

ON THE PERPLEXING CHARACTER OF MAIMONIDES' THEORY OF
ACTIONAL ATTRIBUTES

ON THE ROLE OF ACTIONAL ATTRIBUTES IN MAIMONIDES'
THEORY OF DIVINE ATTRIBUTION.

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ESSAY

The purpose of this paper is to examine the place of the so-called "actional" attributes in Maimonides' overall theory of divine attributes, in light of ~~a~~ problems raised by the comments of some scholars and by the text of The Guide for the Perplexed itself.

The problem of the role of actional attributes arises from some apparently conflicting scholarly interpretations. ^{SEYMOUR} Professor Feldman claims that the use of actional attributes in describing God is "merely a grudging concession to human needs and tendencies,"¹ and "a concession to the psychologically explicable, but philosophically unjustifiable demand for humanizing the divine."² This interpretation also holds that negative theology or negative attribution brings one "closer to God than any other type of knowledge," and that "the best way to contemplate the divine is to remain silent."³

In apparent contrast with Feldman's view, ^{JULIUS} Professors ^{ISRAEL} Guttman and Husik place a much greater emphasis on the role of actional attribution in Maimonides' treatment of possible knowledge of God. According to Guttman, ^{ONE CAN BE SAID} one's ^{TO KNOW GOD IF ONE UNDERSTANDS HIS ETHICAL ACTIVITY, AND ONE CAN} knowledge of God involves an understanding of His ethical ^{BE SAID TO UNDERSTAND GOD'S ETHICAL ACTIVITY IF ONE IMITATES IT IN ONE'S} activity, by which one is made to imitate it in one's own ^{OWN ACTIONS.} [?] actions.⁴ On this view, the purpose of negative attribution, by elevating God above any imperfection ~~for~~ merely human perfection, ~~that~~ might prejudice His actions, seems to be ~~merely~~ to clear the ground for the kind of knowledge gained

BY MEANS OF
 through actional attribution.⁵ Husik regards Maimonides' treatment of actional attribution as an essential element in his endeavor to harmonize the intellectualism of the Aristotelian tradition with the practical orientation of Biblical Judaism: to know God through His actions and to imitate Him is to combine moral and spiritual perfection.⁶

STRIKE → (Husik's claim that Biblical Judaism is inherently recalcitrant to this attempted synthesis is a critical one beyond the scope of ^{OUR DISCUSSION;} ~~this paper~~; his claim that Maimonides takes the view he does toward actional attributes is the point at issue.) ← STRIKE

DMH
 When one turns to the Guide, one finds that selective reading gives support for both interpretations of the role of actional attributes, and thus may indicate an ambiguity in Maimonides' own thinking on the matter. (Before ^{REALLY} ~~examining~~ ^{IS AN INTERPRETATION} ~~examining~~ ^{DEBATE} Maimonides' text, what is at stake in the two scholarly ^{our discussion} ~~views of it~~ can be sharpened by the following considerations.

On the one hand, if Maimonides does give the palm to negative attribution over actional attribution, ^{AS} (Feldman), ^{CLAIMS,} then intellectual virtue could be seen as having primacy over ^{MORAL} practical virtue. On the other hand, if actional ^{NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTION} attribution ^{IS MERELY A PROPAEDEUTIC TO ACTIONAL ATTRIBUTION, AS H. & G. ARGUE,} succeeds upon negative attribution as a ^{PR MORAL VIRTUE SEEMS TO} (propaedeutic) (Husik-Guttmann), then intellectual virtue ^{HAVE PRIMARY STATUS.} and practical virtue are at least of equal status if not coextensive. Furthermore, if Maimonides grants ^{VALIDITY} any philosophical status at all to actional attributes, then

It would seem that practical virtue would be superior.

sounds awkward
 this word commits precedence.

a problem that Professor Feldman has tried to resolve resurfaces: namely, whether Thomas Aquinas and other Medieval thinkers could have found support in Maimonides for analogies between divine action and human action.⁷

Now when one looks at Maimonides' discussion of the importance of silence, one can find support for the "intellectualist" view. He refers with praise in Chapter 50 (this and all succeeding references to the Guide can be found in Part I) to "that class of men who have a conception of truth and understand it, though they do not speak of it;"⁸ and he claims toward the end of his treatment of negative attribution, in Chapter 59, that "the glorification of God does not consist in uttering that which is not to be uttered, but in reflecting on that on which man should reflect."⁹ Maimonides' emphasis on silence is part of his attack on the human tendency to say the right things about God-^{"HE IS"} (He is one, incorporeal, etc.) and at the same time to think the wrong things about Him-^{HARRY} (His essence is composed of the attributes of unity, incorporeality, etc.). "Silence" is thus not a form of dumbness or dumbfoundedness, but a condition of correct thinking. As Professor Wolfson has pointed out, there is a critical distinction for Maimonides between merely verbal utterance and a conception that does or does not correspond to reality. The restriction to silent thinking about God is a way of orienting one to the

