His Existence Is Essentiality
Maimonides as Metaphysician

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6.1 Metaphysical Maimonides

Maimonides famously says some rather radical things about God – radical even by philosophical standards – both about what God is like "in Himself" and about God's relationship with the created universe. Maimonides' most detailed and sustained presentation of these radical ideas is in his discussion of divine attributes in chapters 50–70 of the *Guide*. Indeed, it seems evident that Maimonides' *point* in that section is to make plain these radical ideas. To put matters rather simply and straightforwardly, the radical ideas are these: Strictly speaking, God shares nothing substantive in common with created beings, neither **existence** nor **life** nor **power** nor **knowledge**. Indeed, strictly speaking, God *has no intrinsic nature at all, no attributes at all*, and stands in *no relations whatsoever to the created universe* – save for negative attributes and attributes of action. Even speaking strictly, God *does* have negative attributes and *does* stand in whatever relations to the created universe are entailed by His having attributes of action.

As I say, all this is plainly contained in chapters 50–70 of the *Guide*. But, as is so often the case with Maimonides, if you go ahead and claim that Maimonides' considered view is identical with what he seems to say, you court significant controversy. Due to certain philosophical puzzles and textual tensions to which I will soon turn, a number of scholars have argued that Maimonides' considered view differs from the one he appears to endorse in those chapters. On the one hand, some scholars argue that Maimonides holds a view even *more* radical and austere than what you might naturally understand him to mean, according to which God has no attributes, *period*. That is, strictly speaking, God has neither negative attributes nor attributes of action, either. Austere, indeed – one wonders

if there's anything *there,* there. On the other hand, some scholars argue that Maimonides holds a view less radical and more pedestrian than the impression he gives, according to which: while we don't understand God's nature, we can at least grasp – and even know – *that* God exists and has a nature. And if we can know that it is so, then of course it *is* so. More pedestrian, indeed – one wonders what all the fuss is about.

I don't think either of these positions gets Maimonides right. I think Maimonides means just what he seems to say here. As I have indicated, the scholars who disagree are not without their good reasons. The view Maimonides seems to hold certainly faces a number of challenges and involves us in some serious puzzles. I will turn in Section 6.3 to the task of outlining and addressing these challenges and puzzles, a task that will occupy me for the remainder of the essay. But the truth is, the divide between my reading and the alternative readings revolves around an issue that is in some ways deeper, and prior to, any of those individual challenges. For even my description of the *topic* of these chapters is likely to draw resistance, if not outright criticism, from some quarters.

Notice that as I put it, Maimonides is in these chapters making robustly *metaphysical* claims – claims that are, in the first instance at least, about the nature of *reality*; and, in particular, about the nature of God. If I am right, then Maimonides is not, at least in the first instance, making second-order claims about what we can say, or truly say, about the nature of God. Of course, any claim, even one about extralinguistic reality, has implications for what one can truly say. For if it's the case that *p*, then '*p*' is true. And *maybe* the particular claims Maimonides makes about God have implications for what we can say (about God), *period*. But these implications are just that; *implications* of Maimonides' central contentions about reality itself, all of them downstream of his main point.

But that is not how most scholars seem to approach this section of the *Guide*.[1] Here, for example, is how Arthur Hyman begins a classic paper entitled "Maimonides on Religious Language":

> Moses Maimonides maintained a lively interest in questions of language, particularly language concerning God, throughout his life ... and in his philosophic *Guide of the Perplexed* he devotes most of the first part of the

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[1] There are exceptions. Buijs, for example, clearly draws the distinction between the metaphysical component of negative theology and the semantic component of negative theology (and between both of them and the epistemic component), and sees the former as explaining or undergirding the latter (Buijs 1988, note 10). See also Feldman (1968), Manekin (1990), and Stern (2013), who are careful to disentangle these different strands.

work to a more rigorous, philosophic discussion of divine attributes and names. (Hyman 1991, 175)

As Hyman goes on to make clear (Hyman 1991, 179–180), the "most of the first part" to which he refers includes not just the explicitly exegetical chapters (1–49) – which deal with the meanings of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic Biblical terms – but also with the continuation that deals with divine attributes in general.

And Hyman is far from alone in seeing this section of the *Guide* as centrally focused on religious *language*, on what we can *say*, or *say truly*, about God – or, more broadly, on how we can correctly represent God, whether in speech or in thought – rather than on God Himself. Thus, in a recent work devoted to Maimonides' life and thought, the discussion of this section of the *Guide*, and of the topic of divine attributes in general, is in a chapter entitled "What we can say about God."[2]

Call my reading of this section 'the metaphysical reading', and the dominant reading 'the linguistic reading'.[3] It might seem that the metaphysical reading and the linguistic reading can agree on all points of substance, and that what divides them is merely a matter of emphasis. But that isn't so. The one affirms what the other denies, and the other affirms what the one denies. For according to the metaphysical reading Maimonides is making certain metaphysical claims about God, claims that no one can make (let alone make truly) if the linguistic reading is right. Moreover, differing emphases can *lead* to asking different questions and reaching very different conclusions. The puzzles that are raised on the metaphysical reading are very different from the puzzles that are raised on the linguistic reading, and call for metaphysical solutions, not linguistic ones. As I will argue, solving the metaphysical puzzle seems to require claims that are less radical than those which would be required to solve the parallel linguistic ones, were there such problems that we had to contend with.

Again, the proponents of the linguistic reading in general are not without their good reasons. For one thing, Maimonides undoubtedly did "maintain a lively interest in questions of language," as Hyman claims. For

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[2] Rudavsky (2010). See also Ivry (2016), whose discussion of chapters 50–68 in the *Guide* is part and parcel of a larger section entitled "Wrestling with Language."

