

Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers

Volume 14 | Issue 4

Article 1

10-1-1997

On Negative Theology

Hilary Putnam

Follow this and additional works at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy>

Recommended Citation

Putnam, Hilary (1997) "On Negative Theology," *Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 4 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://place.asburyseminary.edu/faithandphilosophy/vol14/iss4/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faith and Philosophy: Journal of the Society of Christian Philosophers by an authorized editor of ePLACE: preserving, learning, and creative exchange.

ON NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

Hilary Putnam

In addition to being arguably the greatest Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides was also the most radical of the medieval proponents of “negative theology”. Building on some recent important work by Ehud Benor,¹ I propose to discuss the puzzles and paradoxes of negative theology not as simply peculiar to Maimonides’ thought, but as revealing something that can assume great importance for religious life at virtually any time. My discussion will begin with a brief review of well known aspects of Maimonides’ view; following that I will say something about Wittgensteinian views of religious language²; then I will return to Maimonides’ negative theology; and finally I will consider some philosophical criticisms, not only of Maimonides’ view but of the medieval discussion as a whole.

Maimonides’ negative theology and “attributes of action”

A puzzle which confronts any thoughtful reader of Maimonides’ great philosophical text, *The Guide of the Perplexed*³ is the following: Maimonides emphatically tells us that no positive predicate which we are able to understand can apply to God. Indeed, the more we apply such predicates — even “Good” or “Real” — to God, thinking thereby to say something literally or even analogically true of God, we “become like one who likens him to other things”, which is Maimonides’ way of saying we become *idolatrous*.⁴ What leads Maimonides to this conclusion (as it led both Islamic and Christian theologians to much less radical forms of “negative theology”) was the familiar insistence on God’s absolute unity. The following passage from *Guide* 1:50 illustrates the radicalism, as Maimonides *denies that God possesses essential attributes*:

If...you are one of those whose ambition it is to rise to a higher level, at which things are thought out, if you wish to know with certainty that God is truly one, in the sense that there exists no multiplicity whatever in Him and no capability of division in any respect, then you must recognize that He has no essential attributes. Those who believe God to be one with many attributes have affirmed his Oneness verbally while mentally believing Him to be many. This resembles the Christians’ formula that “He is one but three” and that “the three are one,” or the dictum of those who reject anthropomor-



phism and affirm His absolute simplicity⁵ by saying “He is one but he has many attributes, He and His attributes being one” — as if our object were to find out what to say rather than what to believe.”⁶

Given all this, as Benor remarks⁷, it is surprising that “Maimonides permits both attributes of action, and attributes of character such as ‘merciful’, ‘gracious’ and ‘long-suffering’, which invoke an image of God as a moral person worthy of imitation.” True, Maimonides qualifies this by saying that “the meaning is here not that He possesses moral qualities, but that He performs actions that in us proceed from moral qualities”⁸; but can it be the case that Maimonides thought that “He performs actions” is univocal as applied to God and as applied to human beings? Logically speaking, if *no* attribute that we can think can be literally or even analogically predicated of God, then performing actions cannot be predicated of God either. This is the familiar antinomy of negative theology. No one supposes that Maimonides was *unaware* of it. So what is going on here?

Wittgenstein’s view of religious language

At this point, I shall temporarily abandon the subject of Maimonides’ thought and say something about religious language. My views are informed by Wittgenstein’s Lectures on Religious Belief, as I interpreted them when I wrote *Renewing Philosophy*⁹, but I shall not repeat the exegesis of specific passages given there. For my present purpose, what is important is the following: on the view I there ascribed to Wittgenstein, religious language and the languages of ordinary empirical description and scientific theorizing are, in a way, incommensurable.¹⁰ The religious believer (*qua* religious believer) is not — or *should not be* — I said that Wittgenstein’s account is a normative account, and like many normative accounts of religion — engaged in the prediction of empirical phenomena, and religious faith is not refuted by this or that empirical happening or scientific discovery. To suppose, as many people nowadays do, that “science has refuted religion”, is to have a deeply confused understanding of what real religious belief *is*.

As I emphasized in *Renewing Philosophy* (168 ff.), this does not mean that Wittgenstein was immunizing religious belief from criticism (although he was saying that one *sort* of criticism is utterly misguided). One may find what the believer says unintelligible: for instance, one may find that it violates one’s sense of what life means; or one may find that religious belief has lost its hold on one (or one has lost one’s hold on it), and it now appears as something strange and alien; but what one should not do is claim that one’s view, whatever it is, is mandated by “present day science”¹¹. Nor — or so I argued in *Renewing Philosophy* — should one hope that philosophy of language, or analytic philosophy, will be able to tell one whether religious language makes sense and, if so, what sort of sense it makes. There is simply no uncommitted place to stand with respect to the religious dimension of human life.

Of particular importance is the following thought, which runs through all of Wittgenstein’s philosophy: that our understanding of our language

consists in our ability to use it in the stream of life. Coupled with that thought, and closely connected with it is the idea that a given sentence or a given form of words may mean anything or nothing depending on the context in which it occurs. No sentence, in itself, mandates just one use or just one content.¹² But these thoughts are subject to misinterpretations which it is important to guard against if we are to bring them to bear on religious language.

