ALTERNATIVE CONCEPTIONS OF DIVINE UNITY IN JUDAISM

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Introduction

That God is one is a dogma of rabbinic Judaism. This paper will focus
on this judgment as it is expressed in the second foundation belief in
Maimonides'[1] list of thirteen foundations of Judaism. Maimonides' way of
expressing the belief in one God is not the only legitimate expression of this
doctrine, and his understanding of what is a foundation belief is not
universally accepted by spokespeople for rabbinic Judaism. However,
Maimonides' attempt to formulate essential Jewish beliefs occupies a place of
importance in any statement of Jewish belief at least in the sense that no
formulation of what Jews believe can be adequate that does not take
seriously Maimonides' judgments.

In his commentary on the tenth chapter of the tractate Sanhedrin in
the Mishnah, Maimonides gives a list of thirteen "foundations"[2] or
"principles"[3] of the Torah. The first is the existence of the Creator and
second is God's unity. Concerning all thirteen, Maimonides says that anyone

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[1] Moses ben Maimon, known to Jews primarily as "Rambam." He was born
in Cordova, Anadulsia in 1135 C.E. and died in Fostat (Old Cairo), Egypt in
1204 C.E.. Among his many writings on Jewish law and philosophy are his
Commentary on the _Mishnah_ his _Moreh Nevukhim_ (The Guide of the
Perplexed), his letter on Astrology where he discusses the principles of
creation and human choice, and his _Yad Ha-Chazakah_. The last named work
is his talmudic code.

[2] _Qawa'id._

[3] _usul._

who even doubts them "leaves the community [of Israel], denies the fundamental (*kafar bi-ikkar*) is an *epikoros*, and is one who 'cuts among the plantings.'"[4] The second foundation reads as follows:

> ... this One, Who is the cause of [the existence of] everything, is one. His oneness is unlike the oneness of a genus, or of a species. Nor is it like the oneness of a single composed individual, which can be divided into many units. Nor is His oneness like that of the simple body which is one in number but infinitely divisible. Rather He, may He be exalted, is one with a oneness for which there is no comparison at all.

This paper deals exclusively with this text. The first part discusses what Maimonides meant by calling it a "foundation" and what other alternatives Jewish tradition offers on the status of belief in Judaism. On this section I have almost nothing original to say. In fact the material presented is a summary of Menachem Kellner's Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought with some minor revisions of my own.[5] The second part discusses what Maimonides meant by calling God one and what other alternatives Jewish

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[4] Every translation of Maimonides' thirteen foundations is that of David R. Blumenthal in The Commentary of R. Hoter ben Shelomoh to the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides (Leiden, E.J. Brill, 1974), as quoted by Menachem Kellner in Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986).

[5] In my judgment Kellner's work is sufficiently superior -- both in depth and breadth -- to anything else that has been written on the nature of Jewish belief, that I see no need to use any other references. I ask readers to keep this evaluation in mind as they read the rest of this paper. My subsequent footnotes might create an opposite, erroneous impression. I agree with almost everything that Kellner says, and because Kellner says it there is no reason for me to single these statements out for commentary. Instead, I only mention the places where I think Kellner is mistaken. Consequently, since almost everything I will say below about Kellner is critical, a reader may misunderstand my general evaluation of Kellner's work. Again, please note that almost everything I say in the body of this section paraphrases points made by Kellner. I have relegated to footnotes the very few places where I take issue with his excellent study.

tradition offers on the meaning of this belief. As the discussion in the first part will make clear, while it may be reasonable to draw parameters of forms of Jewish belief, it always lies outside of those parameters to designate any single expression as <u>the</u> Jewish belief. That the status of belief in Judaism always has this character is, in my judgment, part of the historic strength of this religion. However, no argument for this claim will be included in this paper.

