GUIDE 1:51
SELF EVIDENT TRUTHS

Maimonides makes three main points in this chapter for us to keep track of, so as not to lose our way.

1. It is a self-evident axiom that God does not have "essential" attributes.
2. It is the work of philosophers to refute those who deny this axiom.
3. The denial of this axiom is due to the power the imagination holds over the mind.

With this outline, we can address the difficulties of the chapter.

1. GOD'S ATTRIBUTIONLESS EXISTENCE IS KNOWN TO ALL MEN

Our chapter continues the train of thought of the previous chapter. Maimonides returns to the concept of the Arabic term *i'tiqad* (justified belief) in the first line of the chapter, but does not use the term itself there. He only uses the term about half way through the chapter (Kafih, note 19), where the object of *i'tiqad* is divine unity. Since the whole point of our chapter is belief/knowledge (*i'tiqad*) of divine unity, it therefore follows that what he defines in the first line is *i'tiqad*. His explanation, though brief and sketchy, follows Saadia's definition, explained in my last chapter:

> "There exist several simply clear things, which are primary premises, sense data, and things that are close to them." (My translation. *Yesh b'mitziot devarim rabim berurim u'pshutim; mehem muskalim rishonim u'mukhashim, u'mehem sh'hem krovim l'elu*.)

Stated more clearly, we all know three things:

> 1) *Primary premises*, that is, primary self-evident concepts;
> 2) *Sense-data*; and
> 3) *Some* axiomatic results of proper syllogistic deductions from the first two.

Examples of *primary premises* are "The whole is greater than the part," "Two is an even number," and "things equal to the very same thing equal each other." They also include such judgments as "Truth is good and falsehood horrid," and "Murder is evil." Efros defines the *muskal rishon/* מעקלאת אול as an "innate idea" (*Philosophical Terms in the Moreh Nebukim*, 71).

Sense data statements, like "fire is hot," are generally reliable, since, as explained last chapter, Maimonides believes in the general correspondence of sense data to the sensed object.

What Maimonides says about these reliable items of *i'tiqad* is that they are pre-philosophic—we need no proof of them. Left without education, and the misleading falsehoods of sophists, we should still readily conclude that "Fire is hot," "Water is cool," "Man exists," "Man has free will," and "A man has the power to move his hand" (see Friedlander, note 3 *ad loc.*, on the denial of these truths by sophists and Asharites). Maimonides is thus in the great tradition of philosophers who have a robust trust in our basic understanding of the world.

The third item, in his list of "several simply clear things" worthy of belief, he fudges in his telling: "And things that are close to them." This group includes some elementary axiomatic deductions. It suits his purpose to fudge the point so that he can address sentences that are only dubiously known to common men. "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts" is not immediately self-evident. Kafih calls these "secondary premises," *muskalot sheniot*, following Maimonides' Book of Logic/*Millot Ha-Higayon* 8:2. But that is not exactly what Maimonides means, because secondary premises also include much of geometry. By "things that are close to them," he means *some* properly derived axioms whose integrity is so strong that they immediately impress themselves on the mind.

The proposition that God is indefinable, i.e., that he has no "essential attributes" of life, mercy or power is not obvious, but "God is one" might be, and God's indefinability may follow from divine unity as a "thing…close" to it. Here is Maimonides' argument that we should know this truth to be self-evident:

> "To the same *class* [of 'several simply clear things,' i.e., worthy of *i'tiqad*] belongs the rejection of essential attributes in reference to God. For it is a *self-evident* truth (*muskal rishon*—primary intelligible, innate idea) that the attribute is not inherent in the object to which it is ascribed, but it is superadded to its essence, and is consequently an accident: if the attribute denoted the essence of the object, it would be either mere tautology, as if, e.g., one would say 'man is man,' or the explanation (definition) of a name, as, e.g., 'man is a speaking animal': for the words 'speaking animal' (*khai ha-huga*, ultimately from Gr., *zoon logikon*, "discoursing animal") include the true essence (definition) of man, and there is no third element besides life [as an animal] and speech in the definition of man; when he, therefore, is described by the attributes of life and speech, these are nothing but an explanation of the name 'man,' that is to say, that the thing which is called man, consists of life and speech. It will now be clear that the attribute must be one of two things, either the essence of the object described—in that case it is a mere explanation (definition) of a name,…—or the attribute is something different from the object described, some extraneous superadded element; in that case the attribute would be an accident, and he who merely rejects the appellation 'accidents' in reference to the attributes of God, does not thereby alter their character: for everything superadded to the essence of an object joins it without forming part of its essential properties, and that constitutes an accident. Add to this the logical consequence of admitting many attributes, viz., the existence of many eternal beings. There cannot be any *belief* (*i'tiqad*) in the unity of God except by admitting that He is one simple substance, without any composition or plurality of elements: One from whatever side you view it, and by whatever test you examine it: not divisible into two parts in any way and by any cause, nor capable of any form of plurality either objectively or subjectively, as will be proved in this treatise."