One of those misinterpretations is the idea that Wittgenstein thought of language as consisting of a determinate number of "language games".¹³ To be sure, Wittgenstein does often refer to some part of language (either actual language or imagined language or even of exchanges which are highly problematic if thought of as possible parts of a functional language¹⁴) as "language games". But to infer from that that the question, "How many language games does English consist of?" has a sense, or that the question "Is the Jewish religion (or Christianity, or Islam, or Zen Buddhism) a language game?" has a sense, is like supposing that because it is useful to speak of this or that "context", the question "How many contexts are there in the universe?" has a sense, or that the question "Is the Jewish religion a context?" has a sense. Like the term "context", the term "language game" singles out a part of language for a certain kind of attention, but neither has a determinate denotation apart from a context of use.

An even more unfortunate misinterpretation, one that piggybacks on the misinterpretation just described, is the idea that Wittgenstein was saying that religious utterances are *true by convention in certain self-enclosed "language games"* (so that "God exists" is supposed to be true by convention in certain traditional religious "language games" somewhat as it is true by convention — the conventions of chess — that one does not check the queen). This interpretation, although it has been put forward by some, seems to me a travesty of Wittgenstein's thought. As Cora Diamond rightly says in the course of her discussion of Anselm's argument, "The questioning expressed in great riddles is *anyone's*; the possibility of such questions belongs to language itself, and not to any particular language game. The tendency to ask them does not depend on any form of life other than speech itself; it is as much something primitive, something given....as responding to other people (and is indeed found in small children)."¹⁵

What then can we say about the intelligibility of religious language? In one sense, there is no question of its intelligibility. Religious forms of life are a standing possibility for us (if not for everyone, for almost everyone, at least at some point or other in life). Even those who cannot or will not make them their own can, if they are intelligent and sympathetic, enter into them imaginatively as William James did in the *Varieties of Religious Experience*. It is through the ways in which religious language develops and is articulated in the life of religious communities and in the lives of religious individuals that it gains its intelligibility. If religious belief is confused or a kind of confusion — as has, of course, been charged again and again — it is neither a confusion about the grammar of our concepts nor a scientific confusion. If it is a confusion, it is a confusion, one might say, about existence as a whole, and the conviction that it is that sort of confusion is, one may say, a religious conviction as much as what it denounces.

But, of course, the fact that religious belief is different from philosophical confusion and from scientific confusion does not, in and of itself, show that it *isn't*, in this more profound sense, a confusion (or a wish-fulfillment, or an attempt to escape from life — as many thinkers have charged). As I have already said, it is not the point of Wittgenstein's account to *settle* the question of the "validity" of religious belief.

What does settle that question? Not, I have said, the mere fact that religious language is used, and that that use can be grasped. Religious language gains its meaning from the different religious forms of life, but it is not *about* those forms of life. The Object of religious belief, That Than Which Nothing Greater Can Be Conceived, does not simply *drop out*. Religious utterances are not empirical assertions about the religious form of life, and (as already said) they are not "conventions", "grammatical truths" within that form of life. Speaking *as* a believer, I of course say that what makes those utterances true, when they are, is directly or indirectly, their relation to God. If I were not a believer, I would say that *nothing* could make them true; for, if the assertion that God exists is not true, then nothing conceivable could make it true. The risk the believer runs is not empirical falsity (a religious belief that could be empirically false would be an idolatrous belief) but, as the Logical Positivists rightly said (though for bad reasons) "cognitive meaninglessness".

[At this point, I ask the reader's leave for a short digression. In these days, "analytic metaphysicians" usually connect the possibility of "objectivity" in a discourse with the possibility of construing it as "corresponding to reality." The possibility that, e.g., mathematical utterances or ethical utterances might make objective claims *without being descriptions* frequently goes missing in their ruminations. Am I saying that religious language also makes objective claims without corresponding to reality?

Not at all. But must I not then claim that it describes some extraordinary part or region of reality? The answer is that the religious person feels that the Reality of God is such that not only is God not a "part" of what is ordinarily called "reality", but that, in comparison with the Reality of God, the right of what we ordinarily call "reality" to *be* so called is what is problematic. Here we enter the problematique of the "transcendence" of God. We may also say that "corresponds to reality" has a wholly different meaning as applied to religious language, and this connects with our present topic, the problematic of "negative theology".]

Last but not least — and this will bring us back to the issues with which we started — it is part of almost all religious forms of life to say that God, or whatever may be of ultimate concern in the particular religious form of life, is not properly conceptualizable by us. The Maimonidean way of expressing that fact, by saying that it is *idolatrous* to take the things we say about God — that He is "personal", or that he is "Good", or that He is "all-powerful", or that He is "all-knowing" — as true either literally or "analogically" — is, indeed, exceptionally radical; but what is behind that radical formulation, namely, the sense that whatever one say about God falls hopelessly, ridiculously, short of describing God, is almost universal. And it is not just that one feels (if one is religious) that one cannot express properly what one *means* by using the words our language provides to describe God; it is that one feels one cannot *mean* what one should mean.