On Being a Dogma of Rabbinic Judaism

In the light of conceptual challenges to Judaism internally from the Karaite movement and externally from Islam, rabbis began to formulate precise statements on Jewish belief in the tenth century C.E. Initial attempts by Bachya, Judah Halevi, and Abraham ibn Daud in the eleventh and twelfth centuries culminated in Maimonides' first comprehensive formulation of his thirteen foundations. This effort is hardly noticed until the fifteenth century, when Maimonides' formulation is subject to sharp and careful examination in the light of the major Christian persecution of that century. With the decline of persecution in the next two centuries, interest in formulating Jewish dogmas again declined. However, in modern times it again became important for Jewish thinkers to examine with care precisely

what it is that Jews ought to believe and what it means to say that they ought to believe it.[6]

The Mishnah text upon which Maimonides' creedal statement is a commentary says the following: "...the following have no share in the world to come: he who says that resurrection is not taught in the Torah,[7] that the Torah is not from heaven, and the *epikoros* "[8] The critical term is "*epikoros*." Maimonides' commentary can be read primarily as an interpretation of the meaning of this expression. In other words, an *epikoros* is someone who denies these thirteen foundations, and such a person has no share in the world to come. In all probability Maimonides himself understood having "a share in the world to come" to mean salvation, and he considered these foundations to be both necessary and sufficient conditions for salvation. Furthermore, in stating these conditions, it did not seem to

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[6] Kellner argues that Judaism's concern with dogma is limited to apologetics, because Judaism is defined by trust (*bitachon* or *amanat*) rather than belief (*emunah* or *i'tiqadat* or *da'at*) in Judaism. My personal judgment is that this distinction is itself confused. Kellner offers little argument for this claim. Instead, he cites as authority Martin Buber's Two Types of Faith (New York, Harper & Row, 1961), and Kenneth Seeskin's "Judaism and the Linguistic Interpretation of Jewish Faith" (in Studies in Jewish Philosophy III, Philadelphia, The Academy for Jewish Philosophy,1983. pp. 71-81. Reprinted Studies in Jewish Philosophy, Lanham, University Press of America, 1987. pp. 215-234.) The Seeskin argument is based on Buber's book, and, in my judgment, Buber's distinction is too vague to serve any useful function to determine conceptual motives for the nature of Jewish belief. The truth of the Buber-Seeskin-Kellner thesis in this case seems to me to be limited to the following judgment: In Judaism's attempt to formulate correct belief, the presence of apparent tension, both from within and without the Jewish people, made that attempt sharper than it would otherwise have been.

[7] As Maimonides presents this Mishnah, the statement reads, "he who says there is no resurrection." The difference need not concern us here.

[8] Menachem Kellner, Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986. (Henceforth referred to simply as "Kellner.") pg. 10.

make any difference whether the individuals' state of belief was intentional or unintentional. In other words, what matters for salvation is what individuals in fact believe and not why they believe.

The first major critic of Maimonides' formulation was Shimon ben Zemach Duran.[9] Duran calls his list of basic beliefs foundations,[10] pillars,[11] and pedestals,[12] all of which are used interchangeably. He mentions four beliefs, viz., creation, providence, miracles and the authority of the Torah, and argues that the fourth logically follows from the second and third, which are logically entailed by the first. Hence, creation is from a logical point of view the single most important root belief[13] of Judaism. It is worthy of note that of these three beliefs, only the beliefs in providence and the authority of the Torah are explicitly stated by Maimonides. However, in a late revision of his creed, Maimonides argued that the fourth foundation about God's eternity entails the doctrine of creation, and others subsequently deduced the doctrine of miracles from Maimonides' fifth foundation that states that only God is a worthy object of worship. Still, Maimonides' and Duran's lists of foundations do not agree with each other. Even granting the later revisions of Maimonides' list, while everything claimed by Duran is included by Maimonides, Duran excludes from Maimonides' list several foundations, including the belief in God's unity. That is not to say that Duran did not

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[9] Born in Majorca, 1361, and died in North Africa (Tlemcen) in 1444. Henceforth to be referred to as "Duran." His major works for our purposes are *Magen Avot* (his commentary on the tractate *Avot*) and *Ohev Mishpat*

[10] For which he uses the term "*yesodot*" rather than Maimonides' term "*qawa'id*."

[11] *Ammudim.*

[12] *Adnim.*

[13] *Ikkar.*

believe in these principles. Rather, his claim is that they are not ~~i~~ foundations of the Torah.

