CONCLUSION

Maimonides, like many of his contemporaries, was concerned with the philosophical weaknesses of the Ptolemaic system; in this he was influenced by the Spanish school of criticism, but differed considerably from it. Though it may seem from *Guide*, ii. 24 that epicycles and eccentrics are unacceptable, and that in fact the true configuration of the heavens is beyond human comprehension, a careful reading of that chapter in conjunction with the relevant portion of the *Mishneh Torah* suggests that Maimonides did indeed have some idea of what the true configuration would be, and that in this configuration epicycles are allowed. The problems raised in *Guide*, ii. 24, were a matter of continued interest among Maimonides' successors and evoked quite different responses.

9

Maimonides on Religious Language

ARTHUR HYMAN*

MOSES Maimonides maintained a lively interest in questions of language, particularly language concerning God, throughout his life. In his very first work, the *Treatise on the Art of Logic*,[1] he discusses language in its relation to logic; in his two major legal works, the *Commentary on the Mishnah*[2] and his great code, *Mishneh Torah*,[3] both of which are addressed to a general, non-philosophic audience, he stresses that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God cannot be taken literally; and in his philosophic *Guide of the Perplexed*[4] he devotes most of the first part of the work to a more rigorous, philosophic discussion of divine attributes and names.

Maimonides' concern with religious language is part of his overall philosophic programme in which the correct understanding of language applied to God is one of the central themes. Not only is it obligatory for the intellectual élite to have a philosophically correct understanding of divine attributes, but even the unsophisticated masses must be taught that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God cannot be taken in their literal meaning. Maimonides expresses this view when he writes in *Guide of the Perplexed*, i. 35:

* Research for this paper was done under a Category A Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, which I held during the academic year 1980–1. I gratefully acknowledge this support.

[1] *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, ch. 13; Arab. ed. I. Efros, *PAAJR* 34 (1966); Heb. and Eng. ed. and trans. I. Efros, *PAAJR* (1938).

[2] *Commentary on the Mishnah*, *Sanhedrin*, *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*, 13 principles; pinciples 2 and 3, Arab., ed. J. Kafih (Jerusalem, 1964), 211; Heb., ed. S. Rabinowitz, *Haqdamot le-Perush ha-Mishnah* (Jerusalem, 1961), 137–8; Eng. in I. Twersky, *A Maimonides Reader* (New York, 1972), 417–18.

[3] *Mishneh Torah*, *Yesode ha-Torah*, i. 7–12; ii. 4, 6; *Teshuvah*, viii. 2–5; ed. and trans. M. Hyamson (Jerusalem, 1962).

[4] *Guide of the Perplexed*, Arab. ed. I. Joel (Jerusalem, 1929); Heb. ed. S. Even Shemu'el (Jerusalem, 1981); Eng. trans. S. Pines (Chicago, 1967).

The negation of the doctrine of the corporeality of God and the denial of His having a likeness to created things and of His being subject to affections are matters that ought to be made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity and ought to be inculcated in virtue of traditional authority upon children, women, stupid ones, and those of a defective natural disposition, just as they adopt the notion that God is one, that He is eternal, and that none but He should be worshipped.[5]

As reason for his opinion he states in the continuation of this passage that 'there is no profession of [the] unity [of God] unless the doctrine of God's corporeality is denied'. Maimonides' interest in religious language, especially in divine attributes, is thus primarily determined by a concern for safeguarding the absolute unity of God, and it is this concern which influences much of what he has to say.

In demanding so stringently the enlightenment of the masses, Maimonides takes issue with the divergent position of his contemporary, Averroes, who, in his *Decisive Treatise*, stated that the masses must be left to their literal understanding of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God. More than that, Averroes maintained that Islamic law prohibits their enlightenment. 'As for the man who expresses these allegories [of the Koran] to unqualified persons,' writes Averroes, 'he is an unbeliever on account of his summoning people to unbelief.'[6] I have tried to explain in my essay 'Maimonides' Thirteen Principles'[7] why Maimonides should be so insistent that even

[5] While in the present passage Maimonides maintains that the masses must be taught not only that anthropomorphic but also anthropopathic terms cannot be applied literally to God, he is more lenient with respect to anthropopathic terms in a political context. Thus he states in *Guide*, iii. 28 that to instill obedience to the commandments of the Torah, the masses may believe that God gets angry at those who disobey him. Cf. *Guide*, i. 55.

My present purpose is to show how Maimonides' theory of divine attributes is based on the proposition that they cannot ascribe multiplicity to God. However, at times his arguments are based on the proposition that there cannot be any likeness between God and creatures. Summarizing his views, he states in *Guide*, i. 55: 'The basis of the matter is that anything that leads to one of the following four kinds of attribution ought of necessity to be negated in reference to Him [God] by means of clear demonstration; namely, (1) anything that leads to attributing to Him corporeality, or (2) that leads to attributing to Him affection and change, or (3) that leads to attributing to Him, for example, a statement that He has not something in actuality, or (4) that leads to attributing to Him a likeness to a thing among His creatures' (Arab., pp. 87–8; Heb., p. 110; Eng., pp. 128–9).

