

Rambam's Theory of Negative Theology: Divine Creation and Human Interpretation

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Part I

Central to Rambam's *Guide for the Perplexed* is the idea he develops of 'negative theology.' This asserts that God is simply 'other' than anything man can speak about. God has nothing in common with anything in the world. Just as it is absurd to compare "intellect with a color", or to say that a "man is stronger than the color green", similarly, it would be that much more preposterous to describe God in any positive way (section 1; chapter 33). On the contrary, any attempt to ascribe any positive attributes to Him would be equivalent to assigning Him with a physical form, and would be therefore tantamount to paganism (ibid. chapter 50). The 'oneness' of God demanded by the Torah requires us to reject any anthropomorphic description of Him (ibid. chapter 55). God is simply 'other' than anything man can speak about.

This negative theology, uniquely radical in theological history, has been the source of much discussion and controversy. A central issue

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most often raised is, given Rambam's position, how is it at all possible for man to relate to God in any meaningful way. Indeed, the entire corpus of Jewish scripture and liturgy is replete with descriptions and praises of God. It would appear that the Rambam's philosophical position is at odds not only with scripture, but the whole nature of Jewish prayer and supplication which the Rambam himself elaborates on in his Mishnah Torah. Although Scripture can always be interpreted metaphorically, as Rambam does frequently in the *Guide*, prayer is not subject to such interpretation. The resolution of this issue is critical for anyone who intellectually subscribes to a rationalist conception of God, but on the other hand recognizes our existential need to connect with Him on a personal level¹.

While Rambam does not present us with an explicit resolution of this difficulty anywhere, it is possible to construct one through gleaning from several passages throughout the *Guide*. Indeed, in his famous introduction, he writes explicitly that, "contradictory or contrary statements" are integral in explicating obscure and difficult concepts. As a consequence, one cannot expect to locate the resolution of all theological difficulties in specific locations, but rather one must take into account different, possibly conflicting, statements, scattered in different sections and thereby construct, through dialectics and synthesis, the overarching concept.

There are two places in the *Guide* where Rambam allows us to describe God with positive attributes, thus allowing for a violation of his negative theology. In one passage, he states explicitly that there is an exception to his principle of negative theology, while in the other place another type of exception is mentioned tangentially, signaling to the alert reader a seeming contradiction between the two passages. For having allowed for a positive description of God in one and seemingly only one instance, how can Rambam allow for positive description in another instance? The first and explicit exception is Rambam's distinction between descriptions of God Himself, and descriptions of God's acts. While descriptions of 'God Himself'

cannot be uttered, descriptions of God's acts are permitted, and do not violate negative theology. He writes,

The fifth category of attributes is one which describes acts. I do not mean a description of one's ability to perform an act, such as describing someone as a carpenter or a glazier, for these are evaluations of the subject himself. But rather, I mean "his actions" which he performs as in the statement "Reuven is the one who built this door" or "constructed this wall" or "wove this suit". This type of predication is distant from the subject of predication and therefore it is permitted in this sense to describe God as such¹.

Rambam, in this passage, explicitly allows one to describe God's acts. In the statement "This type of predication is distant from the subject of predication", Rambam provides the philosophical and theological grounds for permitting this violation. It is precisely God's 'otherness' from the world which allows us to describe Him by describing His acts. For the distance between the act or predicate and the subject, is sufficiently large that no description of any Divine act can ever be construed to be a description of God Himself. Rambam lists five categories of predicates, and this is the only one that permits any kind of positive description. The impression conveyed to the reader is that this is the only exception to be made.

However, in section 1; chapter 59 Rambam, seemingly tangentially, mentions a second category of exceptions - attributes which come from prophecy. He writes there:

Reflect what was said that if God left us (alone) to act in accordance with our intellects, we would never mention any positive attributes nor would we utter them (in prayer), only out of necessity to give people so that they should have some

1 section 1 chapter 52

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concepts, as the Sages say “The Torah speaks in the language of man”, to describe to them God in terms of their own notions of perfection. Our purpose is to draw a line with respect to using these expressions and not to refer to Him by them except when the Torah scroll is read. However, since also the Men of the Great Assembly came along, who themselves were prophets and established that certain attributes should be part of the liturgy of prayer – only those can be uttered.