[3] I don't mean to imply that these readings are exhaustive – neither one captures the emphasis on epistemology found in some readings (e.g., Stern 2013) – and I should make clear that the linguistic reading might in some cases be more aptly named 'the representational reading', since in those cases it sees Maimonides as concerned with representation of God more broadly, not just in external speech.

another thing, chapters 50–70 of the *Guide* do of course follow immediately upon the heels of the explicitly exegetical chapters (1–49), which are explicitly concerned with Biblical terms. For a final thing, a distinction between two senses of 'attribute' – the one, metaphysical sense, in which attributes are on the world-side of the word/world divide, and the other, linguistic sense, in which they are on the word-side of that divide – is hard to draw given the so-called conceptualist theory of universals that Maimonides seems to endorse.[4] If universals are in the mind or of the mind's making, then there would seem to be just one kind of thing, attributes, that play both a linguistic/mental role and a metaphysical role – or at least it would be quite uneconomical to assume otherwise. And if that's the case, then even Maimonides' statements about divine attributes that are prima facie about extralinguistic/extramental reality – about God Himself – are in the end about linguistic/mental reality.

Despite these good reasons, I suggest that when we carefully attend to the details of Maimonides' arguments, there is no escaping the fact that Maimonides is first and foremost making straightforwardly metaphysical claims. We will carefully attend to these details in Section 6.2. But what of the good reasons to accept the linguistic reading? Well, the first two reasons are obviously defeasible. That Maimonides maintained a lively interest in questions of religious language obviously doesn't mean that he was interested *exclusively* in religious language or that he wrote about language everywhere that he wrote anything at all. And that Maimonides placed his discussion of divine attributes immediately after his lexicographical chapters obviously doesn't mean that since the latter is about matters of religious language, so too is the former. There can be abrupt shifts, especially in the *Guide*, especially when a chapter begins, "There are many things in existence that are clear and manifest . . . If man had been left as he [naturally] is, he would not have needed a proof of them . . ." (Maimonides 1963, 1.51: 112).[5] In any case, the lexicographical chapters don't obviously evince a lively interest in questions of religious language, at least not as such. A very natural way to understand what's going on the lexicographical chapters is just this: In order to defend incorporealism, Maimonides needs to refute the main reason a religious Jew would be a corporealist, viz. the huge number of Biblical terms that seem to have corporeal implications and are applied in the Bible to God. And so,

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[4] See *Guide* 2.9–10 and 3.18; Wolfson (1966); and Feldman (1968).
[5] See Manekin (1990, 129), who likewise suggests that there is an abrupt shift following the lexicographical chapters (starting in chapter 51 of the *Guide*).

Maimonides explains or explains away these terms. Of course, it's possible that once forced to address the textual evidence against corporealism, Maimonides makes some philosophically interesting claims about polysemy, or language more generally. But the philosophical *purpose* of these chapters is to defend the metaphysical claim that *God is incorporeal*. On this natural way of reading the lexicographical chapters, one can accept *both* the metaphysical reading of the section on divine attributes and that the section is a direct continuation of the lexicographical chapters: it's metaphysics in two stages. Indeed, as Maimonides maintains – and as he emphasizes at the very outset of chapter 51 of the *Guide* – his denial of divine attributes *follows* (at least in part) from the incorporealism that he defended until that point.

What of the third reason to embrace the linguistic reading? If attributes really are linguistic or mental items, then doesn't it just follow that Maimonides' claims about divine attributes are about the language or concepts we use to talk about God, and not about God? Well, no, because as we have already noted, attributes play *two* roles – one linguistic, and the other metaphysical. So, the issue is not whether Maimonides is making claims about linguistic items – surely, he is, since he is making claims about attributes, which are (among other things) linguistic items – it's whether he's making *linguistic claims*, i.e., claims about attributes in their capacity, or *qua* their role, *as linguistic items*. According to the metaphysical reading, he isn't, at least not in the first instance. I shall now turn to the details of Maimonides' discussion, which I think bears this out.

6.2   The Claims and Arguments

While much about chapters 50–70 of the *Guide* is perplexing, there are some claims that Maimonides makes plainly and repeatedly, both within this section and elsewhere, that I will take as starting points. Here are three such claims.

> (C1): God shares no attributes in common with creatures

Maimonides reiterates this claims several times (*Guide* 1.35, 1.52, 1.55, 1.56), and he repeatedly highlights the same specific consequences, viz. that strictly speaking, God does not share with any creatures the attributes of **life, power**, and **knowledge** (*Guide* 1.56). Indeed, Maimonides does not shy away from embracing the very radical conclusion that God does not even share with creatures the attribute of **existence** (*Guide* 1.35, 1.52, 1.56). [The attributes **life, power, knowledge,** and **existence**, are the

attributes expressed by the predicates "is alive," "is powerful," "is knowledgeable," and "is existent," *when applied to creatures*.] As a linguistic corollary of these assertions, Maimonides famously says that when such terms as "alive," "powerful," "knowledgeable," and "existent," are applied to God, they are "purely equivocal" (*Guide* 1.35, 1.52, 1.56): There is literally nothing at all common to God and a creature in virtue of which it's true to say of both that they are alive, or powerful, or knowledgeable, or even existent.[6] In particular, it's not as though they are both knowledgeable, and God is just much *more* (or even infinitely more) knowledgeable than creatures; and it's not as though they both exist, and God just exists to a much greater *degree* than creatures (*Guide* 1.35, 1.56). No, if there is a creature who is knowledgeable, then (strictly speaking) God isn't knowledgeable (in anything but a purely equivocal sense); and if there is a creature who is existent, then (strictly speaking) God isn't existent (in anything but a purely equivocal sense).

