

MU'TAZILITES, AL-ASH'ARĪ AND MAIMONIDES ON DIVINE ATTRIBUTES

Catarina Belo*

SÍNTESE – Este artigo analisa o debate acerca dos atributos divinos na teologia islâmica medieval (*kalām*), mais especificamente na teologia mu'tazilita e ash'arita. Nele se compara a abordagem da teologia islâmica medieval com a de Moisés Maimónides (m. 1204), filósofo judeu do período medieval. Em particular este artigo debruça-se sobre a identificação dos atributos divinos com a essência de Deus na teologia mu'tazilita, que se desenvolveu na primeira metade do século IX, e analisa a reação dos ash'aritas que se seguiu e que insistiu em considerar os atributos divinos enquanto entidades reais, separadas da essência de Deus. Maimónides, conhecedor da tradição do *kalām*, apresenta uma solução que não envolve a predicação de atributos divinos que comprometeria a unidade divina.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Mu'tazilites. Ash'aritas. *Kalām*. Maimónides. Atributos divinos. Predicação. Filosofia medieval. Teologia islâmica.

ABSTRACT – This article analyses the debate concerning divine attributes in medieval Islamic theology (*kalām*), more specifically in Mu'tazilite and in Ash'arite theology. It further compares their approach with that of medieval Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides (d. 1204). In particular it studies the identification of the divine attributes with God's essence in Mu'tazilite theology, which flourished in the first half of the 9th century. It discusses the Ash'arite response that followed, and which consisted in considering God's attributes as real entities separate from God's essence. Maimonides, conversant with the tradition of *kalām*, proposes a solution that does not involve the predication of any attributes that would undermine his oneness.

KEY WORDS – Mu'tazilites. Ash'arites. *Kalām*. Maimonides. Divine attributes. Predication. Medieval philosophy. Islamic theology.

The issue of divine attributes is one which cuts across particular religions and historical periods. It is shared by Christian, Muslim and Jewish philosophers and theologians alike. It stems not only from a reflection on the Scriptural description of God, but also from a general need to understand the divine and its nature. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers and theologians, in the monotheistic tradition, who tackled God's attributes were confronted with several obstacles to the affirmation of such attributes, the most obvious of which is perhaps God's oneness. If real attributes are predicated of him, the principle of divine oneness is called into question, since that oneness consists precisely in his being simple and indivisible

* Department Of Philosophy, The American University in Cairo.

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under any aspect. And not only is God's oneness stated in the Scriptures but also it constitutes a fundamental principle in the philosophers' argument for his eternity and perfection. That which is simple cannot perish, because coming to be and passing away is the result of a combination of elements in any given substance, more specifically form and matter, as had been asserted by the ancient Greek philosophers. Also, that which is not composed of matter and contains no material element, and so occupies no space, is *per se* indivisible. On the other hand, how can we speak about God without reference to his attributes, i.e., his qualities? And if positive attributes are not to be said or thought of God, then what is the status of the descriptions of God to be found in the Old and the New Testament or in the Qur'ān, the sources of a number of divine attributes accepted by the theologians? Any discourse about God within a religious framework is bound to bring with it a statement of his eternity, omnipotence, omniscience, to name but a few of his attributes.

This prompts another problem akin to that of God's attributes: the question of anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic descriptions of the Godhead. If one describes God as undergoing affections, having feelings of love or hatred towards his subjects and if we describe any particular features of his such as bodily features, does this not constitute an assimilation of God to a human being? This is part of the wider question of the relation between God and his creation, in particular human beings. Can any similarity or resemblance be explained without distorting the true nature of the divine? If there is no analogy and no relation, where do we base our belief in God's existence? And if there is no relation between us and the divine being, in the sense that he cannot be affected by any of our actions, what is the purpose of religion and its rituals? These are some of the issues that underpin the debate that divided philosophers and theologians throughout the medieval period.

In this discussion one can make a conceptual distinction between three planes: the ontological, which discusses the analogy between God and man as beings; the epistemological, whether we can know the divine, and whether our mind is capable of grasping the divine nature; and the logical or linguistic plane of our *language* concerning God, in other words the truth of the propositions we use to talk about him. Although for the philosophers standing in the Greek tradition the logical is of the same order as the ontological the distinction between these two planes becomes increasingly apparent as the inquiry into this problem becomes more refined, and especially so with Maimonides' contribution. In the following I shall limit myself to the ontological and logical planes and will not deal with human knowledge, which deserves a separate discussion.

Maimonides, as it appears in his writings, in particular the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where he expounds and proposes to solve the problem, was conversant not only with the early Muslim theological debates of divine attributes, but also with the philosophy, mostly written in Arabic, that ensued from the discussions arising in the Islamic theological schools. His contribution clearly takes into account these previous debates and therefore I shall start with an exposition of the Mu'tazilite and the Ash'arite views.

