

Rambam's Theory of Divine Attributes

By Rabbi Meir Triebitz

I. The Problem

The First Division of Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed* culminates in a treatise spanning twenty chapters (I. §50-69) which, taken together, set forth the negative theology that will underpin his famous attack against Kalam philosophy concluding that First Division. In that treatise Rambam makes his equally famous radical claim that the Jewish commandment of Divine unity (and incorporeality) forbids any positive description of God whatsoever; God can be described by no positive statement of any kind. And with this radical assertion Rambam seeks explicitly to reject not only the Christian notion of the Trinity but with it the contemporary Islamic 'theory of attributes' expounded by the Muslim Kalam. While the intention of the latter is to propose a notion of Divine attribution reconcilable with their strict monotheism, in contradistinction to what was for them the clearly paganistic doctrine of the Christian Trinity, Rambam nevertheless denies any such distinction and rejects both theories on the same grounds. "[T]rue Oneness" consists in rejecting any possible

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“composition whatever [...] to be found in Him” and any “possibility of division in any way whatever,” so that attribution upon Him would be tantamount to corporeality: “[J]ust as it is impossible that He should be a body, it is also impossible that He should possess an ‘essential attribute’” (I.§50; Munk 57a / Pines 111).¹ Attribution is, in short, in His case always our error.

Such a principle is plain enough. But so too are the grounds for its continual violation. For since language does not always serve faithfully to represent religious doctrine, but rather allows us to “hold[...] beliefs to which [...] [we] do not attach any meaning whatever,” we are ever liable to fall into the folly of drawing false distinctions not correspondent with any underlying true beliefs, “as if we aimed at and investigated what we should say and not what we should believe” (ibid. 56b-57a), as when the fool seeks only to mouth correct beliefs without genuine knowledge of what is spoken about. Thus “[i]f [...] someone believes that [God] is one, but possesses a certain number of essential attributes, he says in his words that He is one, but believes Him in his thought to be many.” This indeed is the error of the Kalam philosophers, who while motivated to distinguish their own thought from Christian theology, wander onto the path of the very error they seek to repudiate, that error being “what the Christians say: namely, that He is one but also three, and that the three are one.” God’s Unity properly understood obviates any theory of attributes, including that proposed by the Islamic philosophers, whose would-be improvement over the Christian Trinity is only cosmetic: an alteration of theological language but not of underlying theological doctrine.

¹ All translations herein unless otherwise noted are those of Shlomo Pines (Ed. and trans., *Guide of the Perplexed*; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1963). Citations are, first, to Book and Section number (which are the Rambam’s own), followed by the folio leaf and side of S. Munk’s Arabic manuscript (Paris, 1856-66) as notated in Pines’s edition, followed last by Pines’s own English pagination.

The bulk of this twenty-chapter treatise (specifically, its first eighteen, §50-67) leaves the reader with an elaborated demonstration why it is impossible to assign any positive attribute to God, why all what may be legitimately described of God is either what He is not, or—and this is crucial²—in what some *act* of His consists. Only via such descriptions do we describe merely the creation or some aspect of it without overstepping ourselves and pretending to describe the Creator Himself—the latter amounting, of course, to (false) attribution, which in the case of God has been categorically ruled out. So it comes as something of a shock when, in the final two chapters (§68-69), Rambam explicitly describes God’s essence with attributes, specifically by attributing to Him *intellect*, *will* and *wisdom*, and *life*.

Concerning the first of these, Rambam defines “the intellect **which is His essence**” as “[t]he act of apprehension owing to which He is said to be an intellectually cognizing subject” (§68, 87b/165; emphasis added). So it would seem that God *thinks* (an act) because He *has an intellect* (an attribute). Concerning the second two, namely “His will and wisdom,” which, again, “**are identical with His essence**,” to them attributes Rambam “the order of all ends” (§69, 90b/170; emphasis added):

[...]He [...] is the ultimate end of everything[...]. This [...] is the meaning of His will, which is His essence. In virtue of this it is said of Him that He is the end of all ends[...]. For this reason the philosophers designated Him as a cause and not only as a maker.

Attribution to God (now as causatively relating to the world) is, in other words, justified from some essential feature of God Himself (that He wills). And this superposition of worldly attributes onto the

² For more on the nuances of the Rambam’s negative theology as well as its relation to prophecy, the reader is referred to this author’s “Rambam’s Theory of Negative Theology: Divine Creation and Human Interpretation” in the inaugural issue of these pages (v1:1, March 2008: 9-28).

