

GUIDE 1:52

MAIMONIDES' "AFFIRMATIVE ATTRIBUTES": A NEW ORDERING

PREFACE

Maimonides uses this chapter to do two things: to deny most affirmative attributes of God, and to defeat theologians who agreed that God had no accidents while asserting that He possessed attributes.

To accomplish this he must deny any attributive predication or description of God. He does this by examining every possible logical predicative category. Simply put, he must test every possible statement we make about God. He has developed a unique and effective scheme to include all these statements. To appreciate this scheme we will need to review Aristotelian logic.

Maimonides tells us the object of this chapter only at the end:

“What we have explained in the present chapter is this: That God is one in every respect, containing no plurality or any element superadded to His essence: and that the many attributes of different significations applied in Scripture to God, originate in the multitude of His actions, not in a plurality existing in His essence, and are partly employed with the object of conveying to us some notion of His perfection, in accordance with what we consider perfection, as has been explained by us.”

This is a large program. Reduced to its elements, he holds that:

- 1) God is simple substance;
- 2) The only plurality predicable of Him is the plurality of His many *acts*;
- 3) The only other reason why scripture predicates many things of God is to suggest His perfection.

In these chapters on *attribution* (1:51—1:60), Maimonides wants to purify our idea of God, each chapter in a different way. Each chapter is a scalpel removing large classes of error in our thought, error that could lead to idolatry. Now, though, he turns to surgical instruments supplied by philosophy, rather than by religion. Compare his similar statement from the last chapter, where, on the contrary, the simple recognition of the religious Jew supplied his tools:

“There cannot be any *belief (i'tiqad)* in the unity of God except by admitting that He is one simple substance, without any composition or plurality of elements: One from whatever side you view it, and by whatever test you examine it: not divisible into two parts in any way and by any cause, nor capable of any form of plurality either objectively or subjectively, as will be proved in this treatise.”

He suggests, “as will be proved in this treatise,” that the religious tools must be supplemented. His focus is now more analytical, and directed with particularity to the divine attributes themselves. Apparently, the self-evident truths that alerted us to the sins of divine pluralism could not save us from the same errors appearing under the guise of the divine attributes.

ARISTOTELIAN PREDICABLES

Maimonides directs us to focus on all the words that we use to describe things. These terms are “predicates,” and what they refer to is the “subject” of any proposition. If there are rules about all the predicates in any sentence, including rules *against* divine predication, then we are in a good position to say what God is *not*. This may help

us to understand what He *is*.

First, some terminology.

Maimonides provides a unique historical synthesis in which he combines and improves upon elements from:

- 1) Aristotle's *ten* Categories (*kategoriai*=predicates) of being,
- 2) Aristotle's *four* Predicables (*kategoramata*) of logical relations,
- 3) The use by Porphyry of the number "*five*" in reference to the Predicables, and
- 4) Avicenna's ideas on predication.

The history of this synthesis will not be given here as it would lengthen my account, and because it is excellently told by Harry Austryn Wolfson in "The Aristotelian Predicables and Maimonides' Division of Attributes," in *Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Religion*, v.2, p. 161. We limit ourselves to explaining Maimonides' synthesis of these elements.

There are two ways things *are*: in reality, and in speech.

From the logical or grammatical point of view, predication *is* existence: the predicate tells me what the subject of the sentence *is*.

When we speak of what things are, these statements all have predicates. These predicates reduce to general classes of predicates. For example, man is a rational animal; but all rational animals are *substances*, that is, things existing through themselves. Substance is a truly general predicate to which many predicates reduce, a *genus generalissimus*.

Aristotle suggests there might be ten such general predicates, which he calls "Categories," but does not insist on the number ten. His medieval followers take his ten categories as doctrinal. These ten, which ultimately answer the question "What is it?" about anything, are Substance, Quantity, Quality, Relation, Place, Time, Position, Property, Passion, and Action. The latter nine categories are all *accidents* of a substance.

Another way of asking about a thing is to ask what its *cause* is. Recall the four causes of Aristotle, the formal, material, efficient and final causes. The definition of a thing is an account of its "formal" causes. If nothing *caused* an existent to exist, i.e., it always was, we say it exists *a se*, and is, therefore, indefinable. If caused, but it exists through itself, i.e., as a substance rather than an accident, it exists *per se*. If it exists as an accident, it exists *per accidens*.

God is the *aseity*, man is a *perseity*, whiteness is attributed *per accidens*. The key to God's indefinable aseity is that His uncaused existence is identical with His essence.

Viewing predication as an account of causation diminished the number of truly general predicates. Thus, Aristotle reduced his ten categories of all the possible predicable attributes of a subject to *four* "predicables": *definition*, *genus*, *peculiar property* and *accident*. Porphyry added *differentia* (difference). They were able to reduce them from ten to five because, viewed from the vantage of causation, they either define the essence of a thing or they do not define the essence of a thing. Those two can be divided again: the first into the terms of a definition (i.e., definition, genus, difference), and the second by the way they modify the essence of the thing (i.e., by a peculiar property or an accident).

The distinction between the Categories and the Predicables is that the Categories are the *ontological* classification of *what* things are, while the Predicables are the *grammatical/logical* classification of the way we *say* they are. The latter are important in scholastic philosophy because the scholastics conducted their ontological battles on the

field of grammar.

