

Could Reason and Revelation Ever Disagree? Science, Torah, and Truth

The God of Truth and Torah

1. Rav Saadia Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot* (The Books of Beliefs and Opinions, trans. Samuel Rosenblatt), Introduction, Opening Blessing

Blessed be God, the God of Israel,
Who is alone deserving of being regarded as the Evident Truth,
Who verifies with certainty unto rational beings the existence of their souls,
by means of which they assess accurately what they perceive with their senses
and apprehend correctly the objects of their knowledge.
Uncertainties are thereby removed from them and doubts disappear,
so that demonstrations become lucid for them and proofs become clear.
May He be lauded, then, above the highest commendation and praise.

2. Rav Saadiah Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot*, Introduction §5

It behooves us to give an account of the bases of truth and the vouchers of certainty which are the source of all knowledge and the mainspring of all cognition.... we declare that there are three [such] bases:

The **first** consists of the knowledge gained by direct observation.

The **second** is composed of the intuition of the intellect.

The **third** comprises that knowledge which is inferred by logical necessity.

Following up [this] enumeration with an explanation of each of these roots of knowledge, we say that we understand by the **knowledge of observation** whatever a person perceives by means of one of the five senses; that is, by means of sight or hearing or smell or taste or touch. By the **intuition of the intellect**, we mean such notions as spring up solely in the mind of a human being, such as approbation of truthfulness and disapproval of mendacity. By the **knowledge derived from logical necessity**, again, is meant conclusions, which, unless they are accepted by the individual as true, would compel his denial of the validity of his rational intuitions or the perception of his senses. Since, however, he cannot very well negate either of these two, he must regard the said inference as being correct.

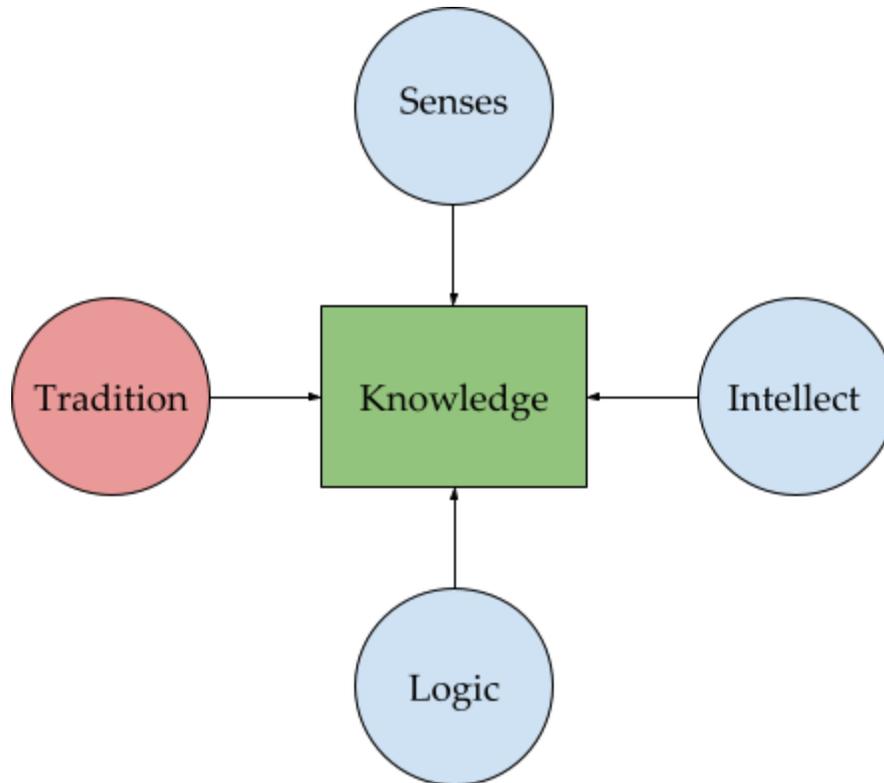
Thus we are forced to affirm, although we have never seen it, that man possesses a soul, in order not to deny its manifest activity. [We must] also [agree], although we have never seen it, that every soul is endowed with reason, [merely] in order not to deny the latter's manifest activity.

...

Again there are people who reject the validity of this [last type of] knowledge in certain instances and recognize it in others, each group among them affirming what its opponent negates. Their argument [in each case] is that logical necessity led them to the particular conclusion. Thus there is he who affirms that all things are at rest. He consequently denies the reality of motion. Another, again, affirms that all things move, and by virtue thereof denies the

reality of rest. Each one declares the evidence adduced by his opponent dubious and unconvincing.

