The question of the compatibility of divine simplicity and divine freedom is one that bedeviled philosophers throughout the Middle Ages and remains controversial today. Part of its difficulty lies in the fact that there are varying conceptions both of divine simplicity and of divine freedom, each with its own distinctive rationale. I will begin with a few comments regarding the problem as it arose in late antiquity, for it is against this background that the commitments of our two authors can best be recognized.

Already in Aristotle one can recognize a weaker and a stronger conception of divine simplicity. The weaker emerges in the argument in *Metaphysics* XII.7 that because the Prime Mover exercises infinite power in producing movement, it must be without magnitude, without parts, and indivisible. Although this argument is predicated on characteristics distinctive of the Prime Mover (along with, although they are not mentioned here, the planetary movers), the type of simplicity it identifies could presumably be attributed to any immaterial agent. A stronger conception of simplicity emerges as Aristotle goes on to argue that because the Prime Mover is a being whose essence is actuality it cannot undergo change of any kind, including that of sequential thought. This kind of simplicity is more rigorous than the first because it rules out not only spatial parts but also temporal variation, presenting God as a being identical with his own eternal and unchanging act.

Yet there is an even more rigorous kind of simplicity, one that arguably had been adumbrated already by Plato. Plato’s Form of the Good is not only immaterial and unchanging (as are all the Forms), it is also the source of being, truth, and intelligibility, while remaining “beyond being in dignity and power.” This enigmatic description can be taken in different ways, but one plausible reading is that the Good is not only without parts or temporal variation, but also without noetic or conceptual structure; that is, it is not a possible object of thought (*noēsis*) but can only be apprehended, if at all, in some other way. Plotinus, of course, elaborated this notion into his own conception of the One or the Good as without form because it is the source of all form. The second Plotinian hypostasis, Intellect, he modeled in turn largely upon the description of the divine intellect in *Metaphysics* XII.

The significance of this synthesis for present purposes is that both the One and Intellect are simple, but in different ways. Intellect is simple as being pure actuality in which thinker, act of thought, and object of thought are identical, possessing no parts and subject to no temporal
variation. The One is simpler yet, for it transcends the duality of thinker and object of thought altogether. Plotinus makes this comparison explicitly in *Enneads* V.3:

That which makes the world of sense could not be a world of sense itself, but must be an intellect and an intelligible world; and that which is before this and generates it could not be an intellect or an intelligible world, but simpler than intellect and simpler than an intelligible world . . . . There must therefore be a concentration into a real One outside all multiplicity and any ordinary sort of simplicity, if it is to be really simple.\(^5\)

Indeed, in the system of Plotinus all three types of simplicity that we have identified—those of immateriality, pure actuality, and what we might call (for lack of a better term) hypernoetic transcendence—are present, corresponding respectively to the three hypostases of Soul, Intellect, and the One.

Plotinus was also the first philosopher to discuss at any length the issue of divine freedom.\(^6\) As is well known, he denies that any of his three hypostases possess what today would be called libertarian freedom, the capacity to choose among alternatives. Although he insists that they are free, their freedom consists solely in full and unimpeded activity in accordance with their own nature. For Plotinus such activity is the very epitome of freedom, for it is free of interference from external agents, random circumstances, and internal conflict or division.\(^7\) In fact, in the case of the One and Intellect (and probably the World Soul), will, essence, and activity are the same, so the very possibility of a conflict between their nature and their activity does not arise.\(^8\)

Within early Christian thought, two distinct approaches can be identified to these issues. The Greek Fathers generally understood divine simplicity in Platonic or Neoplatonic terms as consisting in the absence of form, limitation, or conceptual structure. Unlike Plotinus, however, they did not see such a view as calling for the identification of the divine essence, will, and activity, but if anything as calling for their distinction. In this they hearkened back to the Middle Platonic tendency—found in Philo of Alexandria and the pseudo-Aristotelian *De Mundo*—to distinguish between the divine essence and “powers,” the former consisting in God as He is in His own right, the latter in God as He is known to us through His active and visible expression.\(^9\)

