Chapter 1:58 begins, like the last chapter, with an eye-catching caption: "Deeper than the preceding." Last chapter's "depth" revealed that we could not attribute existence, unity and power to God except by saying, for example, "God exists but not through existence," to indicate the homonymity of the term "existence." In this chapter, the extra added depth is that we cannot even say that God "exists but not through existence," but rather that His "existence" is an implication through denial that He is not absent, that His "unity" implies that He is not subject to plurality, and so on (Shem Tov).

This chapter is Maimonides' strongest statement of his doctrine of negative attributes. In the end, as we will show, pure negativism is not what Maimonides has in mind. Despite the fact that we know nothing of the divine essence, Maimonides' portrayal of God is not, ultimately, negative, but just the opposite. God's existence is so strongly positive, active and actualizing that His positivity overwhelms all other considerations. His classic statement of the nature of God is the dramatic inauguration of Mishneh Torah:

> "The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is to know that there is a First Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is between them came into existence only from the truth of His being. If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist. Their non-existence would not involve His non-existence. For all beings are in need of Him, but He, blessed be He, is not in need of them nor of any of them."

And, 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.'"

SHIRK

The cardinal heresy in Islam is called *shirk*, literally "partnership, sharing or associating" (*Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, p.468). The Qur'an, *Sura an-Nisaa*, 4:48, states, "Surely Allah will not forgive the association of partners (*shirk*) with Him." *Shirk* is the unforgivable sin. When translated into Hebrew the term always becomes *shituf*, which also means partner or association, but did not pick up the meaning of heretical associationism until contact with Islam occurred (but see Schwarz, *ad loc.*, note 3, registering Talmudic antecedents for *shituf* as the heresy of association). The problem with the essential attributes ascribed to God, according to Maimonides, is that they disguise a sophisticated form of associationism. "If one describes him with affirmations this implies *shirk* and defect in Him" (my trans. from Kafiḥ, and see his note 3, *ad loc*).

We have already seen that Maimonides approves of Onkelos' Aramaic translation of the Bible. Onkelos retranslates anthropomorphic divine attributes into entities created by God, like *Shekhina* and Word. By contrast, in Christianity, the essential attribute is not a creation. It has an eternal life of its own, as the *logos*, of which John 1:1 says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God." This Word is Jesus, "the Word made flesh," (1:14). The clear implication of the Johannian text is that the incarnated Logos is the eternal partner of God.

When the Muslims first encountered Christians in the Middle East, their concept of the Qur'an had not hardened to its present form as the eternal and uncreated Qur'an. There were those who thought it a creation of God, as the Torah is a creation of God to Jews. The repercussions of the Christian *logos* in Islam led some Muslims to assert such an eternal status for the Qur'an. Just as Jesus is the incarnated *logos*, analogously, the *logos* is "inlibrated"

in the Qur'an (Wolfson's coinage). Later Islamic theologians reduced the number of attributes for fear of associationism. It became harder to feature essential eternal attributes in their system.

Maimonides, therefore, is not the first to disapprove of essential attributes. The distinction Maimonides brings is the application of a more rigorous grammar to formulas rejecting attributes. We saw in the preceding chapters that we should not even say, "God is wise through wisdom." "Through wisdom" means through wisdom as we know it, and we only know it as an accident sometimes happening to men, not as something identical to the divine essence. We should rather say "God is wise, but not through wisdom," although it is nearly incoherent, as Maimonides recognized (1:57). Now we are told that we cannot even say this. There are problems with saying that "God is wise."

RESTATEMENT OF THE CHAPTER

The chapter begins with praise of what Maimonides calls "negative attributes," *taarei ha-shlila*. He says they are the only correct divine attributes (*ha-taor ha-nakhon*). The reader could be forgiven for thinking that he actually meant to describe God only through such negations, but this is not what he does. The chapter keeps returning to positive statements about God. The reader might also have thought that by employing negations Maimonides spares us the imaginative flights of the attributists. Nevertheless, at the end, Maimonides turns, almost in despair, to the poetry he has tried to free divine science from. Despite his concern that the essential attributes (wisdom, will, power, life, etc.) lead to associationism, he continues to use them.

He begins with his ostensible program:

> "It is now necessary to explain how negative expressions can in a certain sense be employed as [positive] attributes, and how they are distinguished from positive attributes. Then I shall show that we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes."

