

Dr. Lawrence Kaplan and
Dr. David Berger

On Freedom of Inquiry in the Rambam—And Today

In a crisply written and vigorously argued essay in the inaugural issue of *The Torah U-Madda Journal*, Rabbi Yehuda Parnes contends that “Torah u-Madda can only be viable if it imposes strict limits on freedom of inquiry in areas that may undermine the *yod gimel ‘ikkarei emunah.*” Rabbi Parnes bases his contention primarily on a well known ruling of the Rambam in *Hil. ‘Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 that forbids reading books of idolatry and extends that prohibition to include entertaining “any thought that causes a person to uproot any principle of the principles of the Torah.” Correctly rejecting the view that the Rambam’s intent in this ruling was “only directed at those who study such works in order to develop a faith in idolatry or out of a desire to forsake Torah,” Rabbi Parnes understands the Rambam’s ruling as forbidding free intellectual activity “with respect to areas of thought that are essentially heretical.” As Rabbi Parnes notes, “Though freedom of inquiry is almost a prerequisite to acquiring knowledge generally, it is nevertheless eschewed in the critical area of *kefirah.*” His presentation clearly implies that the “strict limits on freedom of inquiry” which he considers halakhically necessary prohibit even a person who is committed to upholding the principles of the faith from risking the “inner tension” that can arise from thinking through a heretical argument.¹

Of course, Rabbi Parnes is well aware of the apparent contradiction between this ruling and the Rambam’s assiduous study of Greek and Arabic philosophy and the books of ancient idolatry. However, for Rabbi Parnes, this “apparent inconsistency . . . is easily resolved.” The

Talmud states that it is permitted to study *kishuf* if the purpose is *lehavin u-lehorot* (to understand and to rule), and the Meiri extends this permission to include the reading of *divrei kefirah* in general. Presumably, then, the Rambam's own reading of books of idolatry and *kefirah* was done—anticipating the position of the Meiri—with the intent of *lehavin u-lehorot*. For Rabbi Parnes, “*Lehavin u-lehorot* represents nothing more than an application of Torah principles to all spheres of life including *divrei kefirah*.” However, he emphasizes, “That is a far cry from an unconditional intellectual endeavor in the domain of *kefirah*.”

Despite the force and clarity of Rabbi Parnes' arguments, his conclusion, in our view, cannot be sustained. For it rests on a questionable and problematic reading of *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 and does not take into account other important relevant texts of the Rambam. Moreover, it does not really come to grips with both the person and world-view of the Rambam.

Even before we examine the Rambam's other writings and the light they shed on this passage, it is evident that the superficial meaning of the formulation in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* cries out for qualification and definition. The unconditional assertion that we are forbidden to pursue any line of inquiry requiring us to analyze ideas or “entertain thoughts” that can result in heresy leads to one *reductio ad absurdum* after another and renders any serious discussion of religion halakhically impermissible. To cite a single example, the problem of theodicy is surely one of the central challenges to religious faith. It aroused the perplexity of the greatest of the prophets and led R. Meir's teacher beyond the point of no return. Dwelling on the suffering of the righteous, then, appears to run afoul of the apparently absolute injunction to avoid any thought that bears the seeds of nonbelief. If so, why may we study Job, say *Elleh Ezkerah*, or recite prayers describing the agonies of the victims of the Crusades and Holocaust? At first glance, citing the religious value of such activities, their capacity to intensify piety, or the relative remoteness of the danger seems quite irrelevant; there is nothing worse than losing faith in God, and an *issur* is an *issur*. Since this conclusion is patently incorrect, we are forced to recognize that context matters, that the level of danger matters, that we have been plunged into an area where we must willy nilly measure probabilities of heresy against religious benefits. The Rambam cannot be instructing us to destroy crucial dimensions of Judaism in order to preserve it.²

Our quest for a clearer understanding of the scope of this prohibition can be facilitated by examining the Rambam's narrower formulation in *Sefer ha-Mizvot*:

We have been commanded not to exercise freedom of thought to the point of holding views opposed to those expressed in the Torah; rather, we must

limit our thought by setting up a boundary where it must stop, and that boundary is the commandments and the injunctions of the Torah. This is the intent of the statement, “You shall not stray after your heart and after your eyes.” In the language of the *Sifre*, “‘You shall not stray after your heart’—this refers to heresy . . . , and ‘after your eyes’—this refers to licentiousness.”³