As regards the divine will, in particular, the decisive statement was made by St. Athanasius, who sharply distinguished the Father’s begetting of the Son as an act of nature from the creation of the world as an act of will.\(^10\) Since within the Greek Christian tradition the divine essence was thus seen as identical neither to the divine activity nor to the divine will, the issue of divine freedom was generally not regarded as problematic, and there was little hesitation in attributing to God choice among alternatives.\(^11\)

The Latin-speaking West took a different course. Augustine had little use for the apophaticism of the One in Plotinus, but he adopted quite freely elements of the Plotinian description of Intellect, which he saw as appropriate to the Christian God.\(^12\) These elements included the identity in God of essence, will, and activity, an identity that Augustine extended to all the divine attributes. Not surprisingly, in light of the ancestry of this idea, Augustine was rather ambivalent about divine freedom. He insisted that God’s will has no external cause and in that sense is unnecessitated. However, it does have an *internal* necessity, in that for God to create anything less than the best possible world would be a moral failure inconsistent with perfect goodness. Augustine accordingly holds a version of the “principle of plenitude” according to which all the gradations of being that can exist consistently with the divine nature.
must do so.\textsuperscript{13} This is much like the position of Plotinus, who similarly held that all that can come forth from the One must do so.\textsuperscript{14}

These Christian antecedents, of course, had no direct influence on Maimonides or Gersonides, and indeed were probably unknown to them. But they are helpful in reminding us of some of the lineaments of the problem and the range of possible solutions. There are actually three problems that arise in regard to divine freedom, only one of which has been mentioned so far. This first problem does not arise from divine simplicity per se, but instead from God’s perfect goodness. It is that of how, if God is perfectly good, He can fail to do the best; or, alternatively, if there is no single path that is best, how God can rightly be described as perfectly good, since He always could have done something better than He did. This is the problem given prominence by William Rowe in his book, \textit{Can God Be Free?}, but as we have seen it was present already in the Christian appropriation of Plotinus by Augustine, and its repercussions can be traced in Anselm, Abelard, Leibniz, and others.\textsuperscript{15}

The other two problems do pertain more directly to divine simplicity, and they will be the ones that concern us here. First is that of whether, if the divine will and wisdom are identical, God’s action must be wholly determined by His rational apprehension of that which is best. This question overlaps with the first, for it too would seem to issue in the conclusion that God can only create one particular world, namely that which is best; however, it is motivated not directly by divine goodness, but rather by the identity of two particular divine attributes, will and wisdom. Second, there is the more general question of how, if the divine will and activity are identical to the divine essence, God could possibly will or do anything other than He does; for it seems that if He were to do so His will and activity would be different, meaning that His essence would be different. Such a conclusion is presumably a reductio, for surely if anything at all is necessary, it is the divine essence. We may call this the modal problem of divine freedom. It was not recognized by Augustine, perhaps because he already, on the basis of the first problem, held that (at least as regards creation) God’s acts are necessitated by the divine nature. However, for anyone who does not hold such a view, but does hold to the identity in God of essence, will, and activity, it is a serious issue.

With this preamble, let us turn to Maimonides. It is well known that there are different strands in Maimonides’s \textit{Guide for the Perplexed} which are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile. Since any attempt to understand Maimonides’s stance on divine simplicity and divine freedom requires a recognition of these strands, I will first describe them briefly and then explain their bearing on our topic.

Book I of the \textit{Guide} begins with a discussion of Biblical terminology that includes, along the way, some important clues regarding Maimonides’s view of God. We learn first that God is identical to His own essence and greatness (I.9), and, not long afterward, that all positive attributes of God, such as power, perfection, bounty, and so on, are identical to the divine essence (I.20).\textsuperscript{16} These statements would have been recognized by philosophically educated readers as placing Maimonides in agreement with al-Farabi and Avicenna, who likewise held that the divine essence and attributes are identical.\textsuperscript{17} Later Maimonides similarly follows Avicenna in holding that in God essence and existence are identical (I.57), and he endorses the view of “the philosophers”—meaning here Aristotle, al-Farabi, and Avicenna—that God is an intellect fully in act in which thinker, thought, and object of thought are identical (I.68). As self-subsistent thought God is the formal cause (or, more simply, the form) of all things, thereby maintaining them in existence (I.69). He is also the pure actuality toward which all things tend, and thus their ultimate final cause (\textit{ibid.}). Finally, He is the efficient cause at the end of all
chains of efficient causation, moving all things through the intermediary of the celestial sphere (I.70).

