GUIDE 1:55
FOUR PHYSICAL THINGS WE CANNOT PREDICATE OF GOD

PREFACE

Guide 1:55 is, with one exception, philosophical. It comes exactly half way through the section of the Guide on the denial of divine attributes. Maimonides' strategy in this chapter is to use physical science, that is, Aristotelian physics, to show why we must deny four types of physical attributes.

The basic concepts of Aristotle's philosophical physics are as follows. All corporeal beings are composed of three elements: form, matter and privation. None of these three is by itself corporeal, for even matter, considered apart from form, cannot be seen or touched. *Privation* is a special way of looking at potentiality. Potentiality is the capacity to achieve perfection, i.e., "actuality," the opposite of potentiality. Since the being still lacks that perfection, we say it is subject to privation. *Matter* always comes with privation, since even formed matter contains potentiality, that is, privation, toward other perfections. *Form* is an active subject that imposes itself upon the inferior and defective material object, toward a resultant perfection. Since matter is the *passive* object of formation, we say that it is subject to "passion." All passion implies change in the object of passion. Finally, in Aristotelian physics, every real thing is in motion, and therefore existence is always *active*, so we use the term "actuality" instead of and in place of "reality."

The four types of divine attributes that we must deny under this analysis are corporeality, passion, non-existence (privation), and similarity. These ideas are integrally related, and are essentially physical. Examples would be, respectively: "The hand of God"; "The wrath of God"; "The desire of God"; and, "The family of God." We must take these statements metaphorically, for otherwise they imply divine corporeality, passivity, privation and likeness.

Josef Stern points out that these attributes are negative attributes, but different from the negative attributes that Maimonides will introduce in Guide 1:58. In our chapter, the negativity of the attributes is their *content*. The ideas of corporeality, passivity, privation and similarity all imply some negative content or property in God himself, i.e., a defect. Maimonides' famous doctrine of negative attributes introduced in 1:58, on the other hand, is about *syntactic* negativity. It constructs sentences that deny positive attributes (Stern, "Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language, in *Maimonides and the Sciences*, R. S. Cohen and H. Levine, editors, Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000, p. 205). Since only three of the ten attribute chapters address the syntactical negative attributes, it follows that they are not the center of Maimonides' interest.

CORPOREALITY

Maimonides does not make the case against divine corporeality in our chapter (instead see Guide 1:76, 2:1-2).

Corporeality is the combination of matter and form, activity and passivity. We can, metaphorically, view matter as the active male principle and form as the passive female principle. All corporeal beings combine matter and form. Matter is the passive object of form, while form is the active subject.

Aristotelian physics shows that God is not corporeal, and bears no relation to corporeality. That is because God is always active, *actual*. Since God is always existent and actual, perfect in every way, lacking nothing, there is no *potential* perfection for Him to attain. Matter, by contrast, is the passive principle of the universe, receiving the impress of form, always seeking to attain a new form.

Because privation and potentiality are necessary adjuncts to matter, it must always seek a new form. But since God is *actual* and without potentiality, it follows that God must be non-corporeal, for He contains no mixture of matter and form. He must also be incorporeal because only an incorporeal being can be the first cause of all

motion (2:1). In Guide 3:8, Maimonides explains that all defects come from matter. Since God is perfect (3:19), lacking any defect, he must be incorporeal. We, therefore, deny any attribute in the form of "The hand of God" because it implies divine corporeality and thus violates the laws of Aristotelian physics.

PASSION

Although we use the term differently today, the word "passion" originally came from passivity. Passion describes the process of change in the passive object. "All passiveness implies change," *kol ha-hitpaaluyot mkhayevot shinui*. Similarly, "affection," however we use it now, means that the possessor of the affection has been affected, i.e., changed, by some other thing. The Hebrew *hitpael* (affection, affected) denotes this passivity well, because it is the reflexive of *paal*, the word for "verb" or "does."

Affection occurs when the active subject effects change in the affected object. In order for this to occur two beings are needed: the subject (the agent), and the object (patient). But no agent affects God, for God is not the passive subject of any other's action. Were this otherwise, there would be an entity equal to or greater than God that could change Him.

All emotions are passions. All passions are qualities. Maimonides explained in Guide 1:52 that God does not possess qualities, including ascriptions of divine emotion. We should not take this to mean that God does not care about his people, but only that our sense of caring and His are not the same.

Emotion/passion always implies change in the affected object. Change implies a defect in perfection, because the patient must change to acquire the perfection it does not yet possess. It receives the action of a superior agent. But nothing that receives the action of another can be said to be perfect. God is subject to neither defect nor change because "all perfections must really (actually) exist in God," *khiuvi shihu kol shlemuyotav mtsuyam b'paal*.