In this connection it should be noted that Maimonides and Duran do not mean the same thing by foundations. Whereas for Maimonides they are necessary and sufficient conditions for individual salvation, for Duran they are logical prerequisites for believing in the Torah is revelation from heaven. In other words, while Maimonides' list was intended to define heresy, Duran's was not. Rather, he made a judgment about the logical, systematic nature of Jewish belief. Furthermore, for Duran heresy is defined not so much by what individuals believe as by what they intend to believe.[14]

The difference between Maimonides' and Duran's definitions of foundations is critical, and therefore deserves further explanation. Assume that a certain belief, p, is a true teaching of the Torah, and q is a contrary of p. There are four possible states of belief vis-a-vis belief in p. (1) Someone, a, believes p and believes that p is taught in the Torah. (2) a believes p but believes that q is taught in the Torah. (3) a believes q and believes that q is taught in the Torah, (4) a believes q and believes that p is taught in the Torah. Both Maimonides and Duran would agree that no heresy is involved in case (1) and that by case (4) a is a heretic. The controversial cases are (2) and (3). Clearly Maimonides would judge a in case (3) to be a heretic in opposition to Duran, since for Duran what is critical is that a derive his

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14 "... one who has properly accepted the roots of the Torah, but was moved to deviate from them by the depths of his speculation and who thereby believed concerning one of the branches of the faith the opposite of what has been accepted as what one ought to believe and tries to explain the verses of Scripture according to his belief, even though he errs he is no denier. ... He only holds that belief because he thinks it is the intention of the Torah. Therefore, even though he errs he is not a denier and sectarian ... since he accepted the roots of the Torah as he should." *Ohev Mishpat*, chpt. ix, pg. 88 of Kellner.

beliefs from the authority of the Torah, independent of whether or not his understanding of the Torah is correct. At the same time it is not clear what either would say about case (2). Maimonides might say that a is not a heretic because he believes in p. On the other hand he might be a heretic because he does not accept the authority of the Torah. Conversely, Duran might say that a is a heretic because he does not accept the authority of the Torah. However, it undoubtedly would be troublesome to Duran to claim that someone is a heretic who holds a true belief irrespective of his error in holding that belief.

The next major figure to enter this discussion was Chasdai Crescas.[15] He distinguished between three[16] levels of Jewish belief. A specific Jewish belief is classified first as a source,[17] or a first principle,[18] or a corner-stone.[19] Such a belief is a presupposition necessary to believe in the general doctrine of revelation.[20] Beneath this level are true beliefs[21] taught either explicitly or implicitly in the Torah, and finally there are beliefs[22] which the

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[15] A leading rabbinic scholar in Aragon. Died in 1412 in Saragossa. Henceforth to be referred to as "Crescas." His major work in Jewish thought was The Light of the Lord (*Or Adonai*).

[16] Kellner lists four levels. However, as I will argue in a note below, I see no real difference between his first two levels.

[17] *Shoresh*.

[18] *Hathalah*.

[19] *Pinnah*.

[20] This is the definition Kellner gives for roots and first principles. He places them at a higher level than cornerstones which are defined as "beliefs the acceptance of which makes belief in revelation in general possible." (Kellner, pg. 121). However, I can see no difference between presuppositions of general revelation and beliefs the acceptance of which make belief in general revelation possible. The latter seems to be no more than an explanation of the former.

[21] *De'ot* or *emunot*.

[22] *De'ot* or *sevarot*.

Torah may or may not in fact teach. Note that for Crescas the belief in God's unity is a source, cornerstone, first principle of the Torah, as are five other foundations of Maimonides and Duran's foundation of miracles. However, the remaining seven Maimonidean foundations and Duran's most fundamental belief in creation are relegated to the lower status of true beliefs taught by the Torah.

It should be noted that Crescas does not speak about "foundations" at all. Rather, he merely distinguishes between "sources"[23] and "beliefs." Furthermore, what Crescas means by "sources" is different from what Maimonides meant by "foundations," although it agrees with Duran's use. In other words, both Crescas and Duran are talking about a logical ordering of Jewish beliefs in which certain ones are designated as axioms from which the others can be inferred, and neither is making a legal ruling about judgments of heresy. The former is a philosophical religious task; the latter is a question of religious law; and while the two have bearing on each other, they are clearly different religious activities. Furthermore, with respect to the legal/dogmatic question, Crescas makes the same distinction that Duran made between intentional and unintentional belief. Heretics are people who believe that what they believe is independent of the teachings of the Torah. This status is not based on the truth or falsity of their beliefs. Again, people who believe something that they believe to be taught in the Torah because they believe it to be taught in the Torah but in fact the belief is contrary to a