The Mu'tazilite stance

It is unsurprising that the issue of divine attributes should have occupied such a central place in the several schools of *kalām* (Islamic theology) that developed after the death of Muhammad and well into the height of the Abbasid empire, if one takes into account the text of the Qur'ān revealed to Muhammad in the early seventh century C.E. Less descriptive and history-based than either the Old or the New Testament, the Qur'ān concentrates very much on divine action and on divine nature. It is in addition the source of the divine names with which God is credited in the Muslim tradition, and some Muslim theologians found over a thousand adjectives (which stands for the Arabic term *ṣifa*) attached to the divine subject. Those *ṣifāt* often stand for the name of God in the Qur'ān, which is *Allāh*. God can be referred to by any of those names, and any interpretation of the Qur'ān to be undertaken by any Muslim theological school had necessarily to include the analysis of those terms on a grammatical as well as on a theological/'speculative' level. Consequently, some scholars of Islam defended that the divine attributes were the central issue of Islamic theology.¹

Among the two principal schools of Islamic theology, one, the Mu'tazilites, took to interpret the attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān – for the debate developed out of an exegetical analysis of Scripture – as being part and parcel of the divine essence and identical with it. The other school, the Ash'arites, took the view that these attributes are real entities, subsisting independently of the divine essence. The Mu'tazilite view is underpinned by a more metaphorical interpretation of the Scripture and the second by with a literalist interpretation.

The Mu'tazilites were the first school of Islamic theology to take a definite position on the issue of God's attributes, and to favour its identification with the divine essence. This school was founded in Basra during the first half of the eighth century by Wāṣil b. 'Atā' (d. 748) and flourished in the first half of the ninth century C.E in the Abbasid empire. The stress on the createdness of the Qur'ān became State dogma as decreed by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mūn (d. 833 CE). The Mu'tazilites by and large defended the unity of God and his attributes, in order to highlight God's oneness (*tawḥīd*). Owing to this, they were labelled the *ahl al-'adl wa-l-tawḥīd*, the partisans of (God's) justice and oneness.² The main principles of classical Mu'tazilism were formulated by Abū-l-Hudhayl (d. 841) and they consisted in God's oneness, God's justice, God's fulfilment of his promises in the Hereafter, the existence of an intermediate state between belief and unbelief (e.g., a Muslim who has sinned) and the obligation to 'command the just and forbid the evil'.³

Consequently, God is the one eternal being, dismissing any claim that his attributes, separated from him, or even the Qur'ān, as the word of God, can be said to be eternal. Any attribute, such as his power, knowledge, justice, must needs be one with him, not having a real (ontic) separate existence, as they have when

¹ Allard, M., *Le problème des attributs divins*, p. 16.

² Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, p. 60.

³ Gimaret, 'Mu'tazila', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vol. VII, p. 783.

predicated of any other being.⁴ Therefore, God is said to be knowing, but by virtue of his essence, and powerful by virtue of his essence, and likewise with all his other attributes. He is not knowing, powerful in virtue of Knowledge or Power themselves, not only because this would lead to a multiplicity being predicated of God but also because it would imply to posit other eternal entities alongside God. The Mu'tazilites, therefore, identify power and wisdom themselves with him, and he is said to be, for instance power and wisdom and justice. In this way, they sought to highlight the fundamental difference between the divine plane and the human plane. God possesses his attributes eternally, man and material substances only fleetingly. Man's existence and power derive from God but are not eternal, as they are in him. This differentiation between the divine and the human natures established by the Mu'tazilites is further illustrated by their metaphorical interpretation of some of the well known attributes and descriptions of God in the Qur'ān. These are anthropomorphic descriptions such as his hand, his face, and his seat on the throne in Heaven.⁵ The Mu'tazilites deemed these descriptions to be unsuitable, if taken literally to refer to the Godhead. If he is eternal and omnipotent, how can he be said to have the characteristics of a material substance? Moreover a body occupies a limited space, and God is infinite, and does not reside in space or in time. His eternity consists in an absence of any relation to time. Consequently, the Mu'tazilites took these Qur'ānic expressions of God's hand and face, to mean, allegorically, his power and his knowledge. With regard to the Qur'ānic description of God's sitting on his throne, they interpreted it as signifying God's omnipotence.⁶ The Mu'tazilites thus stressed God's uniqueness and his being unlike any earthly being. In addition, they applied negative attributes to the deity.⁷ Their position would have significant repercussions. The Muslim philosophers who came under the influence of Greek philosophical tradition took a position that was closer to the Mu'tazilite than to that propounded by the theological school of the Ash'arites, who were to criticise the Mu'tazilites and win the upper hand against them as champions of Islamic orthodoxy.

