

GUIDE 1:60 NEGATION ABUSERS

This chapter concludes Maimonides' treatment of the divine attributes, chapters 1:50 to 1:60. He summarizes his conclusions, and provides parables (*mashalim*) to further clarify his negative theology. He also discovers a new target: attributists who use negations to support their theology.

SUMMARY

Recognizing that he has still not made himself clear, he returns with imaginative examples. His purely philosophical articulation apparently requires poetic enhancement. These examples do not achieve his declared purpose, the justification of negative theology.

A real negative theology implies an unknowable and unapproachable God. Maimonides, on the contrary, strongly asserts that the student can approach God and attain knowledge. I take these statements, not his appeals to negative theology, as his true message. The negations are the means to achieve this end.

This chapter introduces two new ideas. The first new idea is about logic. The affirmative attributes, he argues, are neither mistaken nor heretical; rather, they crowd out all belief in God. This logic of attributism results in the attributist unconsciously excluding God from his thought. This idea arose from Maimonides' recognition that theologians could misuse negative theology while still approving affirmative attributes.

The second new idea is about grammar. Affirmations about God make Him the subject of a sentence in which the affirmation is the predicate. However, God is not a grammatical subject that would support a predicate. Such a sentence says nothing since the subject refers to nothing.

Our chapter bridges into a series of chapters on the names of God, 1:61 to 1:64. We study the attributes in order to understand these names. The name of God is the core subject of Jewish mysticism. In these chapters, Maimonides identifies his own mystical path and derides vulgar competitors.

As we conclude the subject of attributism, keep his real understanding of the meaning of negative theology in mind. It is the *interpretational meditation* on the attributes found in the Bible. This meditation is the path to unification with the intellect we somehow share with God.

THE LAW OF THE EXCLUDED MIDDLE

Maimonides makes the following argument. The positive "essential" attributes carry different meaning for God and for us. But since human language cannot voice what they mean for God, the result is that we do not *know* what we mean when we attach attributes to God. Our statements about God appear to be meaningless.

In logic, a meaningless sentence has no value in a syllogism. "God is wise" could be such a meaningless sentence because it is essentially tautologous. It is tautologous because God's wisdom is identical to His essence: "God is wise" only means "God is God." By saying "God is wise," all I can possibly mean is that *He is wise but not with wisdom as we know it*. This way we can draw meaning from the tautology. The result is the formula, "God is wise, but not through wisdom." Until now, it was Maimonides' approved dictum. He now takes a radical step past this position.

Now he argues that the formula "God is wise but not with wisdom" is contradictory. He mentioned this contradiction before, but only to conclude wearily that language left us in the lurch. This time he argues that the sentence violates the *Law of Contradiction* and therefore says nothing at all. The *Law of the Excluded Middle* then removes any possible lingering sense that there may yet be meaning in "God is wise but not with wisdom"

since there is no mean between wisdom and the denial of wisdom. Either God has an eternal essential attribute of wisdom as His partner or He does not. As we will see, the attributists could use even this negative formula to articulate their affirmative attributes.

ABUSE OF NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

By this turn, by rejecting his own formula “God is wise but not through wisdom,” Maimonides means to forestall both Kalām and Jewish abuse of the *via negativa*. H. A. Wolfson brilliantly states the problem:

“It is not at all certain, he (Maimonides) argues, that the understanding of affirmative predicates as negations will safeguard one against the misconception that such predicates signify the existence of real attributes in God, *for one may take such predicates to mean negations and still believe that they express real attributes* in God. Take, for instance, ‘those who believe in attributes,’ that is to say, the Ash’arites [the mainstream Muslim theologians of the *Kalām*]. According to their belief, the attributes are all eternal like God himself. From this Maimonides infers that, according to the Ash’arites, too, every perfection predicated of God affirmatively ‘is not of the same kind of perfection as that imagined by us, but is used only as an equivocal term,’ just as Maimonides himself has said about his own conception of predicates, and hence, again, as in Maimonides’ own conception of predicates, each affirmative predicate, in the Ash’arite theory, ‘does necessarily amount to a negation.’ Consequently, when the Ash’arites say that ‘God is knowing according to knowledge,’ inasmuch as the knowledge which they predicate of God is *an eternal attribute and hence unlike our own knowledge*, they really mean, says Maimonides, that ‘God is knowing *not* according to a knowledge that is like our own.’ Thus, if you are an Ash’arite, ‘you necessarily arrive at negations, and, while you do not obtain a true knowledge of an essential attribute, you are led to the establishment of a *plurality* in God and to the belief that He is one essence which has unknown attributes.’ The point which Maimonides wishes to establish by this argument is that *the use of affirmative predicates, even when understood as negations, might lead one to a belief in the existence of real attributes* like those maintained by the Ash’arites, and consequently he warns his reader that ‘in the description of God by affirmative predicates there is a great danger.’” (“Maimonides on Negative Attributes,” *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, v. 1, 225-5; my emphases. Wolfson shows that even Jewish theologians could misuse negations: *Repercussions of the Kalām in Jewish Philosophy*, Harvard, 1979, 61-74)

The difference appears to be this: Maimonides held wisdom to be absolute and *identical* with God. By contrast, the *Kalām* held wisdom to be *eternal* with God. They did not hold it to be identical with God. They were thus able to argue that God had an eternal partner in the affirmative attribute of wisdom, which they identified with the uncreated eternal *Qur’an*.

UNCONSCIOUS ATHEISM

What are we left with? Maimonides now says that any affirmative predicate applied to God not only means nothing, but also refers to nothing, and removes God entirely from our thoughts. He thrice dramatically emphasizes that the speaker who says “God is wise but not with wisdom” is not erroneous, not contradicting himself, and not committing the heresy of associationism (*shirk: shiṭuf*); rather, the speaker knows *nothing* about God. He has unconsciously removed God from his mind (see below, “Three Parables,” for more on unconscious atheism).

On this subject, Wolfson’s comment is indispensable to understanding:

“The criticism...of both the belief in attributes and the belief in the Trinity, as I have tried to explain elsewhere, is not that these beliefs are polytheistic but rather that they introduce into God a distinction which is logically contradictory to the conception of His unity as meaning absolute simplicity. In another

place (our chapter), trying to define exactly what is wrong with the belief in attributes, he says that he who affirms real attributes of God is not an ‘associator’ (*mushrik: meshattef*), that is, a polytheist, for an associator, he says, is one who takes what is true of one essence and affirms it also of another essence, ‘but the attributes, according to those who believe in them, are not the essence of God but things superadded to His essence,’ that is to say, the attributes are not regarded by them as gods. What is really wrong with the belief in attributes, he then says, is that ‘he who affirms that God has real attributes...has unwittingly denied his belief in the existence of God.’ What he means by this, as may be gathered from his subsequent statements, is that to affirm of God that He has real attributes is a violation of the Law of Contradiction, for it is contradictory to His unity in the sense of absolute simplicity, and, hence, for a believer in the unity of God to affirm that God has real attributes is tantamount to the affirmation that God is both one and not one. Now, according to a view expressed by Maimonides elsewhere, the conception of anything that is in violation of the Law of Contradiction is the conception of an impossibility which has no existence. Consequently, to conceive of God as having attributes is to conceive of an impossibility which has no existence.” (*Repercussions*, 30.)

Although Maimonides seems pleased to advance this position here, what can he mean? For he *does* express positive statements about God, even in this chapter (“necessarily existent,” “absolutely simple,” “knowing with a knowledge that is ever fresh but never changing”), without, apparently, committing unconscious atheism.

Far from being a *deus absconditus* God is blindingly apparent, but we blinded ourselves to Him by the constructions of our imaginations. It is the purpose of the negations to remove these constructions, but the misuse of the negations returns us to the country of the blind.