Let us give Maimonides the benefit of the doubt about the "self-evident" character of all this. He says in the first sentence of our chapter, "...they (the class of 'several simply clear things') would require no proof if man had been left in his primitive state," *v'ilu hunakh l'adam k'fi sh'hu lo haya tzarikh aleihem hokhakha.* This reminds us of *Hayy Ibn Yaqzan*, the philosophical Robinson Crusoe, of Ibn Tufayl's popular work of Maimonides' time. The main character, *Hayy*, growing up isolated on an island, figures out philosophy, and reaches the pinnacle of neo-Platonized Aristotelianism.

Working backwards through Maimonides' argument: there is a justified belief (*i'tiqad*) that God is "one simple substance," without plurality or composition, and "self-evidently" any addition is only an *accident* or a *definition*: but God bears no accident and has no definition.

God has no *accidents* because accidents are non-necessary attachments to a substance. A substance is something existing on its own. You, God, and a rock are all substances, though God's substantiality is absolute while the others are not. Aristotle defines accidents: "An accident is a specific or definite property attached to a substance. It inheres in it but not necessarily, nor for the most part" (*Metaphysics* 4:30, 1025a14-15). Abarbanel emphasizes that only corporeal substances have accidents.

Examples of accidents are particular skin color or fingernail length: neither is necessary. I could have another skin color and still be human, and my fingernail length will be different next week. There are two types of accidents, permanent and impermanent. In *Millot Ha-Higayon* 10:2, Maimonides says that the whiteness of snow is a "permanent accident" which is, nonetheless, unnecessary to its definition. Reuven's standing or sitting is called an "impermanent accident"; but Reuven remains Reuven either sitting or standing. Accidents never affect essence.

God, by contrast, has no characteristics beyond His substantial simplicity. He is not subject to permanent or impermanent accidents. He is not subject to anything outside of Himself. For this reason, the proponents of divine attributes were careful to call them "essential" (i.e., substantial) attributes, to emphasize that they were not accidents (Schwarz, *ad loc.*, note 6). For Maimonides this was mere terminological camouflage by which the attributists sought to avoid criticism that they subjected God to accidents.

God is also not subject to *definition*. A definition consists of a genus and a difference. I am a discoursing animal, *zoon logicon—genus*: animal; *difference*: possessing the power of discourse (*logos*: speech/rationality). God is not a member of any genus, but is unique. He is thus indefinable. Since definitions attribute nothing additional to a subject, and are not accidents, they could be allowed, *v'anakhnu lo nimna oto klapei ha-shem b'ofen ze.* Maimonides still rejects divine definitional attributes, even though he would allow them for non-divine substances, because the parts of a definition are regarded as Aristotelian "causes," and "God has no prior causes" (Efodi, *ad loc.*).

Any "essential" attributes therefore reduce to either accidents or definitions. Since the common understanding arrives at God's substantial simplicity without proofs, all men therefore innately know that God could not have accidents or definition. It follows that "left in his primitive state" man knows that God has no essential attributes.

I do not find this argument convincing, but Maimonides thinks it is. As we will see, it suits his purpose to think so. His purpose is essentially polemical.

2. IT IS THE WORK OF PHILOSOPHERS TO REFUTE THOSE WHO WOULD DENY THIS AXIOM

Sophistry. Left alone, man would require no proof of the axiom that God is attributionless. Like the Maimonidean Adam, pre-philosophic man possesses dependable knowledge, but like Adam after the sin, he can no longer distinguish truth from falsity (Guide 1:2). The door is open to error, but worse, it is open to sophistry.

