

## GUIDE 1:56 A MEDITATION ON SIMILARITY

In this chapter, Maimonides strives for a deeper meditation on the divine essence.

His method is strange. Usually we meditate on a simple concept. There is nothing simple about this chapter. Maimonides prefers to use theoretical means to achieve a more exalted state of consciousness. His goal is to foster a state of total intellection, from which post-intellectual meditation begins. I support these assertions not only with the content of this chapter but by the last pregnant sentences of it (Pines 131):

“The conception is of immense sublimity to those who know (*v’hinei inyan ze naaleh meod etzel ha-yodaim*). Keep it in memory, and realize its true meaning so that it be ready to hand (*me’uted*) with a view to what we wish to make you understand

The transcendent force of the statement overcomes the apparently theoretical intent of the chapter itself. Philosophy did much to purify our idea of God. But philosophy takes us only to the beginning of the path, not to its end.

The topic is similarity (*dimui, dimion*). It seems unnecessary to return to this topic since he treated it in the last chapter. He had marshaled three quotations from scripture to show that nothing is similar to God. This biblical method stood out in that otherwise philosophical chapter. One reason that he had to abandon Aristotelian philosophy there was that Aristotle was a pagan. How could Maimonides use that philosophy to show that there is none like God when Aristotle thought otherwise? Moreover, Maimonides thought he did not need to prove to his monotheist audience that there was nothing like God.

Since, according to Aristotle, it is the nature of man to know, nature drives us to find whether there is any similarity between God and us. Is God like us in any way?

In this discussion of the notion of similarity, Maimonides’ antagonist is the *Kalām* (pl.: *Mutakallimūn*), i.e., the school of Muslim theologians and their Jewish followers. They thought that God’s existence, power, will and wisdom were in some way like our existence, power, will and wisdom. Nonetheless, they continued to maintain that God was unlike any of His creatures. Indeed, the Arabic term for such likeness, *shirk*, becomes the usual term for heresy (Heb. *shutaf*, partner).

The term “*Kalām*” is difficult to define. It means “word” or “thought,” but becomes the name of the main stream of Islamic theology. This is the first mention of the *Kalām* in the Guide, except in the Introduction, where Maimonides promised to respond to Rabbi Joseph’s concerns about the *Kalām* of their day.

### SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

We can divide *similar* terms into three types: 1) homonymous (equivocal) terms; 2) univocal (synonymous) terms; and 3) amphibolous (ambiguous) terms, including what the scholastics termed *analogia*. Terms that actually are similar fall into the latter two categories only. That is because homonymous terms are completely different in meaning from each other, sharing only the same sound. Real univocal (*haskama*, Jud.Ar.: תראטו) similarity requires *relation*. There is no relation without some *fundamentum* between the *relata*. There must exist comparability in quantifiable terms, i.e., larger, fewer, stronger, hotter, etc. This can occur if both are closely related members of the same species. Despite the *Mutakallimūn* claim that there are divine essential attributes like existence, power, etc., these terms cannot be used synonymously for both God and man. Thus, His power is not “greater” than our power because there is no sense of power that could relate the two. Were this not so, the difference between His power and ours would merely be quantitative, not absolute.

The attributists piously admit this truth, yet do not act on that admission. Somehow, they still hold that these attributes describe both divine and human power.

Perhaps they thought that the similarity was ambiguous (amphibolous) rather than synonymous. In other words, instead of saying that the term existence has the same definition for man and God, perhaps it only means that they share some element which yields some minimal resemblance between them.

Maimonides defines amphiboly (*m'supak*, Arabic: *mushtarakah*) as a *similarity of accidents* between two beings. But since the Kalām admit that God cannot be a bearer of accidents, there can be no amphibolous similarity between God and man. It follows that apparently similar statements about God and man bear no commonality in any respect, for they are neither synonymous nor amphibolous. The only “similarity” they share is the sound of their names, i.e., homonymy (Kafih: *meshutaf gamur*; Even-Shmuel is better: *shituf-hashem b'l'vad*).

God’s “life” or “will” are just Himself, i.e., these terms are tautologies. They are identical with His essence, not added to it. When, by contrast, we speak of existence, life, will and wisdom in man, these attributes are added on to man’s essential nature as a rational animal (*ha-khai ha-medaber*, Gr.: *zoon logikon*).