Here the Rambam defines the biblical prohibition in terms of accepting heretical doctrine rather than entertaining thoughts with the potential of leading to such doctrine. It is no doubt true that if a person feels that the pursuit of a particular argument is seriously threatening his or her belief in what is clearly a cardinal principle of Judaism, there exists an obligation to take the intellectual equivalent of a cold shower, and the ruling in the *Mishneh Torah* underscores this obligation. Nonetheless, the fundamental prohibition is to *embrace* heresy, and this is not an area in which we can mechanically apply the principle of erecting a fence around the Torah or *sefeka de-'oraita le-ḥumra*. Precisely because these issues go to the heart of Judaism, avoiding critical danger raises the specter of preventing critical understanding. Indeed, some of the very principles of faith which we are forbidden to deny were determined and defined through a process that must violate an absolutist understanding of the passage in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah*. Deeply pious medieval Jews maintained that the *denial* of anthropomorphism was a heresy. Both proponents and opponents of the belief in *sefirot* regarded the position they rejected as heretical. In such cases, the requirement to examine sensitive theological questions is unavoidable, since neither option is religiously safe. But no Jewish thinker maintains that a clearly non-heretical position which labels all its rivals as heresies automatically attains a halakhic veto over serious consideration of those other views. As the Rambam proceeded toward his conviction that Jacob did not really wrestle with the angel, that divine providence does not extend to individual animals, and that Rabbinic statements about scientific matters or the details of the messianic process may not be correct, he was not deterred by the awareness that many Jews would regard such views as heretical.⁴ The frontiers of the faith have been established by the weighing of ideas that carry the potential of heresy.

As we return at this point to a closer reading of *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3, we shall discover that the Rambam's primary intention is not to foreclose inquiry into critical areas of religious discourse but to regulate an enterprise that he regarded as not merely permissible, but essential, obligatory, and standing at the very apex of the Torah itself.

We have already noted that Rabbi Parnes correctly rejects as untenable the view that the Rambam's ruling is “only directed at those who study such works in order to develop a faith in idolatry or out of a desire to forsake Torah.” Were that the case, Rabbi Parnes argues, “the Rambam

would not have had to present a rationale for this prohibition.” However, the very rationale that the Rambam does present argues against Rabbi Parnes’ absolutist interpretation of the ruling and supports a more nuanced understanding. Let us, then, examine the reason the Rambam adduces in support of this halakhic prohibition and see what light it might shed on the very nature of that prohibition.

For a person’s understanding is limited and not everyone’s understanding can attain to the clear truth. And if a person will follow the thoughts of his heart, he will destroy the world because of his limited understanding. . . . He does not know the canons of inquiry [*middot*] that he ought [to use to] judge [matters] until he will attain to the clear truth. As a result, he will commit heresy.

This extended rationale suggests that the Rambam was not imposing a blanket prohibition upon intellectual inquiry in areas that might lead to heresy, but rather was imposing a prohibition forbidding intellectual inquiry in these areas undertaken by people who lack the proper and necessary intellectual and technical preparations and tools for such an inquiry, people whose “understanding is limited” and who do not possess the “*middot*” that will enable them to attain to the clear truth. In a word, the Rambam’s prohibition is not directed against intellectual inquiry in sensitive areas, but, rather, against intellectual inquiry in these areas *improperly conducted*.⁵ Now, of course, *madda* itself, i.e., the scientific method, rejects improperly conducted modes of inquiry. However, while *madda* rejects such improperly conducted inquiry on scientific and logical grounds, the halakhah, in the Rambam’s view, rejects such inquiry, at least in areas where such inquiry may result in heresy, on *religious* grounds as well.

One might offer the following reply to our contention. The Rambam’s rationale implies no limitation on the scope of the prohibition since no degree of preparation can provide ironclad guarantees against human error. Moreover, even if sufficient preparation were possible in the rare instance, the Rambam’s rationale is just that, a rationale which doesn’t affect the nature of the prohibition itself. In other words, the halakhah forbids *all* intellectual inquiry in certain sensitive areas because of the fear of improperly conducted intellectual inquiry in these areas, which inquiry, in turn, might lead to heresy.⁶ An examination of certain key parallel texts to *Hil. ‘Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 will, however, in our opinion, amply support our interpretation and demonstrate that the above reply is unacceptable.

In the discussion surrounding this passage in the *Mishneh Torah*, the significance of one particular phrase of the Rambam and its implications have remarkably gone unremarked. The Rambam, after stating that “if a

person will follow the thoughts of his heart he will destroy the world because of his limited understanding,” goes on to offer examples.

How so? At times he will follow idolatry and at times he will wonder concerning the unity of the Creator, perhaps it is [true that God is one], perhaps not. What is above, what is below, what is before, what is after. And at times [he will wonder] about prophecy, perhaps it is true, perhaps not.