[6] *Decisive Treatise Determining the Nature of the Connection between Religion and Philosophy*, Arab., ed. G. Hourani (Leiden, 1959), 22; Eng., trans. G. Hourani (London, 1961), 66.

[7] A. Altmann (ed.), *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (Cambridge, Mass., 1967), 119–45.

the masses must receive a measure of enlightenment concerning correct language about God, and it is not within the confines of this paper to restate my arguments here.

To present Maimonides' views on religious language, we must undertake a threefold task: we shall first examine a passage from the *Treatise on the Art of Logic* in which Maimonides analyses the various ways in which terms may signify; we shall then discuss how he uses the distinctions of the *Treatise* in the *Guide* to show that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms occurring in Scripture must be taken in a spiritual sense; and, finally, we shall consider the reasons which brought him to his position that accidental attributes predicated of God must be interpreted as attributes of action, and essential attributes as negations or negations of privations.[8] By way of conclusion we shall discuss how Maimonides' account of divine attributes influenced his attitude towards prayer.

I

Maimonides, as he tells his reader, wrote the *Treatise on the Art of Logic* at the request of someone who was versed in the juridical sciences and the clarity and eloquence of the Arabic language and desired to gain some familiarity with basic logical terms. As Mubahat Türker, the editor of the full Arabic text of the *Treatise* has pointed out,[9] Maimonides drew upon four Alfarabian *opuscula* for his exposition. While the *Treatise* is thus a rather conventional summary of the logic of the day, it is of help in clarifying certain passages of the *Guide*.

Of special interest for our investigation is a section of chapter 13 of the *Treatise* in which Maimonides discusses the three basic significations that 'words' or 'terms' may have. Terms, he holds, may be distinct (*mutabayyina*), synonymous (*murādifa*), or equivocal (*mushtiraka*).[10] When different words have different meanings—water, fire, tree, for example—they are distinct. Here Maimonides simply points out that individuals, species, and genera are each called by their own terms. When different words have the same meaning—for

[8] For the distinction between these two terms, see below, pp. 187–90.

[9] See M. Türker, 'Musa b. Maymun'un Makāla fi Ṣinā'at al-Mantik'i', *Publications of the Faculty of Letters, Istanbul University, Review of the Institute of Islamic Studies*, 3/1–2 (1956–60), 58–9 n. 17; also A. Hyman, 'The Liberal Arts and Jewish Philosophy', in *Arts libéraux et philosophie au moyen âge* (Montreal–Paris, 1969), 101–2.

[10] See *Maimonides' Treatise on Logic*, ed. and trans. I. Efros (New York, 1938), 59. This classification applies to 'all languages'.

example, Arabic *al-jamal* and *al-ba'īr*, both of which mean 'camel', or the Hebrew *adam*, *ish*, and *enosh*, all of which mean 'man', they are synonymous. When the same word has several meanings it is 'equivocal'. Since the notion of 'distinct' terms is rather trivial, and since terms applied to God and creatures can hardly by synonymous, only equivocal terms need to be considered here.

For Maimonides, the term 'equivocal' has two senses: generic and specific. In its generic sense, the term has the meaning that has already been mentioned, namely, it refers to any term that has different meanings in different contexts. In this sense it refers to any non-univocal or oblique use, the conditions of which are that the same term should appear in two or more propositions and that there should be some similarity and some difference in its varying uses.

Having defined the term 'equivocal' in its generic sense, Maimonides proceeds to divide it into six species. That this division is not exhaustive becomes clear from a comparison with a parallel passage in Averroes' *Epitome of the Categories* in which the Muslim philosopher presents a longer list of 'specific' equivocal terms.[11] The six kinds that Maimonides lists are: (*a*) completely equivocal terms (*al-mushtiraka al-maḥḍat al-ishtirāk*), (*b*) univocal terms (*al-mutawāṭi'a*), (*c*) amphibolous terms (*al-mushakkika*), (*d*) terms used in general and in particular (*mā yuqāl bi-'umūm wa-khuṣūṣ*), (*e*) metaphorical terms (*al-musta'āra*), and (*f*) extended terms (*al-manqūla*).[12] If one examines Maimonides' sixfold division and compares it with the relevant passages in the *Guide*, one finds that three of the specific kinds of 'equivocal' predications are useful for interpreting anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God, while three are not. Univocal terms, such as the term 'animal' applied to man, horse, scorpion, and fish, are inapplicable to God since they refer to a common genus or difference; but God and his creatures do not share a common genus or difference. Similarly, terms used in general and particular, examples of which are the Arabic *kawkab* and the Hebrew *kokhav*, which in their general sense refer to any star and in their particular sense to Mercury, cannot be applied to God, since they refer to a genus and one of its species; but God and his creatures cannot have that relation. Finally,

[11] Heb., *Kol Meleket Higgayon* (Riva di Trento, 1560), 2ᵛ–3ᵛ; Latin, *Aristotelis Opera cum Averrois Commentariis* (Venice, 1562–74), i. 2*b*, 36ᵛ–37ᵛ; repr. Frankfurt, 1962. For a shorter list, see al-Ghazālī, *Maqāṣid al-Falāsifa*, ed. S. Dunya (Cairo, 1961), 42–3. Cf. S. Rosenberg, 'Signification of Names in Medieval Jewish Logic' (Heb.), *Iyyun*, 27 (1976–7), 105–44.