Since God is not subject to passion, a phrase like the "wrath of God" incorrectly attributes passion to God. We only use such language metaphorically, homonymously, to describe a divine action in human terms.

NON-EXISTENCE/PRIVATION

Potentiality implies non-existence or privation in the being having that potential, the potential to acquire a perfection it does not yet have. Potential perfection is non-existent perfection.

There is a cycle in which the agent of change (subject) effects a change in the patient (object). In this cycle, the patient lacked perfection but had the potential to attain it. The change effected by the agent upon the patient produces the resultant perfection. This perfection is its goal (Gr.: *telos*) and its actualization. The patient now is an agent who can change another patient and begin the cycle anew. The Greek terms for the stages of this cycle of potentiality, change and actualization are *dunamis—kinesis—entelecheia.*

In that cycle, the patient is inferior (*garoa*) to the active agent, which is itself inferior to the resultant actual perfection. The "inferiority" is its lack of perfection. The usual example is the learning student whose learning is inferior to one who mastered the subject. He is also inferior in learning to his teacher, who brought about the student's change. Were God subject to any similar potentiality or privation, then another power superior to God could change Him to a more perfect state, which is absurd.

These ideas emerge from pre-Socratic physics, which conceived motion as the essential element of life. See my comments on the pre-Socratics, in 1:11 ("Generation and Corruption") and 1:17. The notion of this cycle of active agent and passive patient begins with Plato:

> "Nothing exists in itself, but all things of all sorts arise out of motion by intercourse with each other; for it is, as they say, impossible to form a firm conception of the active or the passive element as being anything separately; for there is no active element until there is a union with the passive element, nor is there a passive element until there is a union with the active; and that which unites with one thing is active and appears again as passive when it comes in contact with something else. And so it results from all this, as we said in the beginning, that nothing exists as invariably one, itself by itself, but everything is always becoming in relation to something." (*Theatetus*, 157b, Fowler translation)

Aristotle develops Plato's doctrine in chapter nine of his *Metaphysics.* The term "potentiality" comes from potency, which is the power to change. The agent has the power to effect the change that was potential in the patient. The first power (active) is in the agent, the second power (potential) is in the patient. The agent acts upon this passive potency in the patient because the patient lacks some perfection, which lack we call "privation." By contrast, the agent has no privation in respect of this patient. But since there is potentiality and actuality involved, every movement is an act of becoming, and therefore incomplete. The actuality is complete. When the patient attains actualization, and possesses the perfection it lacked, it then becomes an agent, because the process of change never ends.

Change takes place because of the four causes that change all things. Those causes are 1) the *matter* from which the product is made, 2) the *form* by which it is informed, 3) the goal or *telos*, which is the product in view, and 4) the *efficient* cause that really molds it into that product.

Aristotelian science shows that God is not subject to any privation. God contains no element of non-existence, and therefore *is*. His existence is absolute, eternal and unchanging. It must be, because the first mover in the great chain of motion has to be fundamentally different and superior to any other movers. The non-existence of any perfection is a defect possessed by all merely potentially perfect beings. But since God is without defect He has no potentiality. Since God has no potentiality, He has no privation, and therefore lacks nothing and desires nothing. It follows that we must deny any implication that God has a privation, as in the statement "God desires…"

Maimonides does not subject Aristotle's physics to criticism. Jewish thinkers, including critics of philosophy like Yehuda Ha-Levi (c.1075–1141), still broadly accepted it, until Hasdai Crescas broke away. Abravanel's son, Don Judah Abravanel, agreed with Crescas, but failed to persuade his father to break with Aristotelian physical theory (Wolfson, *Crescas' Critique of Aristotle*, 103-104, 119-120, 261, 594-598).

SIMILARITY

This is where Maimonides departs from his strategy in the rest this chapter. The attribution of similarity implies the existence of other Gods, or, at least, other eternal independent entities. But Maimonides, in previous chapters, has qualified the intended audience of the Guide as monotheists who need no proof of divine uniqueness. Maimonides, however, could not change the fact that Aristotle was pagan, so he would not call upon Aristotelian physics to negate the existence of other gods.

The problem goes to the polytheism at the heart of the Hellenic philosophical project, undermining any attempt to use its tools for monotheistic ends. We already knew from 1:52 that similarity implies a basis for quantifiable comparison, and there can be no such *fundamentum* with the perfect being. Maimonides reprises this argument in the next chapter, but it only works when we try to compare God and man. We could hazard a proof in the spirit of the others already given above: all other beings are only potentially perfect; but God has all perfections and is actually perfect. Therefore, God has no similars. The problem with these arguments is that they beg the question of whether there could be two perfect unmoved movers moving two different universes (as Maimonides suggests in 1:75).