The statement of the Rambam, “What is above, what is below, what is before, what is after,” is a citation from Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1. Evidently, the Rambam connects this statement with the general prohibition set forth in *Hil. ‘Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 against entertaining “any thought that causes a person to uproot any principle of the principles of Torah.” If we can ascertain then how the Rambam understands this mishnaic warning we will be able to determine his general intent in *Hil. ‘Avodah Zarah* II:2–3.

As a matter of fact, the Rambam discusses this mishnaic text twice, once in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and once in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, and his interpretation of it is perfectly clear and consistent. Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1 in its entirety reads:

One does not expound the laws of *‘arayot* to three persons, and the Account of the Beginning to two persons, and the Account of the Chariot to one person, unless he be wise and able to understand by himself. And whoever considers four things it were better for him not to have come into the world: what is above, what is below, what is before, what is after. And he who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator, it were better for him not to have come into the world.

As is well known, the Rambam, in his commentary on this mishnah, identifies the Account of the Beginning with natural science and the Account of the Chariot with divine science. We are concerned here with the continuation of his discussion.

And because of the importance of these two sciences, the natural and the divine . . . the Sages warned against people studying them as they study the other preliminary sciences. Now it is known that every person by nature, whether he be a fool or a wise man, desires to know all the sciences, and it is impossible that a person not think about these two sciences in some rudimentary manner. And he will direct his thought toward them without the proper preliminaries and without having proceeded along the various stages of science. Therefore [the Sages] prohibited this and warned against it. And in order to frighten one *from directing his thought to the Account of the Beginning without the proper preliminaries* they said, “Whoever considers four things,” etc. And in order to dissuade the person who directs his thoughts toward and contemplates divine matters with his simple imagination, without having ascended the levels of the sciences, they said,

“He who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator”. . . , i.e., one who does not have regard for his intellect. For the intellect is the honor of God.

The Rambam could not be clearer! The warning against contemplating “What is above, what is below, what is before, what is after” is addressed to the one who studies these matters, i.e., natural science, without the proper intellectual preparations.

A very similar approach to this mishnaic text is set forth by the Rambam in the *Guide* I:32 with the same clarity and, if anything, with even greater force. In this chapter the Rambam speaks about the limits of the intellect, particularly in matters pertaining to the divine science, and the need for a person to recognize and respect these limits. Here is the relevant passage:

You should let your intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp. For in regard to matters that it is not in the nature of man to grasp, it is, as we have made clear, very harmful to occupy oneself with them. This is what the Sages intended by their dictum, “Whoever considers four things,” and so on, completing the dictum by saying, “He who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator”; whereby they indicated what we have made clear: namely, *that man should not press forward to engage in speculative study of corrupt imaginings*. When points appearing as dubious occur to him or the thing he seeks does not seem to him to be demonstrated, he should not deny and reject it, hastening to pronounce it false, but rather should persevere and thereby “have regard for the honor of his Creator.”

Again, as in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, the Rambam makes it eminently clear that the mishnaic statement, “Whoever considers four things . . .” is not directed against all intellectual inquiry into the area of the divine science or any other discipline; rather, it is aimed against “speculative study of corrupt imaginings,” which can result from an effort to apprehend matters that transcend human understanding.

There is, however, an important difference between the Rambam’s interpretation of the warning of Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1 in his *Commentary on the Mishnah* and his interpretation of it in the *Guide*. In his *Commentary*, the Rambam states that the warning is specifically addressed to the beginner, forbidding him to study the natural and divine sciences. In the *Guide*, where the pitfalls involved in the study of the divine science are stressed, the Rambam sees the warning not so much as a prohibition directed at the beginner, but, rather, as a caution directed at the person who possesses sufficient preparation, urging him to exercise extreme care in his study of the divine science, as important and necessary as such study may be, and not to “press forward to engage in speculative study of corrupt imaginings.” Of course, if even the person

who is adequately prepared for the study of the divine science, who appreciates its difficulties—the impossibility of apprehending God’s true reality, the absence of demonstrative proofs in many “divine matters,” etc.—and who presumably has been imbued with the proper spirit of intellectual humility, is in danger of stumbling and going astray in his study, what may we say about the beginner! If the “speculative study of corrupt imaginings” in the area of the divine science is a possibility for the person with the proper preparation, it is a certainty for the beginner. Therefore, the Rambam begins the very next chapter of the *Guide* (I:33) with the following statement:

Know that to begin with this science is very harmful, I mean the divine science. . . . He who is seen to be perfect in mind and to be formed for that high rank—that is to say, demonstrative speculation and true intellectual inferences—should be elevated step by step . . . until he achieves his perfection. If, however, he begins with the divine science, it will not be mere confusion in his beliefs that will befall him, but rather absolute negation.⁷

Thus, although the Sages’ warning in Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1 is relevant on one level even to the advanced student, urging him to exercise extreme caution in his study of the divine science and constantly to be aware of the ineluctable limitations of the human intellect, it applies with particular force to the beginner; indeed, as far as the beginner is concerned, it constitutes a blanket prohibition.