All of this would have been familiar to Maimonides’s readers and would have placed him recognizably in continuity with the Arab Peripatetics. But the famous discussion of theological language, which intervenes between the initial assertions of divine simplicity and the identification of God as intellect, introduces some complications. As I understand him, Maimonides allows three forms of true predications of God. First are straightforward attributions of action, such as that God created or spoke with Abraham (I.52).18 These are acceptable because attributing a multitude of actions to an agent does not necessarily imply that there is plurality in the agent (I.53). Second are the “attributes of action” properly so called, descriptive terms applied to God because His actions are similar to those of human beings who have the quality named. To offer a contemporary analogy, they function much as does ‘want’ when we say that a thermostat wants to keep the room a certain temperature; obviously we do not mean that it literally has this desire, but only that it acts as if it did. Terms such as ‘merciful’ and ‘angry’ as applied to God belong in this category (I.54). Finally there are negative predications, including not only obviously privative terms such as ‘incorporeal’ but also those that are positive in form but negative in meaning. Maimonides stretches this class to a surprising degree, e.g., he claims that ‘one’ said of God indicates only the absence of plurality, ‘exists’ means only that His non-existence is impossible, ‘living’ means only that He is not dead, and so on (I.57-58).

It is far from clear that this account of theological language can be squared with the Peripatetic doctrine of God in which it is embedded. Surely, one would think, to describe God as intellect is to make a positive assertion, as are the further claims that this intellect is identical with its act and its object, it is the form of all things, and it is their final cause and first mover. Aristotle, after all, placed no particular strictures on theological language, and indeed Metaphysics XII presents itself as straightforwardly a description of the divine essence (ousia).

More generally, the view of simplicity that Maimonides inherits from the Arab Peripatetics—that all the divine attributes are different ways of naming the divine essence—is quite different from, and seems in fact to be at odds with, the notion that we cannot say anything positive about the divine essence at all.

As it turns out, Maimonides’s attempt to reinterpret attributions that are positive in form as negative in meaning is ultimately only half-hearted, for he is quite happy to reinterpret the negations, in turn, in a positive manner. This emerges as he discusses the attributes of power, knowledge, and will:

The intention in ascribing these attributes to Him is to signify that He is neither powerless nor ignorant nor inattentive nor negligent. Now the meaning of our saying that He is not powerless is to signify that His existence suffices for the bringing into existence of things other than He. The meaning of our saying that He is not ignorant is to signify that He apprehends—that is, is living, for every apprehending thing is living. And the meaning of our saying that He is not inattentive or negligent is to signify that all the existing things in question proceed from their cause according to a certain order and governance—not in a neglected way so as to be generated as chance would have it, but rather as all the things are generated that a willing being governs by means of purpose and will. (I.58, p. 136)
I take it that this ambivalence or inconsistency on the part of Maimonides is due to the fact that he is attempting to combine two quite different strands of the classical tradition. On the one hand, there is the Aristotelian theology of God as pure act, which can plausibly be taken in the direction (as it was by Plotinus and Augustine) of identifying the divine knowledge, will, and other attributes with the divine essence. On the other hand, there is the negative theology deriving from Plato, and developed in different ways by Plotinus and the Greek Fathers, according to which God is “beyond being” and so has no form or “proper name.” Maimonides found both of these in the Aristotelian corpus as it had come down to him, comprising as it did both the *Metaphysics* and the *Theology of Aristotle*, and so assumed too readily that they form a coherent doctrine.

It is striking that the discussion of theological language in the middle of Book I plays virtually no role in the discussion of divine action in Book II. Instead the identity of the divine will and wisdom comes again to the fore, although in a way that leaves Maimonides’s position subject to serious objection. The crucial passages are chapter 18, devoted to defending the coherence of the idea of creation *ex nihilo*, and chapter 19, devoted to arguing that the universe is the result of design. Two arguments considered in the former chapter are of relevance. The first is that the universe must have always existed because the divine will is not subject to any “incentives, supervening accidents, and impediments.” Maimonides argues in reply that, although it is true that an agent who acts for some external end “must of necessity act at a certain time and not act at another time because of impediments or supervening accidents,” the same is not true in the case of God, who acts for no end other than His own will.

