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Saadia Gaon, from *The Book of the Beliefs and Convictions*

Introduction

1 The author opened his work by saying:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel – the True, in the sense of evidently true, who verifies for rational beings the existence of their souls with certain truth, through which they find their sense perception to be sound, and know their knowledge to be accurate. As a result, errors are removed, and doubts are eliminated; arguments are clarified and proofs established. May He be extolled over the highest and most genuine praise.

2 Now that we have opened with a brief praise and tribute of our Lord, I will preface this book, which I intend to write, with a report of the causes of errors that beset some people in their investigations, and how these errors can be eliminated, so that the people can fully attain the object of their investigations; moreover, why some errors have taken hold of people such that their thought and fancy affirm them as true. May God help me to uncover such errors in my own mind so that I may achieve the state of obedience towards Him, even as His pious one requested that He might grant him perfection, saying, “Uncover mine eyes, that I may behold the marvels of your Law” [Ps. 119:18].

I have resolved to make these introductory statements, and indeed those of the entire book, easy and accessible, rather than difficult and remote, by citing the fundamentals of the proofs and arguments and not their detailed implications, so that readers may find their way about without too much difficulty. By making their study straightforward, they will attain their object, which is justice and truth, even as the pious one said with regard to wisdom when placed within easy grasp: “Then you will

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understand righteousness and justice, and equity, yea, every good path” [Prov. 2:9].

I shall first report the causes of error that beset some men. I say then that intelligibles are based upon sensibles.¹ Now doubts may arise concerning things apprehended by sense through one of two causes: either because the person who is inquiring has an inadequate idea of the object of the investigation, or because he is casual and perfunctory in his observation and research. Take the case of a person who is looking for someone called Reuben ben Jacob. He may be in doubt whether he has found him for one of two reasons: either because his knowledge of Reuben is inadequate, since he never met him before and therefore does not know him, or because he may casually assume that some other person that he sees is Reuben. By taking matters lightly, and neglecting to make proper inquiries, he seeks him half-heartedly and with little application. He will never recognize him.

We can say the same for the things apprehended by our intellect. Here again doubts arise from one of two causes: either because the person who seeks intellectual knowledge is unfamiliar with the methods of demonstration – he judges a bad proof to be correct, and a good one, incorrect – or he knows the right methods of investigation, but he treats the matter lightly and carelessly, rushing to a conclusion about some object of knowledge before having completed the art of investigation concerning it. The case is worse when both deficiencies are combined in the same person, that is to say, when the person is not acquainted with the art of investigation and, in addition, lacks patience to achieve what he can truly know about his object of inquiry. He will remain far removed from that object, and will despair of attaining it. Of the first of the two kinds of persons we have mentioned, the pious one says, “Everyone that knows, understands” [Neh. 10:29]; of the second, “They know not, neither do they understand” [Ps. 82:5].

The case is still worse when we add to these deficiencies a third, namely, that the inquirer has no clear idea as to what he really wishes to know. Then he is so removed from attaining true knowledge that, even if the

¹ Intelligibles [Arabic: *maʿqulāt*; Hebrew: *muskalot*] are the eternal concepts or true propositions acquired by the intellect, e.g., the correct concept *triangle*, or the true proposition that the angles of a plane triangle add up to 180°. Each bit of intellectual knowledge is called an intelligible, since it is both object and content of the intellect. By contrast, the sensibles [Arabic: *maḥsusat*; Hebrew: *muḥashot*] are the objects and content of our senses, e.g., the sensible image of a triangle.

