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THE UNITY OF GOD AND THE UNITY OF THE WORLD:

SAADIA AND MAIMONIDES

The theme of the unity of God is one of the most important, if
not *the* most important, subject for Jewish philosophy of the
Middle Ages as it is, indeed, for Islamic and Christian
philosophy. There is virtually no Jewish philosopher of note,
from the beginnings of Jewish philosophy to the end of the
medieval period and beyond, who has not discoursed on the theme
of divine unity.

The subject we shall here treat is the effect, if any, of the
belief in the unity of God on the conception of the world. Does
the belief in one God as opposed to many have any consequences
for one's perception of the cosmos? Does the unity of the Deity
imply the unity of the world, or does it imply the exact
reverse, namely, that the unity of God is so exclusive that it
denies unity to His creation? To put it another way, does
monotheism imply the existence of the world as a *universe* or as a
multiverse.

This question is primarily a metaphysical one, and before
pursuing it any further it is instructive to inquire concerning
any effects of a less theoretical nature that the unity of Godmay
have on the affairs of mankind, especially in the political

and social spheres. And indeed, we do find a discussion of such relationships in the works of Philo.

In his *De opificio Mundi*, Philo enumerates five lessons that issue from Moses' teaching of the creation of the world by God. The first is that God is eternal, which comes to opoose the views of the atheists. Thereafter,

> Secondly, that God is one. This with a view
> to the propounders of polytheism, who do not
> blush to transfer from earth to heaven mob-
> rule, the worst of evil polities.[1]

This cryptic remark is expanded by Philo in his *De Confusione Linguarum*:

> And therefore when I hear those who say, "We
> are all sons of one man, we are peaceful"
> (Gen. 42:11), I am filled with admiration for
> the harmonious concert which their words
> reveal. "Ah! my friends," I would say, "how
> should you not hate war and love peace--you
> who have enrolled yourselves as children of
> one and the same Father, who is not mortal but
> immortal--God's Man,[2] who being the Word of
> the Eternal must needs himself be imperisha-
> ble?" Those whose system includes many origins
> for the family of the soul, who affiliate
> themselves to that evil thing called polythe-

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ism, who take in hand to render homage some to this deity, some to that, are the authors of tumult and strife at home and abroad, and fill the whole of life from birth to death with internecine wars.

But those who rejoice in the oneness of their blood and honour one father, right reason, reverence that concert of virtues which is full of harmony and melody, and live a life of calmness and fair weather. And yet that life is not, as some suppose, an idle and ignoble life, but one of high courage, and the edge of its spirit is exceeding sharp to fight against those who attempt to break treaties and ever practise the violation of the vows they have sworn. For it is the nature of men of peace that they prove to be men of war when they take the field and resist those who would subvert the stability of the soul.[3]

Philo thus sees a clear influence of man's religious conception on his political-moral behavior. The polytheists, who believe in a plurality of gods who must of necessity be involved in disputes, wars, and intrigue, transfer their theological beliefs to their mundane behavior, and hence are not people of peace. Monotheists too reflect their theology in their mundane lives, but with the opposite results: they are men of peace, but not pacifists. The oneness of the God they worship is revealed in the

oneness of mankind, and hence they cherish peace.

Philo thus establishes that there is indeed a relationship between the belief in one God and the affairs of man in the world. But we must still inquire further about the relationship of monotheism to the nature of the world as such: universe or multiverse?

We here find a divergence of opinion between two giants of medieval Jewish philosophy which, to my knowledge, has not been previously noted.

Saadia and Maimonides hold conflicting views on the consequence for our understanding of the cosmos that flows from the affirmation of divine unity.

For Saadia, the unity of God is so exclusive that its corollary is the necessary multiplicity and non-unitary character of the cosmos, i.e., all else.

Thus, he writes:

> ...[I]nasmuch as the Creator of the universe, exalted and magnified be He, is essentially one, it follows by logical necessity that His creatures be composed of many elements... [T]he thing that generally gives the appearance of constituting a unity, whatever sort of unity it be, is singular only in number. Upon careful consideration, however, it is found to be of a multiple nature....

All these phenomena are in accord with the laws of creation: namely, that the Creator, exalted and magnified be He, be one and His works manifold. This is also borne out by such statements of the Scripture as, "How manifold are Thy works, O Lord! In wisdom hast Thou made them all" (Ps.104:24).[4]

For Saadia, clearly, monotheism implies the existence of a multiverse, not a universe.