SUBJECT AND PREDICATE

The other new idea in our chapter is that when we predicate anything of God, we make Him the grammatical subject of a sentence. In the sentence, “God is wise,” “God” is the subject and “is wise” is the predicate. Any time we say something about a thing, that thing is a subject, and what we have said about it is a predicate. Maimonides fights the battle over attributes on the terrain of grammar.

The problem is that if God were a grammatical subject, He would be a member of a class, the class of all grammatical subjects. This is impossible: God is unique and any “class” He is in would be a class of one. “God is wise” is meaningless because it has no subject, or, better put, the subject refers to nothing, and, therefore, the words do not form a sentence.

Furthermore, if God were a subject bearing a predicate He would be *two* things. All definitions combine at least two things, a genus and species, as in the statement that man is a rational animal, *zoon logicon*. But God is indefinable and non-numerically single. When we try to define God, we say *nothing*, for there is no possible thing that can be predicated of Him. This is a lesser corollary of the Law of the Excluded Middle, for that was a claim about logic while this is a claim about language. It fits with Maimonides’ conclusion that language cannot give us truth about God.

UNPACKING A DIFFICULT PARAGRAPH

Wolfson referred, in his two statements above, to an unusually dense and obscure paragraph that forms the dark core of this chapter. He noted, “The argument of this chapter is not clear,” (*Studies*, 224, note 88) referring to this section. Maimonides’ paragraph challenged all of its translators. Still, with what we now know, we can see what bothers him here, though it is subtle.

He begins by stating that there is a “great danger in applying positive attributes to God,” but what he really has in mind is the danger of the attributist misusing negations to apply positive attributes. It is what Wolfson meant

when he said, “one may take such predicates to mean negations and still believe that they express real attributes in God,” which is the very greatest danger, for it undermines Maimonides’ entire project:

“On the other hand, there is a great danger in applying positive attributes to God. For it has been shown that every perfection we could imagine, even if existing in God in accordance with the opinion of those who assert the existence of attributes (the Ash’arite Kalām, but also any other attributists), would in reality not be of the same kind (species, *min*) as that imagined by us, but would only be called by the same name (homonymously, *b’shituf ha-shem*), according to our explanation; it would in fact amount (*ky b’hekhrahk tetze*, you are necessarily brought) to a negation. Suppose, e.g., you say: ‘*He has knowledge, and that knowledge, which admits of no change and of no plurality, embraces many changeable things; His knowledge remains unaltered, while new things are constantly formed; and His knowledge of a thing before it exists, while it exists, and when it has ceased to exist, is the same without the least change,*’ you would thereby declare that ‘His knowledge is not like ours’: and similarly that ‘His existence is not like ours.’ You thus necessarily arrive at some negation (in lieu of affirmations), without obtaining a true conception of an essential attribute (that it is not really an “attribute” but identical with God): on the contrary, you are led to assume that there is a plurality in God, and to believe that He, though one essence, has several unknown attributes (*taarim bilti yaduim*). For if you intend to affirm them, you cannot compare them with those attributes known by us, and they are consequently not of the same kind (species). You are, as it were, brought by the belief in the reality of the attributes, to say that God is one subject of which several things are predicated: though the subject is not like ordinary subjects, and the predicates are not like ordinary predicates. This belief would ultimately lead us to associate other things with God, and not to believe that He is One (*takhlit hasagateinu l’fi dea zu shituf, lo yoter*—Kafih, note 8). For of every subject certain things can undoubtedly be predicated, and although in reality subject and predicate are combined in one thing, by the actual definition they consist of two elements, the notion contained in the subject not being the same as that contained in the predicate. In the course of this treatise it will be proved to you that God cannot be a compound, and that He is simple in the strictest sense of the word. I do not merely declare that he who affirms attributes of God has not sufficient knowledge concerning the Creator, admits some association with God (i.e., that he is an associator, *mshatef*), or conceives Him to be different from what He is: but I say that he unconsciously loses his belief in God.” (Friedlander’s translation, with my parenthetical expansions and italic emphases)

By “associator” he does not mean an attributist, but someone who carries his attributism to the point where he believes that God is in association with some other eternal being or eternal principle, in combination or partnership. It is almost, but not quite, a euphemism for polytheism, such that Pines translates the Arabic *alshirk* (Heb.: *shituf*) as “polytheism” in the second use of the term above.

