There is much to commend in Josef Stern’s exciting new book, *The Matter and Form of Maimonides’ Guide*. Here is the most extensive and best account of the “skeptical” interpretation of Maimonides, a major school of thought that has gained ground relatively recently and provides an alternative way to approach the hidden aspects of the *Guide for the Perplexed*. In the present context, “skepticism” refers to the claim that it is impossible for humans to know metaphysics. Maimonides is traditionally thought to have considered such knowledge to be the aim of human life. Through knowing metaphysical truth, he says, people merit the greatest reward open to them, knowledge of God, “as far as is humanly possible,” and the eternal life of the intellect. The skeptical reading disputes this interpretation. Since metaphysical knowledge is thought to be the most exalted intellectual achievement, and its attainment the consummation of human perfection, Maimonides’ skepticism redirects people to seek more practical aims. The human goal becomes political, to create a perfect society, and ethical, to perfect moral character traits.

By linking “Maimonidean skepticism” to classical skepticism, Stern makes some important qualifications to this picture. He contends that Maimonides’ philosophical arguments lead to competing claims about metaphysics, both of which appear to be true. The claims cannot both be right, though, because they are incompatible. Choosing one position over the other would require a criterion independent of the two and of the arguments that lead to them. The skeptic believes that there is no such criterion available and therefore suspends judgment as to which is the correct belief. On realizing that one cannot know the truth of the matter in question, the seeker attains a tranquility that enables her to refrain from overstepping her bounds and committing idolatrous metaphysical errors. Nevertheless, “a persistent commitment to inquiry” accompanies this deferral (p. 285). Stern therefore argues that Maimonides’ skepticism preserves the notion that knowledge serves as the ultimate goal even if it is
knowledge of a more restricted set of objects that does not include metaphysics. Striving for that goal while remaining skeptical of the human ability to fulfill it amounts to “a way of living the best humanly realisable life” (p. 146). The goal retains its individual element and remains intellectual rather than solely political.

Philosophers today distinguish between general metaphysics, as the study of the principles of existence, and types of special metaphysics, one of which is natural theology. The second of these is the target of Maimonides’ skepticism. Although Maimonides argued for God’s existence, he also argued that God is entirely unknowable. Indeed, Maimonides is often thought to have gone too far when he denied that anything humanly sayable or conceivable can apply to God in any respect whatsoever. No scientific knowledge about God’s essence is possible, and even the arguments for God’s existence do not provide the same level of understanding that may be gained of items in the physical world. Medieval thinkers also posited a procession of incorporeal beings, intelligences, to account for the heavenly motions. Through a series of close textual readings and technical philosophical arguments, Stern supports the view that Maimonides was skeptical toward these entities as well, believing that people can have no scientific knowledge of them and even questioning their existence. He explains that, as well as focusing on the limits of human understanding, Maimonides, like the skeptics, saw in philosophy a way of life. So instead of philosophical arguments about metaphysics, Maimonides’ explanations of these topics are presented as a series of spiritual and intellectual exercises designed to steer his readers toward a life of the mind and to understand and accept the limitations of such a life.

The Guide’s parabolic nature supplements these exercises. Stern presents an entirely new account of Maimonides’ parables, biblical and rabbinic as well as those of his own creation. On this reading, each parable has three layers of meaning, but Stern’s fascinating exposition of one parable shows how there can be multiple meanings even within a single one of the three levels. The first meaning reflects the way in which the text is understood literally by the vulgar; it is misleading. Once the text is recognized to be a parable, the external parabolic meaning is revealed. This meaning teaches matters that encourage good behavior. Whereas it is usually taken by the Guide’s readers to be the parable’s secret sense, available only to the elite, Stern argues that there is also an internal parabolic meaning, which can be glimpsed if one searches hard enough, a search that encourages progress toward perfection. The deeper parabolic meaning concerns truth rather than ethics, and reflects the skeptical view that metaphysical knowledge is impossible. Stern’s account of parables and the examples he discusses should be of interest to scholars in various fields of Jewish studies.

Connecting the philosophical analysis and textual exegesis, a major part of Stern’s project involves showing how the Guide works as a tutor, encouraging a process that helps the reader to understand human nature and accept its attending restrictions. He argues that Maimonides considered these impediments to be rooted in peoples’ corporeal, animal natures, their matter, which confines them to an existence concerned with carnal desires and necessities, thereby distracting them from engaging in intellectual pursuits and realizing their true human potential. What is specific to humans is their intellects, which differentiates the species from other animals, but they share physicality with nonrational animals. There is a constant tension between the two parts of human nature, matter and form, animal and intellectual. While the human intellect is immaterial, and ought to be able to apprehend incorporeal beings, it is always attached to matter so can only grasp purely immaterial beings through a barrier.

There are some startling consequences of Stern’s reading. For example, he explains that for
Maimonides, the perfect person feels shame at her material structure, which prevents her living up to the ideal she strives for. The shame acts as motivation to strive for the human goal as far as possible, to separate from matter and imitate God. The more perfect one is, the more shameful one feels, and “a ‘holy nation’ is a nation governed by a sense of shame” (p. 380). Ultimately, Stern suggests that Maimonides intimated that since a person’s matter exists only because it is informed by the intellect, “the source of the human’s greatest shame is his own self-defeating intellect” (p. 389). Shame can only bring one so far, since it too is an emotion based in matter, so “by wishing he were pure form, the person once again entangles himself in his matter” (p. 393). Humans are material beings, even though they are ensouled, so if there were no material obstruction to a subject’s understanding, Stern contends, the subject would not be human. An inability to realize the human goal is a result of that goal’s very existence.

Stern writes that “the consequences of Maimonides’ skeptical critique for his philosophy as a whole are enormous” to the degree that the law “is thrown into question”(p. 6). Many of these are delineated very clearly over the course of the book. Some could yet be drawn out more extensively, particularly those related to theological matters in which Maimonides explicitly limits human knowledge, such as the possibility of a beginning to time and whether God knows particulars and can create aberrations in the physical world, miracles, that cannot be understood scientifically. A more traditional reading of the Guide might limit the potential for human knowledge in these areas even more than the skeptical interpretation. Showing that the Guide must be interpreted in skeptical fashion may require greater attention to these sections. Overall, though, Stern successfully introduces a “new way of seeing the aim of the Guide” (p. 15) which, rather than addressing theological doctrines and the relation between scripture and philosophy, asks in what human happiness and perfection consists. The claim that the Guide aims at clarifying and guiding people toward the human goal is convincingly made, but I am not sure that the themes are opposed to one another. The Guide seems to contain material that bears on many different issues. Whether or not the traditional questions ought to be considered part of the Guide’s purpose, it is a delight to read this important and philosophically sophisticated contribution to the field and, although no work on a figure as contested as Maimonides can meet with universal agreement, even those who demur over certain aspects of interpretation will have to contend with Stern’s new approach and will learn much in the process.
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