

# Epistemological Ambiguity in Maimonides' Unknowability of God

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## What is the problem?

This paper starts from the following question. How can we understand the perplexing remarks in Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed?* (abbreviated as *Guide*)

God is always an intellect in actu, it follows necessarily that He and the thing apprehended are one thing, which is His essence. And He is always the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object.<sup>1)</sup>

Thus His essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect.<sup>2)</sup>

I became 'perplexed', because Maimonides was so sure that human beings could not understand God's essence. He said that the meaning of the biblical verse "but my face shall not be seen"<sup>3)</sup> is

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1) *Guide I*, chapter 68, p. 165.

2) *Guide I*, chapter 69, p. 166.

3) *Exodus* 33:20.

that human beings cannot know God's essence.<sup>4)</sup> In that respect, above remarks can be easily regarded as inconsistency, because the above-mentioned phrases seem to imply the "knowability of God's essence" in anyway. So in this paper, I would like to focus on the epistemological inquiry into the above statements.

My questions are summarized as follows. On what epistemological basis, did he make such statement? And what is the meaning of seemingly inconsistency between his claim of unknowability of God's essence and the above-mentioned remarks. In my view, Maimonides has some epistemological ambiguities in his whole theory; however, these ambiguities lead to not just a weakness but to a very important and creative aspect of Maimonides' theory.

## Negative Theology and Unknowability of God

Maimonides has claimed strongly that a human being cannot know God.<sup>5)</sup> In order to elucidate the unknowability of God, he presents story of Moses as an example. Moses asks God to let him know "God's glory (His essence and true reality)", but God made it known to him that His essence cannot be grasped as it really is.<sup>6)</sup>

Moses Said, "Show me your glory, I pray." And he (God) said, "I will..." But, He (God) said, "You cannot see my face; for no one shall see me and live."<sup>7)</sup>

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4) *Guide I*, chapter 37, p. 86.

5) According to Manekin, one of Maimonides' strong beliefs is that all positive attributes of God should be negated. Refer to Manekin's article, "Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes in the Guide of the Perplexed", pp. 117-142

6) *Guide I*, chapter 54, p. 123.

Maimonides' such interpretation of the "God's glory" reflects the deep gap between God and human beings. Maimonides says:

There is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him and the things created by Him, and the difference between Him and them is not merely a difference of more and less, but one concerning the species of existence.<sup>8)</sup>

God is incorporeal so it cannot be composite of anything. Accordingly, God is completely transcendent, thus beyond the all human beings' imagination and understanding. If we take this thorough dissimilarity between God and human beings into consideration, the idea of "unknowability" of God naturally appear. However, God's stark dissimilarity from human being entails a difficult question, that is, how can we understand God's relation with human beings, especially in terms of His providence, which manifested in innumerable times and ways into corporeal world. In response to this question, Maimonides tries to solve the problem by dividing God into two aspects. Put simply, God's absolute essence and the concept of God's attributes of action are his accounting for that matter. Further, his attempt also covers the need for human morality. In this way, he wants to explain the descriptions about God's actual intervention into worldly affairs in *Torah*.

According to Maimonides, God has "his *glory* (essence)" and "his *way* (attribute of action)".<sup>9)</sup> As mentioned above, *Torah* confirms that human beings cannot know God's essence. However, "God's way" is different: God's attributes of action "do not entail the posting of a

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7) *Exodus* 33:18-20.

8) *Guide I*, chapter 35, p. 80.

9) *Guide I*, chapter 53, pp. 122-123.

multiplicity of eternal things or the positing of alteration taking place in His essence as a consequence of an alteration of the things related to Him."<sup>10)</sup> At the same time, "God's attributes of action too are not to be considered in reference to His essence, but in reference to the things that are created."<sup>11)</sup>

In fact, to Maimonides "Every attribute by which God is described in the books of the prophets is an attribute of action."<sup>12)</sup> Maimonides claims very cautiously that a human being can apprehend "His way", but only to some degree. Accordingly, human beings should always keep in mind that "Attributes of action are remote from the essence of the thing of which it is predicated."<sup>13)</sup> So, we should pay utmost attention in application of the attributes of God's action. Negative theology is the product of such carefulness. God could not be described in any positive word or way by which human beings usually use as means for communication; it is only possible by negation of predicates.<sup>14)</sup> Maimonides claims his position as follows:

He [God] cannot have accidents so that an attribute cannot be indicative of them. Accordingly He cannot have an affirmative attribute in any respect.<sup>15)</sup>

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10) *Guide I*, chapter 52, p. 118.