### UNIVOCALITY?

(For the following discussion, see Wolfson, “The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides,” in Vol. 1 of *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, pp 455-475. See also *The Treatise on Logic/Sefer Milot HaHigayon* Ch. 13:4).

If the attributes were to carry a univocal or synonymous meaning when used of men and God, then the only possible interpretation would be that they would apply to God *more than* to us. That could be the case if the synonymy were essential or definitional, as when we say that Shimon and Reuven are both men. They share the same definitional essence as rational animals. We can compare them, and say that one is taller than the other. But Maimonides is interested in a broader sense of comparability which could encompass not only Shimon and Reuven, but God.

Before listing his examples of univocality, Maimonides mentions that the *relata* are members of the same “species,” *min*, Ar. *naw*, but see Pines note 1, p. 130, that the term is brought in a “rather loose sense.” When Maimonides writes about species here, he refers only to members closely related by the same species, in order to exclude such dissimilarities as this “greenness is as intense as that redness.” His other cases, such as the heat shared by melted wax and fire cannot be classified in terms of genus and species.

He gives examples of shared relations between similar things. But, on analysis, his examples of univocality are not really univocal. They are between *qualities*, i.e., those well-settled accidents that are characteristic of a thing but do not define it (Guide 1:53). Still, some of these qualities seem close to being essential and definitional, so much so, that even Aristotle sometimes calls them essential (Wolfson, 469-470).

His first example is the heat of a fire and of a glob of wax melting in the sun. Fire exhibits the extremity of heat while wax is merely warm. The shared quality of heat relates them, so that it is correct to describe the fire as quantitatively more hot than the wax. It is hard to envision fire without heat, and perhaps heat is close to being essential to fire. However, in this case, Aristotle holds that the heat of fire is an accidental quality manifested only when the pure element of fire mixes with the other three elements.

Another example Maimonides gives, presenting a similar problem, is the likeness between a grain of mustard seed and the outer celestial sphere. In this case, the shared quality is their dimensionality (*ha-mamadim*), although the mustard seed represents the extremity of smallness (*b'takhlit ha-koten*) and the sphere the extreme of size. Some

medieval philosophers held that *form*, especially what they called *corporeal form*, is just dimensionality, another way of looking at size (see, Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, Harvard, 1929, pp. 582-590; cf. Spinoza's "extension"). Thus, size and dimensionality characterize all corporeal things.

Nonetheless, size is not part of the definition of either the seed or the sphere, but is a quality of both. It is a well-settled accident that attaches but does not define.

Maimonides does not, in our chapter, try to prove God's lack (*m'sulak*) of any quality shared with men, but instead calls on his opponents to admit it. According to him, the Mutakallimūn verbally agree that the attributes of God and man are completely distinct (*bilti domim*). Still, we see that "as they practically believe" (Friedlander's helpful addition to the translation) there is a relation of "more than" (*yoter m...*) between God's power, will, knowledge, existence and ours, being *more* permanent, more perfect, or greater in the particular case. In other words, they still think there is a relationship even though it is less than a univocal/synonymous relationship.

A *caveat* is necessary here. Kafih refuses to use the Hebrew for "univocal," *haskama*, to translate the Jud.Ar. תואטו, see notes 14 and 23, but substitutes terms that indicate a looser kind of sub-univocality, verging on amphibolity. Wolfson, "The Amphibolous Terms," pp. 471-475, identifies serious semantic drift in all the Arabic terms for similarity, univocality, amphibolity, and homonymity.

### AMPHIBOLITY?

It is difficult to disambiguate ambiguity. Still, this is what Maimonides needs to do in order to reject the vague similarity between divine and human attributes.

The *Treatise on Logic/Sefer Milot HaHigayon*, attributed to Maimonides, has an important definition of *msupak*/amphibolity (my trans. from Ibn Tibon, 96-97, chapter 13):

"The term 'amphibolous' (*m'supak*) is a term employed when two substances possess a similarity. This similarity is not an element of the definition of either term [and therefore must be an accident]. Thus in the case of 'man' the term is used to portray Rueben because he is a 'discouring animal,' (*ha-khai ha-medaber*) but it also portrays a dead man, as well as the human form displayed in wood, stone or any other means of portrayal. Evidently the term 'man' is said for all these because of the single similarity shared by them, viz., they all look like man, but the image of man is no part of the definition of 'man.' On the one hand, amphibolity is like a synonym (*b'haskama* = univocal) because it is applied to two substances called 'man.' On the other hand, it is like a homonym (*m'shutaf ha-gmur*) because one is essentially different from the other. Therefore it is called 'doubtful' (This is the core meaning of *m'supak*)."

