GUIDE 1:57
ABOUT ATTRIBUTES BUT DEEPER

Chapters 57 and 58 are preceded by curious captions: the former reads "About Attributes, But Deeper than before," the latter: "Deeper than what preceded." By "deeper than before" Maimonides could mean that this chapter is deeper than the prior chapter. More likely, it means that this chapter goes deeper into what we may say about God than anything in the preceding fifty-six chapters of the book.

These chapters possess deep content and underlying structure. In the thirty-nine compact lines of text printed in the Judeo-Arabic edition, Maimonides grapples with the most difficult issues of the divine science: the existence, unity and eternality of God.

SUMMARY OF THE CHAPTER

Existence is an accident that happens to beings. This rule applies to all beings that are subject to causation, i.e., all created beings. For example, the name Jacob refers to a particular person before his birth, after he is born, and after he dies. He exists as a living being between the time that he is born and his death. Existence, so to speak, "happens" to the being called "Jacob." It is an accident to Jacob's essential nature as a rational animal. His existence is something separate from his definition as a rational animal.

The exception to the rule is God. God is uncaused in any of the four senses of cause, particularly the formal or definitional cause. While humans have as their formal cause their definition as rational animals, there are no *definiens* for God. When human beings happen to come into existence, that occurrence is accidental to them, not essential or definitional. But no accident occurs to the being that is truly simple, God. The statement "God exists" can only mean that existence is identical to whatever God is. God's existence is identical with His essence and vice versa. Therefore, the term "existence" is an equivocal term, since it is essential to God but accidental with us.

Believers in the attributes of God were comfortable saying that "God exists through (in virtue of) existence." By this they meant that God exists through or because of the attribute of existence. Maimonides, in opposition, insists on strict terminological purity by saying, "God exists but *not* through existence." His formula means that God exists but that His existence is not like existence known to us.

Maimonides treats God's unity and timelessness the same way he treats divine existence. We loosely (*ee hakpeda*, Ar.—*tasāmuḥ*) say "God is one" to mean He is not many. The problem is that unity and plurality are both relations of *quantity*. God is not subject to the category of quantity: He is unquantifiable and His unity is non-numerical. It is just as false to say of God that He is many as to say that He is one, *harei k'shem sh'mukhkhash bo mikra ha-ribui, kakh mukhkhash bo mikra ha-akhdut*. To preserve the idea of non-numerical unity and to eliminate Asharite and Modalist misunderstanding, Maimonides prefers "God is one, but not through oneness."

To affirm His timelessness, we call God *kadmon*, "first," meaning "none before." But to say that God is "first" implies that God comes under the category of *time*. Time is the number of motion, which is an accident of bodies. Since God is not a body, He is beyond reach of the category of time. When Isaiah says that God "is the first and the last," his statement is intentionally contradictory. It means that God was not created. He used the contradiction as a way to get us to think of God beyond the ambit of time.

By contrast, when we are first or last, it is a temporal accident. These terms describe a relation with others coming before us or after us in some time continuum. It is completely different for God, who is not subject to relation or to time. Maimonides says that first and last are to God as crooked or straight are to taste. When we apply these terms to God, we commit a category mistake. The result is that we only loosely (*ee hakpeda*) say of

God that he is "first." Although Maimonides does not say it here, it would follow that we should direct the mind correctly to God's uncreated timelessness by saying that He is "first, but not through firstness," or, perhaps, "eternal, but not through eternality or time."

Maimonides admits that the formulation of a statement and its denial, as "God is living but not through life," is difficult to conceive, but insists that it has meaning to those who know how to think abstractly. "God is living but not through life" denies that God's life is anything other than identical with His essence. Divine life is not life as we know it, because life is not an accident added to God's essence. To speak of God's life and our life in the same breath is a category mistake.

ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE

Maimonides formulates his doctrine of essence and existence in the following language:

> "*It is known* that existence (*ha-mtziot*) is an accident appertaining (*mikra hu sh'kara*) to all [existing] things (*l'nimtza*), and therefore an element (*inyan*) superadded to their essence (*nosef al mahut ha-nimtza*). This must evidently be the case as regards everything the existence of which is due to some cause: its existence is an element superadded to its essence. But as regards a being whose existence is not due to any cause—God alone is that being, for His existence, as we have said, is absolute (*mkhuyav ha-mtziot* = necessary of existence)—existence and essence are perfectly identical; He is not a substance to which existence is joined as an accident, as an additional element. His existence is always absolute, and has never been a new element or an accident in Him."

