Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology

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The theory of religious language advocated by the twelfth-century philosopher-jurist Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) contains an apparent paradox. Maimonides' radical stance regarding the absolute unknowability of God leads him to an austere theology of negation, which appears to be incongruous with his representation of God as a moral agent or intellect. Through analysis of the functions of meaning and reference in Maimonides' theory of language, as well as his explicit or implicit distinctions between literal, metaphoric, and symbolic uses of language in theological discourse, I argue that the purpose of the Maimonidean theology of negation is to establish the reference of the name "God," thereby making possible a rationally disciplined constructivist theology. This article shows how Maimonides sought to include a certain type of religious anthropomorphism in a theology that upholds the wholly other nature of God.¹

Maimonides presents an extreme version of negative theology, going beyond both his predecessor Alfarabi and his successor Thomas Aquinas in denying even a relation of analogy between attributes that apply to human

beings or the world and attributes that apply to God. Maimonides identifies terms that are "completely equivocal"; they have nothing in common; they share only a name.

Although Maimonides admits that scripture applies amphibolous and metaphorical terms to God, he does not allow them to be used in philosophical discussion. Maimonides claims that the word "existence" applies purely equivocally to God and human beings:

Similarly the terms "knowledge," "power," "will," and "life," as applied to Him, may He be exalted, and to all those possessing knowledge, power, will and life, are purely equivocal, so that their meaning when they are predicated of Him is in no way like their meaning in other application. Do not deem that they are used amphibolously. For when terms are used amphibolously they are predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect of some notion.

Maimonides explains repeatedly that we do not understand what our familiar concepts mean when they are used as descriptions of God. Even as he labors—in the lexicographical chapters of the first part of the Guide—to sort out the different possible meanings of such Hebrew terms as "high" (רו), "rock" (סלע), "standing" (‘sadra), and to explain their figurative use in

2See Alfarabi (Abu Nasr al-Farabi; ca. 870–950), Opinions of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City 1.12; 2.5; translated in Al-Farabi on the Perfect State (trans. Richard Walzer; Oxford: Clarendon, 1985) 83, 99. In his introduction to the translation Walzer explains that "Al-Farabi does not share the uncompromising negative theology of the main trend of neo-Platonic teaching, that is, he does not describe God exclusively by what He is not" (p. 12). Alfarabi maintains (Commentary on Aristotle's "De Interpretatione" [trans. F. W. Zimmermann; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981] 120) that "One should, therefore, not say that God most high can be described negatively, but that he can be described by indefinite nouns. In many cases, their precise function is to signify a positive quality which is affirmed in such a way as to distinguish its subject totally from the things of which the corresponding definite noun is true, in which case they do not signify a privation." Although the relation between negation and positive attribution in the theology of Avicenna (Ibn-Sina; 979–1037) defies simple characterization, the mystical orientation of Avicennan negative theology suggests interpreting positive attributes as divine paradigms of absolute perfections. For discussion, see Ian Richard Netton, Allah Transcendent (London: Routledge, 1989) 153–62. Thomas Aquinas argues against the negative interpretation of attributes of perfection like goodness and wisdom and claims that they must be predicated analogically of God and of other beings: "the names said of God and creatures are predicated neither univocally nor equivocally but analogically, that is, according to an order or reference to something one" (Summa Contra Gentiles 1.34; ET On the Truth of the Catholic Faith [trans. Anton C. Pegis; New York: Doubleday, 1955] 147).


scripture, Maimonides warns, "All the numerous attributive qualifications indicating any exaltation of Him and of His great worth, power, perfection, bounty, and various other things, refer to one and the same notion. That notion is His essence and nothing outside His essence." Since God's essence is deemed unknowable, the meanings of such terms must also be unknowable.

Maimonides' theological austerity is informed by two major principles: the metaphysical thesis that as a necessary being God is wholly other from all dependent existence and the religious thesis that whoever has a mistaken notion of God worships a nonexistent being—a figment of his or her imagination. The later thesis leads to an unforgiving rejection of religious subjectivism:

As for someone who thinks and frequently mentions God, without knowledge, following a mere imagining or following a belief adopted because of his reliance on the authority of somebody else, he... does not in true reality mention or think about God. For that thing which is in his imagination and which he mentions in his speech does not correspond to any being at all and has merely been invented by his imagination, as we have explained in our discourse concerning the attributes.

Maimonides seems to think that it is possible to purify our idea of God and escape erroneous notions by negating, in thought and speech, what God is not. His theory of attributes has clear implications for religious devotion and the language of prayer:

It has accordingly become manifest to you that in every case in which the demonstration that a certain thing should be negated with reference 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 one who likens Him to other things and you get further away from the knowledge of His true reality.

Given these concerns, it is surprising that Maimonides permits both attributes of action, which identify God as an agent without describing what God is, and attributes of character such as "merciful," "gracious," and "long-suffering," which invoke an image of God as a moral person worthy of imitation. What is more, in various places Maimonides even directs the

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5Maimonides Guide 1.20; ET 47.
6Ibid., 3.51; ET 620.
7Ibid., 1.59; ET 139.
8Maimonides' clarification that "the meaning here is not that He possesses moral qualities, but that He performs actions that in us proceed from moral qualities" (Guide, 1.54; ET 124) does not change the fact that God is described both with attributes of action and of character that are ultimately reducible to attributes of action. Attributes of character, not action, invoke the idea of God as a moral person.
reader to understand God's unity and incorporeality by thinking of God as an intellect. 9

Given his metaphysical and religious principles and repeated recommendation of silence about God, 10 it seems that Maimonides either contradicted himself in allowing positive speech about God or failed to derive the semantic implications of his epistemological thesis, which maintains that, although it is possible to know that God is, we can only know what God is not. 11 In order to confront this paradox, I propose an interpretation of Maimonides' theology of negation that liberates religious thought from the austere discipline of trying to remain as faithful as possible to what a true description of God might be. In this article, therefore, I wish to explain why Maimonides may have thought the semantic thesis that "we can meaningfully say only what God is not" does not follow from the epistemic thesis that "we can only know what God is not," and why he thought that in some circumstances positive descriptions of God need not be idolatrous projections of the imagination. I intend to show that Maimonides' uncompromising doctrine of absolute homonymy between terms predicated of absolute or divine being and these same terms when predicated of mundane or human being led him to a daring conception of religious language as constructing a symbolic representation or idea of God. I call this representation "symbolic" to contrast it to literal and metaphoric representations. While descriptions are literally or metaphorically true if the object they describe shares most characteristics denoted by the description or at least one outstanding relevant characteristic, descriptions are symbolic when they claim no shared characteristic. Symbolic ideas thus stand for the object without truly representing it. God could be described literally as a moral agent if God were to deliberate, decide, and be moved to act. God could be described metaphorically as a moral agent if, for instance, God were to share with humans a quality of mercy. Maimonides emphatically denies both types of description. He justifies moral descriptions as invoking a notion of perfection that God and human beings do not share. Symbolic descriptions of this type are meant to be self-transcending and point beyond the qualities they represent.

