merciful") is in fact a "yes" answer not only to the request to see God's ways, but to the request to see His Glory and essence. In light of what we have already discussed, this "yes" amounts, in particular, to God revealing His essence to Moses through a true apprehension of and "being struck to wonder" by the order of nature – and, in so doing, inspiring into Moses thoughts like "God is merciful"; God strikes Moses into a state of strong apprehension and wonder precisely through the presence (but as we will see later in our discussion of "hylomorphic apophasis," a kind of hidden presence) of the essence of God in the folds of nature.

2) Support 2: Glory in the Praise of Rocks

Further evidence that Maimonides wants us to consider the essence of God in the folds of nature can be seen in one particular manner in which he exposits the term "Glory" (*kavôd*) – a term which is linked to the essence of God. In his lexicographical chapter (1.64) devoted to the term "Glory," Maimonides talks of the way in which all things (including minerals) "praise" God "through the very fact that by their very nature they are indicative of the power and wisdom of Him who brought them into existence."[22] Another clear instance of Maimonides' linking Glory – that which names the essence of God – with the world of nature, Maimonides goes so far as to highlight the connection by using the special phrase "understand this" – a rhetorical strategy used throughout the *Guide* to alert readers (by way of hint) to especially important points

[22]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.64, p. 157.

whose full implications are not spelled out in the chapter at hand, and are left for the careful reader to piece together through a fuller reading of the entire *Guide* (especially other relevant chapters). The "hint" in this chapter, I would argue, –is the suggestion that God's Glory can in fact be glimpsed in nature by the philosopher, a teaching which is only more fully revealed when we come to understand Maimonides' conclusion – at 1.54 (with support too elsewhere) – that Moses' final experience, in being shown the entire sweep of the cosmos (as per Exodus 33 and 34), results not simply in a state of "seeing nature" or "knowing nature" but in a state that the Exodus text itself describes in terms of *knowing God*.

Adding further support to knowing God's essence through the order of nature, Maimonides here tells us that we ought to think of "Glory" – the ultimate term for the Divine Essence – as referring us to the order of nature (and, as such, the sense in which even rocks sing God's praise – or, we might add in light of what we have already seen, the sense in which even rocks can lead properly attentive humans to sing God's praise, – leading them to cry out "God is merciful"). Maimonides even adds that if you interpret "Glory" this way in various passages "You shall thus be saved from great difficulty."[23] One difficulty we might be saved from, for example, is our incorrect sense in so many tellings of the history of ideas (especially in efforts to uphold our concretized sense of the so called Maimonidean "*via negativa*" vs. Aquinas' "*via analogia*") that for Maimonides, God is absolutely unknowable.

3) Support 3: God's Back Explained in the Chapter on God's Face

In his chapter expressly dealing with Exodus 33 and 34, there is one concept that announces itself fairly loudly by exclusion: God's Back. While Exodus 33:23 talks expressly of God's showing his Back to Moses, and while Maimonides expressly addresses the Hebrew term "back" nearly 20 chapters earlier at 1.38, Maimonides does not say a word about God's Back in the context of his 1.54 analysis of Moses' asking to see

[23]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.64, p. 157.

the Face of God. It would seem that Maimonides is urging us to consult chapter 1.38, a lexicographical chapter on the word "back" in order to ensure that our understanding of Exodus 33 and 34 is complete.

Looking to 1.38, we see an express link for Maimonides between God's Back and the entirety of the cosmos. Commenting here on the Exodus 33:32 verse expressly missing in his fuller treatment of Exodus 33-34 at 1.54, Maimonides notes:

> "And you shall see My back" (Ex. 33:23), which means that you shall apprehend what follows Me, has come to be like me, and follows necessarily from My will – that is, all the things created by Me, as I shall explain in a chapter of this Treatise [i.e. 1.54][24]

This connection between God's Back and the entirety of the cosmos is further emphasized in 1.37 where God's Back is identified with the realm of matter and form.[25] Notably for our current purposes, Maimonides chooses to exposit God's Back in terms of form and matter

[24]Maimonides, *Guide* 1.38, p. 87.