Maimonides presses things one step further. Not only does God share no attributes in common with creatures, God has no attributes, period. Well, not *period*; Maimonides carves out a few exceptions. What's clear is that God has no positive (or "affirmative"), nonactional attributes – whether they be accidental *or* essential. Moreover, God stands in no relations to any creature (*Guide* 1.52); but since everything is either God or a creature, and nothing stands in any nontrivial relations to itself, God stands in no relation to anything whatsoever. Thus, we have:

> (C2): (a) God has no positive, nonactional attributes, and (b) God stands in no relations to anything

Maimonides argues at some length for (C2), and it's worth dwelling on at least part of the argument. The argument proceeds by examination of cases. He first considers the two categories of *definitions* and *parts of definitions*, then the category of *accidents*, and then the category of *relations*, and argues regarding each that no attribute belonging to any of these categories can be had by God (*Guide* 1.52). While the issues he raises regarding the first three cases are subtly different from one another, he summarizes the basic difficulty as follows:

> With regard to those three groups of attributes – which are the attributes indicative of the essence or of a part of the essence or of a certain quality subsisting in the essence – it has already been made clear that they are

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[6] This explication of "purely equivocal term" is drawn from Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic*; I return to this explication in Section 6.5.2.

impossible with reference to Him, may He be exalted, **for all of them are indicative of composition**, and the impossibility of composition in respect to the deity we shall make clear by demonstration. (Maimonides 1963, 1.52: 116) (emphasis mine)

In other words, God is simple not only inasmuch as He lacks any "gross parts," like a left half and a right half, but also in that He lacks any "finer parts," or constituents, which He would have if He had any attribute belonging to one of those three categories.[7] What seems to be in play in this argument is a view about the metaphysical nature of particulars, which now goes by the name of "constituent ontology," according to which a particular is made up of (or composed of, or constituted by) whatever attributes it has.[8]

The third and final claim is a counterpart to the second. It says that what (C2) permitted – i.e., God's possession of negative attributes or attributes of action – is in fact the case. That is, Maimonides doesn't remain neutral on the question of whether God has those sorts of attributes; he asserts that God does (*Guide* 1.52, 1.54, 1.58). Thus, he tells us, "The purpose of all this is to show that the attributes ascribed to Him are attributes of His actions. . ." (Maimonides 1963, 1.54: 128). And later, "It has thus become clear to you that every attribute that we predicate of Him is an attribute of action, or, if the attribute is intended for the apprehension of His essence and not of His action, it signifies the negation of the privation of the attribute in question" (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 136). I presume he means to speak of the attributes that are *correctly* ascribed to Him or predicated of Him, and thus that he endorses the following:

(C3): God has both negative attributes and attributes of action

On the face of it, the third claim is not just a counterpart to the second, but a counter*balance* to both of the first two claims. Indeed, on the linguistic reading, the third claim provides a *solution* to the problem, generated by the first two claims, of how we can manage to speak truly and even know something about God. The solution is that we can speak of both what God is not and what God does. But on the metaphysical reading, the third claim stands in prima facie tension with the first two claims, a tension to which I now turn.

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[7] See Williams (1953) for this way of putting things.
[8] See Russell (1940), Castañeda (1974), Van Cleve (1985), Loux (2006), and Van Inwagen (2011) for foundational discussions of the contrast between a "relational ontology" and a "constituent ontology."

6.3 The Puzzles

The tension between the third claim and the first two is itself multifarious, and is accompanied by still other tensions with other things Maimonides says. Let's begin with the multifarious tension between the third claim and the first two.

(P1): As we noted, and as Maimonides himself notes explicitly, it seems to follow both from (C1) and from (C2) that God does not have **existence**. But anything that exists has **existence**. So, strictly speaking, God does not exist. But if God does not even exist, then it's puzzling, to say the least, how He could manage to have *any* attributes, even if they are negative or actional. (You might think this is the least of Maimonides' problems. Hold your fire, for now.) Here I assume the following principle: of necessity, anything that has any property (or attribute) whatsoever *exists*.[9] How else does it manage to achieve the feat of having a property?

Some would deny this principle, on the grounds that (in their view) there *are* things – things that have being – that don't *exist*.[10] In their view, the principle I just stated is false, while, presumably, the following, weaker principle, is true: of necessity, anything that has any property (or attribute) whatsoever, *is* (that is, it has being). Never mind whether you think their view is coherent or correct, or whether we really need to weaken the principle in this way. The weaker principle also seems to land Maimonides in hot water. For the upshot of both (C1) and (C2) would seem to be that, strictly speaking, God does not have **being** either – indeed, it would seem to be a consequence of those two claims that God has nothing of any "existential import." For if He did, then (a) there would be something that God shares in common with creatures, contra (C1), and (b) there would be some positive nonactional attribute that God has, contra (C2). Or at least so it seems. So, a retreat to the weaker principle does nothing to help.

Some have denied the principle in whatever form.[11] In their view it's possible for something to have properties even in a situation in which it has no being whatsoever. But that this view is held doesn't mean it's plausible. And in any case, their view is consistent with the following, still weaker principle: of necessity, anything that has any property whatsoever, *at least possibly* exists (or has being). But even this principle spells trouble for Maimonides, for according to Maimonides it's not just a *contingent* fact

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[9] See Plantinga (1983) and Williamson (2002).   [10] See Reicher (2019) for an overview.
[11] See Salmon (1998).

that God doesn't have **existence** (or **being**), of course, it's a matter of *necessity*. We are left with a puzzle.

(P2): The third claim is in tension with the first two in yet another way. (C1), which rules out any sharing of attributes between God and creatures, makes no exceptions. So, it is hard to see how it is consistent with (C3), since some of the attributes that the latter attributes to God are, on the face of it, shared by creatures. Anyone who lacks the privation of foolishness will have the negative attribute, **not being foolish**, which is a negative attribute that God has. Likewise, anyone who heals the sick will have the actional attribute of **healing the sick**, which is an attribute of action that God has; indeed, it's an attribute of God that we're supposed to imitate (*Guide* 1.54, 3.54).

Of course, the natural suggestion to make is that just as (C2) is restricted to positive nonactional attributes, (C1) needs to be so restricted as well. But this raises the question of whether a version of (C1) restricted in that way can be adequately motivated. Once we say creatures can be genuinely like God in certain ways – i.e., with respect to *certain* attributes – then haven't we already given up on a strictly transcendent God? Why then insist that God can't share any positive nonactional attributes with creatures? (Here we are not permitted to appeal to (C2), since I take it that is supposed to be motivated independently of (C1).) Moreover, if (C1) is restricted in that way, then it is logically implied by (C2), making it redundant. But it doesn't *seem* like Maimonides thinks that once he puts forward (C2), he can dispense with (C1) – as if the latter were a just a ladder to be kicked away once he gets to the former – because Maimonides repeatedly *appeals* to (C1), even after he has stated (C2) (*Guide* 1.55, 1.56), and it is a reliance on (C1) that guides the ideal inquirer as he proceeds along the *via negativa* (*Guide* 1.60).[12]

But, in any case, restricting (C1) won't help to address a related tension between (C3) and (C2). (C3) says that God has attributes of action. But then He acts. Presumably He acts, at the very least, on creation. But then He causes something about creation to be the case. One can't well act on X without causing something about X to be the case. So, he stands in some causal *relation* to creation. So, He stands in some relation to something.