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truth should chance upon him, he would not notice it. He resembles a man who is unacquainted with the art of weighing, with the shape of the scales and weights, and with the amount of money owed him by his debtor. Even if his debt is paid it will not be clear to him that he had received the full payment; and if he took less than was owed him, he might think that he had cheated his debtor. The person who claims money from his adversary is similar to the person who wishes to weigh money for himself, but is ignorant of the scales and the amount weighed. Or they are similar to the person who exchanges coins without knowing how to appraise them, and, as a result, frequently exchanges good coins for bad, or, somewhat similarly, to the person who knows how to appraise coins but does not examine them well. Scripture has already compared the appraisal of the words of righteousness to the appraisal of money when it says, “The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver; the heart of the wicked is of little worth” [Prov. 10:20]. Those who have only little knowledge in the art of appraising coins, or are impatient, are considered as wicked because they wrong the truth, as it is said: “The heart of the wicked is little worth.” In contrast, the expert appraisers are considered righteous on account of their knowledge and patience, as stated in the preceding words, “The tongue of the righteous is as choice silver.” The wise are to be praised and their doubts removed only if they patiently engross themselves in all aspects of their art after they have gained insight in it, as the pious one says, “Behold, I waited for your words, I listened for your reasons, until I searched out what to say” [Job 32:77], and as has been said by another wise man, “Take not the final word of truth out of my mouth” [Ps. 119:43].

What led me to make these opening² remarks was my observation of the manner of many people’s convictions and beliefs. Some have arrived at the truth and are in a state of knowledge and joy concerning it; of them the prophet says, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them, and Thy words were unto me a joy and the rejoicing of my heart” [Jer. 15:16]. Others have arrived at the truth, but are in doubt concerning it and, not being convinced, fail to hold onto it; of these the prophet says, “Though I write for him ever so many things of My law, they are accounted as strangers” [Hosea 8:12]. Still others “confirm” what is false, thinking that it is true. They hold on to falsehood and abandon what is correct; of them it is said, “He will be misled by falsehood, and falsehood will be his recompense”

² Reading *at-taşdır*, with Munich ms.

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[Job 15:31]. Still others conduct themselves according to a certain procedure³ for some time and then reject it after finding within it a certain defect. They then shift to another procedure for a while and drop it because of finding something odd; then they shift to yet another and leave because of some corrupt opinion. Such people vacillate all their life. They are like a person who wants to go to a town but does not know the road that leads to it; he travels a parasang on one road, becomes perplexed, and returns; then he travels a parasang on another road, becomes perplexed and returns, then again for a third and fourth time. Of him Scripture says, “A fool’s labor wearies him, for he doesn’t know how to get to a town” [Eccles. 10:15].

When I considered these principles and their evil consequences, my heart grieved for my species, the human species, and my soul trembled on account of our own people Israel. For I saw that in our time many of the faithful lack pure convictions and possess mistaken convictions, while many of the deniers boast of their corruption and act haughtily towards the men of truth, although they are themselves in error. I saw men sunk, as it were, in a sea of doubts and covered by the waters of obscurity, and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths and no swimmer to grasp their hands and bring them to shore.

But as my Lord has provided me with some knowledge that I can use for their support, and endowed me with some capacity to be of help to them, I saw that I was bound to assist them, and that it was my duty to guide them aright, as the saint says: “The Lord God gave me a skilled tongue, to know how to teach something. Morning by morning He rouses, He rouses my ear to give heed like disciples” [Isa. 50:4], although I am aware that my science falls short of perfection, and I admit that my knowledge is far from being complete – regarding my ability and intellectual accomplishments I am no wiser than any of my generation, as the saint says, “But as for me, this secret is not revealed to me for any wisdom that I have more than any living” [Dan. 2:30]. Nevertheless, I beseech Him (exalted be He) to grant me success and sustain me in accordance with what he knows to be my aim and purpose in my quest, and not in accordance with my gifts and abilities, as has been said by another saint: “I know, God, that you search the heart and desire uprightness” [1 Chron. 29:17].

³ *madhab*.