The paradox of negative theology

It may seem as if what I am saying, what I am claiming the believer wants to say at certain moments, is that there are *propositions* about God that are true, but that the believer cannot think or even understand. There is, however something verging on contradiction involved in the thought that there are propositions about X which one not only does not understand, but which, by their very nature are unintelligible to one. To be sure, some great logicians of our own time have denied (in a different context, to be sure) that such a thought is contradictory. Describing Bertrand Russell's view in "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", Cora Diamond writes¹⁶,

...let us suppose that each of us is acquainted with his or her own self. This is a view Russell is not certain of, but treats as a serious possibility. Now consider a statement about Bismarck. Since we are supposing that Bismarck has direct acquaintance with himself, he will be able to use the name 'Bismarck' so that it directly designates that self. If he makes the statement, 'Bismarck is an acute diplomatist' or 'I am an acute diplomatist', his self, that he is acquainted with, is actually a constituent of his judgment. But you or I or anyone else can think about Bismarck only via some description; we are not directly acquainted with Bismarck's self. If we say 'Bismarck was an acute diplomatist', what would come out in an analysis of our proposition is that we are not directly designating Bismarck. We designate him via some description.... Because the object Bismarck is known to Bismarck by acquaintance, but known to us only by a description, the judgment we make about Bismarck is not the same as the judgment that Bismarck makes about Bismarck. Bismarck has available to him a proposition that he can understand and that we cannot. We can, however, know by description the proposition that Bismarck understands.¹⁷

But even if Russell felt that his "theory of descriptions" had eliminated or resolved it, there *is* a paradox here.¹⁸ For what Russell is saying is that in addition to the judgment that Russell supposes *he can* make (imagine that it is "The self associated with such-and-such a body is subject to a toothache") there is *another* judgment that only Bismarck can make, in which that same self is referred to by a logically proper name. What makes Russell think this is, of course, that he believes he can think a thought of that kind about himself (the thought he expresses when he says, "I have a toothache"). So he must imagine, concerning the "judgment which Bismarck alone can make", that it is simultaneously *unintelligible* to himself *and* analogous to a judgment he understands. But in what sense can the *unintelligible* be analogous to anything I understand?

I wrote that it may *seem* that what the believer wants to say is that there are propositions about God which are true, but which the believer cannot think or even understand. The reason I wrote "seem" is that the problem the believer faces is even more radical than the one that Russell faced. For,

“proposition” (in the sense of meaningful assertion) is a term that refers to human thought and speech (although Russell’s Platonism might well have led him to deny this). To suppose that God literally thinks in “propositions” would be completely to reject the leading idea of negative theology, the idea that I have been claiming to be prefigured, though not thematized, in ordinary religious consciousness. *There are no “propositions” about God that are adequate to God* — that is what one is committed to if one bravely follows out the line of negative theology to the end, as Maimonides did. For Russell, there were *substitutes* for the judgments about Bismarck that were supposed to be beyond the barrier of intelligibility, substitutes that were supposed to be just as good in a logical sense. But no proposition that human beings can think can be “just as good” as the (WHAT?) that God is able to know about himself. In fact, God cannot — literally or analogically, if we follow Maimonides — “know” anything: “knowing” is also an attribute. Yet, as Benor points out, Maimonides *does* urge us to speak of God as an intellect. How this comes about is what we shall now examine.

Maimonides’ negative theology again

I have emphasized how radical Maimonides’ form of negative theology was. Here is another aspect of that radicality: for some medieval philosophers, “existence” was simply another attribute. But if God has no attributes.....? What should we conclude if we are forced to say that He has not attributes but “attributes”, and that even if we use words like “God” and “Exists” for these “attributes” they do not mean (anything like) what they mean when applied to anything else?¹⁹

Well, in that case, the danger immediately arises that *every* “proof” of God’s Existence *equivocates* — either on the word “exist”, or on the word “cause”, or on one of the other crucial terms. For example, the Cosmological Argument is accepted by Maimonides; that reason itself requires that there be an Unconditioned Ground for the existence of everything conditioned is something a medieval philosopher cannot doubt. Yet the further reasoning that leads Maimonides to the conclusion that the Divine Unity excludes the possession of attributes may show²⁰ that the former reasoning committed the fallacy of equivocation. These paradoxes do not lead Maimonides to lose his faith (just as awareness of the Liar Paradox does not cause present-day people to lose their faith that there is such a thing as truth), but rather to conclude that “the divine essence, as it is, is incomprehensible”²¹, and that “we have no way of describing Him unless it be through negations and not otherwise.”²²

And yet, Maimonides does not tell us to stop talking about God or to talk about God only by way of negations. Indeed, he even tells us how to talk; we can, indeed we must, say that God is good.²³ (In the Amidah, a prayer that they recite silently twice daily, traditional Jews bless God with the words “Blessed are you YHWH, our God, *The Good is your name*, and it is fitting to praise you.” [emphasis added]) Moreover, Maimonides advises us not only to apply “attributes of action” to God, but even attributes of character (to think of God as the supreme intellect, for example).

