

Maimonides's Austere Quietism

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ABSTRACT: Maimonides claims that knowledge of God is negative knowledge, expressible through negations. He further claims that this negative knowledge varies in degree. Maimonides introduces this latter claim through the use of a parable in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, Book 1, Chapter 60. We show that this parable is unable to serve the function which Maimonides introduces it to serve. We argue that the parable, and the position it supposedly illustrates, is a rhetorical device which points us towards Maimonides's proper position. This is the quietist view that there is knowledge of God which cannot be expressed in language. This quietism is *austere* because Maimonides refuses to attempt to express such knowledge through rhetorical devices. We account for the failure of Maimonides's parable and its tension with other parts of the *Guide* through appeal to the fifth source of contradiction outlined in the *Guide's* Introduction. Our position is complicated by the fact that Maimonides does not explicitly endorse quietism. We argue that due to the inexpressibility proper to quietism and his theory of reference, Maimonides is as explicit in his endorsement as he can be. This discussion offers a novel reading of the parable in I.60 and also serves as a further argument in favour of the non-sceptical reading of Maimonides. We engage with the work of Lorberbaum, Lobel, Blumenthal, Kars, and Benor, among others.

Maimonides (1135–1204) is a key thinker in the Jewish tradition. This is due to both his command of Jewish law (most famously displayed in his *Mishneh Torah*) and his command of philosophical argument. The latter was most clearly displayed in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (*Dalalat al-ḥā'irīn* in the original Judaeo-Arabic, *Moreh Nevukhim* in its Hebrew translation), in which Maimonides advocates negativism.¹

Maimonides's negativism comprises two claims.² The first is that we may only assert negations about God. Let us call this 'categorical negativism.' The second is the claim that one may have knowledge of and apply this categorical negativism to a greater or lesser extent. (We postpone a fuller explanation of what this could mean). Let us call this 'scalar negativism.'

So, Maimonides's negativism comprises two claims, which we will gloss as follows:

¹ We would like to express our gratitude to Yoav Meyrav, Shalom Sadiq, and Dov Weinstein for their careful reading of an earlier version of this article. We are also grateful to the members of the Philosophy Department at the University of York for their comments.

² References to Maimonides's *Guide* throughout are to Pines's translations (Maimonides 1963a and 1963b). Roman numerals indicate the book, and the following number indicates the chapter. For example, III:27 would indicate Book 3, chapter 27 of the *Guide*. References to the Babylonian Talmud begin with "BT," followed by the tractate name and the standard Bomberg pagination. This pagination is consistent across English and Hebrew editions, and we do not quote the Talmud directly in this paper, so no specific edition/translation is given.

(1) Necessarily, the only permissible non-analogical statements about God are negations. [*Categorical Negativism*]

(2) One can have knowledge of and apply (1) to a greater or lesser extent. [*Scalar Negativism*]

It may seem odd that in (1), we have described this as a restriction on 'permissible' language. This leaves matters vague about how permission should be construed and how it is granted (and by whom). We could think of (1) instead as a restriction on 'true,' 'possible,' or 'useful' language. But this would presuppose an interpretation of what Maimonides's negativism is intended to do, an issue we will examine later in this paper.

It is also notable that (2) runs together an epistemic claim (about knowledge) and a practical claim (about the application of such knowledge). The reason for this will become clear later, when we discuss Maimonides's account of silence and piety.

Maimonides appears to hold both (1) and (2). But his accepting (1) does not entail his accepting (2). Maimonides derives (1) from divine simplicity. Call this DS. On Maimonides's understanding of DS (adapted from Aristotle), it is not possible that God be composite in any respect:

There is an existent that is necessary of existence and is so necessarily with respect to its own essence, and . . . this existent has no cause for its existence and has no composition in itself, and for this reason is neither a body nor a force in a body. It is he who is the deity, may His name be sublime. (*Guide*, II.1)

On Maimonides's understanding of predication, any propositional statement about a given object (besides negation) attributes composition to it. Therefore, propositional statements about God are impermissible³:

With regard to those . . . attributes indicative of the essence or of a part of the essence or of a certain quality subsisting in the essence—it has already been made clear that they are impossible with reference to Him, may He be exalted, for all of them are indicative of composition. (*Guide* I:52)

Maimonides thus establishes claim (1), categorical negativism. It is not true, on (1), that the 'more' negativistic one is, the more permissible one's language proves to be. (1) simply rules, categorically, that non-analogical statements about God must be negations. Claim (1) is textually grounded. By this, we mean that the surface meaning of the *Guide* clearly articulates this position.⁴ We will adopt this reading of Maimonides (which is the majority view) for the purposes of this paper.

However, it *is* true, on (2), that the 'more' negativistic one is (in a sense to be explored below), the closer you come to God (in a sense to be explored below). Claim (2) is textually grounded (as will be shown)—but not beyond reasonable doubt.

There are reasons to doubt claim (2) is part of Maimonides's genuine position. This paper will give an account of those reasons. We will argue that (2) is not part of Maimonides's genuine understanding of the function and nature of negativism. To pursue this point more closely, we will turn to Maimonides's clearest articulation of the scalar nature of negativistic knowledge. This comes in Book 1, Chapter 60 of the *Guide*, by

³ Hence the use of the term 'necessarily' in our gloss on (1).

⁴ See I:50–60

means of a parable. Maimonides offers explicit instructions on how to understand parables in the Introduction to the *Guide*, and so we must begin there.

1. Parables

In the *Guide*, Maimonides advises us on what parables are and how they should be interpreted. Maimonides holds that parables have a concealed meaning and an apparent meaning.⁵ Notice that all Maimonides claims is that parables have two layers of meaning of unequal value. It is not necessary that these layers contradict. Maimonides also, in this vein, informs us that the *Guide* itself contains both exoteric and esoteric layers of meaning. We will return to this later.

Maimonides warns us that parables are divided into two types. The first are those in which every detail of the parable carries a deeper meaning. Parables of the second type mix their meaning with inessential details.⁶ There is great interpretive danger, Maimonides adds, in mistaking the second type of parable for the first. This would lead us to overinterpret, finding meaning where none was intended. This would lead to “extravagant fantasies.”⁷ This will become relevant later.

1.1 Two Parables; Scalar Negativism

Maimonides prefaces Chapter 60 of Book 1 of the *Guide* with the following:

I wish to tell you in this chapter parables by means of which you will be able to add to your representation of the necessity to multiply His attributes by means of negations and also to add to your shrinking from the belief in positive attributes regarding Him, may He be exalted.

There are two parables in chapter 60. The parables are not introduced to explain to us that or justify why Maimonides is a negativist. That has been established previously in the *Guide*. The stated function of the first parable is to explain to us why a person's accumulation of negations is meritorious. In other words, the parable is meant to show that negativism about God is scalar—that one can be worse or better at it, and thereby closer to or further from God.

The second parable, which we will briefly summarise here and then pass over, is intended to impress on the reader the perils of making positive statements about God. In this parable, an ignorant man claims elephants have various outlandish properties—for example, they have three wings and live in the ocean.⁸ Maimonides holds that such a man fails to refer to an elephant at all. Rather, his statements refer to a figment of the imagination, and the term ‘elephant’ is rendered homonymous. This man is likened to one who applies positive predicates to God. This parable gestures towards (1), categorical negativism. It is not of further interest to us here, but we will return to Maimonides's account of reference later.

It is the other parable which establishes (2), scalar negativism. This is the parable of the ship, which needs to be quoted at length:

⁵ I:Introduction.

⁶ I:Introduction. Kaplan (2018, 78–80) associates this latter type with ‘taper and pearl’ style parables, whose exterior meaning is of no worth. We agree with this and will view the parable of the ship in this way.

⁷ See further Gellman (1991), and Stroumsa (2011).