WHEN ONE TURNS TO THE GUIDE ONE FINDS THAT SELECTIVE READING OF THE GUIDE SUPPORTS EITHER INTERPRETATION OF THE RULE OF ACTIONAL ATTRIBUTION, AND THUS MAY INDICATE AN AMBIGUITY ON MAIMONIDES' OWN THINKING ON THE MATTER.

necessity that the terms predicated of God must conform to rules governing any predicable in logical judgment.¹⁰ *AS WE SHALL SEE,* However, in so far as actional attributes form one of Maimonides' logical predicables,¹¹ the use of an actional predicable in thinking about God in silence cannot be ruled out.

Parts of Maimonides' discussion of negative attributes also lend ^{TEND TO} potential support to an overall intellectualist reading; but a look at other passages seemingly inconsistent with the ^{SE} former ~~one~~ minimizes this liability. One of the foundation-stones of the intellectualist interpretation is surely the following statement in Chapter 58: "we cannot describe the Creator by any means except by negative attributes."¹² That is, ^{ALL} positive attributes ^{SEEM TO BE} are ruled out in describing God, since they imply either a plurality of eternal entities (polytheism) or the inherence of ~~God~~ accidents in God's essence (worse than idolatry). The question is whether actional attributes are among the proscribed positive attributes. Since Maimonides also claims that actional attributes are "appropriate to be employed in describing the Creator,"¹³ I think not. The inconsistency between the ^{SE} two passages can be dispelled by interpreting negative attribution as the only means of describing God's essence, ^{AND ACTIONAL ATTRIBUTION AS A LEGITIMATE MEANS OF} ~~As Maimonides indicates~~ ^{DESCRIBING HIS} ~~later on in Chapter 58:~~ ^{MAIMONIDES DRAWS THE BOUNDARIES} ~~limiting the two modes of attribution in Chapter 58:~~ ^{ACTIONS?} every attribute predicated of God either

denotes the quality of an action, or— when the attribute is intended to convey some idea of the Divine Being itself, and not one of His actions— the negation of the opposite.¹⁴

and previously in Chapter 53, where Maimonides^{HE} interprets the function of the divine attributes referred to in the Bible:

The attributes found in Holy Scripture are either qualifications of His actions, without any reference to His essence, or indicate absolute perfection, but do not imply that the essence of God is a compound of various elements.¹⁵

IT SEEMS, THEREFORE, THAT NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTION AND ACTIONAL
~~It seems that negative attribution constitutes only~~
~~ATTRIBUTION ARE BOTH LEGITIMATE WAYS OF DESCRIBING GOD.~~
 one possible, though very important, means of describing
 God, the only other possible road being the way of
 actional attribution. Whether these modes of description
 are simply alternative or complementary directions in
 which one can move toward knowledge of God, or whether
 negative attribution is ^{ONLY} a necessary prerequisite to
 actional attribution, as Guttman and Husik argue, remains
 problematic; for Maimonides nowhere clearly states the
 alleged functional relation between the two modes of
 attribution.

^{LEGITIMACY} BUT Given the ~~equal validity~~ ^{EACH} of both kinds of divine [?]
 attribution, perhaps an intellectualist interpreter could
 rest content with the prospect of an independent intellectual

virtue, attainable by the systematic practice of negative attribution. Maimonides gives grounds in Chapter 59 for this ^{PROSPECT} hope, when he asserts that "every time you establish by proof the negation of a thing in reference to God, you become more perfect."¹⁶ Back in Chapter 54, however, he seems to imply that ^{MORAL} practical virtue is the primary form of virtue:

the chief aim of man should be to make himself, as far as possible, similar to God; that is to say, to make his acts similar to the acts of God.¹⁷

