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PHILOSOPHY AS A SYMBOLIC INSTITUTION IN MEDIEVAL JUDAISM : SACRED TEXTS AND SOCIAL CONTROL

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Résumé : Comment articuler la volonté de faire triompher une vision philosophique de la religion avec une tradition a- ou anti-philosophique axée sur la récitation et la mémorisation des textes sacrés ? Cet article examine la manière dont deux penseurs du judaïsme (Saadia Gaon et Maïmonide) ont affronté cette redéfinition, et les stratégies discursives qu'ils ont employées pour imposer leurs idées.

Abstract : How is it possible to connect the wish to see a philosophical vision of the religion prevail with a tradition a- or antiphilosophical centred on recitation and memorization of sacred texts ? This article examines how two jewish thinkers (Saadia Gaon and Maïmonide) have affronted this redefinition, as well as the discursive strategies they have used to impose their ideas..

Philosophy as a Symbolic Institution in Medieval Judaism : Sacred Texts and Social Control

par Tamás Visi[*]

The phrase « social control » in the title of this paper can mean two different things : (1) society controlling the philosophers or (2) the philosophers controlling society. Both phenomena occurred in the medieval world and they were often interconnected. To illustrate this I would like to refer briefly to an important episode in the history of Islamic philosophy, one which served as a model for medieval Jewish philosophers in many respects.

This episode is the so-called *mihnah*, an Arabic word that means « test » or « trial » or « inquisition », and refers to a period of persecutions during the Abbasid caliphate from 833 to 848 CE[1]. Shortly before his death in 833 the Abbasid Caliph Al-Ma'mun started to persecute those people,

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1. For a brief account of the events consult J. Lassner and D. Bonner, *Islam in the Middle Ages : The Origins and the Shaping of Classical Islamic Civilization*, Santa Barbara, Calif., abc-clio, 2010 (Praeger Series on the Middle Ages), p. 282-284.

especially religious scholars, who believed that the Koran was uncreated. We do not have to outline the doctrinal background and significance of this question here. What is remarkable is the fact that a Caliph attempted to impose his theological-philosophical ideas on his subjects in a violent way. He was partly inspired by the so-called Mutazilites, a group of Muslim theologians who believed that most of the teachings of Islam were rational doctrines, could be apprehended by the intellect, and proved by arguments. According to them, comprehending religious principles by one's intellect was a *sine qua non* for the profession of correct Islamic faith.

This position had a very surprising consequence. Since belief was a matter of rational argument the only people who were Muslims in the full sense of the word were those who could comprehend the doctrines of Islam in a philosophical manner. That meant in practice that only a few dozen Muslims existed in the whole Abbasid empire. Most members of the Islamic community were technically speaking infidels according to this Mutazila view, since they were not capable of the philosophical understanding of the principles of Islamic monotheism. The Caliph's attempt to impose his views on his subjects and to persecute the dissenting intellectuals followed from the same intellectual mentality. The philosophers assumed the position of defining who belonged to the Umma, the Community of the Muslims, and

translated the teachings of Islam into their own terms and concepts[2].

On the other hand, not everybody was convinced by the Mutazilite arguments. The idea that whoever lacked the proper rationalist understanding of Islam ought to be considered an infidel, was not very attractive for most people. After the death of al-Ma'mun's successor, al-Mu'tasim, the *mihnah* was lifted. This also meant that the traditionalist opponents of the Mutazilites won the game : they declared that the Koran was uncreated and those, who denied it, first and foremost the Mutazilites, were increasingly perceived as heretics. Later, in 1053, the Seljuq Turks anathematized the Asharite theologians, who taxed the uneducated masses with unbelief just as the Mutazilites had done. The Seldjuq sultans themselves were of nomadic origins, and rational argumentation was not the art they excelled in ; nevertheless, they understood perfectly the dangers inherent in the Asharite (and Mutazillite) theological position. Thus, at the end of the day, those theologians who taxed the uneducated masses with unbelief found themselves excluded from the Community of the Muslims[3].

There was no similar conflict around philosophy among medieval Jews, but the same trends and tensions were

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2. R. M. FRANK, « Knowledge and *Taqlīd* : The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism », *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 109, 1989, p. 258-278.
3. Cf. F. GRIFFEL, « The Project of Enlightenment in Islamic-Arabic Culture », in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism : New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. J. T. Robinson, Leiden, New York, and Köln, Brill, 2009, p. 1-20, esp. 1-3 and 8-12.

definitely present. When Saadyah gaon, Moses Maimonides and other Jewish philosophers defined the content of Jewish faith and invented arguments in its defense, the implication was often that the only people who were Jews in the full sense of the word were those who understand these doctrines and able to prove them with philosophical arguments[4]. On the other hand, their opponents argued that philosophy was no less forbidden to Jews than eating pork[5]. Philosophers were controlled by society to some extant and they did their best to gain control over society at the same time.

As a starting point we can consider philosophy as a social phenomenon. In one sense, each society defines who its philosophers are and what philosophy is. This takes place when a group of activities, competences, roles, and functions are considered as constituting « philosophy » and are named as such within a given society. However, a social definition may be lacking entirely if a society does not happen to know about philosophy at all. The definition might also be negative if philosophy is understood as a sort of crime, deviation, or « sickness » from which people have to be protected in general, and if the victims and/or perpetrators of the crime must be cured and/or punished respectively. A more complicated case occurs when philosophy is actually invented

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4. On the dilemmas following from this position, see M. KELLNER, « Heresy and Nature of Faith in Medieval Jewish Philosophy », *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 77, 1987, p. 299-318.
5. On opposition to philosophy among Jewish traditionalists, see I. DOBBS-WEINSTEIN, « The Maimonidean Controversy », in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. D. H. Frank and O. Leaman, London and New York, Routledge, 2003 [1997], p. 331-349 (with further references).

but not termed as such in order to avoid prevalent misgivings about the term or to circumvent an official ban on it. Nonetheless, an alternative name is likely to be invented in such cases, and the possible opponents of the movement and/or some of its more « radical » adherents are likely to notice the resemblance of the new intellectual movement to philosophy, as it is defined by the given society. There is no reason to exclude such intellectual movements from modern histories of philosophies, even if most adherents consciously avoided the term.

In any case, philosophy can be analyzed as a *symbolic institution* that is established in a society, that is so named by the members of the society, and that may go through many transformations comprising a long and complicated history comparable to that of political, social and religious institutions. On the other hand, philosophy in itself is obviously not a political, social, or religious institution, although it may have direct relations with them. Instead it belongs to the domain of other institutions that operate eminently with signs, such as literature, the sciences, arts, or political ideologies. What has been stated above about philosophy is more or less true of these latter symbolic institutions too : they are regulated by social conventions ; they have to be established, justified, and usually named explicitly within the society ; and the conventions themselves may change in time in relation to the transformations of the other sub-systems of society.

Philosophy was not the same symbolic institution in rabbinic Judaism and in mainstream Christianity. If we compare Late Antique rabbinic culture to its Christian

counterpart some important initial differences can be perceived that are responsible to some degree for the different fates of philosophy in Judaism and Christianity during the Middle Ages. In Christian tradition philosophy had an ambiguous reputation : on the one hand, it was condemned as human wisdom attempting to oppose divine wisdom ; on the other hand, it was admitted that human wisdom could create some sparks of the truth and that in certain respects pagan philosophers prepared the way for the Gospels.

This ambiguity was a manifestation of a fundamental problem for early Christian intellectuals : the rich and complex philosophical culture of the imperial period was a powerful alternative to Christianity itself. Consequently, a Christian intellectual (or « culture planner ») had to consider carefully which elements of philosophical culture could be integrated into the Christian religion and which elements had to be rejected and condemned. The broad spectrum of possible responses stretched from an almost complete refusal, such as Tertulian's famous denial that « Athens » had anything to do with « Jerusalem », to an almost complete acceptance of a philosophy, such as Clement of Alexandria's concept of Christianity as « barbarian philosophy » and his thesis of a « double chain of prophecy » in which pagan philosophers were seen as having equal agency as the prophets of the Old Testament in preparing the way of Christ[6]. Early Christians

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6. Cf. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* I, 19-20 and V, 5 ; G. A. G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy : The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1999 (Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament, 112), p. 70-72, and 79.

often perceived themselves as practicing a sort of philosophy ; by the end of Antiquity monasticism was often called the « true philosophy ». Thus, « philosophy » became a possible self-designation for Christianity[7].