He successfully shows that "negative expressions can…be employed as attributes," (*shlilut taarim m'bekhina mesuyamet*) when referring to men. Still, this version of the "negative attributes" is not strongly distinguished from positive attributes, as we will see. Though he says, "we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes," he repeatedly does so. The inescapable conclusion is that he cannot escape affirmation in the divine case, and that when he tries to do so, language breaks down. The best he can do is to take the positive attributes in a "negative" sense, not quite the same thing as the rigorous application of negations. But then his real purpose in this was to show us that the attributes and the divine essence are identical.

The difficulty comes when we name God with *common* terms. This is because there is nothing common with God. We describe men with attributes that participate in the common *universal* of which they are particular instances. By contrast, all names of God are specific in application and meaning to Him. When we attribute wisdom to Joseph, he is not the only being with that property, and the attribution to him does not specify. When we speak of God, we must specify, as He is in all ways unique. This is a problem with both negations and affirmations, since both deal in *common* terms, that is, terms that suggest *associationism* (*harei b'derekh zu mshutafim taarei ha-shlila l'taarei ha-hayuviim, l'fi sh'b'hekhrach hem myukhadim yihud msuyam*).

Examples. To compare and contrast these two types of attributes, Maimonides produces a series of examples. First, he tries to describe a man glimpsed at a distance. In this example, he uses a *positive* attribute. The questioner learns that the being is an animate being (*khai*, as in *baal khai*), thus excluding mineral or vegetable. Even though it focuses on these exclusions, this is still a positive attribution. In the next example, we ask about a being in a house. This time he uses *negations*. This being is *neither* mineral nor vegetable. Since all corporeal things are animals, minerals or vegetables, we derive, by exclusion, that it is an animal. By such exclusions, whether negative or positive in form, we learn something about the object of attribution, but not its actual essence

or definition. We can therefore use this system to guide our minds to true thought about God, whose essence and definition we cannot know.

Notice that both the negations and the affirmations arrive at the affirmation of animal nature, and both do it by drawing conclusions from the evidence affirmed or denied. Still we have not yet specified which animal it is, whether wildebeest or human. Thus, the "attribution" is still common to the kingdom *animalia.* He says:

> "The negative attributes have this in common with the positive, that they necessarily circumscribe the object to some extent, although such circumscription consists only in the exclusion of what otherwise would not be excluded."

Shem Tov questions whether even this would still work had we not been indoctrinated in the tripartite division of sublunar things. But this has always been Maimonides' point: the adept should first devote energy to study nature to learn all the things that can be negated.

Maimonides argues that there is a substantial distinction between the two methods. *Affirmation* suggests 1) parts of the definition, or 2) types of accidental properties. Thus, we affirmed that man is an animal, which is part of his definition as rational animal, or, we could affirm that this man is tall, the affirmation of the accident of tallness. *Negation* arrives at those *definiens* or those accidents only inferentially (*b'derekh ha-hekesh*: see Kafiḥ note 14, *ad loc*), by process of elimination. Even-Shmuel compares the use of negative attributes to a sculptor cutting unnecessary stone to reveal the truth of the sculpture. Nonetheless, while both methods arrive at the same affirmation by logical deduction, the way of negation is more circuitous. Both deal necessarily in common terms since both bring us to "some specification" (*sh'b'hekhrach hem myukhadim yihud msuyam*) about the targeted object. Shem Tov explains, "Just as the first example shows attribution despite the fact that it did not specify, so the second shows attribution despite its being a negation."

<u>Divine Negations</u>. This is well for the example of man, even if vague. The system breaks down when applied to God, since the implied negations overwhelm the positive statements that contain them. Even-Shmuel perhaps goes to far in saying that "the theory of negative attributes has no purpose but as a complete acknowledgment of the impossibility of knowing God in any of His aspects." Maimonides contends that we can know *that* God *is* but not *what* He is; in the next breath, he tells us that these two are identical (*v'ayn anu masigim ele anochiuto b'lvad lo mahuto…l'fi sh'ayn lo anochiuto m'hutz l'mahuto*). The meaning is that we always fail when we try to isolate aspects of his unity. It does not mean that those aspects do not exist, because they do. When he said, "God knows but not through knowledge" the first part of the sentence, "God knows" is just as important as "not through knowledge" (H. A. Wolfson, "Maimonides on Negative Attributes," in *Studies*, vol. II, 195).

