

“Silence is your praise”

Maimonides’ Approach to Knowing God: An Introduction to Negative Theology

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The prophet Isaiah tells us,

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways.⁷³

The content of this verse suggests the inability of mankind to comprehend the knowledge and thoughts of God, as well as the

⁷³ Isaiah 55: 8- 9. The context of the verse is that Isaiah is conveying the message to the people of Israel that the ability to return to God (Teshuvah) is available to them, since the “traits” of God are conducive to this. See *Moreh Nevuchim (The Guide to the Perplexed)* 3:20 and the *Sefer haIkkarim* Maamar 2, Ch. 3.

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divergence of “the ways” of God and the ways of man. The extent of this dissimilarity is clarified in the second statement, i.e. that it is not merely a distance in relation, but rather it is as if they are of a different category altogether, like the difference that exists between heaven and earth⁷⁴. What then is the relationship between mankind and God? What does the prophet mean when he describes God as having thoughts and ways; how is it even possible to describe God as having thoughts and ways?

These perplexing implications are further compounded when one is introduced to the Magnum Opus of Maimonides⁷⁵, the *Mishneh Torah*. The *Mishneh Torah* is a legal composition, consisting of fourteen books, each containing several sections. The structure of each section is organized according to the mitzvot (as are enumerated in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*), whereby the basis of the section is the mitzvot being discussed, and within each chapter, the halachot pertaining to those particular mitzvot are elaborated upon. The first book of the *Mishneh Torah* is called the “Book of Knowledge”, *Sefer HaMadda* and the first section within the “Book of Knowledge” is called the “Foundations of the Torah”, *Yesodei HaTorah*. The first halachah, within the first section, which begins the first book of this legal masterpiece, opens with:

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to know that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. All existing things, whether

⁷⁴ Yosef Albo, *Sefer HaIkkarim*, Maamar 2, Ch. 3

⁷⁵ Moses son of Maimon was also known as Maimonides, or by the acronym of **Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon**, Rambam. Born 1135 in Cordova, Spain and died 1204 in Fostat, Egypt. A great legal codifier, philosopher and physician whose works form the cornerstone of Jewish study.

celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an intermediate class, exist only through His true Existence.⁷⁶

The foundation upon which all else is based and which is of such primary importance, essential to the fulfillment of all legal requirements, is the active pursuit of the comprehension and knowledge of God. This fact, which Maimonides held to be so basic and fundamental that his great legal work, available for the masses⁷⁷, opens with, is a task which the prophet Isaiah seems to have deemed impossible.

The source for the halachah mentioned is found in Maimonides' work, entitled *Sefer Hamitzvot*⁷⁸. It is within this composition that Maimonides enumerates all of the six hundred and thirteen biblical commandments, and separates them into two categories; positive commandments and negative commandments. Not only does Maimonides differ from other medieval commentators with regard to this structure of categorizing the mitzvot⁷⁹, meaning the division into positive and negative commandments, he also differs in the order which he categorizes the mitzvot. Whereas other commentaries⁸⁰ follow a 'chronological' pattern, enumerating the mitzvot according to the order in which they appear in the five books of Moses,

⁷⁶ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Yesodei HaTorah 1: 1, Adapted from Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: The Book of Knowledge translated by Moses Hyamson (Boys Town Jerusalem Publishers/ Israel, 1962), p. 34a/ b. Future reference in this paper will be based on Hyamson's translation.

⁷⁷ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Introduction

⁷⁸ Maimonides, *Book of Commandments*

⁷⁹ *Baal Hilbot Gedolot* (Behag), *Sefer HaChinuch* and the *Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot* (Semag). The Behag was the forerunner in enumerating the Mitzvot, and Maimonides version of a list of enumerated mitzvot is seen as a reaction to the complicated and unclear organization of the Behag's list of mitzvot. See *Sefer Hilbot Gedolot*, Opening Word (Machon Yerushalayim, Israel, 1991)p. 11 (Hebrew)

⁸⁰ *Sefer HaChinuch*

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Maimonides begins with the first statement of God at the revelation of Mount Sinai, which is recorded half way through the second book. Thereafter, Maimonides seems to categorize the mitzvot according to their genre. The first statement of God, which is listed as the very first mitzvah, is “I am the lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt”.⁸¹ This statement commands one in the precept of belief in God, that one should believe that there is a Supreme Cause who is the Creator of everything.

By this injunction we are commanded to believe in God; that is to believe that there is a Supreme Cause who is the creator of everything in existence. It is contained in his words (exalted be He) ‘I am the lord thy God, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt’⁸²

The meaning of the very subject of this commandment, namely ‘to believe’, has caused much discussion amongst the commentaries on the *Sefer HaMitzvot*. There are those who propose⁸³ that the actual Hebrew translation of the *Sefer HaMitzvot* from the original Arabic text is not entirely accurate in this instance, and the word, which is translated as ‘to believe’, should be translated as ‘to know’. This proposal, apart from its philological claim, is strengthened further when the mitzvah in question is cross-referenced with its counterpart⁸⁴ in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, where the word ‘to know’⁸⁵ is used. Although there are others who contest that the Hebrew translation is in fact accurate and should remain as ‘to

⁸¹ Exodus 20: 2

⁸²Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, *The Commandments: Sefer HaMitzvot of Maimonides* (The Soncino Press, London/ New York, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 1, Mitzvah 1

⁸³ See R. Yosef Kapach’s commentary on Maimonides’ *Sefer HaMitzvot*, Mitzvah 1 and *The Guide* 1: 50.