If, however, the act has no purpose whatever except to be consequent upon will, that will has no need of incentives. And the one who wills is not obliged, even if there are no impediments, to act always. For there is no external end for the sake of which he acts and that would render it necessary to act whenever there are no impediments preventing the attainment of the end. For in the case envisaged, the act is consequent upon the will alone. (II.18, p. 301)

I think it is fair to say that we are presented here with a fundamentally voluntaristic picture of the divine will, i.e., one in which God acts for no reason other than His own spontaneous decision. Yet in responding to the next objection Maimonides veers toward a sharply different position. The objection is that the universe must have always existed because God’s “wisdom is eternal as is His essence, and in consequence that which necessarily proceeds from it is likewise eternal.” Maimonides replies:

This is a very feeble way of going on to an obligatory conclusion. For in the same way as we do not know what was His wisdom in making it necessary that the spheres should be nine—neither more nor less—and the number of the stars equal to what it is—neither more nor less—and that they should be neither bigger nor smaller than what they are, we do not know what was His wisdom in bringing into existence the universe at a recent period after its not having existed. The universe is consequent upon His perpetual and immutable wisdom. But we are completely ignorant of the rule of that wisdom and of the decision made by it. For, in our opinion, volition too is consequent upon wisdom; all these being one and the same thing—I mean His essence and His wisdom—for we do not believe in attributes [i.e., as distinct from the essence]. (II.18, pp. 301-02)
Here the divine will is subordinated to the divine wisdom, in that it is assumed that God’s decision to create the world when and how He did must have had rational motives, although these motives are inscrutable to us. And the reason that this must be so is that God’s wisdom and will are simply different ways of naming the divine essence.

As it turns out, the latter view, and not the more voluntaristic one briefly suggested earlier, is Maimonides’s considered position. This begins to emerge clearly in II.19. There Maimonides endorses, with some qualifications, the argument of the Mutakallimun that only divine “particularization” can explain various specific features of the cosmos such as the direction and velocity of the rotation of the celestial spheres and the existence and number of the stars. But he insists, in opposition to the Mutakallimun, that such particular features are never determined without a reason, even though this reason remains unknown to us.

What is the cause for this having been purposed? What is known may be epitomized as follows: All this has been produced for an object that we do not know and is not an aimless and fortuitous act. In fact you know that the veins and nerves of any individual dog or ass have not happened fortuitously, nor are their measures fortuitous . . . All this is as it is with a view to useful effects whose necessity is known. How then can one who uses his intellect imagine that the positions, measures, and numbers of the stars and the motions of their various spheres are without an object or fortuitous? There is no doubt that all of these things are necessary according to the purpose of one who purposes. (II.19, p. 310)

The same view is repeated in Book III, where Maimonides again insists that every divine action has a reason. Amplifying on the suggestion of II.19 that all created things are “necessary according to the purpose of one who purposes,” he writes that “the entire purpose [of creation] consists in bringing into existence the way you see it everything whose existence is possible” (III.25, p. 504). Here Maimonides goes beyond simply affirming that every divine act has a reason to the much stronger claim that this reason is necessitating, and thus God has brought into being “everything whose existence is possible.” Similarly, addressing the issue of why God created when He did, instead of appealing as he had in II.18 to the sheer spontaneity of the divine will, Maimonides asserts that all occurred as determined by divine wisdom: “they [the Jewish sages] say that His wisdom, may He be exalted—the apprehension of which is beyond us—obligatorily necessitated the existence of this world as a whole at the moment when it came into existence, and that the selfsame immutable wisdom necessitated nonexistence before the world came into existence” (ibid., 505). Plainly Maimonides has here abandoned, not only the apparent voluntarism of II.18, but any independent role for the divine will other than as the agent enacting the determinations of divine wisdom.