Despite all this, he still argues that the "negations," even when they are affirmations taken negatively, only "lead the mind" (*l'hankhit ha-makhshava*) to derive these aspects of the divine essence. In a formal sense, just because they are negative, the negations do not commit *shirk* or *shituf*, i.e., negations do not by themselves associate common predicates with God. They only "lead the mind" to the implied affirmations. By contrast, we can only apply the affirmative attributes metaphorically or by way of exclusion. Otherwise, applied directly, the affirmations always associate God in common with things that we know, in the way that we know them.

He demonstrates how he uses these divine negations. He starts by asserting that there is proof of an existence beyond the senses and beyond the ambit of what we know from them (*davar ma zulat elu ha-atzmuyot ha-musagot b'hushim, v'asher et ydiatem makif ha-sekhel*). This "existence" is Aristotle's unmoved mover, the source of all motion in the universe. We know this because causes of motion cannot refer back indefinitely without reaching an ultimate cause. This parallels the example of the man glimpsed in the distance. We know that there must be something out there, but what is it?

There are six negations by which we are supposed to learn "the highest possible knowledge" about "this existence."

The first step is that we know "it" must exist. It must exist, because there must be an initial unmoved cause for all motion. In the same breath, he retreats to negation: by saying "it exists," the idea is that we are denying its non-existence (*sh'hu mtzui, ha-inyan bitul ha-edro*). He *began* with an affirmation and only then converted it to negative terminology to make it, so to speak, philosophically "correct."

He proceeds with further examples, but in those other examples he began with a negation. Had he done so here he would have to have said that we know from science that a prime mover is not non-existent. However, Maimonides realized that he could not write this without making impossible demands on the reader.

But the linguistic tangle gets worse. Note the difference between the English term "non-existence" and the Hebrew "*edro*" or "*eder.*" The English term has a negative prefix, and is therefore negative in form, while the Hebrew term is positive in form and only negative in content. Hold this thought, which we will explain below ("Negations vs. Privations"). In the following examples, Maimonides chooses terms that are positive in form. It takes some forced translations to produce this in English, such as by translating *eder* here as "lacking" or "missing" instead of nonexistent.

He wants to show that "this existence" is unlike anything else. He invokes the convention that all things fall into three classes or combinations of those classes in ascending order: 1) the four elements; 2) the heavenly spheres; 3) the intelligences. He then denies that "this existence" is like any of these.

So, in the second of his six steps he says that "this existence" is not like the existence of the *four elements* because the four elements are "dead bodies," *gufim metim.* Since this "existence" is not dead it must, by exclusion, be alive, "expressing thereby that it is not dead." Having arrived at the affirmation of its life, he retreats to the *negation* of its *death*. (Note again that he negates "dead" rather than "inanimate" because the latter is a term with a negative prefix.)

Next, in his third step, we deny that "this existent" is like the *heavenly spheres*. According to ancient and medieval rationalism, the spheres of the heavens were alive, animate. But though the heavens are living, they are corporeal (according to Maimonides, but not others, see below). Since we comprehend that an unmoved mover must be pure essence we deny that it is corporeal (*sh'aino guf*) like the heavens.

In the fourth step, we deduce that it is also unlike the *intelligences* that animate the spheres. Though these minds are neither corporeal like the spheres nor "dead" like the inanimate physical elements, they were created, i.e., *caused.* "This existence" is, therefore, unlike the intelligences since it commenced the chain of causes. Since this existence (he now starts to call "it" God, *ytalei*) is not caused, like the intelligences animating the spheres, we say that it is "first," *kadmon.* Firstness is the positive term that Maimonides and his contemporaries always use instead of aeternal or atemporal, both of which suggest the negation of time. Firstness means that there was none before, which means that for God there was no cause. We take "first" as a denial of causation only and not that God is subject to the category of time.

Observe how convoluted this is. We know He is not like the intelligences because we deny that like them He is caused, and so therefore He must be first. The example becomes incoherent, since it is non-obvious that saying God is not like the intelligences implies that God is eternal. In this group of examples, Maimonides thinks he has shown that God is alive, incorporeal and uncaused by denying that He is dead, physical or caused. Instead, all he has done is given us the affirmations and translated them into philosophically correct negations. His demonstration is not as good as the example of the man in the house. We knew the man must be animal because he was not mineral or vegetable. But do we really know that God is uncaused, incorporeal and immortal because He is not like an element, a sphere or an intelligence?