Alexander Altmann explained many of the concepts of this chapter in his 1953 essay "Essence and Existence in Maimonides," now in *Maimonides, a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Joseph Buijs, U. of Notre Dame Press, 1998, p. 148. Maimonides' language, especially in the first sentence above, closely tracks the doctrine of essence and existence originally announced by Avicenna (Ibn Sina, 980-1037). Altmann argues that Maimonides is closer to Avicenna's real doctrine than Avicenna's successors and critics. Avicenna argued that there are two kinds of existing things: those that are caused and those that are uncaused. Those that are caused are distinguished by their essences, because those essences are their definitions. Their definitions display their formal causes.

Thus, the essence of man is the definition of man, *zoon logicon*, rational animal. Rationality and animality are also the formal causes of man. The definition, i.e., the essence, is instantiated in the existing thing when existence *happens* (*sh'kara*) to it. That "happening" is the *accident* of existence. Maimonides is careful to show that the accident does not happen to the essence itself, but to the existing being (he thereby follows Aristotle's great reversal of the Platonic ideas). When the being is existent, the accident of existence is "superadded" to the essence. Nonetheless, in themselves, the essences are neutral respecting existence and non-existence. They are just definitions. By contrast, God is beyond definition. His essence is uniquely one with His essence, for He has no causes, formal or otherwise.

Friedlander, note 1, locates the underlying thought that resulted in this Avicennian distinction of essence and existence:

> "Of all the things we notice in the universe, we predicate that they exist; we also speak of the things before they come into existence, or after they have ceased to exist, and say that they did not or that they do not exist. We have, therefore, in our mind two separate ideas: the idea of the thing itself and the idea of existence, which we can imagine as being combined, or separate."

The theory turns on the notion that the being, in some sense, must have some *potential* existence to which the accident of existence happens. This potential of existence made the Avicennian theory controversial. The theory seemed to introduce neo-Platonic elements into the Aristotelian structure of existence. Aristotle had up-ended the

Platonic forms by arguing that universals exist only in the existing being. Existence characterizes the concrete thing, not the essence. There is no "world" of essences. The essences appear only in the existing being. What distinguishes one being from another is their degree of permanence. The process of corruption and generation causes the existing being to change, to appear and disappear; but the essence, i.e., the definition, is eternal.

OPPOSITION TO THE DISTINCTION OF ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE: AVERROES

Since Aristotle's essences do not possess a world of their own, critics attacked Avicenna's theory of separate essences on the ground that it resurrected Plato's noetic world. The principle critic was the great philosopher Averroes (Ibn Roshd, 1126-1198), followed by all of Maimonides' ancient commentators (See, esp. Shem Tov). He argued that there could be no separation of the existing being's essence from its existence.

Maimonides approved of some of the work of Averroes (Altmann, 163, note 3). They were alike in some ways. Both were philosophers and jurists of the same generation from Cordova. Still, according to Altmann, Maimonides did not learn of Averroes' attack on Avicenna while writing the Guide. When Maimonides says, "It is known," in the first sentence of our chapter, he means that Andalusian intellectuals of his generation treated the Avicennian concept of existence as orthodox Aristotelian theory. The reason for this could have been that those intellectuals only knew the Aristotelian materials in heavily neo-Platonized paraphrases and summarizations.

Yehudah Even-Shmuel disagreed with this reading. Writing about Averroes' rejection of the essence/existence dichotomy, he says, *ad loc.*, "If Maimonides knew about this, he did not accept it, but rather viewed all existences, apart from the one Absolute Existence, as accidental attachments to those beings." (My translation. Friedlander: "Maimonides follows Ibn Sina in this point," note 1, 204. Kafih: "He is not concerned with Ibn Roshd and others," *rabeinu lo khash lehem*, note 1. Harry Wolfson seems to be in accord: *Crescas on Divine Attributes*, Ch. 2, in *Studies*, Vol. II).

Altmann and Wolfson both argue that Averroes might not have entirely grasped Avicenna's true doctrine, because of linguistic and bibliographical drift. Averroes and Avicenna agreed on the identity of essence and existence in God. The problem is what happens to these terms in the world of creation. Existence and oneness are not substances existing in themselves as things that we can literally "find" in the world (*find* is the core meaning of the Hebrew for "existence"—*mitsiut*), and so we might be justified in thinking that they are accidents. But existence and oneness are different from other accidents.

The issue is whether the "accident" of existence is a different type of occurrence from, for example, the accident of whiteness to the substance of cloth. We call the cloth a substance because it exists through itself, while whiteness is an accident since it only exists through the cloth. The cloth could have been red or black instead of white. This is not the same as saying that the cloth could have existed or not, or that it could have been many rather than one. We can find the cloth irrespective of its color, but where would we find the cloth before it is woven or after it is burned, before or after its "accident" of existence? We must deny that the disembodied cloth has any sort of real existence as an idea in a noetic netherworld. This is the force of Averroes argument that the essence and existence of the cloth are identical in the concrete cloth itself.