[25]Maimonides, in his chapter on 'face' (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.38, p. 86) shares Onqelos' Aramaic rendering of the Exodus 33:23 claim that Moses will see the back of God in less anthropomorphic terms as: "And you will see that which is behind me"; Maimonides there goes on to emphasize that "what is behind" God means the things "endowed with matter and form." Maimonides clarifies why these existents are related to God's back; speaking in a voice partly on behalf of God (at least midway through the reflection), Maimonides notes that these are: "…the beings from which I have, as it were, turned away, and upon which, speaking in parables, I have turned My back, because of their remoteness from the existence of God, may He be exalted…" (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.37, p. 86 bottom). To be sure, this quote – and many others in the Guide – emphasize God's distance from nature; my thesis does not challenge that there is a sense for Maimonides in which the transcendent God is radically different from (and so, we may metaphorically say, radically "distant" from) nature. I do not view this as challenging my thesis, though, of an ultimate sense, in Maimonides, of God's "transcendence" as a "transcendence in immanence" upon which I will elaborate at greater length, with the implication of God's essence in fact being manifest (and, as I will address in my discussion of "hylomorphic

not in a chapter dedicated to explaining the term "back" (1.38), but in the chapter dedicated to explaining the term "face" (1.37) – yet another indication that Maimonides is tacitly urging us to consider the intimate relation between the two. This is further support for our claim that for Maimonides, the Face can in fact be glimpsed in the Back – which is to say, God's essence can be glimpsed through certain encounters with the order of nature.

And to this link between the Back of God and nature, Maimonides alluringly also adds that the Back of God also refers to *imitatio dei*. In fact, he elides the two notions – and so, adding now to the quote we have already seen above, we find that the notions of God's Back, *imitatio dei*, and the realm of nature all go hand-in-hand-in-hand:

> The term ["back"] also occurs in the meaning of following and imitation of the conduct of some individual with respect to the conduct of life. Thus "You shall walk at the back of [i.e. after] the Lord your God" (Deut. 13:5); "They shall walk at the back of [i.e. after] the Lord" (Hos. 11:10), which means following in obedience to Him and imitating His acts and conducting life in accordance with His conduct. Thus: "He walked at the back of [i.e. after] a commandment" (Hos. 5:11). **In this sense it is said: "And you shall see My back" (Ex. 33:23),** which means that you shall apprehend what follows Me, has come to be like me, and follows necessarily from My will – that is, all the things created by Me, as I shall explain in a chapter of this Treatise [i.e. 1.54]" (1.38, p. 87)

apophasis," also hidden) in nature. (There are resonances here with Levinasian themes of immanent transcendence, revelation of an absent presence, and proximity (without limit) in need of further investigation, comparison and contrast with the implications here for Maimonides' own sense of God's transcendence, hiddenness and knowability (even qua unknowable).

Maimonides goes so far as to link the *imitatio dei* notion and God's showing us the realm of all created things, with the phrase "in this sense": The term "God's Back" refers to our call to imitate the conduct of God, in the sense of Exodus 33:23 that we "apprehend" the cosmos. Here, in this dramatic link between *imitatio dei* and "the apprehension of nature" we find another support for the relation between God and the cosmos: here, the very notion of "be like God" is being identified as the claim "be like nature." This is of course not to suggest that God is nature, but to suggest that for Maimonides, there is a very deep sense in which the essence or Face of God is seen in his Back, which is to say, in the order of nature. Here, the human microcosm is asked to mirror the macrocosm of God's own essential wisdom (God's Face) by mirroring the reflection of that divine macrocosm in the other macrocosm that we as humans encounter, viz. nature (God's Back). We in this sense imitate the Face *by* imitating the Back. While not precisely the same as suggesting that we can know the Face *in* knowing the Back, this is one more piece of support for the intimate relationship in Maimonides between the two.