This was not so for the rabbis of the Talmud. « Philosophers » (in rabbinic Hebrew : *pilosofim*) are mentioned occasionally in the Babylonian Talmud and other pieces of rabbinic literature[8]. They are depicted as a group of pagan sages whose opinions differed from that of the sages of Israel on certain issues. Individual philosophers are not mentioned : we search in vain for the names of Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, or Iamblichus in the roughly contemporary rabbinic texts[9]. Some of the debates that the great rabbis of the Talmudic period had with the *pilosofim* are mentioned sporadically, but nothing like « a response to Neoplatonism/

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7. *Ibid.*, p. 66 and 77.
8. Cf. C. Hezser, *The Social Structure of the Rabbinic Movement in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1997, p. 131, n. 127 and 438-442 and *idem*, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 2001, p. 104-106 including a sober critique of Warren Zev Harvey's hypothesizing stronger contacts between rabbis and philosophers in his « Rabbinic Attitudes Toward Philosophy », in *« Open Thou Mine Eyes… » : Essays on Aggadah and Judaica Presented to Rabbi William G. Braude on His Eightieth Birthday and Dedicated to His Memory*, ed. H. J. Blumberg *et alii*, Hoboken, NJ, Ktav, 1992, p. 83-101.
9. The only possible exception I am aware of is a pagan sage called « Abnomos » in certain rabbinic texts, who may be identical with Oenomaus of Gadara, a Cynic philosopher, who flourished in the first half of the second century CE ; see C. Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

Stoicism/Scepticism/etc. » is found in the teaching of the rabbis[10].

Thus, polemic against philosophers was not completely unknown in rabbinic Judaism but it did not hold the same importance as it had in Christianity. For the Christians the legacy of Greco-Roman philosophy was both dangerous and inspiring ; for the Jews it was neither. Christianity had to work out a relationship to philosophy in order to achieve its own cultural identity ; for rabbinic Judaism this problem did not exist. Certainly the rabbis had to invent a response to the overwhelming pagan environment in which they existed, but philosophy was not the most crucial component of the « pagan challenge » they faced. It is questionable whether most rabbis would have perceived philosophy as a distinct phenomenon of pagan culture at all.

In the early Middle Ages the legacy of the Church Fathers in Christianity played a role that was analogous to the legacy of the Talmudic rabbis in Judaism. Consequently, the different approaches to philosophy that originated in Late Antiquity led to different social perceptions of philosophy in medieval Europe. For Christians, philosophy was an important part of their cultural heritage. They could encounter the names of the important philosophers in the works of the Church Fathers, works within the corpus of their sacred literature. They could find summaries of philosophical doctrines, critical responses to them and

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10. For a possible response to a Stoic doctrine in late midrashim, see G. Freudenthal, « L'héritage de la physique stoïcienne dans le pensée juive médiévale (Saadia Gaon, les dévots rhénans, Sefer Ha-Maskil) », *Revue de métaphysique et de morale*, 22, 1998, p. 453-477 ; here p. 457-458.

occasionally praises for philosophy. These references could motivate the medieval Christian reader to search for further sources in order to learn more about the teachings of Plato, Aristotle, or Plotinus. This was one possible way of achieving a more profound understanding of, for example, Saint Augustine's relationship to these philosophers. Thus, any new information about the teachings of ancient philosophers could be meaningfully integrated into the study of Christian sacred texts.

The case of Judaism was entirely different. Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus are never mentioned in Talmudic literature. The rabbis did not criticize them. The few debates with the *pilosofim* that were recorded in Talmudic literature have no direct relation to any known philosophical texts of the age. Consequently, medieval Jewish students did not find allusions or references in Talmudic literature to pagan philosophical doctrines and literature ; thus, they were not motivated by their own sacred literature to study the writings of the pagan philosophers.

The Talmudic rabbis identified certain (non-Jewish) persons as « philosophers » but the criteria of that denomination were much less definite than in contemporary Christian high culture. In Talmudic literature a *pilosof* was any educated gentleman who enjoyed some prestige in Gentile society and may have engaged in debates with the rabbis. Why such persons were called « philosophers », what this name meant and implied, and in what ways they differed from other Gentile sages were irrelevant questions.

This very vague perception of « philosophers » was the first appearance of philosophy as a symbolic institution in

rabbinic Judaism. It implied that philosophy was a Gentile endeavor and Jews had no reason whatsoever to be interested in it. Moreover, the rabbis believed that God prohibited speculation over certain subjects and forbade public discussion of certain doctrines pertaining to the creation of the world and to God's nature[11]. Thus any newly introduced discourse about the « frontlines » of the civilization could be suspected of violating these old taboos. Coupled with these prohibitions, the rabbinic image of philosophy became even more unfavorable : hardly any benefit could be gained from it and it was in danger of simply being forbidden. Early medieval Jews inherited this attitude to philosophy from their Late Antique predecessors, and any further development of Jewish philosophical literature had to challenge this image.

In Ashkenaz this situation prevailed for many centuries. Rashi, and most of the Tosafists had a very vague and indistinct idea of philosophy. It is typical that to an appearance of the Aramaic word *pilosofa* (« a philosopher ») in Talmud, tractate Shabbat 116a, Rashi added the laconic comment : *min* (« a heretic »). The *Tosafot* quotes Rashi's comment and agrees with it, but adds the following remark : « our rabbi heard from a Jew who came from Greece that in Greek *pilososof* means 'lover of wisdom' »[12]. Even though the

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11. See Mishnah, Hagiga 2: 1 and the related exegetical literature in Tosefta, Talmud Yerushalmi and Talmud Bavli. The interpretation of this prohibition in medieval Jewish philosophical literature will be discussed below.

12. According to Abraham Grossman, Rashi actively opposed philosophy, which he identified with the theme of the seductive woman in the biblical book of Proverbs. He saw the dangers of the new rationalist discourses of

Tosafot had the correct information about the meaning of the word, it preferred Rashi's explanation, and showed no further interest in the ancient pagan « lovers of wisdom ». It is a fair estimation that the profound indifference of the *Tosafot* represented the attitude of most of the rabbis in Ashkenaz, and, in fact, outside of Ashkenaz as well, throughout the Middle Ages.

Christianity and, fearing that Christians would convert Jews through rational arguments, he emphasized that the Torah was the only legitimate source of « wisdom ». See A. Grossman, « Ha-metah bein Tora le-'Hokhma' be-ferush Rashi le-sifrut ha-hokhma she-ba-Miqra » (« The tension between Torah and 'Hokhmahin' Rashi's commentary to the wisdom literature in the Bible »), in *Teshurah le-Amos : Asufat mehqarim be-farshanut ha-miqra muggeshet le-Amos Hakham*, ed. M. bar Asher *et alii*, Alon Shevut, Tevunot, 2007, p. 13-27 and *idem*, « Rashi's Rejection of Philosophy – Devine and Human Wisdoms Juxtaposed », *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, 8, 2009, p. 95-118. Grossman's interpretation is plausible ; however, he fails to prove that Rashi had in mind precisely the rationalist current in Christian polemics. The possibility cannot be excluded that the « human wisdom » Rashi encountered was what Stephen Jaeger calls « Old Learning », that is, not the new dialectical-rational style of thought associated with Peter Abelard, but the older perception of philosophy as *cultus virtutum*. If Stephen Jaeger's reconstruction is correct, this discipline, which dominated Western Europe during the tenth and the eleventh centuries, had little to do with our idea of philosophy, although it was called *philosophia* by contemporaries because it pertained to good morals and etiquette. Thus, it is possible that the alien wisdom Rashi warned his readers of was not rationalism but the age-old temptation to follow the fashions of Gentile society, which may have led to apostasy. For further points of criticism to Grossman's thesis, see D. Berger, « Polemic, Exegesis, Philosophy, and Science : On the Tenacity of Ashkenazic Modes of Thought », *Simon Dubnow Institute Yearbook*, 8, 2009, p. 27-39 ; here p. 32-38. On philosophy as *cultus virtutum*, see S. Jaeger, *The Envy of the*

This is not to say that medieval Jews could not become interested in and obtain knowledge of philosophy, but rather that appropriating or inventing philosophical ideas is not the same as composing and publishing philosophical texts in Hebrew within the framework of an already established Jewish philosophical discourse. The discourse had to be established first. This was not a matter of personal interest or choice but a social action, a transformation of Jewish intellectual life that could take place only under certain circumstances. In other words, philosophy as a symbolic institution had to be re-instituted before a philosophical discourse in the proper sense of the word could emerge.