As for ourselves, the community of monotheists, we hold these three sources of knowledge to be genuine. To them, however, we add a fourth source, which we have derived by means of the [other] three and which has thus become for us a further principle. That is [to say, we believe in] the validity of authentic tradition, by reason of the fact that it is based upon the knowledge of the senses as well as that of reason, as we shall explain in the third treatise of this book.



Pulled in Two Directions?

3. Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim*, Introductory Letter (Goodman-Lieberman Translation)

My dear student Rabbi Joseph (thy Rock protect thee), son of Rabbi Judah (may he rest in paradise)—When you first introduced yourself, proposing to travel so far to read with me, I admired your zest for inquiry and the hearty appetite for ideas I could see in your poetry... I set my hopes on you, sensing that you were ready for some of the mysteries of Scripture to be opened up to you... **I saw you had touched on these subjects with others but were still puzzled and perplexed, your fine soul seeking the right words (Ecclesiastes 12:10)**, but I kept reining you in, urging you to take one step at a time and get a firm grip on the truth, not just stumble into certitude. As long as you were here, whenever some verse came up, or some passage from the Sages that hinted at an out-of-the-way idea, I explained it to you freely. But

when God decreed our parting and you moved on, memories of our sessions revived an old plan of mine: Your absence spurred me to set down this work, written for you and others like you, no matter how few. I've laid it out in separate chapters, all of which will reach you as I write them. Farewell.

4. Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim*, Introduction

It is not my goal to make this work transparent all through to the masses or to intellectual beginners. Nor is it my object to instruct those who study the Torah only for its law. The object of this work throughout, like that of any other of its sort, is a sound understanding of the Torah. But the specific purpose here is to arouse intellectually a religious, morally and spiritually mature person who is settled of mind and committed to the Torah's truth, who has studied and absorbed the philosophical sciences. **Human reason draws such a person invitingly to its domain, but he is troubled by the surface sense of certain biblical expressions. Resisting what he still takes (or was taught) is the meaning of its multivalent, metaphorical, or ambiguous words, he hangs back, perplexed and confused.** Should he follow his reason, reject what he took those words to say, and presume that he has shed core biblical precepts? Or should he hold fast to what he took those words to mean and fight reason's sway, dig in his heels and resist, feeling injured by reason, as though it had sullied his faith, retain his imaginary beliefs, yet remain deeply troubled by anxiety and disquiet.

"Soul" as a Case Study

5. Rav Saadiah Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot*, Introduction §5

Thus we are forced to affirm, although we have never seen it, that man possesses a soul, in order not to deny its manifest activity. [We must] also [agree], although we have never seen it, that every soul is endowed with reason, [merely] in order not to deny the latter's manifest activity.

6. Maimonides, *Eight Chapters*, Ch. 1 – "Concerning the Human Soul and Its Faculties"

Know that the human soul is one, but that it has many diversified activities. Some of these activities have, indeed, been called souls, which has given rise to the opinion that man has many souls, as was the belief of the physicians, with the result that the most distinguished of them states in the introduction of his book that there are three souls, the physical, the vital, and the psychical. These activities are called faculties and parts, so that the phrase "parts of the soul," frequently employed by philosophers, is commonly used. By the word "parts", however, they do not intend to imply that the soul is divided into parts as are bodies, but they merely enumerate the different activities of the soul as being parts of a whole, the union of which makes up the soul.

Thou knowest that the improvement of the moral qualities is brought about by the healing of the soul and its activities. Therefore, just as the physician, who endeavors to cure the human body, must have a perfect knowledge of it in its entirety and its individual parts, just as he must know what causes sickness that it may be avoided, and must also be acquainted with the means by which a patient may be cured, so, likewise, he who tries to cure the soul, wishing to improve

the moral qualities, must have a knowledge of the soul in its totality and its parts, must know how to prevent it from becoming diseased, and how to maintain its health.

So, I say that the soul has five faculties; the nutritive [also known as the “growing” faculty], the sensitive, the imaginative, the appetitive, and the rational. We have already stated in this chapter that our words concern themselves only with the human soul; for the nutritive faculty by which man is nourished is not the same, for instance, as that of the ass or the horse. Man is sustained by the nutritive faculty of the human soul, the ass thrives by means of the nutritive faculty of its soul, and the palm-tree flourishes by the nutritive faculty peculiar to its soul. Although we apply the same term nutrition to all of them indiscriminately, nevertheless, its signification is by no means the same. In the same way, the term sensation is used homonymously for man and beast; not with the idea, however, that the sensation of one species is the same as that of another, for each species has its own characteristic soul distinct from every other, with the result that there necessarily arises from each soul activities peculiar to itself. It is possible, however, that an activity of one soul may seem to be similar to that of another, in consequence of which one might think that both belong to the same class, and thus consider them to be alike; but such is not the case.

7. Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim* I:41

Nefesh (soul) has multiple meanings. It is a name for the animal soul common to all sentient beings: *in which there is a living soul* (Genesis 1:30). It also denotes the blood: *Thou shalt not eat the soul with the flesh, [for the blood is the soul]* (Deuteronomy 12:23). And it may mean the rational soul, the human form: *as the Lord liveth, who made this soul of ours* (Jeremiah 38:16). This word, too, names what survives of a man after death: *My lord’s soul shall be bound up in the bond of life* (1 Samuel 25:29).

Soul is also a name for the will: *to bind his princes to his soul* (Psalms 105:22)—to his will. Similarly, *deliver him not to the soul of his foes* (41:3)—don’t surrender him to their will. This is analogous, as I see it, to *if it be to your soul that I bury my dead out of my sight* (Genesis 23:8)—meaning if such be your desire and intent. Similarly, *Though Moses and Samuel stood before Me, My soul would not incline toward this nation* (Jeremiah 15:1)—My will does not favor them, I do not wish them to endure.

8. Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim*, Introduction

Human reason draws such a person invitingly to its domain, but he is troubled by the surface sense of certain biblical expressions. Resisting what he still takes (or was taught) is the meaning of its multivalent, metaphorical, or ambiguous words, he hangs back, perplexed and confused.

Reason and Interpretation

9. **Rambam, Letter on Astrology, from *Maimonides' Empire of Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief*, trans. Ralph Lerner, 183**

It is not proper to abandon matters of reason that have already been verified by proofs, shake loose of them, and depend on the words of a single one of the sages from whom possibly, the matter was hidden. Or there may be an allusion in those words; or they may have been said with a view to the times and the business before him. (You surely know how many of the verses of the holy Law are not to be taken literally. Since it is known through proofs of reason that it is impossible for the thing to be literally so, the Translator rendered it in a form that reason will abide.) **A man should never cast his reason behind him, for the eyes are set in front, not in back.**

10. **Rambam, *Moreh Nevukhim* II:25**

It is not because the Torah says that the world began that we shun eternalism. The texts indicating that the world began are not more frequent than those suggesting that God is a body. And the gates of interpretation are not closed in our faces. Nothing keeps us from interpreting those texts freely, as we did in denying God's embodiment. It might be far easier. We could readily explain away these passages and affirm the world's eternity just as we glossed those and denied corporealism.

1. **Rav Saadiah Gaon, *Emunot Vede'ot* VII:2**

And so I declare, first of all, that it is a well-known fact that every statement found in the Bible is to be understood in its literal sense except for those that cannot be so construed for one of the following four reasons.

It may, for example, either be rejected by **the observation of the senses**, such as the statement: *And the man called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living* (Gen. 3: 20), whereas we see that the ox and the lion are too the offspring of womankind. Hence we must needs conclude that the implication of the statement embraces human descendants only.

Or else the literal sense may be negated by **reason**, such as that of the statement: *For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God* (Deut. 4: 24). Now fire is something created and defective, for it is subject to extinction. Hence it is logically inadmissible that God resemble it. We must, therefore, impute to this statement the meaning that God's punishment is like a consuming fire, in accordance with the remark made elsewhere in Scripture: *For all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy* (Zeph. 3: 8).

Again, [the literal meaning of a Biblical statement may be rendered impossible] by **an explicit text of a contradictory nature**, in which case it would become necessary to interpret the first statement in a non-literal sense. Thus, for example, it is said in Scripture: *Ye shall not try the Lord your God, as ye tried Him in Massah* (Deut. 6: 16). And it is also said, on the other hand: *And try Me now herewith ... if I will not open you the windows of heaven* (Mal. 3:10). Now the point wherein

these two statements agree is that we must not test our Lord as to whether He is able to do a certain thing, as they did of whom it is reported: *And they tried God in their heart by asking food for their craving. Yea, they spoke against God; they said: "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?"* (Ps. 78:18, 19) ...

Finally any Biblical statement to the meaning of which rabbinic **tradition** has attached a certain reservation is to be interpreted by us in keeping with this authentic tradition. Thus it has been transmitted to us that the punishment of stipes consists of thirty-nine blows although Scripture states: *Forty stripes he may give him* (Deut. 25:3). We therefore adopt the view that this is just a rough way of saying that there be thirty-nine stripes. The text of Scripture has merely expressed this thought in round numbers, as it has done in the statement: *After the number of the days in which ye spied out the land, even forty days, for every day a year shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years* (Num. 14:34). For in reality there were only thirty-nine years, since the first year of Israel's sojourn in the wilderness did not enter into this punishment.