THE CATEGORICAL PROBLEMATIC

Before we begin to survey Maimonides' reaction to this Aristotelian/Porphyrion legacy, there is an important *caveat* to bear in mind. On one level, he simply takes the ancient classification and subjects it to his own new classification. It should then be relatively easy to drop the old elements into the new slots, and then determine which may be predicated of God and which may not. This would constitute a mere logical problem and not a philosophical problematic (*aporia*). But our relationship with the ineffable is one that necessarily generates new problems. As Maimonides says in the Introduction to the Guide:

“Do not imagine that these most difficult problems can be thoroughly understood by any one of us. This is not the case. At times, the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Our nature and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night.”

To a certain extent, it is merely a logical problem. Indeed, Wolfson asserts that Maimonides' departure from the philosophical tradition was to move the categories from the sphere of ontology to that of logical propositions, especially since he could then use them to address statements in the prophetic literature. The result should be that we could just plug certain obvious conclusions into our propositional logic. Maimonides calls such conclusions “primary intelligibles.” An example of such a major premise would be the obvious conclusion that God is not definable (because He is not a member of any genus or species). Similarly, God cannot be subject to material categories such as time, place, quantity or affection.

But we should not deceive ourselves. At the fuzzy, shifting, expanding margins of *quality*, *relation*, and *action*, there are no neat classifications. This opacity flows from the broader problematic of how anything relates to God, whether we speak of attributes, of people generally, or of Jews in particular. Denying that there are essential attributes in God, conceived as real incorporeal beings is easy, but it does not tell us where we stand in the cosmic scheme, or even if there is a scheme.

Yet we cannot abandon the quest. Only atheists can be comfortable with the denial of any ultimate relation between God and man. We want to know more, but at this higher level the utility of *logical* classification breaks down, irrespective of whether we call these groupings categories, predicates, predicables or attributes. Ontology keeps breaking through Maimonides' schema of logical propositions. That is why our relation to the divine remains an eternal philosophical problem of the highest order.

MAIMONIDES' PREDICABLES: “AFFIRMATIVE ATTRIBUTES”

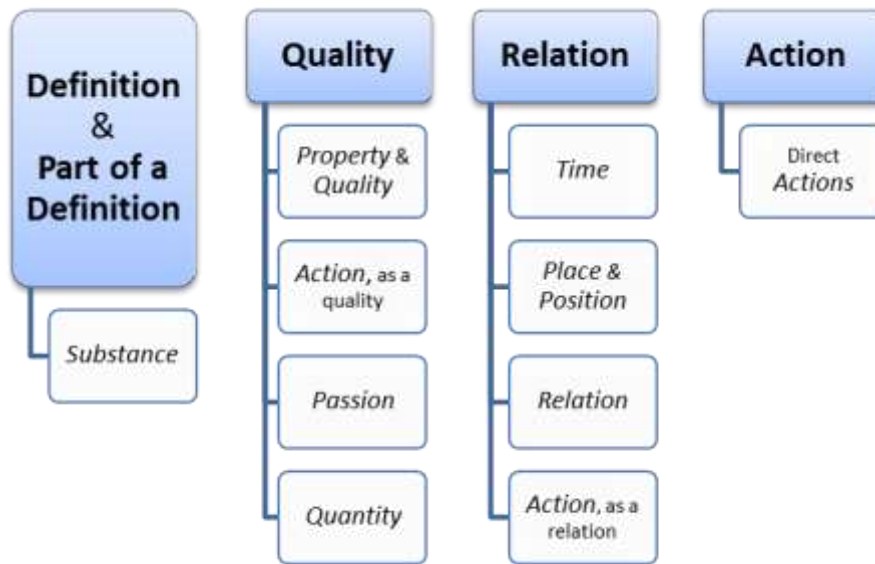
What is everything?

Maimonides introduced a new approach to description. To distinguish it from Aristotle's and Porphyry's, he calls his list “Affirmative Attributes,” *ha-taarim ha-hayuvim*, צפאת אלהיגאב, of which there are *five*, thereby preserving Porphyry's now orthodox numbering, but not his content. Maimonides' five “Affirmative Attributes” do not include the class of “Negative Attributes” which he introduces later. (He referred to them obliquely here when he said, “...and are partly employed with the object of conveying some notion of His perfection,” since the negations are supposed to suggest perfections).

In his version, Genus, Definition and Differentia reduce to two: *Definition* and *Part of a Definition*. Peculiar Property becomes *Quality*, which includes the *category* Property. Maimonides divides the rest of the predicables between *quality* and *relation*. He then introduces a new predicable, *Direct Actions*. This gives him five

“Affirmative Attributes,” which form the structure of the chapter. By Wolfson’s count, all ten Aristotelian categories are included within these five. He regards Maimonides’ Affirmative Attributes as a breakthrough: “Consequently, histories of philosophy or of logic, which hitherto had assumed that nothing new had happened in the classification of predicables from the time of Porphyry to that of Kant may now report that a new list of predicables was introduced in the twelfth century by Maimonides” (*ibid.*, p. 194).