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Divine Essence is pushed still further when, immediately preceding (ibid. 90a/169), we call Him 'alive':

God has [...] with reference to the world, the status of a form with regard to a thing possessing a form, in virtue of which it is that which it is: a thing the true reality and essence of which are established by that form[...]. Because of this notion, God is called in our language the 'Living of the worlds' meaning that He is the life of the world, as shall be made clear.

It seems that the prospect of describing God's life sends us directly into the realm of positive analogy with the world, if not into expressed positive description as worldly. One has to wonder what relevance or sense remains to the crucial point of Rambam's first eighteen chapters forbidding any divine attribution by the time we have, in the final two chapters, elucidated God's very essence as *thinking, living, wise, and willful*, undermining, it would seem, one of the fundamental tenets and central themes of the *Guide*.

Put briefly: *Why may we, following the Rambam, attribute to God's essence these attributes (of intellect, wisdom, will, and life) without contravening belief in God's unity as demanded by the Torah?* Which is to ask: *How does Rambam mean to escape his own charges against the Islamic philosophers that have fallen prey to meaningless linguistic dogma at the expense of rationally founded belief?* Or still, put most generally: *How can the theology of the Guide hope to collapse the Muslim Kalamist project into the failures of Christian theology while itself remaining philosophically distinct of that project?*

II. A Rejected Answer: Rav Saadiah on the Christian Trinity

The theory of attributes was a relatively late development in Islamic thought. According to some³ it was probably imported as a

³ See, for example, H. A. Wolfson, "The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity," *Harvard Theological Review*, v49/n1 (January 1956): 1-18.

consequence of Christian-Muslim dialogue, wherein even the staunchest Islamic apologists defending against any Trinitarian conceptions were forced to concede that the Creator must necessarily possess some certain attributes, such as wisdom, power, or knowledge, even while His incorporeality precludes any independent description of His essence without undermining His unity. A stalwart monotheist is thus forced to the conclusion that God's essence is *identical with* His wisdom, His life, and His power and thus too to the concession that God is properly describable by *essential* attributes we may understand as properly his own such as these—i.e., not attributes that He has but attributes He Himself Is. Indeed, it is precisely in contradistinction to Christian theological error that Rav Saadiah Gaon, in his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, enunciates this conclusion two and a half centuries prior to the Rambam's *Guide*:

[L]et me say that [...] the Christians erred when they assumed the existence of distinction in God's personality which led them to make of Him a Trinity and to deviate from the orthodox belief [...]. [They] maintain that they adopted their belief in the Trinity as a result of rational speculation and subtle understanding and that it was thus that they arrived at these three attributes and adhered to them. Declaring that only a thing that is living and omniscient is capable of creating, they recognized God's vitality and omniscience as two things distinct from His essence, with the result that these became for them the Trinity.⁴

The argument for a 'theory of attributes' is very compelling: If one admits that God can be described as 'living,' 'knowing,' or 'willing,' why should God's 'life,' 'knowledge' or 'will' be any less real than His existence? On the other hand, an attribute which is separate or other from Himself would necessitate corporeality or some disunity within

⁴ *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions [Emunot ve-Deot]*, trans. Rosenblatt (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1989): 103-104.

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Him. The only apparent solution is to posit attributes, such as those listed above, which are “at one with His existence,” i.e., essential.

The distinction between this approach and that of Christianity can be explained in the following way: Christianity posits that these attributes are themselves separate personae, a viewpoint is fundamentally paganistic or polytheistic. Islam, by denoting them ‘attributes’ and not separate personae, seems to do away with the objection of paganism. Rav Saadiah counters, however, that so long as “one attribute is not identical with the other,” God necessarily becomes corporeal. Thus, the only way to understand the matter is to maintain that all His attributes are in fact one, however indescribable may be that essential unity. We maintain them as one, even as in speech we multiply them, just as the fire-worshipper “who says that he does not worship the fire but the thing that burns and gives light and rises upward, which is in reality nothing else than fire.”

Rav Saadiah's argument against this Islamic view, however, is that so long as “one attribute is not identical with the other,” God necessarily becomes a corporeal being. He claims that the only way to understand the matter is to maintain that all these attributes are in fact one. It is possible to think of them as one, even though it is impossible for a human being to combine these attributes as one in speech. Yet this does not pose a serious problem. Rav Saadiah cites an analogy of “him who says that he does not worship the fire but the thing that burns and gives light and rises upward, which is in reality nothing else than fire”.