Their similarity is "doubtful" because they share something that is not essential to their natures. In our own chapter, he says, along the same lines:

"Do not deem that they are used amphibolously [when applied to God and man]. For when terms are used amphibolously they are predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect to some notion, which notion is an accident attached to both of them and not a constituent element of the essence of each one of them." (Pines trans.)

The problem arises because of the contradictory position taken by the Kalām that there is no similarity between God and His creatures, but that they have similarly defined attributes. "They hold that one definition (relation) may include them, and that, nevertheless, there is no similarity between them," *khoshvim ki ha-gedera akhat koleltam, v'sh'ayn dimion bineihem*. He announces his categorical rejection of their position in his opening line:

“Similarity is based on a certain relation between two things: if between two things no relation can be found, there can be no similarity between them, and there is no relation between two things that have no similarity to each other.”

The only remaining possibility would be that an ambiguous relation exists between them, a relation of amphiboly. But Maimonides denies this also, “Do not deem that they are used amphibolously,” since they would then have to share at least an accidental element, and God is free of accidental attachments.

Both Efodi and Shem Tov try to explain the assumed definition of God supposedly shared with his creatures. According to them, the attributists could have a general genus comprising all existents, paired with a divine difference—the lack of any similarity whatsoever. Thus, you could define the attribute “existence” so that God exists like other beings, but is different from the rest in that He is not like any of them. Such an attempted pairing of genus and difference bursts the very notion of “definition.”

Was it appropriate to quote the *Treatise on Logic* as Maimonides’ statement of this issue? The *Treatise* has till recently been treated by scholars as the work of Maimonides. Herbert Davidson in *Maimonides, the Man and His Works*, now denies Maimonidean authorship. The *Treatise* does use language close to Maimonides’ style. It well represents the way logic would have been taught in his time. If Maimonides had not written it, he probably was familiar with it. Wolfson, who held that Maimonides wrote it, shows that it is based on the solid philosophical fundamentals accepted as elementary in Maimonides’ milieu. I do not think Davidson would deny this, indeed, he says that Maimonides would have nothing to be ashamed of had he written it. (Among scholars recently holding that Maimonides wrote it are Schwarz in his translation of the Guide, and Joel Kraemer, *Cambridge Companion to Maimonides*, pp. 20, 51).

## THE HISTORY OF AMPHIBOLITY

The trouble with Maimonides’ account of ambiguity or amphiboly as only involving the accidental *relata* is that he deprives us of the richness in the accounts of these terms developed by Aristotle, Porphyry and the Muslim philosophers. Aristotle, for instance, gives an important example that Maimonides and the Muslim philosophers pointedly do not quote:

“If there is a different definition for each separate soul, as for horse and dog, man and god; [then the term] ‘animal,’ as the universal, is to be regarded either: A) as *nothing*, or B) as *posterior*.” (*De Anima*, 1:1, 402b, 6-8)

What this means is that we use the term ‘animal,’ i.e., animate, for all four beings either: A) equivocally, or B) as some kind of moderation of the idea of animacy. That moderation is amphiboly. It is striking that Aristotle puts these four together this way, including “god,” and Maimonides likely knew that he did.

We do not completely understand Aristotle’s view of divinity, but it was very different from Maimonides’ view. The universe precedes this god, and the god functions as the desirable end that sets it in motion. Aristotle posited an ambiguous similarity between god, dog, horse and man, all of which live in this world, unlike the God of Maimonides, who, because He was outside the world, could create it from nothing.