The Ash'arite response

An emphatic response to the Mu'tazilite identification of God with his attributes and their metaphorical interpretation of the Qur'ān – as well as their defence of the createdness of Qur'ān – came from Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 855), a Muslim theologian and jurist, founder of the Hanbalite *madhhab*, one of the four schools of law in the Sunni tradition. He was persecuted by the authorities during the time of the *mihna* – caliph al-Ma'mūn's inquisition to enforce Mu'tazilite positions – for proclaiming the

⁴ For the identification of God's essence with His attributes as stated by the Mu'tazilite Abū-l-Hudhayl, vide Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 276.

⁵ The references to God's face, eyes and hand in the Qur'ān can be found in verses 55:27, 54:14 and 38:75 respectively.

⁶ Maimonides offers a comparable interpretation of the divine throne in his metaphorical interpretation of an Old Testament passage (Jeremiah 17:12). Vide *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, 9.

⁷ Wensinck, *The Muslim Creed*, p. 76.

Qur'ān as the uncreated speech of God. He also held that the descriptions to be found in the Qur'ān, even the anthropomorphic ones, were to be taken at face value, but without questioning its true meaning (*bi-lā kayfa*).⁸ Ibn Ḥanbal turned the tide of Muslim theology by opposing the prevalent Mu'tazilite tendencies of his day. His position would become remarkably influential in the course of time.

Al-Ash'arī (d. 935), a Muslim theologian who studied under one of the leading Mu'tazilite theologians of his day, rejected Mu'tazilism at the age of forty, particularly with regard to Qur'ānic interpretation. He followed in the vein of Ibn Ḥanbal in adhering closer to the letter of the Scripture. Also, he strongly criticised the Mu'tazilite dogma of divine attributes. Opposing Mu'tazilite theology, al-Ash'arī held that the attributes are real entities subsisting independently of God. He claimed that God is powerful by virtue of a power residing in him, and wise by virtue of a wisdom residing in him. His critique was founded on a stress on the attributes as real and eternal entities, and on the claim that positing the attributes as equal to the divine essence amounts to a denial of those attributes.⁹ This is in line with the Muslim theologians' identification of the *ṣifāt allāh* with real entities (*ma'ānī*) residing in the essence of God.¹⁰ The *ṣifāt allāh*, according to al-Ash'arī, do not just refer to divine predicates, such as living, powerful, wise. Indeed, in linguistic terms, the *ṣifāt allāh* refer specifically to the nouns describing those entities, such as power and life existing in God, and the adjectives could not possibly be predicated of God if he were deprived of those real entities. However, the Mu'tazilites do not view these attributes as *ma'ānī*.¹¹ Moreover, according to Sunni theologians, the rule for predication in general is based on two principles, to wit (a) every adjective has a cause (*'illa*), a reason for existing which is the corresponding noun,¹² and (b) the principle of the analogy of the invisible with the visible. The fact that those entities reside in him means that he possesses them in a way that is not to be found in humans, in whom they do not reside but are merely attached.¹³ For example, God possesses will as an eternal attribute, humans possess it as an accident.¹⁴ Therefore, these predicates, such as living, powerful, can only be properly ascribed to God, not to man. They are said differently of man and God. According to al-Ash'arī, to use the same predicates to describe God and man does not mean that we are setting up a strict similarity between the two, for God possesses these predicates from all eternity.¹⁵ However, the term *ṣifā* entails some ambiguity in al-Ash'arī, for it sometimes refers to the predicate, for example, powerful,

⁸ Ibidem, p. 86.

⁹ According to an early Sunni dogma, the divine names were uncreated. Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī* p. 350.

¹⁰ Vide Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 236.

¹¹ 'Un mu'tazilite dira couramment de Dieu: *yūṣafu bi-l-quḍra* ('ala') au sens de *yūṣafu bi-annahū qādir*, sans que cela implique nécessairement de comprendre *quḍra* au sens d'un *ma'nā*'. *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 238.

¹² Gimaret, 'Mu'tazila', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, New Edition, vol. VII, p. 787.

¹³ For the Mu'tazilite denial of the existence of these attributes as separate entities in God, vide *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 346.

¹⁴ *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 193.

¹⁵ *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 249. In restating this dissimilarity between God and man, al-Ash'arī follows the Qur'ān, when it states: 'laysa ka-mithli-hi shayū'n', 42:11.

sometimes also to the qualities possessed, in this case power.¹⁶ There is also an ambiguity in the acceptance of corporeal descriptions as real attributes of God.¹⁷ Al-Ash'arī accepts them without committing himself strictly to a literal or a metaphorical interpretation, which is in conformity with the ancient interpretation of the *ahl al-ḥacīth*,¹⁸ a group in early Islamic theology and law which was opposed to the *ahl al-ra'y*, more in favour of a free interpretation of the Islamic sacred texts, including the Qur'ān and the Sunna.