Although Maimonides’s final position is plain enough, the argument by which he advances it is highly dubious. In both II.19 and III.25, he assumes that an act must be either determined by a specific purpose or “aimless and fortuitous.” Such a dichotomy is surely too simple. To take a famous case discussed by al-Ghazali, a hungry man faced with a choice between two identical dates presumably will eat one of them even though he has no particular reason to choose one over the other; in order to satisfy his hunger he simply holds in abeyance the need for reasons and picks one of the two at random. Such an act is neither fully determined by a specific purpose, nor “aimless and fortuitous.” One might suppose that in the
same way God had determined for various good reasons to create a world with celestial spheres, but there were an indefinite number of combinations of direction and velocity that would serve His purposes. Surely He could then simply pick one. Such a view would be fully consistent with Maimonides’s insistence upon God’s wisdom and goodness, for it is no part of wisdom to insist upon a reason when none is to be found.

Something like this is, in my view, what Maimonides ought to have said. The fact that he did not was due to his commitment to divine simplicity. On the view of simplicity that he had inherited from the Arab Peripatetics, the divine will and wisdom are not simply in harmony with one another, but identical, so that there is nothing to the divine will other than the recognition and response to reasons. If so, then God simply is not capable of a random decision even when in other respects such a decision would be fully rational. That was, of course, the view of al-Farabi and Avicenna, so it is not surprising that Maimonides, despite his recognition of the importance of divine particularization, ultimately came to the same conclusion.24 In addition, even setting aside the particular problem posed by the identity of will and wisdom, there is also that mentioned earlier regarding the identity of the divine will and the divine essence. To suppose that God sometimes simply chooses in a way not fully determined by reasons would be to suppose that His will could be other than it is, which would mean, in turn, that His essence could be different. It is unclear how Maimonides, any more than Augustine before him, could have addressed this problem.

Although Maimonides ultimately abandoned anything more than a verbal commitment to divine particularization, the reason that led him to posit such particularization—the apparent contingency, and even arbitrariness, of many features of the world—has an undeniable force. It was given considerable weight by Maimonides’s greatest successor among the medieval Jewish Aristotelians, Gersonides (1288-1344). As we will see, Gersonides faced precisely the same difficulties as Maimonides, but his response was more ambivalent.

Gersonides’s Aristotelianism is perhaps most apparent in his description of the divine attributes, which is clearly inspired by that of Metaphysics XII. For our purposes, this account can be summarized under three points. First, God is an intellect who thinks eternally and as a whole the “law, order, and rightness of existent things.”25 Second, because intellect in act is identical with its objects, God not only thinks but constitutes this intelligible order, and is thus the Form ordering all things. Finally, since form is the source of unity, God is “more truly describable as ‘one’ than anything else” (V.3.12, 175). Although Gersonides does not discuss explicitly the identity of the divine essence and attributes, it would seem that this account commits him to roughly the same understanding of the divine nature and divine simplicity as that found in Maimonides and the Arab Peripatetics.

At the same time, however, he also wishes to preserve a greater role for the divine will than do his predecessors, in part because of his commitment to temporal creation.26 This first becomes clear as he attempts to counter a number of arguments against the possibility of temporal creation. One of them is that, since God as the ordering Form of all things is more truly an agent than anything else, there can be no point at which He initiates a new activity.

Gersonides replies:

The believer in creation of the universe could say that the First Cause eternally does the activity that is especially attributable to Him, i.e., self-knowledge. However, the activity that derives from Him by way of beneficence and grace, i.e., the giving of form to existent things in the most perfect way, is not attributable to Him except at the moment of
creation. In short, if this activity [i.e., creation] were for the perfection of the First Cause, this objection would be plausible. But it is not for the benefit of God; rather it is an expression of His beneficence and grace, and things of this sort need not be actualized. (VI.1.4, pp. 231-32)

Gersonides here distinguishes between two kinds of divine activity. One is essential (i.e., self-knowledge) and the other is due to “beneficence and grace” (i.e., creation). The question, of course, if whether such a distinction is consistent with his own description of the divine attributes. One difficulty is that of how the existence of two fundamentally different types of divine activity coheres with the claim that God is “more truly describable as ‘one’ than anything else.” Does not the capacity to act in one way, while refraining from acting in another, imply a certain duality? In addition, there is the question of how the supposition of a new divine activity is consistent with the assertion that God is an intellect eternally fully in act. Surely, one would think, at the moment when God creates He knows that He creates, so that there is at that moment some kind of passage from potency to act in the divine intellect.