⁸⁴ Meaning the Halachot in the Mishneh Torah which expound the practical application of the mitzvot listed in the *Sefer HaMitzvot*.

⁸⁵ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah: Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah*, 1: 1

believe', the explanation of belief according to Maimonides must be understood. It is apparent from the guide that belief means the entrenchment and internalization, through clarification and correct verification of a certain matter⁸⁶. This definition renders the injunction 'to believe' almost identical to the injunction 'to know'. The outcome is that the first commandment is to be understood as 'to know that there is a Supreme Cause'. Once again this divine pursuit, to which Maimonides attributed such prime importance, so crucial for the fulfillment of the six hundred and thirteen biblical commandments⁸⁷, that it 'merits' to be the opening for yet another one of his great works, leads us towards the obstacle highlighted by the words of the prophet.

The message that reverberates throughout the writings of Maimonides is the necessity of intellectual pursuit within the framework of divine investigation. Before one discusses the nature and limitation of this aforementioned intellectual pursuit, one is compelled to question the source for attributing such importance and prime-status to this awe-inspiring task. Much has been said regarding whether Maimonides was a product of his time, thus explaining his philosophical leaning, or whether he more closely resembled a prophet illuminating the hidden word of God; however at present what we can glean from his writings are the sources which substantiate his proposal.

⁸⁶ See Tzionim, *Sefer HaMitzvot of Moses Maimonides* (Hotzaat Shabse Frankel LTD., Israel, 1995), Mitzvah 1. *The Guide* 1:50

⁸⁷ Even the Behag, who does not list knowledge or belief of God as one of the mitzvot, holds it to be entirely fundamental to fulfilling the 613 mitzvot. In fact it is due to the fundamental nature of this concept of knowledge and belief in God that the Behag does not enumerate it as a mitzvah, but rather views it as a prerequisite to all the mitzvot. See Maimonides, *Sefer HaMitzvot*: Hasagot HaRamban, Mitzvah 1, for reasoning of the Behag.

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The significance of intellectual investigation and the elevation of the intellect as man’s most valuable possession are strikingly evident in yet another opening passage, this time in Maimonides’ great philosophical work, *The Guide to the Perplexed*. The subject of the first chapter is the Hebrew words *tzelem* and *demut*. *tzelem* is defined as the “specific form of a thing, which constitutes the essence of a thing, whereby the thing is what it is”. *Demut* is defined as the likeness of a thing which “denotes agreement with regard to some abstract relation.” The definitions of these two terms are introduced in order to resolve a fundamental misunderstanding of a perplexing biblical verse. The verse in question is found in Genesis⁸⁸, at that ultimate point in the History of Man and the world, the creation of mankind. The verse says, “Let us make man in our image (*tzelem*) and our likeness (*demut*)”. An incorrect interpretation would lead one to attribute corporeality to God, thus overstepping the intellectual capacity of man in his comprehension of God, consequently causing him to promote disbelief in God. (Maimonides mentions that there is no such thing as an incorrect perception of God in this matter, rather there is either belief or disbelief. One who attributes corporeality to God is merely creating a fictitious invention and cannot be said to have a false belief, it is not even considered belief.⁸⁹) The true interpretation of this verse (at least on the surface of Maimonides’ explanation, the fact that there are layers upon layers of meaning and interpretation within the Guide notwithstanding) is that the *form* of man “is that constituent which gives him human perception”, and his intellectual perception is that with which he bears some resemblance and likeness, in an abstract relation, to the Divine perception.

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

⁸⁸ Genesis 1: 26

⁸⁹ See p. 12

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 unto 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 stirring 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.⁹⁰

The medium through which God and Man relate (one must understand the definition of the word relationship in this sense) is the faculty of intellectual perception. It is this faculty, which elevates Man above all other creations, and provides man with the bridge to venture into a world of metaphysical and theological study.

After investigating the opening passages of three of the classical works within the Maimonidean corpus, what should be overwhelmingly apparent is the emphasis and primary importance of intellectual investigation with the purpose of arriving at true knowledge of God. Yet, what remains to be addressed is the question of what one can know of God and what is the method by which one can attain that knowledge?