⁸ I:60

Assume that a man has acquired true knowledge regarding the existence of a ship but does not know to what it is that this term is applied: namely, whether it is applied to a substance or to an accident. Then it became clear to some other individual that a ship is not an accident; afterwards, it became clear to yet another individual that it is not a mineral; then . . . to someone else again that it is not solid all through. Now it is clear that the last individual has nearly achieved, by means of these negative attributes, the representation of the ship as it is. He has, as it were, attained equality with one who has represented the ship as being a body consisting of timber, a body that is hollow, oblong, and composed of a number of pieces of timber; that is, he has attained equality with one who has represented the ship by means of affirmative attributes. As for those whom we have cited in the parable as being prior to him, every one of them is more remote from representing the ship to himself than the one who comes after him; thus, the first one figuring in our parable knows nothing but the bare term alone. Accordingly, the negative attributes make you come nearer in a similar way to the cognition and apprehension of God, may He be exalted. Desire then wholeheartedly that you should know by demonstration some additional thing to be negated but do not desire to negate merely in words. *For on every occasion on which it becomes clear to you by means of a demonstration that a thing whose existence is thought to pertain to Him, may He be exalted, should rather be negated with reference to Him, you undoubtedly come nearer to Him by one degree.* In this respect, there are people who are very near to Him, whereas others are extremely far away from Him.⁹ (emphasis ours)

Those who amass many negations about God are in a proportionally superior epistemic position to those who have fewer, few, or none. This superior epistemic position is also connected to a superior spiritual position in being nearer to God. This serves to connect negativism as a philosophical position with questions of piety.

Our task will be to try to understand how gradation in negative knowledge, as described in I:60, is possible.

1.2 The Function of the Parable of the Ship

The function of Maimonides's parable is to build on our acceptance of (1)—already previously argued for in the *Guide*—and to encourage us also to adopt (2). This procedure is faulty. This becomes apparent when we reconsider Maimonides's reasons for (1). These are DS and the claim that predication entails the attribution of composition. From these two claims, we can capture Maimonides's account in a simple syllogism:

All predicates positively applied to God are false (as they ascribe multiplicity to something uniquely simple)

X predicates a property of God

X is false.

⁹ I:60

Given that all positive statements about God ascribe predicates, then all such statements are false. This leaves no way to explain how grasp of (1) could be scalar—either one understands the syllogism and thereby negates all possible non-negative, non-analogical statements, or one does not.

As Rudavsky argues,¹⁰ Maimonides seems to be inviting us to consider talk about God as exhibiting a category error. This is particularly apparent in I.58:

[Even] negations are not used with reference to or applied to Him, may He be exalted, except from the following point of view: . . . one sometimes denies with reference to a thing something that cannot fittingly exist in it. Thus, we say of a wall that it is not endowed with sight.

If we know—as Maimonides himself states above—that applying predicates to God is categorically false or nonsensical, then this knowledge is not scalar. In recognising that the non-analogical application of predicates to God is a category error, I thereby recognise that all candidate propositions about God are false, save for negations. This grants me immediate knowledge that all predicative statements about God are only fit to be negated. If you and I know this, there is no way for you to know it ‘more’ than I do. All the permissible non-analogical statements (the negations) follow immediately from recognition of the category error.¹¹

Accordingly, claim (2)—scalar negativism—cannot be understood in terms of *knowing more negations* than someone else. With this in mind, we should try to find other ways in which gradation in knowledge of negativism is possible.

As it happens, Maimonides offers an account of gradation in negative knowledge in the preceding chapter, I.59. But it is importantly dissimilar to the gradation which interests us in I.60. The gradation in I.59 is in terms of *how* and *if* a negation is known. Four modes are listed: knowledge via demonstration; knowledge via ‘science’; a negation heard but held in doubt; and a negation rejected in favour of a contrary opinion. By contrast, I.60 is not about how negations are known—it presupposes that all the negations it discusses are known by demonstration. What is prescribed is the quantitative increase in negations via demonstration, as we saw in the italicised portion of I.60 further above. So, the account in I.59 does not underwrite the scalar negativism advocated in I.60.