Nonetheless, despite the tug exerted by his Aristotelian commitments, Gersonides proceeds to argue that some role must be attributed in creation to divine free choice. His argument is that there are many features of the cosmos, such as the size, arrangement, and composition of the celestial spheres, that cannot be accounted for simply by the constituents’ natures and so must be attributed to “will and choice” (VI.1.8, p. 256). This is the familiar argument for divine particularization offered by Maimonides. As we saw in Maimonides, it does not necessarily follow from such a view that there is an ineliminable role for divine choice, for one might hold that God’s choices in such matters are determined by reasons that are unknown to us. Gersonides’s view on this point is ambivalent. On the one hand, he argues that creation ex nihilo is impossible because it would require God to place the world somewhere within a previously existing vacuum, and there could be no reason why He would place it in one location rather than another (VI.1.17, p. 326). This argument presupposes that God cannot or would not simply choose an arbitrary location. On the other hand, not long afterward Gersonides dismisses the question of why God created precisely when He did on the grounds that “if He had created . . . before this moment no matter by how much, the same question could still be asked” (VI.1.18, p. 343). Here Gersonides seems to presuppose that God must exercise arbitrary choice, for otherwise a temporal creation would be impossible.

It would appear that Gersonides simply did not think through very clearly the question of whether God exercises choice in a way that is not fully determined by reason. On balance his view is probably most clearly exhibited in the passage about creation as an act of beneficence and grace. However, this passage offers no answer to the question of how such a view can be reconciled with his Aristotelian account of the divine attributes.27

In conclusion, it seems to me that in both Maimonides and Gersonides one encounters a fundamental inconsistency between an Aristotelian understanding of God, with its attendant view of divine simplicity, and a desire to assert divine free choice. The latter is grounded, at the broadest level, in a recognition that there are innumerable features of the universe that defy rational explanation and can best be understood as resulting from a “particularization” brought about by the divine will. Both authors also invoke such particularization to address the question of why God would bring the world into being at one moment rather than another. They differ in that Maimonides ultimately backs away from anything more than a verbal commitment to
particularization, whereas Gersonides retains a more robust commitment despite the fact that it ill consorts with his Aristotelian natural theology.

The conclusion I would draw from this story is not that divine simplicity and divine freedom are incompatible. It is that, if one adopts a fundamentally Aristotelian understanding of divine simplicity, then one must interpret divine freedom, as Maimonides ultimately did, in the minimalist manner of Plotinus and the Arab Peripatetics. But that may, after all, be simply an argument against the Aristotelian understanding of divine simplicity. The arguments offered by Maimonides and Gersonides in favor of divine free choice are (when suitably updated) perfectly plausible, and furthermore there are—as both authors recognized—many religious and Scriptural reasons leading to the same conclusion. It seems, then, that we ought to seek a different way of understanding divine simplicity than that found within the Aristotelian tradition. As I mentioned near the outset of this paper, history has left open such a path in the work of the Greek Fathers. I believe that philosophers ought to look there, rather than to medieval Aristotelianism, for the most promising reconciliation of divine simplicity and divine freedom.


4 Plato, *Republic* VI 509b.


6 He may well have done so in response to the early Christian belief in divine free choice, although the precise provocation remains uncertain; see A.H. Armstrong, “Two Views of Freedom: A Christian Objection in Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.8[39].?” *Studia Patristica* 17, Pt. 1 (1982), 397-406.

7 This is of course not a full account of Plotinus’s understanding of freedom, for he also emphasizes that free activity must be in accordance with intellect and directed toward the Good. See *Enneads* VI.8.1-7, and for freedom as action in accordance with one’s nature see particularly VI.8.7.11-31.

8 For the One see *Enneads* VI.8.7.46-54, 13.5-11, 20.6-9, 21.12-16, for Intellect see VI.7.4.24-34, 6.26-38, and for the World Soul see IV.4.12.43-49. (The latter passage does not mention
essence and activity explicitly, but their identity seems to be implied in the statement that the World Soul is nothing other than its own intelligence.)