The attributes of God which appear in Jewish liturgy are permissible according to Rambam for they are rooted in prophecy. The prophets here are the Men of the Great Assembly, who composed the central corpus of Jewish liturgy. In addition, it seems that the attributes which appear in the Torah are also permitted for the same reason. The Torah is no other than the prophecy of Moses. One might be tempted to interpret Rambam as allowing for the Torah reading exception to negative theology because of the statement of the Sages, “the Torah speaks the language of man”. However, it is difficult to understand why Rambam should justify such a violation. Rather it seems to me that the more plausible interpretation of Rambam's intention in this paragraph is that the Torah reading is permitted for it is also an act of prophecy. Otherwise the final sentence, beginning “however” with respect to the Men of the Great Assembly is redundant. Therefore Rambam is emphasizing his central point that attributes derived from prophecy, such as the attributes that appear in the liturgy of the Men of the Great Assembly do not violate negative theology.

It is clear that Rambam does not view prophetically derived attributes as violations of negative theology. The question which immediately arises is why? What difference should it make if we are describing God by prophetic utterances? Why are these not considered to be ascribing Him with bodily form and thereby violating the Torah

prohibition of paganism? In other words, what is it about prophetic utterances which describe God that are truly not about Him?

This problem can be formulated in the following way: Rambam, as we have seen, makes an explicit exception in his negative theology for descriptions of God's acts. Rambam also, makes a parenthetical remark while discussing prayer, that attributes which appear in liturgy are permitted descriptions of God, for they are prophetic utterances. If descriptions of acts and prophetic utterances constitute two separate categories or permissible descriptions of God, why were they not both explicitly presented in section 1; chapter 52? It is probably more reasonable to assume that the parenthetical exception is to be included in the explicit exception. In other words, prophetic utterances are essentially descriptions of acts of God. How is this so? What is it about prophetic utterances that Rambam considers to be descriptions of God's acts and not descriptions of God Himself.

In order to answer this question we must turn now to two passages in the *Guide* which describe the act of prophecy. The two passages appear in two different parts of the *Guide*. Nonetheless when analyzed together they will help us understand Rambam's conception of the process which gives rise to prophetic revelation. Once again we are witnessing Rambam's methodology at work. The first passage is part of a general discussion of prophecy. There he writes:

Know that the true reality and essence of prophecy consists in its being an overflow from God, may He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty².

The second passage is located in an earlier section of the *Guide* where Rambam discusses creation. In that chapter Rambam is trying to

2 Section 2 chapter 36

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resolve the philosophical difficulty of how an incorporeal body, namely God, can be understood to causally affect a corporeal, physical world. Rambam's solution is that God's causal relationship with respect to the physical world is not direct. Rather it is achieved through an 'overflow' which originates in His thoughts and which eventually develops into the 'active intellect' which, through the celestial spheres, imparts movement to the world. The central idea is that even though God is non-corporeal, the 'overflow' of His thoughts is considered a Divine act. In the course of his exposition, Rambam makes an important analogy to the prophetic process.

The action of the separate intellect is always designed as an overflow, being likened to a source of water that overflows in all directions and does not have one particular direction from which it draws while giving its beauty to others. For it springs forth from all directions and constantly irrigates all the directions, nearby and afar... Similarly with regard to the Creator, may His Name be sublime, inasmuch as it has been demonstrated that He is not a body and had been established that the universe is an act of His and that He is its efficient cause – as we have explained and shall explain – it has been said that the world derives from the overflow of God and that He has caused everything that is produced in time to overflow into it. Similarly, it is said that He caused His knowledge to overflow to the prophets. The meaning of this is, these actions are the actions of one who is not a body and it is His action that is called an overflow³.