He says that we perceive that "this existence" is not merely sufficient unto Himself, like other beings, but emanates (*shofim*) many beings from Himself. This is his fifth step. Maimonides immediately qualifies his emanationism by asserting that these emanations are willed, unlike light emanating automatically from the sun or heat from a flame. "This existence" wills, orders, and governs its emanations, unlike those emanators with which we are familiar. For this reason, we call Him "powerful," "knowing," and "willing." These conclusions, however, clearly do not derive from the negations, but from Maimonides' commitment to the conceptions of those latter-day religious philosophers who conceived God as *willfully* emanating, a concept at odds with its original source in neo-Platonic *necessary* emanation.

The aim of these affirmations "powerful," "knowing," and "willing," is that He is not "weak," "stupid/foolish" (*sikel*), or "rash/forgetting" (*yaalem/yazniakh*)—all terms negative in meaning but positive in *form*. He then backtracks and explains that by saying that God is not "weak" we derive that His "existence is capable (*dai*, sufficient) of producing the existence of many other things." By denying "foolish" we deduce that it "perceives," and, therefore, we know it is "alive," since, as Aristotle taught, life and perception are synonymous (see 1:53, under my heading "The Actuality Of Thought Is Life"). By denying "rash/forgetting," we derive that God does not leave His creatures subject to chance but subjects them to His organizing will. The conclusion of these examples is that by denying that God is limited to his own existence, we imply that He is not weak or stupid, by which we deduce that He is providential. A treacherous path, indeed.

From the foregoing negations, we now derive that He is *unlike* all other beings, because all other things that emanate, like fire or the sun, do so subject to weakness, without organization, and without will. This is the sixth step. This time he concludes that there must be none like God, therefore we say that He is *one*, "signif(ying) the denial of multiplicity" (Pines translation). Even-Shmuel restates, "one means alone," *ekhad perusho yakhid*. In Maimonides' Second Fundamental Principle (from *Helek*, in Commentary on the Mishnah), he says of this oneness:

> "We are told to believe that God is one, the cause of all oneness. He is not like a member of a pair, nor a species of a genus, nor a person divided into many discrete elements. Nor is He one in the sense that a simple body is, numerically one but still infinitely divisible. God, rather, is uniquely one. This second fundamental principle is taught in the Biblical verse: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

In other words, this oneness is a non-numerical unity, a unity that is just barely expressible but humanly incomprehensible.

From these six steps we derive eight "essential attributes" implying the negations of their opposites: existence, life, incorporeality, firstness, power, wisdom, will and oneness.

The Demonstration of Divine Unknowability. Maimonides has one more example (he uses eleven imaginative examples in this chapter), which leads to his most dangerous demonstration, the demonstration of God's unknowability. He had employed the example of the *animate* existence of the heavenly spheres and he now returns to those spheres. He argues that though the science of astronomy tells us much about the metes and bounds of the cosmic beings, it knows nothing of the nature of their constitutive matter. By negation, we know that this matter is different from the matter of the sublunar elements. Unlike them, physics demonstrates that this "fifth element" is neither heavy, nor light nor the passive recipient of external impressions or affections. It is not heavy or light because its motion is not up or down but circular. It is not passive because it is entirely active, actual, the motor activating the universe. We, therefore, can only describe this unknown matter in negative terms. We leave the student with the notion that there is such a quintessence, that it is different from all known matter, and that we know nothing more about it than what it is not.

This last set of negations follows from the acceptance of Aristotelian cosmological theory (by no means the only theory of the cosmos even at that time). Since we see that the spheres possess the unique circular motion, we deduce that there must be a heavenly matter different from earthly matter, even though it is otherwise indefinable. (Maimonides, unlike Averroes and Crescas, interprets Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII:2:1069b to mean that the heavenly fifth element is corporeal. In this he is joined by Bakhya, Ibn Daud, and Abarbanel. See *Hovot ha-Levavot*, 1:6, *Emuna Rama*, 1:2, Wolfson's *Crescas*, 594-598).

He now draws an analogy from lesser to greater. If we must use negations to derive the indefinability of the heavenly matter, how much more must we use the *via negativa* to portray the unknowability of "this existence" that is free from matter (*ha-naki min ha-khomer*), ultimately simple (*ha-pashut b'takhlit ha-pashut*), necessary of existence, uncaused, non-composite, and lacking defect? Thus, even God's "perfection" is a negation of defects from Him, i.e., it is the denial of the privation of His perfection, *asher inyan shlemuto shelilat ha-megraot mimenu.*

It is true that God's unknowability transcends the unknowability of the spheres, and if the *via negativa* is legitimately employed in the latter case it is legitimate in the former. Nevertheless, is the *via negativa* really invoked when we only switch the affirmations with their corresponding negations?