11) *Guide I*, chapter 53, p. 122.

12) *Guide III*, chapter 53, p. 632.

13) *Guide I*, chapter 52, p. 119

14) Charles Manekin succinctly summarizes negative theology of Maimonides in his article. "Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes" in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, pp. 129-139.

15) *Guide I*, chapter 58, p. 135.

## Epistemological Ambiguity

If it is totally impossible for human beings to know God's essence, how can we understand his next 'perplexing' remark? Maimonides said: "Thus His essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect."<sup>16)</sup> If God is 'Unity' that does not permit any composition and separation in Him, and if there is nothing outside of Him, how can we know God's such characters? Or how can Maimonides himself know that?<sup>17)</sup> In a word, what is the epistemological basis of his those remarks?

Maimonides deals with this puzzling problem in *Guide I*, chapter 68. As Maimonides mentioned above, God is a total 'Unity'. Therefore, God is 'One' and there is no composition in Him. Maimonides wants to emphasize God's 'Unity', which is the natural consequent of God's incorporeality. And yet, surprisingly, Maimonides deduces the concept of God's Unity from the human perception process. Maimonides says:

Man, hylic intellect, and the form of the piece of wood—these being three separate notions. When, however, the intellect is realized in actu, the three notions become one.<sup>18)</sup>

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16) *Guide I*, chapter 69, p. 166.

17) Interestingly, Spiro argues that Maimonides' negative theology need not be given the agnostic interpretation, because Spiro assumes Maimonides himself used his theory of negative attributes as a means for expressing a positive content in our knowledge. In that sense, Spiro's argument shows a similar characteristic of mystical theology; human being have a gnosis of absolute reality, in spite of its ineffability. Spiro, Schubert, "Is the God of Maimonides Truly Unknowable?"

18) *Guide I*, chapter 68, p. 165.

In his intellect, man transcends separation. Maimonides applies human cognition scheme to God without the further explanation how God's essence can be the same with human apprehension process. Thus there is fundamental correspondence between human apprehension process and God's essential characters!

Maimonides' such approach cannot help avoiding the subsequent puzzlement. Above all, his supposed 'correspondence between God and human beings' collide with his strong emphasis on complete dissimilarity between God and human beings. Through out the whole *Guide*, Maimonides is so sure of the substantial, irreconcilable difference between God and human beings:

The meaning of the qualificative attributions ascribed to Him and the meaning of the attributions known to us have nothing in common in any respect or in any mode.<sup>19)</sup>

However, he only inferred the concept of "God's essential unity" from the human act of apprehension somewhat easily without further detailed explanation or justification.<sup>20)</sup>

His example itself is not convincing either. When a man is engaged in the act of apprehending 'wood', the abstract form of wood becomes the only thing in his mind. Accordingly, in the dimension of human mind there is no separation among his intellect, the abstract form of wood, and man. However, in reality there still remains a real separation. The wood still exists as a separate thing from man or its mind. The 'oneness' is only possible in the human mind conceptually, but in material world there is no such unification

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19) *Guide I*, chapter 56, p. 131.

20) Marvin Fox claims that such conflict in human intellect could be understood properly in terms of 'balanced tension' found frequently in the *Guide*. Refer to "The Range and Limits of Reason".

at all. In addition to that, the oneness in human mind never could be permanent: as Maimonides pointed out it is only possible from time to time. How could such temporary, transient oneness in the human mind be a solid basis of inference for God's unity?

Furthermore, the problem of "God's intellectual unity" cannot be demonstrated philosophically either. Taking into the fact that even God's creation of the world is not demonstrable, how can we demonstrate God's intellectual unity, which exists in purely metaphysical dimension? At any rate, it seems that Maimonides' such remark "Thus His essence is the intellectually...." surely deals with God's essence in anyway. As Maimonides claims, God's creation of the world cannot be demonstrated: even though it belongs to the category of God's action, and the existence of world itself appears as an undeniable proof. In that respect, the demonstration of God's intellectual oneness is the more difficult problem than creation of this world. Then, how can Maimonides compromise with his theory of "unknowability of God" and such perplexing, epistemologically ambiguous remarks? Given the importance of the problem, he should do more to support his argument. But he just adopted the mechanism of human perception as the 'sole' foundation of his claim without further endeavor. And at the last paragraph of same chapter he added:

We have repeated this notion several times in this chapter because the minds of men are very much strangers to this way of representing the thing to oneself.<sup>21)</sup>