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[23] In the interest of brevity, from this point on I will simply use Crescas' term "*shoresh*" to stand for all three interchangeable terms for his highest category of Jewish beliefs.

logically fundamental belief of the Torah are, according to Maimonides,

heretics, but, according to both Crescas and Duran, they are not heretics.[24]

The next important figures in this discussion of dogma were Joseph

Albo[25] and Isaac Arama.[26,27] Albo distinguishes between roots,[28] branches,[29]

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[24] Crescas' position on the possibility of unintentional heresy is somewhat subtle, but it is not as confused as Kellner's discussion suggests. At the bottom of pg. 131 he distinguishes three cases. Case a: Someone does an act because he believes it to be commanded in the Torah but in fact that act is forbidden. Case b: Someone tries to believe something that he believes to be taught in the Torah. He cannot bring himself to do so and he feels guilty about his failure. Case c: Someone believes that some belief is taught in the Torah. He holds that belief and is in fact pleased with himself for holding that belief because he believes that it is taught in the Torah. The complexity of these cases in no way makes Crescas' position more comprehensible. What Kellner lists as three alternatives are at least 128 (viz., 2^7). The variables are (1) believing or not believing something that (2) may or may not be taught in the Torah, (3) acting or not acting on the basis of what someone (4) does nor does not believe, and (5) feeling either joy or pain for what (6) one does or does not either (7) believe or do. Again, apply Crescas' position on dogma to all of these alternatives and we would have to consider at least 128 different cases. However, Crescas' position can be illustrated with far greater simplicity by the four cases listed above for Duran.

[25] Lived between 1380 and 1440 in Monreal, Aragon. Crescas's student. Author of _Sefer ha-Ikkarim_.

[26] 1420-1494, from Spain and, after the expulsion from Spain, from Italy. His major work was a commentary on the Pentateuch called "_Akedat Yitzchak_."

[27] At this stage Kellner gives a chapter to Abraham Bibago (Jewish community leader in Huesca and Saragosa. Died around 1489. His major work in Jewish religious thought was _Darkeh Emunah_ (1480).) On Kellner's interpretation, Bibago presents "principles" in a unique way as general signs of the Torah's divinity. However, as I read the text that Kellner presents, Bibago means nothing more by this characterization than what Duran, Crescas and Albo meant by logical first principles. In any case, his only axioms are miracles and creation. What is of interest is the way that Bibago reconciles Maimonides' principles with Rambam's discussion of divine attributes in The Guide of the Perplexed. (Cf. Kellner, pg. 171) However, that discussion adds nothing to the present topic of the status of dogma.

[28] _Ikkarim_.

[29] _Anafim_.

and sources.[30] The roots are general principles of divine law that include three beliefs -- God's existence, the revelation of the Torah, and divine providence. Albo understands these to be roots in the same sense that Crescas spoke about "sources."[31] The branches also are first logical principles of Mosaic law that differ from the roots only in their degree of generality, viz., they are specific rather than general principles. Finally, Albo's sources are logical inferences from his roots. The doctrine of divine unity is a source Jewish belief that can be inferred from the root Jewish belief in God's existence. Albo, like Duran and Crescas before him, limits heresy to intentional disbelief. Arama moves the discussion to a different plane. For him the principles of Judaism are neither logical first principles of the system of Jewish belief (as they were for Duran, Crescas and Albo) nor criteria for salvation (as they were for Maimonides). Rather, they are beliefs that uniquely characterize Judaism in comparison with philosophy and other religions. From this perspective God's unity is not a principle of Judaism, because it is not a unique claim of this one religion.

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[30] *Shoreshim.*

[31] Kellner believes that Albo and his teacher, Crescas mean different things by principles. However, based solely on Kellner's own description I fail to see any substantial difference. For Crescas, the first level of principles consists of sources that are presuppositions of revelation in general and the second level is made up of cornerstones the acceptance of which make belief in revelation in general possible (Kellner, pg. 121). Again, this seems to me to be a distinction that is not a distinction. For Albo the first level are general principles of divine law and the second level are specific principles of the Torah (Kellner, pp. 141ff). In both cases the first two levels are logical axioms from which the third and final level of principles are deducible. Kellner tells us that Crescas discusses principles in an "analytic sense" and Albo in a "logical or axiomatic sense" (Kellner, pg. 186). Again, if there is any difference between these two senses, I fail to see it, and nothing in Kellner's description helped me to overcome my problem.