The founders of the discourse had to give an account of why philosophy was important for Jews, how its study harmonized with the traditional values and objectives of Judaism, and what passages in the sacred literature encouraged the writing of philosophical texts and laid out the rules for doing so. They also had to refute or dismiss the all too obvious objections the traditionalist opponents could marshal.

Moreover, special efforts were needed for the establishment of a Jewish philosophical discourse in Hebrew or in other « Jewish » languages. First, an appropriate language register had to be invented that included terminology, nominal and verbal patterns, syntactic structures, and rhetorical conventions to enable the chosen « Jewish » language to express philosophical ideas. A corpus of

Angles : Cathedral Schools and Social Ideals in Medieval Europe 950-1200, Philadelpia, Pa., University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994, esp. p. 76-115.

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indispensable philosophical texts had to be translated and explained to the Jewish audience. Or, alternatively, a non-Jewish language had to be adopted to serve the purpose of Jewish philosophical writing. Sooner or later the problem of education had to be faced as well : a curriculum of the studied topics and texts had to be invented and integrated into Jewish education[13].

This task was accomplished by several generations of Jewish intellectuals living in Islamic territories. The whole story cannot be told here, but the most important turning points will be recounted.

1. Saadyah Gaon (882 ou 892-942)

Although the beginnings of medieval Jewish philosophical literature are obscure, there is reason to believe that Muslim and (Eastern) Christian influences played an important role in its genesis. The Cairo genizah preserved a curious fragment from a Judeo-Arabic version of Philo of Alexandria's *De decalogo* testifying to the possibility that medieval Jewish philosophers could be influenced by their great predecessor in

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13. The same problems certainly existed for Christians as well, but not to the same degree. To create a language for philosophy in Medieval Latin or Greek was certainly less of a challenge than it was in Hebrew : a rich and complex philosophical literature from the pagan past of both classical languages was of great help for the Christian philosophers. Similarly, the pagan tradition could provide educational models as well. Moreover, the Christian tradition could offer more straightforward arguments and more historical precedents to justify the study of pagan philosophical texts than Talmidic literature did.

Antiquity[14]. Nevertheless, there is no reason to believe that anything like a continuous Jewish philosophical tradition connecting Hellenistic Alexandria with medieval Baghdad existed. The Philo-fragment is probably evidence of Christian influence : in all likelihood early medieval Jews drew their modest knowledge of Philo of Alexandria from Christian sources. In fact, one of the first known medieval Jewish philosophers, Dawud al-Muqammas, is reported to have studied for some time at the Nestorian theological academy of Nisibis and to have composed an allegorical commentary on Genesis, which is no longer extant. The Muslim influence is attested, for example, by the same Dawud al-Muqammas' treatise on the unity of God that follows the patterns settled by the Mutazila kalam[15].

These modest beginnings prepared the way for Saadyah gaon to establish a theological-philosophical discourse modeled chiefly on Muslim theology (*kalam*) as a legitimate branch of Jewish religious sciences. Saadyah's splendid career – he was elected gaon of Baghdad, the most prestigious Jewish religious office in the age – his charismatic personality and his enormous reputation as a traditional Talmudic scholar

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14. Cf. H. HIRSCHFELD, « The Arabic Portion of the Cairo Genizah at Cambridge », *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 17, 1905, p. 65-66. On Philos' possible influence on Judah Hallevi and Moses Maimonides, see H. A. Wolfson, « Hallevi and Maimonides on Prophecy », *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 33, 1942, p. 49-82 ; also in *idem, Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 105.
15. Cf. S. STROUMSA, « Tsabaim shel Haran ve-tsabaim etsel ha-Rambam : al hitpathut ha-dat le-fi ha-Rambam » (« The Sabians of Harran and the Sabians of Maimonides : the development of religion according to Maimonides »), *Sefunot*, 7 [22], 1999, p. 277-295.

were key factors in the success of his innovations. What Saadya considered to be legitimate was legitimate for many of his contemporaries (although he had some fierce opponents) and for most later generations as well[16].

In Saadya's time, and partly due to Saadyah's influence, Arabic was accepted by more and more Jews as the language of certain types of discourses[17]. Consequently, Saadyah chose to adopt Arabic philosophical language rather than inventing a philosophical diction of Hebrew when he composed his own philosophical works. This choice was certainly very reasonable from Saadyah's own perspective, but it was also one of the major hindrances to the spreading of Jewish philosophical discourse beyond the borders of Islamic civilization. Most European Jews outside of Hispania knew no Arabic and could not access the products of Judeo-Arabic literature in the original. This circumstance was more fatal to Ashkenazi Jews then to their coreligionists in Provence, Italy, or in the Byzantine territories, since these places were less isolated from Islamic civilization.

The type of discourse Saadyah established was not called « philosophy » by Saadyah himself, although later medieval authors did not fail to recognize that Saadyah's undertakings could rightly be called philosophy. Saadyah employed a

16. On Saadyah's career and significance, see R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1998, p. 235-248 and *idem, Rav Se'adya gaon,* Jerusalem, The Zalman Shazar Centre, 2006, with further references.
17. Cf. R. Drory, *Models and Contacts : Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture,* Leiden, Boston and Köln, Brill, 2000, esp. p. 126-146 and 165-189.

number of terms to describe his intellectual enterprise : it was
« knowledge », (*'ilm* and *ma'arifa*), « understanding » (*fahm*) and
« theorizing » (*nazar*) ; its purpose was to attain « justice and
truth » (*al-'adl wal-haqq*) and « true belief » (*al-i'tiqād al-
haqīqī*)[18]. The term « justice » (*'adl*) is not surprising in this
context if we recall that the Mutazila (the Muslim school of
theologians who inspired Saadyah's work to a great degree)
were known as the « people of justice and unity » (*ahl al-'adl
wal-tauhīd*). In a technical sense « justice » referred to the first
part of the Mutazila's doctrine, which treated human free
will : the followers of the school held that there could be no
« justice » in God's punishment of humans for their sins
unless free will had been granted to them. Saadyah used the
term in this technical sense in the fourth chapter of his
book[19].

Justifying his undertaking « to pursue knowledge by means
of speculation and inquiry with the object of attaining
mathematical certainty », Saadyah anticipated and answered
the charge that his new « pursuit of knowledge » violated the
old taboos that limited the range of permissible subjects for
discussion[20]. His strategy of argumentation is not very
surprising :   the   objection   that   contemplating   the
fundamentals of religion leads to heresy is dismissed as mere

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18. Cf. Saadyah's prolegomena to the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, referred
to according to the follwing edition : *Kitāb al-Amanāt wa'l-I'tiqādāt von
Sa'adja b. Jūsuf al-Fajjūmī*, ed. Samuel Landauer, Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1880,
p. 1-26, *passim*, esp. p. 5, l. 5-6 (hereafter 5.5) (*'ilm* and *ma'arifa*), 6.7 (*fahm*
and *nazar*), 1.15-2.1 (*al-'adl wal-haqq*), and 11.10 (*al-i'tiqād al-haqīqī*).
19. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 20-21.

superstition, whereas the explicit prohibitions in rabbinic literature on discussing the creation of the world and similar theological subjects are interpreted as being valid only under specific conditions which do not apply to Saadyah's project.