*The Relation of Maimonides’ Affirmative Attributes to Aristotle’s Categories
According To Wolfson*



These five Affirmative Attributes are:

I. Definition: example: “Man is a rational animal” (*ha-khai ha-medaber*, Gr.: *zoon logikon*). Definitions are made from causes (rational and animal are the *formal* causes), but there can be no definition predicable of God. He is uncaused, an *aseity*. He is indefinable. Many commentators object, following Averroes, that there is a second possible way of defining, “*per prius et posterius*.” The first type of definition of God is impossible, but a definition relating God as *prior* to other *posterior* existences is possible. It is possible because God’s absolute “existence” is prior analogically to the possible existence of His creatures. Maimonides, however, deals with this type of linkage under his fourth Affirmative Attribute, *relations* (Averroes, *Tahafut al Tahafut*, trans., Van Den Bergh, p. 222. See below, “Loose Relations”).

II. Part of a Definition: examples: “Man is rational,” “Man is an animal.” Either rational or animal will do, as both are necessary parts of the definition. God, however, does not have parts. The significant point is that either part *necessarily* connects in each and every instance with the subject. They differ from accidents, which have no necessary connection with the subject.

Abarbanel asks why we need the second Affirmative Attribute if we already have the first. The simple answer is that “part of a definition,” can stand either for Aristotle’s second predicable, *genus*, or for Porphyry’s additional predicable, *difference*. All definitions require two parts, a genus and a difference. Abarbanel suggests two other reasons for the theologians to retain a second category of definition. First, we must deny “part of a definition” in the case of God, to clarify that God is not composite. Secondly, “part of a definition” is precisely the form in which we encounter the “essential” attributes, such as Wisdom (*logos*), that we must deny of God (like, “God is love”).

These first two Affirmative Attributes define the *substance* of any non-divine thing. The next two classes of predicables are both *accidents* of a substance. Definition and Part of a Definition are Maimonides' reclassification of Aristotle's category of substance.

III. *Quality*. These are things that a substance *has* that are not necessary to it. Qualities "go beyond" definition (Pines' translation). Quality was the third of the Aristotelian Categories. It answers the question, "How?" in the sense of "How does the person exist?" i.e., as a carpenter, a pious man, sick, or tall, etc. It tells us the nature of an object. Qualities describe but do not define.

There are four Maimonidean *qualities* (each of the four is also an Aristotelian category). The qualities are: 1) *property* (mental *disposition*), 2) *natural power* (physical *disposition*), 3) *passion* and 4) *figure* (quantitative *disposition*).

Maimonides briefly explains these four qualities, providing examples:

1) *Property*. Properties are mental dispositions, including moral dispositions. (Pines confusingly uses the archaic term "habitus" when he means "property"). Examples: a man is a carpenter, a sage; or he is merciful, pious, cruel, irreligious. In all of these possibilities, the predicate connects to the subject by the copula "is." Properties are accidents that are permanent or deeply rooted. The man who is a carpenter will always know how to do carpentry so long as he retains his memory. It is that by which he plans and performs woodwork. This intellectual disposition, in Greek, *techne*, is a learned ability requiring knowledge of some general principles, universals and causes. Being a carpenter is strictly an accidental mental property. It is "accidental" since it is not necessary to a person's existence as a member of the human race.

God has no such accidents. There is no difference logically between "God is merciful" or "God is a carpenter," if the latter is illogical, so is the former, and for the same reason. Both are accidental mental dispositions. If God, who never changes, is part of these sentences, then He is eternally subject to an accidental property.

In the history of philosophy we call such relations "propositions of the *third* adjacent," referring thus to the threeness of sentences which contain three elements, a subject, a predicate, and the copula "is" (Israel Efron, in his translation of *Millot ha-Higayon*, calls them "trinary"). God cannot be part of a "proposition of the third adjacent." He can only be part of a "proposition of the *second* adjacent," i.e., one that does not use the word "is." Such binary propositions are attributions of actions, not of qualities. The key is that in the first case the word "is" attaches the subject to the predicate. In actions, the predicate connects through an uncopulated *verb*. God creates. He creates the world, but the "world" here is the object of the verb, not a description of God. "Creates" is an action, not an attribute of the Creator.

With respect to Aristotle's categories, the affirmative attribute of *property* combines his category *quality* (how a thing is) with his category *property* (the result of being acted upon, e.g., "shod," "armed"). Wolfson also suggests that it includes the original Aristotelian version of the category of action, which was the ability to do something easily, as suggested by Maimonides' example of the *techne* "carpenter." Further on, Maimonides carves out a new attribute of *direct action*, distinguishing it by his examples from *action* falling under the attributes of *quality* and *relation*. See chart above.

2) *Natural Power* (physical disposition): example: a thing is soft, hard, strong or weak. Though these "dispositions" are also deeply rooted, here they are natural physical dispositions. Men are strong, rocks are hard, but both descriptions are equally physical descriptions. Hardness could apply to men, since some men have harder or softer skin. The point is that both "strong" and "hard," spoken of about a man, are not qualifications of man *qua* man, but man as part of the *natural* kingdom. The opposite of *techne* is

phusis, which is such a natural disposition. Thus, if we say, “God is strong,” we falsely attribute a *phusis* to Him, as though we said, “God is hard.”

Wolfson says that this attribute of a *natural power* rephrases Aristotle’s category of *action*, again, as a “natural power...of doing something easily,” where the term “doing” reflects the category of action. To repeat, *action* taken as a *quality* (in the sense of a physical power), must be distinguished from *direct actions*. At this margin of actions as qualities, Maimonides’ division of the attribute *quality* between *properties* and *natural powers* seems to cloud over, since both can be called “actions.”