The last major contributor to this discussion was Isaac Abravanel.[32] He, like Maimonides, defines heresy in terms of belief and not in terms of the intention of the belief. However, at the same time he rejects the claim that any specific set of Jewish beliefs are more privileged than any others. In other words, it is not simply the denial of certain beliefs that are sufficient and necessary conditions for heresy, but rather, the rejection of any Jewish belief itself is heresy and denies its advocate a share in the world to come. In this context Abravanel would claim that to deny God's unity for whatever reason would make one a heretic who will not be saved. In this judgment he agrees with but only with Maimonides. At the same time he would say that the belief in God's unity has no special status among Jewish beliefs. In this claim he parts company with every other major Jewish thinker. The sole possible ally in this case would be Duran. Kellner suggests that the motive for Abravanel's unique position on dogma lies in the fact that his work was composed two years after the expulsion from Spain. Faced with major persecution, Abravanel was primarily concerned with the survival of the Jewish people as a faith community. In this emergency context Abravanel felt that no exceptions to holding the line of Jewish faith should be granted and all aspects of Jewish commitment should be seen by the masses to have salvific value. Based on this analysis, Kellner suggests that Abravanel's list of principles are no mere academic study in Jewish logic, as they were for Duran, Crescas and their followers, nor an attempt to

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[32] Spanish Jewish philosopher, 1437-1508, who resided in Naples after the expulsion. Author of the Principles of Faith (*Rosh Amanah*) (1494). We will exclude from our consideration Kellner's discussion of Yom Tov Lipmann Muehlhausen (an Ashkenazi rabbi who died after 1450), Elijah ben Moses Delmedigo (an Italian rabbi who died between 1460 and 1497), David ben Judah Messer Leon (an Italian rabbi who died between 1470 and 1526) and Moses ben Joseph Trani (a rabbinic scholar from Safed, 1500-1580).

exclude from Judaism heretics, as it was for Maimonides. Rather, for Abravanel the beliefs of Judaism are discussed as measures to strengthen the Jewish masses to survive overt, hostile attacks by their gentile neighbors.

In summary, Maimonides principles of the Jewish faith define salvation from a Jewish perspective. They are distinctive beliefs in that those who deny them will have no share in salvation. As such Maimonides position is unique. Abravanel would deny that this list of beliefs is any more central to Judaism than any other beliefs found in the Torah. However, what is more important, most authorities would argue that salvation has more to do with the intention of the believers than what they in fact believe. What is critical for salvation is that Jews accept the authority of God's word as revealed in the Torah, whether or not they are successful in interpreting that word. In his *Or Adonai* Crescas presents the clearest picture of the place of dogma in Judaism. The salvation of Jews rests on their obedience or disobedience to the commandments of the Torah. However, God can only command what is voluntary, and belief is involuntary in the sense that no one can will to believe what they, for any reason, disbelieve. Judaism teaches true beliefs. That God is one is such a belief. However, it can no more command this belief than it can command someone to have a healthy heartbeat. True belief can be acquired only through good education. It can neither be forced nor demanded. Consequently, while Judaism would claim that it is true that God is one, it cannot command anyone to believe it. One <u>ought</u> to believe this doctrine because it is better to believe what is true than what is false. However, "ought" in this sense does not entail an imperative. To make the same point is slightly different words, it is a dictate of morality

that one ought to believe what is true, but this moral judgment cannot be expressed as an imperative. Not to do so is itself a dictate of morality.

That God is One

The single most important expression of what Maimonides believes it means to say that God is one is contained in his theory of divine attributes, and his fullest statement of that theory is found in The Guide of the Perplexed.[33] It is contained in 59 chapters of this work.[34] 22 of them are philosophical and 37 are hermeneutic, i.e., Maimonides develops his theory in 24 chapters and illustrates its use in interpreting Scripture in 37 chapters. Of the 24 philosophic chapters, the critical ones are 52, 57-59 and 47. I will confine my attention to these five chapters.