Maimonides uses the term three times in the above passage, but he uses it ambiguously. In both Hebrew and Arabic *shituf* / *shirk* carries three possible meanings: a partnership, a homonym, or the heresy of associationism. Maimonides purposely deployed the ambiguity, since the first usage, as I showed in parentheses, certainly means “homonym.” Taking that usage as their starting point, the ancient commentators, Efodi and Shem-Tov, and Even-Shmuel among the moderns, understand the term in all three instances to mean “homonym.” They therefore take the whole paragraph to be a warning about the “great danger” of the homonymous use of affirmations.

This is a possible reading, but Pines, Kafih, Friedlander and Schwarz all take *shituf* / *shirk* to mean “associator” in the second and third uses. This seems the better reading, given the surrounding verbiage: *takhlit hasagateinu l’fi dea zu shituf, lo yoter*—Pines renders: “the utmost of our apprehension would be, on the basis of this belief, polytheism, and nothing else” (Jud.Ar.: פינו גאיה דרכנא בהדה אלעקירה אלשרק לא גיד). Granted that Pines went too far here in translating “associationism” as “polytheism,” the typically acerbic Maimonidean touch of *lo yoter*, “nothing else,” together with surrounding remarks point to the more modern reading of “associationism” for the latter two instances of *shirk* / *shituf*.

Since Maimonides saw negation abuse as a dagger to the heart of his entire ideology, he wanted to distinguish it from the merely erroneous use of homonyms. He had spent most of the first section of the Guide teaching us about the necessity of interpreting biblical language homonymously. Now it appears that attributists could nod their smiling faces in agreement with him, all the while maintaining that, *of course*, God comes equipped with an eternal attribute of wisdom inliterated in the Qur'an or incarnated in Jesus, it's just not like other attributes and predicates. When Maimonides calls this "associationism, and nothing else," it is his angry reaction to this abuse of homonyms.

This would not really be so bad if we were only talking about the Qur'an and Jesus. The problem is that rabbis could, and perhaps were, doing the same thing: reading the biblical attributes as homonyms without eliminating these predications from their thoughts of God. For that reason, Maimonides subtly made the point (that Pines bashes over our heads), that there is a danger of personal heresy that flows from the misuse of negations. He pointedly does not raise it here as a halachic prohibition, which he would have to had he meant to say "polytheism" unambiguously. He is purposely ambiguous. He does not want to dump the traditional biblical terminology, nor does he think it possible to do so. He trusts that the wise will understand, and those not so wise will apply to the wise for guidance.

Even though the attributist concedes that divine wisdom is not like wisdom with us, he is forced to concede that it is not merely different, but of a completely different species. That is why, the first time Maimonides uses the word *shirk* here, it means "homonymous." Therefore, in the case of God, the word "wisdom" refers to something completely different than it does with us, sharing, in both cases, only the same sound. The attributist thus agrees with what Maimonides had said of traditional terminology in the lexical chapters of the Guide.

Maimonides then imagines a declaration on this subject by a firm believer in the predication of affirmative attributes of God, the long sentence in italics above. Maimonides intentionally makes this sound as close as he can to his own doctrine. Try to see if you can pick out what is missing. "Suppose, e.g., you say: 'He has knowledge, and that knowledge, which admits of no change and of no plurality, embraces many changeable things; His knowledge remains unaltered, while new things are constantly formed, and His knowledge of a thing before it exists, while it exists, and when it has ceased to exist, is the same without the least change.'"

What is missing, as we will see, is that God is identical with His wisdom. This makes all the difference in the world. Let's take a closer look at the attributist's statement.