Al-Ash'arī draws an important distinction between attributes of essence (subdivided into *nafsiyya*, in which the name is identical with the thing named, and *ma'nawiyya*, which are neither similar nor dissimilar to the thing named) and attributes of action, where a difference can be observed between that which is named and the name.¹⁹ Moreover, among the eight essential attributes, life, knowledge, power, will, hearing, sight, speech and duration, the first four are known in a positive way and the last four in a negative way, i.e., by negating in God the opposite imperfections.²⁰ This differentiation between attributes known through affirmation and negation prefigures Maimonides' solution.

Al-Ash'arī also criticises the identification between God and his attributes from a logical point of view. For him, one has to say that God is knowing through a knowledge existing in him. This is due to his definition of knowledge, 'that by which the knower knows that which he knows', this being what distinguishes it from the other attributes. If God is made identical with his attributes, one is forced to accept the absurdity that the knowledge is knowing, or that the knower is the knowledge.²¹ There must needs be a conceptual differentiation between the knowledge and the knower, corresponding to a real difference of entities denoted by the terms used. If everything were identical in God, as stated in the principle that there are no distinctions to be made within the divine essence, then justice and knowledge would be identical in God, and God would have to be said to know through his justice as much as through his knowledge, which goes against al-Ash'arī's definition of knowledge.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 238.

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 252-255. According to al-Ash'arī, the corporeal attributes are not to be taken metaphorically. 'Les anthropomorphismes du Coran représentent non pas de simples substituts métaphoriques, mais d'autres attributs positifs (*thābita*) de l'essence divine, s'ajoutant (*zā'ida*) aux précédents [...], et qui ont seulement pour particularité de nous être connus non par la raison, mais par la révélation'. *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 323. But there was a gradual tendency among the

¹⁸ Ash'arites to interpret these attributes metaphorically.

¹⁸ 'Entre ces deux attitudes extrêmes se situe la position des *aṣḥāb al-ḥacīth* qui, tout en excluant toute représentation 'corporéiste' et 'assimilationniste' de Dieu, rejettent pareillement l'interprétation métaphorique, la bonne règle étant, selon eux, de s'en tenir strictement sur ce point à ce que Dieu ou ce qu'a dit le Prophète, sans chercher à l'expliquer, à se le représenter concrètement: "Nous disons qu'Il a une face, deux mains, deux yeux, sans [chercher à savoir] comment (*bi-lā kayfa*)". *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 324. "Ibn Kullāb, quant à lui, représente la transposition proprement théologique de la thèse des *aṣḥāb al-ḥacīth*: "Je dis que Dieu a une main, un oeil, une face, parce que Dieu l'a dit; je ne dis rien de plus. Je dis: ce sont des attributs (*sifāt*) de Dieu, comme je dis de la science, de la puissance, de la vie, qu'elles sont des attributs'. *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 324.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 352.

²⁰ Ibidem, p. 260.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 275.

The Mu'tazilites would argue that the use of an adjective/attribute to qualify the subject corresponds to affirming in that subject/substance the existence of the corresponding quality, and that this is valid for all existents. They would also say that although God's knowledge is convertible with him, the inverse is not the case. These two theses would provide some, though not essential, differentiation between God and his attributes, so as to obviate the Ash'arite objection.

For his part, and in order to forestall objections to the effect that positing real attributes in God is tantamount to a denial of his simplicity, al-Ash'arī states that in God, knowledge is neither identical to his power nor other than it. This a controversial and obscure response to the Mu'tazilite position, but it constitutes the Ash'arite solution to the problem of multiplicity when real attributes are predicated of God. Al-Ash'arī claims that the attributes are neither identical with God nor other than him, a distinction which includes both similarity and difference.²² But whereas similarity and difference belong to the plane of essence, otherness belongs to the plane of existence. For al-Ash'arī, there are two definitions of otherness: (a) if a thing is other with respect to another, then one can be said to exist and the other not to exist, or (b) there is a possibility of one existing separately of the other in time or space. But in reality none of these apply to God and his attributes,²³ hence the inconsistency of al-Ash'arī's claim.

The solution, it would seem to me, would consist in a clearer distinction to be drawn between the logical and the ontological planes. Both parties are treating the attributes with a stress on the ontological plane, a treatment that is bound to produce difficulties in connection with God. This distinction is not clear-cut in the Ash'arite/Mu'tazilite debate, but Maimonides moves closer in that direction, as has been noticed by Wolfson. We shall see how, according to Wolfson, by introducing Aristotelian categories/terminology into the age-old debate about divine attributes, not only does Maimonides lay open the complex nature of the problem in its diverse aspects (ontological, epistemological and logical/linguistic) but he also contributes greatly to a solution which, within an Aristotelian framework, incorporates the preceding considerations.