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[12] It is precisely this apparent redundancy that Crescas (1990, 1.3.3: 103) exploits in one of his criticisms of Maimonides: What knowledge is gained, Crescas asks, by negating of God *human* perfections, once we know that God has no positive nonactional attributes at all?

And (C2) says that God stands in no relation to anything. The tension is manifest.[13]

(P3): A final puzzle concerns the relation between (C1) and what Maimonides writes elsewhere. Thus, for example, despite his repeated affirmation that 'knowledge' is purely equivocal in its two applications to creatures and to the divine (*Guide* 1.56, 3.20), in *Guide* 1.68–69 Maimonides seems to concur with "the philosophers" that for God, just as for creatures, knowledge involves an identity between subject, object, and the act of intellection.[14] Likewise, despite his repeated affirmation that 'existence' is purely equivocal in its two applications to creatures and the divine, Maimonides' proofs for God's existence (*Guide* 2.1–2) seem to go by way of principles that involve existence *as such*; it's hard to see how these proofs could be any good, let alone how we could *see* that they're any good, if there is nothing in common between divine existence and creaturely existence.

6.4 Extant Resolutions

These puzzles cry out for resolution. Two prominent resolutions involve qualifications of at least one of the three claims. The first resolution qualifies, or just outright rejects, (C3), making Maimonides even more radical than he appears. The second resolution qualifies (C1) and (C2), making Maimonides more conservative than he appears. I turn all too briefly to these two resolutions.[15]

6.4.1 Go Radical

Josef Stern (2000; 2008; 2013, 204–218) argues that Maimonides doesn't in fact accept (C3) – at least not as *true*, even if it's in some sense *correct* (i.e. it captures a more *proper* way to represent God). Stern's point of

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[13] See Feldman (1968) and Harvey (1996), who interpret attributes of action in such a way that they say nothing positive at all, not even something relational, about God. I myself don't see how such attributes could be aptly described as attributes *of action* if they fail to entail any relation whatsoever, nor do I see how to reconcile that interpretation with Maimonides' own causal-sounding language when explicating the attributes of action ("It is then clear that the ways . . . are the actions *proceeding from God* . . ." (Maimonides 1963, 1.54: 124; emphasis mine)).

[14] See Lobel (2002) and Shatz (Essay 12, this volume). I should note that Josef Stern contends that Maimonides doesn't concur in this chapter with "the philosophers," he is rather "arguing with the philosophers according to their conception of the deity" (Stern 2013, 235–240, 236).

[15] I don't mean to imply that the authors whose views I subsequently discuss were proposing these views *as resolutions* to any or all of the puzzles I've listed. I am enlisting their views for my purposes.

departure is Maimonides' argument for (C2), understood *linguistically* (or, more broadly, representationally). As he interprets (at least one of) the arguments for (C2), the central point is that every claim we can make about anything and every thought we can have about anything – including God – has a complex, subject/predicate, syntactical structure. But no claim about *God* with such complex syntactical structure could be true, for God would have to exhibit a corresponding complexity, and God is absolutely simple, not complex. Stern then argues that if this is true, it holds equally of *negative* predications – indeed, even so-called categorial negations of privations – for those too have a complex, subject/predicate, syntactic structure: it matters not what the predicate is. But then no sentence that predicates a negative attribute of God will be true. From which it seems to follow that it's false that God has negative attributes, and so (C3) is false.

Of course, dropping (C3) immediately dissolves the first two puzzles. And both Stern's linguistic reading of the argument for (C2) and the dropping of (C3) have textual basis for them. As to the former, Maimonides says as follows:

> For there is no oneness at all except in believing that there is one simple essence in which there is no complexity . . . and you will not find therein any multiplicity either in the thing as it is outside of the mind *or as it is in the mind.* (Maimonides 1963, 1.51: 113) (emphasis mine)[16]

As for the latter, Maimonides seems to hedge in places on whether the predication of negative attributes is ultimately sustainable. As he says:

> The most apt phrase concerning this subject is the dictum occurring in the Psalms, *Silence is praise to Thee*, which interpreted signifies: silence with regard to you is praise . . . For of whatever we say intending to magnify and exalt, on the one hand we find that it can have some application to Him, may He be exalted, and on the other we perceive in it some deficiency. (Maimonides 1963, 1.59:139–140)

This seems to suggest, perhaps, that while the predication of negative attributes is better than the predication of positive attributes, it's still a less than ideal concession to human frailty. And it's presumably less than ideal because it's not, strictly speaking, *true*.[17]

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[16] As Stern points out, "Maimonides' Arabic term for complexity. . .is the very same term appropriated by Al-Farabi for logical syntax" (Stern 2013, 217).

[17] At least it's not strictly speaking true until and unless it reaches its final station, in absolute silence. Thanks to Zev Harvey here.

But whatever the merits of this interpretation, it encounters difficulties, at least one of them serious. There is, of course, the fact that Maimonides says much *else*, both about God and about what one can say or truly say about God, that implies (C3) (or some other claim that "permits" predicating certain attributes of God). For example, Maimonides says just one chapter earlier:

> Know that the descriptions of God, may He be cherished and exalted, by means of negations is the correct description. (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 134)

This and other such statements can be handled in a variety of ways. Stern (2013, 210–213) suggests, regarding the statement in *Guide* 1.58, that descriptions by way of negations are "correct" only insofar as they are superior to those that use "indefinite nouns" – descriptions that Al-Farabi had allowed, but that Maimonides held to be inappropriate because of their positive content.