Maimonides' above remark means that he also felt undeniable difficulties in his argument, and that recognition implies that his

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21) *Guide I*, chapter 69, p. 166.

remark about God's intellectual unity might come from out of *Torah*. In fact it comes from the philosophy of Aristotle, more exactly, Neoplatonic philosophy.<sup>22)</sup>

Despite such epistemological ambiguity, why does Maimonides argue 'intellectual unity in God' so strongly? To Maimonides, God's 'incorporeality' and 'unity' is the most important foundation for right understanding of God, which could be strong bulwark against 'idolatory' and 'superstition' that he wants to prevent in Jew. So Maimonides strenuously emphasizes "God's being One by virtue of a true Oneness, so that no composition whatever."<sup>23)</sup> In this respect, the epistemological ambiguity in Maimonides shows a discord between 'the need for preventing idolatry' and 'an epistemological difficulty.'

At the same time, the idea of God's intellectual unity itself poses serious problem, which is absolute separateness between God and human being. If God is in absolute oneness, how can we understand God's intervention of *Torah*? In other words, if God is in completely indivisible self-satisfying states, what can exist outside of Him, and how can we understand relation between God and human being? Especially, how can God's numerous interventions in the history of Jew be explained?

In this way, Maimonides' epistemological ambiguity contains the most difficult problems in it. How can Maimonides compromise namely 'the God of philosophers' and 'the God of Moses'?

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22) Pines argues that Maimonides already knows very well about Neoplatonic ideas by way of Avicenna, or Arabic translations of Plotinus works, however, which were introduced as the works of Aristotle at that time. Shlomo Pines, Translator's Introduction, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Trans. Shlomo Pines, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963.

23) *Guide I*, chapter 50, p. 111.



Furthermore how can corporeal man understand incorporeal God? Maimonides asked as follows:

What then should be the state of our intellects when they aspire to apprehend Him who is without matter and is simple to the utmost degree of simplicity, Him whose existence is necessary, Him who has no cause and of whom no notion attaches that is superadded to His essence, which is perfect—the meaning of its perfection being, as we have made clear, that all deficiencies are negated with respect to it.<sup>24)</sup>

### **The Deep Abyss between God of Aristotle and God of Moses**

There is a deep abyss between two different concepts of God. Aristotle supposes a complete separation between the absolute God and the universe. However, God of Jew in *Torah* cannot be separated from this world completely. Unlike Aristotelian God, who exists in self-actualizing condition, God of Maimonides does not exist far from this material world. God of Moses has a very specific intention that should be manifested in human history, especially through the Jewish people.<sup>25)</sup> Therefore, there must be some theoretical or theological compromise. Maimonides really wants to adopt and synthesize two systems, without losing both anyway, and his attempts to find out middle way leads to his unusually creative interpretation of human intellect and perfection of human being. Put simply, it is the human being that could be a bridge between those

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24) *Guide I*, chapter 59, p. 137.

25) Spiro also argues that Maimonides' negative theology and the concept of God's attribute of action are his endeavor to account for the Biblical description of God as a source of ethical values, and living reality in the lives of individuals. Refer to his "Is the God of Maimonides Truly Unknowable?"

two aspects of God.

It is sure that God is absolute being. However, due to the creation of world, God came to have relation with man anyway. So, Maimonides was obliged to find out 'the bridge' connecting God and this world, especially human being. Finally, the human intellect comes to be the most important concept in his theory, because to him that is the only proper bond between God and man. As God gave intellects to human beings, the human intellect is immaterial and originated from divinity. Therefore, man could be said that he was created in God's image, unlike other God's creatures.

At the same time, God who has a relation with human beings is always in danger of anthropomorphism. The most horrible example of anthropomorphism is 'idolatory.' How can incorporeal God have relations with human beings in a corporeal world in corporeal way? As philosophers show so clearly, God who is translated and understood in such human concepts are so ridiculous. For example, a God that wants to eat 'the flesh' of sacrifice is unreasonable and foolish. But *Torah* is full of such anthropomorphic descriptions of God. So in the first part of *Guide*, Maimonides makes great philosophical efforts to make people understand God's incorporeality and non-anthropomorphic nature.