Since the Rambam in the *Guide* I:32–33 interprets the mishnaic warning as applying not only to the beginner but also, in a more limited way, to the advanced student, he was very concerned that he would be misunderstood, or that the mishnaic warning would be misunderstood, as advocating the exclusion of entire areas of study even for the person with proper preparation, as artificially limiting intellectual inquiry. He therefore hastened to issue a clarification (*Guide* I:32):

The intention of these texts set down by the prophets and the Sages [cited earlier in the chapter which appear to warn against intellectual inquiry] is not, however, wholly to close the gate of speculation and to deprive the intellect of the apprehension of things that it is possible to apprehend—as is thought by the ignorant and neglectful, who are pleased to regard their own deficiency and stupidity as perfection and wisdom, and the perfection and the knowledge of others as a deficiency and a defection from Law, and who thus “regard darkness as light and light as darkness” (Isa. 5:20). Their purpose, in its entirety, rather is to make it known that the intellects of the human beings have a limit at which they stop.

We believe this powerful passage speaks for itself.

The Rambam’s discussion in his commentary on Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1

and in the *Guide* I:32 clarifies a crucial point in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3. Rabbi Parnes in his essay argues that the Rambam's prohibition is directed against free intellectual inquiry "with respect to areas of thought that are essentially heretical," that it requires that freedom of inquiry be "eschewed in the critical area of *kefirah*," that it bars "unconditional intellectual endeavour in the domain of *kefirah*." But where in this halakhah does the Rambam speak of or refer to "areas of thought that are essentially heretical," or "the critical area of *kefirah*," or "the domain of *kefirah*"? Rather he refers to "any thought that causes a person to uproot a principle of the principles of the Torah," and the examples he gives are speculation about the unity of God, about the truth of prophecy, and about the revealed status of the Torah. What areas of thought, then, is the Rambam speaking about? The answer is as simple as it is surprising. He is prohibiting improperly conducted intellectual inquiry in the realms of the natural sciences (the Account of the Beginning) and the divine science (the Account of the Chariot). This, as we have seen, is precisely what the Rambam states in his commentary on Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1, and it is also what he states in the *Guide*.⁸

One may ask: If, indeed, the Rambam's intention in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 is of a piece with his views as expressed in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and the *Guide*, why is his formulation of the matter in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* not as explicit as his discussions in the *Commentary* and the *Guide*? We would suggest the following: In *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* the Rambam was attempting to encapsulate a two-tier obligation in a single halakhah. First, an individual who is unprepared may not study the natural and divine sciences. (If this lack of preparation results from an educational rather than an intellectual deficiency, the individual is *religiously obligated* to undertake the necessary preparation and pursue a curriculum in which books espousing heretical views will, as we shall see, play an important role. Nonetheless, anyone who remains unprepared is excluded from this area of study.) Second, even one who is prepared must recognize human limitations (as indicated in *Guide* I:32) if he is to avoid crossing the boundary into heresy (as indicated in *Sefer ha-Mizvot*). On this level, however, the limitation is no longer in the curriculum; it operates on an issue by issue basis in the mind of the committed believer engaged in an intellectual quest from which he is not free to desist. In a word, the two tiers which are treated separately in the *Guide* (the advanced student being the focus of I:32, the beginner the focus of I:33) are fused together in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah*.⁹

In light of the above, there is of course no contradiction between the Rambam's own assiduous study of Greek and Arabic philosophy and the books of ancient idolatry and the prohibition set forth in *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3. For the Rambam studied these works as part of his study of the natural and divine sciences. And certainly the Rambam, if anyone,

possessed the requisite halakhic knowledge and the requisite scientific and logical knowledge to undertake such study. There was no danger that he would “press forward to engage in speculative study of corrupt imaginings.”