[12] See Efros, *Maimonides' on Logic*, 59.

extended terms, such as the Arabic word *ṣalāt* and the Hebrew word *tefillah*, which at first referred to any request and afterwards to prayer, a specific request, are inapplicable to God since these terms are related as a species to one of its members; but God and his creatures cannot have this relation.

This brings us to the three specific 'equivocal' terms that can be applied to God. The first of these are completely equivocal terms, an example of which is *'ayin*, which in both Arabic and Hebrew refers to the eye as well as to the fountain. Completely equivocal terms have only a name in common and they are the most likely candidates for the interpretation of attributes applied to God. It should be noted, however, that while such terms have nothing in common but the name, each of these terms has it own definition or description.[13] Then there are amphibolous terms, such as the term 'man' applied to Zayd, the corpse of a man and the picture of a man, which have in common the appearance or the shape of a human being, but this common factor is an accidental property and hence does not constitute their essence. Finally, there are metaphorical terms, such as the Arabic *al-asad* and the Hebrew *aryeh*, whose first meaning refers to the lion but is then transferred to the description of a courageous man. In this case the term has a fixed usage in its original meaning and is then transferred to another object in which it does not have a permanent meaning. As with amphibolous terms, the common factor in metaphorical terms is not the essences of the things compared but some accidental property. It should be stressed that while in the exegetical context Maimonides concedes that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic attributes applied to God may be understood as amphibolous and metaphorical terms, he excludes these uses from his philosophic account.[14]

II

In his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides discusses language about God in two contexts: one exegetical (*Guide*, i. 1–49), the other

[13] Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, 1, 1*a*, 1–6: 'Things are said to be named "equivocally" when, though they have a common name, the definition corresponding with the name differs for each. Thus, a real man and a figure in a picture can both lay claim to the name "animal"; yet these are equivocally so named, for, though they have a common name, the definition corresponding with the name differs for each. For should anyone define in what sense each is an animal, his definition in one case will be appropriate to that case only.'

[14] See *Guide*, i. 56.

philosophical (*Guide*, i. 50–70). Maimonides' great concern with the correct understanding of scriptural terms applied to God emerges from the very beginning of the *Guide* when, in the Introduction,[15] he writes: 'The first purpose of this Treatise [the *Guide*] is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in the books of prophecy.' And using the enumeration of the *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, he goes on to state: 'some of these terms are "equivocal" (*mushtarika*), . . . others are "metaphorical" (*musta'āra*), . . . and others are "amphibolous" (*mushakkika*)'.[16] In each of these cases the ignorant masses take the term in an inappropriate sense, and Maimonides undertakes to correct their mistakes by providing the right interpretation.

In devoting most of the first forty-nine chapters of the *Guide* to matters of exegesis,[17] Maimonides addresses not only the philosophic audience for which the *Guide* was primarily intended, but also the masses, the beginners in speculation, and those rabbinic scholars who were only engaged in the legalistic study of the Torah.[18] Pursuing his programme of the philosophic enlightenment of these, Maimonides shows these non-philosophers that the mere comparison of scriptural texts reveals that the same term may have different meanings, so that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God, interpreted correctly, can be seen to have a figurative sense. In taking this stance, Maimonides does not speak primarily as a philosopher, but he places himself, as Leo Strauss has noted,[19] in the line of traditional biblical exegetes who attempted to discover the meaning of the text through careful philological and contextual analysis.

While the details of Maimonides' method and its backgrounds still require monographic exploration, some of its principles are clear enough. There are, Maimonides notes, scriptural terms, which, never denoting a corporeal quality, are most appropriately applied to God; and there are others which, always denoting a corporeal quality, can

[15] Arab., p. 2; Heb., p. 4; Eng., p. 5. [16] Ibid.

[17] Concerning the non-exegetical chapter, Maimonides writes: 'We shall include in this Treatise some chapters in which there will be no mention of an equivocal term. Such a chapter will be preparatory for another, or it will hint at one of the meanings of an equivocal term that I might not mention explicitly in that place, or it will explain one of the parables or hint at the fact that a certain story is a parable' *Guide* i. Introd. (Arab., p. 6; Heb., p. 9; Eng., p. 10). Leo Strauss points out in his 'How to Begin to Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*', in *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, pp. xxiv–xxv, that 30 of the first 49 chapters are lexicographic.

[18] *Guide*, i. Introd. (Arab., p. 2; Heb., p. 4; Eng., 5). Cf. Strauss, 'How to Begin', pp. xv ff.