9 See, for example, ibid., 1.1, 68; ET 22–23, 163.

10 See, for example, ibid., 1.50; ET 112: "But men ought rather to belong to the category of those who represent the truth [God] to themselves and apprehend it, even if they do not utter it, as the virtuous are commanded to do." See also 1.59; ET 140: "Accordingly, silence and limiting oneself to the apprehensions of the intellects are more appropriate," and 2.5; ET 260 (quoted below).

11 I follow here Joseph A. Buijs's instructive distinction between three theses of negative theology ("The Negative Theology of Maimonides and Aquinas," Review of Metaphysics [1988] 723–38): a metaphysical thesis about the nature of God, an epistemological thesis about what knowledge of God is possible, and a semantic thesis concerning the language we should use to speak about God.
This use of the term "symbolic" to designate the way descriptions that use absolutely homonymous terms stand for God's unknown perfection must be distinguished from the very different sense in which the term is sometimes used in the study of religion. In this regard, Julius Guttmann, the great historian of Jewish philosophy, is exemplary in his explanation of the status of Maimonides' positive statements about God. Consistent with his Neoplatonic interpretation of Maimonides' negative theology, Guttmann claimed that ethical attributes "express the fact that hidden within the divine essence there [necessarily] lie the presupposition of such [moral] action; their value is merely symbolic." Guttmann's notion of symbolism stresses continuity between domains of meaning that tend toward a relation of analogy. In order for such symbolism to be possible, Guttmann must hold that God really does act morally with regard to human beings, rather than merely appearing to act in this way. Guttmann's Neo-Kantianism makes him predisposed toward such a claim, whereas Maimonides is more cautious. Maimonides' approach to the language of being, or God-talk, makes his work an important background and a potentially valuable resource for a postmodern constructivism. The symbolic function of God-talk is important for accomplished philosophers who realize that no conception of God is possible, according to the Maimonidean dictum that "Torah speaks the language of human beings." Intellectual lovers of God are therefore not beyond the realm of human-bound religious language.

Since the metaphysical foundation of Maimonides' theology of negation has been studied at length, I will only summarize it briefly as background for my discussion of Maimonides' theory of reference and its relation to his theology of negation. Philosophical arguments to prove the existence of God, which are based on the nature of the world as we know it, are likely to influence the way we think about God. This seems to be the case with Maimonides, who held that a cosmological argument demonstrates beyond possible doubt that God exists as a necessary existent. From the meaning...
of "necessary existence" Maimonides concludes that God is absolutely simple and incomparable.\textsuperscript{17} This in turn leads to the further conclusion that "we are only able to apprehend the fact that He is and cannot apprehend His quiddity."\textsuperscript{18} This incomparability thesis is radical and its implications are far-reaching. It implies that God cannot be represented as infinitely greater and more perfect than we but only as absolutely incommensurable, wholly other. God's wholly other nature as necessary being defines the context for negative theology to maintain that since we have no knowledge of what God is, we only know what God is not. What kind of knowledge is this, and what does it imply about the language we should use to speak about God?

What do we know about God when we only know what God is not? Either we apprehend, vaguely and momentarily, something of God that eludes conception in a way that does not amount to knowledge, or we apprehend nothing. The first option may lead to rationalist mysticism and preference for preference as the most adequate way to relate to God.\textsuperscript{19} The second may lead to devout agnosticism intent on negating persistent illusions about what God is.\textsuperscript{20} It is important to examine these options briefly prior to presentation of the Maimonidean alternative.

The mystical option relies on elements of Neoplatonic metaphysics and epistemology that penetrated medieval Aristotelian thought.\textsuperscript{21} Just as the

\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 1.57; ET 132-33; 2.1; ET 243-52.
\textsuperscript{18}Ibid., 1.58; ET 135.
\textsuperscript{19}Julius Guttmann and Alexander Altmann may be cited in support of a Plotinean interpretation of Maimonides' way of negation. Guttmann (Philosophy of Judaism, 164) stressed the Neoplatonic context of Maimonides' theory of divine attributes and argued that theological negation is metaphysically oriented and involves much more than mere logical considerations. Guttmann ("Maimonides' Doctrine of God" in idem, Religion and Knowledge [Jerusalem: Magnes, 1955] 107-11 [Hebrew]) held that Maimonidean theological negation is intended to indicate the presence in God's hidden essence of something parallel to that which is known to us. Alexander Altmann ("Maimonides on the Intellect and the Scope of Metaphysics," in idem, Von der mittelalterlichen zur modernen Aufklärung: Studien zur jüdischen Geistesgeschichte [Tübingen: Mohr/Siebeck, 1987] 121-22) developed this interpretation further when he drew attention to the similarity between Maimonides' advocacy of silence and that of Plotinus. Charles H. Manekin ("Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes in the Guide," Maimonidean Studies 1 [1990] 117-42) suggests a nonmystical interpretation of this option claiming that Maimonides' doctrine of attributes suggests the possibility of possessing certain beliefs about God through the indirect device of "approaching an apprehension" by understanding what possible perfections there are and gaining demonstrative knowledge that they cannot apply to God.

\textsuperscript{20}This is Isaac Franck's interpretation of negative theology ("Maimonides and Aquinas on Man's Knowledge of God: A Twentieth Century Perspective," Review of Metaphysics 38 [1985] 591-615).