Would-be intellectuals, seeking credit for intelligence they do not have, delude their unsuspecting audience with false imaginings for money and power. They are like the corrupted priesthood, who, in Maimonides' telling, took the reasonable but erroneous proposition: "Honor God by honoring his servants" and made it into worship of the stars (Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara*, 1:2). Similarly, these sophists cause the citizens to deny the reliability of their senses. (On sophistry: *Millot Ha-Higayon*, ch. 8. Efros, p. 74, says that there were five arts: logic, dialectic, rhetoric, sophistic, poetic. Rhetoric based proofs not on logical but on "traditional" premises. Sophistry based proofs on erroneous or false premises).

Of course, Maimonides' targets are no longer the sophists of ancient Athens. He aims at the theologians of the Islamic Asharite Kalām and their Jewish epigones, who were the post-modern subjectivists of his day (Shem Tov wrote, "The basis of the Kalām is sophistry"). They argued all the following propositions: The world is made of indivisible atoms, including matter-atoms and time-atoms (even atoms of destruction). What we see is merely the occasional momentary constellation of these atoms. I only think a table is before me, but it could disappear in a moment, for it is a mere agglomeration of unseen ever-changing atoms, not a table. My thinking it a table is a prejudice based on the unwarranted assumption that those atoms will come together as a table in each successive moment. Similarly, my arm does not really cross the table, but like Zeno's arrow, appears here at one moment, appears there at another, and so the sense of continuous motion is another mental prejudice. Neither does an animal naturally course from birth to death. Our sense of nature is just a habitual expectation that things will persist, that effects will follow causes. Rather, God miraculously intervenes recreating every existent in the universe at every instant. Similarly, we choose nothing; God does all the choosing for us. He compels all our actions.

These claims sound, at first, vaguely plausible. Their purpose is to make us doubt the objective reality that we thought we knew: i.e., that fire is hot, tables are solid, my arm moves, animals live and die, and that we make choices.
The philosophers were called on to uphold our common sense by refuting the sophists. They had to demonstrate that nature is a usually reliable source of information, that we can generally believe what we see, and that we can make choices. They also refuted the primitive version of atomism, which we should not confuse with modern particle physics.

Essential Attributes as the New Sophistry. Similarly, Maimonides must refute those who said that God has attributes. He suggests that they were the sophists of his day. His polemical *subtext* is that both types of sophists resemble the priests of idolatry in the Mishneh Torah. He asserts God's substantial simplicity against those who mislead us from this self-evident truth. Just as the philosophers saved nature from the sophists, now The Guide for the Perplexed comes to save our untutored belief in the oneness of God from the attributionists.

The Kalām theologians and their followers said that God has attributes like power and wisdom. Wisdom is the *logos*, which is *inlibrated* in the eternal uncreated Qur'an. This Word is a hypostasized eternal entity existing alongside God. ("In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" John 1:1. "Inlibrated" is Wolfson's term, as opposed to *incarnated*: see *The Philosophy of the Kalām*, Harvard, 1976, p. 248).

These ideas lead to the destruction of the idea of God in the people's minds, since God's uniqueness is His utter simplicity. Maimonides' mission is to prevent these opponents from perverting the people's innate understanding. He validates what the people *originally* knew, God's unity, by showing that God cannot be subject to accident or definition. He shows that the existence of multiple essential attributes leads to the heresy of multiple eternal beings existing with God*, nosaf l'ma sh'mkhayav havayat devarim rabim kadomim im hayav hataarim rabim.* This follows because God is eternal, and since any "essential" attribute would necessarily be part of God's definition, it, too, would have to be eternal.

Maimonides argued that these Kalām notions were so illogical that they could only be products of the imagination. They have no objective or subjective reality. They evaporate when subjected to the power of the intellect. Maimonides says that the Kalām could only support them with invective and logic-chopping. Worse, the Kalām had asserted as *principle* a great falsehood: whatever we can imagine is real (Guide 1:73, Proposition 10).

Modalism**.** Sensitive to these arguments of the scholars, the Kalām fell back to defensive positions, but those positions were also figments of the imagination. One of these doctrines was called "modalism." Thus, the Asharite Kalām, the dominant trend in Muslim theology (named after Abu al-Hasan al-'Ash'arī, d.945), made the following statements, designed to stun and stupefy the minds of their philosophical opponents:

- God has no essential attributes but neither does he lack attributes;
- The universals are neither existent nor nonexistent;
- The atom fills no definite place but occupies an atom of space;
- Man has no freedom, but is free to choose to adopt his actions and their consequences.