3) *Passion* (including non-permanent emotional dispositions). A passion is a state in which an external agent changes the passive subject. Example: man is irritable, timid, merciful, hot, cold, dry, or moist. There is a distinction between mercifulness when it is a deeply rooted characteristic, in which case it is a *property*, as in 1) above, and its appearance here as an occasional *passion*. The object of a passion is the *patient*. All passions indicate change in the patient, from outside the patient. God is not a passive patient subject to change. Maimonides’ attribute of passion is identical to Aristotle’s category of passion.

4) *Figure*: (a type of quantity): for example, long, short, curved, straight. Figures are limited by the boundaries of their *place*. Since God is not limited in any way, He has no such bounded shape or figure. Also, all quantities are multiple in nature, but God is one, in the sense of a non-mathematical unity. Maimonides’ attribute of figure is Aristotle’s category of quantity.

All qualities are accidents. God has no qualities because God is not a substrate for accidents. He has no non-necessary attachments to His substance. Nor does He have dispositions, passions, physical nature or figure: these are all accidents pertaining to corporeal substances. The possession of any quality also implies composition, but God is not composed of parts.

IV. *Relation* is the fourth Affirmative Attribute of Maimonides. His treatment of relations is the longest and most difficult part of this chapter. Relations are of four kinds, all of which stand for Aristotelian categories:

1) Relation to *time*: Reuven was born in a certain year. Time is the numbering of motion, which is an accident of material bodies. Time is composed of parts, some of which are non-existent: part of time was, but is no more; part will be, but is not yet (Aristotle, *Physics* 4:10). This type of relation is identical to Aristotle’s category of time.

2) Relation to *place*: Reuven dwells in a certain house in a certain place. Place is an accident of bodies. Place or space is the physical boundary of any object. This relation is identical to Aristotle’s category of place. According to Wolfson, it also includes his category of *position*, in the sense that your position is your relationship to your place, or in the sense of the relative position of the parts of an object.

3) *Reciprocal* Relation: Reuven is the father of Shimon, who is the son of Reuven. Such relations as master/slave, long/short, before/after are reciprocal relations (*Millot Ha-Higayon*, ch. 11). Included, by virtue of Maimonides’ example of father and son, is the relation of causation or creation. This latter species of relation would include the relation *per prius et posterius*, even though it might not always be reciprocal.

4) *Comparative* Relations: Reuven is a partner (Heb: *shituf*) of another. Maimonides loosely includes in this division any relation that does not imply reciprocity.

All four divisions constitute a more expansive classification of Aristotle’s category *relation*. The broadness of *relation* bespeaks the difficulty of pinning it down. Avicenna and Averroes included all the other Aristotelian categories under *relation*. These include *action* taken as a relation, particularly in the

sense of the *actions* of causation or creation, which, before Maimonides, were assumed to be predicable of God. (See Wolfson, “Maimonides on Negative Attributes,” *Studies, ibid.*, v. 2, 230; and, also, below, my “Loose Relations”).

Relations are also accidents, but these accidents differ from the *qualities* in that they exist only in the relationship. Thus, the accident of relation exists only if the *relata* exist in that relation. Therefore, if it turns out that Reuven is not the father of Shimon, then neither is Shimon the son of Reuven.

Time is the enumeration of the successive moments of before and after in the movement of a physical body. It is classically understood as the moments of the movement of the sun. In and of itself time does not exist, and apart from its relationship to motion, it does not attach to Reuven as a quality describing him. So even though “relation to time” is an accident, the time of Reuven’s birth is not a real existence, because time and motion do not exist apart from their interdependent relationship. It does not describe him the way his skin color, a quality, does.

Similarly, we determine Reuven’s *place* by his body’s relative position with respect to a particular space, place being the physical boundary of any object. It does not exist in its own right, but only insofar as the relation exists. Obviously, place does not apply to an unlimited or incorporeal being.

Generally, relations require a basis, called a *fundamentum*. This basis establishes reciprocity. Since God’s existence is absolute, and ours is only a necessary existence, there can be no reciprocal basis and hence no direct relation between our contingent and His absolute existence (cf. Mishneh Torah, *Yesodai ha Torah* 1:2-3). Even-Shmuel asserts that God is master, even without a servant. Solomon Ibn Gabirol expressed this absolute existence poetically, “Master of the universe *before* any creature was created,... and *after* all has ceased to be, the awesome One reigns alone,” *adon olam b’terem kol yetzir nivra...v’akharei kikhlot hakol levado yimlokh nora*.

Interesting is Maimonides’ suggestion of a fourth kind of relation, the *Comparative*, what he vaguely calls “some relation” (*ktzat yakhas*). The example of *partnership* may characterize it. The *comparative* is actually a *quantitative* relation since we say that the *relata* are greater, smaller or equal to each other. Thus, partners are equal or unequal partners in a partnership. Their *fundamentum* is the partnership itself and their relative quantitative comparability.

Is there a comparative relation between God’s absolute existence and our contingent existence? Not in this sense of quantitative comparability. Maimonides, however, suggests that, in a loosely metaphorical or analogical sense, there may be (see below, “Loose Relations”). Strictly speaking, though, the term “existence” in the two cases is too homonymous to warrant our affirming a relation. It is as though we used two different terms pronounced the same way. For that reason, he seems to reject the relation *per prius et posterius*, in which the prior existence is the necessary ground for the emanation of the posterior existence. My assessment, however, is that while there may be no relationship as such, this is not homonymy in the strong sense of “apples and oranges” equivocality.