Everything the attributist just said we can agree with. He not only says that divine knowledge and human knowledge are different but he tells us why: divine knowledge is eternal, unchanging, and unitary, while human knowledge is temporary, mutable, and multiple. This fits the attributist's theology well: for the *Qur'an*, the *Logos*, and the *personae* of the Trinity are also eternal, immutable and unified in themselves. Therefore, the attributist can say next that "His knowledge is not like ours": and similarly that "His existence is not like ours," virtually similar to Maimonides' preferred formula, "God is wise but not through wisdom" like ours.

For these reasons Maimonides says, "You thus necessarily arrive at some negation (in lieu of affirmations), without obtaining a true conception of an essential attribute: on the contrary, you are led to assume that there is a plurality in God, and to believe that He, though one essence, has several *unknown* attributes (*taarim bilti yaduim*)." Because the attributist means to differentiate his divine attribute of wisdom from human wisdom, that very act of differentiation constitutes a negation. Thus, the attributist believes that there really is an eternal attribute of wisdom combined with or in partnership with God, but since it is different from human wisdom, he knows nothing about it. Since the attributist admits that he does not know the content of the divine attribute of wisdom, he is prepared to believe that God has "several unknown attributes," which are not of the "same species" familiar to us.

Maimonides then begins to move closer to the nub of the problem, its grammatical nature, “You are, as it were, brought by the belief in the reality of the attributes, to say that God is one subject of which several things are predicated: though the subject is not like ordinary subjects, and the predicates are not like ordinary predicates.” God’s simple unity forces the attributist to make the extreme claim that these predications must also be different from any other predications: that the words do not mean what they say.

Maimonides then suddenly, and without warning, turns around and slams the attributist: “This belief would ultimately lead us to associate other things with God, and not to believe that He is One (*takhlit hasagateinu l’fi dea zu shituf, lo yoter*),” or, as I translate, that he is an “associator, and nothing more.” These are fighting words. No longer does he use the term *shirk / shituf* merely to say that the words mean one thing to God and another to the attributist, as he did the first time he used the term in the quoted paragraph. Now he changes the context so he can charge the attributist with the heresy of associationism, the notion that God relies upon another equally eternal and powerful force to create and run the world. This was the charge that some elements of the Mu’tazilites used to attack the Ash’arites.

What the attributist failed to say in the long italicized sentence is that God’s wisdom is identical to God. His wisdom is not just eternal and immutable. What Maimonides really meant by the formula “God is wise but not through wisdom” is that “God is wise but not through the *attribute* of wisdom.” It is not only that our wisdom is different from His, but that it is another thing altogether, another *species*. The wisdom that we know of is something that we can predicate of a subject. But God’s wisdom is not a predicate. His wisdom is Himself, a tautology, and no effective predication can be tautologous. This gets to the heart of the matter, which expresses itself in grammar: our sentences cannot grasp the divine.

Thus, returning to the grammatical, he says: “For of every subject certain things can undoubtedly be predicated, and although in reality subject and predicate are combined in one thing, by the actual definition they consist of two elements, the notion contained in the subject not being the same as that contained in the predicate.” What he means to say here is that even when I am talking about one thing, e.g., Socrates, a single unitary being, there is a duality. Socrates and his wisdom are, conceptually, two different things, even to a naturalist like Aristotle. While Socrates’ wisdom may not be some otherworldly *eidōs* tangentially connected with his person, we can still distinguish, at least grammatically, between Socrates and his wisdom. When we say that Socrates is wise, we mean that Socrates is a subject whose predicate is wisdom. The wisdom is not the same as Socrates, if only because Socrates is the subject and his wisdom is not a subject.

The situation is completely different in this most basic way with God: “God cannot be a compound, and ... He is simple in the strictest sense of the word.” It is not true that He is a subject unlike any other with predicates unlike any other. He is not a subject at all. He has no predicates at all. All that He is, He is Himself.

Coming back to the idea that the attributist believes in “unknown” attributes, Maimonides finds that the situation is even worse. For the unknown attributes that the attributist believes in are not attributes at all. He is not merely wrong about God, he is completely ignorant of God, and quite unconscious of his own ignorance. Thus Maimonides says, going further than he had before, “I do not merely declare that he who affirms attributes of God has not sufficient knowledge concerning the Creator, admits some association with God (i.e, that he is an associator, *mshatef*), or conceives Him to be different from what He is: but I say that he unconsciously loses his belief in God.” It is not just that the attributist could be accused of associationism, now Maimonides calls the attributist an unconscious atheist, as I explain below.