As Benor interprets what is going on here, Maimonides is not opposed

to our using inadequate ideas in speaking of God. What he is opposed to is the *unknowing* use of inadequate ideas. To use inadequate ideas thinking that one is literally describing God is to fall into idolatry. But that does not mean that adequate ideas are available to us; in the end, even the philosopher must use the inadequate ideas, must thank God and petition God and praise God's Wisdom and Mercy and Goodness and Power, because those are the only ideas we have. Similarly, the ordinary believer, whom I have described as also having what we might call a moment of negative theology in his or her religious life, cannot simply keep silent in the face of the unknowability of God; for the awareness of God's transcendence is only one facet of that life, and the other facets — the sense of the *availability* of God, gratitude to God, the sense of dependence on God, humility before God — require that we speak of God, however inadequate our speaking. What concerns Maimonides is not that we speak of God, but that we tend to fall into idolatry by forgetting how hopelessly inadequate that speaking must be. As Benor puts it:

I carefully note here that Maimonides considers an inadequate idea of God to be an invention of the imagination only if it is constructed without prior knowledge. This leaves room for an inadequate idea of God to be constructed with knowledge, not as a mere product of the imagination. Maimonides' anthropology identifies two cognitive faculties that are capable of positing general conceptions of the world: an intellect that conforms to objective reality, and an imagination that projects a view of the world in the service of human desire. In the latter Maimonides finds the root cause of idolatry, because imaginative projection is uninterested in correspondence to reality. An inadequate idea of God constructed after knowledge has been achieved can no longer be considered imaginative in this sense because it already assumes an objective orientation of the mind.²⁴

Maimonides' position has often been analogized to Kant's²⁵, and indeed Benor speaks of it as "constructive theology". What these positions have in common (if we accept Benor's reading of Maimonides) is that while indeed our descriptions of God may be better or worse, what makes them better or worse is not that any of them is more *accurate*, but that some of them are *better for us*, that is serve to support our morality (in Kant's view), or to produce in us religiously appropriate attitudes, e.g., reverence and humility, and to keep us farther from materialism and idolatry (in Maimonides' view). Yet, persuasive as Benor's reading is, I wonder whether in the end Maimonides' apparent inconsistency in this regard is not fortunate. What I mean by his apparent inconsistency is the fact that (as I read him) he appears to regularly ignore the fact that if nothing can be predicated of God, then we cannot even think of God as the unconditioned sufficient reason for the existence of everything conditioned. That he "ignores" this is, I think, the reason that Maimonides allows us to use attributes of action, that is, to ascribe "goodness" to God *in the sense that the things He brings about are as if they were brought about by a good intelligent being*. I confess that, whatever Maimonides' "theory of predication with respect to God" may logically

have required him to maintain, what he writes seems to me to breath a deep conviction in the existence of a Ground of the whole created world; and I do not believe that, in his heart of hearts, he regarded this as just an idea that was good for *him* to have. (Indeed, it seems to me — although I have not been able to convince anyone else of this interpretation! — that Maimonides may even have exempted “is created by Him” and — “proceeds from Him” from the category of attributes altogether, and hence may have believed that when we say that things are created by God and that certain actions proceed from God we are saying what is literally true²⁶.) And I speak of this inconsistency — if it is an inconsistency — as fortunate because I think that post-Kantian versions of negative theology often involve both a philosophical confusion (the notion of the *Ding an sich*, which makes all ordinary objects into “appearances”) and a religious confusion. The religious confusion appears when the constructive theologian speaks (as some present-day theologians do) of God (or of our idea(s) of God) as a *construction*.. For speaking of our ideas of God as “constructions” loses the sense of them as —however imperfect —*perspectives* . A perspective on something cannot simply be “constructed”; if it is to be a perspective at all, it must be constrained by *what* it depicts and not simply by our moral or other needs.

Benor brings two additional philosophical ideas to bear in interpreting Maimonides’ view. Drawing upon some of my own work on the semantics of natural kind terms²⁷ and upon Saul Kripke’s work on the semantics of proper names,²⁸ he endorses the view that a term can have reference without being synonymous with any description.²⁹ The “proper names” of God, are, for Maimonides, terms of just this kind; they refer to God, but they cannot be “unpacked” conceptually, as conjunctions of attributes.

However, according to Benor, Maimonides does provide what may be called a negative conceptual unpacking, namely by a series of negations of attributes. Benor goes on to explain that, according to Maimonides, the kind of negation of an attribute that is appropriate in the case of God cannot be construed as an ordinary negative attribute; for example, speaking carefully as a philosopher, one may even say that God is *not* good, not meaning that he has the attribute of “not-goodness”, i.e. that God is bad, but that goodness (i.e., the attribute normally referred to by the adjective “good”) is not predicable of God. Moreover, Benor claims that “Maimonides held that the way of negation is sufficient and necessary to determine the reference of God-talk,”³⁰ i.e., it is possible to fix the reference of “God” negatively, by asserting the totality of all such negations: (“God is not P”), one such negation for each predicate P.

The mystery remains

It is important, however, to keep in mind that these ideas, while they may be excellent as reconstructions of aspects of Maimonides’ philosophical views, in no way eliminate the paradoxes I have described. I shall now explain why they do not.

First of all, the contemporary semantic theorizing Benor refers to (often referred to as “the theory of direct reference”) does, indeed, allow for the

possibility of names which have reference but no "intension", no description that constitutes their very conceptual content. But both Kripke and myself have had to say something about how we come to master the use of such names, and in that account descriptions do play a role, a role as *reference fixers*, even if the word whose reference they help to fix does not become synonymous with any of those descriptions. For example, in Kripke's account, a baby may be given a proper name, say "Paul". The persons participating in the naming ceremony must obviously be able to pick out the baby that is being named, pick it out as, say "the baby being held by Mrs. Jones". Later on, speakers may be able to use the name without knowing that Mrs. Jones was present at the naming ceremony, and hence without knowing that that description, which (along with a number of others) could have been used to indicate which child was being named, *ever* applied to "Paul". Some later speaker may simply intend to refer to whoever the speakers from whom he or she learned the relevant use of "Paul" in turn referred to.