[19] See Strauss, 'How to Begin', p. xxiii.

never be applied to him. An example of the former is provided in *Guide*, i. 1, by the verse 'Let us make man in our image (*be-ẓalmenu*) and likeness (*bi-demutenu*)' (Gen. 1: 26). There were some, Maimonides comments, who inferred from this verse that God must have a body, since this could be the only likeness between man and God. On the contrary, Maimonides interprets, the term *ẓelem* never refers to the appearance or shape of anything, but only to its natural form or essence. There is a Hebrew term, *to'ar*, which exclusively refers to the shape or the appearance of something, but this term is never applied to God. Similarly, in *Guide*, i. 3, he points out that the term 'shape' (*tavnit*), which can only have a corporeal meaning, is never applied to God, while a similar term 'figure' (*temunah*), which has several meanings, is applied to him. Still further, he states in *Guide*, i. 26,[20] Scripture describes God only by means of attributes considered perfections by the masses; never by means of attributes considered by them deficiencies or privations, such as eating, drinking, sleeping, or being ill. The very terminology of Scripture, then, shows a sensitivity to nuances of language by never applying inappropriate language to God.

But since 'the Torah speaks in the language of the sons of men', not in the language of philosophers, it cannot avoid language that is anthropomorphic and anthropopathic in its literal sense. The exegetical comparison of texts reveals that such language is 'equivocal', and that it can be interpreted to yield non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropopathic meanings. Keeping in mind the distinctions of the *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, Maimonides shows that such terms may be predicated according to complete equivocation, amphibolously, or metaphorically.

To illustrate Maimonides' thesis, let us turn to two examples: one of completely equivocal, the other of amphibolous predication. Maimonides provides an example of the former in *Guide*, i. 13, where he discusses the term 'standing' (*'amidah*). In one of its senses this term refers to a bodily posture, in another it signifies 'to abstain' or 'to desist', and in a third it points to something stable or endurable. The first meaning is illustrated by the verse 'when he [Joseph] stood before Pharaoh' (Gen. 41: 46), the second by the verse 'and she [Leah] left off bearing' (Gen. 29: 35), and the third by the verse 'that they [the deeds of purchase] may stand many days' (Jer. 32: 14). Turning to the verse

[20] See also *Guide*, . 46, 47.

'His [God's] righteousness standeth (*'omedet*) forever' (Ps. 111: 3), Maimonides argues that whenever the term 'standing' is predicated of God, it can only have the third sense, in this case, 'His [God's] righteousness if permanent and enduring'.

An example of amphibolous predication is provided in *Guide*, i. 4, where Maimonides discusses three terms for 'seeing'—*ra'oh*, *habbit*, and *ḥazoh*. In their primary meaning, all these terms refer to sensory apprehension, that is, seeing by means of the eye; but this meaning is transferred to intellectual apprehension. An example of the first meaning is provided by Gen. 29: 2: 'and he [Jacob] saw, and behold a well in the field' (Eccles. 1: 16); 'yea my heart has seen much wisdom and knowledge' is an example of the second. Whenever the term 'seeing' is applied to 'seeing God', as in Kgs. 22: 19, 'I saw the Lord', it can only refer to intellectual apprehension.

From what has been said so far, it follows that scriptural terms signify completely equivocally, amphibolously, or metaphorically, and that the exegetical application of these distinctions yields a non-anthropomorphic and non-anthropopathic sense for anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms predicated of God.

III

While the exegetical approach might be adequate for the enlightenment of the masses, and while it may have a preparatory function for philosophers, the problem of divine attributes is more complex. Maimonides devotes *Guide*, i. 50–70 to the discussion of its philosophic aspects. But in this section he is not concerned with establishing by means of arguments which attributes may be predicated of God, but rather with giving a philosophically adequate account of those which in fact occur in Scripture.[21]

By way of preliminary observation it should be noted that, absolutely speaking, Maimonides takes a rather dim view of the ability of human language to convey significant truths about God and he prefers silent

[21] In *Guide*, ii. 1, Maimonides offers demonstrative arguments that God exists, is one, and is incorporeal. By contrast Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae*, i, qq. 2–26, *passim*, presents arguments for a whole series of attributes that can be predicated of God.

For a discussion of the content and structure of this section of the *Guide*, see E. Schweid, *Ta'am we-Haqqashah* (Ramat Gan, 1970), 105–48.

contemplation to speaking about him. He expresses this opinion when, discussing divine attributes in *Guide*, i. 57, he writes:

> These subtle notions [divine attributes] that very clearly elude the minds cannot be considered through the instrumentality of the customary words, which are the greatest among the causes leading unto error. For the bounds of expression in all languages are very narrow indeed, so that we cannot represent this notion to ourselves except through a certain looseness of expression.[22]

Even more explicitly he writes in *Guide*, i. 59:

> The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms (65: 2) 'Silence is praise to Thee', which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to You is praise . . . Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate—just as the perfect ones have enjoined us when they say (Ps. 4: 5): 'Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still, Selah'.[23]

While the silent contemplation of God thus seems to be Maimonides' ideal goal, it is a fact that Scripture describes God in human language and that men pray to him and speak about him. Maimonides still has to describe how human language functions correctly concerning God.