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In the name of God, the Creator of the universe, I adjure any learned man who peruses this book and finds in it a mistake, to correct it, or if he finds in it a doubtful term, to replace it with a better one. That it is not his book should not deter him, nor that I preceded him in clarifying matters that he found obscure. For the wise have compassion on wisdom and feel a longing for it as close relatives feel a longing for each other, as is said: "Say unto wisdom: thou art my sister" [Prov. 7:4]; the ignorant have likewise compassion on their ignorance, and do not forsake it, as is said: "Though he saves it, does not let it go, holds it inside his mouth" [Job 20:13].

In the name of God (exalted be He) I implore further all seekers of wisdom who examine my book to read it without prejudice, to make my aim their own, and to abandon partisanship, haphazard conjecture, and confusion, so that they may derive the most benefit and profit through the power of Him who has taught us wherein consists our benefit, as the saint said: "I the Lord am your God, instructing you for your own benefit, guiding you in the way you should go" [Isa. 48:17]. If both the scholar and the student conduct themselves in this manner when they read this book, then whoever is certain will have his certainty increase, and whoever is in doubt will have his doubt vanish; the believer on the basis of tradition will become a believer on the basis of speculation and understanding; the sophist will be silenced; the obstinate and the arrogant will be ashamed; and the righteous and upright will rejoice, as is said: "The upright see it and rejoice; the mouth of all wrongdoers is stopped; the wise man will take note of these things, he will consider the steadfast love of the Lord" [Ps. 107:42–3].

In this way men's inner being will be made to resemble their outward behavior. Their prayers will be pure, as there will be deep in their heart something warning them about sin, and summoning them to right conduct, as the prophet says: "In my heart I treasure your promise; therefore I do not sin against You" [Ps. 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. He will be for them salvation, mercy, and happiness, as God (praised and sanctified be He) has said: "Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth, for I am God, and there is none else" [Isa. 45:22]. All this will result from the disappearance of doubts and the removal of errors. The knowledge of God and His Law will spread in the world like

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the spreading of water in all parts of the sea, as is said: “For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” [Isa. 11:9].

3 Now someone may ask: “Why did the Creator (exalted and magnified be He) permit these uncertainties and doubts to remain among His creatures?” To this question we answer that the very fact of their being creatures necessitates their entertaining uncertainties and illusions. That is to say: by the plan of creation, they require for every act they perform a span of time within which to complete that act step by step. Cognition, therefore, which is one of these activities, obviously depends upon a like condition. Now the process of knowing on the part of men begins with things that are at first jumbled, obscure, and ambiguous. However through their rational faculty they continually refine and purify their idea over the course of time until the uncertainties depart, and the idea emerges dissociated from any doubt.

Now, since all human arts consist of stages, if men were to stop in their endeavors before these stages were completed, the operation in question, such as sowing or building or weaving or other tasks, that can be brought to completion only by the patience of the worker to the last stage, would never be completed. In like manner the art of cognition requires that one start in it at the beginning and proceed step by step until its end. At the initial stage, for example, there may be ten problems, which at the second are reduced to nine, and at the third to eight. Thus each time that man’s reasoning and reflection are applied to them these problems decrease, until at the last of these stages, the sole object of his quest is extracted and left removed from all ambiguity or doubt . . . [some text omitted].

It has been shown, then, that the person who speculates begins with many things that are all mixed up, from which he never ceases to sift nine out of ten, and then eight out of nine, and then seven out of eight, until his object has been refined from all perplexities and doubts with only the pure essence remaining. If, therefore, he were to cease in his speculation upon reaching the fifth or the fourth or any other stage, the number of doubts resolved by him would be in proportion to the number of stages he had completed, and he would still be left with a number proportionate to the stages before him. Should he retain what he has achieved, there is hope that he may come back to it and complete it. If, however, he does not retain it, then he will be compelled to repeat the entire speculation from the beginning. It is on this account that many people remain in error

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and reject wisdom, some of them not knowing the way to wisdom, others because they began their journey but fail to complete it. They are of the ruined, as the verse says: “A man who wanders from the way of intellect will rest in the company of ghosts” [Prov. 21:16]. The sages among the Israelites have said of a person who does not complete his studies: “When the disciples of Shammai and Hillel who had not sufficiently served their masters increased, so did dissension.” This saying teaches us that had their disciples completed their studies, there would not have been either dissension or controversy.

