The importance of Sefer Moreh HaNevukhim by David B Levy

The Guide for the Perplexed by Maimonides (1135-1204), known as Rambam, is a favorite text because it guides the way Philosophic Maimonideans perceive what is important in life, goals and mission, and provides a cognitive GPS for navigating life. Books change lives and this text is a life changer for all who incorporate it into their souls, even if the soul perplexed as "Shushan was Perplexed!" (nevukh).

New levels of knowledge are fathomed, as each study of the Guide turns up new pearls of wisdom. There are many Hebrew translations by Rabbis Judah ibn Tibbon, Judah Al harisi, Yosef Qafih, from the Arabic original دلالة الحائرين, dalālatul ḥā'irīn, as well as editions in French by Rabbi Munk titled Le Guide Des Egares, There is An abridged early edition in Latin titled Doctor Perplexus that St. Thomas Aquinas drew upon although the first complete translation in Latin (Rabbi Mossei Aegyptii Dux seu Director dubitantium aut perplexorum) was printed in Paris by Agostino Giustinianii/Augustinus Justinianus in 1520.

The Guide, like the Platonic dialogues, is very carefully written. Nothing is accidental for the Guide is purposively organized in 7 sections. Rambam's earlier magnum opus, the Mishneh Torah (MT.), purposely organized in 14 sections, is known by the name yad (yod+daleth=14) hazakah i.e. the "strong hand" as in "with strong hand I freed you from Egypt." The logic being that with the MT. Rambam's text will free the reader/learner from their state of cognitive "Egyptian" confusion, to be more prepared to accept freedom for revelation. Further the numerical equivalent (14) of the name David, the name of Rambam's brother who financially supported the Rambam for most of his life before the Rambam became a physician around the age of 40 years, as 14 is the numerical equivalent to the # of sections in the MT. perhaps serving as a dedication to Rambam's love for his brother.

While the Rambam is traditionally interpreted as a Ratinalist, at moments in the Rambam's work the "great eagle" gives hints of his discernment of hidden numerical patterns, that provide the hermeneutic mechanisms by which to crack the codes of Rosetta stone like hidden secrets, such as when noting that Ezekiel's vision occurs during the30th year, fourth month, and fifth day of a King's reign, spelling the word "laidah", a construct of the verb to give "birth". However before we put the"chariot cart" before the horse, let us explain further.

Touro hosts a library guide on Rambam at http://libguides.tourolib.org/rambam Since the Rambam was a philosopher, halakhist, ethicist, and physician other related TC. Library guides in which Rambam plays a major role include those on (1) Jewish philosophy at http://libguides.tourolib.org/jewishphilosophy, (2) Evolution of Halakhah at http://libguides.tourolib.org/codification (3) Jewish Ethics http://libguides.tourolib.org/jewishethics (see chart of Rambam's understanding of virtue as the mena) and (4) science and Torah at http://libguides.tourolib.org/scienceandtorah and (5) philosophy of science at http://libguides.tourolib.org/philosophyofscience

The Rambam reconciles the science of his day with Torah, which is the ongoing quest of each intellectual in every generation as illustrated by rare types of rabbinic scholars today who know both science and
Rabbinic texts, such as Rabbis Moshe Tendler, Fred Rosner, David Bleich, Moshe Meiselman, Jeremy Brown, and Touro's own Tzvi Flaum.

Who cannot not admire the great scope of Rambam's wide intellectual interests as documented by noting that Rambam's works can classify in the diverse areas of the LC System: (1) B Logic & Philosophy (Sefer HaHigayon), (2) BF Ethics (Hilchot Deot, Laws of building good character traits), (3) BM halakhah (MT. and pirush ha-mishnah), (3) LB Education (Shemoneh Perakhim, the 8 chapters), (4) M Music Therapy (Responsa on listening to Music), and (5) WZ numerous Medical Writings.

Although the Rambam would argue "life is not a game" to draw on a baseball metaphor, You know a "big hitter" who is not a narrow truncated myopic specialist when their books classify in many areas of knowledge represented in a library classification system. That is not common today as we live in an age of narrow truncated specialization in the name of what Dilthey identified as "bourgeois" fetishization of "expertise." The Rambam was an expert in many areas, as well as a generalist who knew a lot about a lot, rather than a lot about a little.