However, in the case of the word "God", or of any of the Names of God that Maimonides discusses (e.g., YHWH), there was *never* a point at which some human speaker was able to indicate to Whom he or she was referring by using a literally correct definite description.³¹ In the case of "God" (or YHWH), not only are there no descriptions available which are *synonymous* with the name; there are no descriptions available to serve as reference fixers in the way in which "the baby being held by Mrs. Jones" served as a reference fixer.³² How we come to *understand* the Name of God remains a mystery. It is, of course, just this mystery that what Benor calls "the way of negation" is supposed to resolve.

*Does the way of negation really "fix the reference of God-talk"?
The problem of existential import, etc.*

In the case of negative specification of the reference of a name of God, specification by an endless list of negations, the situation is quite complicated, and we shall have to consider carefully the different sorts of predications that may be involved.

An attribution may be understood either as having or as lacking "existential import". (The medievals were frequently unclear about this.) To understand a positive predication, say "Pegasus is a winged horse" with existential import is to interpret it as meaning "Something pegasizes³³ and is winged and is a horse").

On that interpretation, there are only two plausible interpretations of "Pegasus is not a winged horse". If this negative predication is intended as the *negation* of the corresponding positive predication, then it must be read as asserting "Nothing pegasizes and is both winged and a horse". On this reading of the negative predication, it is true (since, in fact, nothing pegasizes — Pegasus does not exist). Indeed, *for every predicate P, "Pegasus is not P" is true*. But, for Maimonides' theory (as reconstructed by Benor) to work, it needs to be the case that God is the *only* subject S such that for every predicate P, "S is not P" is true. (So we had better not interpret our negative predications *this* way if we want to find a "charitable" reading of

Maimonides' theory.) —The second plausible interpretation of “Pegasus is not a winged horse” takes it, like the corresponding positive predication to have existential import. (The reason this is plausible is that Aristotelian logic seems to treat all predications as having existential import — at least this is the default assumption.) On this second interpretation, however, since Pegasus does not exist the negative predication is false. So the danger that “the way of negation” may fail because the name “God” (or whatever other name of the Deity one might substitute) might behave exactly like a non-referring proper name (like “Pegasus”, for example) would be averted. However, it follows from Maimonides' own view (that existence is also an attribute, and thus not strictly speaking predicable of God) that “God is not P” (e.g., the philosopher's assertion that God is not — properly speaking — a person) is *not* true if understood with existential import. So the problem of understand the possibility of reference to God cannot be solved in this way if we wish to be faithful to Maimonides.

There is at least one more possibility, however. We might — this sometimes happens, in fact — construe a positive predication not as an existential quantification but as a *universally quantified strict implication*. For example, “Pegasus is a winged horse” might be understood, not as asserting that Pegasus exists (in which case it would be false), but as asserting that, for any entity *x*, if *x* pegasizes, then (necessarily) *x* is a winged horse. On this interpretation, it is plausible that “Pegasus is a winged horse” is true, and “Pegasus is not a winged horse”, understood as its truth-functional negation, is false. Maimonides' claim (restated in accordance with Benor's reconstruction) that the Names of God are the only subject-terms *S* such that “*S* is not *P*” is true for *all* attributes *P* now looks as if it may well be true.

So far we have worried that subject-terms like “Pegasus”, meaningful but non-referring subject-terms, might be a counterexample to this claim. (*Referring* subject terms like “Saul Kripke” cannot be counterexamples, because all existent things have essential properties, at least in medieval philosophy.) But what happens if we choose as our subject-term *S* a *meaningless* name, say “Gravelboom”? Presumably “Gravelboom does not have *P*” is not true, but meaningless. So Maimonides as interpreted by Benor seems to be right: the Names of God are the only subject terms *T* such that *all* the negative predications of the form “*T* is not *P*” are true (when interpreted as negations of strict implications, as we suggested). But that, of course, presupposes that the Names are not meaningless terms. That that is so is not *explained* but rather *presupposed* by “the negative way”.

Philosophical answers to Maimonides

Maimonides' radicalism did not, of course, go unchallenged. Perhaps the most famous of his critics was Thomas Aquinas.³⁴ As the story is usually told, the disagreement between Maimonides and Aquinas is perfectly straightforward: Aquinas, although agreeing that we cannot predicate any attribute of God in the same (literal) way that we predicate it of a creature, did think that we could predicate Goodness, Power, Wisdom, Existence, and the rest of God by *analogia*, analogy. While this is not exactly false, as

usual, on closer examination, the situation turns out to be more complicated than this account would suggest.