With this question as a backdrop, one can come to appreciate more fully the necessity and value of the treatise which Maimonides calls Negative Attributes⁹¹. Maimonides proposes the concept of Negative Theology or Negative Attributes in the *Guide*, primarily from chapters fifty through sixty. Although it constantly reappears throughout the entire *Guide*, this is the place where it is elaborated upon most

⁹⁰ Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated by Shlomo Pines (The University of Chicago Press, Chicago/ London, 1963), 1: 1

⁹¹ The Guide 1: 50- 60

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extensively. It has been pointed out that this is not Maimonides’ innovation, it is however certainly one of the most emphatic propositions presented by a Jewish philosopher, as is highlighted by Julius Guttman:

Although essentially Maimonides teaches nothing that had not been said before by a number of earlier Jewish philosophers, yet the conceptual sharpness and the profound systematic consistency with which he developed these basic ideas make him their classical exponent in Jewish philosophy.⁹²

The treatise, called Negative Theology, proposes that since God is the Supreme Infinite Being who possesses no plurality or corporeality, it is impossible to ascribe any attribute to Him in an attempt to reveal or describe His essence, without in actuality detracting from His essence.

In order to fully appreciate the deficiency of inaccurate description, the reader is given an introduction to the different methods of description. Maimonides tells us that there are five possible methods of describing something. The first is when something is described by its definition, for example, man can be described as ‘a being that lives and has reason.’ The second is the description of something by part of its definition. The third is the description of a general quality of something, whereby the general quality is not identical with the essence of the object; rather it is an extraneous characteristic, determined by a prior cause. For example, the trait of humility is a

⁹² Julius Guttman, translated by David W. Silverman, *Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (Shoken Books, New York, 1973), p. 180

One must ask then, who or what was Maimonides speaking out against and what provoked such a strong treatise at this juncture, if others had fulfilled this task prior to *The Guide*?

quality which does not describe the essence of a person, but rather the quality which has been acquired through a certain means. The fourth method is the description of something by its relation to another thing and the fifth is the description of something through its actions. The first three methods of description all imply plurality and are therefore inappropriate and inaccurate to use in reference to God, since they violate the statute of the incorporeal nature of God. To describe all or part of the characteristics of God would be to affirm that God possesses parts which constitute His essence. Only a being which has a compound nature can be said to be 'one', whereby 'oneness' is a unity of all its parts. Maimonides has already told us that the nature of God is not that of a composite compound:

This God is one. He is not two or more than two, but One; so that none of the things existing in the universe to which the term one is applied is like unto his Unity; neither such a unit as a species which comprises many units; nor such a unit as a physical body which consists of parts and dimensions. His unity is such that there is no other unity like it in the world.⁹³

The belief and knowledge of the unity and unique oneness of God is so fundamental it takes second place in the enumeration of the mitzvot by Maimonides, preceded only by the injunction to believe and know the primary nature of God.

By this injunction we are commanded to believe in the Unity of God; that is to say, to believe that the Creator of all things in existence and their First Cause is One. This injunction is contained in His words (exalted be He) 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One'. In most Midrashim you will

⁹³ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Yesodei HaTorah 1: 1

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find this explained as meaning that we are to declare the Unity of God’s name, or the Unity of God, or something of that kind. The intention of the Sages was to teach us that God brought us out of Egypt and heaped kindness upon us only on condition that we believe in His unity, which is our bounden duty.⁹⁴

When dealing with definitions of God in an attempt to describe His essence, particularly through these three methods, one has to resign oneself to the fact that, in the words of Guttman; “No positive statement about God can go beyond the mere tautology that God is God.”⁹⁵

With regards to the fourth method, Maimonides states that this would be the most appropriate method to be employed, since “they do not imply that a plurality of eternal things exists, or that any change takes place in the essence of God, when these things change to which God is in relation”⁹⁶. However since one cannot ascribe any similarity or relation of God to one of His creations, the usage of this method is inadmissible. Relation between God and His creations must be denied, since God is incomparable to anything else. An example of this is illustrated with regards to true existence. The existence of God is absolute and not dependent upon anything else and our existence is only a possible or ‘accidental’ existence, dependant on other factors. This particular distinction is clearly expressed in *Sefer Yesodei HaTorah*:

⁹⁴ Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel, *The Commandments: Sefer HaMitzvot of Maimonides* (The Soncino Press, London/ New York, 1967), Vol. 1, p. 3, Mitzvah 2

⁹⁵ Julius Guttman, translated by David W. Silverman, *Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (Shoken Books, New York, 1973), p. 181. Wolfson also uses this expression, see note 54.

⁹⁶ *The Guide* 1: 52

If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist

If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were non-existent, He alone would still exist. Their non-existence would not involve His non-existence. For all beings are in need of Him; but He, blessed be He, is not in need of them nor any of them. Hence, His real essence is unlike that of any of them.⁹⁷

Due to the fact that definition of existence contains no similarity and the definition of relation is the correlation of two objects of the same kind⁹⁸, there can be no relation and there can therefore be no description of God by His relation to another being.

The fifth method mentioned, the description of something through its actions is, according to Maimonides, the most appropriate. Despite the fact that the act or the action described is borne out of God's essence, it is however understood that it is not His essence. If one were to ask how it could be that a being that is one can have many different things coming out of it, Maimonides would answer that an example of this is fire⁹⁹. Fire, which performs actions such as bleaching, blackening, burning, boiling, hardening and melting, does not do so through different elements, rather it is the singular quality of heat that achieves all these tasks.