Nevertheless, we can say what a cloth is if we need to convey a clear idea of it, indeed, we can even find terms that define it. While that definition is not an existence found in any world but the artificial world of a dictionary, nonetheless, it is always the same definition, the "what-ness," *mahut*, or essence of the thing. The definition does not palpably exist in the world, but it is an object of knowledge. Thus, the essence is knowledge, entirely incorporeal, which instantiates the matter of the cloth once the weaver, who possesses that concept, in-forms it in the woven material. Therefore, the existence of the cloth is something that "happens," though in a more fundamental sense than when the already existing cloth happens to be dyed red or green.

If this is true with the humble shred of cloth, how much more so in man, the image of God. There was a particular time in history when we could find Jacob in his tent mourning the disappearance of Joseph. Yet, in a different sense, Jacob is always with us, as concept, as goal, as genetic/spiritual inheritance, as supernal principle, as guide, as inspirer. We still call by the name of Jacob a tray of bones brought back to the land that eternally bears his name Israel. When he attached himself to God in moments of prophecy, he transcended his corporeality and existed beyond temporality. There are all of these Jacobs, and yet we use the same name for all of them. Maimonides forcefully asserts that a distinction remains between the eternal Jacob and the Jacob who once ate and studied with his sons,

So, we can understand why Shem Tov wants to object, following Averroes, that "the existence that man portrays in his mind is not the existence outside of it, but rather that existence and essence are one...not super-added on to that man." And we do want to be careful not to reify our mental portrayals into hypostases and gods. But we, nevertheless, recognize a distinction between our Jacob and the Jacob grieving in his tent. If we accept with Maimonides that the mind is not of our body, and that it has infinite potential, we make a comprehensible statement when we say that it becomes instantiated in a corporeal existence whose physical flesh we can find for a moment in our world.

It is probably the case that even Shem Tov would have accepted this account. According to Wolfson, the European scholastic successors of Averroes also probably would have, because they changed the terms of the debate.

> "In its origin, among the Arabs and Jews, the problem of essence and existence was much simpler than in its later development among the Schoolmen. To the latter the problem presented itself in the following form. *Assuming the presence* of a distinction between essence and existence within actual beings, they ask, What does this distinction consist in? The various answers given to the question ran parallel to the solutions offered to the problem of universals, real, conceptual or nominal" (my emphasis; *ibid.* 302).

The reason that they could assume the same presence of a distinction between essence and was that they all believed, unlike modern-day existentialists, that essence preceded existence. Only one who believes that existence precedes essence, denying the soul, could totally obliterate the distinction between man's essence and his existence.

While it is admittedly difficult to think of individuals without thinking of them existing, when viewed both before and after their existence we can, perhaps, grasp the instantiation of their being as a *special type* of accident. Schwarz translates the actual Judeo-Arabic term given here for "accident," עארצ, as "occurrence" (*eirooa*), instead of using the technical term "accident/*mikra*" (unlike Ibn Tibon, Kafih, Friedlander, and Pines). In this he follows Altmann, who says:

> "The term 'accident' (עארצ) merely expresses the fact that things 'happen' to exist. In a certain sense it also means that the essence 'happens' to appear in this particular matter. It does not indicate that a non-existent or ideal essence has become 'existent' by the grace of the additional attribute of existence [which would correspond to the technical meaning of 'accident']. Nor does it obliterate the recognition of concrete substances as having existence in a primary and absolute sense. It merely defines existence as being due to factors outside the essence, and for this reason uses the term 'accident'...Avicenna employed the same term in a similar sense, and it is not unlikely that this is the way Maimonides understood Avicenna."

Aristotle also recognized that existence and unity are different from other accidents in that they are "the most universal of all predicates" (*Metaphysics,* X:2:1050b21). It is for these reasons that Maimonides might have recognized, even in the face of the Averroist attack on Avicenna, the distinction of essence and existence in God's creatures.

OPPOSITION TO THE DISTINCTION OF ESSENCE AND EXISTENCE: THE KALĀM

The theory of essences was also controversial for the Asharite Kalām. This was especially true of the writings of Averroes' great earlier opponent, Al-Ghazali (1058-1111). The Kalām theologians, as we will see in chapters 1:71-76, denied the existence of nature. They held that all existing beings and all of their changes were nothing but miraculous interventions of God in a chaos of atoms. They denied that there were any other causes other than the miraculous divine will in everyday life.

Part of their program meant the elimination of essences entirely. They denied that there were formal definitional causes of existing beings. Definitions implied that these things were out of Allah's minute control. They argued that He could change each definition as He pleased. They complained that the necessary *natural* generation of things from causes implied the absence of divine will in the generation of those things.

Maimonides' response was to agree that the role of divine will was paramount in the creation of the superlunary beings and in their influence on the sublunary world. He also held that divine will is the cause of the instantiation of form in the creatures. Nonetheless, he never denied the natures of things, holding instead that nature reveals God's wisdom.