The Heresy of *Shirk*. Is God a *relata* in partnership with anything?

Wolfson reminds us that the term for “partnership” used here, *shituf*, and its Arabic equivalent, *shirk* (*sharik*), also mean *homonymy* (*ishtarāk*). When we make a statement about God relative to man, The term relating both does so in a homonymous sense, differently for each *relata*. Thus with the term “existence.” God’s existence is absolute but man’s existence depends on divine will. Existence has a different meaning for both.

Were we to assert any comparative relationship with God we would commit the heresy of establishing a “partnership” between that *relata* and God. Such a relation would suggest that God and man share a substance, quantity or quality in equal or unequal proportions.

For this reason, *shirk* becomes the Arabic term for heresy. Obviously, if Aristotle is right to assert the eternity of the universe (which Maimonides denies), there might be a relation of absolute eternal existence between the universe and God. When Maimonides says, “The term *existence* is applied to Him and other things, according to our opinion, only by way of pure homonymity,” Friedlander comments, dubiously, “[This is] according to the opinion of those who believe in *creation ex nihilo*. Those who believe in the eternity of the universe need not consider the term existence as homonymous when applied to God and to the Universe” (note 2, *ad loc.*, 183; he follows Crescas here). Abarbanel disagrees. He explains that eternity is a relation of time, which is an accident of the movement of matter, and therefore *fundamentally* unrelated to God’s absolute existence. God’s existence is really time-less: it has nothing to do with time. Moreover, he quotes Aristotle himself that there can be no relationship between time and the unformed matter of the universe, even if it were eternal, because unformed matter is only a potential for existence. (See “Loose Relations,” below). Wolfson emphasizes the religious consequence of Maimonides’ rejection of *relation* as *shirk*, even when this is called a “relation” of *action*:

“...That part of his discussion of relation, in which Maimonides tries to show that relations such as that of father to son cannot be predicated of God, ...is a direct criticism of all his predecessors, Jewish, Moslem and Christian, ever since Philo, who invariably admitted such a kind of relation, i.e., the relation of agent and patient, as an attribute of God, which kind of relation,...is also to be called action.”

Apples and Oranges. Only things that are both in the same species *and* “necessarily close” are relatable as comparisons. Even things of the same type may not be correlative, as, for instance, a sentence asserting that “This red is as intense as that green.” This sentence commits a mistake, even though both red and green are of the genus of colors, since they are different species of colors, and species do not directly *compare*. It is worse between items of different genres, as in the attempted comparison between sweetness and intelligence. More obviously erroneous is comparing 100 cubits to the sharpness of pepper, since the former is in the category of quantity while the latter is in the category of quality. Therefore, since the difference in kind between the “existence” of man and the “existence” of God is larger than any other category or genus difference, they can have no relation in any comprehensible sense. (I rearranged the ascent of Maimonides’ comparisons here to add force to the original, which, Friedlander says, suffers from “confusion” due to multiple “corrections and alterations in the text,” note 3, 183, and note 1, 184).

In general, however, relations are less objectionable attributions than definitions or qualities since they add nothing to the divine essence. Narboni argues that relations do not exist in themselves but are only mental constructs. Shem-Tov ben Joseph ibn Falaquera (1225 – c. 1290) says that relations are “only words.”

ACTION: THE NEW AFFIRMATIVE ATTRIBUTE

V. Action is the fifth Maimonidean Affirmative Attribute. These are *direct actions*: “Reuven made a door; built a wall; wove a garment.” These kinds of attributions *are* appropriate to God because they do not affect His essence, and are not qualities or relations with Him. This is Maimonides’ innovation in the historical classification of predicables. It is important because it does not imply change in or partnership with God. It is grammatically and logically distinct from the quality of *property* given above. The examples in that class all bore predicates connected by the the copula “is.” The copula, in logic, is the link between the subject and predicate terms of a categorical proposition, like the verb “are” in *all men are mortal*. That sentence is a “propositions of the third adjacent” because it displays three parts: the subject, the predicate, and the copula “is.” By contrast, attributions of direct action, like “Reuven made a door,” link through a verb uncopulated by “is.”

This is a major distinction, though grammatical, which typifies scholasticism’s use of grammar to conduct ontological debates. Thus, the sentence “God is merciful” formally violates the rule, since it implies that God possesses a *property*—just because its predicate ties to God with the copula “is.” It really means that God possesses an eternal attribute of mercifulness, a thing in partnership with Him. The sentence has a form that implies either *definition* of God, who is indefinable, or, on the other hand, *qualification* of God with an accidental

property. By contrast, a sentence in the form of “God loves the righteous” does not have such a copula. “Loves” is an action, not a copula. Even though it has a direct object, “the righteous,” the direct object is not defining or qualifying God. This is not a “proposition of the third adjacent.” Whatever “God loves the righteous” might mean, its *form* as a logical proposition does not imply change or plurality in God. It is a “proposition of the second adjacent” because it involves two parts, an uncopulated subject and predicate (Efros calls it “binary”).