These ideas are strange and require explanation. Maimonides reveals the purpose of the Kalām "modal" statements: they wanted to have it both ways. They wanted to acknowledge both sides of the great debates on attributes, universals, etc., hinting that only they knew the truth secluded between the antinomies.

There are two kinds of "modes," of which Maimonides approves one and disapproves the other (See generally, H. A. Wolfson's essays: *Jewish Repercussions of the Kalām*, Harvard, 1979, pp 31-40; *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 2, 195-230, 249-271; and "Maimonides on Modes and Universals," in *Maimonides*: *A Collection of Critical Essays*, Buijs ed., 1998, 166).

The first, which he approves, has to do with the "universals." My coffee cup is a particular instance of the universal basic "cupness." What is this "cupness"? Is it a real substantial existent or merely a word? Medieval philosophy called belief in former "realism," and the latter "nominalism." A third way, called modalism or conceptualism, may exist. Without getting too deeply into this, Maimonides does support the idea that "cupness" is *mental reality* or "mode" (*ḥāl*). Nonetheless, He would object to the formulation that, for instance, "The universal cupness exists and is non-existent." This formula means that the universal "exists," i.e., it is not a mere name; but it is "non-existent," i.e., it exists as a concept. Still, the *form* of the sentence violates of the *law of the excluded middle* (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 7, 1011b-23), which states that there is no middle choice between A and not-A. It also violates the law of contradiction. The *formula* tells us *nothing*. Maimonides would prefer to just assert that "cupness" is a mental reality, a concept (*ma'ānī dhihniyyah*/*devarim s'khalim*/conceptual thing, Guide 3:18).

The problem arose when the Kalām extended this idea to the divine attributes. This second type of modalism Maimonides disapproves. Some Kalām theorists claimed that the divine attributes are neither real attributes or mere names, but modes (esp. Abū Hāshim ibn al Jubbai, d. 993). Their formula was that "God has no essential attributes but neither does He lack attributes." When they said, "God has no essential attributes," they meant that *real* "essential" attributes do not exist. When they said, "He does not lack attributes" they meant that the existence of the attributes was not merely *nominal*. Their solution was that the attributes had a modal, i.e., conceptual, existence in the divine mind.

How could they have only a conceptual existence in God's mind? God's mind, unlike our minds, cannot "contain" modes. Everything about God is *active* and *real*, so that if the modes were to have notional existence in God's mind this must be a real independent existence. But then they would be real attributes, and not merely modes.

Even the concept of God's "mind" is homonymous. God's "mind" is only Himself. Thus, if God has real mental attributes they are *additional* to Him and are therefore accidents, since anything additional to a substance is an accident, *l'fi sh'kol inyan nosaf al ha-atzmut, harei hu n'safakh la bilti mashlim l'amitata, v'zehu inyan ha-mikra*. But God is not a substrate for accidents. So, when Maimonides writes, "...the denial [of essential attributes] is a primary intelligible, inasmuch as an attribute is not the essence of the thing of which it is predicated, but is a certain mode (*ḥāl*) of the essence, and hence an accident," (Pines' trans., 112), his point is that even "modes" are accidents, and therefore not essential. Since God has no accidents, He has no modes either.

That leaves the stark alternative of accepting or rejecting divine attributes, excluding any imagined middle position. The modal existence of attributes, like all claims of the sophists who want it both ways, violates the law of the excluded middle. There is no middle ground between existence and non-existence, and between attribute and substance. Exceptions exist in the imagination, not in reality. Even to the limited extent Maimonides does allow attributes, he only does so when they are tautologous names or logical definitions (and, with respect to God, he rejects definitions). But such predicates add nothing to their substantial subject.

The other choices listed above by Maimonides also violate the law of the excluded middle. Either an atom has a place in space or it does not. Putting the contradictory propositions together in a "dialectical" formulation does not advance knowledge. Similarly, man either has freedom of action or not. The Kalām had said that a man could choose to adopt the action forced on him by God and accept its consequences, that is, to "acquire" it. The doctrine of "acquisition" thus, illogically, maintains that man has no freedom to act, yet freely "acquires" his acts.

But that "acquisition" is itself an *act*, chosen by a free will. (On atoms and "acquisition," see Friedlander, notes 2 and 3 on 176; Wolfson, *Repercussions*, 164 on atoms and 201-2 on acquisition).