The importance of this passage for us is that according to Rambam, just as God does not directly impart movement to the physical world, He also does not directly speak to prophets. Rather, God through His thoughts produces 'mental' acts whose overflow is discerned and

3 section 2 chapter 12

apprehended by the prophet through their imaginative and/or rational intellect. Prophecy, then, consists of an interpretation or description of an act of God. Hence prophetic attributes of God are no other than the prophet's description of God's 'mental creations' and naturally fall into Rambam's fifth category of predication. As a result prophetic attributes are admissible descriptions of God and do not violate negative theology.

With this observation we can now understand Rambam's statement above regarding the permissibility of Divine attributes which appear in the liturgy. The positive attributes which appear in a prophetically inspired liturgy are essentially prophetic descriptions of Divine acts. Therefore it is precisely the prophetic nature of the corpus of Jewish prayer which allows the worshipper to refer to God in a positive way and to praise Him.

If so, we can understand Rambam's comparison analogy between contemplating the words of the prophets, such as liturgy, and the physical world. Rambam states in his section on prophecy:

You should know that sometimes [in prophecy] the intellectual overflow flows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all towards the imaginative faculty – ... this is characteristic of the class of men of science engaged in speculation⁴.

Having established a parallelism in Rambam between intellectual apprehension of prophetic texts and intellectual apprehension of the physical creation, we can now understand Rambam's conception of prayer and worship. In a passage in the *Guide* Rambam invokes a statement of the Sages that prayer is considered 'service of the heart'⁵. In the context of this verse which forms the basis of the Sages'

4 section 2 chapter 37

5 *Sifrei* Devarim 41

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statement, worship itself is a consequence of love of God. Rambam in this passage adds the crucial link, that love itself is a consequence of intellectual apprehension:

“The Torah has made clear that this worship which we have discussed in this chapter can come about only after intellectual apprehension. The verse says “To love Adonai your God and to worship Him with all you hearts and all your souls (Devarim 11: 13). We have already made clear several times that love of God is in accordance with intellectual apprehension. After love will follow worship which the Sages have also referred to as “worship of the heart” (Sifrei Devarim 41). This is, in my opinion, philosophical reflection on “the primary thought” and meditation on this as much as possible.

What is Rambam referring to when he says “We have already made clear several times that love of God is in accordance with intellectual apprehension”? It seems that he is referring to two places in the *Mishnah Torah* where he asserts that through contemplation and meditation on the wisdom of creation one will come to love Him.

In Hilchot Teshuva, Rambam writes (chapter 10 halachah 6):

It is well known and clear that the love of God is not imbedded in man's heart until he pursues persistently and abandons everything else in the world, as it is stated “with all your hearts and with all your souls” – for this can only come about through his knowledge of Him. For only by knowledge of Him can one love God, whether a little or a lot. Therefore one should devote himself to understand and contemplate the wisdoms and sciences which make him aware of his creator in accordance with his ability to understand and contemplate, as we explained in Yesodei HaTorah.

The reference to Yesodei HaTorah is to the scientific description to be found there of the natural universe as Rambam understood it. There too he says (chapter 2: halachah 2):

And what is the path to love and fear of God? When a person contemplates the great and wondrous acts and creations of God, and sees their great wisdom which has no bounds, immediately one is overcome with love...”

We see clearly that for Rambam, ‘service of the heart’ which constitutes the Torah dictate of prayer can only come about through a ‘love of God’ which is based upon intellectual apprehension. This however, raises a problem, for the love of God described by Rambam in the two passages above from the *Mishnah Torah* come as a result of intellectual apprehension of God’s creation. In the case of worship, what is the object of that intellectual apprehension which leads to it? Based upon what we have established, that prophetic texts are analogous to the physical creation, it follows that the intellectual apprehension involved in prayer is of the liturgy itself. Rambam makes this point explicitly in this following passage (chapter 51 of section III):

I will now commence to guide you in the proper methodology, in order that you will reach this great achievement. The first thing is to try to empty yourself of all (outside) thoughts when you recite the Shema and prayer (the eighteen benedictions)... when you accomplish this and it becomes rooted with in you after years, attempt after which every time you read from the Torah or hear it. When this has become rooted in you after a certain period, try every time you read from the Prophets that your thoughts are always pure. Even during all the blessings reflect upon what you say and pay attention to its meaning.