\textsuperscript{21}Neoplatonic ideas found their way into Arabic philosophy through the apocryphal Theologia Aristotelis, which summarizes books four through six of Plotinus' Enneads, and Liber de Causis, a synopsis of Proclus's Elements of Theology, which was also attributed to Aristotle. For discussion of these books and their influence see Majid Fakhry, History of Islamic Phi-
universe emanates from the ineffable One in a process of differentiation and particularization that increasingly obscures its sublime source and true being, the human intellect approaches the intellectual overflow that pervades reality by overcoming veils of perception and conception, negating all that obscures its vision until it can gaze, if only for a fleeting moment, upon absolute being. Maimonides may have had this type of illumination in mind when he likened intellectual apprehension to the flaming sword of Gen 3:24, explaining that "sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think it is day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first."22 The mode of religious expression that seems most fitting for this type of apprehension is silence, which limits the domain of linguistic articulation to instruction for oneself or for others:

For he who praises through speech only makes known what he has represented to himself. Now this very representation is the true praise, whereas words concerning it are meant to instruct someone else or to make it clear concerning oneself that one has had the apprehension in question. Thus it says, "Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be still, Selah" (Ps 4:5).23

These suggestive statements need not necessarily manifest the attitude of intellectual mysticism. The image of fleeting illumination applies to all difficult intellectual challenges, not only to apprehension of ineffable truths. Similarly, preference for silence need not have a mystical basis; it may simply reinforce awareness of the purely intellectual relation between worshipers and God, a relation that renders linguistic articulation superfluous or misleading. It was not Maimonides' intention, however, to recommend mystical detachment from knowledge of the world.24 On the contrary, in affirming the absolute transcendence of God, Maimonides presents knowledge of the world and contemplation of its teleological structure as the supreme human achievement.25 Maimonides returns to this theme in the most mystical chapter of the Guide:

Those who set their thought to work after having attained perfection in the divine science, turn wholly toward God, may He be cherished and held sublime, renounce what is other than He, and direct all the acts of

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22Maimonides Guide 1. Introduction; ET 7.
23Maimonides Guide 2.5; ET 260.
24This is not to say that he did not recommend detachment from the affairs of the world.
25See Shlomo Pines's comparison between Neoplatonic and Maimonidean applications of negative theology ("The Philosorigh Sources," xcvi).
their intellect toward an examination of the beings with a view to drawing from them proof with regard to Him, so as to know His governance of them in whatever way is possible. . . . This is the worship peculiar to those who have apprehended the true realities.26

Apprehension of the "true realities" leads not to mystical absorption in absolute being but to contemplation of the universe. It further leads to construction of a moral idea of God as a perfect ruler, as can be seen in the case of Moses and his proclamation of the thirteen attributes.27 These considerations also show that even if negative theology yields no special apprehension of what God is, according to Maimonides, it does not follow that all we ought to think or say about God is "what God is not."

The emerging Maimonidean distinction between knowledge and language deserves closer and more detailed consideration than is possible in the confines of this article; relations between thinking, understanding, believing, knowing, and the use of language are very complex. While we may sometimes be tempted to believe that we think and understand more than we can express in words, it is at least as likely that we can think much more than we can know and can say even more than we can think. On the one hand, negative theology can argue for the inadequacy of language yet allow the soul a superrational, mystical knowledge of God. On the other hand, negative theology can claim that the soul is unable to have any knowledge of God whatsoever and, accordingly, has little or no concern for the inadequacy of language to express that which can neither be known nor thought. Negative theologians of the first and second persuasion would have considerably different approaches to religious language. Since, according to Maimonides, the semantic implications of the way of negation

26 Maimonides Guide 3.51; ET 620.

27 Regarding the attributes, see Exod 34:6-7. It is important to realize that the moral idea of God cannot result from metaphysical illumination but must be interpreted as a construct that imposes a moral interpretation on nature. I believe this is the only way to account for the ethical turn in Maimonides' presentation of the life of intellectual perfection. This account overcomes Shlomo Pines's argument ("Philosophic Sources," cxxii, and idem, "Spinoza's Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, Maimonides, and Kant," Scripta Hierosolymitana 20 [1968] 27-28) that many of God's actions, including earthquakes and floods, and the qualities they may represent, do not conform to any recognizable conception of morality. A constructivist account also avoids Altmann's resort to an un-Aristotelian notion of virtue to explain the Maimonidean shift from a theoretical to an ethical conception of human excellence (Alexander Altmann, "Maimonides's Four Perfections," in idem, Essays in Jewish Intellectual History [Hanover: University Press of New England, 1981] 65-76). I discuss the issue at some length in my Worship of the Heart: A Study in Maimonides' Philosophy of Religion (New York: SUNY, forthcoming). The argument that the "overflow of perfection" that compels prophets and philosophers to teach, moves the solitary Maimonidean contemplative to an ethical imitatio dei, does not explain how such an ideal is cognitively possible. For analysis of the final section of the Guide in which the ethical shift takes place, see Ralph Lerner, "Maimonides' Governance of the Solitary" in Kraemer, Perspectives on Maimonides, 33-46.
require neither mystical silence nor constant negation, it is necessary to determine how Maimonides understood negative theology, what purpose it had for him, and why he thought it did not have austere semantic implications.

I propose that Maimonides found in negative theology a method of uniquely identifying the ground of all being, and thus a method of determining the reference of the name “God,” without forming any conception of what God is. The primary purpose of negative theology is neither to direct the mind toward some notion of God nor to instruct in the intelligible use of theological language, but to determine how anything human beings think or say, however erroneous or misguided, can be about God. Maimonidean negative theology is not an inquiry regarding what sort of theological thoughts should occupy one’s mind or which theological language one might use to cultivate or express these thoughts. According to my reconstruction, Maimonides’ radical thesis of absolute divine incommensurability and its epistemological implications forced him to confront the difficult philosophical problem of explaining how thoughts or words can be about God if humans possess neither a description nor an experience of God. I believe he found the solution in negative theology.