The problem has to do with the nature of analogy. Aquinas is standardly held to have distinguished between two sorts of analogy, analogy of attribution and analogy of proportion, but this reading has recently been challenged by McNerny, who holds that Aquinas uses "proportion" as a synonym for analogy, not as a name of a *kind* of analogy.³⁵ However that may be, here is a typical statement by Aquinas on this topic (*Summa Theologica*, Ia, q.13): discussing the application to God of such terms as "being" and "good" and "wise", after having said that these terms are neither applied univocally nor equivocally, but analogically, Thomas writes³⁶,

It should be said thereofre that names of this kind are said of God and creatures according to analogy, that is, proportion. This occurs in two ways in naming: either many things have a proportion to one, as "healthy" is said of medicine and urine insofar as each is ordered to the health of the animal, of which the latter is the sign and the former is the cause; or one is proportioned to of another, as "healthy" is said of medicine and animal, insofar as the medicine is the cause of the health that is in the animal. And in this way some things are said analogically, and not purely equivocally or univocally, of God and creatures. We can only name God from creatures as was said before. Thus, whatever is said of God and creatures is said insofar as there is a certain order of creature to God as to its principle and cause in which pre-exist in an excellent manner all the perfections in things.

Let me simply note that the analogy between medicine and health in the animal that Aquinas uses in explaining the doctrine of analogical predication (in the case of God), strongly suggests that when we call God "good" or "wise" or a "being" we so refer to him not because he is good or wise or a being in the sense that a creature is (since these terms are not univocally applied to creatures and to God, even though "we can only name God from creatures"), but because God is the "principle" or ground of (what we call) goodness and wisdom and being in creatures. And this is exactly Maimonides' account of the attributes of action!³⁷

Another kind of answer entirely, one whose possibility was not missed in the Middle Ages, although it was never accepted as the orthodox view in any of the monotheistic religions, was the answer of Nominalists and Conceptualists. Although there are important differences between these positions, what they shared was the belief that the whole "problem of the Unity of God", insofar as it led to paradoxes concerning the very possibility of predication, was generated by the reification of attributes. If God has distinct attributes, and attributes have real existence outside the mind, as postulated, though in different ways, by both Aristotle and Plato (and many fusions of Aristotelianism and Neo-Platonism took place, importantly in the Islamic philosophical world by which Maimonides was deeply influenced), then for God to have more than one attribute is for him to have a kind of internal complexity, to have different and distinguishable universals "in" Himself. But if, on the other hand, attributes are either *just*

names in language or *just* ideas in the mind, then applying as many of them as you like to a subject does not, in itself, imply any sort of internal complexity in that subject unless the attribute itself implies internal complexity. So, as Gersonides for one maintained³⁸, we should get rid of the whole problem of negative theology by scrapping the bad philosophy that led to it.³⁹

However, it seems to me that a simple rejection of the problem would be a profound mistake.⁴⁰ If Maimonides emphasized the error of supposing that one can think of God as “good” in the sense in which a human being may be more or less good, or as “wise” in the sense in which a human being may be more or less wise, or as having “power” in the sense in which a human being may have more or less power, this was not simply because he made a theoretical mistake, if he did, about the nature of predication or the problem of universals, but because he was concerned to combat the temptation to what he called “idolatry” (and what we today call “fundamentalism”). And similarly, if Aquinas, although also concerned with the danger of “idolatry”, wished to stress that there is a sense in which we can *believe* that God possesses wisdom and goodness and power and not just *say* (for that Maimonides certainly allowed us to do) that God is wise and good and powerful, it is because he was concerned to combat a different religious temptation, one that he saw Maimonides as succumbing to, which we may describe as the temptation to a mysticism that empties God of all content, and thereby threatens the *availability* of God.

Those spiritual issues were all the more profound because the relations between philosophy and religion were so complex. On the one hand, issues which had always been philosophical issues — creation *ex nihilo* versus the eternity of the world, the freedom of the will, the existence of evil, the immortality of the soul (which might or might not be construed by a philosopher as what we call “personal” immortality), the nature and possibility of human happiness, the relations between knowledge and virtue — all took on added poignancy when they became fused with the concerns of revealed religious traditions. Conversely, revealed religion was itself deeply changed by its contact with Greek philosophy — such doctrines as the *immateriality* of God, the *omniscience* of God and the *omnipotence* of God may be, as William James said, “the product of the philosophy shop”, but they have undeniably become part of the religious consciousness of hundreds of millions of believers.

In spite of the intimacy of these relations, there is also an obvious difference between ordinary religious belief and the religious belief of a philosopher like Maimonides. On the view of religious language I earlier ascribed to Wittgenstein, it is not, in the end, the theories of predication of a Maimonides or Gersonides or Aquinas that can speak to the problem faced by the believer in the moment I described as having something in common with “negative theology”. According to Wittgenstein, as I said, the intelligibility of what Benor calls “God-talk” is secured by the standing possibility of understanding and participating in the form(s) of life with which that talk is interwoven — the quotidian religious forms of life — and not by the abstruse reasoning of Neo-Aristotelian or Neo-Platonic theology. This view would be out of the question for Maimonides, because of his allegiance to

philosophy as he conceived it, philosophy as a thousand year old way of life⁴¹ which holds out its own promise of a kind of salvation through philosophical understanding, a promise which, alas, "the many" are not supposed to be able to appreciate. Maimonides' problem was generated by his unique realisation that philosophy itself, the only form of religious thought worthy of the name, in his view, cannot reach to the *comprehension* of the Deity. His problem then becomes, as Benor describes, one of securing *reference* without *comprehension*.