In addition to a stress on the ontological level, another similarity between Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites, in their reasoning concerning the attributes, is that they both draw on the analogy between God and humans, and between the Creator and his Creation,²⁴ although the Mu'tazilites are more reluctant to accept a direct analogy, especially in so far as the anthropomorphic or revealed attributes are concerned.

²² Vide Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, pp. 277-9 for the fine distinctions in the Arabic of al-Ash'arī.

²³ Gimaret, *La doctrine d'al-Ash'arī*, p. 278.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 248.

Maimonides' approach

Maimonides, while conversant with his predecessors' position on divine attributes, has a radically different view in that he takes the absolute difference between humans and God as his starting and fundamental point. This had already been advocated by certain Muslim and Christian authors, particularly the champions of negative theology, which had Neoplatonic echoes. Such theologians would hold that God cannot be grasped by any knowledge.²⁵ Negative theology was also propounded by Plotinus (d. 270 A.D.) – the foremost exponent of Neoplatonism, himself wary of postulating a multiplicity in God – as the only possible discourse about God. Plotinus goes to such lengths to stress the transcendence of the One that even the predicate of being is inadequately applied to him. The One is beyond being. Like Maimonides a millenium after him, Plotinus does not wish to state the essence of the One or circumscribe it.²⁶ A need arises to refer to God exclusively by means of negative attributes, because the attributes applied to man cannot adequately describe God.

This radical difference between God and man, which resulted in a negative theology, was also the characteristic of certain theological schools of Islam, such as the Jahmiyya and the Isma'ilis, the latter having found favour with Alfarabi, a Muslim philosopher who had immense influence on Maimonides.

But although Maimonides was acquainted with the previous Islamic theological debates, he takes a specific approach by tackling the matter in a distinctively rational, argumentative and logical way, where most theologians had taken a position which was mystical rather than argumentative. Notwithstanding this he does not lose sight of the Jewish religious monotheistic tradition, and in fact shows an effort to keep with the true spirit of tradition. Furthermore, unlike Ash'arites and Mu'tazilites, he does not accept the principle of the analogy of the invisible to the visible.

He starts by stating that affirming the oneness of God cannot go *pari passu* with a belief in essential attributes, as it would represent a belief in a multiplicity.²⁷ It becomes clear at once that Maimonides makes no concessions in his defence of monotheism. He rejects from the start the theory of essential attributes said of God, because God cannot be divided in any sense. Because his approach is based on an analysis of logical propositions, as we shall see, this implies not just a real division in

²⁵ 'Dionysius emphasizes the idea that the Superessential One cannot be reached by any knowledge [...]. A different way of describing the One consists in the enumeration of negative qualities. This is attempted by Dionysius in his *Mystic Theology*, when he said that the One is "neither soul nor spirit, nor representation, nor opinion, nor thought, nor equality, nor disparity, ... nor night, nor light, nor living, nor life"'. Wensick, *The Muslim Creed*, pp. 70-1.

²⁶ 'Note that the phrase "transcending Being" assigns no character, makes no assertion, allots no name, carries only the denial of particular being; and in this there is no attempt to circumscribe it: to seek to throw a line about that illimitable Nature would be folly, and anyone thinking to do so cuts himself off from any slightest and most momentary approach to its last vestige', Plotinus, *The Enneads*, 5.5.6, p. 408.

²⁷ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 111.

God, but also a conceptual division.²⁸ A multiplicity of essential attributes would entail a multiplicity in the essence of God and in our perception and language about it, and must therefore be rejected. The denial of essential attributes, according to Maimonides, is a primary intelligible because 'an attribute is not the essence of the thing of which it is predicated',²⁹ and this becomes clear in his logical treatment of predication. A logical treatment of predication implies an analysis of the divine attributes in terms of logical propositions, that is, in terms of any sentence, comprising a subject and predicate, referring to God. This is how Maimonides proceeds to treat the problem.

