

**Maimonides (1135-1204):
The Problem of Divine Discourse**

There is an initial and powerful dilemma regarding our discourse about God. Either we make God out to be a kind of superhuman or Greek god (just like us or more so) OR he is made so distinct from us that we cannot speak of him at all. Religious language involves the distinction between God and the creature, we can make too much of that distinction or not enough.

Islamic theologians were divided over whether the divine attributes were identical with God's essence or distinct from it. The Muslim Al-Ghazali thinks of God as acting very much like humans, only with greater power and knowledge. Averroes reasserts the difference between God and creatures, which he takes to be an essential feature of Islam. God possesses attributes in the most perfect and complete manner. He thereby counters the gross literalism of Al-Ghazali.

Whereas Averroes held to an equivocal link between ordinary language and religious discourse, Maimonides argues that there is no connection at all. We can only talk about God's actions and the effects of those actions, but no positive predication can be applied to God.

Why this move? Why such an extreme position?

Maimonides saw this as a necessary consequence of God being immaterial, simple, and immutable.

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* we read that:

1. God has no essence in the sense that we can define him. (1:51-52)
2. God is not divisible into a collection of qualities and has no properties connected to him in a contingent way. (1:52)
3. He cannot be affected or influenced by anything else in existence (1:55)
4. To assert that God exists is itself beyond understanding if "exists" takes its meaning from the existence of contingent beings. (1:56)

Scripture asserts that God is one and transcendent creator of the universe. If this is true God must be *sui generis*. And this in turn at least suggests that God is wholly simple, a being who lacks all metaphysical composition, not only a composition of essence and accidental properties, but a composition of essence and existence. But if this is true, then how can we talk about God at all?

A. Five Kinds of Attribution (ch. 52, p. 375-378)

1. Essence Attribution: Q is predicated x, where Q = the definition (nature) of x.

Man is a <rational living being>.

2. Attribution of Necessary Property: Q is predicated of x, where Q is a part of the definition (ro essence)of x.

Man is a <living being.>

3. Accidental Attribution: Q is predicated of x, where Q is a quality of x which is not part of the essence of x.

John is <angry>

4. Relational Attribution: Q is predicated of x by virtue of a relation x sustains to y.

Elvis is <the father of Lisa Marie.>

5. Action Attribution: Q is predicated of x by virtue of x's having performed some action.

Elvis <sang 'Are you lonesome tonight">.

B. God and Attribution

Maimonides rejects all the attributions above with reference to God except the last. His reason is basically that all the others are incompatible with God's simplicity, and - as we shall see - God's simplicity is taken to be a necessary consequence of God's being transcendent. It is THE way of distinguishing God from the world.

1. Attributes indicative of essence, part of essence, or qualities cannot be predicated of God.

In each case these are not applicable to God:

a. God has no causes anterior to him by which he may be defined.

B. God has no parts and so cannot have parts of an essence.

C. God has no accidental parts either, and so lacks qualitative attribution.

(I) he does not possess any quantity (because he lacks spatial extension...is not a body),

(ii) he does not receive impressions, (iii) has no dispositions, etc.

2. God has no relational attributes.

Since God is a necessary being and all other things are possible. God and creatures belong to two different ontological orders. All relational predication presupposes that the things in relation are within the same ontological order.

C. Scripture as a Ground for Belief in Divine Attributes (ch. 53)

1. People are not led to belief in divine attributes by speculation

2. People are led to belief in divine attributes by following the external sense of scripture.

When taken in a literal sense, Scripture predicates attributive qualifications to God, and so people believed that God has attributes. However, these same people do not think of God as a material being. But by thinking of a God with attributes, they have not emptied their idea of God from the mode of materiality - namely accidents. But this external sense of Scripture cannot be taken literally anymore than it can when speaking of God as though he is a body.

D. Action attribution may be predicated of God

The purpose for using attributes in scripture is to predicate perfection to God, but not the same one's possessed by creatures. Most of the so-called attributes of God are attributes of action. Since a multiplicity of different actions may be predicated of a single agent, action attribution is permitted with reference to God.

Examples:

Elvis sings and eats.

Fire blackens, burns, cooks, etc.

In these cases, it is not that there are a multiplicity of qualities subsisting in the essence of a thing. Fire performs all these actions by means of one quality - heat.

E. Negative Theology

Negative theology involves making statements about God by denying of him what is true of human beings. According to Maimonides, describing God by way of negation is the correct way of talking about God.

1. Similar to attributes of affirmation, attributes of negation particularize a thing, but it does so by way of exclusion. To say that X is a living being is to achieve a kind of particularization by exclusion: X is not dead, or not not-alive.

2. Different from attributes of affirmation, attributes of negation do not give us any truth about the essence (whole or part) of a thing.

What might be thought of as accidental attribution is really action attribution in God's case.

What might be thought of as essence (or essential) attribution is really negative attribution in God's case.

All of the specific actions of God take on the form of positive action attribution.

All of the essential attributes of God are taken as negations.

God exists = God's non-existence is impossible.

God is living = God is not dead.

God is immaterial - God is not material

God is eternal = God has no cause for his existence

God is powerful = God is not powerless

God is knowing = God is not ignorant

God is willing = God is not negligent

Every attribute of God is either an attribute signifying some action of God's

or an attribute signifying the negation of some privation.

F. The Knowledge of God

It might seem that if the preceding is true, that any revelation from God is wrong-headed and that any command from God to grow in a knowledge of our creator is similarly wrong-headed.

1. Our Silence is Praise to God

Maimonides responds: we grow in our knowledge of God by means of denying of him more and more things which are true of the created order. (P. 384-385) Conversely, the more we predicate of God positively, the closer we move toward unbelief.

Scriptural basis for this view: "Silence is praise to thee" (Psalm 65:2).

[[Silence with regard to you is praise.]]

2. The Torah sets the Constraints for positive attribution

Nevertheless, we can speak of God in positive terms only to the extent that the Torah does and that the prophets used them in prayer. Scripture is a model for how we talk about God.

This is accommodation. It is permitted, but for those who are mature, the proper way of speaking about God becomes manifest.