We have now come full circle. Man relates to God through prayer as the scientist relates to God through the physical creation. ‘Service of

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the heart', which is prayer, is achieved by "reflecting" upon the words of the liturgy and "paying attention to its meaning".

Rambam's concept of prayer as an act of 'worship of the heart' which follows from intellectual reflection upon the prophetically derived words of the Jewish liturgy is a direct consequence of his 'negative theology'. For by positing the absolute 'otherness' of God from creation, the sole means man has at his disposal is to intellectually apprehend the 'acts' of God. These acts can be physical, in which case perspicacity of them constitutes the scientific wisdom of His universe. Or they can be an 'overflow' of Divine thoughts, in which case its apprehension occurs during the act of prophecy. This leads to the establishment of sacred scripture and liturgy, through whose apprehension, in theory, constitutes man's worship of God.

The connection between Divine actions and human worship then appears to take place in two steps. In the first one, the prophet apprehends God's overflow while in the second the worshipper reflects upon the scriptural or liturgical words of the prophet. This would seem to contrast with the love of God which comes directly from apprehending God's creation. The truth is, however, that the latter also takes place in two stages. For Rambam tells us that we come to love God only by apprehending 'the wisdoms and sciences'. Hence we have here a two step process. First man apprehends the physical universe around him and discovers its 'wisdom and science'. Then, through reflecting upon the 'wisdom and science' man comes to a love of God.

The 'hallmark' of Rambam's negative theology then is that man never relates to God directly, but always indirectly. The 'distance' between the subject of predication and act of predication demanded by Rambam when we speak of God therefore constitutes the medium through which we relate to God. By filling up this space and never allowing the gap to be bridged, man paradoxically comes close to God through love and worship.

Part II

In part I, we saw how Rambam's 'negative theology' allows for God's acts and thoughts to be intellectually explored and understood by man. God's 'otherness' from the world is the very thing which allows for its intelligibility. Through knowledge and understanding of God's physical and mental 'act' man can enter into a relationship of love and worship with Him. But what of man's acts? How does 'negative theology' give significance to man's acts within the corpus of Judaism which places a central emphasis on man's knowledge and obedience to God's divine law therefore subjecting man to Divine reward and punishment?

There is an apparent paradox in the *Guide* regarding this. On one hand, Rambam reiterates the complete unintelligibility of God's essence. On the other hand, in three cases he identifies that essence with three positive attributes.

Rambam writes regarding the Divine Intellect (section I; chapter 68):

Since it has been rigorously proven that God is an active intellect, and not potentially, but rather continuously apprehends things intellectually... it then follows that He and the object ascertained intellectually are one, and it is His very essence. His essence is intellectual apprehension, the object of apprehension and the intellect itself.

Similarly in chapter 69 he writes concerning divine will:

Therefore all chains of events end up at His Will and Wisdom, which we have already explained, are His essence, for this Will and Wisdom are not things separate from His essence.

Finally In chapter 20 of section III he writes concerning Divine knowledge:

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In summary, just as we cannot apprehend the truth of His essence (self) but nevertheless we know that His existence is the most perfect existence ... we cannot know the truth of His knowledge for it is His essence.

From these passages we see that Rambam identifies God's unknowable essence with His intellect, knowledge and will. It thereby follows that intellect, knowledge and will are attributes of God, which constitute a seeming contradiction to his "negative theology".