Maimonides admits this class of predication. Such sentences are about *actions*, not *properties*. We can usefully discuss what God does, not what He is. With this in mind, we may attribute the action of creation to God, in the sentence, “In the beginning God creates,” *bereshit bara elokim*. We can do this insofar as He is “always” creating, especially as time (“beginning”) is not a relevant factor for God; and so long as we recognize that there is no eternal attribute of creativity in partnership with Him.

Since the other four affirmative attributes clearly derive from the Aristotle’s classification, does Maimonides’ attribute of action come from Aristotle’s category called action? Wolfson does not think so:

“In view of this, it is quite natural for us to inquire whether [Maimonides’] fifth attribute, which he calls action, has a similar origin [as Aristotle’s category], or whether it is something of his own device, dictated by the exigency of the problem of divine attributes, in which action had to be separated from all the other attributes, inasmuch as it is the only attribute which according to him can be predicated of God affirmatively.”

That is why Maimonides, by way of the examples he gives here, strongly distinguishes direct actions both from actions predicated as qualities, such as “carpenter,” and actions predicated as relations, such as “father/son”:

“I mean the action the latter has performed--we speak, e.g., of Zaid, who made this door, built that wall, wove that garment. This kind of attribute is separate from the essences of the thing described, and, therefore, appropriate to be employed in describing the Creator, especially since we know that these different actions do not imply that different elements must be contained in the substance of the agent, by which the different actions are produced, as will be explained [in the next chapter]. On the contrary, all the actions of God emanate from His essence, not from any extraneous thing superadded to His essence...(kulam b’atzmuto lo b’inyan nosef).”

Maimonides also demonstrates, in the next chapter, that the performance of many different actions does not imply multiplicity in the actor.

REJECTION OF THEOLOGICAL ATTRIBUTIONISM: WHO IS LIKE YOU?

In the midst of his discussion of the *four qualities*, Maimonides interrupts with a critique of contemporary theologians. He complains that those theologians deny that God has accidents while maintaining that He has attributes. They fail to see that by asserting attribution, they admit composition in God. These theologians are the Kalām, together with anyone else who would say, “God is powerful,” etc., without realizing that the quality *powerful* is both an attribute and an accident. He says of them, in the next chapter, 1:53:

“...It is then believed that God possesses attributes: as if He were to be exalted above corporeality, and not above things connected with corporeality, i.e., the accidents, I mean psychical dispositions, all of which are qualities [and all qualities are accidents connected with corporeality].”

And so, in reaction, these thinkers piously denied that God had qualities but continued to assert that He had attributes. What could it mean for them to say that they accepted attribution but rejected qualification? It is easy to deny that God has a beard, wears a white cloak, reclines upon a golden throne, radiates light, and has a voice of thunder. All of these are accidental physical qualities that God, who is not subject to accidents, could not possibly

have. Prophets used such language of God equivocally; others use it through ignorance, or to spice up a legend, and so on. Any clear thinker knows that these kinds of descriptions cannot really describe God. We know it is nothing but a metaphor to call God the “potter”: God does not spin clay. But saying God is “merciful” is no improvement, because mercifulness is a “settled habit,” i.e., a non-necessary human *quality*. You can be a rational animal without having to be merciful, and even if the merciful Reuven were usually merciful, he would still be Reuven were he suddenly to become cruel. In other words, mercifulness in Reuven is an accidental quality and not part of the definition of Reuven. Nor can it be an essential attribute pertaining to God.

If we reject the statement “God is merciful,” must we reject scriptural passages portraying Him as wise, intelligent, knowing, strong, just, kindly, etc? All of the *Sefirot* are such attributed qualities. All descriptions of God found in prayer and praise fall into this group. There are wonderful prayers that rise above this limit, like the “*Nishmat Kol Khai*”: “Who is like unto Thee, who is equal to Thee, who can be compared unto Thee?” Usually, though, prayer is not so abstract.

WHAT CAN WE SAY ABOUT GOD?

Maimonides does not mean to jettison all God talk, but we must know that all such talk is equivocal, a homonymy, spoken in the tongue of men since we have no other tongue to express the inexpressible. We do not say that God *lacks* mercy, justice, kindness, intelligence, wisdom; for He has no defect. These things describe what He does, not what He is. By contrast, the assertion that God possesses attributes of mercy, justice, intelligence and wisdom is inappropriate, for these define or qualify Him with the effects of His actions. If the attributes have a real and not merely nominal existence, they suggest a real *partnership* with God. The notion that God is in partnership with any other eternal being implies plurality in eternity.

This is confusing, because we do identify humans by their actions, i.e., I am writing so I am a writer, but that does not work with the radically different simple substance that is God. When we attribute to God an accidental human quality, we assert a defect in Him. God performs merciful acts, but if we say He possesses the attribute of mercy, we have to be able to say what that mercy is. It cannot be a part of His definition for He has none, and if it were *part* of His definition, it would imply that He is composed of parts, inevitably resulting in the proliferation of real eternal things beside Him.

We employ language like “God is merciful,” to humanly describe God’s perfection, realizing that God ultimately beggars all such description. Sometimes Maimonides understands these statements as negations of privations (“negative attributes”), as we will see. He is moderately indulgent of the practice. Moreover, Maimonides authorizes us to speak of what God does, and, in this limited sense, he allows the ascription of those actions to Him. While we need not rewrite these predicables, we must actively interpret them to ourselves as we read them.