It has already been seen that as a first step towards the correct understanding of language about God, scriptural terms ascribing to God corporeality, affects, or likeness to creatures must be shown to be figurative through interpretation of the biblical texts.[24] But to be philosophically correct, propositions about God must meet two further conditions: (*a*) they must signify literally[25] and in accordance with the customary usages of human language; and (*b*) since God is one, attributes forming predicates of these propositions must not introduce any multiplicity into him.

That God is 'one' was axiomatic for Maimonides the believing Jew and competent philosopher. But what does the proposition 'God is one' mean? In its obvious sense it seems to signify that God is unique, and this is the sense in which the masses understand it. But for philosophers this meaning is not enough, for something can be unique and yet be composite. If, then, God is one, he must be not only unique, but also simple or non-composite. That God lacks any physical

[22] Arab., p. 90; Heb., p. 113; Eng., 132–33.
[23] Arab., p. 95; Heb., p. 119; Eng., 139–40.
[24] See above, pp. 179–82 and n. 5.
[25] The attributes predicated of God and human beings cannot signify metaphorically or amphibolously, but only according to complete equivocation.

composition is evident from his incorporeality, but beyond that he must also lack any kind of ontological composition.[26] It is the latter proposition that is central to Maimonides' philosophic account of divine attributes.

Before proceeding to the next step in Maimonides' exposition, we must turn briefly to some points of logic and ontology. Logic, for Maimonides, was subject-predicate logic, that is, it dealt with propositions of the form '*S* is *P*'.[27] That in all propositions of this kind the predicate is linguistically distinct from the subject is clear enough, but is it also ontologically distinct? The answer to this question depends on one's conception of the metaphysical status of attributes that form the predicates of propositions.

Attributes that form the predicates of propositions are of two kinds: essential and accidental.[28] Essential attributes are those the denial of which entails the denial of the existence of their subject. For example, if in the proposition 'Socrates is living', the predicate 'living' is denied, the existence of Socrates is denied thereby. Accidental attributes, on the other hand, are those the denial of which does not entail the denial of the existence of their subject. If, for example, in the proposition 'this table is brown', the predicate 'brown' is denied, the existence of the table is not denied thereby. For it may be the case that the table is brown at the present time, but it remains the same table even if it is painted green at some future time.

That accidental attributes introduce ontological multiplicity into the subject of which they are predicated was generally admitted by medieval philosophers, but they differed concerning essential attributes. There were those who maintained—Averroes among the Muslims and

[26] *Guide*, i. 51: 'For there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity or multiplication of notions, but one notion only; so that from whatever angle you regard it and from whatever point of view you consider it, you will find that it is one, not divided in any way and by any cause into two notions; and you will not find therein any multiplicity either in the thing as it is outside of the mind or as it is in the mind' (Arab., p. 76; Heb., p. 96; Eng., p. 113). Also, *Guide*, i. 52: 'He [God], may He be exalted, is one in all respects; no multiplicity should be posited in Him' (Arab., p. 80; Heb., p. 101; Eng., p. 119).

[27] *Treatise on the Art of Logic*, chs. 1–2.

[28] Of this general classification, Maimonides speaks of 'essential attributes' (*al-ṣifāt al-dhātiyya/ha-to'arim ha-'aẓmiyyim*)—denying that they can be predicated affirmatively of God—but he does not speak of 'accidental attributes'. Instead, he speaks of 'attributes of actions' (*ṣifāt al-af'āl* [*fi'liyya*], *to'arc ha-pe'ulot* [*pe'ilut*]), sometimes of 'attributes' (*ṣifāt/to'arim*), and in *Guide*, i. 54 he identifies such attributes with the biblical term *derakhim* and the rabbinic term *middot*. His reason seems to be that Scripture only uses those accidental attributes that can be understood as 'attributes of action'.

Gersonides among the Jews—that essential attributes are explicative, that is, they explain the meaning of the subject, so that they do not introduce any ontological multiplicity. According to this view, essential attributes can be predicated affirmatively of God, though it must still be shown how they differ in their application to God and creatures.[29] Others—Avicenna among the Muslims and Maimonides among the Jews—held that essential attributes, no less than accidental ones, are expansive, that is, they add information about the subject, so that they introduce ontological multiplicity. Hence, they cannot be applied to God with any positive signification. Agreeing with Avicenna, Maimonides writes in *Guide*, i. 57: 'It is known that existence (*al-wujūd*) [and one may add, any other essential attribute] is an accident attaching to what exists. For this reason it is something (*ma'nā*) that is superadded to the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of what exists.'[30] Having affirmed then that neither accidental nor essential attributes can be predicated affirmatively of God, Maimonides must show that propositions about God containing affirmative attributes as their predicates must be interpreted as propositions that say something significant and correct about him, yet do so without applying attributes that signify affirmatively.