In these respects, Neoplatonism has much common with Maimonides.<sup>26)</sup> Unlike Aristotle, Plotinus, the founder of Neoplatonism, tried to bridge the gap between absolute God and this 'emanated' material world through 'human intellect' given by the One or God. And Plotinus also puts a great emphasis on philosophical reasoning and moral purification for attaining the one

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26) Refer to Alfred L. Irvy, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought" in Joel L. Kraemer (ed), *Perspectives on Maimonides* (Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 115-140.

with God. Maimonides takes a very similar approach in *Guide*; he continually emphasizes the function of philosophy for the perfection of human intellect. And Maimonides also argues that God permits the perfection of man only after long human endeavor of moral purification. In spite of such great similarities, there is still big difference between them on knowability of God. Plotinus regarded the 'mystical experience—the union with the One' as the most important basis of human knowledge of God. He claims that a human being can experience 'Union with God', or 'the One' and from that experience man can attain a kind of 'intuitive knowledge' of God. As mentioned above Maimonides adopts many Neoplatonic schemes,<sup>27)</sup> but he can never regard the human experience as a final epistemological foundation. Consequently, he strongly opposes to the idea of knowability of God's essence, because in *Torah* God clearly declares that God's glory, or God's essence never could be known to human beings.

Maimonides tries to reach a compromise between philosophy and religion through his theory of the human intellect and a theory of human perfection, which is symbolized as "Kiss of God". Despite the Maimonides' unwelcoming attitude toward 'Neoplatonic epistemology,' or mystical gnosis of God, his theory of human perfection has an undeniable commonality with Neoplatonism.

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27) Irvy claims that the Neoplatonic background serves as the ultimate prop in Maimonides' defense against both the *mutakallimun* and the philosophers, that is, the Aristotelians. Refer to Irvy, Alfred, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought" pp.138-139.

## Human Intellect: the Only Way to God

The human intellect is one of the most important concepts in Maimonides' whole theory. However, as Alexander Altman points out, he didn't give us a systematic explanation of the human intellect.<sup>28)</sup> But, through the whole *Guide*, he alludes to the human intellect from time to time. According to Maimonides, the human intellect came from God because "God made overflow unto man and that is the latter's ultimate perfection."<sup>29)</sup> Furthermore, the intellect is the only thing that God and human being share: "I mean because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that is said of the latter that he is *in the image of God and in His likeness*, not that God, may He be exalted, is a body and possesses a shape."<sup>30)</sup>

The human intellect is the only bond between God and man, and at first the responsibility of perfecting the human intellect lies in the hands of man. Man should attain perfection of the intellect by long and hard training. The perfection of the intellect is possible only by gradual steps, and there are specific and proper ways for the perfection of human intellect:

Thus he who is seen to be perfect in mind and to be formed for that high rank that is to say, demonstrative speculation and true intellectual inferences should be elevated step by step, either by someone who directs his attention or by himself, until he achieves his perfection.<sup>31)</sup>

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28) Alexander Altman, "Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics", p. 60.

29) *Guide I*, chapter 2, p. 24. At the same time, pay attention to the concept of 'overflow' from God. Maimonides' such explanation is surprisingly similar to Plotinian 'emanation', or 'overflow'!

30) *Guide I*, chapter 1, p. 23.

31) *Guide I*, chapter 33, p. 71.

Whoever wishes to achieve human perfection to train himself at first in the art of logic, then in the mathematical sciences according to the proper order, then in the natural sciences, and after in the divine sciences. ... And the perfection, which constitutes the end to be aimed at, is realized for them only after the above-mentioned preliminary studies.<sup>32)</sup>

However, Maimonides never forget to assert the limits of the human intellects: "Man's intellect indubitably has a limit at which it stops."<sup>33)</sup> "This means that you should let your intellect move about only within the domain of things that man is able to grasp."<sup>34)</sup> It is so evident that there are some things that the human intellect can never grasp, such as "the number of the stars of heaven and whether that number of the species of living beings, minerals, plants, and other similar things."<sup>35)</sup> In addition to the infinite things in the material world, the problems such as essence of God, creation of world, eternity of world, and end of world do not lie in the domain of human intellect:<sup>36)</sup>

What is the final end of our existence with that perfection? Necessarily and obligatorily the argument must end with the answer being given that the final end is: God has wished it so, or: His wisdom has required this to be so... Thus they [Sages] have explicitly stated that there does not exist a final end, but only the Will alone.<sup>37)</sup>

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32) *Guide I*, chapter 34, p. 75.

33) *Guide I*, chapter 31, p. 65.

34) *Guide I*, chapter 32, p. 69.

35) *Guide I*, chapter 31, p. 66.

36) Ben Zion Bosker clearly summarizes the role and insufficiency of human reason in Maimonides' whole system. Refer to his article, "How shall we think of God?"