Representation of God: Meaning and Reference

To understand how Maimonides thought negative theology could direct the mind toward God and solve the problem of how thought or speech can

28This proposal suggests that Maimonides’ religious interests led him toward a theory that modern philosophy of language recognizes as an anti-Fregean view of the relation between meaning and reference. Gottlob Frege (1848–1925), who initiated the modern distinction between the meaning of a term (what human minds grasp when we understand it) and the relation of that term to the object it designates (its reference), held that the meaning of a term determines its reference ("On Sense and Reference," in Peter Geach and Max Black, eds., Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege [Oxford: Blackwell, 1952] 56–78). This is also a standard view of language in medieval Arabic philosophy, a view that Maimonides generally takes for granted. A dissenting medieval view, which dissociates reference from meaning, may be found in Ghazali’s argument that particular objects can be identified only by ostension (including such indexical words as “this” and “that”), with no appeal to meanings apprehended by the intellect. Ghazali’s argument is quoted by Averroes in Tahafut al-Tahafut (The Incoherence of the Incoherence) (trans. Simon van den Bergh; 2 vols.; Oxford: Oxford University Press and London: Luzac, 1954) 1. 275–77. In claiming that the name “God” can refer to God without a mediating concept, I believe Maimonides moved toward a position similar to the anti-Fregean views of Hilary Putnam and Saul Kripke, who hold that reference can be determined independently of meaning. See Hilary Putnam, "Meaning and Reference," Journal of Philosophy 70 (1973) 699–711 and Saul A. Kripke, Naming and Necessity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). Only by moving away from a representation theory of reference could Maimonides present the articulated name (YHWH) as indicative of God’s essence (Maimonides Guide 1.61; ET 148). My comments here are a partial response to Arthur Hyman’s observation ("Maimonides on Religious Language," 190) that “Maimonides’ theory of how proper names signify remains to be worked out.”
be about God, it is necessary to examine his notion of the relations between words, thoughts, and objects. According to the philosophical concept of language accepted by Maimonides, words refer to objects by mediation of concepts. Three elements are involved; words, representations, concepts or ideas in the mind; and objects, the essences of which are grasped by the intellect through abstraction. Maimonides' basic notion of representation in the mind is similar to what modern philosophy of language calls meaning. The technical term "representation"—tasawwur, in Arabic, suggesting something that is "figured"—was used in medieval philosophy to denote an isolated concept in the mind. No truth value can be ascribed to the concept itself, but it can be affirmed or denied in relation to other concepts or in correspondence to external reality. In modern terminology, representation is the idea—an image, notion, or concept—formed in our mind when we understand the meaning of a word or a phrase.

Linguistic entities, such as words or phrases, are thought to refer to extralinguistic entities through the mediation of mental entities, such as notions or propositions that correspond to essences of things or to relations between essences. In this view of language, reference is established through meaning. Consequently, Maimonides held that no theological doctrine a person professes can be about God. This view motivates Maimonides' religious intellectualism by implying that, without knowledge, piety and devotion amount to worship of a figment of one's imagination. Yet, God's wholly other nature and unknowability suggest that the required knowledge is necessarily beyond our reach.

I believe it is significant that Maimonides' famous statement that belief is not a matter of utterance or proclamation, but rather of representation in the mind, opens his exposition of negative theology. He asserts that belief requires both representation and affirmation that what is represented is true. Once the reference of God is established negatively, as denoting a being so different from the universe that the being does not even partake in its mode of existence and hence is inconceivable to our mind, Maimonides thinks that the necessity that God exists immediately follows. This is shown in his argument that "there is an existent that is necessary of existence in respect to its own essence." It is noteworthy that of his four speculative proofs for the existence of God, Maimonides singles out this third proof as "a demonstration concerning which there can be no doubt, no refutation, and no dispute." Maimonides' position would then be that with this determination—of the reference of the word "God" through negation—comes not

29 The distinction can be traced back to Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* 16a.3–9.
30 Maimonides *Guide* 1.50.
31 Ibid., 2.1; ET 247–48.
32 Ibid., 2.1; ET 248.
only affirmation that the referent of the word "God" is real, but also cer-
tainty. Maimonides seeks to show that negative theology alone can yield
the required representation of God that does not violate God's unknowability.
By analyzing how it does so and what the representation amounts to, one
can see that Maimonides' delineation of indirect identification of an entity
through a process of negation moves toward a position that resembles a
modern distinction between meaning and reference.
Maimonides' solution is based on the existence and the uniqueness of
God as established by the cosmological proof. The major premise of the
solution is simple and straightforward: a unique entity can be isolated and
identified indirectly by negative descriptions that rule out all that it is not.
Although Maimonides asserts that an entity can be definitively identified
through negation and that the reference of the term denoting it can be
determined, he stops short of claiming that negative identification amounts
to proper representation. Regarding a person who comes to acquire the
concept of "a ship" by means of negations, he circumspectly affirms that
this "individual has nearly achieved, by means of these negative attributes,
the representation of the ship as it is," and goes on to say that "the negative
attributes make you come nearer in a similar way to the cognition and
apprehension of God." If one can only "nearly achieve" representation of an object like a ship,
the essence of which is directly accessible to intellectual abstraction and
the relation of which to other entities allows us to construct an approximate
idea of what it must be like, it is reasonable to think that the indirect
negative identification of God will achieve even less of a representation.
This seems to be what Maimonides has in mind when he proclaims that

As everyone is aware that it is not possible, except through negation,
to achieve an apprehension of that which is in our power to apprehend
[of God] and that, on the other hand negation does not give knowledge
in any respect of the true reality of the thing with regard to which the
particular matter in question is negated all men, those of the past and
those of the future, affirm clearly that God, may he be exalted, cannot

33For analysis of Maimonides' statement on belief, see Charles H. Manekin, "Belief, Cer-
tainty, and Divine Attributes in the Guide of the Perplexed," Maimonidean Studies 1 (1990)
117-41. I believe that Manekin's conclusions regarding "aboutness" are too conservative.
34See Maimonides Guide 2.1; ET 247-49 on "the third philosophic speculation." For analysis
of Maimonides' arguments for the existence of God, see William Lane Craig, The Cosmologi-
35Maimonides Guide 1.6; ET 143-44 (my emphases). It is interesting to compare Maimonides'
struggles with representation through negation to Thomas Aquinas' categorical statement that
"through negations, when we have a proper knowledge of a thing, we know that it is distinct
from other things, yet what it is remains unknown" (see Summa Contra Gentiles 3.49.1; ET
127).
be apprehended by the intellects, and that none but He Himself can
apprehend what He is, and that apprehension of Him consists in the
inability to attain the ultimate term in apprehending Him. 36

How should one understand Maimonides' evasive conclusion about nega­tive representation? I suggest that it is best understood when rephrased in
modern terms as a claim that negative predication identifies the entity God
by determining the reference of the word "God" but leaves the word devoid
of meaning. 37

If, as I suggest, Maimonides held that the way of negation is sufficient
and necessary to determine the reference of God-talk, then it follows that
religious language need not, and indeed should not, employ positive predi­cates to direct the human mind to God. A conclusion such as this may have helped Maimonides to uphold his uncompromising doctrine of absolute
homonymy between terms predicated of absolute or divine being and these
same terms when predicated of mundane or human being. By denying any
analogy between these domains of meaning, Maimonides austerely pre­ferred the objectivity of a true referent for human thoughts about God over
the satisfaction of providing content to these thoughts that would render
their referent an object of intellectual illusion.