But I don't see how the view being attributed to Maimonides can avoid the more serious problem of *self-defeat*, a problem to which many such sweeping views succumb. For the view says something about God, albeit something negative – to wit, that God isn't something that anyone can say anything about – indeed, it says a whole lot of things about God, albeit all of them negative. And if the view is true, then nothing at all can be said about God. So, if the view is true, then it isn't true. In fact, if the view is true, then there is no such view! So either the view is false or there is no such view. And it's surely uncharitable to Maimonides to see him as writing and saying so much that expresses no view at all, especially since doing so contravenes Maimonides' own admonition, at the beginning of the section on divine attributes, not to be among those who "merely proclaim it [the theological truth] without representing to themselves that it has a meaning" (Maimonides 1963, 1.50: 112).

There is much more to say about this problem –and, indeed, Stern (2013, 240–249) himself has more to say about it – but I myself see no viable solution on the horizon. One of the morals to be drawn from this discussion is that a linguistic interpretation of the "argument from complexity" for (C2) leads us down a dead end. *If* there is an in-principle problem with our saying something of God, then the problem will completely generalize, and swallow itself with it.

6.4.2 Go Conservative

A second resolution lies in a qualification of the first two claims, or at least in what we took to follow from them. The key distinction to draw is

between God's *whatness* and God's *thatness*, between *what* God is like and the fact *that* God is. Charles Manekin (1990; 2008b) and Herbert Davidson (1992–1993) point to a number of passages in which Maimonides seems to assert not only *that* God *is*, but that we can completely grasp and prove it with certainty (even if it doesn't amount to a scientific demonstration). What we can't completely grasp is what God is like (*Guide* 1.58, 1.59).

The distinction between whatness and thatness opens the door to either (a) interpreting (C1) and (C2) as restricted to the "attributes of *whatness*" – to those attributes that characterize what the thing is like – and not applying to the attribute of **existence** or (b) keeping (C1) and (C2) as they are and denying that there *is* any attribute of **existence** (a la Kant), even if there are attributes of *whatness*.

This would seem to address at least (P1). Yes, perhaps having negative or actional attributes requires having the attribute of **existence**, or, at the very least it requires that the thing exists, but that's no problem: *that* God *is* is something not only true, but demonstrably so.

Of course, this leaves the other two puzzles unresolved. But worse still, it's not clear that it even resolves the first puzzle. For, as we noted, Maimonides explicitly endorses, as a consequence of (C1), the pure equivocity of the term 'exists'. And that seems to be enough to get the first puzzle off the ground, whether or not there is such an attribute as **existence**. For without any tempering or modification or reinterpretation of the claim of pure equivocity, it would seem to follow from it that nothing of any "existential import" can be said of God – whatever is of existential import, after all, can also be said of creatures (whether it's that they exist, or that they are). And if we do temper or modify or reinterpret the claim of pure equivocity, as I will soon suggest we should, it's not clear that we will *need* to qualify the first two claims or deny that there is any such attribute as **existence**. The proposed resolution is therefore either inadequate or idle.

6.5   New Resolution: Go Maimonidean

I suggest taking Maimonides at his word. None of the three claims needs to be qualified in order to resolve our puzzles. They just need to be better understood. In order to understand them, we need some background on the relationship between predicates and attributes, and to correct what I think is a misunderstanding of Maimonides' doctrine of pure equivocation.

6.5.1   *Predicates and Attributes*

Following Lewis (1983; 1986), let us distinguish among the realists about attributes (universals) between those who maintain a sparse conception of attributes and those who maintain an abundant conception. The latter hold that for every predicate that can be truly applied to something, there is a genuine attribute (universal), expressed by that predicate, which the thing instantiates. The former deny this, to one degree or another; they hold that there are predicates, whether disjunctive, conjunctive, negative, "grue-like," mere-Cambridge, or what have you, that can be truly applied to a thing without there being any genuine attribute (universal) that the predicate expresses.[18] What makes statements involving such predicates true is the pattern of instantiation of the *genuine* (positive, basic, intrinsic. . .) attributes. In a word, in their view not every *bit of language that could rightly be said of something* corresponds to some *worldly bit of reality*.[19]

This inegalitarian division among predicates was endorsed by a number of philosophers throughout history, including, it seems to me, Maimonides. Or, taking account of the fact that Maimonides maintains a "conceptualist theory of universals," we can put Maimonides' view this way: While *some* attributes play both a linguistic/mental role and a metaphysical role (of constituting the objects that instantiate them), other attributes play only the former role and not the latter.

Thus, Maimonides assumes that relational predicates, like "*x* is five meters from the Empire State Building," don't correspond to anything *in* the object that satisfies that predicate (*Guide* 1.52). Likewise, while "attributes of affirmation . . . indicate a part of the thing the knowledge of which is sought, that part being either a part of its substance or one of its accidents," negative attributes do *not* (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 135). In contemporary parlance, we would say that (in Maimonides' view) there *are no* negative or actional attributes, just negative and actional predicates. We, along with Maimonides, will sometimes speak as if there are such attributes, but that's because attributes themselves wear two hats, one on the word side (predicates) and one on the world side (universals).

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[18] "Grue-like" predicates are those relevantly like the predicate "grue," introduced by Goodman (1955) in his presentation of the New Riddle of Induction.

[19] See Armstrong (1978) for a robust contemporary defense, and Loux (2006) for a historical discussion, well-informed by contemporary debates, that focuses on Aristotle.

6.5.2   What Is "Pure Equivocation"?

As we noted in Section 6.2, a number of times in the *Guide* Maimonides tells us that a certain term is purely equivocal, or absolutely homonymous, when used regarding both God and creatures.[20] But nowhere in the *Guide* does he explicitly define the term "purely equivocal." The standard interpretation – indeed, the interpretation that, as far as I can tell, is unanimously accepted by interpreters of Maimonides – can be put as follows:

> (D1) "term F is used purely equivocally in contexts A and B" = $_{df}$ the attribute picked out by F in context A (call it F-ness$_A$) shares nothing in common with the attribute picked out by F in context B (call it F-ness$_B$).