DOES NEGATIVISM SUCCEED?

My criticisms of Maimonides' negations are not meant as criticisms of the *via negativa* generally, as that is outside the scope of this commentary. My point is to show that his commitment to negativism is half-hearted at best. He begins with affirmations and continually returns to them. As we suggest below, Aristotle would have pushed the negations considerably farther than Maimonides is willing to go. Maimonides could not say, *à la* Lao Tzu, that the God that is known is not the eternal God, for then he would have to reject the God we know from Torah, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses. Maimonides is clearly uncomfortable with affirmations, but knows that since we express our thoughts about God in human language they are inescapable. More to the point, the negations can never really portray God's absolute unity.

At our chapter's conclusion, language disintegrates. Despite Maimonides' antipathy to poetry, poetry forces itself upon him. He suggests that God runs the universe as a captain of a ship; he then immediately denies the appropriateness of this analogy. Kafiḥ explains that the captain's survival depends on the ship not sinking, but God's survival is not dependant on anything (note 48, *ad loc*). Shem Tov is closer to Maimonides' thinking when he says that God's providence for the universe is not limited like the captain's providence for his ship and crew.

In a final burst of poetry, Maimonides gushes that our mind's grasp of God's existence turns to weakness; that when it strives to conceive His willed emanation of other beings, our intelligence becomes stupidity; and when our tongues seek to exalt Him with attributive affirmations they only stutter. Observe that the defects previously denied God, i.e., weakness, stupidity, are turned from God onto man. The *via negativa* collides with man's inability to articulate God's absolute *positivity*. Even-Shmuel says, "What little that man knows of God is hidden from him when translated into words," *ki ha-me'at sh'bnai adam yodim neelam mehem b'voam l'targemo b'milim.*

Neither English translation seems to do justice to the final statement of the chapter. The very last word is *v'gamgum*, stuttering (in both Kafiḥ and Schwarz Hebrew translations from Jud.Ar. ותקצירא, a more sensitive translation than Pines' more literal "incapacity"), meaning the destruction of speech. In the end, Moses Maimonides can only stutter and sputter, a trait he shared with the original Moses.

HOW TO INTERPRET AFFIRMATIVE STATEMENTS ABOUT GOD

Harry Austryn Wolfson revealed the deep structure of this chapter in "Maimonides on Negative Attributes," *Studies*, vol. II, 195. Since Wolfson's essay so completely explains that structure, I abstract its findings here.

Islamic philosophy was a battleground over the nature of divine predication and attribution. This is because the thrust of Islamic monotheism is toward an ineffable Allah while preserving the concept of the eternal Q'uran. Maimonides enters the battle with the modern sounding idea that a strictly logical and grammatical approach will clear the field.

"God is knowing," is a Proposition of the Third Adjacent (*propositio tertium adiacens*) in form, meaning that there are three terms "adjacent" to each other in a sentence, the subject, the predicate and the copula "is." In 1:52, we said that such statements about God were inadmissible. Still, since the Torah uses them, how should we usefully interpret them? There are four interpretive paths:

1. *Tautology*: Interpret "God is knowing" so that God and His knowledge are identical. His essence is His knowledge and His knowledge is His essence. Despite that important recognition, a proposition in this form is useless as a logical proposition, since all it is telling us is that God is God. We may not use a tautology in a syllogism. Therefore, we must look to the other three paths.

2. *Attributes of Action*: Reinterpret the sentence as though it were a Proposition of the Second Adjacent: "God is knowing" means "God knows." "Knows" is merely a verb that tells us what God does, and has no existential standing. By contrast, in Propositions of the Third Adjacent ("God is knowing") "knowledge" could have conceptual or real status when set over against God, as something additional to Him.

3. *Equivocality*: Read it like this: "God is knowing" in an essential way (knowledge identical to essence), as contrasted with man's knowledge, which is an accidental occurrence. This is more than just a tautology, as above, because we use the attribution to contrast God with man. "Joseph is wise," means that Joseph has the *accidental* attribute of wisdom, i.e., wisdom as we know it, which is a particular instance of the universal of wisdom. "God is wise," by contrast, means that His wisdom is *identical* to His essence, not something accidental that happened to it. Wisdom in the divine sense is a specifying term used only with God, not universally applicable to any other individuals. Maimonides expresses this equivocality by saying that "God is knowing but not through knowledge." Another way of expressing this same idea is that God's knowledge is infinite, man's knowledge—finite.