Maimonides outlines four basic principles which one cannot declare with regard to the essential nature of God: Corporeality, Emotion or Change, Potential or Non-existence and Similarity. The concept of incorporeality and the unity of God are intrinsically connected to negative theology. If God were of a corporeal nature, there would be

⁹⁷ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Yesodei HaTorah 1: 1- 3

⁹⁸ *The Guide* 1:56

⁹⁹ *The Guide* 1:53, Here Maimonides provides this analogy and logic.

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no transgression by ascribing attributes to Him. If the unity of God were also in question, one would be pardoned from describing this type of god in terms of his parts. Both the unity and incorporeality of God are directly connected to the primary nature and ‘Being’ of God, namely that He is the first being in existence. This concept is more commonly known as the “prime mover” theory or the immovable mover, attributed to the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. A basic summary of this principle is that in order for something to move or to be in motion (a fundamental element of existence) there must be something that moved it. The sequence will backtrack to each preceding mover, which in turn has that which moves it, until we come to the immovable mover or prime mover, who is not moved by anything else.

All movement requires a prime mover: if a is in motion, then there must be something that is moving a.” Therefore there must be unmoved movers: “a is moved by b, b is moved by c... eventually y is moved by z, which is itself motionless.”¹⁰⁰

Since the Prime mover preceded all of creation, it must be that it is an entirely simple being (not in terms of non-complexity, but rather being Absolutely One) and therefore non-finite as well, for if that Being was of a compound nature it would imply corporeality. This Aristotelian philosophy is clearly utilized by Maimonides in the first chapter of Yesodei HaTorah:

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to know that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. All existing things, whether

¹⁰⁰ *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* edited by Jonathan Barnes: Metaphysics by J. Barnes (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/ New York/ Melbourne, 1995), p. 66- 108.

“We are not discussing a chronological progression of motion, but rather all movements are simultaneous.”

celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an intermediate class, exist only through His true Existence.

This being is the God of the universe, the Lord of all the earth. And he it is who controls the sphere (of the universe) with a power that is without end and limit; with a power that is never intermitted. For the sphere is always revolving; and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone making it revolve. God, blessed be He, it is, who, without hand or body, causes it to revolve.¹⁰¹

In light of this, one seems to be thrown into darkness when one encounters Biblical literature. It would appear that the polar opposite of this treatise is presented. One is confronted with the form, sight, place, chair, ascent and descent, sitting and standing of God, to mention but a few. If this were the gauge by which one was able to attribute characteristics, one would have a God who was not only corporeal, but also highly emotional and shared many similarities with His creations, heaven forbid! What then is it that warrants this flagrant violation of these principles in the very place that these principles should be upheld, according to Maimonides? The explanation is simply that “the Torah speaks in the language of man”.¹⁰² Therefore when the Torah uses an expression of emotion, one would have to interpret that expression as the attribute that would be applied to man, if man were experiencing that action. The expression reflects the emotion or action through the perception of man, and in no way denotes corporeality or emotion or change on behalf of God. It is with this in mind that Maimonides devotes a great amount of the first section of ‘the Guide’ dealing with these ambiguous expressions. His general method is to identify the homonymous nature of the particular biblical expression in question

¹⁰¹Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*: Yesodei HaTorah 1: 1 & 5

¹⁰² *The Guide* 1:53

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and to demonstrate that within that particular expression, there are multiple definitions and implications which do not suggest anthropomorphic qualities of God.

An example of this is found in the eighth chapter of *The Guide* where the subject being discussed is the Hebrew word *makom*, which literally means place. The simple definition of the word is applied to a ‘particular spot and space in general’; however it can also mean a position or degree regarding the perfection of man in certain areas. Similarly we find it used in this manner in the Babylonian Talmud, Ketuvoth¹⁰³, where it is said of Rabban Gamliel that “he fills his ancestors place in his fear of sin”. Therefore, when interpreting the verse “Blessed be the glory of the Lord from His place”¹⁰⁴, one should apply this figurative meaning which would render the verse, “Blessed be the Lord according to the exalted nature of His existence”. The difficulties one encounters can therefore be resolved in one of two ways. Either the expression is to be understood as identifying the emotion or action man would experience when being confronted with this situation, and not a description of a real action or even less the essence of God, or one is to find the most appropriate definition of the expression which does not violate negative theology.

What emerges from this is that the sphere within which the descriptive methods are to be utilized is only with regard to the actions of God and not His essence. If one wishes to ascribe attributes to God, it can only be in reference to His actions. The fact that one cannot attempt to describe the essence of God is not just an arbitrary rule created in order to preserve the sanctity of the Almighty, rather it is due to the fact that “God is God” which makes His essence unfathomable and indescribable. The confines of our

¹⁰³ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Ketuvoth, p. 103b, "ממלא מקום אבותינו"

¹⁰⁴ Ezekiel 3:12

temporal existence, as that of a created entity, imprison us within a world of finiteness and definition, multiplicity and disparity, all of which contribute to the dissimilarity between Creator and creature. However it is also due to this state of existence that we can follow the breadcrumbs that lead us towards knowing what God is not.