Saadyah also emphasized the benefits of his rational approach to faith for religious Jews. Many of his arguments were to reappear in similar contexts in the writings of later Jewish philosophers ; therefore, they deserve to be summarized here briefly.

Saadyah takes for granted that the practice of the Jewish religion involves professing faith, and that this faith has a content that can be described in precise terms and that can become the object of knowledge. However, he acknowledges that doubts may rise and undermine one's faith and thus, ultimately, one's commitment to religion. Saadyah identifies such doubts as a major challenge for the Judaism of his age. After lamenting over his contemporaries' confusion and perplexity in matters of faith he announces the mission of his book :

> « When I considered these evils both in their own nature and in their particular manifestations, my heart grieved for my race, the race of mankind, and my soul was moved on account of our own people Israel, as I saw in my time many of the believers clinging to unsound doctrines and mistaken beliefs while many of those who deny the faith boast of their unbelief and despise the men of truth, although they are themselves in error. I saw men sunk, as it were, in a sea of doubt and covered by the waters of confusion, and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths and no swimmer to come to their rescue. But as my Lord has granted unto me some knowledge which I can

> use for their support, and endowed me with some ability
> which I might employ for their benefit, I felt that to help
> them was my duty, and guiding them aright an obligation
> upon me, as the Prophet says, 'The Lord God hath given
> me the tongue of them that are taught, that I should know
> how to sustain with words him that is weary' (Isa. 50:4) »[21].

An emergency situation is depicted in these lines : people are sinking in « a sea of doubt » waiting to be saved by someone who can deliver them from errors and doubts. The image suggests that the unusual intensity of the crisis justifies the unusual measures adopted to meet the challenge. To save the « faith » of the people one is entitled to employ the otherwise suspicious conceptual language of non-Jewish philosophers and theologians. With the same move Saadyah cleverly establishes his own position as the spiritual guide of his age, who has been commissioned by God, almost as a prophet, to save his people: an extraordinary person for an extraordinary task. Had Saadyah not been a charismatic religious leader and the holder of the highest Jewish religious office in the age, these claims would have hardly been taken seriously.

A second group of arguments steers away from the need to study philosophy as an antidote to the threats menacing religion and points instead to the benefits of such studies in their own right. Saadyah claims that his book will help people to appropriate their own religion : their faith will be purified,

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21. Tr. A. Altman in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1965 [1945], p. 29. Arabic original : Saadyah, *Kitāb al-Amanāt*, ed. Landauer, *op. cit.*, p. 4-5.

their commitment will attain a higher degree, and even their relationship to the other members of the community will be more harmonious :

> « If both the scholar and the learner follow this path in reading this book, the certainty of he who feels certain will increase; the doubt of he who is in doubt will vanish; the believer who blindly relies on tradition [*taqlīd*], will turn into one basing his belief on speculation [*nazar*] and understanding [*fahm*] ; those who put forward erroneous arguments will be silenced ; those who are obstinate and defy evidence will be ashamed ; and the righteous and upright will rejoice, as is said, 'The upright see it and are glad ; and all iniquity stoppeth her mouth. Whoso is wise, let him observe these things and let them consider the mercies of the Lord' (Psalms 107:42-43) »[22].

It is remarkable that Saadyah, following the ideas and the terminology of the Mutazila, contrasts *taqlīd* « blind, unquestioning adoption » with « speculation » (*nazar*) and « understanding » (*fahm*) two terms that denote his own endeavor[23]. He claims that his intellectual project will lead not only to correct beliefs but to a greater commitment to religion. Thus Saadyah here introduces a second focus of « knowledge » : in addition to being directed towards an

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22. Tr. A. Altmann, *Three Jewish Philosophers*, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.
23. On the concept of *taqlīd*, see R. M. FRANK, « Knowledge and *Taqlīd* : The Foundations of Religious Belief in Classical Ash'arism », J*ournal of the American Oriental Society*, 109, 1989, p. 258-278 and F. GRIFFEL, « The Project of Enlightenment in Islamic-Arabic Culture », in *The Cultures of Maimonideanism : New Approaches to the History of Jewish Thought*, ed. J. T. Robinson, Leiden, New York, and Köln, Brill, 2009, p. 1-20.

object, that is correct faith or doctrine, knowledge has a subjective focus that is characterized by understanding and inner conviction. *Taqlīd*, on the other hand, is the consequence of the lack of inner conviction and understanding : it is « blind » obedience to a non-internalized authority. Attaining « knowledge » will help to internalize religious norms because it establishes and increases the firmness of one's convictions and the lucidity of one's understanding of religious subjects. Thus, it will effectuate a positive change in behavior : a mere external observance characterized by *taqlīd* will be replaced by a personal appropriation of religious values. The text continues :

> « In this way the innermost thoughts of a man will be purified and brought into conformity with his outward behaviour ; his prayer will be sincere as there will be enshrined in his heart an inner voice[24] rebuking and summoning him to right conduct, as the prophet says, 'Thy words have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee' (Psalms 119:11). Their faith will show itself in their dealings with each other; jealousy between them in matters of this world will diminish ; all will turn towards the Master of wisdom and not to anything else… All this will

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24. The phrase « inner voice » is the translator's addition ; it has no direct counterpart in the Arabic original, although it is evident enough that Saadyah indeed must have had a kind of inner voice in mind. A more literal translation is « because [something] comes into being with them in their hearts [and this something] rebukes them from sin and summons them to right conduct… ». Cf. Saadyah, *Kitāb al-Amanāt*, ed. Landauer, *op. cit.*, p. 6 : اذا صار معهم فـى قلـوبـهم الـزاجر لـهم عن الـخطا الـمحرّك لـهم عـلى الـصـواب .

result from the disappearance of doubts and the removal of errors »[25].

These passages reveal that « knowledge » was a form of self-construction as well as an assemblage of correct information. The point was not only to create a database of correct beliefs, a *doctrinal* focus of knowledge – although this was certainly an important component of Saadyah's project – but also to effectuate a spiritual change in the self of the knower. This was the *spiritual* focus of knowledge.

In this way Saadyah managed to integrate his intellectual enterprise with an old concern of rabbinic Judaism : to increase the believers' commitment to their own religion, to make them « sincere », to promote the internalization of religious values. Philosophers of the subsequent centuries were to claim, following Saadyah's lead, that studying philosophy was the best way to achieve these goals. In a sense philosophy was proposed as a replacement for the older methods of self-construction partly by integrating them into its own structure. There will be several occasions in this study to observe this phenomenon ; in the present context it will suffice to point out one example.

Saadyah quotes Psalms 119 :11 : « Thy words have I laid up in my heart, that I might not sin against Thee ». Medieval commentators took the first part of the sentence as referring to the memorization of the God's words[26]. Since transgression was often described as a consequence of forgetting, the connection between the presence of the divine

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25. Tr. A. Altmann, *Three Jewish Philosophers*, *op. cit.*, p. 30-31.
26. Cf. Rashi *ad loc.*, Radak *ad loc.*

words in the mind and the avoidance of sin required no explanation. Therefore, this sentence was probably understood as a reference to an ancient method of self-construction : the « voice » speaking through the pages of a corpus of sacred literature was internalized through the memorization of the relevant sacred texts and by repeating them as often as possible. Thus the « voice » of the religious authority would have an almost continuous presence in the believer's mind.