4. *Negative interpretation of affirmative sentences*: "God is knowing" means He is not ignorant.

The last is the most significant in 1:58. What does Maimonides mean by the negative interpretation of attributes?

PRIVATIONS VS. NEGATIONS

Affirmations understood negatively can mean either: a) the negation (*apophasis*) of their opposite, or, b) the privation (*steresis*) of a property (property = habit, Latin *habitus*, the technical term for property, it is what one may "have"). If I merely deny "Balaam is good" I might not mean that Balaam is bad, but only that he is not good now, or not totally good. To deny Balaam's goodness so that he is totally deprived of it and is indeed bad is called *privation*. Negative interpretation of affirmatives is always *particular* (to the facts, as with Balaam) but privative interpretations are *absolute* denials. Narboni (12th century commentator on the Guide), therefore, divides negation and privation as "particular" negation and "absolute" negation, *shelilat ha-myukhedet* vs. *shelilat ha-meshulakhat*, with only the latter applicable to God (Spinoza: "absolute infinite," Hermann Cohen: "infinite judgments." See Wolfson, *Spinoza* 1:37, Cohen, *Ethics of Maimonides*). Shem Tov takes a different approach to

these "absolute" negations: "When the idea is to convey some notion of the divine essence, both negations and affirmations are forbidden."

The problem with privative interpretation of affirmative statements is that privation only works when the subject could have had the habit at the time the statement is made. So Balaam could be both not seeing (negation) and he could be blind (privation). That is because he is blind in one eye (Rashi to Numbers 24:3), and he temporarily cannot see from the other (Numbers 22:31). However, a wall cannot be blind, for it can never have the habit of seeing. So we have this division:

1. Cannot say: the wall is seeing
2. Cannot say: the wall is blind
3. Can say: the wall is not seeing
4. Can say: the wall is not blind.

1 and 2 are impossible because the wall cannot conceivably have the habit of sight, and 2 is specifically impossible because there is no privation where there could be no habit. 1 and 2 are nonsense statements. 3 is a negative statement indicating that walls are in general sightless, and, most interestingly, 4 is a negative statement with a privative predicate denying that the wall could ever be deprived of the habit of sight. It could not be deprived of what it never had (Wolfson, 211).

Under 2, above, there is another version: "The wall is not-seeing." Each language has different problems expressing privative terms. According to Wolfson, we can adopt the convention of representing a "positive" privative such as "blind" by writing with a hyphen, as in "not-seeing." The tradition calls these hyphenated expressions "transposed terms." Just as we could not say, "the wall is blind," we could also not say, "the wall is not-seeing," even though we could say "the wall is not seeing" without a hyphen.

AFFIRMATION OF PRIVATION

There is another possibility. This is the "Affirmation of Privation." In this format, we are affirming a privation that has a negative prefix or suffix. Thus: "Balaam is unseeing." We treat this as an allowable *negative* proposition just like "the wall is not seeing," even in cases where its meaning is privative.

We distinguish between privations that are positive in format and those with a negative prefix or affix. The former, for example, "blind," we only affirm when the opposite habit "seeing" could naturally exist in the subject, so, therefore, we could not say "The wall is blind."

We strain to come up with words that are *not* negative by prefix or affix to show this. Thus, Friedlander in this chapter translates "insipid" (negative prefix) when he should have translated "vapid" (Heb.: *tefel.* Wolfson 212, note 50). By contrast, "unseeing" is fully privative though negatively expressed, and so we treat it as a mere negation, affirming "unseeing" of a subject in which the opposite habit, "seeing," would not naturally exist. We can, therefore, say "the wall is unseeing," because it is the special case of the affirmative sentence containing a privation negatively expressed, where we treat privative term as a mere negation. We could not say "the wall is blind," even though we could say "the wall is eyeless," though no wall has eyes.

We treat the affirmative sentence whose predicate has a negative prefix merely as a negation even when the term itself is privative in meaning. "The wall is unseeing" is a non-controversial utterance telling us that walls do not have the habit of sight. "The wall is blind," by contrast, is an impossible attribution of blindness in something that could never have had sight. The former is a positive term with a negative prefix, while the latter is a pure privation in form. While both are privations, we allow the former since it is a negation appearing in an affirmative sentence.