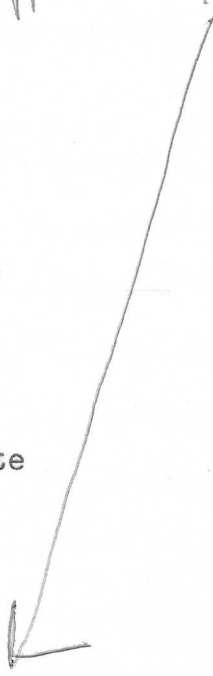
see also
Chapter 51 of
Part III

^{THIS} The above passage addresses the core of the problem raised at the beginning of ^{OUR DISCUSSION} this paper: that is, whether ^{ESSAY} actional attribution serves a role in Maimonides' theory of divine attributes beyond what the intellectualist concedes to it; and, if so, whether such a role permits analogies between divine action and human action. It seems that the first part of the problem has been decided affirmatively, against the interpretation of Professor Feldman, but not in such a way that the views of Professors Guttman and Husik on the functional relation between negative attribution and actional attribution can be ^{SUPPORTED} ~~established~~ by the text of the Guide. Some ~~remarks on~~ ^{QUESTIONS} BUT IF the relation, between actional attribution and practical ^{MORAL} virtue ^{SHOULD BE CLARIFIED, SO THAT THEN} can be made in any case; and the second part of the problem, that of possible analogies between divine ^{CAN NOW BE} action and human action, can be ^{BE RESOLVED DECISIVELY.} ~~approached as a way of~~ concluding this ^{ESSAY} paper.

* Actional attributes as descriptions of God serve an intellectual and practical purposes. But the former use is concerned with ~~God~~ ^{God}, the latter with man.

It is patent from the foregoing analysis that negative attributes are used to describe God's essence. Professor Wolfson has shown that negative attribution involves affirming something absolutely equivocally of God's essence, in such a way that the attribute is *ALSO* identified with His essence and the attribute's opposite is negated.¹⁸ A negative attribution has the form of a three-term proposition ("God is wise") conjoined with a qualifier ("but not with/according to wisdom"). In Chapter 57 of the Guide, one finds that God exists, lives, knows, is omnipotent, is wise, and is one, but without possessing the positive attributes of existence, life, knowledge, omnipotence, wisdom, and unity.¹⁹ Any attribute referring to God's essence must involve an equivocal predicate with a negative meaning, in order both to preclude comparison of God's perfections with human perfections, and to guarantee the exclusion of imperfections (plurality, corporeality, affection, potentiality) from His essence.

if it is absolutely equivocal, what is the point of the affirmation?



Wolfson also points out that there are two kinds of actional attribution for Maimonides, only one of which can be validly used to describe God.²⁰ The first sort of actional attribute is expressed in a three-term proposition ("Zaid is a carpenter"), and indicates a power, capacity, "passion," or "habit" in the agent as the source of particular actions. The second type of

actional attribute is expressed in a two-term proposition ("Zaid built this house"), and qualifies the action "purely," or ~~need~~ indicates no power or other disposition as the source of the action whatever. The first form of actional attribution is clearly ruled out for describing God's actions, since it would refer to the inherence of dispositions incompatible with the simplicity and incorporeality of God's essence. The second form of actional attribution is a ^{LEGITIMATE} possible way of describing God's actions, since it makes no logical reference to any disposition or dispositions as their source. "God acts angrily," as opposed to "God is angry," describes God's action "purely," or refers to no passion of anger in God's essence as the corresponding source of His angry action. To be sure, a negative qualifier, such as "but not from anger," might have to be appended to an actional attribution of God, in order to get one's meaning across in "the language of men."

why not?

However, anyone who understands the logical rule governing the two-term propositions used in actional attribution should be able to grasp their correct meaning immediately.

Maimonides' outline of actional attribution occurs at the end of Chapter 52. ^{IN THE NEXT CHAPTER,} ~~In Chapter 53,~~ he supports his argument against attributing a plurality of actional dispositions to God's essence by showing that even in the case of natural substances, such as fire, a plurality of kinds of effect (heat and illumination) may emanate from

a single agency. Still more kinds of effects can originate in a free will, "and still more with regard to God, who is above all description."²¹ No matter how many kinds of action God may perform, they all ^{SEEM TO} emanate from His essence without implying multiple dispositions as their corresponding sources. *Is this so?*

Maimonides' crucial discussion of God's action and of the way in which men can imitate it occurs in Chapter 54. Two important considerations in the foregoing analysis play a role in this discussion. Firstly, since two-term propositions can be used to describe human action as well as divine action, it is possible to ^{THINK AND} talk about human action also without referring to powers, habits, or passions as their sources. Secondly, since "the number of actions originating in man's reason is almost infinite,"²² it is possible for ^{AN INCREASING NUMBER} ~~more and more~~ human actions to emanate from a single source, so that human activity by degrees can ^{RESEMBLE} "almost" approach divine activity. *//*

NO NEW // ~~TO PUT MAIMONIDES' COMPARISON~~ ^{MAIMONIDES THEN PRES MAKES THE COMPARISONS} In Chapter 54, one finds that God "performs actions ^{OR DIVINE ACTION AND HUMAN ACTION COMPARE BY SAYING THAT} similar to such of our actions as originate in certain qualities, i.e., in certain psychical dispositions; not that God has ~~really~~ such dispositions."²³ That is, God acts mercifully, but not from mercy, while human beings tend to act mercifully from mercy, or to be merciful. As a negative condition of imitating God's action, then, a man would also have to act mercifully, but not from mercy,

in so far as it is possible for a man to control or moderate mercy or any other passion. A two-term proposition qualifying such an action might then have a meaning analogous ~~(!)~~ to the meaning of a similar proposition qualifying God's action. But given the human propensity to refer even God's actions to powers or passions inhering in His essence, one can imagine the difficulty involved in denying this reference in a description of certain actions of men.