Maimonides, however, draws the exactly opposite conclusion from the identical premises. The unity of God, he avers, yields not the manifold quality of the world but its unitary nature. Thus:

Know that this whole of being is one individual and nothing else. I mean to say that the sphere of the outermost heaven with everything that is within it is undoubtedly one individual having in respect of individuality the rank of Zayd and Umar. The differences between its substances, I mean the substances of this sphere with everything that is within it, are like the unto the differences between the limbs of a man, for instance. Thus just as, Zayd, for instance, is one individual and is at the same time composed of various parts of the body, such as the flesh and the bones and of various mixtures and of several spirits, the sphere in question as a whole is composed of the heavens, the four elements, and what is compounded of the latter....[5]

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Here Maimonides goes into a lengthy scientific discourse intending to show how the physical world, astronomically and biologically, functions as a whole, integrating its various parts. He then continues:

> Accordingly, it behooves you to represent to yourself in this fashion the whole of this sphere as one living individual in motion and possessing a soul. For this way of representing the matter to oneself is most necessary or most useful for the demonstration that the deity is one , as shall be made clear. By means of this representation it will also be made clear that the One has created one being.[6]

Maimonides then returns to his analogies from Nature, in order to demonstrate that the world as a whole is one by virtue of a single governing principle. Thus he concludes:

> In the same way there exists in being something that rules it as a whole and puts into motion its first principal part granting it the power of putting into motion, in virtue of which this part governs the things that are other than itself... [I]t is in virtue of this thing that that the existence of the sphere and every part of it endures. This thing is the deity, may its name be exalted.[7]

Hence, unlike Saadia, Maimonides sees the entire cosmos as one large organism, and indeed it is this unitary character of the creation that leads us to conclude that the Creator is One. This answers, for Maimonides, the ancient question of how the One can be the author of the many; the world is not "many" but one, and the unity of existence and the unity of the Creator thus reflect each other.[8] Of course, the nature of that unity differs with respect to God and the universe: the divine unity is simple and the unity of the world is compound--the unity of an organism rather than that of a "simple" substance.

The question now is whether this difference of opinion is itself fundamental and arbitrary, i.e., that it expresses a mental bias about the exclusive nature of divine oneness, Saadia holding that such oneness excludes any other oneness, even that of the created world, and Maimonides maintaining that since the Creator is one, that oneness must be reflected in His creation; or is there a more fundamental difference in outlook between them to which this controversy can be reduced?

I suggest that there is indeed such a more basic difference that can explain their divergent views on the universe/multiverse issue, and that is, their respective philosophies on the divine attributes. However, the relationship between the two sets of views is not necessarily symmetrical.

In the matter of the nature of the divine attributes, which was central to so much of medieval philosophical thinking, Maimonides follows the Neoplatonic trade on, refracted through the prism of

Arabic Aristotelianism, according to which God is an absolutely simple substance, a concept of unity which excludes all plurality.[9] Hence, he demonstrates the impossibility of predicating positive attributes to God.[10] All positive statements about God in the Torah concern the effects and not the being of God. For Maimonides, both accidental and essential attributes are expansive, adding information about Him, and implying ontological multiplicity. Therefore, essential attributes cannot be predicated affirmatively of God. And accidental attributes must be understood as referring to His actions, for that does not imply multiplicity.[11] This negation of privation applies as well to the attribute of unity, so to say that God is one is, in effect, to exclude from Him any multiplicity.[12]

Moreover, essential attributes cannot be interpreted amphibolously or metaphorically, for this introduces an element of multiplicity into God and requires some degree of likeness between God and world.[13] And for Maimonides, God and world are totally unlike each other. "Would that I knew," he writes, "whence the likeness could come so that the divine and human attributes could be comprised in the same definition and used in a univocal sense."[14]

At first blush, it would seem logical that Maimonides, for whom God and world are totally dissimilar, would support the idea that the world is not "one," that it is a "multiverse" and not a "universe," thus accentuating the radical difference between the Creator and His creation. One would expect, equally, that those

who reject the principle of negative attributes, and for whom
God and world thus share the attribute of oneness, would
advocate a unitary world. (Whether this is true for Saadia, and
if so to what degree, we shall see presently.) However, the facts
are quite the contrary and, paradoxically, they probably issue
from the same premises.

With regard to Saadia, we have no clear and unambiguous reading
of his views as we do those of Maimonides. Saadia is sufficiently
ambiguous to admit of several different interpretations of his
opinion on the divine attributes and, indeed, historians of
Jewish philosophy are divided in their exegesis of Saadia.