37) *Guide III*, chapter 13, p. 452.

How can we know the limit of the human intellect? Paradoxically, Maimonides says that human being can know the limit of intellect by using intellectual speculation. And knowing the insufficiency of human intellect surely lies in the domain of philosophy not in theology. Of course, as quoted above there are some phrases about the limit of human intellect in *Torah*. However, Maimonides says:

Do not think that what we have said with regard to the insufficiency of the human intellect and its having a limit at which stops is a statement made in order to confirm to Law. For it is something that has already been said and truly grasped by the philosophers without their having concern for a particular doctrine or opinion.<sup>38)</sup>

The above remark by Maimonides clearly shows that as long as philosophical speculations are possible, he prefers using the human intellect to the mere quotation of the Law. So the limit of human intellect can be proved 'philosophically', not 'theologically.' In other words, we do not need *Torah* for the proof of limit of human intellect.<sup>39)</sup>

However, it is not at all an easy task to know the limit of the human intellect through philosophy. After the long and hard endeavors in the field of discipline from logic to natural sciences, intellectual perfection can be possible. Then man becomes capable of differentiating the things proven by intellectual speculation and demonstration from those things that cannot be. For example, the

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38) *Guide I*, chapter 31, p. 67.

39) At the same time, as Simon Rawidowicz clearly shows, in Maimonides' theory, human reason not only know its limit but also transform itself into a deep passion and attachment to God through its perfection. Refer to his article, "Knowledge of God".

creation of world by God is not a problem than can be showed by intellectual demonstration. We don't need to refer to the Law for that kind of question, which could be evident by philosophy of Aristotle. If so, how can we get the knowledge of things that lies out of human intellect? Maimonides takes God for the source of such things:

I mean to say that of the eternity of the world or its creation in time-becomes an open question, it should in my opinion be accepted without proof because of prophecy, which explains things to which it is not in the power of speculation to accede.<sup>40)</sup>

God provides knowledge for such things through prophecies and revelations. Prophecy does not fall into a domain of the human intellect, that is, intellectual speculation and demonstration. The reason and end of prophecy completely belong to God's will. It is God who chooses the prophet:

When, in the case of a superior individual who is perfect with respect to his rational and moral qualities, his imaginative faculty is in its most perfect state and when he has been prepared in the way that you will hear, he will necessarily become prophet, and there is a fundamental principle that God turns whom He wills, whenever He will it, into a prophet.<sup>41)</sup>

In this way, divine intervention through prophecy and revelation provides ultimate answers to questions that cannot be solved by human intellect. However, even though prophecy comes from a supra-rational domain, it must be understood properly by the human

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40) *Guide II*, chapter 16, p. 294.

41) *Guide II*, chapter 32, p. 362.

intellect, especially by perfected one. In order to be a true prophet and to attain perfect understanding of prophecy, human intellect should be perfected. Maimonides said about this:

Moreover every perfect man -after his intellect has attained the cognition of whatever in its nature can be grasped- when longing for another apprehension beyond that which he has achieved, cannot but have his faculty deceived or destroyed -as we shall explain in one of the chapters of this Treatise- unless divine help attends him.<sup>42)</sup>

Intellectual perfection is a necessary condition for prophecy, not a satisfying condition. Without intellectual perfection, true understanding of revelation is totally impossible. Maimonides clearly presents this point:

For the overflow of the Active Intellect goes in its true reality only to it [that is, to the rational faculty], causing it to pass from potentiality to actuality. It is from the rational faculty that that overflow comes to the imaginative faculty. How then can the imaginative faculty be perfected in so great a measure as to apprehend what does not come to it from the senses, without the rational faculty being affected in a similar way so as to apprehend without having apprehended by way of premises, inference, and reflection?<sup>43)</sup>

## **The Kiss of God: Moment of Human Perfection**

The "Kiss of God" is the expression of human perfection, which includes intellectual, moral perfection; it is the nucleus of Maimonides whole theory. According to Maimonides, the "Kiss" is a

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42) *Guide I*, chapter 1, p. 49.

43) *Guide II*, chapter 38, p. 377.



poetical expression that means "the apprehension that is achieved in a state of intense and passionate love for Him [God]."44) The "Kiss of God" represents the perfection of the human being. Through the "Kiss of God" he tries to overcome the insurmountable barrier between God and human beings.