Like other philosophically inclined religious thinkers, Maimonides advo­cated an allegorical approach to religious language and applied it to the
interpretation of scripture. 38 For him, allegory is a method of grafting philo­sophical doctrines to mythic images. It is essential for Maimonidean

36 Maimonides Guide 1.59; ET 139 (my emphasis).

37 This suggestion requires careful examination. It is not a claim that the word "God" has
no linguistic interpretation or that the word cannot be given a dictionary definition. Rather,
the claim is that however the word is defined, it is not accompanied by a corresponding idea
in the mind. Maimonides' understanding of the term "necessary existent" is entirely negative.
The question of whether any specifiable thought can correspond to a negation of all that God
is not is interesting. I believe the only Maimonidean candidate for such a thought is Moses,
to whom Maimonides attributes the total grasp of the structure of the universe and the relation
of its parts. This type of scientia intuitiva can perhaps be a corresponding mental counterpart
of "all that God is not," and as such may be available for denial in thought. To Maimonides'
idealized Moses, then, "what God is not" has the required meaning. My reading of Maimonides'
discussion of representation through negation is diametrically opposed to Hyman's conclusion
("Maimonides on Religious Language," 189) that "from all this it follows that we can say
something significant about God's essential attributes without assigning to them affirmative
signification."

38 Maimonides devoted a major part of his introduction to the first part of the Guide to a
method of allegorical interpretation of scripture and prophecy (Guide 1. Introduction; ET 8–
14). For further references to Maimonides' defense of allegory and its application to interpre­
tation of rabbinic literature, see Isadore Twersky, Introduction to the Code of Maimonides
(New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980) 366 n. 31. For a history of the allegorical
method from Philo to the church fathers, see Harry Austryn Wolfson, The Philosophy of the
hermeneutics that both sides of an allegorical equation be available to the human mind: one available to the imagination, the other to the trained intellect. As I suggest, however, negative theology uniquely identifies absolute or necessary being, and determines the reference of the name “God” without forming any conception of what God is. Insofar as Maimonides adheres to a theology of negation and is committed to deny the human intellect any content for its idea of God, he must also be committed to the view that no allegorical representation of God is possible.

These considerations suggest a strict Maimonidean distinction, in the act of thinking about God, between forming a notion of God in one's mind and directing one's mind to God. The first is an exercise in positive theology involving a quest for the most adequate description of God, however imprecise its terminology, recognizing that some notion must be apprehended by the mind if it is to be thinking about anything. The second involves use of concepts and words to direct the mind toward God without generating false beliefs about God. When Maimonides must choose between them, he prefers the second. The determining factor in his unqualified preference is his concern for reference to true reality. This concern is stated boldly in Maimonides' striking claim that piety and devotion are nothing at all if they lack an objective intentional relation to God.

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 desires. In the latter Maimonides finds the root cause of idolatry,

39Maimonides recognizes this necessity in his discussion of the language of prayer (Guide 1.59; ET 140–41), where he quotes a Talmudic story about Rabbi Hanina's criticism of a person who opened his prayer with an invocation much longer than the terse traditional formula, “God the great, the valiant, the terrible” (b. Ber. 33b). Even though the traditional epithets are logically permissible attributes of action, Maimonides argues that their use in prayer would not have been permitted were it not for the need to form some notion of God in a worshiper's mind. Thus Maimonides writes: “Consider also that he has stated clearly that if we were left only to our intellects we should never have mentioned these attributes or stated anything appertaining to them. Yet the necessity to address men in such terms as would make them achieve some representation—in accordance with the dictum of the Sages: The Torah speaks in the language of human beings—obliged resort to predication of God their own perfections when speaking to them.” Since prayer is not directed to human beings but to God, use of these attributes in the invocation is permitted only because it is ritually required. Rabbinic discussion of these predicates shows that they are meant to designate attributes of action (see b. Yoma 69b: “Why were they called Great Assembly?”).

40Maimonides Guide 3.51; ET 620 (quoted above); see also Guide 1.50.
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.\textsuperscript{41}

The objectivity of reference to God is indispensable in genuine Maimonidean worship, and it can only be established through a strict theology of negation that yields no conception of God. Yet, for all its austerity, Maimonides' theology of negation has a profound liberating effect. Rather than stultify religious discourse, it gives Maimonides the freedom to experiment with a variety of theological models which make the \textit{Guide} so rich and multitextured. Once a relation of reference is firmly established, leaving no place for doubt concerning which entity one uses the word "God" to designate, several possibilities emerge. First, it becomes possible to worship the real God. Second, it becomes possible to have mistaken beliefs that are still beliefs about God. Such mistakes would not otherwise be possible because mistaken beliefs form in the mind a representation of another entity and thus are not, after all, mistakes about the real God. Third, and most important for this article, it also becomes possible, self-consciously, to entertain positive notions of God in order to affect a proper attitude toward God, while knowing these notions to be untrue of God. This is a dialectical awareness that keeps such inadequate notions from determining the reference of the word "God." Even though the second and third possibilities are important to religion, not to philosophy, it is Maimonidean philosophers who need them most, for only these philosophers reach the stage where their concept of God is truly empty.\textsuperscript{42}

\section*{Philosophical Symbols of Perfection: Intellect and Moral Excellence}

I believe the austerity of Maimonides' formal theology of negation, and the certainty with which he thought it established a genuine reference to God, allowed him not to leave religious thought in a state of unconceiving silence. This allowed him to resort instead to symbolic ideas of God that provide content for religious thought as they point beyond themselves and deny their literal or metaphoric truth. We underestimate the problem

\textsuperscript{41}I discuss Maimonides' view of the cognitive role of the imagination in "Models for Understanding Evil in the \textit{Guide for the Perplexed}," \textit{Iyyun} 34 (1985) [Hebrew].