Let not the vexed fool ascribe his sin to the Creator (exalted and magnified be He) by saying that it was He who had imposed the doubts in him. Rather it was his own folly or his vexation that plunged him into these doubts, as we have shown. For it is impossible that a one-time act on his part should remove all uncertainties, for then he would not be subject to the laws governing creatures – and yet he is one! Even if one does not ascribe his sin to his master, yet wishes God to provide him with indubitable knowledge, he asks to become His equal. For one who knows without a cause is the Creator of All, blessed and sanctified be He, as we shall show below.

But created beings cannot acquire knowledge except by the mediation of a cause; that is, by the process of research and speculation, which requires time, as we have shown. This is why they remain in doubt from the first period of time to the last, as we have explained. The praiseworthy will wait patiently until they have refined the dross from the silver, as Scripture states: “The dross having been refined from the silver, a vessel emerges for the smith” [Prov. 25:4]; or, until they have distilled the [milk of the] art and extracted its cream, as Scripture says: “As milk under pressure brings forth butter” [Prov. 30:33] or, until their seed has grown so it can be harvested, as Scripture says: “Sow righteousness for yourselves, reap the fruits of goodness” [Hos. 10:12]; or, until the fruit has ripened on the trees and has become fit for food, as Scripture says: “It is a tree of life to those who hold on to it” [Prov. 3:18].

4 Now that we have concluded what we wished to mention concerning how to resolve uncertainties and doubts, we should explain the meaning of conviction.⁴ We say that it is a notion that arises in the soul

⁴ *Fitiqād*. Another common translation is “belief.” The term denotes a cognitive attitude of assent and is neither limited to religious conviction, nor opposed to rational knowledge.

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regarding the actual state of the object of knowledge. When the cream of speculation emerges, when it is embraced and encompassed by the minds and, through them acquired and digested by the souls, then the person becomes convinced of the truth of the notion he has thus acquired. He then deposits it in his soul for a future occasion or for future occasions, as the wise say: “The Wise store up knowledge” [Prov. 10:14]. Scripture says also: “Accept instruction from His mouth; lay up His words in your heart” [Job 22:22].

Convictions are of two kinds: true and false. A true conviction consists in believing a thing to be as it really is; namely, the much as much, the little as little, the existent as existent, and the nonexistent as nonexistent. A false conviction, on the other hand, consists in believing a thing to be the opposite of what it actually is, such as that much is little, and little is much, and white is black, and black is white, and that what exists is nonexistent, and what is nonexistent exists.

The praiseworthy wise man is he who makes a principle of the truth of things and bases his convictions thereon. Notwithstanding his wisdom, he relies only on what is deserving of trust and is wary wherever caution is in order. The reprehensible fool, on the other hand, is he who makes a principle of his own conviction and assumes that the truth of things results from his convictions. Notwithstanding his ignorance, he trusts in what should be shunned and shuns what is deserving of trust. All this is borne out by Scripture, which says: “A wise man fears and shuns evil, but a dullard rushes in confidently” [Prov. 14:16].

Regarding this observation I should express my surprise at certain people who, being slaves, yet believe that they have no master, and who are confident that whatever they deny must be non-existent and whatever they affirm must exist. These individuals are so sunken in folly as to have reached the very depths of perdition. For if they are correct, then let him among them who has no money take it into his head that his coffers and chests are filled with money, and see what it would profit him. Or let him believe he is seventy years old, when he is only forty years of age, and see what good it would do him. Or let him assume that he is sated when he is hungry, or that his thirst is quenched when he is thirsty, or that he is covered up when he is naked, and see what would happen to him. Or let one of those fools who has a vicious enemy believe that his enemy has died and departed, with the result that he no longer takes precautions against

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the latter. How quickly will he be overcome by the misfortune for which he did not sufficiently prepare.