IV. Seeing God's Face in and through God's Back, and "Hylomorphic Apophasis"

In supporting the possibility in Maimonides of God's knowability, we have spoken of God's essence being in some sense known to (or at least, glimpsed by) the philosopher in her "moment of wonder," and we have supported that idea by emphasizing Maimonides' sensitivities to the presence of God's essence in nature: we have spoken of Maimonides' choosing not to emphasize that God's answer to Moses' request to see his Face was "no," as we have also emphasized God's Glory (His essence) being manifest in nature, God's Back being exposited in the chapter on God's Face and other emphases in Maimonides on the intimate presence of God's Face in His Back. In this sense, Maimonides can be seen to subvert the *prima facie* sense of Exodus 33-34 that speaks of God's switching out his Face with His Back; instead, as we have been highlighting, Maimonides offers up his own hidden sense that God's Face can be

known in nature (in the sense of being glimpsed by the attentive philosophical intellect). For Maimonides, God's Back (or, the realm of nature) reveals not only (as we have seen above) God's ways, but God's Face (His essence).

Having in this way found a kataphatic addition to the undeniable Maimonidean apophasis, we may introduce a new category of "Hylomorphic Apophasis." For, in the folds of form and matter, God's essence is at once revealed (to the philosopher in her moment of "wonder") as it is at once concealed. Here, I apply Elliot Wolfson's analysis of God's presence-as-absence in Jewish mystical texts to the question of God's manifestness-as-hiddennes in nature for Maimonides. As Wolfson has shown in the case of Jewish mysticism, the forms of the mystic's imagination at once reveal God (i.e. they give Him some form), but as such they conceal God (i.e. covering His true formless reality with forms). Here, revelation is concealment, as concealment is revelation.[26] Drawing on this dynamic, I arrive at the notion of hylomorphic apophasis in the context of my thesis of the presence of God's essence, for Maimonides, in the order of nature. While on the one hand, we have been emphasizing how this is a moment of revelation (God is grasped in the moment of wonder by the philosopher in her encounter with the order of nature), we must here emphasize too that in God's very manifestation in nature, He is hidden. Mirroring Wolfson's insights on God's being at once revealed and concealed in the single act of the mystical imagination's vestment of the divine with forms, I ask us to consider the unique joint revelation and concealment at play for Maimonides in the manifesting of, God's essential goodness and wisdom (His Face) in the material folds of nature (His Back).

Hylomorphic apophasis, I argue, is a more accurate conception of Maimonides than "*via negativa*," as the former (but not the latter) em-

[26]For an overview of this idea (which Wolfson engages throughout his corpus), see, for example, Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, 17-19. On the Kabbalah's "ontological esotericism" in this regard see Wolfson, *Abulafia*, 52; see too Wolfson, *Speculum*, 1994.

phasize the joint sense in Maimonides of God's unknowabless and knowabless – his hiddenness and disclosure.

(In this context of suggesting a trace of God in nature in which the infinite transcendence is itself bound up with the limits of the day-to-day (in the case of Maimonides, the limits of nature), and in which the manifesting of the infinite is always a manifesting of a [hidden] absence, we may also suggest the beginnings of a link between Maimonidean theology and some aspects of Levinas' immanent transcendence, but I leave a fuller investigation of this to a separate project).