For the case of accidental attributes predicated of God, Maimonides holds that they must be understood as attributes of action.[31] In the case of human beings, such attributes must meet two conditions: someone possessing them must (*a*) have certain dispositions, either habits or affects,[32] and (*b*) perform or be able to perform habitually actions of a certain kind. Since dispositions introduce ontological multiplicity into

[29] Gersonides, for example, maintains that essential attributes are predicated of God and human beings according to priority and posteriority, a kind of amphibolous predication. See *Wars of the Lord*, iii. 3 (Heb. edn. Leipzig, 1866, pp. 132–7); Eng. *Gersonides on God's Knowledge*, trans. and com. N. Samuelson (Toronto, 1977), 182–224.

[30] See A. Altmann, 'Essence and Existence in Maimonides', *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, NY, 1969), 108–27.

[31] For the logic of attributes of action, see H. A. Wolfson, 'The Aristotelian Predicables and Maimonides' Division of Attributes', in I. Twersky and G. H. Williams (eds.), *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ii (Cambridge, Mass., 1977), 161–94, esp. 187–94.

[32] Maimonides' terminology is not very precise. For the case of human beings, he sometimes describes these attributes as dispositions (*hay'āt/tekhunot*), sometimes as habits (*malakāt/kinyanim*), and sometimes as affects (*infi'āl/hipa'alut*). Other terms used by him are moral qualities (*akhlāq/middot*) and dispositions of the soul (*hay'āt nafsāniyya/tekhunot naf̣shiyyot*). On balance, one gains the impression that 'disposition' is a generic term whose species are habits and affects. In *Guide*, i. 52 his examples are habits (see below, n. 35); in *Guide*, i. 54 they are affects.

the subject to which they belong,[33] they cannot be predicated of God. It only remains that accidental attributes in his case must be understood as referring to his actions. While the knowledge of actions is more limited than knowledge of dispositions and actions together, it has the advantage, in the case of God, that it does not impose any multiplicity.

Maimonides' position rests on two principles: (*a*) the relation of cause and effect can exist without there being a likeness between the two,[34] and (*b*) knowledge of the effect can provide some knowledge of the cause without providing any knowledge of the essential nature of the cause or any of its properties. Let us illustrate by means of an example.[35] Suppose that (*a*) a being *X* exists in an otherwise empty room; (*b*) wood, nails, and other materials are introduced into the room; (*c*) nothing miraculous happens in the room; and (*d*) after some time a finished table is handed out of the room. From these conditions we can infer that *X* has the ability to make a table, though we do not gain any knowledge of what kind of being *X* is or of any property that enables *X* to make a table. Expressing this point, Maimonides writes in *Guide*, i. 52:

> I do not intend to signify by the words, His action, the habitus of an art[36] that belongs to him who is described . . . But I intend to signify by the words, his action, the action that he who is described has performed . . . Now this kind of attribute is remote from the essence of the thing of which it is predicated. For this reason it is permitted that this kind should be predicated of God.[37]

Having shown that accidental attributes predicated of God must be interpreted as attributes of action, Maimonides might have gone on to affirm that essential attributes should be understood as attributes of action as well. However, he never seems to have considered this

[33] A second reason is that dispositions imply change in that to which they belong. God cannot be subject to change.

[34] In the *Guide*, Maimonides considers two kinds of causality: that in which there is a likeness between the cause and the effects, and that in which there is no likeness between the two. The former is divisible into a cause that produces one effect—for example, the motion of the hand which produces motion in the stick it moves; and a cause that produces many effects, such as the heat of fire which bleaches and blackens, burns and cooks, makes hard and melts (see ibid. i. 53). God, who is a cause of the second kind, produces many effects and is unlike any of the effects he produces.

[35] This example is based on *Guide*, i. 52, where in speaking of habits productive of certain actions, Maimonides uses the examples of carpenter, smith, builder, and weaver. For examples of effects, see ibid. i. 54.

[36] *Malakat al-ṣinā'a/qinyan ha-melakha.*

[37] Arab., p. 80; Heb., p. 101; Eng., pp. 118–19.

possibility.[38] (Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae*, i. qu. 13, a. 2 cites such an opinion in the name of Alain of Lille.)[39] Similarly, he might have held that essential attributes can be understood as amphibolous or metaphorical terms, but this possibility is rejected by him as well. For, as has been seen, such terms introduce multiplicity into God and, in addition, they require that there is some likeness between God and creatures.[40] It only remains that such terms are predicated of God and creatures according to complete equivocation, and that they signify by way of negation or negation of privation. In *Guide*, i. 58 Maimonides lists eight essential attributes together with their negated privations; these are: (*a*) existing–not-existing, (*b*) living–not dead, (*c*) incorporeal,[41] (*d*) eternal–not caused, (*e*) powerful–not powerless, (*f*) knowing–not ignorant or inattentive, (*g*) willing–not negligent, and (*h*) one–not many.