If we carefully examine each of the above attributes, which Rambam has identified with God's essence, we see that each one accounts for a fundamental Divine-like attribute of man.

So, for example the first attribute, intellect, is what the Rambam understands at the very beginning of the Guide (Chapter 1 of Section I) to be man's Divine image. Intellect, writes the Rambam, is the most defining aspect of man in contrast to the rest of creation, and is also ostensibly the thing he has most in common with God.

In addition, in section 69, Rambam draws an explicit analogy between the processes of Divine and human intellect. According to Rambam in the act of thinking, the subject and object become one. This is true both of God's and of man's thought and is described by Rambam as follows:

"You should not then think that the intellect in actu is a certain thing existing by itself apart from apprehension is something else subsisting in that intellect. For the very being and true reality of the intellect is apprehension. Whenever, therefore you assume that an intellect exists in actu, that intellect is identical with the apprehension of what has been intellectually cognized. This is most clear to whoever has attempted this kind of speculation. Accordingly it is clear that the act of the intellect, which is its apprehension, is the true reality and the essence of the intellect. Consequently the thing by means of which the form of that piece of wood was

abstracted and apprehended which thing is the intellect, is also the intellectually cognizing object. For it is the very intellect that abstracted the form and apprehended it, thus being its act because of which it is said to be an intellectually cognizing object. Now its act is identical with its essence. Accordingly that which has been assumed to be an intellect in actu has nothing belonging to it except the form of the piece of wood. Accordingly it is clear that whenever intellect exists in actu, it is identical with intellectually cognized thing. And it has become clear that the act of every intellect which act consists in its being intellectually cognizing, is identical with the essence of that intellect. Consequently the intellect, the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object are always one and the same thing, in the case of everything that is cognized in actu.”

If this is true, is there any difference between the act of thinking in man and God? The answer, according to Rambam, is that in man, the intellect is not always active but also exists in a potential state. In this potential state, the subject, object and act of thinking are not unified. As Rambam says, “If, however, potential cognition is assumed they – that is the intellect in potential and the potentially cognizable object, are necessarily two things.” This is true for man. However as far as God is concerned, He is “an intellect in actu and there is absolutely no potentiality in Him – as is clear and shall be demonstrated – thus it is not possible to claim that God sometimes apprehends and sometimes does not, His intellect is a constant factor, it follows necessarily that He and the thing apprehended are one thing, which is His essence. Moreover, the act of apprehension is in itself the intellect, which is His essence. Thus in truth, the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellect, and the intellectually cognized object are one and the same thing wherever we have an intellect in actu. We, however, pass intellectually from potentiality to actuality only from time to time.”

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We see clearly that when man is actively thinking, he is imitating God, *Imitatio Dei*. As we have shown this intellectual act occurs not only when man seeks to understand the world but also when he reflects upon the words of the prophets or on prophetically inspired liturgy. The claim that “God’s intellect is His essence” does not violate negative theology precisely because man also thinks in a Divine fashion, so that there is no distinction between the human attribute and the Divine attribute. For the danger of idolatry recognized by negative theology in the attribution of positive descriptions to God is precisely because there is a distinction between man and God. Hence what we say about man cannot be said about God, for God cannot be reduced to man. However, if with respect to a particular attribute, man and God are commensurable, as when they are actively thinking, and then assigning that attribute to God does not reduce God’s status to that of man. When Rambam says that God’s intellect is His essence, he is essentially saying that our description of the intellectual act is not more pronounced in God than it is in man. Each is of equal irreducibility. Hence, negative theology becomes the way in which man can be said to act in a Divine manner. This thereby grants vast significance to the human act. In the case of intellect, it allows man to apprehend Divine wisdom.