Now it is utter folly for people to imagine that, if they do not believe in God's sovereignty, they will be exempt from His commandments and prohibitions, and from his promises of reward and threats of punishment and other such things. Of such individuals the Scripture says, "Let us break the cords of their rope" [Ps. 2:3]. Thus some Hindus learn to endure fire, although it burns them whenever they touch it. Other individuals feign youthful heroics and learn to endure the blows of the cane and the whip, although when struck by them they are in pain. How much more serious should be the case of those who embolden themselves against the Creator of the universe! Despite their folly they will not escape what His wisdom has decreed for them, as Scripture has indeed said: "Wise of heart and mighty in power – who has challenged Him, and prospered?" [Job 9:4].

5 Now that we finished what we saw fit to add to our first statement, we ought to mention the principles that lead us to truth and are conducive to certainty, the principles of all science and the mainspring of all knowledge. We will discuss them as much as befits the aim of this book.

We say that there are three such conducive principles. The first is observational knowledge; the second, intellectual knowledge, and the third, knowledge obtained from necessary inference. We shall explain each of these principles separately.

We say that observational knowledge is that which a man apprehends with one of his senses, i.e., sight, hearing, smell, taste, or touch. Intellectual knowledge is that which arises solely through the human intellect, such as the approval of truthfulness and disapproval of mendacity. Knowledge obtained from necessary inference is that which, if not accepted as true, entails the impossibility of a sensible or intelligible. Since there is no way to reject either of these, the individual is compelled to regard the matter as being correct. Thus we are forced to affirm that man possesses a soul, although we have not seen it, in order not to deny its manifest activity. Now we find that there are many people who deny these principles. A small minority of them reject the first principle. Of these we shall give an account in the first treatise of this book, together with a refutation of their opinion. By rejecting the first principle, they have rejected the second and the third, since the latter two are based upon the first. More

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numerous than this group are those that acknowledge the validity of the first but reject the second and the third [principles]. Of their thesis, too, we shall make mention in the first treatise and refute it. Most numerous of all, however, are those who acknowledge the validity of the first two principles [of knowledge] and reject the third. The reason for the divergent number of adherents lies in the fact that the second [type of] knowledge is more profound than the first, and likewise the third more so than the second, and that whatever is invisible can more readily be denied than what is visible.

Again there are people who reject the validity of [inferential] knowledge in some instances and recognize it in others, each sect among them affirming what its opponent negates. They argue that necessity compelled them to draw a certain conclusion. Thus there is one who affirms that all things are at rest. That one consequently denies the reality of motion. Another, again, affirms that all things move, and thereby denies the reality of rest. They consider the proofs cited by their opponents doubtful and unconvincing.

As for ourselves, the community of monotheists, we accept these three principles of knowledge to be true. To them, however, we add a fourth conducive principle, which we have derived by means of the other three, and which has thus become for us a further principle, namely, the validity of authentic tradition. For it is based upon sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, as we shall explain in the third treatise of this book. Here we say that this knowledge (I mean the religious tradition and the prophetic books) confirms for us the first three principles of knowledge. Thus Scripture enumerates the senses when it denies them of idols, bringing their total to five and adding an additional two. It says, namely: "They have mouths that do not speak; eyes that do not see; ears that do not hear; a nose that does not smell; hands that do not touch; feet that do not walk; nor do they utter anything with their throat" [Ps. 115:5–7]. The first five are the senses themselves, while one of the additional two ["feet that do not walk"] refers to motion. Through motion we become conscious of heaviness and lightness. Thus a person is hindered from moving about on account of his heaviness, but not on account of his lightness. For this reason, indeed, certain people thought to add to the number of the senses, for they asked: "How [else] can the sensation of lightness and heaviness be experienced?" Our answer is: "By means of the sense of motion, according to whether the latter is found to be easy or difficult."