All conflicting extreme pairs are merged into the "Kiss of God", which is accomplished at the moment of man's death. Put simply, when a man discards his 'corporeality,' he receives the "Kiss of God". For "Matter is a strong veil preventing the apprehension of that which is separate from matter as it truly is"<sup>45</sup>); when man loses his body, the veil of matter comes to be weakest. Accordingly, the chance of human perfection will increase in proportion to the weakness of this veil. However, in human history there were only three persons who have received the "Kiss" from God:

Deaths of Moses, Aaron, and Miriam that the three of them died by a kiss, the generally accepted poetical way of expression that calls the apprehension that is achieved in a state of intense and passionate love for Him, a kiss.<sup>46</sup>)

Maimonides' interpretation of "Kiss of God" is very creative. In order to understand his interpretation properly, it is prerequisite to know the paradoxical character of human intellect. Above all, in proportion to its perfection, the human intellect comes to a more accurate recognition of its limit and insufficiency. Maimonides explains the human intellect's paradoxical breakthrough as follows:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate

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44) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 628.

45) *Guide III*, chapter 9, p. 436.

46) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 628.

His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity: and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance: and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity!<sup>47)</sup>

Very ironically, the human intellect can be perfected only by a full acknowledgement of its limit. In other words, only full understanding of its limit enables a transcending its limit and insufficiency! In proportion to the degree of intellectual perfection, those human beings come to get more exact understanding the limits of intellect. Moreover, the more fully man gets to understand the far-off distance between God and himself, the nearer does man get to God! It is so paradoxical. However, this apprehension is not merely a rational one: intellectual perfection naturally leads to surrender to God, and at the same time, to full acceptance of humility. Eventually, when a man apprehends the true realities through his intellect: "the more they think of Him (God) and of being with Him(God), the more their worship increases."<sup>48)</sup> In this way, intellectual perfection brings about "total devoting to God," and "the endeavor to come closer to God." And this results in "strengthening the bond between you and Him—that is, the intellect."<sup>49)</sup> Maimonides claims strongly, "Now we have made it clear several times that love is proportionate to apprehension."<sup>50)</sup>

At last, we arrive at the core of Maimonides' creativity. He argues that full understanding of human intellect makes it qualitative transformation-into 'love.' Now the human intellect becomes a field

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47) *Guide I*, chapter 58, p. 137.

48) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 620.

49) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 620.

50) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 621.

for the synthesis of rationality, love, and joy. In a word, the 'Kiss of God' becomes possible only in the field of 'transformed' human intellect. Maimonides talks about "Union with God-I mean apprehension of Him and love of Him-became manifest."<sup>51)</sup>

The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at the moment in this state of pleasure.<sup>52)</sup>

Moses, Aaron, and Miriam died in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love. Maimonides explains what it is like to be in the situation of "Kiss of God", or the perfection of human being as follows:

After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, that intellectual remains in one and the same state, the impediment that sometimes screened him off having been removed. And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure, which does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures.<sup>53)</sup>

Except for the one fact that the "Kiss of God" is possible only at the moment of death, it is quite difficult to find differences between 'Kiss of God' and Neoplatonic 'Union with the One.' Even though, Maimonides denies the possibility of mystical gnosis of human beings and does not remark the names of Neoplatonic philosophers in his works,<sup>54)</sup> the idea that the human being comes to merge into

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51) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 624.

52) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 627.

53) *Guide III*, chapter 51, p. 628.

54) That is the reason why Irvy describes Maimonides' adoption of Neopla-

the incorporeal God through discarding his corporeality, and to be in everlasting pleasure and intellectual apprehension is very 'Neoplatonic' one.

### Epistemological Ouroboros in '*Guide*'

Maimonides gives the "Kiss of God" as his answer to how corporeal man might know an incorporeal God. It is possible only when the human intellect is perfected without corporeality at one's deathbed. At that time, human being can come into the state of God's absolute unity and incorporeality. As I explained above, at that time, intellectual apprehension stopped being simply rational: it is transformed and mingled with joy, pleasure, and love. In this way, Maimonides tries to compromise 'God of philosophers' with 'God of Moses,' and philosophical 'rationality' with theological 'faith in God.'

However, can the epistemological ambiguity in *Guide* be fully solved through his theory of the "Kiss of God"? And does he really make successful compromise between philosophy and faith. To me, there still remains an epistemological ambiguity. I believe that Maimonides' 'Kiss of God' cannot provide the proper answer to the epistemological inquiry that how Maimonides come to know God's absolute Unity. In fact, that ambiguity is closely connected with the whole epistemological scheme of Maimonides.