The next attribute associated by the Rambam with God’s essence is His will. In chapter 69 Rambam writes that when one investigates the purpose of anything he follows a process of purposes which ultimately end up with the answer “it is God’s will”. He writes:

“This should be done with regard to every end occurring in time until one finally arrives at his mere will – may He be exalted – according to a certain opinion, as shall be made clear so that ultimately the answer will be: God willed it so; or – according to the opinion of others, as I shall make clear – one finally arrives at the decision of His wisdom so that ultimately the answer will be: His wisdom dictated it so. Thus

according to these two opinions the order of all ends is ultimately does do His will and wisdom, as to which it has been made clear, according to our opinion that they are identical with His essence; His will and His volition or his wisdom not begin things extraneous to his essence. I mean to say that they are not something other than His essence. Consequently He, may He be exalted, 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. This, as shall be made clear, is the meaning of His will, which is His essence. In virtue of this it is said of Him that He is the end of ends”

The key statements here are that the “end of the universe is similarly a seeking to be like unto His perfection as far as is in its capacity. This, as shall be made clear, is the meaning of His will, which is His essence.” Where is this “made clear”? It seems to me that it is at the very end of the *Guide* in chapter 53 of section III when Rambam writes that the highest perfection that man can reach is to imitate God’s ethics. There the Rambam says:

“He (the prophet) says that one should glory in the apprehension of Myself and in the knowledge of My attributes, by which he means His actions, as we have made clear with reference to its dictum “Show me now Thy ways”, and so on. In this verse (Yeremiyahu 9: 23) he makes clear to us that these actions that ought to be known and imitated are loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness. it is My purpose that there should come from you loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment in the earth in the way we have explained with regard to the thirteen attributes; namely that our purpose should be assimilation to them and that this should be our way of life. It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his

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capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His very providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension will always have in view loving-kindness, righteousness and judgment through assimilation to His actions, just as we have explained several times in this treatise.

Here, as in the case of intellect, we may ascribe ethical acts to God precisely because man's ethical actions are commensurable with those of God. As such, the maxim of negative theology is not violated, for the human act is indistinguishable from the Divine one. Hence, we are not attributing anything human to God. In addition, this allows for the possibility of man's acts to be ethical from a Divine point of view, which is significant in that it allows for a system of Divinely based ethics.

The final attribute which Rambam identifies with God's essence is Divine knowledge. In contradistinction to the attributes of intellect and will, or ethics, man's knowledge is incommensurable with God's knowledge. Rambam's identity of Divine knowledge with God's essence comes not to draw a parallel but, on the contrary, to create an infinite gap between the two. In chapter 20 of section III Rambam writes:

“Just as we do not apprehend the true reality of his essence, but know without doubt that His existence is the most perfect of existences and not commingled in any way with any deficiency or change or being acted upon, so although we do not know the true reality of his knowledge because it is his essence, we do know that He does not apprehend at certain times while being ignorant at others. I mean to say that no new knowledge comes to him in any ways that His knowledge is neither multiple nor finite; that nothing among all the beings is hidden from Him; and that His knowledge of them does not abolish their natures, for the possible remains as it was with the

nature of possibility. All the contradictions that may appear in the union of these assertions are due to their being considered in relation to our knowledge, which has only its name in common with His knowledge.”

In the next chapter, chapter 21 of volume III, Rambam writes further:

“He who studies true reality equitably ought accordingly to believe that nothing is hidden in any way from Him, may He be exalted, but that on the contrary, everything is revealed to His knowledge, which is His essence, and that it is impossible for us to know in any way this kind of apprehension. If we knew how it comes about, we would have an intellect in virtue of which an apprehension of this kind might be had. This, however, is a thing that in what exists belongs only to Him, may He be exalted, and it is His essence”.

The major consequence of this is that man may be said to possess absolute free will unencumbered by Divine knowledge. For since God’s knowledge, according to Rambam, is wholly other than man’s, we cannot speak about a contradiction between God’s knowledge and man’s free will. In addition we can safely be assured that God rewards and punishes man in perfect accordance with man’s actions. For any evidence to the contrary will be attributed to man’s inability to comprehend God’s knowledge. This idea is also expressed by Rambam in his *Mishnah Torah* (Hilchot Teshuva chapter 5; halacha 5) and in his *Shemonah Perakim* (chapter 8).