I would add that we should also distinguish prayers and praise from statements and propositions. Thus, a prayer employing the copula “is” might not really be a “proposition of the third adjacent” that we must deny of God, simply because it is not a proposition. As for *sefirot*, we would have to know what they are to determine if they really are attributes, since what they are is usually left unexplained. They also are probably projections back from the results of divine *actions*.

HOMONYMY?

Maimonides makes one more statement about God in this chapter. He argues against *relation* by asserting that there is no relation between God’s *absolute* existence and our *contingent* existence. He thus admits that God has *existence*. This would be a positive statement about God, even though it is in trinary form. Maimonides suggested the same thing in the first paragraph of the Mishneh Torah:

“It is the most basic of basic principles and a support for wisdom to know that there is something (namely

God), that this is a first existence (*mtzui rishon*), and that He created everything that there is. Everything in the skies, on the ground and in between exists only through the truth of His existence (*m'amitat hemtzu*).”

Again, as he said in *Helek, Commentary on the Mishnah*:

“*The First Fundamental Principle* (of his famous list of thirteen): To believe in the existence of the Creator; that there is an Existent complete in all the senses of the word ‘existence.’”

This “existence” is very different from ours, as though they were two different things. However, insofar as this homonymy goes, we intuit that the difference between absolute and contingent existence as a weak sort of homonymy, unlike the strong homonymy of a term bearing two possible “apples and oranges” meanings, like the “bark” of a tree and the “bark” of a dog. He admits, in our chapter, “...the same sort of *existence* is common to both” referring to the existence shared by both accidents and substances, an even fainter sense of homonymy. We intuit that there must be some kind of loose relation between our existence and God’s existence.

LOOSE RELATIONS

The discussion of comparative relations, e.g., partnerships, in which the members have a quantitative relation of less or more, included a possible set of non-quantitative relations that are uncategorizable, but which we recognize intuitively. Maimonides writes:

“Now, as God has absolute existence, while all other beings have only possible existence, as we shall show, there consequently cannot be any correlation [between God and His creatures]. That a certain kind of relation (*yakhas m'suyam*; Ibn Tibbon has *ktzat yakhas*—‘some relation’) does exist between them is, by some, considered possible, but wrongly. It is impossible to imagine a relation between intellect and sight (Pines translates, literally, ‘color,’ Jud. Ar., אצללן), although, as we believe, the same kind of *existence* is common to both (*v'shneihem kollelet otam m'tziut akhida b'shitateinu*); how, then, could a relation be imagined between any creature and God, who has nothing in common with any other being; for even the term *existence* is applied to Him and other things, according to our opinion, only by way of pure homonymity.... Besides, if any relation existed between them, God would be subject to the accident of relation; and although that would not be an accident to the essence of God, it would still be, to some extent, a kind of accident (*b'kol ofen mikrei m'suyam*; Ibn Tibbon has *b'klal k'tzat mikrei*). You would, therefore, be wrong if you applied affirmative attributes in their literal sense to God, though they contained only relations: these, however, are the most appropriate of all attributes, to be employed, in a less strict sense (*asher ravi sh'lo l'hafkid*), in reference to God, because they do not imply that a plurality of eternal things exists, or that any change takes place in the essence of God, when those things change (*shinui*) to which God is in relation.”

I quoted extensively to reveal Maimonides’ struggle with *indirect relationships*. These are relationships that we cannot logically or philosophically define, but which we believe exist. Is this a well-founded belief (*itiqad*) or merely a product of the imagination?

In the sentences that I purposely elided from the above quotation, he contrasts these indirect relations against direct relations, i.e., those which are *reciprocal*, as well as against those that are quantitatively *comparative* direct relations (“more, or less, or equally intense”). That leaves him Maimonides with just that catch-all of indirect relations.

This vague or loose kind of relationship of “some relation,” *ktzat yakhas*, Abarbanel calls a “metaphorical” or “analogical” indirect relation, *derekh haavara*. Maimonides specifically refers to the relation of *existence* between two things. He provides the odd sounding example of an alleged relation between “intellect and color,”

by which he means the *existence* of intellect and the *existence* of color, saying, "...as we believe, the same kind of existence is common to both," but which he yet denies, for it is "impossible to imagine." The point is that even with different categories, as of color and intellect, we readily concede that they both exist, so that *some relation* of existence pertains to both. (Friedlander has "intellect and sight," but the Hebrew *marei*, given by both Ibn Tibbon and Kafih can mean either sight or color; Pines correctly translates the original Judeo-Arabic as "color" as does Schwarz, *tzava*).

Abarbanel explains these *relata*, intellect and color. First, he notes that intellect can be taken as a *substance* existing through itself, by which he means the human intellect that survives death, or the active intellect, or the separate intellects that we call angels. Color, however, is purely an *accident* pertaining to a substance. Thus, the attempted comparison of intellect and color seems to commit the category mistake of relating a substance (essence) to an accident.