THREE PARABLES

In this final attempt in the Guide to clarify his version of negative theology, Maimonides leaves the plane of intellect for the imagination, producing three imaginative examples, one about a boat, one about the sense of taste, and one about an elephant.

The Boat Parable: Maimonides' first example supposedly demonstrates how we can learn from negations. There is a boat, but we are only told that there is a boat, not what a boat is. Each successive listener learns a single negative fact about the boat: it is *not* an accident attaching to a substance; *not* animal, mineral or vegetable; *not* existing naturally in nature; *not* a geometric shape; and *not* solid through. Maimonides claims that the last respondent's knowledge is the same as the knowledge of another who is told in positive terms that it is a long, hollow thing made of wooden boards.

This is a dubious claim, at least without quite a few more negations. The listener still would not know a ship from any other thing of boards, like a house. It is true, however, that each successive listener knows more than the prior one. From this, Maimonides concludes that with each successive negation the adept advances one more level to knowledge of God. His knowledge is asymptotic, i.e., he keeps approaching, but never actually knows God as God knows Himself. What Maimonides really means is that with each successive interpretational meditation, the seeker comes closer to God.

Even-Shmuel asks, if the one who multiplies negations reaches the result that the other who used the affirmative description achieved, as in the boat example, why not cut to the chase by going straight to the affirmations. His answer is that "great danger" results from using affirmations, in that all affirmations, to some extent, define their object. The result, in the case of God, would be qualitatively worse than with the boat, since you would come to portray the Indefinable with affirmations that *eo ipso* define (*lama lo n'taar af anaknu et ha-eloa b'taarim khayuvim v'nekatzer aleinu et ha-derekh...k'sh'anu ba'im l'taar b'taarei hagbala et ha-bilti mugbal*).

The Taste Parable: Maimonides gives a second example. This example illustrates how the Law of the Excluded Middle leaves the attributist *devoid* of an idea of God. If someone says, "taste is a quantity," he not merely errs, he says nothing at all. He commits a category mistake. Taste is a quality, not a quantity. All statements about God are like category mistakes. Thus, when I state a predication of God, that God is this or that, since I cannot add anything to Him, what have I said? Whatever I have predicated I mean so homonymously with God as to refer to nothing at all, as though I described taste as a quantity. I have said nothing; indeed, I have removed from my mind the very idea of taste. So, when I say God is X, I have said *nothing* and referred to *nothing*—I exclude God from my thought.

Maimonides now makes an important, if scholastic, distinction between being wrong and being ignorant. Someone who is merely *wrong* makes an erroneous or even false claim about something, where the claim is at least of the same species as the thing he gets wrong. Thus, a sick person might describe a sweet food, like candy, as sour. At least he knows that the object of his description is a food, and he describes it with a predicate from the species of taste. Thus: "He, who conceives an incorrect notion of an object, must necessarily have a correct idea of the object to some extent." When he recovers from his illness, he will return to calling candy sweet.

On the other hand, one who is *ignorant* of the object applies a predicate that has nothing whatsoever to do with it. He simply does not know what he is talking about. This person says that taste is a quantity. While we can cure the one who is merely wrong of his disease, the one who continues to ignorantly discuss an object of which he knows nothing has a void where the subject of his sentence should be. The danger is that when the subject is God, the speaker violates both the First Commandment as well as Maimonides' First Fundamental Principle of Faith (from *Perek Helek*), for God has come to have no existence in the speaker's mind. He becomes an unconscious atheist, *h'adir mtziut ha-shem m'daato b'li sh'yargish b'kakh*.