According to Maimonides, an attribute can be twofold. It can be (a) 'the essence of the thing of which it is predicated'.³⁰ In this case the relation between subject and predicate is one of tautology, such as to say that 'man is man', in which case it is also superfluous. Or (b) the predicate is an explanation, or definition, of the subject. It may also be that 'the attribute is different from the thing of which it is predicated, being a notion superadded to that thing'.³¹ In this case, the predicate signifies something more than the subject itself. A difficulty immediately arises. To say that God is God is superfluous. A sentence referring to God cannot be an explanation, a statement of his essence, for he cannot be defined. The Aristotelian definition comprises the genus and differentia of the definiendum and God, as an infinite being, cannot be classed under a genus. And if the attribute predicated of the divine includes something that is not in the subject (that is not in him) then a multiplicity will arise in the divine subject which contravenes the assumption of his oneness. Maimonides' aim is to define the limits of our language about God, as expressed in sentences containing a subject and a predicate, without having to admit only the tautologous propositions as valid when referring to God, since the sentences stating the essence of God or crediting him with a superadded notion must be discarded. Maimonides' proceeds to explain in greater detail the meaning of 'attribute'.

Maimonides analyses any positive attribute as falling under five classes. An attribute is either a definition of the thing of which it is predicated, or part of the definition; it can also be a quality, a relation or an action.

The first two are rejected by Maimonides, because God cannot be defined or his essence divided, following the Aristotelian analysis already mentioned. Aristotle defines man as a 'rational animal', 'animal' designating the genus and 'rational' the differentia. But defining God in a similar manner is impossible, because he cannot be subsumed under any genus or species, or any corresponding differentia. Traditionally, the Muslim philosophers and Maimonides held the view that the genus and species to which any being belongs are not merely logical categories but entail also a degree of causal reality in relation to the beings which they subsume. In

²⁸ Ibidem, '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', p. 113.

²⁹ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 112.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 113.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 113.

this sense, God cannot belong to any genus, let alone species, otherwise he would somehow be caused by them, and it is God who creates genera and species, since he is the cause of all intelligibles. A tenuous line can be seen to separate the ontological and the logical plane. Obviously, God could not have part of a definition predicated of him. According to Maimonides, 'if he has a part of an essence, his essence must be composite'.³² We are faced with the same problem as when predicating an essence of him, for having part of an essence predicated, say 'rational', is again subsuming God under a genus or species.

The attribute considered as quality is rejected by Maimonides because it does not explain the essence, it 'is not a thing through which the essence is perfected and constituted',³³ but a superadded notion. Furthermore, quality is one of the ten Aristotelian categories which serve to classify any substance, and are said of a the subject as an accident inheres in a substance. But God, for several medieval philosophers, is not a substance. He is not a compound of different elements, of form and matter, and he is not a substratum for accidents. The error of endowing God with an attribute of quality is further illustrated by Maimonides' in expanding on the four genera of qualities. Quality can refer to (a) a person's moral habits or dispositions, such as to say that a person is chaste; or to (b) a natural property, for instance if substance is soft or hard; or to (c) an affection, such as mercy, or to (d) 'quantity considered as such', for example length. By virtue of the fact that God is not a body, (b) and (d) are automatically excluded. And because God does not have a soul – and consequently is not constituted by different faculties – and does not receive affections (a) and (c) are equally discarded. So much for the attribute of quality.

Attribute understood as relation is considered not to entail multiplicity, for a person can bear relations to different entities – for example the same person can be a mother and a daughter in relation to other persons, but it does not apply to God because there is no relation between him and the world. Maimonides highlights the absolute transcendence of the divine. There are other, more specific reasons for Maimonides' rejection of the attribute of relation as predicated of God. One such reason is that there is no relation between him and the world because nothing can be said of him in the same way that it is said of the world and its substances. Not even 'existence' can be predicated of humans as it is of God. Existence can solely be said of man and God by way of absolute equivocation. Equivocal predication, in Aristotle, refers to entities (in this case, attributes) bearing the same name but having a different definition,³⁴ so that the analogy in predicating the same attribute of man and God is casual, and does not point to an essential similarity. The other reason is that, according to Maimonides, there can only be a relation between two beings that belong to the same species. Yet God does not share a genus with humans or any other being. Therefore, one cannot employ the attribute of relation in any sentence about God.

³² Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 115.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Categories*, Ia 1-6.

The only positive attribute accepted by Maimonides for predication regarding the divine subject is an attribute of action, which also marks the boundary of what we can positively say of God. We cannot know God himself, because he bears no relation to the created world, but we know the effect of his actions in this world. Maimonides had to find a kind of logical predication in sentences referring to God without limiting himself to a merely tautologous (and superfluous) proposition³⁵ but also without drawing on an non-existing similarity between God and man. As a consequence, he prefers the attributes of action predicated of God in a 'proposition consisting of a subject and a finite verb', rather than a 'proposition consisting of a subject and predicate connected by the copula'.³⁶ In the former, 'the predicate and the subject can be identical without making the proposition tautological'. The attributes of action belong to a specific kind of predication which allows us to say something positive about the divine subject without an attempt to describe its essence – perhaps the most original contribution of Maimonides' to divine predication. In using Aristotelian logic, he finds a way of establishing the limits and possibilities of our language about God without losing sight of the Scriptural spirit. The Aristotelian method is employed for theological and philosophical purposes in order to clarify the main issues involving predication of the divine. This clarification was made possible by Maimonides' ingenious use of an Aristotelian framework of inquiry. Furthermore, it complies both with the Scriptural principle of an ever active and creative God and with the Aristotelian conception of God as pure activity and intellect. If no attributes could be asserted of God, how to understand the scriptural references to God? Scripture contains above all a description of God's *acts* and his interaction with humans since creation. Thus Maimonides' solution, which allows attributes of action as the only positive predication of God is in perfect compliance with the Old Testament's description of God. And, as mentioned before, it does not try to define his essence, which would anthropomorphise him. Although predication through the use of attributes of action does not encroach on God's essence, these acts according to Maimonides are carried by means of his simple essence.³⁷