Arguing against the anthropomorphists for whom the Biblical
expressions about God are taken in their literal and material
rather than their metaphoric sense, Saadia writes of five
attributes: one, living, omnipotent, omniscient, and unlike
anything else.[15] He then goes on to focus on the three middle
attributes--life, power, and wisdom.[16] It would seem, therefore,
that at least in the case of these three elementary attributes
Saadia believes in the "real" existence of divine attributes. Yet
elsewhere, Saadia writes:

> If language were to restrict itself to just
> one term, its employment would be very much
> curtailed and it would be impossible to
> express by means of it any more than a small
> portion of what we aim to convey.It therefore
> preferred to extend its use of words so as to

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transmit every meaning, relying for the correct interpretation upon reason and acquaintance with the texts of Scripture and with history. Were we, in our effort to give an account of God, to make use only of expressions that were literally true, it would be necessary for us to desist from speaking of Him as one who hears and sees and pities and wills to the point where there would be nothing left for us to affirm except the fact of His existence.[17]

The first of the two above references to Saadia on attributes appears to confirm David Neumark's contention that Saadia strongly favors the three attributes mentioned, while the second seems to support the conclusion of David Kaufmann, who interprets Saadia as in principle rejecting all attributes.[18]

Julius Guttmann disagrees with both. "All this, however," he writes in connection with Saadia's statement on the inadequacy of language, "does not permit us to attribute to Saadia the negation of all positive attributes." In many places Saadia does clearly admit the fundamental attributes of God, and therefore "we must accept his doctrine as it stands, with all the intrinsic contradictions which Saadia felt but could not resolve."[19] Fundamentally, Guttmann avers, Saadia maintains that the divine attributes are identical with His essence. In this he follows the Mu'tazilites who taught the identity of the attributes and the divine essence, which is absolutely simple. In this manner, they

sought to avoid the conclusion of the Neoplatonists who, in responding to the Cynics' old problem of how one subject could have many predicates, when applied to God, asserted that the One had no positive attributes and was therefore beyond reason. Saadia, along with the Mu'tazilites, held fast to the idea of a personal God, but they did not differentiate His attributes from His essence, which remained absolutely simple.[20] Guttmann holds, in sum, that Saadia rejected a negative theology.

If we accept this interpretation of Saadia by Guttmann, then we arrive at a symmetrical solution to the problem we posed, namely, how to explain the difference between Saadia and Maimonides on whether the unity of God leads to the unity of the world or the opposite, its multiple nature. Because divine unity for Saadia is a positive attribute, he has to struggle to preserve its integrity, and especially its non-composite nature, by insisting upon its exclusivity and guarding against its use to describe all that is non-divine. Affirmation of a "universe" would somehow make the unity of the Creator less significant, especially since both statements are positive predications. Saadia, therefore, is inclined to deny the organic unity of the world, even if such unity be understood as merely composite.

Maimonides, however, has no fear of diluting the concept of divine unity by declaring that it is reflected in the unity of the cosmos. God and world are so radically unalike, the one being a negation of multiplicity and the other a positive statement of composite unity, that to infer the unity of the world from that of God is patently an assertion of common unity only in the most

formal sense. Maimonides has no worry that any confusion will result, and that the vast differences between them will be compromised by establishing that the unity of God is reflected in a completely different kind of unity of the world--or "universe."

Thus, the dispute between Saadia and Maimonides on whether monotheism implies a universe or a multiverse reduces to the question of the positive or negative nature of the attributes. Paradoxically, Saadia who asserts the unity of God as a positive attribute denies the unity of the universe, and Maimonides who holds that the unity of God must be understood negatively and that the world and God are radically different teaches that monotheism leads to a conception of one world.

However, as mentioned, this conclusion is warranted only if we adopt Guttmann's views--and they are by no means universally accepted. Israel Efros, for one, is critical of Guttmann and maintains that Saadia does not contradict himself in the matter of attributes and that Saadia consistently maintains that the attributes are not univocal terms. Saadia seeks to remove plurality from the concept of divinity. God's action, including the three attributes of life and power and wisdom as an expression of action, he writes, "spring not from attributes or powers or hypostases, but from the mystery of His essence alone. And in this Saadia is clearly echoed in Maimonides."[21]

