

THE LOGIC OF SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY AND SKEPTICISM IN MAIMON'S PHILOSOPHY:

Satz der Bestimmbarkeit and the Role of Synthesis¹

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Maimon stressed the importance of the *Satz der Bestimmbarkeit* (the Law of Determinability) within his system on several occasions, remarking, for instance, that “the law of determinability is the highest principle of all real thinking” (VII, 148), or “that it is the highest principle of any synthetic thinking which determines objects” (ibid., 202).² However, despite these forceful assertions and the fact that he devotes considerable portions of some of his books to the topic, his statements remain vague, since he is primarily concerned with a technical description of this law, and refrains from discussing its role within his system. This is partly due to his style of writing, in that he avoids a clear presentation of the general structure of his ideas. The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to present and explain the Law of Determinability (henceforth, LOD); and, second, to discuss its far-reaching implications for the whole project of Maimon’s philosophy.

The second part involves three basic stages. In the *first* I suggest that the way in which Maimon characterizes his own philosophy as a combination of dogmatism and skepticism (I, 436-437) arises from his special understanding of logic, which, in turn, rests on the LOD. In the *second* I contend that Maimon thinks we can attain to a picture of how real knowledge should appear, and how it is derivable from transcendental logic; at the same time, however, this knowledge remains unrealizable. In the *third* I argue that Maimon’s was the very first to think through the possibility of

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² Maimon interpreters repeat this claim as well. For instance, Kuntze (1912a), 48, claims that the LOD is the “center of gravity of the whole system”.

speculative logic, which was later developed mainly in the speculative philosophy of German Idealism. To understand this double approach to knowledge is also to understand why Maimon rejects this possibility in advance on philosophical grounds.

It is not my intention to give an historical account of Maimon's influence on German Idealism, but I think the present approach will serve to defend him from the accusation that he abandoned the achievements of critical philosophy by turning back to Leibniz. I will try to give substance to Fichte's famous declaration, contained in a letter to Reinhold: "My respect for Maimon's talent knows no bounds. I firmly believe that he has completely overturned the entire Kantian philosophy as it has been understood by everyone until now, including you, and I am prepared to prove it. No one noticed what he had done; they looked down on him from their heights. I believe that future centuries will mock us bitterly" (Fichte (1988), 383-384). It is usually assumed that Fichte was referring to Maimon's skepticism. But I believe that more was involved, and that Fichte recognized that his own philosophical approach was deeply indebted to Maimon.

The Law of Determinability: General Characterization

In very general terms, the LOD is the law of synthetic thinking. It should already be observed that "synthesis" is of key importance for understanding Maimon's philosophical undertaking. Synthesis, he contends, is the form of any thought which determines objects, or what he calls a *real* thought. The LOD reflects the form of relation between the subject and the predicate of a judgment in terms of "real thought". The relation between them can take different forms. There are basically two kinds of compositions: one produces "a correlative concept", the other "an absolute concept". A *correlative concept* is the result of a composition both of whose elements are mutually dependent. As such, each element can serve either as a subject or as a predicate. The pair "cause and effect" exemplifies a correlative concept, i.e., neither element gains meaning³ without

³ I use the expression "to gain meaning", though Maimon himself does not use it in the present instance. However, he employs the term 'meaning' (*Bedeutung*) on other occasions (concerning the reduction thesis in relation to the notion 'true') which will be discussed later in this essay. The reason I choose this

an immediate relation to the other element of the composition (II, 86).⁴

The *absolute concept*, which is of particular interest to Maimon,⁵ is the result of a synthesis which fulfills the conditions set by the LOD. The hallmark of this synthesis is that the subject is independent of the predicate, whereas the predicate cannot be thought without the subject (*ibid.*, 84). For instance, we can think a triangle without thinking the predicate “right-angled”, but we cannot think the term “right-angled” without relating it to some subject (*ibid.*, 84). Maimon calls the subject “the determinable” (*Bestimmbares*), the predicate “the determinant” (*Bestimmung*), and the whole synthesis “the determination” (*Das Bestimmte*). In so defining the relations, he maintains that we cannot predicate something,

expression will be partly clarified when we deal with discursive thinking. But it is worth mentioning here that Maimon formulates the LOD in two ways with regard to the role of thinking. Sometimes it is formulated as if a predicate (correlative or absolute) is what cannot be *thought* without a subject (II, 84-87). Elsewhere it seems that the role of thinking is secondary to the logical possibility of a combination (*ibid.*, 378). Maimon’s commentators tend to accept the relation between thinking and the LOD without further qualifications, and to choose the first option (cf. Bransen (1991), 110; Potok (1968), 103). So far as I can see, it can be understood only if we take into account another term, the “consequence” (*Folge*). Every new synthesis which is a “real” synthesis has new consequences which cannot be derived from the former synthesis. That is to say, it cannot be derived from the subject-concept (again, one should be careful here not to conflate “subject” with the “subject-concept”). In brief, the former as it appears to us in intuition, the latter is how it is formulated in accord with the LOD). For Maimon there is only one way to differentiate between two terms which comprise a synthesis, and this is by looking at their consequences. If we follow this lead, then we can understand that the role of thinking in the definition of the LOD is a secondary one. The dependence of a predicate on the subject is due to the logical dependence of the predicate term when dispensing with the subject in an absolute concept.

⁴ Maimon claims that concepts like “cause and effect” represent a relation which is grounded in identity and based on definition. He considers the claim that it is necessary for each cause to have an effect the very definition of this relation (II, 37). At a later stage, however, he revises his view and asserts that this correlative relation is not an analytic, but rather an analytic-synthetic judgment (VI, 78, 156; cf. Bergman (1967), 110n. 29). Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss judgments of this kind, I believe that Maimon’s reason for introducing this new category (analytic-synthetic) will become clearer if we can grasp his criticism of Leibniz. This issue will be treated in the second part of this essay.

⁵ Maimon argues that for an infinite intellect correlative concepts are absolute (cf. II, esp. 86-87). This distinction between an infinite and a finite intellect will occupy our attention later.