I:52

The kinds of sentences that claim to provide knowledge are declarative. They can be divided into the positive and the negative, i.e., sentences of the form S is P, where a predicate is affirmed of a subject, and S is not P, where a predicate is negated of a subject. Declarative sentences also can be divided into univocal ones, i.e., where there is only a single meaning to the sentence, and equivocal ones, i.e., where there are several meanings to the sentence. The predicate expression in an univocal, affirmative, declarative sentence affirms of its subject either a definition, a part of a definition, an accident, a relation or an action. Any affirmation of the first two kinds is inadmissible, because it entails that God is not one in the sense

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[33] Henceforth referred to as "The Guide."
[34] All of these chapters are found in Book I. They are 1, 3, 4, 6-16, 18-25, 28-30, 36-48, 50-70

of being a simple substance. God's unity also has the consequences that God cannot be related to anything, and no affirmation of an accident is admissible. Accidents are attributable to a subject only insofar as it is contingent, but to say that God is the prime mover or first cause of the universe means that whatever is true of God follows from what God is, i.e., is necessarily true. In other words, the first cause must be in every respect a necessary being. Hence, if God were subject to accidents, God would not be the first cause.

I:57-58

Since literally no univocal affirmation is possible in a sentence whose subject is God, affirmative declarative sentences are possible in a language of God talk only where those sentences are equivocal in meaning. Maimonides' general rule for interpreting such sentences is the following: Given any sentence of the form, "God is F," either F is a synonym for God or the sentence literally asserts that "God is not G" where G is the contrary of F. In other words, all intelligible statements about God that are not tautological are on final analysis negative. They give us information about God only to the extent that to know what a subject is not is to have some knowledge about the subject. Consequently, that God is powerful means that there is nothing of which God is not a sufficient cause; that God is living means that He apprehends, and that God apprehends means that there is nothing of which God is ignorant; that God is attentive means that nothing is not subject to divine providence; and finally, that God is one means that God is not complex.

Based on the above analysis, it is intelligible to attribute to God power, life, knowledge, governance and unity, because literally what these affirmations mean is that their contraries are not true of God. Gersonides[35] would subsequently point out the logical flaw of Maimonides' analysis.[36] In terms of logic it is just as reasonable to say that God is weak, dead, ignorant, indifferent and complex, because literally what these affirmations mean is that their contraries are not true of God, which in fact they are not. Maimonides' response to this objection is contained in this chapter.

Scripture never ascribes figuratively to God what human beings regard as a deficiency; it only affirms what they recognize to be perfections. Consequently, imaginative reasoning (*ra'yon*) is not attributable to God, because such reasoning is not able to distinguish truth from fantasy, but thinking (*machashavah*) and understanding (*tevunah*) are, even though none of these forms of human conceptual activity literally are true of God. Similarly, while hearing, sight and smell are ascribed to God, touch and taste are not, even though in reality the first three senses are no more applicable to God than the latter two. The reason why the first three are more applicable is because the perceiver can hear, see and smell an object at a distance, whereas he can only touch or taste it if he is spatially next to the object.

In other words, what it means to say that God is F, where F is any predicate whose contrary is G, is that God is not G, F is not a human excellence, and G is a human vice. In other words, on final analysis

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[35] Provencal Jewish philosopher and astronomer, Levi Ben Gershon, known to Jews as "Ralbag." Born in Bagnols in 1288 and died April 20, 1344. His major work in philosophy was The Wars of the Lord (*Milhamot Adonai*).
[36] In Treatise III, chapter 8 of The Wars of the Lord (*Milhamot Adonai*), translated into English by N. Samuelson (Toronto, Pontifical Institute, 1977).

statements about God do not inform us about God; rather, they instruct us in human ethics. In other words, Maimonides' theory of negative attributes is an explanation of the principle of *imitatio dei*. [37] "You shall be holy because I *yhwh* your god am holy"[38] means that the characteristics formally attributed to God are human excellences that all human beings ought to strive to attain.

I:59

While Maimonides answers but does not list Gersonides' objection to Rambam's theory of divine attributes, he does mention another objection the consideration of which is important for our purposes. Maimonides' objector says that if there is no way to form a true univocal affirmative declarative sentence whose subject is God, then no one knows anything about God, in which case there is no difference between the wise man and the fool. Maimonides' response is the following: No human being can know God. But some human beings are more ignorant than others. In other words, there are degrees of ignorance, and as we know each negation of God, we come closer to knowing God.