The ability to know God through His actions is illustrated in the book of Exodus.¹⁰⁵ There, Moses requested two things from God: that God should let him know His attributes, as it says, “Show me now thy way, that I may know thee”¹⁰⁶, and that He should let him know His true essence, as it says, “show me thy glory”.¹⁰⁷ In response to the first question, God promised to show His attributes to Moses with the reply, “all my goodness”¹⁰⁸, which Maimonides interprets to mean the nature of all things, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God, and that these are only His actions. Regarding the second question, Moses is told that no human being can perceive the essence of God, as it says, “Though canst not see my face”.¹⁰⁹ What one learns from this interaction is that the way that God can be known is only through the knowledge of His work, which is the knowledge of His attributes, and that all attributes ascribed to God are attributes of His acts, and not His essence¹¹⁰.

Since the essence of God is incomprehensible, one has to know Him through what He is not, and what He is not is everything we experience and know, namely the creation. The study of creation is divided into two major categories: *Maaseh Bereishit* (Works of creation) and *Maaseh Merkavah* (Works of the chariot), which Maimonides renders as physics and metaphysics. Physics includes all of the natural

¹⁰⁵ Exodus 33: 13-20

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 33: 13

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 33: 18

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 33: 19

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 33: 20

¹¹⁰ The interpretation of these verses are found in *The Guide* 1: 54

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sciences, whilst metaphysics is the study of theology, which is comprehended through the philosophical approach. As in the system of Aristotle, Maimonides’ opinion is that the study of metaphysics is the goal of one’s studies, as the study of metaphysics is the study of the first cause. Consequently, since the study of the first cause is the study of theology, and the study of first cause is primary, the study of theology is primary¹¹¹. The necessary requirements for the study of theology are clearly outlined by Maimonides in his introduction to *The Guide*.

We must first form a conception of the Existence of the Creator according to our capabilities; that is, we must have a knowledge of Metaphysics. But this discipline can only be approached after the study of Physics; for the study of Physics borders on Metaphysics, and must even precede it in the course of our studies...Therefore the Almighty commenced Holy Writ with the description of the Creation, that is with Physical science¹¹².

The centrality of the reconciliation and synthesis of these two realms of philosophical knowledge and Biblical revelation is integral to negative theology. Thus, according to Maimonides, Philosophy is not something extraneous to biblical teaching; rather it is entirely necessary for full appreciation and understanding of the content of revelation:

¹¹¹ *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle* edited by Jonathan Barnes: Metaphysics by J. Barnes (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/ New York/ Melbourne, 1995), p. 66- 108

¹¹² Maimonides, *The Guide for the Perplexed* translated by M. Friedlander PhD (Dover Publications, INC., New York), p. 4

Religious faith is a form of knowledge. Philosophical knowledge renders an immediate apprehension of the objects of faith possible.¹¹³

Therefore the means to attempt to bridge the relationship between God and us is through our knowledge of these spheres, through that very faculty that bears some slight resemblance to the Divine faculty, the mind.

We have mentioned previously that according to Maimonides knowing something means the internalization of a certain matter through clarification and correct verification. It is therefore crucial that one who attempts to know God understands how to actively implement the teachings of negative theology. If one were to describe an object by what it is not, one would eventually reach a more accurate understanding of that object than when they started. Let us take for example a ship, where one is told that it is not a mineral, another is told that it is not a plant growing in the earth, another that it is not a body whose parts are joined together by nature, that it is not a flat object, that it is not a sphere, that it is not pointed, and so on. The more a person progresses with the negative descriptions, the closer they come to a fuller comprehension of the object being described. If one could positively describe something it is undoubtedly a far superior way of reaching an understanding, however, since it is inaccurate to provide positive affirmations of God, the sole method available to us is negative description. Every subject of research and every facet of knowledge can be used to understand what God is not. Therefore if one were to study the nature of time or the nature of space, the more time one devoted to them, the more that would deepen and widen one's understanding of

¹¹³ Julius Guttmann, translated by David W. Silverman, *Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (Shocken Books, New York, 1973), p. 176

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these particular subjects. Consequently, one’s understanding of the concept that God is beyond time and beyond space would increase, provided that one’s knowledge was used in the intended direction of Divine investigation. Thus Maimonides states that, “Every time you establish by proof the negation of a thing in reference to God, you become more perfect”.¹¹⁴

It is of interest to note that whilst in *The Guide* the Aristotelian method is explicitly employed in order to prove the existence of God, in *Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah* the Aristotelian method is only alluded to. There, Maimonides brings the verse “Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is One”.¹¹⁵ If the biblical verse is sufficient, why is there a need for the opinion of the philosophers, and if the logical verification of the philosophers is sufficient, then why is the verse required? On a simple level, one need only to look towards the audience Maimonides was addressing. For those who are comforted by the authoritative position of the Torah and its legislature, one need not venture any further than scripture. However for the one who is in need of logical confirmation of philosophical and theological dilemmas, a synthesis of philosophy and Biblical revelation is required. The one who is in this state of perplexity, is the student for whom Maimonides intended *The Guide*, as he says in the introduction to *The Guide*:

The object of this treatise is to enlighten a religious man who has been trained to believe in the truth of our holy Law, who conscientiously fulfils his moral and religious duties, and at the same time has been successful in his philosophical studies. Human reason has attracted him to abide within its sphere; and he finds it difficult to accept as correct the teaching bases on the literal interpretation of the

¹¹⁴ *The Guide* 1: 59

¹¹⁵ Deuteronomy 6: 4

Law...Hence he is lost in perplexity and anxiety. If he be guided solely by reason, and renounce his previous views which are based on those expressions, he would consider that he had rejected the fundamental principles of the Law; and even if he retains the opinions which were derived from those expressions, and if instead of following his reason, he abandon its guidance altogether, it would still appear that his religious convictions had suffered loss and injury. For he would then be left with those errors which give rise to fear and anxiety, constant grief and great perplexity.¹¹⁶

Yet each of these sources are not mutually exclusive (hence the strong Aristotelian undertones in the Mishneh Torah) and neither does the audience need to remain in mutually exclusive camps; rather, as we have mentioned, the purpose is the reconciliation and synthesis of these two realms.

The importance of negative attributes in reference to God has been emphasized throughout the writings of Maimonides, yet what remains to be clarified is the severity of positive affirmation and description. The purpose of description is to illustrate the characteristics of a certain object or subject. When this method is used in reference to God, it is void of purpose since no description can be ascribed to Him. When one then does describe God in these physical characteristics, what has been achieved? Maimonides tells us that what has been achieved is nothing more than the invention of a fictitious being, bearing no relationship to God. Since there can be no true definition, any definition is untrue. An anecdote found in the Babylonian Talmud is brought by Maimonides in order to illustrate this point.

A certain person reading prayers in the presence of Rabbi Haninah said, ‘God the great, the valiant and the tremendous,

¹¹⁶ *The Guide*, Introduction

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the powerful, the strong, and the mighty.’ The Rabbi said to him, Have you finished all the praises of your master? The three epithets, ‘God, the great, the valiant and the tremendous,’ we should not have applied to God, had Moses not mentioned them in the Law, and had not the men of the Great Synagogue come forward subsequently and established their use in the prayer; and you say all this! Let this be illustrated by a parable. There was once an earthly king, possessing millions of gold coin; he was praised for owning millions of silver coin; was this not really dispraise to him?¹¹⁷

Maintaining this false perception is not only where the problem lies, rather it is within the consequence of this perception. We are told that this erroneous perception is tantamount to disbelief. Belief in God means knowing God, and knowing God can only be achieved through negative privations. Therefore, one who suggests positive affirmations of the nature of God, is in fact distancing himself from knowledge of God and thus from belief in God. What the anthropomorphist is worshipping is the figment of his own imagination. The consequence of this belief is not merely an obstacle to intellectual enlightenment, it also bears significance to the legal status of one who promotes these ideas. Thus, in *Hilchot Teshuva* Maimonides lists five individuals whose outlook renders them heretics. Of these five, the third is one who agrees to the monotheistic view of God; however he attributes physical characteristics to God and therefore denies the incorporeality of God. Whilst metaphoric interpretation of scriptural anthropomorphisms was the accepted view, and as we have mentioned Maimonides was not necessarily the pioneer of negative

¹¹⁷ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot, p. 33b, Quoted in *The Guide* 1: 59

theology, there were those in the Jewish camp that rejected this treatise proposed by Maimonides.¹¹⁸

The validation of an anthropomorphic view of God is evident in the Critique, *Hasagot*, of the Ravad¹¹⁹ in response to this very halachah in Hilchot Teshuva. The Ravad is astonished by the ruling of Maimonides, since he claims that there are many great people, better than Maimonides who subscribed to this view due to scriptural and midrashic implications! This hasagah has received varying interpretations, some claim that the Ravad himself was amongst the anthropomorphists¹²⁰ and attributists, whilst others claim he was merely trying to defend the adherents of this view from receiving the status of a heretic. Professor Isadore Twersky argues that it is unlikely that the Ravad was an anthropomorphist himself; rather he was against the “doctrinaire statement that one who affirms corporeality of God is a heretic”.¹²¹ The fact that the Ravad passed over the first chapter of Yesodei HaTorah without comment, further substantiates the claim that he himself was not against the idea that God is of an incorporeal nature.

There was yet another group whose doctrine was the target of Maimonides emphatic declaration of negative theology; they were known as the Kalam. The Kalam, derived from the Arabic word which literally means speaking or speech, is the name given to a sect of Islamic rationalists of the eighth century. Their initial purpose was

¹¹⁸ For example, R. Moses b. Hasdai Taku, a Tosafist, author of *Ketav Tamim*. See p. 192 of the Article by Marc B. Shapiro, ‘The Last Word in Jewish Theology? Maimonides: The Thirteen Principles’, *The Torah U- Madda Journal* Vol. 4 (1993), pp. 187-277, for the prevalence of the anthropomorphists in the Jewish camp.