When Maimonides[42] describes in general fashion how essential attributes predicated of God are to be understood, he maintains that they must be understood as negations.[43] But, speaking more technically,

[38] To Maimonides it seems self-evident that there is a difference between essential attributes and dispositions. Essential attributes describe what something is, not what it does. He writes in *Guide*, i. 58: 'It has thus become clear to you that every attribute that we predicate of Him [God] is an attribute of action or if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of His essence and not of His action, it signifies the negation of the attribute in question' (Arab., p. 93; Heb., p. 116; Eng., p. 136).

[39] See *Basic Writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, ed. A. C. Pegis (New York, 1945), i. 114 n. 9. For a discussion of Aquinas' account of divine attributes, see J. F. Wippel, 'Quidditative Knowledge of God according to Thomas Aquinas', in L. P. Gerson (ed.), *Graceful Reason: Essays in Ancient and Medieval Philosophy Presented to Joseph Owens* (Toronto, 1983), 273–99 and refs.

[40] *Guide*, i. 56: 'Do not deem that they [the essential attributes] are used amphibolously. For when terms are used amphibolously they are predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect to some notion . . . Would that I knew accordingly whence the likeness could come so that the divine and the human attributes could be comprised in the same definition and be used in a univocal sense' (Arab., p. 89; Heb., p. 112; Eng., p. 131).

This argument, in fact, would be Maimonides' reply to philosophers such as Gersonides and Aquinas who hold that essential attributes are to be predicated of God affirmatively and that they can be understood as amphibolous or analogical terms.

[41] In Maimonides' list, this term does not have an opposite. H. A. Wolfson, 'Maimonides on Negative Attributes', *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ii. 205, bottom, suggests that 'God is pure form' would be a proposition containing such an opposite. Maimonides does not list it because it is not in common usage. This interpretation seems to me rather forced, as my interpretation on p. 188 below tries to show.

[42] The discussion that follows is based on Wolfson's 'Maimonides on Negative Attributes'.

[43] *Salb/shelilah.*

he states in *Guide*, i. 58 that they must be understood as 'negations of privations'.[44] Since, however, privations are of different kinds, he indicates the kind of privation he has in mind by adding: 'one sometimes denies with reference to a thing something that cannot fittingly exist in it. Thus we say of a wall that it is not endowed with sight [not seeing].'[45]

In using the example of the wall that cannot see,[46] Maimonides alludes to a distinction between two kinds of privations: (*a*) the absence of some property (or habit) that can naturally be there, and (*b*) the absence of some property (or habit) that cannot naturally be there. An example of the former is provided in the proposition 'the man is blind'; an example of the latter 'the wall is not seeing'. In the case of the man, an ability is lacking that men ordinarily possess; while in the case of the wall, the property being negated is one that walls can never possess. Privations of the second kind exclude the subject of which they are predicated from a certain class of beings or properties. Since God can never have any properties (or habits) that are affirmatively predicated of him, the privation that is negated of him must be of the second kind. Thus, when the proposition 'God is wise' is understood as 'God is not ignorant', it is meant to exclude God from the class of ignorant beings.

One further distinction remains to be made. Linguistically, privative attributes predicated of God are of two kinds: (*a*) those which are negated of God, such as 'ignorant' in the proposition 'God is not ignorant', and (*b*) those which are affirmed of God, as 'not corporeal (incorporeal)' in the proposition 'God is not corporeal (incorporeal)'.[47] Since propositions of the latter kind in their literal signification serve to exclude God from certain classes of properties, Maimonides does not devote a special discussion to them. It is only for the first kind that Maimonides has to show that they are to be understood in the same manner. It is probably because the two kinds of privative attributes signify in the same fashion that Maimonides finds it possible to include 'incorporeal' in his list of eight essential attributes.

[44] *Salb 'admihā/shelilat he'adero.* [45] Arab., p. 93; Heb., p. 116; Eng., p. 136.

[46] For greater clarity, I have simplified the terminology applying to the two kinds of privation. The distinction beween them goes back to Aristotle, who calls the first kind 'privation' (*sterēsis*), the second 'negation' (*apophasis*). Alexander of Aphrodisias provided the example of the wall that is not seeing. In Maimonides' terminology the first kind of privation is called *'adm* (*he'ader*); the second, *salb* (*shelilah*). Noted that the negation mentioned in this context differs from that in the phrase 'negation of privation'. See Wolfson, 'Maimonides on Negative Attributes', 207–13.

[47] To describe propositions of this form, Wolfson uses the term 'affirmation of privation'; see 'Maimonides on Negative Attributes', 213–16.

The distinction that was insignificant for Maimonides became crucial for Aquinas,[48] for when Aquinas speaks of divine attributes that are to be understood as negation, he only admits private attributes of the second kind. Essential attributes, by contrast, cannot simply be understood as negations; they must signify positively in some way. For Aquinas they signify according to analogy.