Altmann says, "Maimonides related essence to the Wisdom and existence to the Will of God" (*ibid.* 154). He describes Maimonides' theology of will and wisdom as a "compromise solution" in the battle between the will-theology of the Asharites and the wisdom-theology of the more philosophically oriented Mutazilite branch of the early Kalām. It would be better to say that Maimonides just describes things as they are. Generation and corruption is a natural process, begun by God, and, in some incomprehensible way, providentially maintained by Him. Its entirety reflects the identity of His will and wisdom, as Maimonides explains in Guide 1:72.

"GOD IS LIVING BUT NOT THROUGH LIFE"

The formula that "God is living but *not* through (in virtue of) life" plays an important role in Maimonidean thought.

To begin with, it controverts the compromise formulas that the Muslim theologians deployed to conceal their differences.

The Asharite attributists could say, "God is living in virtue of His essence" because they took a position resembling the familiar one of the Christian Trinitarians. Their divine *logos* ("inlibrated" in the Qur'an), as well as divine power and will, were all real attributes with real independent existence united obscurely in the divine essence.

By contrast, those Mutazilite anti-attributists who held that the attributes were mere names taught that all these attributional concepts were nothing but God's essence. When they used the formula "God is living in virtue of His essence," they meant to express the unity of the divine essence, thereby rejecting the addition of anything to it.

A third group, the Modalists, held that the attributes were *concepts* in the divine mind, neither mere names nor real beings. They understood the formula "God is living in virtue of His essence" to express their position perfectly, for they meant that God's life is a *concept* expressed in His essence, neither a real attribute nor merely a name.

To clear the field, Maimonides said that "God is living but *not* through life" in order to reject both Modalist and Asharite positions, and to remove ambiguity from the nominalists' assertion that attributes are only actions or mere names. (He did not invent the rare formula, see Wolfson, *Repercussions*, 74, and *Kalām*, 230).

The problem is that his formula seems self-contradictory. Maimonides' tries to resolve this problem by appealing to the intransigency of language. None of the world's languages, including Hebrew, possesses sufficient terms for the ineffable. Our language is inevitably subject to corporeality. It cannot express concepts free of this dross. He expressed this through his interpretation of the dictum that "Torah speaks in the language of men," i.e., it speaks of the unspeakable in only a loose sense (*ee hakpeda*).

A *MITZVA* OF INTERPRETATION?

The Maimonidean solution is to appeal to the mind. He uses his contradictory formulation as shorthand to lead the mind to the truth of his complicated message (*v'l'fikakh niskam et ha-inyan v'nadrikh et ha-makhshava al amitat ha-inyan*). So, for example, we say that God is one or that He is first (*kadmon*). But oneness is a relation of the accident of *quantity*; while firstness is a relation of the accident of *time*. God is absolutely independent of all considerations of time or quantity, and subject to no relations. To lead the mind to this doctrine that is so deep it eludes thought (*ha-amukim halelu ha-alulim l'heialem min ha-makhshavot*), we stun the mind with this self-contradictory formula that God is one but not through oneness. We expect the student to examine this conception critically and abstract its truth (*u'bekhinam ba-hasagat ha-sekhel otam v'ha-pashatuto otam*) from its customary verbiage (*b'btuim ha-ragilim*). Maimonides does not forbid the customary verbiage, like "one" or "first," but teaches us to interpret it.

Maimonides never quite says that there is a commandment of interpretation incumbent on all Jews. He apparently does require those capable of abstract thought to interpret statements about divine existence, unity and eternality along something like the lines enunciated in this chapter. It may be an obligation of the heart (cf. Bakhya Ibn Pakuda, *Hovot Ha-Levavot* 1:8-9). The Thirteen Fundamentals of faith clearly require that all Jews believe in the existence, unity and eternality of God. But it is also clear from statements in *Helek* and elsewhere (e.g., Guide 1:35, see my comments there) that he expected at least some Jews, especially those admitted to the study of the divine science, to advance to this feat of interpretation.

What this is leading up to is his famous doctrine of the negative attributes. The significant core of the formula "God is living but not through life" is the word "not." In the next chapter Maimonides finally unveils his version of the *via negativa*.

But how to describe God by negation, who so positively exists, and who so positively embodies perfection? Since we never really get away from positive statements, we must strongly interpret them. As we learn in the next chapter, we must interpret divine "existence" so that it only has these three meanings: 1) the term is meant *tautologously*, ie, God is God; 2) it is meant *negatively* to deny that His existence is like our existence; or, 3) it is interpreted as a *proposition of the second adjacent* rather than the third adjacent ("God lives" rather than "God is living") and would therefore only tell us about what God *does*, not what He is. He did not mean by negative theology to negate the existence of God.

scottmalexander@rcn.com