\textsuperscript{42}This Socratic attitude toward true wisdom as overcoming the illusion of knowledge is interesting when compared to the nonphilosophical view of R. Solomon ben Isaac (Rashi, 1040–1105). In his commentary to page 49b of \textit{b. Yebamot}, Rashi writes: "all the prophets looked through an unclear glass imagining they were seeing but were not and Moses looked through a clear glass and knew that he did not see God's face." (\textit{כָּל} הַפְּרוּשִׁים \textit{בַּסְפָּרָיו}, \textit{בַּבּוּיתָא \textit{יְבָאָמוֹת} \textit{בָּרָרָא \textit{דָּרְשְׁאָא}, \textit{בַּסְפָּרָיו} \textit{בֵּרָרָא \textit{דָּרְשְׁאָא} \textit{בָּרְאָא} \textit{דָּרְשְׁאָא} \textit{בָּרְאָא} \textit{דָּרְשְׁאָא}). I am indebted to Yeshayahu Leibovitz for this reference.
Maimonides faced if we locate it in the inability of language to express difficult metaphysical ideas. The problems of the limits and imprecision of language can be easily overcome by silence when speech is unnecessary. Maimonides recommends this kind of silence throughout his writings. More profound is the difficulty facing those who reach the stage where their concept of God is truly empty and realize that they must either rid their minds of all thought about God or allow their minds to entertain thoughts they know are inadequate.

Given the choice between relating to God through contentless thought or through some inadequate notion, Maimonides prefers the latter. He was not attracted to the self-enclosed infinity of an empty self-contemplating mind that Aristotle describes in book twelve of his *Metaphysics*.\(^{43}\) Ultimately, Maimonides does not seem to accept Aristotle's idea as a notion of what God's thought might be like, nor can he accept it as a mode of intellectual worship. Being self-enclosed and empty, such thought cannot be about anything and cannot relate to God. If the intellect is to relate to God at all, it must permit itself to use inadequate ideas to provide necessary content for thought about God. The most important notions Maimonides uses for this purpose are those of intellect and ethical perfection. It is these notions alone that provide content for his ideals of intellectual love of God and of *imitatio dei*. Both are employed as self-transcending conceptions; invoking a notion of perfection yet made transparent by their ever-apparent inadequacy, they point beyond themselves toward the inconceivable divine being.

While the idea of the wholly other nature of God described by the negative concept of necessary existent dominates Maimonides' religious epistemology, the idea of divine perfection informs his attitude toward God. Central here is the idea of an unmoved mover, the supreme teleological cause, whose perfection motivates imitation in all inferior beings and sets the universe in motion. For Maimonides, God as an epitome of perfection "is the ultimate end of everything; and the end of the universe is similarly a seeking to be like unto His perfection as far as is in its capacity. . . . In

\(^{43}\)Speculating on the nature of divine thought, Aristotle concluded that "it must be itself that thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things), and its thinking is a thinking on thinking" (*The Complete Works of Aristotle* [trans. W. D. Ross; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984] 1074b15–35). Maimonides seems to suggest this view when he argues for the identity of life and knowledge in God, saying that "everyone who apprehends his own essence possesses both life and knowledge by virtue of the same thing" (*Guide* 1.55; ET 122). He distinguishes there between his allusion to divine self-knowledge and the focus on God's knowledge of the world by theologians who believe in positive attributes. While Maimonides ascribes self-knowledge to God, he is unwilling to limit God's knowledge to a self-knowledge that is not also omniscient. He deviates from the Aristotelian model and presents divine thought as knowing the world (1.68) and later defends the doctrine of divine omniscience against philosophical criticism (3.19–21).
virtue of this it is said of Him that He is the end of the ends.” Accordingly, when Maimonides adapts to his purposes the rabbinic principle that “Torah speaks in human language” to save the Bible from materialistic anthropomorphism, he tries to show that scripture attributes to God actions and qualities that people tend to consider instances of perfection. It is not, however, anthropomorphism as such that Maimonides seeks to overcome, but the crude materialistic notions that sophisticated believers find embarrassing. A moral idea of God can perhaps be defended as more spiritually refined than the notion of a mighty heavenly warrior, but not as less anthropomorphic. I suggest that Maimonides devoted major parts of the Guide to extend this theory and create a religious language appropriate to the needs of those who use philosophy to overcome the materialistic limitations of the imagination.

**Intellect as Symbol for God’s Unity and Immateriality:** In apparent contradiction to negative theology, Maimonides presents as generally accepted a philosophical doctrine that God is an intellect for whom the knowing subject, the known object, and the activity of knowing are one. Maimonides seems to have no reservations in concluding the discussion with a positive statement regarding God’s essence, relating it to a state of the human intellect: “Thus His essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect, as is also necessarily the case with regard to every intellect in actu.” However Maimonides intended his special formulation of this philosophical doctrine to be understood, it clearly directs his reader to think of God as of an intellect, and this notion will not be totally obliterated by Maimonides’ argument in another part of the book that human knowledge and God’s knowledge have only a name in common. This glaring inconsistency gives the reader reason to suspect that Maimonides’ use of the term “intellect” in relation both to

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44 Maimonides *Guide* 3.20.
45 Maimonides’ explanation for why angels are described as flying with wings is an instructive application of his theory. He claims that “through the admixture with their shape of something belonging to the shape of irrational animals...the mind is guided toward a knowledge of the fact that the rank of the existence of the angels is below the rank of the deity” (*Guide* 1.49; ET 109). He says that the motion of flying was chosen to point to the fact that the angels are living beings because flying “is the most perfect and the noblest of the motions of the irrational animals, and man believes it to be a great perfection; so that he wishes to fly in order that it might be easy for him to flee from all that harms him and that he might betake himself swiftly to whatever agrees with him.”
46 Maimonides *Guide* 1.68.
human beings and God represents a further case of homonymy. In his lectures on the *Guide*, Yeshayahu Leibovitch proposed that all of Maimonides' references to a conception of God as self-cognizing subject should be subsumed under the general principle of negative theology. Although I believe this is true, it cannot be the whole story. One still must explain why Maimonides chose to write as if he had a positive notion of what God is.