Prima facie Maimonides' defense of his position is invalid. Suppose that there are a certain finite number, n, of possible solutions to a problem,

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[37] Note that *kadosh* is not included among the list of divine predicates that Maimonides discusses in The Guide. In fact the sole appearance of the term is in Book II, chapter 45 with reference to the highest pre-prophetic level of human consciousness (Maimonides' "second degree") where the human beings who are the authors of the last section of Scriptures called the Writings, such as David in Psalms and Solomon in Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs, are said to have composed their poetry through the aid of the "Holy Spirit" (*ruach kodesh*).

[38] Lev 19:2. Also see related expressions in Lev 11:44,45; 20:7,26; 21:8; Ezek 39:7 and Ps 99:9.

one of which is the correct solution. As I examine each possible solution and discover that it is false, I come closer to knowing the truth. But this is only the case if there is a solution and the number of possible answers is finite. Were the number infinite, then each failure would not yield information, since infinity minus any finite number is not any more definite number. Yet, Maimonides told us in principle no affirmation of God literally can be true.

What underlies Maimonides' analysis for excluding univocal affirmations in defining God is Aristotle's theory of language in which all essential, affirmative predications of a subject are internal, i.e., to say that A is P means that P inheres in A. Maimonides' position is based on the judgment that an expression of a definition involves affirming a genus[39] and a specific difference.[40] Consequently, anything that is definable possesses at least two essential characteristics. However, what it means, on Maimonides' analysis, to say that God is one is that there is one and only one essential characteristic that defines God, which is God himself. Hence, the only definition of God is "God is God," which, while true, yields no information. It is worthy of note that given an alternative theory of language such as the one that Bertrand Russell presents in the <u>Principia Mathematica</u>, this objection to divine definitions collapses. For in this case to say that A is P, where A and P are not identical, asserts an external relationship between the two, and since the affirmation does not entail that P inheres in A, the affirmation also does not entail that A is complex.

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[39] Viz., the general class to which the subject belongs, which entails that the subject shares at least one essential characteristic in common with the other members of the class.

[40] Viz., what distinguishes the subject from the other members of the class, which entails that the subject has at least one other characteristic that is shared by no other member of the genus.

The same limitation must be set on Maimonides excluding univocal affirmations of relations between God and something else. His argument against relations is that if God were related to something or someone, then there would be something else, F, in common between God and His relatum. However, if that were so, then the relatum either would be identical with God, in which case there would be no real relation, or God would be complex, since He would possess in addition to F some characteristic, G, which His relatum does not possess. Once again, the argument collapses given an alternative theory of language in which relations are external rather than internal. It is worthy of mention that on Abraham ibn Daud's[41] theory of divine attributes, God literally is just as subject to relations as he is to actions, for in fact actions are simply one kind of relation.

Solutions to all of these problems can be found if we accept Diesendruck's analysis of Maimonides' theory of divine predicates as an instance of Kantian infinite judgments.[42] According to Kant, judgments of the form 'S is non-P,' are not logically the same as judgments of the form, 'S is not P.' The latter are negative statements whose form is finite, viz., a specific predicate is being denied of a specific subject. However, the former statements are not only grammatically but logically affirmative, and in this case what is being affirmed is infinite, i.e., a class containing innumerable members, each of which is a proper contrary of P. In this case, to say that 'S

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[41] Andalusian philosopher, 1110-1180 C.E., born in Toledo, a younger contemporary of Judah Halevi. The first author to apply Aristotelian categories to Jewish religious thought. See Book 2, Basic Principle 2 of his Exalted Faith (1160 C.E.), translated into English by N. Samuelson (London & Toronto, Associated University Presses, and Rutherford-Madison-Teaneck, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986).

[42] Disendruck, Zvi. "The Philosophy of Maimonides," Central Conference of American Rabbis Yearbook, LXV (1935): pp. 355-368.

is not non-P' logically differs from making the affirmative, finite claim that 'S is P.' Rather, 'S is not non-P' negates an infinite class of alternatives, and as such it yields some form of knowledge, even when the number of possible alternatives for positive predication is infinite.