It is clear that Rambam did not find Rav Saadiah's theological rejoinder compelling. While in the chapters that concern us here—those final, problematic chapters cited above (§68-69)—Rambam identifies God's essence with His will, His existence, His life, and His wisdom, there is no attempt to unite and identify those four attributes. On the contrary, the attributes of will and wisdom are explicated in worldly terms; their being given worldly meaning undermines such a notion of implicit unity as Rav Saadiah would

want to suggest. In the final analysis, it would appear that not only is Rambam advocating a theory of attributes that directly contradicts his own theology as laid forth in the prior chapters (*Guide* §50-67) but also a theory that contravenes the defense of such a theory Rav Saadiah could offer. The need for a resolution thus becomes more pressing, as it would seem that Rambam is indeed putting forth a theory of attributes in the very tradition of those Islamic thinkers he manifestly would want to condemn as re-cosmetized Christians. Our aforementioned contradiction stands, and stands indeed against an even wider opposition than we initially supposed.

III. A Resolution

Contradictions in the *Guide* should not be dismissed as mere lapses by the author. On the contrary, they are Rambam's vehicle for teaching to his more astute and intelligent readership. This, in fact, is his primary addressee, as he declares plainly at the outset of his work: "I am he who prefers to address that single [virtuous] man by himself," to which end he will readily sacrifice contenting an audience of "ten thousand ignoramuses" (I. Introduction, 9b/16). In a famous passage of that Introduction Rambam very explicitly maintains that contradictions the reader finds in the *Guide* exist to a purpose and are of two types (11b/20): Either they arise "from the necessity of teaching and making someone understand" an "obscure matter that is difficult to conceive"—in which case the explanation that "is easy to conceive" will precede the more difficult, more exacting explanation, laying forth "that obscure matter [...] in exact terms and explain[ing] as it truly is" (10a/17-18)—or, alternatively, arise "in speaking about very obscure matters," so obscure that the speaker need "conceal some parts and [...] disclose others" (10b/18; emphasis added):

Sometimes in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise,

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whereas in another place necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. **In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.**

Put very briefly: The first contradiction occurs as a kind of stepwise pedagogical tool, while the second seeks surreptitiously to teach to a heterogeneous audience of mavens and novices, the sophisticate and the vulgar.

I want to assert that our contradiction here regarding negative theology is of the second type.⁵ Rambam's exposition of negative theology is too difficult and involved for us to assume that he is just making the matter "easy to conceive" in the manner of the first type of contradiction. In all likelihood Rambam was of the opinion that his negative theology was too subtle for most readers, and the contradiction by which he here elucidates it reflects a tension both essential and essentially irresolvable: Although the prohibition against paganism requires foremost that we forgo any positive attributes for God and thereby avoid anthropomorphism, we nonetheless need ways of speaking about God and about His acts—indeed, about such things as "His Wisdom and Will" (quoted above)—and that we be able to do so in ways we can relate to—that is to say, anthropomorphically. As a result, an authentic Jewish theology must validate this ever irresolvable, ever relevant tension, at once irreducible and dichotomous, by walking a course that averts us from paganism on one hand while on the other providing us a way we can speak about and relate to God—a course, in short, between polytheism and atheism. Such a theology requires, almost as its

⁵ "First" and "second" are termed here for our purposes only. In the Rambam's Introduction they actually correspond, respectively, to the *fifth* and *seventh* of the types of contradiction listed there.

natural literary device, paradox and contradiction to elucidate this dialectical tension.

This method of exposition by paradox is evidenced most elegantly in Rambam's interpretation of the dialogue between Moshe and God (Shemos 33), the underlying subject of which is according to him most fittingly the fundamental principles of Jewish negative theology (*Guide* 64b/124). Moshe entreats two requests of God: "Show me now Your ways, that I may know You..." (v13) and "Show me, I pray You, Your Glory" (v18). Initially God does not respond to the first but only later concedes after categorically denying Moshe the second: "You cannot see My face" (v20), but "I will make all My Goodness pass before You" (v19). The initial reticence followed by later acquiescence expresses the potential danger of the first request, and only by being denied the second is Moshe granted it. It is as if to suggest that *both* requests—or, we'll suggest, both *questions*—are really forbidden—or, to say the same here, *unanswerable*—but that for lack of any clear alternative and out of necessity, we receive a grant of the lesser only once we have been explicitly barred from the greater, that we may thereby come to recognize the essential impossibility of either request being granted—and the a priori provisionality of any such answer to either question. Man's relationship to God is illustrated by two questions, where the one answer *can only come at all* upon the complete forsaking of the other. Within the Biblical dialogue between God and Moshe resides a fundamental paradox illustrative of and explicated by the dichotomy of Rambam's negative theology: Man may predicate certain attributes to God only once such predication has been already set apart from ordinary predication as always ultimately in vain.