One point must be added immediately. It is a mistake in our view to focus too closely on the Rambam’s own study of these works. For then one is too quickly tempted to resort to the all too easy and too often invoked dismissive comment, “Well, the Rambam was a special case.” It is not just that the Rambam studied these works. He actively encouraged *others* to study them, and although this encouragement was directed toward those whom he regarded as capable of proper preparation, the Rambam was not so naively humble as to believe that they would attain his own level of intellectual and religious achievement. Of course, the whole *Guide* both presupposes and encourages a basic knowledge of Greek and Arabic philosophy. More direct is the Rambam’s famous letter to his translator, R. Samuel ibn Tibbon, in which he prescribes for him a philosophic course of study. Two excerpts will, here, suffice.

The works of Aristotle are the roots and foundations of all works on the sciences. But they cannot be understood except with the help of commentaries, those of Alexander of Aphrodisias, those of Themistius and those of Averroes.

I tell you: as for works on logic, one should study only the writings of Abu Nasr al-Farabi. All his writings are faultlessly excellent, in particular *The Principles of the Beings*. One ought to study and understand them. For he was a great man.¹⁰

This, of course, is the same Aristotle who believed the world was eternal, who held that divine providence is not exercised over human individuals but that they are left to chance, etc. etc. And it is the same al-Farabi who believed that one could *demonstrate* the eternity of the world, who denied the immortality of the soul, etc. etc. And yet the Rambam recommended that their books be read and studied.

As we have already noted, the Rambam studied these works as part of his study of the natural and divine sciences. And, doubtless, he recommended that others study these same works as part of *their* study of these sciences. That the Rambam felt that the study of Greek and Arabic philosophy is one of the primary means whereby a person can gain an understanding of the natural and divine sciences is evident from all of his works.¹¹ As for the study of the books of ancient idolatry, such study, for the Rambam, is one of the primary means whereby a person can gain an understanding of the causes of many of the commandments, of the wisdom inherent in the commandments, and, by extension, of the purpose of and wisdom manifest in the Law as a whole,¹² all of which, in our opinion, belongs to the study of the divine science.¹³

Perhaps this motivation may be viewed as a form of *lehavin u-lehorot*, but, if so, such a type of *lehavin u-lehorot* is very different from Rabbi Parnes' understanding of the concept. For Rabbi Parnes, as we have noted, "*Lehavin u-lehorot* represents nothing more than an application of Torah principles to all spheres of life, including *divrei kefirah*." But the Rambam was not engaged in the enterprise of applying Torah principles to judge the works of Aristotle or al-Farabi or the writings of ancient idolatry. The Rambam studied Aristotle and al-Farabi and the books of ancient idolatry because, as we hope has become eminently clear, he believed that only through studying these books intensively and seriously *could he achieve a proper understanding of Torah*.¹⁴

The problem with Rabbi Parnes' understanding of *lehavin u-lehorot* is that it is too narrow and limited¹⁵ and in danger of becoming static and mechanical. The assumption is that one understands the principles of the Torah and then uses these principles to judge what is acceptable or unacceptable in, say, a particular book or system of philosophy. The possibility that grappling with a particular book or system of philosophy may lead to a revised and deeper understanding of Torah principles does not enter into the picture. But precisely that possibility was a vital reality for the Rambam, and, we would argue, is the way we should understand the concept of *lehavin u-lehorot* today. For certainly the Rambam's understanding of such basic Torah principles as prophecy and providence—to take only two examples—was profoundly influenced and shaped by his study of and struggle with Greek and Arabic philosophy. And, to take a modern case, certainly Rabbi Soloveitchik's understanding of such fundamental religious categories as *Hiddamut* and *Devekut*, as that understanding is set forth in his classic essay, *U-Bikashtem mi-Sham*, is profoundly influenced and shaped by his study of and struggle with Aristotle, Kant, and Hermann Cohen, not to mention the entire modern liberal critique of revealed religion.¹⁶ In sum, *lehavin u-lehorot* is not a static and mechanical process, but one that is dynamic and creative, that, if conducted in the proper spirit, a spirit of commitment to the truth of the Torah combined with intellectual seriousness, openness, and humility, can reveal new levels and new vistas of Torah.

As we have noted, the advocacy of such study, even for those with the proper preparation, is not without religious peril. The Meiri, whose understanding of *lehavin u-leharot* was cited by Rabbi Parnes,¹⁷ confronted this issue in a letter which objected to the well-known ban against the study of non-Jewish philosophical works by people under the age of twenty-five. The letter, which survives only in selections quoted in a reply by a disciple of the Rashba, candidly recognizes the dangers but insists that they are outweighed by the benefits.