What it would then mean to say of men that he acted mercifully but not from mercy

~~THERE IS FURTHER EVIDENCE FOR~~
~~Nevertheless, Maimonides' argument does seem to~~
~~move in the direction of~~ analogy between divine action and human action in Chapter 54, particularly in his discussion of the actions of prophets and rulers. Not only are their actions, in so far as they do not proceed from emotion, like God's actions in the negative sense described above; but the actions of this elite have a positive character resembling God's actions as well.

~~BDS~~ MAIMONIDES'

Maimonides claims that "acts ... emanate from God solely for the benefit of His pious men,"²⁴ or "they are in accordance with the guilt of those who are to be punished, and not the result of any emotion."²⁵ God's actions do not stem from any emotions, but are directed toward the just merits or deserts of those He acts upon. In imitating His action, prophets and rulers ought ~~(implying "can")~~ to perform the same kind of actions in the same manner, though they in fact tend not to do so for the most part.

Thus, ~~if~~ there are any grounds for discerning the possibility of making analogies between divine action and human action in Maimonides' thinking, surely they lie in Part I, Chapters 52-54 of the Guide. First, there is some evidence for the logical possibility of describing divine action and human action in a similar way, by means of the "pure" type of actional attribution; and secondly, there is some evidence that certain exceptional men, such as prophets and rulers, can, ought to, or even do act in a manner similar to God's manner of acting. It is no wonder, then, given this evidence, that Maimonides has been interpreted as permitting analogies to be drawn between divine action and human action.

Do you think that there are any significant differences between Maimonides' ~~the~~ theory of actional attributes and the theory of analogical predication? (e.g. Aquinas)

Your discussion of negative attributes ~~could~~ ^{should} have been developed ~~more~~ ^{with} in a bit more detail. I think that they are best seen as "category -

to conclude, ~~as seen~~ ^{as seen} mistakes".

Two justified claims can be made about the place of Good piece of work. actional attribution in M.'s theory of divine attributes. First, ~~actional~~ ^{actional} attribution, no less than negative attribution, is a legitimate form of describing divine attributes. Secondly, ~~actional~~ ^{actional} attribution offers a limited sphere of legitimate analogical predication in discourse and thinking about God and men.

~~To conclude, one can justifiably claim that for Maimonides, there are two legitimate forms of divine attribution, the negative and the actional, and ~~that~~ the latter form ~~provides~~ makes possible a limited sphere of legitimate analogical predication.~~

Notes

1. Feldman, Seymour, "A Scholastic Misinterpretation of Maimonides' Doctrine of Divine Attributes," The Journal of Jewish Studies (1969), p. 29.

2. Ibid., 39.

3. Ibid., 39.

4. Guttman, Julius, Philosophies of Judaism. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, Inc., 1964, pp. 176-77.

5. Ibid., 161.

6. Husik, Isaac, A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916, pp. 299-300.

7. Feldman, supra note 1, 37.

8. Maimonides, Moses, The Guide for the Perplexed. New York: Dover Publications, Inc. (M. Friedlander trans.), 1956, p. 68.

9. Ibid., 87.

10. Wolfson, Harry, "The Aristotelian Predicables and Maimonides' Division of Attributes," in Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion, (Vol. II) (Collected essays, I. Twersky and G. Williams, eds.). Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, pp. 162-63.

11. Maimonides, supra note 8, 72; Wolfson, supra note, 174.

12. Maimonides, supra note 8, 81.

13. Ibid., 72.

14. Ibid., 83.

15. Ibid., 73-74.

16. Ibid., 84.

17. Ibid., 78.

18. Wolfson, Harry, "Maimonides on Negative Attributes,"
in Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion, Vol. II
(collected essays, I. Twersky and G. Williams, eds.).
Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977, p. 226.

19. Maimonides, supra note 8, 80.

20. Wolfson, supra note 10, 188-91.

21. Maimonides, supra note 8, 73.

22. Ibid., 73.

23. Ibid., 76.

24. Ibid., 76.

25. Ibid., 77.

~~26. Ibid., 77.~~