But does negative language about God provide any knowledge of him? Maimonides concedes that affirmative attributes provide a more adequate account of the essence and attributes of an object; but as the following example illustrates, negative attributes provide some knowledge as well (*Guide*, i. 60). Suppose someone knows that a ship exists, but does not know the object to which the term applies. Let us now imagine that someone knows that a ship is not an accident, another that it is not a mineral, a third that it is not a plant, and so forth; as the negations are multiplied, one comes closer and closer to knowing what a ship is, though the ship is never known in positive fashion. 'It is clear', writes Maimonides, 'that the last individual [in the example] has nearly achieved, by means of these negative attributes, the representation of the ship as it is.'[49] From all this it follows that we can say something significant about God's essential attributes without assigning to them affirmative signification.[50]

One question remains. If essential attributes are understood as negations, would it not be sufficient to affirm generally that God is unlike any of his creatures? In that case, however, it would follow that 'Moses our Master and Solomon [the wisest of men] did not apprehend anything different from what a single individual from among the pupils apprehends' (*Guide*, i. 59).[51] This, however, is not so.

[48] *Summa Theologiae*, i, qu. 13, a. 2. See H. A. Wolfson, 'St Thomas on Divine Attributes', in *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, ii. 497–524, esp. 497–502, 514–24.

[49] Arab., p. 98; Heb., p. 122; Eng., p. 143.

[50] This point may be further illustrated by the following example. Suppose it has been demonstrated that God is incorporeal. This does not provide any positive knowledge about God's essence or his attributes. However, should someone claim that some corporeal being (e.g. the sun or the moon) is God, knowledge that God is excluded from the class of corporeal beings allows us to counter this claim.

Maimonides' position was criticized even by medieval philosophers, for example Gersonides and Aquinas (see above, nn. 29, 48). For a recent discussion of whether the interpretation of divine attributes as negations provides any significant knowledge about God, see the exchange between G. Englebretsen, 'The Logic of Negative Theology', *The New Scholasticism*, 47 (1973), 228–32, and J. A. Buijs, 'Comments on Maimonides' Negative Theology', ibid. 49 (1975), 87–93.

[51] Arab., pp. 93–4; Heb., p. 117; Eng., pp. 137–8.

For just as each additional affirmative attribute increases the knowledge of that which is described, so each additional negation 'particularizes'[52] God more and more. Moreover, it is not enough to simply deny certain attributes of God; a philosopher must know by apodictic proof why a given attribute is to be denied. The acquisition of this knowledge requires time and training, as Maimonides explains when he writes in *Guide*, i. 59:

> A man sometimes labours for many years in order to understand some science . . . so that he should have certainty with regard to this science, whereas the only conclusion from this science in its entirety consists in our negating with reference to God some notion of which it has been learned by means of a demonstration that it can not possibly be applied to God.[53]

While the terms discussed so far are attributes predicated of God, there is one name, namely the tetragrammaton, which signifies his essence. Perhaps indicating the notion of necessary existence, this name has no association with any terms applied to creatures. 'This name', writes Maimonides in *Guide*, i. 61, 'gives a clear and unequivocal indication of God's essence.'[54]

It may finally be asked: what are the implications of Maimonides' rigorous conception of language concerning God for its religious use? Is it not the case that the believer who reads Scripture and prays means something more in saying that God is one and living than that he is not many and not dead? Would one not expect that language about God signifies positively in some way? Ever the purist, Maimonides would reply that positive predication introduces multiplicity into God and for that reason must be avoided at any cost. It is better to say little about God and say it correctly than to say much and mislead. How consequent he was becomes apparent in *Guide*, i. 59 when he inveighs against 'poets and preachers' who increase language about God, and when he approvingly cites the story of Rabbi Ḥaninah (*Berakhot*, 33*b*) who chided someone who, in the '*amidah*, added to the traditionally sanctioned phrase 'God the great, valiant, and terrible' the words 'the mighty, the strong, the tremendous'. The story of Rabbi Ḥaninah was also in Maimonides' mind when in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Tefillah*, ix, 7 (see commentaries ad loc.) he writes that in one's devotion

[52] *Tukhassis/yityaḥed.*

[53] Arab., p. 94; Heb., p. 118; Eng., p. 138.

[54] Arab., p. 100; Heb., p. 125; Eng., p. 147. Maimonides' theory of how proper names signify remains to be worked out.

> one should not multiply the attributes of God saying God the great, the valiant, the terrible, the strong, the mighty, the powerful, since it is not in man's power to exhaust His praises. One should only recite the attributes used by Moses, peace upon him, that is, God the great, the valiant, the terrible.

This passage from *Mishneh Torah* provides one more example of the confluence of Maimonides' philosophic and halakhic views.[55]

[55] Cf. I. Twersky, 'Some Non-halakhic Aspects of the Mishneh Torah', in Altmann *Jewish Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, 95–118; id., *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)*, (New Haven–London, 1980), 356–514, *passim*.