Therefore, in our chapter, he refrains from disproving similarity with God through philosophical proof. Otherwise, he would have to explain why the pagan progenitors of philosophy thought there were other gods. Rather than advance his own excellent proof here, he quotes three biblical passages, two from Isaiah and one from Jeremiah, that there is no being *like* God, i.e., there is nothing similar to God.

It is because of that prophetic insistence alone that we must deny a statement like "the family of God."

Since Maimonides does not bring his own proof here, he relies on these biblical assertions of divine uniqueness, trusting that the evidence of prophecy should suffice for his audience. Otherwise, he would have to explain why Aristotle did not abandon paganism, but he never explores that question explicitly.

WHY DIDN'T MAIMONIDES ARGUE HIS PHILOSOPHICAL PROOF FOR MONOTHEISM HERE?

In our chapter, Maimonides maintains that we must not merely reject divine corporeality, passion, privation and similarity, but that we must know the details of the proofs.

> "He who knows these things, but without their proofs, does not know the details which logically result from these general propositions: and therefore he cannot prove that God exists, or that the [four] things mentioned above are inadmissible in reference to God."

We have seen that he provides, in shorthand form, the proofs for the rejection of passion and privation. He previously demonstrated the rejection of corporeality in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodai* 1:7, as he does again in Guide chapters 1:76 and 2:1-2. He had already provided us with his Lexicon, which is a practical tool for the removal of corporeality from Judaism.

But when he gets to the rejection of divine likeness and similarity, which rejection is the very basis for monotheism, he merely says "this has been generally accepted," *v'zeh davar sh'kol ekhad khashav,* i.e., it has been generally accepted that we must reject terminology which suggests the existence of other gods or other eternal entities. This almost sounds like a first intelligible, something that everyone already knows or should know. His commentators did not question this, taking it as given. Abravanel says, "there is no need for further discussion," *v'dvarav m'boarim*; Even-Shmuel says that to accept divine likeness, "is mere error," *aino eleh mtatea.* Others are silent. You may inspect Maimonides' entire statement rejecting divine similarity:

> "Another thing likewise to be denied in reference to God, is similarity to any existing being. This has been generally accepted, and is also mentioned in the books of the Prophets: e.g., 'To whom, then, will you liken me?' (Isa. 11:25); 'To whom, then, will you liken God?' (*ib*. 18); 'There is none like unto Thee' (Jer. 10:6). Instances of this kind are frequent."

He includes no explicit proofs to support the rejection of divine similarity. Since, however, it is a religious duty to prove the rejection of corporeality, passion and privation, to the point where we "know the details which logically result from these general propositions (in the proofs)," *yada et ha-pratim sh'hem khiuviim min ha-hakdamot ha-klaliot halelu khiuvi ha-khrekhi*, wouldn't we have an even greater duty to demonstrate the lack of similarity of any entity to God? For both the divine attributes and the gods of the pagans seem to be similar to God in some way.

In fact, Maimonides does assemble serious arguments against divine similarity later in the Guide, in 1:56, 1:75 and 2:1. Here he seems content to leave his readers with three quotations from the prophetic scriptures. Why?

His first problem, as we observed, is Aristotle. We see that Maimonides builds his proofs against divine passion and privation on a philosophical physics directly derived from The Philosopher. He does this because he wants to register as many agreements in his ledger so that he can later dispute core peripatetic claims with integrity.

But he cannot make Aristotle an advocate for monotheism. Indeed, as we show in the next chapter, Aristotle could conceive of an ambiguous likeness between the god and a dog (which Maimonides probably knew but conceals). Worse yet, in Guide 1:75, Maimonides makes Aristotelian science the platform for his devil's advocacy of dualism, which he uses to smash the lame Kalām arguments for monotheism (see my essay there, "Maimonides' Aristotelianized Version Of Manichaeism").

When, in 1:75, he concludes his attack on the Kalām doctors' "proofs," he wearily says that they would have been better off to rely on simple religious faith. It is to that simple faith that he appeals, at this stage of the Guide, thereby avoiding Aristotle's paganism.

MAIMONIDES' PROOF

Maimonides does not articulate own post-Aristotelian proof until after his polemic against the Kalām in 1:73-76 and after his summation of the principles of Aristotelian science in the Introduction to Book Two of the Guide. It would have required too many explanatory prefaces to put it in our chapter.

So, for example, in the next chapter, 1:56, he returns to the problem of divine similarity, but confines himself to syntactical arguments and rules, rather than philosophical proofs. In 1:75, in the Kalām's second argument for monotheism, the argument of "specific difference," he subtly signals his preference for a version of that argument, but does not detail it.