Thus, Michael Schwarz, in the explanatory notes accompanying his translation of the *Guide*, explains that a term is purely equivocal when it "expresses two meanings (or more) that are entirely different from one another" (Maimonides 2002a, introduction, note 8). It is also commonly held to follow from the definiens of (D1) that neither F-ness$_A$ nor F-ness$_B$ can be defined in terms of the other, nor can they be defined in terms of some other attribute. This is what underlies the classical criticism of Maimonides, going back to the medievals, that if every term F we use regarding God is purely equivocal, then we can't infer anything at all from such statements as "God is F," nor can we infer that statement from anything else (Gersonides 1987, 108–111).[21]

But while Maimonides does not explicitly define the "purely equivocal" in the *Guide*, he does so in his *Treatise on Logic*.[22] And quite remarkably, his own definition appears to disagree with what the interpretive consensus has taken him to mean in the *Guide* (and everywhere else). Here is what he says in the *Logic*:

> The absolute homonym is one applied to two things, between which there is nothing in common to account for their common name, like the name *'ain* signifying an eye and a spring of water ... (Maimonides 1938, 59)

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[20] ism mushtarik = اِسم مُشْتَرك‎ = אסם משתרק‎ in Arabic; Ibn Tibbon usually translates it as '*shemot mishtatfim*'; Schwartz translates it as '*shemot meshutafim*'; Efros translates it as 'absolute homonym'; Pines (in his translation of the *Guide*) usually translates it as 'purely equivocal' (and sometimes as 'absolutely equivocal'). I will use the terms interchangeably.

[21] See W. Z. Harvey (1988) and Eisenmann (2007) for a defense that points to the *pedagogical* value in using certain terms and not others regarding God.

[22] On the attribution of the *Logic* to Maimonides, see Davidson (2001) and Stroumsa (2009, 127–128).

That is, a given eye and a given spring of water share nothing in common in virtue of which it is true of each of them that it is an *ayin*.[23] More generally, a general term F is purely equivocal when used regarding some Gs and some Hs just in the case that there is no single attribute in virtue of which both a given G is F and a given H is F. If we put this in attribute-terms – and the attribute names we used in (D1) – we seem to have the following:

> (D2) "term F is used purely equivocally in contexts A and B" =$_{df}$ for anything x that has F-ness$_A$ and anything *y* that has F-ness$_B$, there is no single attribute F-ness such that (a) x has F-ness$_A$ (at least partly) in virtue of having F-ness and (b) y has F-ness$_B$ (at least partly) in virtue of having F-ness.

This definition, I contend, aligns precisely with what Maimonides tell us in his own explicit definition. But notice that it disagrees, and disagrees rather badly, with (D1). For (D1) stays at the attribute-level, and (D2) descends to the object-level. In particular, the definiens of (D2) says nowhere that F-ness$_A$ and F-ness$_B$ *themselves* share nothing in common, just that *the things that have the respective attributes* share nothing in common; indeed, more carefully, it makes the even weaker claim that the things that have the respective attributes share nothing in common *in virtue of which they both have F-ness*. As far as the definiens of (D2) says, there might even *be* an attribute of F-ness, and it might even be shared by any two things, one of which has F-ness$_A$ and the other of which has F-ness$_B$. It just won't ever be that in virtue of which the one has F-ness$_A$ and the other has F-ness$_B$; it will be, to use some contemporary jargon, an intrinsically disjunctive attribute.[24] In all likelihood, the existence of such disjunctive attributes is ruled out by Maimonides' sparse conception of

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[23] As others have noted, this category has no counterpart in Aristotle's list at the beginning of his *Categories*, as evidenced by the fact that Aristotle's example of his first category – the "most" homonymous of his categories – is an example that Maimonides uses to illustrate his *third* category, that of the amphibolous term, i.e., "a term applied to two or more objects because of something which they have in common but which does not constitute the essence of each one of them" (Maimonides 1938, 60). There *were* earlier commentators on Aristotle who had a category that corresponded more closely to Maimonides' absolute homonymy – and Aristotle himself elsewhere (Aristotle 1984, *Metaphysics* 1060b33–34) mentions in passing a category of 'homonymy, but according to nothing in common' – but one has to be careful not to assimilate their category to Maimonides' without justification. (See Irwin (1981) for an excellent discussion of Aristotle's own views. Thanks to Josef Stern for pointing me to this article.) In particular, I disagree with Horovitz's identification (cited in Baneth 1935, 34) of Maimonides' absolute homonymy with the chance homonymy of Porphyry (1992, 65; see also Aristotle 2009, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096, b26–31; Simplicius 2003, 31; and Al-Farabi 1981, 49–50), since I see no evidence in Maimonides' definition that the shared usage must be by chance (a point whose importance will emerge shortly).

[24] See Sider (2011) and McDaniel (2017).

attributes. At the very least, however, the following is clear: A term F in contexts A and B can satisfy (D2) – if any two things that have F-ness$_A$ and F-ness$_B$ (respectively) share nothing in common – but fail to satisfy (D1), because F-ness$_A$ and F-ness$_B$ themselves share something in common.

This can happen in any number of ways, corresponding to those ways in which attributes can share something in common that don't entail or derive from a commonality in their instances. Thus, the cardinality of the set of their instances (perhaps they both have just a finite number of instances), or their formal features (perhaps they are both symmetric relations), or their modal status (perhaps they are both essential to anything that has them), or their logical relations to other attributes – all of these could serve as something that attributes share in common without that requiring that their instances share anything in common (let alone something in common in virtue of which they have the attributes in question).

To take what is (in most cases) a trivial sort of example: An attribute F-ness and its negation, non-F-ness, where they both exist, certainly share something in common, since at the very least the latter can be defined in terms of the former. But it's hard to see how two things – one of which has F-ness and one of which has non-F-ness – could share some attribute *in virtue of which the one has F-ness and the other has non-F-ness*. As we shall see momentarily, this sort of case is far from a triviality, and indeed lies at the heart of Maimonidean theology. (And the general point that (D2) is weaker than (D1) suffices to address Gersonides' objection.)