Maimonides allows himself bold positive language unmitigated by warnings that the term can be used homonymously. In part one of the *Guide*, Maimonides presents the philosophical doctrine that God is an intellect that differs from our intellect by being always *in actu*, never moving from potential to actual intellection. In part three, Maimonides uses predicates of divinity in reference to the intellect, describing it as "the great king who always accompanies him [the man of God] and cleaves to him." Maimonides moderates this daring deification of the intellect with a typical Maimonidean ambiguity. In the final clause of the statement, he clarifies that "this king who cleaves to him and accompanies him is the intellect that overflows toward us and is the bond between us and Him, may He be exalted." Although it seems here that Maimonides withdraws from an identification of God and intellect, the reader must confront an even more problematic possibility that Maimonides is referring to the Agent Intellect as an intermediary object of religious experience. Could Maimonides have wanted his readers to think of God as an intellect and at the same time to be aware that the wholly other nature of God renders that notion absurd? What purpose could such thoughts serve? This is exactly what he does in the first chapter of the *Guide*.

Maimonides first introduces an oblique identification of God and intellect in discussing the biblical idea that human beings were created in the image of God: "That which was meant in the scriptural dictum, *let us make man in our image*, was the specific form, which is intellectual apprehension, not the shape and configuration." Maimonides' purpose is to overcome the materialistic implication that since man was made in the image of God, God must have some sort of human-like form. He claims that the image of God in man is not the human shape but the power of intellection. Performing this substitution, Maimonides presents human intellectual ca-

49Ibid.
50Ibid., 3.52; ET 629.
51Ibid., 3.52; ET 629.
52For a discussion of a possible parallel to mystical christology, see Ithamar Gruenwald, "Maimonides' Quest beyond Philosophy and Prophecy," in Kraemer, *Perspectives on Maimonides*, 145.
53Maimonides *Guide* 1.1; ET 22.
pacity as true human essence and inevitably implies thereby that in this humans resemble God. The chapter ends several sentences later with a qualifying explanation:

Now man possesses as his proprium something in him that is very strange as it is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon, namely intellectual apprehension. In the exercise of this, no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used; and therefore this apprehension was likened to the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument, although in reality it is not like the latter apprehension, but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion. It was because of this something, I mean because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is in the image of God and in His likeness, not that God, may He be exalted, is a body and possesses a shape. 54

It is no simple task to sort out what the chapter affirms and what it denies. At first, human beings are said to be God-like because of their intellect. This suggests that God is also some sort of intellect. Subsequently, the suggestion is severely qualified and then reaffirmed with no further denial. Informed by negative theology and the doctrine of the wholly other nature of God, the reader would not have been surprised had Maimonides chosen to end the chapter with a statement of the opposite import. Although he could have written that "God, may He be exalted, is not an intellect," he chose not to do so. Maimonides states that the notion of the intellect is invoked to represent God because the human intellect is the only immaterial entity with which the readers are familiar, and he warns his readers not to think that God apprehends as humans do. The notion that God is an immaterial, knowing subject, however, is not denied. Since Maimonides thought that most people were incapable of comprehending the notion of an intellect and that those who can are able to do so only after demanding philosophical instruction, he could not have thought that scripture resorted to the language of human beings and likened God to an intellect. The language scripture descends to is a language of imagery, not of abstract concepts.

Throughout the Guide, Maimonides helps his intended reader understand what the human intellect is, what its perfection requires, how a person who achieves it lives, and what such a person can expect in life and in death. It is Maimonides who resorts here to the language of human beings and uses the concept of the intellect to represent God's immateriality. As he invokes the notion of the intellect, Maimonides reminds the student not to believe that the comparison denotes what God is. Maimonides uses the

54 Ibid., 1.1; ET 23.
notion of the human intellect as a symbol for God's mode of being. Thinking of God as an intellect makes it easier for our mind to accept the reality of God's immaterial mode of being, but thinking about God and knowing are separate things. The distinction between them is secured by the demand of negative theology that human beings deny of God everything that God is not, everything that does not share God's unique mode of necessary existence—the intellect included.

To those who understand his view of the nature of the intellect, Maimonides suggests that the unity of the intellect can be a symbol for the unity of God.55 The concept of the unity of the human intellect beyond its diverse applications helps the reader to accept the claim that attributing to God many diverse actions need not threaten God's unity. Thus Maimonides writes:

There need not be a diversity in the notions subsisting in an agent because of the diversity of his various actions....

I shall illustrate this by the example of the rational faculty subsisting in man. It is one faculty with regard to which no multiplicity is posited. Through it he acquires the sciences and the arts; through the same faculty he sews, carpenters, weaves, builds, has a knowledge of geometry [architecture?], and governs the city.56

This illustration forms an important link between Maimonides' two major notions of God, intellect and moral agent. The intellect is presented as an agent and its unity is invoked to represent the unity of God. No reference is yet made to the nature of that unity. The missing reference to the essential unity of the intellect, whether human or divine, is supplied in the tripartite identification of knower, known, and knowing in chapter sixty-eight of part one of the Guide.

**God as Moral Person:** Maimonides presents the notion of God as an ideal of practical excellence as a theological construct that serves as an object of imitation for those who have reached intellectual perfection.57 He

55Maimonides was able to use the intellect as a symbol for God due to the particularly strong view he held of the unity of the intellect. Unlike other Aristotelian thinkers, most notably Alfarabi, he refused to distinguish between a theoretical and a practical intellect. For discussion of the relevant sources and references to secondary works, see Howard Kreisel, "The Practical Intellect in the Philosophy of Maimonides," *HUCA* 59 (1988) 189–215.

56Maimonides *Guide* 1.53; ET 120–21.