Maimonides' position on divine attributes of action represents a concession to the use of attributes, which is necessary if we are to speak meaningfully about God. His approach focuses on the linguistic aspect of the problem, as we have seen, whilst bearing on important issues such as the wider problem of our relationship with God. Without attributes to speak and think about God, any religious discourse would be void. This would constitute just as serious an obstacle to a theistic stance as anthropomorphism, which assimilates God to human beings and undermines his transcendence. Maimonides, while keeping

³⁵ 'Logical propositions must express some kind of relation between subject and predicate other than a relation of identity. This is the main burden of his [Maimonides'] enquiry'. Wolfson, *Maimonides on negative attributes*, p. 195.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 196.

³⁷ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 119.

with a rigorous view on God's oneness and transcendence, felt the need to strike a balance between sheer anthropomorphism and a divested view of God that might border on agnosticism. This he does not only by allowing attributes of action to be predicated of him (and as we have seen al-Ash'arī had already distinguished between attributes of action and attributes of the essence), but also by allowing negative attributes to be said of him. Positive attributes other than attributes of action must be excluded, and in this Maimonides is much stricter than al-Ghazzālī, who takes attributes said of God and man alike to be univocal. He is also stricter than Averroes, who in spite of asserting that the terms or attributes referring to God and to humans are predicated by equivocation (*bi-ʾishtirāk*), is not quite as reluctant as Maimonides in accepting positive predication in relation to God.

I shall explain al-Ghazzālī's and Averroes' views before proceeding with the exposition of Maimonides' account of negative attributes.

The polemic between Mu'tazilites and Ash'arites regarding divine attributes and the wider issue of scriptural exegesis continued in the debate between al-Ghazzālī (d.1111), a theologian of the Ash'arite school who defended a more literal interpretation of the Qur'ān, and the Muslim philosophers, who shared a common speculative approach with the Mu'tazilites (albeit without sharing many of their views) and were influenced by the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian tradition. The *falāsifa* had a twofold task, supporting a speculative approach to the Qur'ān and championing Greek, i.e., pagan and foreign (in the eyes of the theologians) science. Al-Ghazzālī, the most influential Muslim theologian of all times, explicitly accuses the philosophers of denying God's attributes in the sixth discussion of his *Tahāfut al-falāsifa* (*The Incoherence the Philosophers*), and faults them for holding the position that the Mu'tazilites had held before.³⁸

In addition he accused the philosophers of *kufʾ* (heresy), on three counts: their views on the eternity of the world, their theory that God knows particulars in a universal way and their denial of bodily resurrection. His main target was Avicenna (d. 1037), but it extended to all philosophers following Greek science and philosophy, and a conception of God that departed from the explicit text of the Qur'ān. The main bone of contention lay in divergent conceptions of God. Al-Ghazzālī defended a personal God. There is, for him, a clear analogy between God and humans, even though God possesses his attributes in a way different to humans. According to al-Ghazzālī, their viewing God as a merely intellectual renders the use of such terms as 'agent' and 'creator' nugatory. Again, the issue is: how are the divine attributes mentioned in the Qur'ān to be understood and interpreted?

³⁸ Al-Ghazzālī's passage is quoted by Averroes in his *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*. Averroes' *Tahāfut al-tahāfut* (*The Incoherence of the Incoherence*), p. 186, original Arabic version, Bouyges, pp. 311-312. See al-Ghazzālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, p. 96.