Thus, while we would not say "the wall is not-seeing" (a positively expressed privation in transposed form equivalent to "the wall is blind"), we could say "the wall is unseeing" (an affirmative statement with a formally negative predicate). This latter distinction of not-seeing and unseeing is apparently unreproducible in Arabic (218) and the cause of some interpretive drift. Hebrew and Greek put the negative particle in specific different positions in the sentence's syntactical structure to reach either a privative or negative meaning (Wolfson 215, 216, notes 64 and 65). When the particle is in the privative position in a sentence it has the same force as a positive privation like "blind" (218-219, notes 74-76, *adam yimtza lo tzadik* vs. *adam lo yimtza tzadik*).

The importance of this exception for negative affixes is that it allows statements like "God is immortal" which are "Affirmations of Privation." We treated them as negations, not privations. Had we found a way to say the word "immortal" without a negative prefix we could not say it of God in an affirmative sentence, since for Him mortality is not a habit of which He could be deprived. But when, as in "immortal" it has a negative prefix and is not a hyphenated "transposed" term, we treat it grammatically as a negation even though it is privative in meaning.

THE PARADOX OF REVERSIBILITY

An important difficulty with privations is that privative terms are *reversible*. Thus, "Joe is not blind" denies that Joe has the habit of blindness (i.e., the property of blindness) at a time he could have had it. The reverse of "Joe is blind" is that he could see. Wolfson says (208):

> "But here a question must have arisen in the mind of Maimonides. The very same law of the excluded middle which makes every proposition 'A is B' imply 'A is not not-B' also makes every proposition 'A is not not-B' imply that 'A is B.' Consequently, if we object to the affirmation of a 'habit' of God, we cannot justify such an affirmation by saying that it means the negation of its opposite privation, for the negation of the privation reciprocally means the affirmation of its opposite habit. In other words, if we cannot say 'God is living,' then we cannot justify our saying it by maintaining that it means 'God is not dead,' for the latter proposition, logically, means, 'God is living.'"

Wolfson, in the last sentence, disputes Maimonides' explanation of the meaning of affirmative attributes. In Maimonides' account, when the properly trained student applies them to God, he means to deny that God possesses the attribute in the usual sense. The usual sense is as a habit, i.e., a property, and all properties are accidents, but God has no accidents. The student, therefore, uses the attribution equivocally, i.e., that the attribute of God is absolutely identical to Him, in contrast to its accidental possession by us. But if we mean this term to be privatively opposite to the habit, so that "God is living" means "God is not dead," then, by reversal, the denial of that privative opposite must admit the habit. Thus, "God is not dead" means that "God is living," i.e., *through the attribute of life*, precisely the opposite of Maimonides' "living but not through the attribute of life." By using privative terms we open the door to affirmation due to the paradox of reversibility. Just because they deny what God could never be, privative terms when reversed saddle God with that habit. It follows that we can only use negative terms for most of these negations and not privative ones, even though we meant to completely and absolutely deny the habit of God. How do we get out of the bind?

We get out of it by negating the habit the same way we did with the example of the wall. Walls never have eyes just as God never has habits. So recall the last two possibilities I listed: 3) The wall is not seeing; and, 4) The wall is not blind. 3 and 4 are possible because neither implies the possession of a habit. Maimonides himself mentions 3 as the way we can deny an attribute of one that could not have that attribute. Now, recall that the form "not seeing" was taken to be negative not privative. Just as we can say, "the wall is not seeing" even though the wall never has eyes, so we can say that "God is not mortal" without suggesting that mortality could ever be attributed to God in any sense by reversing the terms. By contrast, "blind" and "dead" though positive in grammatical form (i.e., not possessing negative prefixes or suffixes) are naturally privative terms that completely exclude the habit of sight or life at a time the possessor could have had them.

So, let's finish our chart, adding two more possibilities:

1. Cannot say: the wall is seeing
2. Cannot say: the wall is blind
3. Can say: the wall is not seeing
4. Can say: the wall is not blind.
5. Cannot say: The wall is not-seeing
6. Can say: The wall is unseeing.

We cannot say 5, for the same reason as we could not say 2, above; but we can say 6, for the same reason we can say 3. 5 and 2 are both privative, and could only make sense if a wall could have eyes, which is impossible. 6 and 3 are merely negative, and do not imply that the wall could have eyes, even if the terms were reversed. 3 makes it possible to say "God is not corporeal," while 6 makes it possible to say "God is immortal." "Immortal" is negative in form but privative in effect, an affirmation of privation properly predicated of God. It follows that while we mean our negations to be strong denials of affirmative attributes, we *cannot* mean them as absolute privative statements, as in 5, the case of the transposed affirmation.