V. The Divine Prayer Shawl: Final Reflection on Glimpsing the Face of God in Nature

I end by further tracing the kataphatic Maimonidean notion that God's Face is in His Back by turning to Maimonides' seemingly inexplicable decision to at one point highlight a graphically anthropomorphic rabbinic myth about God's prayer shawl. In the context of his 1.21 treatment of the term "to pass" (*'abor*), Maimonides oddly chooses to highlight a Rabbinic reading (at Babylonian Talmud, *Rosh Hashanah* 17b) of the Exodus 34:6 passage "and the Lord passed before him and proclaimed…" as alluding to God being wrapped in a prayer shawl.[27] Maimonides' decision to bring this image even onto the reader's horizon seems especially

[27] *Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashana*: "It is written [Exodus 34:6]: "And the Lord passed by before him and proclaimed." R. Johanan said: Had this passage not been written, it would have been impossible to have said it, for it teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, wrapped Himself, as does a minister who recites the prayers for a congregation, and pointing out to Moses the regular order of prayer, said to him: Whenever Israel sins, let him pray to Me, after this manner, and I shall pardon him." Along related lines of envisioning God in prayer garb praying for the people in the context of Exodus chapters 33 and 34, consider too *Berakhot* 7a (which itself begins with a discussion of God saying prayers): "And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back" [Exodus 33:23]. R. Hama b. Bizana said in the name of R. Simon the Pious: This teaches us that the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses the knot of the *tefillin*." The idea here is that Exodus 33:23's reference to the back of God is actually a

odd not only in light of his own aversion to unnecessary anthropomorphic depictions of God, but in light of his going on within that same analysis to offer the reader a competing commentary by Onqelos that God's Word – not God – passed before Moses, – a commentary which, on the face of it, seems much more Maimonidean in spirit in its move away from anthropomorphism. In replacing "God" as subject, with the tacit "Word of God" as subject, Onqelos reveals a Maimonides-style sensitivity to decidedly minimizing anthropomorphic resonances in claims about God. Aand so, instead of "God" passing before Moses, he talks of "the Word of God" passing before Moses, and at times too of the Glory of God, the Indwelling of God, et. al.

Maimonides' bringing up the Rabbinic reading of God wrapped in a prayer shawl not only runs counter to his own anti-anthropomorphism, but seems even odder in light of (1) his overtly offering up for us Onqelos' competing – and anthropomorphically sensitive – reading of the Exodus 34:6 claim about God's "passing" activity, and (2) the especially strange fact that Maimonides takes pains in the context of this entire analysis to tell the reader that she is free to choose either reading.[28] This is an unusual rhetorical move by Maimonides, and really pushes the question: if Onqelos offers us a non-anthropomorphic reading of God's "passing" activity, then why offer up the highly anthropomorphic rabbinic reading – and why put so much emphasis on allowing the reader to "take her pick" on which reading she likes?

The answer lies in understanding that Maimonides – even while liking the non-anthropomorphic sensibility of Onqelos' reading – finds

reference to the knot of God's *tefillin* – in Jewish practice, the knot of *tefillin* is always worn at the *back* of the head.

[28]"You should not consider it as blameworthy the fact that this profound subject, which is remote from our apprehension, should be subject to many different interpretations. For this does no harm with respect to that toward which we direct ourselves. And you are free to choose whatever belief you wish…." (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.21, p. 50, bottom); and again just a bit later: "Choose whatever opinion you wish, inasmuch our only purpose is that you should not believe that when Scripture says…He passed by…[that God has a body]…" (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.21, p. 51).

something of critical importance in the Rabbinic reading – something critical that speaks to him even from under the anthropomorphic imagery of God wearing a prayer shawl. For, leaving the prayer shawl image aside (though, as the subject for a separate study, I think that the implications of that for the ultimate story of providence, *imitatio dei*, and Moses as leader/teacher for Maimonides are actually quite important), what Maimonides likes about this Rabbinic reading is its unique parsing of what is actually being stated in the Exodus 34:6 verse. While Onqelos (and most other commentaries and even contemporary translations) see in this verse a claim about God (or, for Onqelos, the Glory or Word of God) passing before Moses, the Rabbinic reading actually sees in this verse a claim about God passing before himself. For the Rabbinic reading, God passes before himself – not before Moses – which is what prompts the commentary about wrapping Himself in a prayer shawl: it is a self-directed passing onto oneself which for the Rabbis suggests the motion of wrapping oneself in a prayer shawl. Again, the prayer shawl details aside, Maimonides, I would argue, is drawn to this Rabbinic commentary for its grammatical reading of God's passing before himself. Maimonides is so intent on emphasizing the importance of this reading that, in describing the view that God passes before himself, he rhetorically emphasizes that this is *his own view* by adding the phrase "In my opinion…"[29] He adds this emphasis even in spite of shortly afterwards stating that the reader is free to read the verse either as God's (or God's Voice – as Maimonides adds as his own preference over Onqelos' "God's Word")[30] passing before Moses, or as God passing before God. Clearly,