Nonetheless, he continues, existence itself is an accident of all existing things, whether we speak of the existence of an essence or the existence of an accident pertaining to that essence. Existence is accidental because, while I exist today, I will not exist forever; and because my existence forms no part of my definition as a rational animal. Still, existence is not an accident of God, for He is the unique being whose essence is identical with His existence. Therefore, on this first of Abarbanel's analyses, the *existence* of any creature is only accidental and does not compare to the *existence* of God, which is essential (substantial); just as the accident "color" does not compare with the substance "intellect"

Approaching the question a second time, Abarbanel considers the objection of R. Hasdai Crescas (c.1340 – 1410/1411). Crescas says that if Aristotle is right that there is no creation *ex nihilo*, so that the universe is eternal, then God and the world would share a relation of infinite existence. Abarbanel responds by noting that even Aristotle denies any attempted relation between the unformed matter (*hyle*) of the universe and time, even though both would then be eternal, because *hyle* is only a potentiality for existence and time is an accident on an accident. Just so, there is no relation between the *possible* existence even of an eternal universe and God's *absolute* existence.

But, Crescas demands, what about the fact that God is the first cause and abiding principle of existence ("the soul of the universe"), without which nothing exists? How can we deny a relationship of *existence* between God as cause and principle and the *existence* of the effect of His causation and providence, the universe?

Now that Crescas has elevated the issue to its most sublimely profound level, Abarbanel proceeds analytically. First, he rejects that such a comparison could be a *direct* relation since it lacks reciprocity, like the relations of father/son and master/slave. God's existence is absolute and therefore non-reciprocal with any merely possible existence.

He then notes that Maimonides had suggested and rejected existence as an *indirect* relation, *ktzat yakhas*, as "impossible to imagine" despite both God and man being existents. Abarbanel calls this language "difficult" (*zeh ha-lashon kashei meod*), and reiterates his suggestion that existence is an accident pertaining to both color and intellect. Still, at this higher level, the term is homonymous, since God's existence is identical with His essence, not accidental to it.

Crescas' rejoinder is to reject the homonymy. He replies that the term "existence" is not a homonymous term (*shem m'shutaf*) but an ambiguous term (*shem m'supak*). Abarbanel denies this. He responds that ambiguous terms are terms that are characterized by a relation of "more or less." Relations of more or less are the quantitatively *comparative* relations, like partnerships. He stumbles here, confusing terms with relations, i.e., ambiguous terms with ambiguous relations. The ambiguity that Crescas is trying to get at is the ambiguity of indirect relations, not the relatively clear issue of quantitatively comparative relations. This relation of God's existence to man's existence could be called a relation of "prior and posterior," in which case there is an

analogical relation showing the dependence of an effect upon its cause, or of a copy on its “formal” exemplar. Maimonides does admit these ambiguous relations when they involve other things besides God. That is because ambiguity implies some similarity between terms connecting members of genres or species, in a relation of “more or less.” Since God is not similar to anything, Maimonides rejects this analogical predication at the divine level. His rejection of the relation “*prius et posterius*” separates him from all major Arabic philosophers, since they still thought that such divine predications could be taken ambiguously. (See Wolfson’s important article on “*prius et posterius*” relations, and Gersonides’ four marvelous arguments against Maimonides’ rejection of them: “Maimonides and Gersonides on Divine Attributes as Ambiguous Terms,” *Studies, ibid.*, v. 2, esp. 231-233. Unfortunately, this story is beyond the scope of my essay).

More to the point, all relations, are, at bottom, intellectual constructs (*b’sekhel*). Abarbanel explains that relations are subject to change, and any change in any *relata* destroys the relationship, as when your son turns out to be the Prince of Sweden, then you are no longer his father. Relation must always be conceptual. Since any change in the ever-corruptible individual changes the *relata*, the relation no longer has any real “existence,” if it ever did. For “a master whose servant died” the relation of mastery is obviously conceptual, since he is no longer the master he was. All relations are, in some sense, relations of denial and absence, where our mind bridges the gaps.

Abarbanel quotes Psalm 29:10, “The Lord sat enthroned over the flood (yea, the Lord sitteth as King forever),” but says that this passage does not portray a relation between two existences. Rather, the relation of God to his creatures is a relation with “the species that exist always, not to their *members* who are subject to corruption,” citing Guide 1:11 (but see my qualifications there). Once again, a relation between the Creator and the universals, such as species, can be only a conceptual relation, an intellectual *mode*.

Now Abarbanel is finally ready to consider the default case of “some relation,” meaning, a loose analogical or metaphorical affiliation. Although all relations are accidents, Maimonides had called such a loose relation only a “sort of accident,” *ktzat mikrei*. Such an accident is purely conceptual (i.e., modal), and therefore not a real accident pertaining to corporeal substances, like color. It is, nonetheless, a permissible relation which people readily attribute to God, although it is metaphorical (*zeh m’ha-makhshava v’lo ha-mtziut b’atzmo, sh’yakelu al hamon l’taaro ytalei b’taarei ha-yakhusim, k’ele lo al derekh ha-emet ki im al derekh haavara*).

The only other possibility is to call it an attribute of action, which is also permissible.

Others comment that, boiled down, actions themselves are a kind of relation. Thus existence, seen from the aspect of the *action* of the Creator, may be characterized as “some relation.”

But are all these vague intimations of relations merely imaginary?

Wolfson answered that while Maimonides rejected divine attributes as modal existences, he could accept universals and perhaps other categories as intellectual modes. That is to say, relation is a kind of existence that is not real, but not imaginary either, and so our intuition that we share a relation may be such an intellectual mode. Moreover, the level of our relation to God as His “image” is precisely at the level of the intellect (Guide 1:1).

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