At the same time, this method is susceptible to being guilty of *taqlīd*, since the essence of the method is the mechanic memorization and repetition of words. Nevertheless, once a sufficient number of texts are memorized, they may begin to live a new life : a network of allusions, cross-references, and surprising connections between various passages (« intertextuality ») will emerge in the mind of the believer, a range of motifs, topics, and themes will take shape and call for further elaboration. All these mental events lead to a profound and firm internalization of the « voice » of the religious texts enabling the person to extract the « spirit » from the letters and to find out on his or her own how to apply it to unexpected situations[27].

Learning sacred texts by heart was an integral part of education at the rabbinic academies during the era of the geonim[28]. There is no reason to think that Saadyah had any

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27. Cf. M. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 178-183.
28. Cf. S. Dov Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 2, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, University of California Press, 1971, p. 205-211 ; R. Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia*, *op. cit.*, p. 156-161.

reservations about this practice or any objection to it. Nonetheless, in the paragraph quoted above he proposes a different interpretation of Psalm 119 : 11. Instead of learning passages by heart Saadyah speaks about understanding religious doctrines through reason. Knowledge could bring about a harmony between one's private mental-psychic world and the social-religious norms one is expected to acknowledge and realize within the religious community. For Saadyah « laying down » the divine word in one's « heart » meant turning the content of faith into proven or, at least, well-founded knowledge ; it did not mean the memorization of biblical verses.

What was the reason for this shift in self-construction ? The answer probably lies in a new anthropological idea : the rational animal. Man has an intellect, a faculty of reason, which may receive « wisdom » from God, as Saadyah explains. This wisdom fits man the best ; accordingly, a method of self-construction in which the rational faculty plays the chief role is more appropriate for human beings than other methods. The real « self » is the intellect. Religious norms are internalized when they are appropriated by the intellect, since the intellect is the quintessence of the human being.

We can thus identify an important pre-condition of Saadyah's founding of philosophy as a symbolic institution within rabbinic Judaism : a new anthropological vision in which the intellect is the true essence of the human being. A remarkable passage depicts the « superiority » of the human race positing « wisdom » as the center of the vision :

> « Afterwards we studied well the question wherein man's superiority consisted, and we found that he was raised to

superiority by virtue of the wisdom which God bestowed upon and taught him, as is said, 'Even He that teacheth man knowledge' (Psalms 94 : 10). By virtue of it man preserves the memory of deeds that happened long ago, and by virtue of it he foresees many of the things that will occur in future. By virtue of it he is able to subdue the animals so that they may till the earth for him and bring in its produce. By virtue of it he is able to draw the water from the depth of the earth to its surface; he even invents irrigating wheels that draw the water automatically. By virtue of it he is able to build lofty mansions, to make magnificent garments, and to prepare delicate dishes. By virtue of it he is able to organize armies and camps, and to exercise kingship and authority for establishing order and civilization among men. By virtue of it he is able to study the nature of the celestial spheres, the course of the planets, their dimensions, their distances from one another, as well as other matters relating to them »[29].

The enthusiasm about the wonders of « wisdom » and « knowledge », attested by the passage above, must have been shared by a number of educated Muslims, and Christians no less than Jews, who witnessed the flourishing of the sciences and philosophy in early Abbasid times. It is a plausible hypothesis that this enthusiasm formed a common ground for the intellectuals of the age. Saadyah's project probably gained credibility among educated Jews because it

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29. Tr. A. Altmann, *Three Jewish Philosophers*, *op. cit*., p. 116-117 ; Saadyah, *Kitāb al-Amanāt*, ed. Landauer, *op. cit*., p. 147.

harmonized with their admiration for the sciences and « knowledge »[30].

This conclusion seems to support Marc Richir's theory of symbolic institution. Marc Richir, a contemporary Belgian philosopher in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, devoted one of his major works to the philosophical analysis of the relationship between symbolic institution and the experience of the sublime. The latter concept was introduced to modern philosophy by Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment*; it is defined as experiencing something that is unqualifiedly « great ». One of Richir's conclusions is that the experience of the sublime grants a new self-perception to those who share it. Moreover, they will be endowed with a new solidarity, a new feeling of participation in a transcendent community. Thus a new community is born, defining itself by symbols that create the foundation of a new symbolic institution[31]. Therefore a « tectonic break » in the history of intellectual life is likely to be marked by a new experience of the sublime.

Saadyah's act of founding a rationalistic discourse within the framework of rabbinic Judaism can be interpreted along these lines. The above quoted passage about the sublimity of the human race in subduing nature, establishing society, and attaining knowledge was the common experience that established a new perception of self for an emerging

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30. On « philosophical interconfessionalism » in the age, see S. M. Wasserstrom, « The Islamic Social and Cultural Context », in *History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. D. H. Frank and O. Leaman, *op. cit.*, p. 93-114.
31. Cf. M. Richir, *Du sublime en politique*, Paris, Éditions Payot, 199), p. 84-87 and *passim*.

community of intellectuals : man as rational animal. The attempt to transplant philosophical knowledge into rabbinic Jewish culture became feasible when this self-perception was shared by a critical mass of educated Jews. Saadyah's argument that rational knowledge was the best way to achieve sincerity in religious matters is convincing if the key premise – that reason is the real self of human beings – is accepted. If our reason comprises who we truly are, then religious sincerity is achieved if and only if our reason finds religion acceptable. Later we will see that similar considerations operated in other cases of transplanting philosophical knowledge as well.

We have seen that « knowledge » or « correct belief » had two *foci* for Saadyah gaon : (1) a *doctrinal* focus, meaning the precise formulation of the content of the faith ; and (2) a *spiritual* focus, meaning the transformation of the self effectuated by the acquisition of knowledge[32]. However, knowledge also had implications in two additional and distinct fields. Saadyah held that faith could not be firm without eliminating doubts, and that doubts could only be eliminated through logically valid interferences on the basis of true premises. Thus Saadyah's concept of « knowledge » or « correct belief » implied not only the precise formulation of the doctrinal content but the ability to prove it.

Moreover, Saadyah took for granted that the spiritual change effectuated by knowledge would have no antinomian

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32. For the various lists of articles of faith in Saadya's works, see H. Ben-Shammai, « Asarat iqqarei ha-emuna shel Rav Se'adya gaon » (« Saadya Gaon's ten articles of faith »), *Da'at*, 37, 1996, p. 11-26.

implications. That is to say, the « sincerity » of devotion could not be a pretext for violating the established religious rules. Such a rebellion against religious authority would not be granted the honorific titles « knowledge » and « correct belief ». On the other hand, true knowledge could lead to a more precise understanding and performance of the commandments. Thus, in addition to the overall spiritual transformation, theoretical knowledge could have more particular pragmatic consequences as well, influencing one's behavior in everyday life. We can therefore add two more *foci* to the doctrinal and spiritual : (3) an *argumentative* focus, that is, the ability to argue for the articles of faith and to defend them in religious debates ; and (4) a *pragmatic* focus, namely, the realization of the implications of knowledge in everyday life.

Stressing the importance of « knowledge » or « faith » was by no means new to Judaism. Saadyah's innovation consisted in attributing all four *foci* enumerated above to these concepts. Any medieval Ashkenazi rabbi would have admitted that a « knowledge » of religion and « correct belief » was indispensable for keeping the commandments. The rabbis would have subscribed to Saadyah's claim that faith brings about sincere observance. But would they have understand « knowledge » and « faith » as Saadyah did in the *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* ? Most of the medieval Ashkenazi rabbis, in fact, ignored the argumentative focus : learning how to demonstrate the articles of the faith was not considered obligatory. Even the doctrinal focus had lesser importance : for most of the Middle Ages Ashkenazi rabbis did not see it

necessary to precisely formulate the content of their faith, to specify it in the form of a list of the key propositions, etc.