57Isadore Twersky has shown ("On Law and Ethics in the *Mishne Torah*: A Case Study of Hilkhot Megillah II:17," *Tradition* 24 [1989] 143) that Maimonides made "a major and most far-reaching innovation" in determining that the scriptural phrase "You shall walk in His ways" (Deut 28:9) should be considered a distinct commandment and not only a general call to obey God's laws. Maimonides' son, Abraham, justified this decision by explaining that the phrase should be understood as a command to mold, nurture, and sustain an ethical personality. He explained that this is a completely autonomous mitzvah.
offers two versions of the ideal: one embodied in the Mosaic proclamation of God's ways, and the other in a verse from Jeremiah that describes God as "the Lord who exercises loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth" (Jer 9:23). Both consist of virtues attributed to God on the basis of attributes of action, and their status is accordingly problematic. Maimonides says that they are "merely something that is in thought," that they "are indicative of a perfection likened to our perfections, which are understood by us" and that "the meaning here is not that He possesses moral qualities, but that He performs actions resembling the actions that in us proceed from moral qualities—I mean from aptitudes of the soul; the meaning is not that He, may He be exalted, possesses aptitudes of the soul." Again, both affirmation and denial direct human beings toward God's unknowable perfection. Maimonides calls upon a philosophical conception of human excellence to represent the perfection of God's mode of action, with which it is known and attested to have nothing in common.

It is a central claim in Maimonides' psychology of religion that once the human soul turns to perfect its intellectual capacities by embarking on a scientific quest to comprehend the wisdom that is manifest in nature, the soul finds itself inexorably attracted to secure a knowledge of God. Failing to apprehend God, the perfected intellect is stricken by a passionate love of God that drives it to generate a speculative idea of God out of the only elements which the theory of attributes allows—out of attributes of action. Human beings generate this idea of God by contemplating the structure of nature and interpreting it as an expression of God's will, as proceeding from that which in humans would be virtues. The result is an acknowledgedly inadequate idea of God that humans construct by imposing an ethical interpretation on the structure of nature. It is important for Maimonides that this idea of God is not merely an imaginative projection but a construct of the intellect that requires practical wisdom.

58 The theological status of attributes of action is itself problematic. Feldman succinctly explains this ("A Scholastic Misinterpretation of Maimonides' Doctrine of Divine Attributes," 271), noting that "the actions of God are coextensive with the course of nature, which men describe in anthropomorphic terms," that "all expressions, even of God's actions, are absolutely equivocal," and that "this level of religious language is inferior to negative attributes, which Maimonides maintains are the only true attributes of God.

59 Maimonides Guide 1. 53; ET 123.
60 Ibid., 1. 53; ET 124.
61 I defend this claim systematically in chapter one of my Worship of the Heart.

62 This is the main thrust of Maimonides' argument in the first part of Guide 3.51. Describing the "regimen of the solitary," of those who "attained perfection in the divine science [metaphysics]," Maimonides says that they "direct all the acts of their intellect toward examination of the beings... so as to know His governance of them in whatever way it is possible." Several sentences later, Maimonides sets forth the necessary conditions for avoiding that which "has merely been invented by the imagination" (3.51; ET 620).
The Aristotelian concept of practical wisdom, on which Maimonides' work is based, involves understanding the relations between ends according to their place in a teleologically ordered life. Such wisdom can include the best function of a craftsman in a household or the total scheme of civic activities. The wider the context in which a person can order the ends, deliberate, and justify a course of action, the greater the person's wisdom. Since, according to Maimonides, the highest theoretical achievement possible for a human being is a firm grasp of the totality of the teleological structure of nature, this achievement establishes the widest possible context within which human ends can be understood. Maimonides presents a portrait of Moses as the person who understood the ends of politics and strove to imitate the example set by an idea of God that personifies Maimonides' notion of the ideal ruler. The accomplished person of the end of the Guide, who is not a prophet-ruler but a solitary religious intellectual, comes to exhibit the totality of the practical virtues by attributing to God and expressing in action the qualities of loving-kindness, justice, and righteousness.

Remarks on Maimonidean Constructivism

Clearly, Maimonides did not think that we can meaningfully say only what God is not even though he did think that we can only know what God is not. Rather, knowing what God is not allows Maimonides relatively free use of language to effect what he considers a proper attitude toward God's unknowable perfection. His major theological models, which depict God as intellect and as paradigm of moral excellence, use the most highly respected notions of human perfection available in his philosophical culture. His principle that choice of symbols must be culturally sensitive means that no specific construct should ever be absolutized. Whoever would be guided by Maimonides' analysis of the nature of religious language should be aware, for instance, that under no circumstances may a description of God as a moral ideal determine how human beings ought to act; this would be an absurd reversal of logical order. Consequently, a society that comes to

63 Explaining Moses' requests to know God, as described in Exod 33:12–23, Maimonides writes: "This was [Moses'] ultimate object in his demand, the conclusion of what he says being: 'That I may know Thee, to the end that I may find grace in Thy sight and consider that this nation is Thy people'—that is, a people for the government of which I need to perform actions that I must seek to make similar to Thy actions in governing them" (Guide 1.54; ET 125).

64 Another purpose of Maimonidean theological construction, which I cannot discuss here, is to protect the unknowing human mind from dangerous speculative errors. This, for example, is the purpose of his discussion of God's knowledge in part three of the Guide.

65 In chapter one of Maimonides' "Laws Concerning Character Traits"—the part of his code of Jewish law devoted solely to ethical instruction—he applies the logical order just de-
doubt and reevaluate its moral ideals will not be saved by imitation of God. From a Maimonidean perspective, moral and theological confusion would seem to be intimately related. His analysis suggests that doubts now common in contemporary society regarding whether religion should present the same image of God to women and men will only be resolved if society is able to achieve a unified concept of the best life for a human being—a concept that can apply both to women and men. These brief remarks suffice to show that freedom from the constraints of true representation does not lead Maimonidean constructivism to theological anarchy. Freed from speculating on what God might truly be like, this constructivism demands that human beings attend to what we can know and that we use this knowledge symbolically to shape our thoughts about what we want to know but cannot.

scribed. First, he presents the Aristotelian doctrine of the mean (without revealing its philosophical origins). Later, imitating the language of scripture, Maimonides says that "we are commanded to walk in these middle ways, which are good and right ways." Then he states that the prophets and sages applied terms to God that denote median virtues. This allows Maimonides to conclude: "Since these are names by which the Maker is called, and they are the middle way that we are obliged to walk, this way is called the way of God." Theology does not precede ethics but follows it. For the full text, see Raymond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth, eds., Ethical Writings of Maimonides (New York: Dover, 1983) 28–30. My translation is significantly different in some places.