We will not lay aside a [Jewish] work replete with a number of pearls because of one or two or three [religiously problematical] passages. We sometimes review these passages again and again to judge them generously . . . , particularly in light of the Rabbinic statement [about Qohelet], “Because it begins and ends with words of Torah. . . .” Even the books of the Greeks themselves which were translated among us by Jewish scholars are in agreement with us with respect to all sorts of rational principles. . . . If once or twice someone will stumble in his investigation, then he will be cut off and destroyed through his sin. But why should wisdom die? Were the gates of *Pardes* locked when Elisha ben Avuyah left it by descending and destroying? On the contrary, the spirit of the Lord has since spoken to us with the arrival of the works of [the Rambam]. . . . If a few fools sometimes err, this does not affect us except insofar as we must smite such an individual with the whip of our tongue. . . . Should we abandon our [philosophically oriented] faith because this fool behaved improperly?¹⁸

None of this means that the danger of heresy should be taken lightly. Freedom of inquiry is not unbounded, and our intellect as well as our will must submit to the word of God. Care and caution and, above all, genuine humility, both religious and intellectual,¹⁹ are called for in dealing with sensitive areas of study. For this reason, and for many others, the person engaging in such a process of study needs proper preparation, again both religious and intellectual, and what constitutes such preparation is, without doubt, a difficult and complex practical and educational problem. Here we merely wish to establish the fundamental principles involved. To artificially limit serious intellectual inquiry where the person is properly prepared, even if such inquiry involves reading works of heresy, is to stultify an individual’s religious growth. Let the last word belong to the Rambam: The intellect is the honor of God!

NOTES

1. “Torah U-Madda and Freedom of Inquiry,” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* I (1989), 68–71.
2. Rabbi Parnes’ substitution of “areas of thought that are essentially heretical” and similar categories for the Rambam’s “any thought that causes” heresy is one way to avoid such *reductiones ad absurdum* while otherwise retaining an absolutist understanding of the Rambam’s formulation. At the same time, his category of “areas that spark and arouse ideas which are antithetical to the tenets of our faith” (p. 70) could certainly include theodicy and raise questions about the permissibility of careful reflection on this problem. For the Rambam’s vigorous reaction to such a position, see his *Sba’ar ha-Gemul*, in *Kitvei Ramban*, ed. by C. D. Chavel (Jerusalem, 1963), II, 281. We shall return to these categories later on.
3. *Sefer ha-Mizvot, lo ta’aseh* #47. Though the analogy is imperfect and surely has no decisive probative value, it is worth noting R. Moshe Feinstein’s ruling regarding the avoiding of circumstances with the potential of leading to the second genre

of thought prohibited by the verse cited in the *Sifre*. Because of the value attached to work, he permits travel on a crowded train even for someone who “knows” that such travel leads him to licentious thoughts. Let that person strengthen himself, says R. Moshe, by concentrating on words of Torah, rather than safeguard the purity of his thoughts at the expense of leading a productive life. See his *Iggerot Moshe, Even ha-‘Ezer II* (New York, 1963–64), #14, p. 328. Needless to say, this is not meant as an argument that R. Moshe himself would have endorsed the thesis of this article.

4. See *Guide* II:42; III:17; III:14; *Mishneh Torah, Hil. Melakhim XII:2*.
5. We should point out that this is a preliminary and somewhat simplified explanation of this prohibition. A more nuanced and refined explanation will emerge in the course of our analysis. A similar explanation of this prohibition has already been offered by Dr. Norman Lamm, “Faith and Doubt,” in *Faith and Doubt: Studies in Traditional Jewish Thought* (New York, 1971), 39–40, n. 52.

[After this article was completed, we had the opportunity to see the typescript of Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein’s contribution to a forthcoming volume on Jewish approaches to general culture to be edited by Dr. Jacob J. Schacter, which contains a valuable discussion of this passage in the *Mishneh Torah*.]