For Maimonides, the Law and Moses are undeniable starting points of his whole theory. It means that the main purpose of *Guide* is to show the priority of *Torah* over human philosophy through

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tonic doctrines and perspectives as a 'better kept secrets of *the Guide*.' Refer to "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought", p. 138.

using philosophical reasoning, especially Aristotelian one. According to Maimonides, Moses was a perfect man. It means that Moses attained intellectual and imaginative perfection. Thus, Maimonides refers Moses as 'perfect philosopher.' Second, God picked him for a prophet by God's own will, so he is called as 'Prophet.' And thanks to his intellectual perfection, he came to 'perfect' understanding of God's message:

And what has been apprehended by [Moses], peace on him, has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after Him.<sup>55)</sup>

In many ways, *Torah* is really perfect; at first, it was given by God, and translated by Moses, who attained intellectual, imaginative, and moral perfection. Due to the perfection of the imaginative faculty, Moses got God's message so perfectly without any distortion; further, his intellectual perfection made God's message be translated into words of man perfectly. The only remaining problem is other people's imperfect and insufficient capacity for correct understanding of *Torah*. That is the reason why there are so many misunderstanding of *Torah*, including 'idolatory.' However, if they attain intellectual perfection through the difficult but proper training, they also finally come to understand the Law's perfection like Maimonides himself without prophetic talents, put it differently, without divine revelation. Maimonides was so sure that

They, *may their memory be blessed*, have already made it clear that the reward of him who conceals *the mysteries of Torah*, which are clear and manifest to the men of speculation, is very great.<sup>56)</sup>

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55) *Guide I*, chapter 54, p. 123.

56) *Guide III*, Introduction, p. 415.

And his method for truth was also speculative:

I followed conjecture and supposition: no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so and so.<sup>57)</sup>

True philosophers know so well that there are some problems that cannot be understood by mere intellectual speculation and demonstration. Accordingly, true philosophers come to realize that we need other sources of knowledge, that is, 'divine revelation.' In this way, intellectual perfection finally results in the acceptance of perfection of the Law, or God's word. Thus the epistemological snake bites its tail, like Ouroboros. God gave the Law to Moses who attained intellectual, moral perfection. And anyone who has intellectual perfection gets to accept the perfection of the Law even without prophetic talents. In this way, Maimonides tries to compromise philosophy and the Law, ultimately in favor of the Law.

Maimonides' intention itself is the origin of epistemological ambiguity in *Guide*. As soon as someone enters that circle, he or she finds out that there is no exit at all. Maimonides' epistemological system makes big closed circle and it is a kind of everlasting one. How can we know the Law's perfection? Through intellectual perfection! When we attain 'true' intellectual perfection, what will happen? Then, true recognition of insufficiency of intellect! In the long run, we realize the need for the Law to compensate for such insufficiency. In this way, head devours its tail, making a big

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57) *Guide III*, Introduction, p. 416.

and never-ending epistemological circle.

The remaining questions are two. Did Maimonides attain human perfection like Moses? And did Maimonides get the "Kiss of God"? For the first question, the fact that Maimonides is referred as '*Moses Maimonides*' or Rabbi '*Mosheh ben Maimon*' is so revealing. Why does he want to be called as *Moses*? But for the second, we only know that we can never know. That is the power of Maimonides' epistemological Ouroboros.

### **Conclusion: Mystery of Existence**

To Maimonides himself, following questions were very perplexing. How can corporeal human beings know incorporeal God? How can incorporeal God intervene into corporeal, worldly affairs? As human beings, how can we know God's will? And how we can compromise philosophy and faith, put differently, '*God of Aristotle*' and '*God of Moses*'? He tries his best to find out answers to those questions. In so doing, he feels a strong need to synthesize all kinds of conflicting aspects found in human existence, such as reason/emotion, natural science/prophecy, absoluteness/relativeness, corporeal body/incorporeal intellect, and philosophy/religion, etc. Finally, he finds out that the only key that we can have is human intellect itself, which is given by God. However, very paradoxically, he also discovers that those problems cannot exist at all outside of human intellect itself. In fact, that paradox is the mystery of human existence. Human intellect itself is the key and problem at the same time! In that respect, Maimonides' insight is very modern—even postmodern too. But more exactly, the problem that he wanted to solve is basically

everlastingly modern. How corporeal human being can know incorporeal God? Can there be an epistemological ground satisfying everyone? If the infinity is the boundary separating relative world from absoluteness, can we pass that boundary of infinity for getting into absoluteness? Is there any true answer to those questions? If any, what is that?