On the other hand, the pragmatic focus received much more emphasis in the Ashkenazi rabbinic understanding of faith than in Saadyah's thought. For most of the Ashkenazi rabbis, faith signified first and foremost loyalty to God, which was understood as loyalty to rabbinic tradition. What mattered to traditional rabbinic minds was not avoiding false statements about God but precluding any revolt, even the appearance of revolt against rabbinic tradition in general, including some Talmudic aggadot employing anthropomorphic imagery concerning God. The motivation behind Moses Taku's provocative formulation of an anthropomorphic concept of God was the desire to demonstrate his full and blind obedience to the relevant aggadot in rabbinic literature. The non-literalist interpretation of anthropomorphic passages was perceived as a danger because it could be understood as an indirect rejection of the authority of these texts. Thus, faith was understood as submission to the Law revealed on Mount Sinai, and this submission had to be articulated primarily in the daily observance of the commandments. Saadyah's new emphasis on « knowledge » and « correct belief » as having a doctrinal, argumentative and spiritual focus in addition to the pragmatic must be appreciated against this background.

In summary we may identify four essential characteristics of medieval Jewish philosophy as founded by Saadya gaon :

   1. The rational animal. The author of a philosophical text understands both himself and his readers as rational animals who will consider the weight of the

arguments presented in the text by their intellects. The intellect is believed to be the true self of man.

2. A project of intellectual and spiritual perfection. The author of a philosophical text is likely to view himself as contributing to a project of discovering truth and perfecting one's morals and intellect. This may be presented in rather dramatic terms, such as « saving » the contemporaries from the « sea of doubts » or providing the « perplexed » with a « guide ».

3. The four *foci* of faith. Whereas faith may have meant nothing more than loyalty to God in a pre-philosophical form of Judaism, medieval Jewish philosophers are likely to place special emphasis on the dogmatic content, the argumentation and on the spiritual implications of faith in order to re-define « correct faith » in these terms.

4. Use of alien sources. As rational animals medieval Jewish philosophers are likely to consider the arguments of other rational animals, even if they are not Jews.

These characteristics remained valid in later forms of medieval Jewish philosophy as well, although a number of other important characteristics developed in time, as will be shown below.

2. Moses Maimonides (entre 1135 et 1138-1234)

The second decisive turn in the development of medieval Jewish philosophy is associated with another giant of traditional Talmudic studies : Moses Maimonides. The events

leading up to Maimonides' splendid career were similar to those in Saadyah's case : as a physician he served at Saladin's court, he gained an enormous reputation for erudition in traditional religious scholarship, and he possessed a charismatic personality[33].

First, the model discourse had changed. By Maimonides' time the branch of Islamic thought from which Saadyah gaon had received the most inspiration, Mutazila *kalam*, had lost its vitality. Cutting edge philosophers of the twelfth century took Aristotle as their starting point instead. This is true of Ibn Badja, Ibn Tufayl, Ibn Rushd, and in a sense, even of al-Ghazali (inasmuch as his critique of Aristotelian philosophy and his brilliant summary of the « philosophers' opinions » were important contributions to the body of Aristotelian philosophy itself). Most of the aforementioned thinkers were inspired by Neoplatonic ideas as well which they often mistook for authentic Aristotelian lore. Maimonides wanted to adopt an Aristotelian-Neoplatonic discourse to rabbinic Judaism. He rejected *kalam*, and he implicitly criticized Saadyah gaon's contribution as well.

Second, Maimonides managed to find a definite place for philosophy within the intellectual universe of rabbinic Judaism. Instead of employing vague phrases, such as « knowledge », « understanding », etc. to denote the discourse, Maimonides declared that Aristotelian natural philosophy corresponded precisely to what was called *maase bereshit* (« The

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33. The best available monograph at this moment on Maimonides is H. A. Davidson, *Moses Maimonides : The Man and His Works,* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005).

Account of the Beginning », that is, creation) in Talmudic literature, and that metaphysics was identical with the subject traditionally referred to as *maase merkava* (« The Account of the Chariot », alluding to the chariot appearing in a prophetic vision in the first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel). This declaration was first made not in a philosophical work, but in a rabbinic work – his commentary on the Mishnah. The relevant passage from the Mishnah is as follows :

> « One does not expound on forbidden relationships with three, and not on the Account of the Beginning with two, and not on the Chariot with a single one, unless he was a wise man and understands himself. Whoever looks at four things, it would be better for him had he not come to the world: what is above, what is below, what is before and what is after. And whoever does not have regard for the honor of his Creator, it would be better for him had he not come into the world »[34].

After explaining some details of the quoted text Maimonides states :

> And now hear from me this thing, which became clear to me in my thoughts from my reading of the sayings of the Sages, namely, that what they designate by 'the Account of the Beginning' is the science of nature [*al-'ilm al-tabi'i*] and the research of the principles of existence. And by "the Account of the Chariot" they mean the divine science [*al-'ilm al-ilahi* =metaphysics] which treats existence in its entirety and the existence of the Creator, and his Knowledge, and his Attributes, and the descent of the

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34. Mishnah, Hagiga 2 : 1.

existents from Him, and the angels, and the soul, and the intellect that is conjoined to the human being and what will be after death.

And since these two sciences, the natural and the divine, are very prestigious – and rightly so – [the Mishnah] forbids teaching them in the way the mathematical sciences [are taught]. And know that all human beings by nature desire all kinds of knowledge, and [this is true of] the ignoramus and the knowledgeable alike. Now man cannot but think about [the topics] of these two sciences right away, and directs his mind on them without principles and preparation in sciences. [Therefore, the Mishnah] prohibits it and warns of it employing an intimidating language against those who dare to approach the principles with their mind without having prepared, as we have mentioned : Whoever looks at four things, etc »[35].

It is remarkable that Maimonides does not prove his identification of these opaque traditional terms (« the Account of the Beginning/Chariot ») as Aristotelian natural philosophy and metaphysics with any arguments. The only evidence he presents is his firm conviction (« …which

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35. Maimonides, *ad loc*, translated on the basis of Jerusalem, The National Library of Israel, Ms Heb. 4o5703, p. 145 ; available online : http://jnul.huji.ac.il/dl/mss/html/heb5703_l.htm. Cf. H. A. DAVIDSON, *Moses Maimonides*, *op. cit*., p. 161. Note that Maimonides refers back to this comment in his Mishneh Torah and in the Guide as well, see *ibid*. Unfortunately I was unable to consult Menahem Kellner's translation and study of the quoted text ; M. KELLNER, « Maimonides' Commentary on Mishnah Hagiga II,1 : Translation and Commentary », in *From Strength to Strength : Lectures from Shearith Israe*l, éd. M. D. Angel, Brooklyn, N. Y., Sepher-Hermon Press, 1998, p. 101-111.

became clear to me in my thoughts from my reading of the sayings of the Sages ».) Now, because it was Maimonides' conviction, it was believable for many : Maimonides was a leading authority in the interpretation of the « sayings of the Sages », namely Talmudic literature, and his commentary on the Mishnah soon became a classic of the genre. Other Jewish philosophers who did not possess such erudition in rabbinic literature could hardly have made such a statement. Maimonides' philosophical Judaism was credible because of his rabbinic erudition. His position as a giant in rabbinics as well as in philosophy was truly exceptional and unique; moreover, it was the key to his success in redefining the place of philosophy within rabbinic learning.

The identification of philosophy with the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot had important consequences. The legitimacy of the endeavor stood on firmer grounds : Maimonides was able to quote rabbinic proof texts about the high status of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, which he interpreted as referring to the two essential parts of Aristotelian philosophy. He could refer to historical precedents as well : reports about ancient rabbis studying these esoteric subjects acted as evidence that the Talmudic rabbis were accomplished philosophers. Whereas Saadyah argued that rationalistic reasoning was not altogether forbidden, and it could bring great benefit to his unfortunate generation covered by « a sea of doubts », Maimonides could create a more definite and positive meaning for the pursuit of philosophical and scientific studies within the framework of rabbinic Judaism : philosophy had always been a branch of

rabbinic scholarship ; moreover, it was its most prestigious branch, it pertained to the very essence of Judaism, and its study was a religious obligation.

