Our philosophic understanding of Moses's uniqueness completes our presentation of Maimonides’s theological views with respect to human knowledge of the divine. Prophecy combines humanity’s relation to God and God’s relation to humanity. But it is proper to consider this central theological issue in its own right: What do we know about God’s relation to humanity and to the world, as its cause or creator, its director, its legislator and judge? At the center and foreground of these issues stands the problem of divine will and the relation of God’s will to His wisdom. Maimonides’s Aristotelian psychology not only raises the problem we raised with respect to the divine attributes—namely, ascribing wisdom and will to God as two distinct attributes. It also poses the question whether “will” is a perfection that one may ascribe to God in the form of a negative attribute. In Aristotle’s view, “will”—which expresses a person’s need to obtain something from his environment—is a major lack. God, the Necessary Being, lacks nothing. He has no needs to be satisfied from His environment, and thus He has no interest in it. He knows Himself, and that is His perfection. This is a profoundly pagan outlook, and the opposition between it and the Torahitic outlook, based on the notion of a good and beneficent God, Whose perfection is expressed precisely in His active interest in the world and in humankind, could not be more pronounced. If from the standpoint of the human obligation to know God it was possible to establish full compatibility of the Torah and philosophical outlooks, with respect to God’s relation to the world and humankind a contradiction stands out that is very hard to reconcile. Maimonides could overcome it only by departing from Aristotelian theology and combining it with Neo-Platonic elements.


God as the Unity of Intellect, Knower and Known

Investigation of these topics should start with Chapter 68 of Part I. After completing several loose ends of the theory of attributes (in particular the names of God), Maimonides opens here a new stage of his philosophic deliberation by proposing the Aristotelian idea that God is a unity of *nous, noesis*, and *noeton* (in Hebrew, *sekhel, maskil*, and *muskal*—intellect, knower, and that-which-is-known). This applies to every process of knowing, including human knowledge. Before one learns some new item of knowledge, one’s intellect (the sum of a person’s present actual knowledge) differentiates between the “knower” who has not yet learned the new item and the “to-be-known” item that has not yet been learned. After the new item has been learned, unity is effected between the “knower” and the item that is now “known.” The difference between the human and divine intellect is that the human being is always in a state of becoming, whereas the divine intellect is eternally the same. Some commentators see in Maimonides’s adoption of this view a contradiction with his theory of attributes, inasmuch as it affirms the similarity of divine and human intellect and ascribes positive attributes to God. However, after his discussion of the attributes of existence as applied to God, it is not necessary to show again how such a contradiction can be reconciled dialectically. The problematic that Maimonides sought to raise through this notion becomes focused on the question of the will, for in the perfect actual unity of “intellect, knower, and known” the aspect of will is wholly superseded.

Philosophy as Authentic Torah-Tradition

It thus becomes clear that Chapter 68 does not continue the discussion of attributes that was started in Chapter 50, but rather constitutes a systematic introduction to the next topic of deliberation. We should pay attention to an instructive difference between the way he opens the discussion of attributes in Chapter 50 and the way that he starts the discussion of divine will in Chapter 68. Chapter 50 starts with interpretation. It sets out from the Biblical narrative and moves gradually towards philosophical understanding by grappling with the interpretative methods of the Kalamic thinkers. Here, by contrast, Maimonides has arrived at an advanced theoretical topic, which in his opinion requires unequivocal departure from Kalamic methods. They had tried to philosophize on the basis of Scripture, but found themselves chained to its