Averroes (d.1198), a contemporary of Maimonides, his countryman (both hailed from Cordoba) and an Aristotelian like him, offers a point-by-point response to al-Ghazzālī's criticism in the *Tahāfut al-Tahāfut*. Averroes' chief response against the criticism poured on the philosophers, whose overall positions he defends, is to stress the difference existing between God's and man's nature on several counts. Averroes emphasises, against al-Ghazzālī, that the philosophers do grant God a will, with the proviso it differs from human will. They also accord him knowledge, which it is not to be confused with human knowledge or understood through an analogy between God's knowledge and human knowledge. As regards these attributes, will and knowledge, they are predicated of God and humans alike by sheer homonymy or equivocation, which as we have seen is in Aristotle tantamount to saying that they bear different definitions. The Arabic expression used by Averroes in several of his works to denote homonymy is *bi-l-ishṭirāk*, literally, by equivocation, or by sharing the same designation, but not the same definition.³⁹ In spite of this qualification, Averroes accepts that God's attributes are identical with his essence, and that we can speak of God's knowledge. In this he does not go as far as Maimonides', who denies any positive predication of God with the exception of negative attributes and attributes of action. It is yet to be established whether Averroes had a textual influence upon Maimonides, since they were contemporaries. At any rate the latter's stance on attributes comes across as a development and radicalisation of Averroes' conception of divine versus human attributes. Maimonides' contention that these are to be taken as completely equivocal is best understood in his use of negative attributes with regard to God.

Because there is no relation between God and the world, the terms we use to describe the world cannot be applied to God, also because, according to Maimonides, our language is limited in scope.⁴⁰ Therefore, it is necessary to establish what we can validly say about God. In addition to attributes of action one may use negative attributes, which refer indirectly to the divine essence, and enable us to acquire a certain grasp of divine nature. There are several advantages in using negative attributes. They entail no multiplicity, they say nothing about the essence of God as such, which is a mystery that the human mind cannot attain, but they allow for some particularisation, which is vital if we are to speak and think about God. Similarly, all affirmative attributes that are applied to God must be interpreted as denying the opposite of what they state. To say that God is just means to say that he is not unjust, thereby excluding him from the set of beings that are unjust. This does not involve placing God under any set, i.e., genus or species. Furthermore, the limits Maimonides imposes on our language about God are so narrow that he himself speaks of

³⁹ Averroes, *Tahāfut al-tahāfut*, p. 264, original Arabic version in Bouyges, p. 439.

⁴⁰ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, p. 139.

positive attributes when talking about God in his *Guide*. This must be seen not as a device to confuse the reader or as a flagrant contradiction, but as putting into practice the principle according to which there are several kinds of language one can use to speak about God, depending on the level of understanding and intellectual training of the addressee, a distinction that harks back to Aristotle and is present in his Greek commentators and the Muslim theologians.⁴¹ This is what Maimonides explicitly states in his introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed* as one of the causes to 'account for the contradictory or contrary statements to be found in any book or compilation'.⁴² And this rule is clearly applied in Maimonides' treatment of divine attributes because he proceeds from explaining the simpler aspect, which is the application of attributes of action, to the most difficult, which is the use of negative attributes to refer to God.

Maimonides' discussion of attributes of action and negative attributes is a coherent and logically consistent way of tackling the problem of multiplicity caused by an affirmation of positive attributes in God. It defines the acceptable boundaries of human speech when referring to God, and keeps to the principles of God's absolute oneness and transcendence that constitute the foundations of a monotheistic stance.

⁴¹ For a specific treatment of this subject in Maimonides, see Oliver Leaman's *Moses Maimonides*, pp. 33-34. Leaman is critical of Maimonidean scholarship which stresses Maimonides' use of contradiction to elude the readers of the *Guide*. According to Leaman, many of the so called contradictions to be found in the *Guide* can be explained away through Maimonides' use of different kinds of discourse. The three kinds of discourse accepted by the Muslim philosophical tradition were the rhetorical, which comprises the discourse for the majority, the dialectical, which is based on commonly accepted premises and the demonstrative, which is based on indisputable premises. This is a methodological scheme first developed by Aristotle. A variation in discourse, Maimonides' fifth cause to account for any contradiction patent in any book, along with the seventh cause, consisting in a deliberate use of contradiction for the purpose of eluding the less intellectually minded reader, constitute the two causes of any contradiction to be found in the *Guide*. But it can be argued that those to whom the *Guide* is addressed, those possessing an excellent religious grounding and philosophical training, would gather from the context which type of discourse Maimonides is using and when he switches from one to the other, without having to be expressly reminded of it. That Maimonides' overall stance is rational, and logically consistent is evinced for example by Spinoza's (d. 1677), himself a philosopher and exegete of the Jewish Bible, position towards Maimonides. In his *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Spinoza criticizes Maimonides' doctrine in the *Guide* precisely for its attempt to reconcile Scripture and Reason by way of subsuming Scripture under Reason and forcing it into a philosophical framework. Spinoza's view is that these two domains are best kept apart and distinct. Vide *Theologico-Political Treatise*, chapter 7, pp. 114-119, and chapter 15, pp. 190-194.

⁴² Leaman, pp. 17-20.

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