Wolfson gives us the history of the philosophic development of amphiboly. He notes different kinds of amphibolous relationships, which are difficult to distinguish. I have reorganized his several lists in order to give a sense of the range of the relationships that philosophers had at one time or another called amphibolous:

- 1) *Primitive terms*, like “being” in its application to “substance,” “quality” and the other categories (a thing or a feeling both “exist”). Another example given by some is “heat” as applied to both “fire” and other warm objects, though Maimonides assigned it to similarity rather than amphiboly. This would also include terms proceeding from one source.
- 2) *Derivative terms*. For example, “healthy” as applied to both gymnastics and symptoms, both of which have some derived relation to health.
- 3) *Priority and posteriority*. For example, as “essence” is prior “in its application to [the existence of] many of the categories and their species.” This group also includes the relation of primacy and subsequency, as well as substance/accident (which could also be in category 1 above). This group is perhaps the most significant of the amphibolities. It is what Aristotle meant by saying that the term “animal,” as applied to dog and god, was a “posterior” relation.
- 4) Terms applied to things in the same order or genus;
- 5) Terms applied *analogously* as “heart” to both the heart of an animal, the heart of a palm, and the heart of a city. (I replaced an untranslatable example noted by Wolfson).
- 6) Relationships of *difference*. For example, the relation of “vinaceous” both to grapes and to the color of a face. Another example given is the whiteness of ivory to whiteness of an ivory crown. This category is close to the category of analogy, and both are instances of priority/posteriority. This group may also include terms applied to *contraries*, for example, we call both prohibitions and commands “laws.”

Following a discussion of these types of ambiguous comparatives, Wolfson seems to conclude that Maimonides’ definition distills this history.

Though Maimonides introduces the category of amphibolous terms in our chapter, he gives no examples. He did achieve the insight that amphibolous *relata* share an *accidental* characteristic. This characteristic is a *quality* in one of the amphiboles, and either a quality or some other type of accident in the other. This supports his larger point that since God has no accidental qualities, He is not similar to any of his creatures, all of whose qualities are accidental.

As I suggested above, the examples Maimonides gave under univocality, (mustard seed, wax, etc.) verge onto amphiboly and any of the other philosophers Wolfson lists could have used them as examples of amphiboly.

Working on the example in the *Treatise on Logic* (man, corpse, statue), Wolfson argues that it really fits the priority/posteriority or analogy type of ambiguity, which goes back to Aristotle (god, man, dog, horse). The image transferred from the live man to the dead man and then to the stone man is an accident they share, fixed as a *quality* in the live man and the dead man, but only subsequently copied onto the stone. Wolfson argues even further that it really expresses an equivocality, since the word “man” signifies a completely different thing in each instance. He explains this collapse of equivocality into amphiboly by noting that the actual Arabic terms for similarity changed their meaning over time.

I think that based on the terminological history of amphiboly, and with what we know of Maimonides’ position, we can say that the term “power,” for instance, is *tautologically identical* (not definitional) with God but *accidental* with man. In other words, to say that God is powerful is only to say that God is God, without telling us anything essential about Him. To say that man is powerful is to say that he accomplished some small thing once or twice, and his coming into power is just something that happened to him.

Thus, the same word has two completely different meanings, although we seem to grasp what each connotes. This similarity can appear without denial of the absolute difference between the two. Maimonides never says that we should deny that God is powerful; he only says that our power is absolutely different from God’s power. Denying the attribute of power is not the same thing as denying the existence of power (1:57). Noting this distinction seems to be sufficient, and there is no need to change our language.

Still, according to Josef Stern, this “power” may only be “a ‘placeholder’ for the predicate—if we could ever know it—that *would* univocally express the ‘mysterious’ attribute apparently attributed to God” (“Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language,” p. 206, in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, Cohen and Levine, editors). Once again, language is an insurmountable obstacle, and, as we previously quoted from Joseph Dan: “Mysticism is that which cannot be expressed in words, period...*the mystics and the religious are two kinds of believers who are separated by a common language.*”

## CONCLUSION

The not particularly remarkable conclusion that Maimonides comes to at the end of our chapter is that:

“...it is not proper to believe, on account of the use of the same attributes, that there is in God something additional to His essence, in the same way as attributes are joined to our essence.”

But then he says this concept is of “immense sublimity” to those who know it. We are to “Keep it in memory, and realize its true meaning.” He means it not merely to deny attributes of God, purifying our idea of God from all attempts to make it resemble us, but as a meditation leading to a higher consciousness of the divine.

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