This method of exposition by paradox is not confined to the nuances of negative theology; we see it arising again throughout the *Guide*. Perhaps the most notable example is the difficulty of reconciling the Torah presumption of an incorporeal Creator ex nihilo with His

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eternity.⁶ As a consequence, while Rambam's discussion of creation begins by asserting that the opinion of Torat Moshe is that the world was created by God *ex nihilo*, by the time that discussion concludes eighteen chapters later (II. §30),⁷ he makes the subtle point, casually dropped as if merely incidental, that one of the terms referring to creation in the Torah (*qinyan, qeil qoneh*) itself “tends toward the road of the belief in [...] eternity” (71b/358). To the astute ear honed to his method of paradoxical exposition, the underlying thrust is clear: He begins with the assertion he believes to be obvious and most fundamental—namely, *creatio ex nihilo*—after which, following long diversions, he introduces the contrary premise—*creatio continua aeterna*—by which time the less aware, less initiated reader will likely not notice the subtle discrepancy and the controversial nuance therein entailed: that creation *ex nihilo* is not creation in time, *chiddush nifla*.

And so it is in the case at hand. That the Torah rejects any theory of attributes is a premise most obvious and fundamental, subsumed within the repudiation of paganism upon which Torat Moshe is founded and against which it even defines itself. After a long discussion which emphasizes and reemphasizes this point, thereby wearing out all but Rambam's most alert reader, only then can he bring up a contrary premise for his selected and intended audience, that he might convey to them a more nuanced theology involving conceptions, e.g., of divine will, divine wisdom, and divine life.

⁶ For an extended examination of this contradiction in the Guide and its relation to prophecy and intellectual self-perfection, the reader is referred to this author's “Rambam's Theory of Negative Theology: Divine Creation and Human Interpretation” (Op. cit. above n.2).

⁷ For an extended examination of this contradiction in the Guide and its relation to prophecy and intellectually self-perfection, the reader is referred to this author's “Rambam's Theory of Negative Theology: Divine Creation and Human Interpretation Guide for the Perplexed on Creation” previously appearing in these pages (Reshimu v1/n2, September 2008: 131 Op. cit. above n.2).

IV. Conclusions

We have asserted thus far that Rambam’s negative theology is not as monolithic as it is radical, but rather that it rests on a fundamental dichotomy that demands a dialectical, self-contradictory exposition, and that his theology requires this dichotomy precisely in order that the nuances therein not come at the expense of the radicality of its basic premises—in other words, in order that the simple understanding of the vulgar reader not be compromised for the sake of a more nuanced but more accurate truth aimed at the lone sophisticates within Rambam’s audience. That we may allay skepticism of this assertion—which, we grant, must remain conjectural—it behoves us to examine more closely the concluding chapters of Rambam’s treatise (namely, the aforementioned *Guide* I. §50-69) in light of it. Therein (§68-69), so we’ve claimed, positive divine attributions ostensibly violate his initial premise of divine inattributability, among them *intellect* and *will*. It is those we shall re-examine now.

Regarding God’s intellect we have from Rambam’s *Mishneh Torah* the fundamental “philosophers” principle that God, being absolutely unitary, is uniquely characterized by being with regard to His act of knowledge at once identically the knower, the known, and the knowing itself—in the words of the *Guide*, “the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object” (§68, 86b/163).⁸ Presumably this identity would not only distinguish God from man but uniquely characterize Him; indeed, in the *Mishneh Torah* it ostensibly serves as the culmination of the negative theology briefly summarized therein—a negative essential attribute of sorts. Yet Rambam closes the same chapter of the *Guide* with what is a very

⁸ Cf. *Sefer haMada’*: *Hilbot Yesodei haTorah* 2:10

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surprising point, the more so in the context of that very chapter (88a/165-66):

[T]he numerical unity of the intellect, the intellectually cognizing subject, and the intellectually cognized object does not hold good with reference to the Creator only, but also with reference to every intellect. [...]n us too, the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellect, and the intellectually cognized object are one and the same thing[...].