6. See *Guide* III:34 and the Rambam’s responsum concerning the songs of the Ishmaelites in *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. by Y. Shailat (Jerusalem, 1987), I, 428–29. There is an extensive secondary literature on this subject. The reader may wish to begin with I. Englard, “The Problem of Equity in Maimonides,” *Israel Law Review XXI* (1986), 296–332 and use the references there to work his or her way backward.
7. Here in the *Guide*, then, the Rambam offers a rationale for the blanket prohibition against studying the natural and divine sciences that the Sages imposed upon the beginner, as contrasted with his discussion in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, where the Rambam presents the prohibition *sans* rationale.
8. The prohibition of this study to one who has not acquired the requisite and preliminary logical, technical and intellectual preparations is parallel to the prohibition of the same study to one who has not “filled his belly with bread and meat” (*Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* IV:13), i.e., one who has not acquired the requisite and preliminary halakhic knowledge. In the *Guide* I:34, the Rambam sets down the following prerequisites for studying the divine science: (a) knowledge of preliminary disciplines, i.e., the art of logic, the mathematical sciences (including astronomy) and the natural sciences; (b) possession of moral virtues, in particular “the qualities of tranquility and quiet”; (c) “being perfect in the varieties of political regimes.” Filling one’s belly with bread and meat, i.e., achieving knowledge of “the permitted and the forbidden and the like concerning the other commandments” (which knowledge is set forth in a clear and ordered form in the *Mishneh Torah* itself), provides one with prerequisites (b) and (c). For, as the Rambam goes on to state in *Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* IV:13, “They [i.e., “the permitted and the forbidden”] give preliminary composure to the mind [= the qualities of tranquility and quiet]. They are the precious boon bestowed by God to promote the social well-being of the earth [= the varieties of political regimes].” Similarly, the knowledge of the *middot* (canons of logical inquiry), the requirement set forth in *Hil. ‘Avodah Zarah* II:3, provides one with prerequisite (a).

The discussions in the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide* on the prerequisites for the study of the *Pardes*, thus, blend together beautifully and mutually illuminate each other. Two points of difference, however, ought to be noted. First, the discussion in the *Guide* is more universalistic, befitting its philosophic nature. (Thus there is no specific mention in *Guide* I:34 of the study of halakhah *per se* as a prerequisite). The discussion in the *Mishneh Torah* is more particularistic, more “Jewish,” befitting its halakhic nature. Second, in the *Guide*, the divine science is

singled out as the esoteric science par excellence. Indeed, though the Rambam does not say so explicitly, a careful reading of the *Guide* I:32–33 suggests that the Rambam viewed the *Pardes* as consisting only of the divine science, and that the natural sciences, despite their esoteric nature, should be viewed as preliminary sciences and not as part of the *Pardes*. In the *Mishneh Torah*, the natural and divine sciences are generally presented as a unit, as together comprising the *Pardes*. In this connection, note that in his commentary on Mishnah *Hagigah* II:1 the Rambam interprets the two parts of the mishnah, “Whoever considers four things” and “He who does not have regard for the honor of his Creator,” as constituting two distinct warnings, the first prohibiting improperly conducted study of the natural sciences, the second prohibiting such study of the divine science; in the *Guide* I:32, by contrast, he interprets *both* parts of the mishnah as a unit, as *together* warning against “speculative study of corrupt imaginings.” And, again, though the Rambam does not say so explicitly, it appears that he has in mind the “speculative study of corrupt imaginings” in the area of the divine science.

9. We have, then, the following relationship between the five texts under discussion (*Sefer ha-Mizvot, lo ta'aseh* #47; *Commentary on the Mishnah, Hagigah* II:1; *Guide* I:32; *Guide* I:33; and *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3): The *Commentary on the Mishnah, Hagigah* II:1, speaks of a prohibition directed to the beginner, forbidding him to study the natural and divine sciences. It corresponds, thus, to the discussion in the *Guide* I:33. *Sefer ha-Mizvot, lo ta'aseh* #47 speaks of a general prohibition forbidding a person to go beyond the proper limits of intellectual inquiry by “holding views opposed to those expressed in the Torah.” It corresponds, in turn, to the discussion in the *Guide* I:32. (Note, however, that *Sefer ha-Mizvot, lo ta'aseh* #47, focuses directly on the *religious* offense of extending intellectual inquiry “to the point of holding views opposed to those expressed in the Torah,” while the *Guide* I:32, as befitting its philosophic nature, first speaks of the *intellectual* offense of extending intellectual inquiry beyond its *inherent* limits, and only then proceeds to make the *further* point that such illegitimate extension will result in the *religious* offense of heresy.) *Hil. 'Avodah Zarah* II:2–3 fuses both prohibitions and thereby incorporates motifs from all four other texts, paying the price, however, of a certain lack of clarity.
10. See *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, ed. by Y. Shailat (Jerusalem, 1988), II, 552–54; cf. Shlomo Pines, “The Philosophic Sources of *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” in the Chicago edition of the *Guide* (1963), lix–lx.
11. See, for example, the Introduction to the third part of the *Guide*.
12. See *Guide* III:29, 30, 37, 45, 46, 48, 49; *Iggerot ha-Rambam*, II, 480–81.
13. See *Guide* II:39; III:27, 32, 49, where the Rambam draws an analogy between the divine wisdom manifest in nature and that manifest in the Law. The question of the divine wisdom manifest in nature is part of the general subject of God’s providence, which subject belongs to the divine science (see *Guide* I:35). By extension, then, the question of *ta'amei ha-mizvot*, i.e., the ends of the individual commandments and the purpose of the Law as a whole, is also part of the subject of God’s providence and consequently also belongs to the divine science.
14. The natural and divine sciences = the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot (*Commentary on the Mishnah, Hagigah* II:1; *Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah*, Chapters 1–4; *Guide*, Introduction to the first part) = *Pardes* (*Hil. Yesodei ha-Torah* IV:13) = integral part of *Gemara* (*Hil. Talmud Torah* I:12).
15. Of course, the Talmudic context of *lehavin u-lehorot*, which deals with a very specific halakhic issue, is, indeed, narrow and restricted. The point is that if the Rambam was in fact utilizing this category to justify the full scope of his intellectual pursuits, he must have understood it far more broadly than Rabbi Parnes’ limited expansion of the concept would permit.