[29] Maimonides, *Guide* 1.21, p. 48.

[30] "…We, for our part too, take the *nomen regens* omitted here to be VOICE. The assumption accordingly would be that the verse should read: "And the voice of the Lord passed by before him and called." We have already explained that the Hebrew language uses the word *passage* in a figurative sense with reference to voice…[and] it is in these very words that expression is given to the fact that God, may He be exalted, spoke to Moses…According to this assumption, the interpretation of our verse would thus be: a voice from God passed by in his presence and called: Lord, Lord. The repetition of the word Lord would be due to its being a call, for He, may He be exalted, would be the one who

for Maimonides, there is a special message in the idea of God's passing before God.

And so, we step back to the overall structure of the chapter of the *Guide* we are in: for Maimonides, chapter 1.21 is actually a lexicographical chapter dedicated to explaining to us different possible meanings of the term "to pass." In this context, we learn expressly of the term "to pass" that it can sometimes have the implication of switching out one goal for another. Talking of God's passing before himself in this sense would mean that God switches out one goal for another – which, in the context at hand of Exodus 33 and 34 points to the Face "being switched out" for the Back. But, the extent to which Maimonides unspeaks this point – inviting us to consider other readings – suggests that the "switching out" of the Face for the Back itself reveals for him a deep paradox of disclosure and hiddenness: Maimonides does not think that the Face is literally replaced by the Back (which is to say, he does not think that God's essence is identical to the order of nature); he thinks, rather, that our reflection on the Face of God (i.e. God's essence) must inextricably be tied up with our reflections on the manifestation of the face (i.e. God's essence) in the Back (i.e. nature). In other words, the complexity of the structure of 1.21 – and of Maimonides' suggesting and then unsuggesting the reading of "God's passing before Himself" – suggests that Maimonides is once again wrestling with his hylomorphic apophatic sensitivity to the fact that the exchanging of the Face for the Back is no regular exchanging – which is to say, his sensitivity to the fact that the essence of God itself necessarily includes its being an essence-manifesting-in-nature. The Face is separate, but in a critical sense necessarily bound up with the Back.

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is called…This too is a very fine interpretation" (Maimonides, *Guide* 1.21, p. 50). (Regarding the last words "This too is a very fine interpretation," we might also add this as further highlighting the oddity of Maimonides' insistence in the context of this entire analysis that the reader is free to either (a) follow the Rabbinic reading – which Maimonides says he prefers – of Exodus 34:6 as "And God passed before Himself", or (b) follow Onqelos' reading "And the Word (though Maimonides prefers, Voice) of God passed before Moses").

Once again this supports our sense that for Maimonides, God's essence is manifest (and can be glimpsed by the properly attuned philosopher) in the folds of nature, even as God's Glory is hidden by the folds of that same nature.

Conclusion

For Maimonides, we may thus speak, alongside his negative theology, of a kataphatic breaking through of the essence of God into nature, revealing itself in traces to the philosopher in her moment of "being struck" – in her moment of wonder. This is the teaching of the revelation of God's Face to Moses: God's Face is not only always and only seen through (while at once concealed by) the divine Back, but is itself inextricably bound up with that Back. It is in this sense that we may speak of the knowability of the unknowable divine Essence in Maimonides.

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