Rambam who read Aristotle's Posterior Analetics, Categoria, and Topica was interested at an early age in classification theory (see: http://databases.jewishlibraries.org/node/17678 ) which is today a subfield of philosophy and library science. Rambam drew on his knowledge of abstract classification theory to sublimely organize the architectonic of the Mishneh Torah topically, as every section fits together as a part in an intricate clock. This skill that contributed to the Rambam's genius [or being an iluy] can also be noted in the organization of the numbered levels of prophecy, ranks of angeology, and categorization of proofs for the existence of G-d in the Guide etc. see intro at http://libguides.tourolib.org/ethicalmonotheism

Some are drawn to the Rambam as with other Rabbinic philosophers because the stakes are very high i.e. a life redeemed by intellectual quest for wisdom-understanding-Knowledge or a life unredeemed if lived at the level of an animal and common human pleasures that the many pursue such as hedonistic pleasures, sports events, gambling, fleeting fame. The essays on the library guide on Jewish ideas of the next life that I wrote are very much shaped by the Rambam's worldview. In a section of the MT. titled Hilchat Teshuvah (the laws of Repentance) the Rambam asserts that the reward in the next world where there is no eating, drinking, or anything physical is proportional to the intellectual virtue gained lishmah in this world (see: http://libguides.tourolib.org/philosophyeducation for a definition of learning lishma )

Leo Strauss argued that the Guide is Maimonides esoteric philosophic work, while visa versa Rabbi Isidore Twersky characterizes Rambam's Mishneh Torah as Rambam's esoteric work and Rambam's Guide as the exoteric work.
In part what makes the Guide an esoteric work is the treatment of the subjects ma'aseh merkvah (doings of the divine chariot or Elijah's ascent to heaven on a fiery chariot which Ezekiel sees on the Chabar river in Babylon and Isaiah (6) sees in G-d's Temple in Jerusalem) which Rambam insists requires the pre-requisite understanding of metaphysics and understanding of divine causality, transcendent time or meontology, and what constitutes true knowledge. The Rambam also transmits in the Guide the secrets of ma'aseh bereshit (doings of the divine Creation ex nihilo) requiring the pre-requisite of science, particularly physics. The mysteries of the chariot specifically refer to Elijah the prophet ascending in a fiery chariot to G-d's throne in heaven, Isaiah's vision of this throne (Isa. ch. 6), and Ezekiel's vision of G-d's chariot in Babylon (Ezek. Ch.1). A soul drawn to quest for understanding these secrets is well rewarded in the Guide as a gateway to the topic as addressed throughout the Rabbinic tradition in obscure hints.

Throughout history, the Guide and parts of the Mishneh Torah, were censored (see: AIJ Proceedings 35 (2000) 172-177 2000). Chapter 51 of Part II of the Guide in part prompted Rambam's work to be censored given the Rambam's high estimation of the importance of philosophy which in the time of the Middle ages meant knowledge of science including the works of Aristotle, Plato, Al Farabi, Al Kindi, etc, who influenced to Rambam's (1) understanding of Biblical anthropomorphisms philosophically (2) denial of the corporeality of the Godhead (ain lo demut ha guf ve-aino guf) (3) virtue as a mean, (4) G-d as the Unmoved Mover First Cause who set in motion the heavenly bodies, etc.

The wondrous power as a "field of force" of the Guide is suggested when the Rambam compares his act of writing down the secrets of Torah as that of a deep sea diver who has brought up precious pearls of wisdom by sounding and fathoming the depths of thought. Secondly the Rambam likens the Guide itself to a key (mafteach) that potentially may allow the reader to open gates in G-d's 7 palaces in heaven, whereby the pilgrim soul may enter, be refreshed and delighted by celestial angelic discourses of wisdom that harmonize the perplexities and contradictions that "appear" to exist between science and torah, but can be reconciled for the sake of truth.

If one were stranded on a desert Island as depicted in ibn Tuful's medieval Arabic work and the modern Daniel Defoe novel Robinson Cursoe, the one book that Maimonideans may perhaps choose in such a state is the Guide, even more so than how to build a raft. That is because the Medieval Arabic philosopher ibn Tuful notes that if one is stranded on a desert island the only option is to contemplate the attributes of G-d, rather than pollute the environment, enslave the population, and construct a technological civilization as the modern scenario in Defoe's novel dictates. Strauss (see Philosophie und Gesetz) holds that medieval enlightenment is far superior to the modern Enlightenment that has led us to a century of atomic weapons, genocide, and causal irreverence for the sanctity of life in all its forms. If you want to understand ancient Hebrew philosophy and the true meaning of the Biblical text according to proper Rabbinic interpretation, then the Guide is a text you can only ignore at your own risk.

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