It's worth emphasizing that pure equivocation, despite its being weaker than traditionally understood, still has teeth. For one thing, (D2) still sets the "purely equivocal" apart from the other five cases of equivocation or homonymy that Maimonides lists in that chapter of the *Logic* (I leave this as an exercise for the reader). For another thing, the definiens of (D2) still has the consequence that it's not the case that F-ness$_A$ is just F-ness to a much greater *degree* than F-ness$_B$, for if the latter were so then (plausibly at least) there would be something, viz. F-ness, at least partly in virtue of which the one thing has F-ness$_A$ and the other has F-ness$_B$. As we've already indicated previously, Maimonides takes note of exactly that consequence of the pure equivocity of "knowledge" and "exists" (when used regarding both God and creatures).

6.5.3   *The View*

With this background in place, we are ready to lay out the relevant parts of the Maimonidean outlook. Crucially, Maimonides sides with Aristotle

(*Metaphysics* Γ.2, *Metaphysics* Z.1) that "being is said in many ways."[25] In particular, for Maimonides, "being" is said in at least *two* ways. But unlike Aristotle – who thinks that "being" is *pros hen equivocal* in its various usages (Aristotle (*Metaphysics* Γ.2, *Metaphysics* Z.1) – Maimonides thinks that "being"/"exists" is *purely* equivocal in its expressions of these two ways. When we say of a creature that it exists, we pick out the attribute of being **utterly contingent**, or what comes to the same thing for Maimonides, **radically dependent**. They are dependent not just in the efficient causal way, but in the formal and teleological ways, ultimately on God (*Guide* 1.69, 2.11–12).[26] That's not a further attribute of creatures, that's just what it *is* for them to exist. On the other hand, when we say of God that He exists, we pick out the feature of being **necessarily-existent**, or what comes to the same thing for Maimonides, **absolutely *in*dependent**, not being caused in any of those ways. That's not a further attribute of God, that's just what it *is* for God to exist.

This emerges from a number of passages in the Maimonidean corpus.[27] Here, for example is what he says at the beginning of the *Laws of the Foundations of the Law*[28]:

> All existing things, whether celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an inter-mediate class, exist only through His true existence. If it were supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist. If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist … *Hence, His true reality is unlike that of any of them* (Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Law 1.1–3) (emphasis mine)

Notice that the difference in dependence/independence is translated into a difference in the *sort of reality* that God and creatures possess.

The identification of divine existence with absolute independence helps illuminate another Maimonidean claim. Maimonides famously holds, apparently following Avicenna, that God's essence just *is* existence, where

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[25] For a contemporary wide-ranging and penetrating development of this view, see McDaniel (2017).

[26] See Segal (forthcoming).

[27] See also Stern (Essay 10 in this volume) for excellent discussion. While I agree wholeheartedly with Stern that Maimonides identifies divine existence with absolute independence, I disagree with his assertion that we don't understand what that is; I think we understand perfectly well what it is, since it's the (categorial) negation of creaturely existence.

[28] Translation taken from Twersky (1972), with a few modifications. (Most importantly, I have translated *amitato* as "His true reality" rather than "His real essence," since the latter translation is ill-suited for the other instances of the term in *Mishneh Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Law* 1.4, a point implicitly acknowledged by Twersky in his translation of the latter.)

the latter, just in the case of God, is not "superadded" to the former.[29] On the face of it, it's hard to understand what this could mean, in a way that doesn't make it trivial (and in a way that sets God apart from creatures): isn't existence part and parcel of *everything*'s essence? For anything whatsoever, it's part of what it is to be that thing that at the very least it exists, and it's necessarily (and trivially) true that if it exists, then it exists.[30] But none of these facts sets God apart, and each is trivial. I think we can get a better grip on the Maimonidean formula if we pay more careful attention to it. Here is what Maimonides says:

> As for that which has no cause for its existence, there is only God, may He be magnified and glorified, who is like that. For this is the meaning of our saying about Him, may He be exalted, that His existence is necessary. *Accordingly, His existence is identical with His essence and His true reality, and His essence is His existence*. (Maimonides 1963, 1.57: 132) (emphasis mine)

Two points are noteworthy. First, Maimonides identifies God's essence not with existence as such, but with *God's* existence – God's essence just is *God's* existence. Second, Maimonides explicitly calls attention to the symmetric nature of the identity claim. We could put Maimonides' claim equally well this way instead: God's existence just is God's essence. That is, we have here a claim about God's existence, about the *sort of being* that God enjoys. In particular, the claim is that God's way or manner of being is captured by His essence. But His essence just is **being absolutely independent**. So, we have a straightforward and nontrivial way to construe Maimonides' claim that God's essence is existence; it might be more perspicuously put by saying that God's existence – God's way of being – is *essentiality*.[31]

This difference in ways of being trickles down into differences between all the other attributes that God and creatures have. Thus, **knowledge$_{divine}$** and **knowledge$_{creature}$** are different ways of knowing. The latter is the sort of knowledge we have, in which we depend for having it on the state of the world. The former, on the other hand, is the sort of knowledge God has, in

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[29] Avicenna *seems* to make this point in his *Metaphysics of the Healing* (Avicenna 2005, viii.4, 343.10–15 and 345.6–347.16). But as Adamson (2013) notes, he elsewhere seems to say that God has no essence at all, and as I read him, he may be better understood as identifying God's essence with His *haecceity*, not His existence.

[30] See Plantinga (1974, 61).

[31] This way of understanding the Maimonidean formula shows just how different Maimonides' view is from Avicenna's, since the latter held that "exists" is univocal, or at least not purely equivocal. (Much closer to Maimonides on this point is al-Shahrast̄anῑ, a sharp critic of Avicenna. See Adamson 2013.)

which the state of the world depends on God's knowledge – and in particular His self-knowledge – and not vice versa. This is why, I take it, divine foreknowledge, as opposed to creaturely foreknowledge, doesn't exclude free will (*Guide* 3.20). The same goes for the other attributes.

Note well: it is at this point that it is absolutely critical that Maimonides had in mind (D2), rather than (D1). Maimonides is explicit that "exists," and "knowledge," and so on, are all purely equivocal in their divine and creaturely usages. If (D1) gives the correct meaning of "purely equivocal," then it would follow that **existence_divine** and **existence_creature** share nothing in common – and that, in particular, the former couldn't be understood in terms of the latter – contrary to everything I've just attributed to Maimonides. The same applies for **knowledge_divine** and **knowledge_creature**.