¹¹⁹ Rabbi Avraham ben David of Posquieres, ? – 1198. A Talmudic scholar noted amongst the “Sages of Provence”

¹²⁰ Professor Isadore Twersky, *Studies in Jewish Law and Philosophy* (Ktav Publishing House Inc., New York, 1982), p. 148- 179

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

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the reconciliation of scripture and rational thought through debate. This goal was adopted by the Mutazilite group¹²²; however it became overshadowed at a later stage by the Ashirite group, who advocated the superiority of revelation, prophetic tradition and general consensus over the method of applying reason to questions of faith. In addition, Biblical interpretation was also limited, for if the plain meaning of the text was incompatible with reason, reason would have to be abandoned. The main theory of the Kalam which conflicted with negative theology was their concept of Divine Attributes. They claimed that God does possess attributes, however they are neither identical with his essence, nor are they an entirely separate entity, rather they are suspended between the two in some quasi state which eludes linguistic definition. Therefore Maimonides attempted to promote and clarify the treatise of negative theology in order to eradicate any contradiction and distortion of those claiming the ability to describe God. The clarification of mistaken thoughts would appear to be a background for Maimonides’ proposal of negative attributes.¹²³ However when one places this chapter in context of *The Guide*, especially the Introduction, there seems to be a further explanation to the importance of this treatise, which is more than just reactionary. When the theologian fully accepts the theory of negative theology, particularly that God is indescribable, they are seemingly left without any means of knowing God. At that instance, Maimonides introduces his theory of investigating and knowing everything in the world in order to know what God is, by knowing what he is not.

¹²² The Mutazilites were an early sect of the Kalam whose influence was eventually eclipsed by another sect of the Kalam, the Ashirites.

¹²³ *The Guide* 1: 51. In the beginning of this chapter, Maimonides says that certain obvious concepts have to be proven, merely because they have been contradicted and distorted. For example, Aristotle and Motion.

Amidst the proposition of Negative Theology, where we are told in no uncertain terms that it is a falsehood and borders on heresy to attribute characteristics to God, Maimonides seems to violate this very principle. God is described as possessing Knowledge, Will and Existence (some also claim that Maimonides attributes Power and Life as well), and that these attributes are identical with His essence. How does one reconcile this inconsistency, especially in light of the fact that it has been emphasized that one cannot describe the essence of God? Some have attempted to resolve the apparent contradiction by explaining the affirmations of Maimonides that God has knowledge and Existence, as excluding the implication that God does not have Knowledge. Therefore all affirmations are to be understood as confirming that God is not lacking, and not to be misconstrued as actually affirming an attribute¹²⁴. Others explain that what the doctrine of negative theology prohibits one from doing, is determining the essence of God. However what one can claim is that this simple essence includes within it certain perfections that correspond to Knowledge, Will and Power, provided that the details are left undefined.¹²⁵

Both of these attempted resolutions seem to maintain that one may use a description of God, provided that one specifies that the characteristic is identical to His essence, or that it implies that God does not lack this characteristic. For example, He possesses knowledge and His knowledge is identical to His essence, or He possesses knowledge, He possesses no ignorance. According to this, one should be able to ascribe most attributes to God, by claiming that it is identical to His essence. However, Maimonides seems to

¹²⁴ H. A. Wolfson, *Studies in the History of Philosophy and Religion: Maimonides on Negative Attributes* (Cambridge, 1973), Vol. 2, p. 195- 230

¹²⁵ Julius Guttman, translated by David W. Silverman, *Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (Shocken Books, New York, 1973), p. 186

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refer to God with the aforementioned attributes only. Furthermore, the ascription of knowledge to God is also apparent in the teachings of Aristotle, who also maintains the inability of man to describe God. W.D. Ross, in his introduction to Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* highlights that “Aristotle can only ascribe to it mental activity, and only that kind of mental activity that owes nothing to the body, viz. knowledge; and only that kind of knowledge which does not grasp conclusions by the aid of premises but is direct and intuitive; i.e. the prime mover is not only form and actuality, but mind... The object of God’s knowledge is therefore God himself.”¹²⁶

It should be noted that the philosophic legacy that Maimonides followed is situated somewhere between Aristotelian and Platonic doctrine. Whereas the Aristotelian philosophy is employed in order to prove the existence of God, with regards to the concept of God as being “the highest and incomprehensible One, of which we know only that it beyond and above every known and knowable perfection”¹²⁷, he follows the Neoplatonic position. The merging of the Aristotelian and Platonic traditions is almost certainly due to the fact that the philosophic texts which Maimonides studied were the products of the translation movement of Baghdad in the eighth century. There the works of Aristotle were translated into Arabic from the original Greek, as well as the commentaries on his works, of which the majority of the classical Greek commentators on Aristotle were Neo-Platonist. The Arabic philosophers who mainly formed the