Thus, in identifying God’s knowledge with His essence, Rambam has essentially made God’s knowledge incorporeal. It is as separate from man as He is from the physical world. Just as God’s incorporeality allows for the reality of the scientific structure of the world, in a similar vein, God’s incorporeal knowledge allows for man’s absolute free will. Thus the concept of reward and punishment in accordance with man’s actions becomes a feasible reality. This therefore gives

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meaning to the system of Halachah which is the Divine law. For a Divine law, according to Rambam, is meaningful only if man is free to choose whether to obey or disobey it, and is rewarded or punished accordingly. Negative theology therefore can be said to provide the philosophical basis for the halachic system of Judaism.

Part III

By positing the absolute otherness of God from His creation, God's acts become wholly separable from God and are therefore intelligible to man. This applies to God's physical creations, which allow man to understand the world scientifically. It also applies to God's thoughts which allow for prophecy and thereby allows man to reflect upon the prophetically inspired liturgical texts. This constitutes the essence of man's worship of God. On the other hand, those attributes with which we identify God's essence become ipso facto attributes of man. This allows man to significantly understand God's wisdom in creation, to choose freely to obey God's will, and to act ethically from a Divine viewpoint.

Reflection upon these two consequences of negative theology provides us with a philosophical basis for the Halachic system. Not only can man successfully comprehend God's law and submit himself to it, but he can creatively interpret it and evolve it in accordance with his intellect. In so doing man makes contact with the Divine ethos and will. Rambam's negative theology becomes, therefore, the theology of the Jewish Halachah. With this Rambam has forged a central and vital union between his *Guide* and the *Mishnah Torah*.

ⁱ In an article in the Harvard Theological Review entitled 'Meaning and Reference in Maimonides' Negative Theology', Ehud Z. Benor proposes a resolution which draws upon the modern philosophical distinctions between 'meaning' and 'reference' in language. This makes possible a 'reading' of Rambam which supports a "rationally disciplined constructionist theology' which 'includes a certain type of religious anthropomorphism in a theology that upholds the whole other nature of God."

The first step in Benor's analysis is to establish the fact that a Divine attribute, while being meaningless according to Rambam, can nonetheless refer to God. Reference, unlike meaning, can be established by a series of negations (the Rambam's third cosmological argument for God's existence is an example), in complete agreement with Rambam's negative theology. Hence attributes of God can possess reference, even though they are meaningless. This builds upon modern

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theories of language which posit the existence of words which have reference independent of their meaning.

It is Benor's thesis that Rambam is not prohibiting the use of positive attributes of God, but rather the uninformed usage of such terms. If a person uses positive attributes and is therefore led to believe that they can describe God, then he is violating the prescriptions of Rambam's negative theology. However, if one knows in advance that God cannot possibly be described in any positive way, but knowingly uses such terms for the purposes of self edification, this is entirely allowable within the scheme of the Guide. As Benor puts it (p. 413):

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 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.

Benor then uses this idea to develop a 'constructive theology' according to Rambam which allows us to depict God in terms which reflect the "most highly respected notions of human perfection available in his philosophical culture." In Benor's scheme of things, religion works from the bottom up. First we construct an ideal image of man, then we use this ideal to generate attributes which refer to God (pp. 359 - 60). According to this view, Judaism basically boils down to anthropology (p. 148).

However in chapter 59 of volume I, Rambam appears to reject such a concept. There he writes:

It has been made clear that the more you are proven that something cannot be said about Him (God), the more you are complete, and the more you ascribe to Him, then the more you are comparing Him to other things and are distancing yourself from His truth. On the basis of this it is fitting to come closer to conceiving him through investigation and study until you understand Him eventually can only negated of Him but not by ascribing to Him things which add to His essence or things which attribute to Him perfections since we see that they are perfections for us.