We had said that man grasps the existence of God but not His essence. However, in seeking to predicate God's essence man loses his grasp of God's existence. This is not merely a danger, but a disaster, for he does not recognize God as absolute positivity (*khiuv ha-mtziut*) but as absolute negativity, i.e., the void. There is no there there.

This example, “taste is a quantity,” only refers to a sentence that has no meaning. Tautologies also are meaningless. Still, the case of God might be different. In any homonymous expression, the predicate is identical with God, but only accidental with us. Thus, God is wise, and you are wise. God is wise in the sense that He is identical with His wisdom; His wisdom is not anything added to Him, as it is to you. I have, thus, *interpreted* “God is wise” such that I have learned something of God that is not merely tautologous. I have learned He is not like you in the category of wisdom, and I have a sense of why He is different from you in that category. The tautology is not meaningless.

The Elephant Parable: The problem with this path of interpretation was that it ended up with the same formula that the attributists accepted: “God is wise, but not through wisdom.” Maimonides’ ultimate answer to this conundrum is that we must pursue the path of interpretation with *intellectual integrity*. The attributist had maintained that God is wise with wisdom not like ours, since ours is transitory and His eternal, purposely not mentioning its identity with God. He thereby adds an affirmative eternal attribute of wisdom to the divine essence. But this is absurd. Such abuse of the *via negativa* crowds out God from our thought. Saying, “God is wise with the eternal attribute of wisdom, but not wisdom as we know it” is no different than saying “taste is a quantity.” Attributes are qualities, and all qualities are accidents. But God is not subject to accidents. Worse, it subjects God to the predicate of wisdom. The statement is devoid of meaning because it refers to nothing. The speaker is not merely wrong: he uttered a nonsense statement about God.

His third example, the parable of the elephant, extends the boat parable to include the case of these attribute abusers. In the boat parable, a succession of negative or positive facts brought the listener closer to the true idea of the boat. In the case of the elephant, the situation is reversed: instead of facts, the questioner is given errors or lies. We are told, in this third example, of a man who has heard of an elephant from an erroneous or mendacious informant (*ha-toeh o ha-mtoeh*—recall that Maimonides thought the priests of idolatry *intentionally* fomented error, see Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara* 1:2). This informant tells the listener a succession of falsehoods about the elephant. The elephant is a one legged animal that looks and talks like a man, but is transparent, has three wings, sometimes flies and sometimes swims. These things do not go together. Its not that the listener has the wrong idea of “elephant.” Rather, this listener has *no idea* about it. The term “elephant” has no content for him because it refers to nothing. It is nonexistent and impossible. Similarly, by affirming impossible attributes of God, our conception of God becomes nonexistent and impossible.

HOW SHOULD WE INTERPRET MAIMONIDES’ NEGATIVE THEOLOGY?

After relating the elephant parable, Maimonides wrote that he would, in subsequent chapters, prove that God is necessarily existent, and, further, that His necessary existence implies that He must be absolutely simple. These two positive statements show that we can indeed know something about God. This would fly in the face of his previous seeming implication that knowledge of God would violate the *Law of the Excluded Middle*. But there is more that shows us that God is not unknowable or unapproachable.

Maimonides exhorts the student to follow the path of negations, know it, and rise through it (*haven ze heitav v’deahu v’haya sogeh bo*—not *sameakh bo*, see Kafih note 10). The adept should follow this path if he wants to *approach* God, should that be his desire (*ha-derekh asher im telekh ba titkarav elav ytaleh, v’lakhen lekha ba im tirtzeh.*)

So it is not impossible to approach God, even though it would be impossible to reach Him. We cannot define Him but we know that He exists. We can learn things about God.