16. In a similar way, Rabbi Soloveitchick's understanding of *teshuvah*, in particular the manifold distinctions between *teshuvah me-ahavah* and *teshuvah mi-yir'ah*, between *tohorah* and *kapparah*, is profoundly influenced by his reading of Hermann Cohen and Max Scheler, the former a liberal Jew, the latter a Jewish apostate!
17. Despite the validity of Rabbi Parnes' assertion that the Rambam did not limit his restrictive ruling to those who "study such works in order to develop a faith in idolatry or out of a desire to forsake Torah," it is a matter of no small interest that the Meiri apparently did. In his comment on R. Akiva's prohibition of perusing "external books," he makes the following observation: "I.e., [when such books are read] not for the purpose of *lehavin u-lehorot* but with the intention of following their faith." Apparently, the objective of "understanding" subsumes everything short of a serious consideration of apostasy. See Meiri, *Bet ha-Behirah 'al Massekhet Sanhedrin*, ed. by Avraham Sofer, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem, 1971), 328 (to *Sanhedrin* 90a, s.v. *Rabbi 'Akiva omer*).
18. Quoted in Simon b. Joseph's "Hoshen Mishpat," published by David Kaufmann in *Jubelschrift zum Neunzigsten Geburtstag des Dr. L. Zunz* (Berlin, 1884), 157–58, 162, 164.
19. We have emphasized the importance and vital necessity of the virtue of humility, both religious and intellectual, in accordance with the view of the Rambam that it is intellectual hubris, the refusal to recognize the limitations of the human intellect, which is ultimately at the root of heresy. Indeed, it is precisely in connection with instilling in a person the trait of humility that the two types of training which the Rambam envisages for the study of *Pardes* blend into one. Intellectual training teaches one about the inherent limits of the human intellect, while moral and religious, i.e., halakhic, training imbues one with the general virtue of humility. (On the course of preparation for the study of the *Pardes*, see above, n. 8.)

It is worth pointing out that for the Rambam it was precisely this type of intellectual hubris—the refusal to recognize the proper limits and reach of the human intellect and the "aspir[ation] to apprehend things that are beyond . . . apprehension"—that gave rise to the heretical views espoused by the arch-apostate of Rabbinic Judaism, Elisha b. Avuyah (see *Guide* I:32). Interestingly enough, the most recent of the many modern scholarly studies devoted to the question of the nature of Elisha's sin arrives at strikingly similar conclusions to those of the Rambam. See Yehuda Liebes, *The Sin of Elisha, The Four who Entered Pardes and the Nature of Talmudic Mysticism* [in Hebrew], Monograph series of the Institute of Jewish Studies of the Hebrew University (Jerusalem, 1988), 27–29, 31. As Liebes states (p. 27), "Elisha's fundamental sin, from which all his other sins derived, was the sin of pride, of impudence (*huzpah*) toward heaven, or, to use the Greek term, hubris." Surprisingly, however, Liebes does not cite the *Guide*.

Might we, in conclusion, suggest that it was this belief on the part of the Rambam that intellectual pride is at the root of heresy that may, among other factors, be responsible for his insistence that with reference to the virtue of humility one should aim not at the mean (*'anavah*) but at the extreme (*shiflut ruah*). See *Hil. De'ot* II:3 and *Commentary on the Mishnah, Avot* IV:4. Note, in particular, that the Rambam in both places cites the rabbinic statement, "He who raises his heart [in pride] denies the root principle [*kafar ba-'ikkar*]." Once again we see how a view of the Rambam expressed in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* and/or in the *Mishneh Torah* can only be fully understood in the light of its philosophic underpinnings as set forth in the *Guide*.