On the Wittgensteinian account, on the other hand, there is a different difficulty (one which pseudo-Wittgensteinian "language game theologians" seek to sweep under the rug). We may, in a sense, "understand" religious language through our potential for participating in the form(s) of life which are its home, but how does that language come to connect us with One who transcends all our "forms of life"? There is a mystery here, I would say, but it is a religious mystery and not a philosophical problem calling for a "theory of predication". As Franz Rosenzweig held⁴², it is the "primal right" of human beings to give names, to create and speak languages — but our language is also the language that we use to speak to God, and that God uses to speak to us in scripture. *That* religious language connects us to God is something one can feel with one's whole being, not something that one can *explain*. *Pace*, Maimonides, it is not the theoretical intellect that connects us to the Divine.

NOTES

* This paper owes a great deal to constructive criticism from Ruth Anna Putnam and Eleanore Stump.

1. "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 88:3 (1995), pp. 339-360. I am also indebted to Benor's brilliant study of Maimonides' conception of prayer, *The Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides' Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995).

2. My interpretation of those views is presented in *Renewing Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), chapters 7 and 8.

3. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines; 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963).

4. Maimonides' *Guide* 1:59, "It has accordingly become manifest to you that in every case in which the demonstration that a certain thing should be negated with respect to Him becomes clear to you, you become more perfect, and that in every case in which you affirm of Him an additional thing, you become like one who likens Him to other things and you get further away from the knowledge of his true reality." (Quoted by Benor in "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology", p. 341.)

5. Here Maimonides expresses his acceptance of the doctrine of divine simplicity, a doctrine whose ultimate sources are neo-Platonic, but whose chief upholders in the Islamic philosophical world by which Maimonides was influenced were Alfarabi and Avicenna. Maimonides version of this doctrine, and the doctrine of negative attributes that he derives from it, is, however, more radical than anything envisaged by his predecessors. For example, Maimonides is not just denying that God possesses essential attributes, but denying a variety of other claims as well — e.g., the claim that God has acci-

dental attributes, the claim that there is in God a distinction between subject and attribute, the claim that there is in God a distinction between nature and existence. (Cf. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, chs. 51-54.)

6. The above is Lenn Goodman's translation in (Lenn Goodman, ed.) *Rambam: Readings in the Philosophy of Moses Maimonides* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), p. 77.

7. *loc. cit.* p. 341.

8. *Guide*, 1:54.

9. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966).

10. My use of the word "incommensurable" here is not meant to be an invocation of Kuhn's or any other "theory" of science or of language; the problem of understanding the phenomenon I refer to is the problem of understanding religious discourse itself, and that is not something one achieves by theorizing about language. See *Renewing Philosophy*, pp. 148-153.

11. Cf. my "God and the Philosophers", forthcoming in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*.

12. For a reading of Wittgenstein's later philosophy which stresses the importance of this idea, see Charles Travis', *The Uses of Sense: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

13. This misinterpretation has the effect of largely neutralizing, or missing the importance of, Wittgenstein's endlessly repeated stress on the importance of *context*, rightly stressed in the interpretations by Travis (cf. the previous note) and Cavell (cf. the next note). On this misinterpretation, all "context" does is determine which "language game" one is playing; once that is fixed, what an utterance means is determined by the "rules of the game", very much as in Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language*. For a recent rebuttal of this misinterpretation see also James Conant, "Wittgenstein on Meaning and Use", *Philosophical Investigations* (forthcoming).

14. For example, Wittgenstein imagines people who speak of an amount of lumber as "greater" if the lumber is spread out over a larger area, and "smaller" if the lumber is stacked up in a column. For a discussion, see Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 115-125.

15. Anselm's "great riddle", as Cora Diamond terms it, is "that than which nothing greater can be conceived". Cf. "Riddles and Anselm's Riddle", reprinted in her *The Realistic Spirit* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), p. 287-8.

16. I am quoting from her unpublished Whitehead Lecture at Harvard University, "The Logical Basis of Metaphysics".

17. As Russell himself put it, "...when we say anything about Bismarck, we should like, if we could, to make the judgment which Bismarck alone can make, namely the judgment of which he himself is the constituent. In this we are necessarily defeated, since the actual Bismarck is unknown to us."

18. It is the gravamen of Diamond's paper, that, although they do not mention Russell by name, certain sections of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* present a refutation of Russell's view. The difficulty Wittgenstein sees (on Diamond's reading of these sections) is that understanding of the existential quantifier in 'There is an x such that x is a P ' presupposes that replacing the variable x by one of its substituends results in an intelligible proposition. If " a is a self and a belongs to Bismarck" is *unintelligible* when a is the one and only substituent which could make the proposition *true*, then a cannot be a value of any of my variables, and so I cannot refer to Bismarck *even by description*. [The mention-use confusion here is my attempt to mimic Russell's view that objects them-

selves, and not their names, are constituents of propositions.]

19. In the case of "Exists", Maimonides has a special reason for thinking that this cannot be predicated of God in the sense in which it is predicated of the contingent things that we know: Maimonides emphasizes the fact that God's existence is *necessary existence*! This already shows that it is utterly different from the kind of existence we ordinarily speak of, even if the doctrine of divine simplicity is not assumed. (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, ch. 52.)