Harry A. Wolfson similarly, and even more trenchantly, argues that Saadia is located in the Antiattributist camp, beginning with Saadia's emphasis on "nothing...resembles Him, and... He does not resemble any of His works"[22] and the internal

simplicity or non-compositeness of God.[23] Actions, for Saadia, can be attributed to God without compromising His unity.[24] Then, advocating the metaphorical interpretation of inappropriate terms, Saadia distinguishes between those that have a positive and those that have a negative meaning. Life, power, and wisdom--attributes which have a positive meaning--are merely explanations of the term "Maker/Creator" and have no independent existence,[25] whereas the term "One" has a negative meaning: "the annulment of otherness," by which is meant both the otherness of other gods and the otherness of any attributes.[26] Finally, there is a class of relative terms--those that are expressions of man's esteem and reverence for God; these are subjective glorifications of God.[27]

It is evident, if only from the variety of ways of understanding Saadia, that he is not as well focused and lucid as, say, Maimonides. Hence, the conclusion we arrived at above, that Maimonides' assertion of a "universe" flows from his negative theology, is far clearer and more cogent than its obverse, namely, the explanation of Saadia's opinion that the world is a "multiverse." Nevertheless, it can be argued that because of his more varied and less clearly structured theory of attributes, Saadia wants to be sure that there is a distinct difference between God and the cosmos, in that God is one while the world is multiple.

NOTES

(1) *Philo*, Loeb Classics Library, (Cambridge/London: 1929), volume I, 135.

(2) Philo is here referring to the Logos.

(3) Philo, volume IV (1932), p.33.

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(4) Saadia Gaon, <u>The Book of Beliefs and Opinions</u>, Treatise X, Exordium (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: ed. and trans. Joseph Kapah [New York, 1969/70] p. 287; Medieval Hebrew trans. Judah Ibn Tibbon, ed. Israel Kituber [reprt. Jerusalem, 1962] pp. 99a-b; English: trans. Samuel Rosenblatt [New Haven, 1948], pp. 357-58).

(5) Maimonides, <u>Guide of the Perplexed</u>, Part I, chap. 72 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: ed. and trans. Joseph Kapah [Jerusalem, 1972] p. 198; Medieval Hebrew: trans. Judah Ibn Tibbon, ed. Judah even Shmue'el [Jerusalem, 1981] p. 159; English: trans. Shlomo Pines [Chicago, 1963], p. 184).

(6) Maimonides, <u>Guide</u>, Part I, chap. 72 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 202; Medieval Hebrew: p. 162; English: p. 187).

(7) Maimonides, *Guide*, Part I, chap. 72 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 202; Meideval Hebrew: p. 162; English: p. 187).

(8) See further my *Faith and Doubt* (New York, 1971), p. 66, n.1.

(9) More accurately, the source for the idea of the absolute simplicity of God is Philo; Greek philosophy denied Him the composition of matter and form, but went no further than that.

See Harry A. Wolfson, *Philo* (Cambridge, Mass., 1962), Vol.II, pp. 94-164, and "Saadia on the Trinity and Incarnation," in *Studies and Essays in Honor of Abraham A. Neuman* (Philadelphia, 1962), p. 551.

(10) Maimonides, 1:51 and 52.

(11) See Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides on Religious Language," in *Perspectives on Maimonides: Philosophical and Historical Studies*, ed. Joel L. Kraemer (Oxford University Press: 1991), p. 185.

(12) Maimonides, Guide, Part I, chap. 56 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 137; Medieval Hebrew: p. 112; English: p. 131).

(13) See Hyman, p. 187.
(14) Maimonides, 1:56.
(15) Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Part II, chap. 1 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 82; Medieval Hebrew: p. 87; English: p. 94).

(16) Saadia, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Part II, chapters 4 and 5 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: pp. 88-93; Medieval Hebrew: p. 91-93; English: p.101-107).

(17) Saadia Gaon, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Part II, chap. 10 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 101; Medieval Hebrew: p. 97; English: p. 118).

(18)   Cited in Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism*, trans. David W. Silverman (Philadelphia, 1964), p. 418f., n. 29.

(19) Guttmann, pp. 69-70.

(20) Guttmann, p. 69.

(21) Israel Efros, *Studies in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (New York & London, 1974), pp. 51-55.

(22) Saadia, *Beliefs and Opinions*, Part II, chap. 1 (Arabic and Modern Hebrew: p. 83; Medieval Hebrew: p.87; English: p. 94).

(23) Wolfson, "Saadia on the Semantic Aspect of the Problem of Attribute," in the *Salo Wittmayer Baron Jubilee Volume* (Jerusalem,   1974),   II,   p.   1009.

(24) Wolfson, "Semantic Aspect," p. 1010.

(25) Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy* (Cambridge MA, 1979), p.11.

(26) Wolfson, "Semantic Aspect," pp. 1012-1014; *Repercussions*, p. 50.

(27) Wolfson, "Semantic Aspects," p. 1014.