It is only in Guide 2:1 that he carefully reveals enough of his argument for us to reconstruct it. He is careful not to attribute the argument to Aristotle, since it is the work of Maimonides' monotheist philosophical predecessors among the Jews, Christians and Muslims. The proof does hark back, though, in much altered form, to Aristotle, who argued that there could be only one heaven or universe (*ouranos*). This was because the moving principle of the universe had to be incorporeal (2:1, First Philosophical Argument), and since corporeality is the source of multiplicity, it followed that if its mover was incorporeal and single, then the universe it moved could not be multiple. For Aristotle's monotheist successors, including Maimonides, this was an obvious opening, and they merely traded God for Aristotle's *ouranos* (Guide 2:1, p. 22).

The argument of "specific difference," then, is that if there were two gods they must share some element (divinity) and differ in some other element (the separate realm that each separately ruled). In other words, each god would be defined by its shared genus and specific difference, as in any definition. But since the unmoved mover must be incorporeal, there could not conceivably exist the multiplicity or composition which such genus and difference imply (Propositions VII and XVI, Introduction to Part Two of the Guide). It follows that there must be only one God, not two or more, and there can be no such thing as a "genus" of divinity. (Maimonides' proof can be found in Friedlander's translation of Guide 2:1, page 20. See my essay in 1:75, "The Second Argument: Maimonides' Own Argument For Unity")

Also, to the extent that there could be said to be multiple intelligences, as in the case of angels, their multiplicity resides merely in their role as cause and effect to each other (Prop. XVI). At bottom, there is no real multiplicity in intellect, except in its engagement with matter. Therefore, no thing or principle resembles God, except in a homonymous metaphorical sense.

Until Maimonides had completely explained his stance on the Kalām and on Aristotle, it was too early to make this case. It was more prudent at this juncture, especially in view of the *Hagigah* rule against public teaching of the *Merkava*, to leave his student with simple faith in the existence of only one God.

DOES MAIMONIDES SIGNAL HIS PROOF AGAINST DIVINE SIMILARITY HERE?

There is, though, a way in which Maimonides signals these ideas in his proof-texts. He cites Isaiah 40:25, "To whom then will ye liken Me, that I should be equal" in two earlier works, Mishneh Torah, *Ysodai* 1:8, and in Principle Three of his Thirteen Fundamental Principles of Faith (Commentary on the Mishnah, *Sanhedrin* 10:1). In both places, he quotes the Isaiah passage with the identical tagline following it: "if He were a body, He would be like other bodies," *v'ilu haya guf haya domei l'shaar gufim.*

The Isaiah passage and this tagline seem to form an inseparable link in Maimonides' mind. The tagline is a shorthand version of the proof of specific difference. "If He were a body"...but He is not a body, since the prime mover must be incorporeal; "He would be *like* other bodies," in that all corporeal entities are multiple and composite, being members of some genus individuated by some specific difference. But just in virtue of God's incorporeality He must be non-multiple and non-composite, a member of no genus, and, therefore like no other being. He is therefore absolutely unique, the one God. (This same argument in a different form appears in Mishneh Torah, *Ysodai* 1:7).

Maimonides quoted Jeremiah chapter 10 in Mishneh Torah, *Avoda Zara* 1:1, though, instead of quoting Jeremiah 10:6 he quotes 10:7, but both verses repeat the phrase "there is none like unto Thee," *me'ein kamokha.* 10:7 reads, "Who would not fear Thee, O King of nations? For to Thee doth it appertain: forasmuch as among all the wise [men] of the nations, and in all their kingdoms, [there is] none like unto Thee." Mishneh Torah explains the passage, emphasizing the phrase "all the wise of the nations":

> "This means that all know that Thou art alone are God; their error and folly consists in imagining that this vain worship (idolatry) is Thy desire."

In Maimonides' mind, there is an indissoluble link between the Jeremiah passage and the notion that wise idolators know the true unique status of God.

What Maimonides means by citing these passages together is that even if the pagan Aristotle never could bring himself to admit the truth of monotheism, he must have realized it from the necessary lack of a specific difference in an incorporeal first mover.

CONCLUSION

Philosophy shows that God is beyond any attributes or descriptions. It does not matter whether these are corporeal descriptions, attributions of passion, or ascriptions of privation. Prophecy maintains that no being bears a likeness to God.

Maimonides begins to accumulate agreements between revelation and philosophy so that he can later address their disagreements. Only when coming to the denial of divine likeness does he abandon philosophy. In the next chapter, he focuses entirely on the attribution of similarity to God, arguing his syntactic case against it.

scottmalexander@rcn.com