20. The reason I say "may show" and not simply "shows" is that it is possible that being the cause of something else is not something Maimonides would regard as an *attribute*. Consider, for example, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, ch. 52, where Maimonides writes, "There is no relation between Him and time and place; and this is quite clear. For time is an accident attached to motion.... and God is not a body.It is clear at the first glance that there is no correlation between Him and the things created by Him.....As for the view that there is some relation between them, it is deemed correct but this is not correct." This makes it quite clear that for Maimonides "being created by Him" is not a *relation* between God and the created things. (In this connection, Abraham Stone has pointed out to me that causation does not fall under any of the Aristotelian categories.)

21. *The Eight Chapters of Maimonides on Ethics*, Ch. VIII.

22. *The Guide of the Perplexed*, I, ch. 58.

23. This aspect of Maimonides' account can seem puzzling. As a friend recently put the point, "If all terms used of God and creatures are used equivocally, then how do we know what the right attitude towards God is? That is, on what basis is Maimonides assigned to say that the philosopher who knows that his ideas of God are inadequate — in the very radical sense that he doesn't know what meaning to assign to the terms he uses to talk of God — must nevertheless thank and praise God?" The answer is that Maimonides thinks we can know things about the *world* that we no longer think can be scientifically known — for instance, that the world is teleologically ordered (exactly *as if* it were designed by a wise and merciful and compassionate being). Since God is the ultimate ground of this teleological order, we are allowed to ascribe "attributes of action", although these are not really *attributes* (do not denote genuine relations) in Maimonides' view. (Cf. n. 20 above). If the teleological order of the world is far from evident to most people, that is because they have not gone through the rigorous intellectual and moral training that is necessary to become one of the Wise. This aspect of Maimonides' view is usually ascribed to his Aristotelianism, but it is necessary to add that in late antiquity "Aristotelianism" frequently incorporates a good deal from Stoicism, as well as from Neoplatonism.

24. "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology", pp. 351-2.

25. Most famously by Hermann Cohen, e.g. *The Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. S. Kaplan (Frederick Ungar, 1972).

26. Cf. n.20 above.

27. Cf. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'", collected in my *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1: *Mind, Language and Reality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975).

28. Cf. Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980). (Lectures originally given in 1972.)

29. "Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology", p. 347n.

30. *loc. cit.* p. 350.

31. It could be objected (to this reconstruction of Maimonides' view), that surely *Moses* could fix the reference of the name Y.H.W.H., e.g., by the description "that being whose words I am now hearing" or "that with respect to

which I am now feeling a great sense of awe". A full discussion of this objection is impossible here (for one thing, it would be necessary to discuss in detail Maimonides' account of prophecy, which is beyond the scope of this paper). A short answer is that if Moses — or anyone else — can direct their minds towards God (and Maimonides clearly thinks that this is possible, indeed that that is what human beings are meant to do), it is not the *semantics of their words* that enables us to do this, but something else, something that is beyond language altogether. (This is the element of Neoplatonism in Maimonides' thought that I had in mind in n.23.)

32. The case of natural kind words and physical magnitude terms is similar to that of proper names. See my "Explanation and Reference" for examples of the sorts of descriptions that get used as reference fixers.

33. For the device of reconstructing a proper name as a predicate — e.g., Pegasus as "pegasizes" — so as to avoid existential implications, see W.V. Quine, "On What There Is", reprinted in his *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953).

34. Cf., e.g., *Summa Theologica* I, q. 13, a.2.

35. Cf. Ralph McNerny, "Aquinas and Analogy: Where Cajetan Went Wrong", *Philosophical Topics*, vol. 20, no. 2 (Fall 1992).

36. McNerny's translation in the article cited in the previous note.

37. An alternative (and more perhaps more traditional) interpretation of Aquinas would have it that what Aquinas means is that God's goodness is to God what human goodness is to human beings. This would involve Aquinas in (1) denying that God's goodness is *identical* with God; and (2) holding that the metaphor of proportion can be taken *literally*. I don't think it is clear that either of these views can be correctly attributed to Aquinas.

38. Gersonides (Levi Ben Gerson, 1288-1344) was, perhaps, the most powerful Jewish metaphysical thinker in the century and a half after Maimonides' death.

39. Against Gersonides' and kindred views it will be objected that if "goodness" is just a name in a language or an idea in the mind 'without anything in God which corresponds to it', then how would we know that it was more appropriate to use this name or idea than any other, such as 'evil', for example? This is just the standard objection to Nominalism and Conceptualism, and I have nothing to add here to the discussions pro and con this objection (which does not depend on whether the subject of predication is God at all; in the usual form one asks why "green", or any adjective you like, isn't just *arbitrarily* applied to both grass and a piece of cloth if there is isn't "something" which is both "in" the cloth and in the grass. Note that Bertrand Russell accepted this argument for universals and Quine denounced it as a bad argument in "On What There Is").

40. To dismiss it on Nominalist or Conceptualist grounds would also be a philosophical mistake, by the way, because the dilemma is unreal; we are not really forced to choose between viewing attributes as intangible objects that reside in the things that have them and thinking of them as names or as ideas in the mind.

41. Cf. Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) for an account of the role of "spiritual exercises" in the history of philosophy.

42. *Concerning the Sick and the Healthy* (Nahum Glatzer's translation of *Das Büchlein vom gesunden und kranken Menschenverstand*, written by Rosenzweig in 1921, but never published; New York: Noonday Press, 1954), p. 60.