On the other hand, accepting this thesis implied that the prohibitions against teaching the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot publicly applied to philosophy as well. This created further problems for Maimonides and he had to dedicate much of the introduction of his chief philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, to justify the very fact that he was writing a book about the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot.

However, the challenges caused by the rabbinic prohibition on communicating esoteric doctrines should not be overestimated. In fact, the Arab Aristotelian philosophers, whom Maimonides took as models, taught that philosophy was an esoteric subject, as not everyone was capable of understanding it. The « secrets » of philosophy were not to be revealed to such people, the philosophers taught. The prohibitions in the Mishnah harmonized with the admonitions of the Arab Aristotelian philosophers. This fact corroborated Maimonides' identification of the Account of the Beginning and Chariot with Aristotelian lore.

More important is that Maimonides' esotericism was the consequence of a different vision of humanity than that which we encountered in Saadyah's case. For Maimonides man was certainly a rational animal, but the emphasis shifted from « rationality » as a common property shared by all humanity to « rationality » as the key to the unusual diversity of the human race : some men's intellects were almost as perfect as that of the angels, whereas other human beings

were considered to be only slightly more rational than animals. This idea is seen in the denial of Saadyah's thesis about the supremacy of the human race : whereas Saadyah argued that humanity must be the purpose of creation and superior even to the angels, Maimonides put humanity below the angels within the great hierarchy of beings.

Al-Farabi, one of Maimonides' sources, envisioned humanity as a continuum of various degrees of perfection that stretched from the highest class of the animals to the lowest class of the angels[36]. This image must have been convincing for Maimonides as well[37]. The real issue was not what specific difference set humanity apart from the animal – as everyone knew that was reason – but what the maximum potential of that property was and how it could be achieved. What was the peak of human perfection ? Or, to put it more precisely, who was the most perfect human ? Who was the closest to the angels ? Who was the most intelligent of all mankind ? Aristotle ? Muhammad ? Jesus Christ ? Or Alexander the Great ?

For Maimonides, the only conceivable answer was Moses, the lawgiver of Judaism. (In fact, Maimonides' apology for Judaism focused on Moses' perfection : because Moses was the most perfect man, the laws established by him were the most perfect laws, and his religion the only true religion ; cf., for example, *Guide* II, 39)[38]. The sublime vision of humanity was refocused on the achievements of the most perfect

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36. Cf. Al-Farabi, *Fusūl al-Madanī. Aphorisms of the Statesman*, ed. and tr. D. M. Dunlop, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1961, p. 59 [Arabic text : p. 147].
37. Cf. Maimonides, *Guide* II, 40, at the beginning.

human : Moses. His excellence was mysterious, the way in which he received revelation from God was not comparable to that of other prophets. The truth revealed to him was not something that could be learned in the usual way : it was an esoteric truth that sometimes flashed out like lightening. To some degree it was accessible to others as well ; but for Moses it was a series of lightening bolts that created an unceasing light. Moses encountering God on Mount Sinai, Moses descending from the mountain with the law in his hands and with his face emitting a mysterious light – this was Maimonides' vision of human superiority. In the introduction of *The Guide of the Perplexed* we read :

> « You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think it is day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets, to whom it was said : But as for thee, stand thou here by Me [Deut.

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38. Cf. A. IVRY, « The Image of Moses in Maimonides' Thought », in *Maimonides after 800 Years : Essays on Maimonides and His Influence*, ed. J. M .Harris, Cambridge, Mass. and London, Harvard University Press, 2007, p. 113-134 ; esp. p. 124 and 129-134.

5:28], and of whom it was said, that the skin of his face
sent forth beams, and so on [Exod 34:29] »[39].

However, this emphasis on Moses' perfection did not
harmonize well with the fact that philosophy had to be
learned from alien sources. « Aristotle was better than
Christ », a fourteenth-century Christian heretic claimed[40]. Was
he not better than Moses, too ? No, Maimonides explains, the
revelation Moses received included the secrets of the
« Account of the Beginning » and the « Account of the
Chariot », which were the original, best versions of natural
philosophy and metaphysics. Unfortunately, Maimonides
continues, since these sciences were transmitted only orally
and only to a small number of the most excellent students
(see the quotation from the Mishnah above), their
transmission was very vulnerable and they had been long
forgotten by the time of his generation. The good news was
that Moses' lost philosophy could be at least partially
retrieved. The main objective of his chief philosophical work,
The Guide of the Perplexed, was to re-discover the lost esoteric

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39. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. S. Pines, Chicago and
London, Chicago University Press, 1963, p. 7.
40. *Item blasphemavit iste Thomas haereticus dicens quod melior erat Aristoteles
quam Christus…* as an inquistional record about Thomas Scotus or Thomas
Braunceston states ; see P. Nold, « Thomas of Braucenston O. M./O. P. »,
in *Kirchenbild und Spiritualität dominikanische Beiträge zur Ekklesiologie und zum
kirchlichen Leben im Mittelalter ; Festschrift für Ulrich Horst OP zum 75.
Geburtstag*, ed. T. Prügl and M. Schlosser, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2007,
p. 179-195 ; here p. 195. I owe this reference to Sylvain Piron (EHESS,
Paris).

teachings referred to as the Account of the Beginning and the
Account of the Chariot in Talmudic literature :

> « We have already made it clear several times that the
> chief aim of this Treatise is to explain what can be
> explained of the Account of the Beginning and the
> Account of the Chariot… This is the reason why the
> knowledge of this matter has ceased to exist in the entire
> religious community, so that nothing great or small remains
> of it. And it had to happen like this, for this knowledge was
> only transmitted from one chief to another and has never
> been set down to writing. If this is so, what stratagem can I
> use to draw attention toward that which may have appeared
> to me as indubitably clear, manifest, and evident in my
> opinion, according to what I understood in these
> matters ? »[41]

The substantiation for the correctness of Maimonides'
reconstruction of the lost esoteric lore is again apparently
nothing other than his strong personal conviction.
Maimonides emphasizes that he received neither revelation
nor tradition pertaining to it. Nonetheless, Maimonides is
confident that any intelligent man with the necessary level of
erudition will be persuaded of the plausibility of his
reconstruction :

> « In addition to this there is the fact that in that which
> has occurred to me with regard to these matters, I followed
> conjecture and supposition ; no divine revelation has come
> to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in
> question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe

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41. Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. S. Pines, *op. cit.*, p. 415.

in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the [Talmudic] Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that the things are indubitably so and so. Yet it is possible that they are different and something else is intended »[42].

The « speculative premises » referred to in the quoted text are scientific and philosophical theses taken from Greco-Arabic sources. Maimonides repeatedly had to face the problem of non-Jewish sources. Moses may have been the greatest philosopher, but his teachings could not be reconstructed without Aristotle and other non-Jewish sources. Saadyah did not treat this problem in a systematic way. Maimonides had to present some justification for relying on the teachings of some ancient idolaters, such as Aristotle, when idolaters were generally despised and condemned as immoral and savage people in rabbinic literature.

A solution to this problem was proposed by al-Kindi, one of the first philosophers writing in Arabic, who can be considered the « founder » of philosophical studies in Islamic civilization in general. Al-Kindi's solution is based on a theory of the accumulation of truth : many small truths can be discovered by different people in different places and times and each can be added to a continuously growing treasure of knowledge. The outcome is a « cumulative truth » which is not discovered by a single individual at once, but which emerges out of the collective work of many generations of scholars.

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42. *Ibid.*, p. 416.

The underlying premise is that truth is something objective, something that is valid independently of place and time, race, sex, colour, or religion. He appeals to the « objective attitude » that may be said to characterize any scholarly discourse to some degree. In other words, a contribution matters more than the person who has contributed it and it can be judged independently of the virtues or vices of the person. Any scholarly discourse including Jewish and Islamic religious sciences is likely to adopt an « objective attitude » at least in a limited number of cases. Al-Kindi appeals to this attitude when arguing for the use of alien sources :

> « We ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth and of acquiring it wherever it comes from, even if it comes from races distant and nations different from us. For the seeker of truth nothing takes precedence over the truth, nor belittling either of him who speaks it or of him who conveys is »[43].