The result is some thin resurrection of affirmation. True, we cannot predicate habits such as power and knowledge of God in their ordinary sense. But we may also not *negate* them of God *even* in their ordinary sense (*ibid.*, 225). In this, Maimonides seriously parts company with Aristotle. Aristotle held that a god has "no vice (*kakia*) or virtue (*arete*)." The god's state is "higher than virtue" and so Aristotle would not object to the statement "the god is not virtuous" any more than he would object to "the god is not vicious." Not only does Maimonides disagree with this, but he goes further (1:53) and says "one *may believe* concerning some of them that they are predicates to be taken as indicating a perfection by way of comparison with what we consider as perfections in us..." Wolfson concludes (227-228):

> "The affirmative form of the predication is not altogether useless. It has for its purpose the affirmation that nothing which is ordinarily regarded by us as a perfection is alien to God's nature."

and:

> "God, by virtue of His absolute perfection in every sense, has an infinite number of aspects in His essence; and had we only the means of doing so, we should be able to express them all in human language."

SUMMARY

From these considerations come the following rules by which we can correctly frame propositions about God:

1. Since attributes imply habit and relation, we only use them of God in an equivocal and negative sense: identical with God, not accidents as with men.

2. We can use attributes in the form of "action attributes." This means they are only Propositions of the Second Adjacent, i.e., "God lives," not "God is living."

3. Negations are governed by rules:

A. *Perfections* with us are predicated of God with the understanding that we take them to emphasize the negation (not privation) of the opposite. Therefore, "God is living" though affirmative in grammatical *form*, we treat as negative in *meaning* (not privative), as, "God is undead" (not "undead" in the Bram

Stoker sense), or, perhaps, "not mortal." We avoid treating the negations as privations in order to avoid the paradox of reversibility.

B. *Imperfections* with us are predicated of God:

   i. In negations like "God is not mortal." We accept this even though mortality could never be a divine property, for the same reason that we can say, "The wall is not seeing," even though a wall could never possess sight. Or:

   ii. In affirmations with formally negative predicates like "God is immortal." We can say this despite the privative nature of this phrase, since its negative prefix makes us regard it as negative and not privative. "God is immortal" can be said of God though mortality is not a divine property, just as a wall can be "unseeing."

   iii. But not in affirmations with transposed terms (i.e., taken privatively) like "God is not-mortal" since its reversal implies possession of a habit of immortality. We cannot say that He is "blind" or "not-seeing" or "mortal." these are physical characteristics, and neither the habit or the privation of these characteristics are possible in His nature.

There are two important qualifications:

1. You may not affirm privations in an equivocal sense. Gersonides (Ralbag, 1288-1344) criticizing Maimonides, asked why we could not call God corporeal in an *equivocal* non-defective sense. In other words, why can't we say that the corporeal terms in the Bible have a *different* meaning for God, for example, that He is substantial rather than corporeal? God is, after all, a self-sufficient "substance." Maimonides responds that we cannot do so because the term "corporeality" implies defect, and we can never imply a defect in God even if we take the term in some obscure non-defective sense (Guide 1:47).

2. You may not use affirmative attributes excessively. While what we said above implies not only that some affirmations are allowable but also necessary, we should not let this writ run riot. To avoid the implication of divine plurality we strictly limit such affirmatives to those sanctioned by Torah and liturgy (1:59). Additionally, affirmations lend themselves to misinterpretation by Attributists and Modalists, posing a "great danger" (1:60).

WOLFSON CORRECTS HIMSELF

If you have difficulty with this material, you are in excellent company. Wolfson himself initially left the impression that the opposites negated of God are privations rather than negations in his 1913 article, "Crescas on the Problem of the Divine Attributes," *Studies*, Volume II, p. 247. He corrected himself, and in so doing came to the much better position that I call "moderate negativism" as opposed to "absolute negativism." His final statement on the issue, "Maimonides on the Negative Attributes," in 1945, contains a long footnote, 84, p. 222, confessing his change of mind. Wolfson had followed a tradition of interpretation that comes from Kant, together with some not very clear statements of Maimonides in our chapter. As a result, he first thought it so important to negate the essential attributes of God that he had to use privative terms to do so. In this, he followed the neo-Kantian Hermann Cohen. He later saw that we must use non-privative terminology to negate the attributes.

In exculpating his prior position Wolfson said, "This is the kind of interpretation that would naturally suggest itself to any student of philosophy."