14 See Enneads IV.8.6, V.5.12.


18 Maimonides offers no examples, but I take it that these are the sorts of actions he has in mind. Another possibility favored by many interpreters is that Maimonides, here as elsewhere, deliberately uses self-contradiction in order to mask his true views. The best known advocate of such an approach is Leo Strauss, who in the introductory essay to the Pines translation of the Guide, “How To Begin To Study The Guide of the Perplexed,” pronounces that Maimonides’s negative theology is a “smoke screen” (cxxxviii) designed to hide his true allegiance to the natural theology of Avicenna. In reply it is important to note that Avicenna also adopts, however inconsistently, a broadly negative theology (see n. 20 below). More generally, surely such an esotericist reading ought to be adopted only when more straightforward attempts to explain a contradiction in terms of its probable historical sources have failed. For a sensible critique of esotericist approaches to the Guide see Oliver Leaman, Moses Maimonides (Richmond: Curzon, 1997), 6-17.

19 Maimonides’s more proximate source was Avicenna, who taught that God is to be described, after affirming the fact of His existence, only by negation and by “affirming of Him all
relations,” since all things are from Him (Metaphysics, p. 283). Avicenna claims that the description of God as intellect means only that “the possibility of mixing with matter and its attachments is negated of Him,” and that other apparently positive attributions can be similarly interpreted (Metaphysics, p. 296). This left him open to the obvious rejoinder, made later by al-Ghazali, that simply to equate intellect with immateriality is hardly warranted even if one believes that intellect is in fact immaterial; cf. Al-Ghazali, The Incoherence of the Philosophers, trans. Michael E. Marmura (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2000), 126-27.

This is a point worth emphasizing, for interpreters sometimes attempt to appropriate the discussion of theological language in rather arbitrary ways in order to address the puzzles raised by Book II. For example, Arthur Hyman, “Maimonides on Creation and Emanation,” Studies in Medieval Philosophy, ed. John F. Wippel (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1987), 45-61, claims that for Maimonides ‘will’ when said of God is a privative term, and so “is predicated of God and man according to complete equivocation” (54). Not only does this overlook the reinterpretation of negative terms as positive in I.58, it also ill consorts with Maimonides’s actual usage of the term in Book II, where he clearly assumes that the divine will is a will in the normal sense of a faculty for making decisions.

I wish to thank Sarah Pessin for drawing my attention to this passage.

See al-Ghazali, Incoherence of the Philosophers, 22-23; Averroes [Ibn Rushd], Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence), 2 vols., trans. Simon van den Bergh (London: Luzac, 1954), vol. 1, 22-23. My description of this case follows that of al-Ghazali rather than Averroes, who states (implausibly, I think) that the choice of one alternative over another must always be based upon some reason, even if it is one of which the chooser is unaware. For a useful discussion of the issues at stake here see Nicholas Rescher, “Choice without Preference: A Study of the History and Logic of the Problem of ‘Buridan’s Ass,’” Kant-Studien 51 (1959-60), 142-75.

Avicenna recognizes explicitly that to posit choice or purpose in God (other than as synonymous to His knowledge) would violate divine simplicity; see Metaphysics, 294-95, 326.


Gersonides is one of the few medieval philosophers to hold that God created the cosmos out of pre-existing matter, so that one can speak in a straightforwardly literal way of a time before creation.

See also the similar conclusion reached by Menachem Kellner, “Gersonides on the Problem of Volitional Creation,” Hebrew Union College Annual 51 (1980), 111-28. Kellner, however, goes astray when he argues that Gersonides was committed to volitional creation only by his theory of miracles (118, n. 16). Although the belief in miracles is clearly an additional confirming consideration, Gersonides’s main reason was the argument from particularization.

The Christian tradition recognizes both sorts of reasons, including the need to differentiate creation from the begetting of the Son (as recognized by Athanasius) as well as a role for something like particularization in the act of creation. For the latter see, for example, Aquinas, Summa contra Gentiles I.81, Summa Theologiae I, Q. 19, art. 3 and 10.