I believe that it is possible to make sense of Diesendruck's logical claim about Maimonides' theory of divine attributes on the model of asymptotic functions with a finite limit. For example, consider the mathematical sequence,

$$\lim_{n \to \infty} n/(n + 1) = 1$$

Were we to exhibit this algebraic expression in terms of geometry, using Cartesian coordinates, where n would increase along the horizontal x-axis from 0 to progressively larger numbers, we would see the curve rise along the vertical y-axis where it would become increasingly close to but never equal to 1.[43] Now, it is true that the curve will never reach 1. But, as we observe the pattern of the curve we can see that 1 is the limit of the sequence. Similarly, using Diesendruck's application of Kant's infinite judgments to Maimonides' theory of attributes, we can answer the above criticisms as follows: Consider the statement "God is F," where each $G_1, G_2, \ldots G_n, G_{n+1}, \ldots$ is a contrary of F. What this statement means is the following: Based on the dictum, "You shall be holy as I the Lord your God am holy," we

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[43] Viz.,

$$y = x/(x + 1)$$
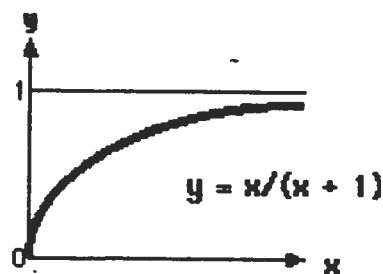
are commanded to strive to become F. To be F lies beyond human capability; at best in this world we approximate this ideal by avoiding each of the infinite number of contraries of F that are not true of God. In this life this moral guide is how we relate to God.

It could be further objected that on this interpretation of Maimonides' theory of attributes we again must face Gersonides' objection. Could it not be said that on this analysis every predicate expresses an ideal limit, so that to pursue the infinite end of perfect weakness, death, ignorance and indifference is as valid an end in moral terms as the pursuit of ideal power, life, wisdom and concern? It is in response to this objection that we can consider the final part of Maimonides' defense of his position in I:59, viz. his consideration of the passage from the Babylonian Talmud[44] where we are limited in prayer to the attributes used in Scripture to praise God. While philosophy can explain how in general it is possible to speak of God, revelation is necessary to know in the concrete what is proper to say of Him. In other words, it is only religion and not reason that can determine moral life in the concrete.

Maimonides' and Gersonides' interpretations of divine attributes are not as different as they might appear to be at first glance. Maimonides says that every F attributed to God is part of an equivocal expression that affirms an absolute moral ideal for human behavior. In effect, Gersonides says the same thing. They differ only about the extent to which God statements are equivocal and whether these statements say anything at all about God, and in this case Gersonides' position is the more reasonable of the two alternatives. While Gersonides can agree with Maimonides that we can know nothing literally about God, it is not that we know absolutely nothing,

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[44] Berakoth 33b.

because it is not intelligible to claim that the statement "God is F" is intelligible if there is absolutely no relationship between the F that is affirmed of God and the F that is affirmed of anything else. Rather, what we do know is that God is F in a primary, absolute way which functions for human behavior as an ideal. Thus, for example, in saying that God has knowledge we can differentiate between how we and God know and we can affirm that to know something in a unified way rather than through a series of unrelated propositions and to know something actively as its cause rather than to know something passively is a superior form of knowledge. For example, all other factors being equal, to know political science in a purely "academic" way where our knowledge has no consequences for political action is inferior to knowledge that can be put into practise in the world of every day events.[45] In other words, it is not the case that in knowing statements about God we only know statements about ethics. On Gersonides' analysis statements about God and ethics mutually entail each other.

In summary, Maimonides' understanding of God's oneness is expressed in his theory of divine attributes. Oneness expresses simplicity and, what is more important, uniqueness. God is so unique that any speaker who intends to affirm of God any form of association with anything else is guilty of idolatry. The only sense in which it is proper to make any positive statements about God is one in which the real subjects are humans and the real objects are moral imperatives. As such Maimonides'position is itself unique. Far more representative of rabbinic philosophical tradition is the position of Gersonides where statements about God and human morality mutually entail each other. In this context what it means to say that God is

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[45] The "other factors" relate to the moral consequences of the practical applications of the knowledge.

one is that God by nature constitutes the unique infinitely distant limit that all human beings ought to strive to approximate through their thoughts and deeds. Furthermore, every action that is in fact good and every judgment that is in fact true is in itself an approximation of the infinite deity.