I note that Charles E. Manekin also defends a “philosophically optimistic reading” of Maimonides’ *via negativa*, (as against Josef Stern’s far more pessimistic reading). Manekin tries to explain what we can learn about God. He distinguishes between *properties*, which God cannot be assigned, and “*states of existence*,” a lesser order of things we can know of God:

“It should be emphasized that the existence, necessity and uniqueness of God are not properties in the sense that they characterize His essence. Rather, they are what we may call ‘states of His existence.’ In Guide 1:46, Maimonides distinguishes between ‘guidance leading to a knowledge of the existence of a thing,’ and ‘an investigation of the true reality of the essence and substance of that thing;’ the former is possible with respect to God, the latter is not....At the end of the journey, the student is vouchsafed a representation of God.” (“Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes in the Guide,” *Maimonidean Studies*, I:135-137, A. Hyman, editor, Yeshiva, 1990. Compare, J. Stern, “Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” *Maimonides and the Sciences*, Cohen and Levine, editors, Springer, 2000).

Manekin’s “states of existence” remind us of Maimonides’ adherence to modal as opposed to real or nominal universals. But we should be careful, because Maimonides specifically opposed modalism in divine attributes.

I understand Maimonides’ “negative theology” this way: whatever propositions we employ (whether negative in form, positive but understood negatively, positive with negative prefixes, infixes or suffixes, privative, and so on) the main teaching is that all propositions about God have to be *interpreted*. What work does the interpretation do to the proposition? The interpretation removes the imagination’s deceptions. The correct use and understanding of the proposition combats erroneous notions about God concealed in the innocuous sounding formulations of *Kalām* theologians.

The problem is always the imagination. The imagination is the corporealizing part of our mind because it makes pictures out of concepts. It makes an image of reality that is not the reality itself. Still, we need the imagination to gain some idea of the ineffable. We need the imagination because language cannot voice what is real yet indefinable. What is demanded is a meditation, in which all possible understandings of God, however produced, whether in liturgy, scripture, poetry or imagination, are subjected to interpretation. The *interpretation* sheds the reifying imaginative element from these understandings of God. What remains in the mind is truth, even if we cannot utter it. The truth is that God is readily apparent, and the interpretation removes our blinders.

IMPACT ON THIRTEENTH CENTURY JEWISH THOUGHT

The Thirteenth Century Kabbalists knew and were obsessed with the negative theology of Maimonides. His ideas had unforeseen repercussions in their thought.

Already in the Mishnah *Pirke Avot* and in Talmud *Hagigah* a list of ten Attributes of God was commonplace, though the names of the members of the list shifted. In the course of time the ten attributes collided with, became identified with, and ultimately replaced the ten spheres of the outmoded Aristotelian cosmology. Though called *sfirot*, these ten dynamics no longer retain sphericity. But they are considered real. (On the fortunate etymological confusion of *sfira* and σφῆρα, see Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 1014; Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 99; Idel, *Kabbalah, New Perspectives*, 62-67. For the history of *sfirot*, Idel, *ibid.*, chapter 6.)

After Maimonides, how did God, indefinable and unpredicable, relate to the unspherical *sfirot*?

The name *Ayn-Sof*, the infinite, first emerges with the 12th century Spanish Cabalist Isaac the Blind, son of the Raavad (Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 12). This term preserves an unapproachable, ineffable level of deity (*Ayn Sof*: without limit). *Ayn-Sof* is important in the *Zohar*. It is God without any attributes, indeed, without any content at all. Cabala invests *Ayn-Sof* with a unique history: it is in dynamic tension with biblical God and with man, mediated by the attributes of the *sfirot*. Its highest literary depiction is the first chapter of the *Zohar*, which appears as a Midrashic meditation upon the white space found *before* the first letter of the first word of Genesis 1:1 (the *bet* in *bereshit*).

The *Zohar* relates that the *Ayn-Sof* was originally the unmanifested totality of being. It reduced itself (*tsimtsum*) to a point “that was not a point.” This concentrated energy emerges in a “lamp,” but the lamp cannot contain the energy. As soon as the lamp appears, it shatters. The energy snaps through and emanates in a new form as the life of the *sfirot*, and then the primal consonant *Bet* (= the house, a sexual euphemism) at last emerges. The meaning of this mystical mythos is that the indefinable God is radically *other* than the attributes. These attributes portray the dynamics by which divine intelligence creates from nothing. They are the name of God.

All of this significant, for the next five chapters concern the esoteric subject of the *name* of God.

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