¹²⁶ W. D. Ross, *Aristotle’s Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924), Aristotle’s *Theology* p. cxxx- cliv

¹²⁷ Julius Guttman, translated by David W. Silverman, *Philosophies of Judaism: A History of Jewish Philosophy from Biblical Times to Franz Rosenzweig* (Shocken Books, New York, 1973), p. 183

basis and influenced the philosophical teachings of Maimonides were Al-Farabi, Avicenna and Ibn Bajja.¹²⁸

Why do the philosophers, and Maimonides in a similar vein, assume that knowledge is an integral quality that one is compelled to ascribe to the prime mover or God? It has been suggested that the answer lies in understanding how the Greek philosophers understood “thought” and knowledge. Thought was viewed as a concept completely separate from any corporeal implication. It was intangible even in a psychoanalytical sense, thus promoting it to a status of an ethereal nature. God, according to the philosophers, was also a concept far removed from any tangible analysis. In fact according to Aristotle, God is considered as existing eternally as pure thought.¹²⁹ Therefore when God is depicted as thinking or possessing knowledge or intellect, it bears no physical relation and is therefore appropriate to use. However an emotional quality such as love or happiness is inappropriate since it is associated with physical characteristics and bodily actions.

The characterization of God as ‘thinking’ is conditional upon certain prerequisites: that one realizes that the knowledge of God is not separate from His essence, and that His knowledge is unlike our knowledge, despite the fact that the same word, knowledge, is used. The homonymity of the word knowledge has misled people to assume comparison between man and God, whereas the difference between the two is “like the distinction between the substance of the heavens and that of the Earth”.¹³⁰ Thus the words of the prophet Isaiah, which state “For my thoughts are not your thoughts... saith

¹²⁸ The Cambridge Companion to Arabic Philosophy: Islamic Philosophy and Jewish Philosophy (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2005), p.353

¹²⁹ *Bertrand Russell*, *History of Western Philosophy: and its Connection with Political and Social Circumstances from the Earliest Times to the Present Day* (Routledge, London, 1996) p. 182

¹³⁰ The Guide 3: 20

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the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways”, should be interpreted with this idea in mind.

God is perceived as having thoughts and thinking, insofar as thought represents a quality elevated beyond physical definition and implication. This quality resembles, but is not comparable to, that faculty in man which elevates him above the other creations in the physical realm. Since man possesses an intellect which resembles the realm of purely spiritual substances, he is subject to influence from the realm of purely spiritual substances. Therefore the more one utilizes one’s intellect, the more one resembles the Divine Intellect and in turn becomes subject to influence from this realm, which is called Divine Providence. It is through this intellectual ‘connection’ that Maimonides explains the concept of providence; the greater the intellectual perception, the greater the providence. The concept of free will is also intrinsically connected to providence. The ability to discern between good and bad is directly proportionate to one’s level of intellectual awareness. Therefore a similar equation unfolds, the amount that one draws upon the intellect will directly affect one’s ability to discern between good or bad, which will actively resemble the Divine and will therefore affect the level of providence that they receive.

The endeavor that is thus placed before man is one which touches the very nature of his existence as an intellectual being in a world of other creatures, and as a lowly finite creation brought into existence by an infinite Creator. The treatise of negative theology, which disqualifies the usage of any description of the essence of God whereby one is only allowed to describe His actions, seems to provide no place for God to ‘reside’ in this world. God is portrayed as the ‘platonic’ God, a transcendent being where there is no possible

way to connect to His essence.¹³¹ The Maimonidean perception of a transcendent God leaves the world empty of God; however it is filled with His influence through His actions.¹³² Investigating the world becomes a 'holy' pursuit, where everything is filled with purpose, namely the purpose of knowing what God is not, and the tool designated exclusively for this task is the intellect. Thus the void created by the unfathomable nature of God provides the sole opportunity for man to 'connect' to God, through intellectual investigation of the nature of all things in the world, their relation to each other, and the way they are governed by God (His acts). 'Knowing God' according to Maimonides is the direct result of the inability of man to positively affirm any characteristic of God; rather his 'relationship' can only be based upon the theory of negative attributes. The basis of this 'relationship' and the foundation of this theory are perhaps most clearly expressed in the words of King David, "Silence is Your Praise".¹³³

¹³¹ Even the Aristotelian God or Prime mover, which according to Ross "leads him to think of God not as operative with equal directness in all change and being, but as directly operative only at the outermost confines of the universe and as affecting human affairs only through a long series of intermediaries" is unknowable to Man and indescribable. See W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924), 'Aristotle's Theology' p. cxxx- cliv.

¹³² Whether God is immanent or transcendent is not clear in Aristotle, however what is clear is that *order* is due to God, and can be said to "be at work in the world, and is in this sense immanent. See W. D. Ross, *Aristotle's Metaphysics* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924), Aristotle's Theology p. cxxx- cliv.

¹³³ Psalms 65: 2