But if (D2) gives the correct meaning of "purely equivocal," then **existence_divine** could well be the negation of **existence_creature** – and the former attribute could just be **absolute independence** and the latter, **radical dependence** – even though "exists" is purely equivocal in its divine and creaturely usages. For the pure equivocality of "exists" implies nothing stronger than that there isn't any single attribute in virtue of which creatures have **radical dependence** and God has **absolute independence**. The only decent candidate for such a single attribute would be generic **being**, equivalent at least to the disjunction **being either radically dependent or absolutely independent**. But, if there were such an attribute, Maimonides would hold that it's an *intrinsically* disjunctive one, always instantiated in virtue of one of the disjuncts, and not vice versa. And indeed, given Maimonides' sparse conception of attributes, there won't be any intrinsically disjunctive attributes, and so there won't be any such attribute as generic **being**, at all. All of that, however, is consistent with **existence_divine** and **existence_creature** being defined in exactly the way that I have suggested, and in the former being perfectly well understood.

Note well, a second time: each of the nonactional divine attributes is a specification of a negative attribute. **Being absolutely independent** is the negation of the (relational) attribute of **being dependent**; and, as Maimonides sees it, the latter is (in itself) positive, and the former is (in itself) negative, as it says what God *isn't*. **Knowledge_divine** is a *specification* of being absolutely independent; it is to not just to *be* in a way that has no cause, but specifically to *know* in a way that has no cause. And so on for the other nonactional divine attributes. And each of the actional attributes – or the relations entailed by having those actional attributes – is a specification of the relation of **radical dependence** that creatures bear to God; it is not

just to *be* radically dependent on God, but to be radically dependent *in such-and-such a way* on God.[32]

Note well, a third and final time: all the talk of negative and actional *attributes* is a facon-de-parler, for given Maimonides' sparse conception of attributes, there are no such things. (Or, at least there are no such *worldly* things; at most they are *wordy* things.) But we can still truly say of God that He is absolutely independent, that He independently-knows . . . , and that everything depends on Him for their existence and nature. And all of that is strictly and literally true.

Let's see how all of this allows us to resolve the puzzles.

6.5.4 Puzzles Resolved

Solution to (P1): In developing (P1), we assumed that it was a consequence of each of (C1) and (C2) that God has nothing of any "existential import." But now we can see that this is a consequence of neither of those claims. God has **existence$_{divine}$** (aka **necessary-existence**, aka **absolute independence**). This is not shared with any creature, so God's "having" it doesn't violate (C1), and it is a negative attribute, so God's "having" it doesn't violate (C2). But, crucially, it has "existential import," in the sense relevant to whether (C3) could be true. Being absolutely independent is evidently sufficiently robust, ontologically speaking, to allow *other* things to be true of something that is absolutely independent. It is, again, critical that we understand "pure equivocation" in terms of (D2) rather than (D1), so that **existence$_{divine}$** really does have "existential import." If we understood "pure equivocation" in terms of (D1), then **existence$_{divine}$** *couldn't* have "existential import."

Solution to (P2): There is no need to restrict (C1). God and creatures share absolutely no attributes in common. And not only in the sense that there is no worldly bit (no genuine attribute) that God and creatures share – a fact that is entailed by God having no attributes (in that sense of attribute) *at all*. It's also true in the sense that *whatever* can be truly said of God and *whatever* can be truly said of creatures – and there is plenty of each of those things – none of those things that can be said make for any *similarity* between God and creatures. And that's because each of the

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[32] For a different take on the relationship between attributes of action and negative attributes – one that sees the latter as a "photo negative" of the former – see Harvey (1996). (This is a consequence of his taking attributes of action to be saying nothing positive at all, not even something relational, about God. See note 13, this essay.)

things that can be truly said of God and each of the things that can be truly said of creatures are specifications of their respective *ways of being*. And, Maimonides contends, no two things can be similar in any way if they don't belong to the same genus, let alone if they don't enjoy the same sort of being (*Guide* 1.52).

Moreover, there is no tension between God having actional attributes and His standing in no relations to anything. As Maimonides makes clear, by "relation" he has in mind a proper subset of what we would call relations: only those that entail some similarity between the relata. (This is not an ad hoc restriction. It seems that Maimonides didn't think there *were* any other possible relations.) Perhaps ordinary causal relations are like that – so Maimonides seems to have thought. But the relations entailed by God's possessing actional attributes are not like that. Indeed, since they're all specifications of the relation of **absolute independence**, they're all relations the standing in which entails that the relata *are not at all similar*, because the relata, of necessity, *enjoy different sorts of being*.

Solution to (P3): It should be obvious how I think the final puzzle should be resolved, since it relies on a misunderstanding of "purely equivocal" that I have sought to clarify. There is no incompatibility between the pure equivocality of "knows" and the claim that for God, just as for creatures, knowledge involves an identity between subject, object, and the act of intellection. For the former just requires that there is no shared attribute *in virtue of which* God knows what He knows and creatures know what they know; and that's true, because **knowledge_{divine}** and **knowledge_{creature}** are specifications of different ways of being. Again, there can be a structural similarity between the two kinds of knowledge, without there being any similarity between the things that possess the two kinds of knowledge, let alone a similarity in virtue of which they both have the kind of knowledge they do. Likewise, there is no incompatibility between the pure equivocality of "exists" and the fact that Maimonides' proofs for God's (necessary-)existence go by way of principles that involve some notion of "existential import." For the former is compatible with **existence_{divine}** (aka **necessary-existence**, aka **absolute independence**) having existential import.

6.6 Conclusion

It is uncontroversial that Maimonides had some subtle and interesting views in the philosophy of language, even if he didn't present them

systematically.[33] But seeing him as primarily, or even exclusively, interested in matters of religious *language*, as opposed to religious *metaphysics*, has tended to obscure Maimonides' true view about divine attributes – and other matters besides – and mired us in insoluble puzzles. Maimonides was a very fine metaphysician, whose metaphysical views beautifully cohere, if you let them speak for themselves.

[33] See Stern (2000).