Man and God both, it seems, intellectualize similarly; man actualizes his intellect in time, while God, Himself a purely active intellect, is always actuating what man only actuates at certain given moments. Let us be clear: Not only is Rambam concluding the chapter with an implicit contradiction, but he implicitly contradicts his “fundamental principle” by explicitly analogizing God to man, contradicting thereby his entire negative theology most blatantly. Of course, explanation is in order (ibid. 166):

[...] His Essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect, as is also necessarily the case with regard to every intellect in action. We have repeated this notion several times in this chapter because the minds of men are very much strangers to this way of representing the thing to oneself. I did not consider that you might confuse intellectual representation with imagination and with the reception of an image of a sense object by the imaginative faculty, as this Treatise [the *Guide*] has been composed only for the benefit of those who have philosophized and have acquired knowledge of what has become clear with reference to the soul and all its faculties.

The last of the three sentences above, it would seem, aims at addressing the contradiction. (And given our understanding of the Rambam's method of surreptitious instruction to the lone maven beyond the attention of the vulgar many, we should not be surprised

that he addresses the contradiction quite briefly and without emphasis.) The answer he offers, however unprecedented, is itself clear enough and even intuitive:

Intellect is unique among our faculties, yet such uniqueness is often compromised by the minds of most men (or, in this case, most readers) who are apt to analogize the intellect to one of their other mental faculties, such as imagination or sensation. With respect to acts of those more corporeal faculties, any anthropomorphic analogy applied to God will necessarily violate His incorporeality. But in the case of intellect, being essentially and uniquely incorporeal, one can describe God and man in similar ways without violating the principles of negative theology. This, of course, should be obvious for that reader whom Rambam has chiefly in mind, “that single [virtuous] man” referenced in his Introduction, which is to say here someone “who has philosophized and acquired knowledge of what has become clear with reference to the soul and all its faculties.” Such a reader will rightly conclude that while we speak of God ‘having’ intellect only at the gravest doctrinal peril, nevertheless we can arrive at some sound understanding of God as Himself Intellectual only because we ourselves by virtue of our own intellection are most essentially *imago Dei* (Heb. *tzelem Elokim*). Yet this point will remain simply beyond any reader who, though his intellect be directly accessible to him, has yet failed to grasp that his intellection is incommensurable with any other faculty; for him, only God’s incommensurability with man is to be grasped, and only it may be taught.

A similar point is made with regard to God’s will in the final chapter (I.§69). As the creature who performs God’s will, man possesses a will which itself thus participates in the divine Will. (And as with ‘intellect’ above, so with ‘will’ here:) As man’s will partakes of God’s, so then is God’s will obviously analogous to man’s. What the “meaning of [that Divine] Will” is, we are cryptically informed—and, again, almost in passing!—“shall be made clear” subsequently, a

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promise not fulfilled until the very last chapter of the *Guide* (III.§54),⁹ where we finally come to learn that the purpose of man is morally to imitate God and in such imitation reach the highest level of perfection. And what is it in God that man is to imitate? Well, what is “not something other than His essence”—being, ultimately, “His Will and Wisdom,” which constitute “the ultimate end of everything” (90b/170). In short, man by acting like God imitates His will, partaking thereby in some most essential attribute of divinity that is itself closed, actually and doctrinally, from humanity at large.

So in the final analysis we see that Rambam, despite all initial apparent protestations to the contrary, indeed does subscribe to a theory of attributes. We maintain, however, those protestations to be sincere; his was a radically different theory of attributes from that of his Islamic counterparts. For whereas Islamic philosophers understood the attributes to be part of God, or even, à la Rav Saadiah Gaon, essentially identical with God, Rambam understood them as ultimately reflecting true conditions of man's existence, specifically the essential divinity of man's intellectual faculty and man's inherent potential for service to God in *imitatio Dei*. God's attributes, it seems, define man's ability to relate intellectually and morally to God and His creation. And in light of this equation, Rambam's admonition at the beginning of this treatise on negative theology not to be satisfied just with expressions of speech but to represent them in the mind takes on new meaning (I.§50, 56b-57b/111-12); in true Biblical stylistic fashion, it is itself not just an admonition but a sanctioning command to man that he realize those intellectual and moral potentialities granted him by, and reflective of, his Creator.



⁹ See Michael Schwarz' note to his Hebrew edition (*Moreh ha-Nevukhim* [Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv UP, 2002], ed., 180n30).