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〈국문초록〉

## 마이모니데스의 '신의 불가지성' 개념의 인식론적 모호성

성 해 영

이 글은 마이모니데스(Maimonides, 1135/8-1204)의 저작 『방황하는 자들을 위한 안내서 (*The Guide of the Perplexed*)』에서 전개된 '신의 불가지성(unknowability of God)' 개념을 인식론적으로 고찰하는 것을 목표로 한다. 그는 이 기념비적인 저작에서 인간은 신의 본질(essence/glory)을 알 수 없으며, 다만 신이 이 세계를 창조하고 개입하는 방식, 즉 신의 행위(action)를 통해서만 간접적으로 신을 알 수 있다고 주장한다. 하지만 한편으로 그의 저작 속에는 '신의 불가지성'과 상충되는 듯한 구절들이 발견된다. 특히 '부정신학(negative theology)'을 다루는 장에서 언급한 신의 일원성과 비물질성에 대한 묘사는 인식론적으로 모호해 보인다. 그는 신이 결코 나뉠 수 없는 '하나'의 '통일된' 상태 속에 있으므로, 신의 본질은 '부정(negation)'을 통해서만 가까스로 표현된다고 주장한다. 하지만 신의 '통일성(unity)'에 대한 근거로 그가 제시하는 인간의 인식 행위, 즉 인식주체와 대상, 그리고 인식 행위 간의 하나됨이라는 예는 모호하다. 동시에 그의 이러한 논거는 *The Guide of the Perplexed* 전체를 통해 강도 높게 주장되는 신과 인간 간의 압도적인 비동질성이라는 명제와 분명 상충된다.

실제로 신의 본질에 그의 묘사는 당시에 아리스토텔레스의 이름으로 아랍에 널리 소개된 '신플라톤' 주의의 영향을 받은 것으로 보인다. 그러나 마이모니데스는 인간의 '경험'이 신에 대한 인식론적 근거가 될 수 있다는 신플라톤주의의 주장이 내포한 유대 율법과의 상충성을 인지했

으므로, 신의 본질에 대한 그들의 'gnosis'를 인용하면서도 동시에 '올법'에 충실하여 신의 불가지성을 주장한다.

한편, 그의 이론이 지닌 인식론적 모호성은 세계로부터 완전히 초월해있는 신(God of Aristotle/God of Philosophers)과 유대민족을 통해서 세계에 적극적으로 개입하려는 신(God of Moses)사이에 존재하는 근본적인 갈등을 해소하려는 그의 평생의 목표에서 기인한 것이기도 하다. 마이모니데스는 신의 올법이 지성적 완전함을 성취한 '모세'를 통하여 인간에게 주어진 것이므로, 올법의 완벽함은 이미 '철학적, 지성적 완전함' 위에 근거한다고 주장한다. 동시에 신이 부여한 인간의 지성은 철학을 비롯한 제 학문의 부단한 학습을 통해 완성에 이를 수 있으며, 이러한 완성은 역설적으로 인간 지성이 지닌 한계에 대한 절감으로 귀결된다고 본다. 그리고 참된 철학자들에게만 가능한 '인간 지성의 불완전성'에 대한 명확한 인식이 역설적으로 신의 지혜와 사랑에 대한 요청, 즉 종교적 열망으로 이어진다고 보았다.

그런 점에서 그의 이론은 결국 '올법의 완전성'에서 출발하여 다시 그것에 귀결되는 일종의 인식론적 순환 고리, 즉 일종의 닫혀있는 체계의 성격을 갖는다. 특히 도덕적, 정서적, 지성적인 완성을 이룬 인간의 임종시에 '신의 키스(Kiss of God)'가 주어진다는 그의 이론은 이러한 인식론이 지닌 자기 완결성을 가장 극명하게 드러내고 있다. 그들이 진정으로 신의 키스를 받았는지 알 수 있는 유일한 인식론적 근거는 결국 '올법'밖에 없다! 동시에 신과 하나가 되어 영원한 신적인 지혜와 사랑 속에 머문다는 '신의 키스가 플로티누스의 '일자(一者)와의 합일'이라는 개념과 갖는 놀랄 정도의 유사성에도 불구하고, 마이모니데스는 결코 '올법'을 벗어나지 않는다. 하지만 이 같은 '호교론적(apologetic)' 경향에도 불구하고, 그의 *The Guide of the Perplexed*는 인류 지성사에 결코 흔하게 등장하지 않는 경탄할 만한 저작임에 분명하다.