Maimonides summarized the idea in a short aphorism : « Hear the truth from whoever says it »[44]. This is sometimes

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43. Al-Kindi, « On First Philosophy », tr. A. L. Ivry in *Al-Kindi's Metaphysics*, ed., tr. and commentary by A. L. Ivry, Albany, New York, State University of New York Press, 1974, p. 58.
44. Tr. R. L. Weiss and C. Butterworth, *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, New York, Dover Publication, 1975, p. 60. Cf. Moses Maimonides [Maïmonide], *Traité de l'éthique – « Huit chapitres »*, ed. and tr. R. Brague, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 2001, p. 32, note 25. For a possible source in hadith literature, see D. Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture : The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early 'Abbāsid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries)*, London and Boston, Routledge, 1998), p. 159 :

quoted as a dictum of the « Sages » in later Jewish literature. One of the chapters of the *Guide* (I, 71) relates that the sciences were studied among the Jews in biblical times but were forgotten afterwards as a result of the exiles and persecutions. The Gentiles invented the same or similar sciences, and their body of scientific literature has survived. Maimonides did not claim, as did some of his predecessors and some of his followers, that the Gentiles took their knowledge from the Jewish sources, for example the lost astronomical books supposedly composed by King Solomon. Nonetheless, the reader cannot avoid the impression that the sciences and philosophy that can be learned from the non-Jewish sources must coincide more or less with the content of the lost Jewish sciences. In an astronomical context Maimonides claims that Jews may rely on the Gentile sciences without considering the personal qualities of the (Gentile) authors, since the truth of the matter is established by proofs[45]. The underlying assumption connoted is that truth was not a matter of culture, not even a matter of religion ; therefore, whatever was true of the Gentile sciences must have been included in the lost Jewish sciences as well. Thus, Maimonides legitimized the usage of Aristotle and other non-Jewish scientific and philosophical sources.

« Ibn Abbas [the Prophet's uncle] said : Take wisdom from whomever you hear it, for the non-wise may utter a wise saying… » (quoted from Ibn Qutayba's ʿUyyūn al-ahbār). Cf. S. Stroumsa, *Maimonides in His World : Portrait of a Mediterranean Thinker*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009, p. 12.
45. Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Qiddush ha-hodesh* 17 :24.

The same issue came to the fore even more dramatically when Maimonides discussed topics relating to the « translatability » of God's name : could the God worshiped by the Jews be identical with any of the deities worshiped by non-Jews[46] ? Maimonides had no explicit answer. Nevertheless, a specific approach is present quite consistently in his works. Maimonides took it for granted that, when describing ideas like the Prime Mover, or the First Cause, the Gentile philosophers were discussing the same God as the one worshipped by Jews. On the other hand, Maimonides denied that *Shiur Qoma*, a Jewish mystical text in which some of the most respected Talmudic rabbis were quoted, referred to the God of Israel in its discussions. The criterion was the denial of God's corporeality : since the *Shiur Qoma* attributed a body to God, this must have been a false god ; since the philosophers denied God's corporeality, they were discussing the true God. In a famous response Maimonides condemns the *Shiur Qoma* :

> « Altogether, it is a great *mitsva* to delete this book and to eradicate the mention of its subject matter; 'and make no mention of the name of other gods' (Exodus 23: 13), etc., since he who has a body [*qom*ā] undoubtedly is [to be classed among] 'other gods' »[47].

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46. On « translatability », see J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian : The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 44-54.

47. Tr. A. Altmann, « Moses Narboni's 'Epistle on *Shi'ur Qom*ā' », in *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. A. Altmann, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 225-280 ; here p. 231-232. Arabic original : Maimonides, *Teshuvot ha-Rambam*, ed. J. Blau, vol. 1, Jerusalem, Mekize

Thus, Maimonides denied that the deity mentioned in certain Jewish texts was identical with the God of Israel, whereas he affirmed that the deity mentioned in certain non-Jewish texts *was* identical with the God of Israel. The implications could not be more radical : some Jewish texts had to be excluded from the intellectual orbit of Judaism and copies of these texts had to be destroyed (the sentence « it is a great *mitsva* to delete this book » was meant quite literally), whereas certain philosophical treatises composed by Muslims or Greek idolaters had to be granted admission to the curriculum of Jewish religious studies. In other words, Maimonides challenged the traditional contrast between « the pious Jews » and « the impious Gentiles » : some Jews were not so pious, after all, and some of the idolaters came closer to the truth than many of the uneducated Jews.

Attributing more value to some Gentile books than to certain branches of germane Jewish literature was an idea difficult to swallow for many Jewish intellectuals of his age, and for those in the following centuries. Nevertheless, the idea was firmly grounded in Maimonides' innermost theological convictions, as is illustrated by the text quoted above : who has a body cannot be the God of Israel. The denial of God's corporeality was not an issue where compromise was possible for Maimonides. Whatever conclusion ensued, Maimonides accepted it ; and one of the possible consequences was admitting the value of Aristotelian philosophical texts. Thus the practice of using non-Jewish

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Nirdamim, 1957, p. 200-201 [nr. 117].

philosophical literature obtained an implicit theological foundation in Maimonides' thought.

In accordance with these developments Maimonides repeated many elements of Saadyah's institution of philosophy with minor modifications. Knowledge had both a doctrinal and a spiritual focus for Maimonides too. He put great emphasis on correct beliefs. Just as Saadyah, he insisted that belief is not possible without understanding ; a mere repetition of words is not sufficient. Following Saadyah's initiative he proposed a short summary of Jewish faith in thirteen articles ; this list was destined to have an impressive career.

As for spiritual focus, Maimonides appended some practical guidelines of spiritual life to a chapter at the end of *The Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 51). His instructions outline a program of appropriating Jewish liturgical customs for the purpose of philosophical spirituality :

> « Know that all the practices of worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world ; you should act as if you were occupied with Him, may He be exalted, and not with that which is other than He. If, however, you pray merely by moving your lips while facing a wall, and at the same time think about your buying and selling; or if you read the Torah with your tongue while your heart is set upon the building of your habitation and does not consider what you read ; and similarly in all cases when you perform a commandment merely with your limbs – as if you were digging a hole in the ground or hewing

> wood in the forest – without reflecting either upon the meaning of that action or upon Him from whom the commandment proceeds or upon the end of the action, you should not think that you have achieved the end »[48].

These comments imply that correct performances of prayer, Torah reading, and other commandments are accompanied by philosophical meditations on the meaning of these actions and on God, who ordained them. Maimonides' works, in fact, contain much material that can be used for such purposes. Maimonides gives further instructions :

> « The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast onto is that, while reciting the Shema' prayer, you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus… When this has been carried out correctly and has been practiced consistently for years, cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading »[49].

In the continuation of the text Maimonides instructs the reader to develop a gradually similar attitude towards all religious rites. In this way « sacred » and « profane » time periods should be kept separate every day. Avoiding worldly thoughts during the performance of religious obligations is beneficial in itself ; Maimonides' underlying assumption seems to be that closing the material world opens up the spiritual world automatically. Furthermore, one should « reflect » on the commandments, presumably through

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48. Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, tr. S. Pines, *op. cit.*, p. 622.
49. *Ibid.*

meditation on the inherent teleology of the *halakha* as a system. Another possible « content » of such meditations is God himself according to the « intellect » and not according to idle imaginations, as Maimonides underlines. This probably means a recollection of the « correct » concept of God by denying rather than affirming attributes of Him, as Maimonides explains in the relevant chapters of the Guide (I, 50-60). If Maimonides' program of spiritual training is realized consistently, Judaism with its rites, beliefs, legal system, and social order becomes a great machine serving one purpose : the perfection of the intellect of few philosophers. Thus, at the end of the day, Maimonides' re-founding of philosophy within rabbinic Judaism amounted to the re-founding of rabbinic Judaism itself.