These sentences were all products of the imagination, advanced by Kalām theologians who exalted the imagination.

3. THE DENIAL OF GOD'S SIMPLICITY IS CAUSED BY THE POWER OF THE IMAGINATION OVER THE MIND

How can the imagination so easily mislead us from what we should know? The answer is that we work from our experiences, and when we meet something new, we fall back on those experiences. Thus, every being we ever saw we could define: it has a genus but is different from other members of that genus. That is why Adam could name the animals (Guide 2:30). We know what nature leads us to expect.

God is different. We know that God is simple substance, yet we are uncomfortable when told we cannot define Him. We define everything else. We fit everything else into the natural order. Why shouldn't we be able to define Him? Besides, didn't the poets and the prophets give Him affirmative attributes?

We now know, by this fifty-first chapter of the Guide, that these descriptions were not to be taken literally. They were imaginative compositions that had a different purpose, to impress on men gripped by imagination the reality of the God of Israel. Still, even some Rabbis said that those descriptions were true, i.e., that God has a physical body and real attributes. They did so because they strongly adhered to the literal reading of prophetic texts, *kol ze havaya ha-halikha akhar pashtei sifre ha-navua*. Other thinkers maintained the attributes but denied their physicality or reality by calling them modes. None of this could possibly be true. These ideas were born of the anxiety that we could no longer treat the unknown as we would treat the known. They are the reifying projections of our imagination. Since God is incorporeal, He is beyond the power of the imagination to grasp. Maimonides explains this (1:73):

> "Nor can imagination in any way obtain a purely immaterial image of an object (*ayn ha-dimion yakhol klal l'hishtakhrer b'musagav min ha-khomer*), however abstract the form of the image may be (*afilu yafshit tzura msuyamet b'takhlit ha-hafshata*). Imagination yields therefore no test for the reality of a thing."

Man's *nature* explains why his imagination does not grasp abstract concepts. Man is the "discoursing animal," an integral combination of mind and matter. The imagination is the animal "mind," i.e., it is that higher process which combines sensory images. The animal's imagination combines these images in order to acquire the animal's needs, i.e., food, shelter, etc., and to escape danger. No animal process can attain purely abstract concepts. We can only conceive divine *unity* when our "discoursing" mental part liberates itself from the animal's clasp.

The imagination, by contrast, always seeks to bring divine simplicity back down to the mirror world of images, where any single simple thing finds its multiple reflections.

This drive to find multiplicity where there is only unity is understandable. God manifests Himself as active, ordering and providential. Still, this apparent division of God from His actions is non-existent, since God and His actions are one. The desire to explain the existence of multiplicity cannot come from multiplicity itself. Only the existence of an original unity can explain the existence of multiplicity (Even-Shmuel, 234; Mishneh Torah, *Yesodai* 1:1). Indeed, the existence of the many things flows from God's absolute existence as (in Maimonides' formula) the "Soul of the universe" that instantiates and preserves the individual existences.

PHILOSOPHIC AND PRE-PHILOSOPHIC RELIGION

In this opening to the chapters on attributes, which are entirely philosophical, Maimonides must clarify the role of philosophy in religion, and its contrast to the pre-philosophic views of most Jews. He does this by making clear, in the first instance, the general reliability of Jewish pre-philosophic views. Indeed, they must be reliable, because he requires all Jews to possess a reasonably clear conception of the thirteen articles of faith (from *Helek*, in his Commentary on the Mishnah), and especially those regarding divine existence, unity, incorporeality and eternity, and he could not require this if philosophic demonstration were necessary to the possession of these beliefs.

On the other hand, the refutation of divine attributes is one the major demonstrations sought by those who seek relief from perplexity. Their ability to make this demonstration is necessary for the system to work. That is because those Jews unable to formulate these beliefs for themselves must apply to those more knowledgeable for guidance (Guide 1:35). But those are the very leaders who must be able to demonstrate to themselves clear and convincing conceptions of those beliefs, free from the admixture of those false products of the imagination that are the curse of our semi-corporeal existence.

There must be, therefore, a bridge between these two approaches to religion, the philosophic and the pre-philosophic. Maimonides rather dramatically portrays it as a religious need to refute sophists who turned the imaginations of the public from pure monotheism. In this way, he preserves the usual picture of the Torah world as a self-generating organism free from philosophic admixture, while retaining philosophy for its ultimate preservation.

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