We will now consider some candidate explanations of Maimonides’s claim that there is a gradation in negative knowledge of God in I.60.

It might be that one’s understanding of the *grounds* of a category error is incomplete and can be expanded by further investigation. Alternatively, it might be that one comprehends the grounds of the category error but is not fully aware of the *scope* of the resulting category error. This offers us a way to harmonise (1) and (2) in some cases. What characterises those cases is that either:

(A) Our grasp of the grounds of a category error is incomplete

or,

(B) Our grasp of the consequences of that ground is incomplete.

¹⁰ Rudavsky (2009, 46–47).

¹¹ Stern (2013, 214–218) likewise notes that the serial production of negations cannot really produce increasing particularisation as Maimonides notes, nor do they in themselves amount to knowledge.

There is a collection of facts to know (about walls; about our sense modalities) before we can understand why, categorically, walls cannot see. Understanding those facts could—if one's education is very piecemeal—fail to entail understanding the facts that underwrite the categorical impossibility of walls hearing. The grounds of this category error and our understanding of its consequences are accordingly composite.

In God's case, however, there is no composition in the grounds or in the understanding of their consequences. From divine simplicity, all positive predications about God are provably false by virtue of ascribing composition to God. I need know nothing about the meaning of such predications. Hence, (A) is not possible with relation to God. By the same argument, there is no room to misconstrue the consequences of the syllogism—and so (B) is not possible (at least, not without a profoundly deviant grasp of the principles of inference).

With both (A) and (B) defeated, it does not appear possible to acquire greater or lesser insight into negativism as Maimonides understands it. It is accordingly difficult to understand what gradation there is between us and Maimonides's sages, like Moses, who are said to have superior knowledge to us.¹²

1.3 Interpretation of the Ship Parable

Another option is to reconsider our interpretation of the ship parable. True, the analogy is concerned with improvement in our knowledge. But all parables of Maimonides's second type fit imperfectly, and perhaps the gradation the analogy is pointing towards is not gradation in how much is known, but in how well it is understood. We have already seen that in I:59, Maimonides suggests that there is a taxonomy of comprehension of divine negations, including via demonstration, via scientific enquiry, holding in doubt, and opposition. Perhaps I:60, which targets knowledge via demonstration, is an attempt to deliver a separate taxonomy of understanding in relation to demonstrations alone.

On this reading, multiplying negations does not add any propositional knowledge about DS, but rather improves our grasp and understanding of why DS generates negations in the various contexts in which it is applied. Working through various predicates stepwise, looking closely at why they are inapplicable to God, might grant us some greater understanding of God's otherness and hence a greater appreciation of God's transcendence. This position is urged by Aydogan Kars (2013, 268) who claims the production of negations increases our "grasp . . . that God is not similar to this or that."

The problem here is that a grasp of how and why any given predicate fails to apply to God requires us only to run the same syllogism deriving from DS. The nature of the given predicate is irrelevant to its falsity in God's case. The ascription of composition alone does the work. Each predicate is eligible to come under the major premise, serve as the minor premise, and produce the conclusion in the same way. Swapping predicates in and out of this syllogism would be merely iterative.

We might instead interpret the 'grasp' which is strengthened by negation as not epistemic, but aesthetic. Kenneth Seeskin (2002, 8), for example, sees the role of multiplying negations as increasing our 'awe' at God's unknowability. Maimonides is careful, as seen in the quote above, to couch the parable (and the value of increasing negations) in terms of knowledge via demonstration. If the expansion of the experience of 'awe' is tied to the expansion of knowledge, then the generation of new negations is not eligible to produce it. As we have seen, they add no new knowledge. If this 'awe' is not tied to knowledge on Seeskin's reading, then it simply cannot be supported by Maimonides's text.

¹² Hasdai Crescas notes this in *Or Hashem* (2018, 104).

Benor 1995 (352–353) offers the idea that collecting negations serves to successfully fix the reference of the term ‘God,’ without the term being accompanied by any entertained representation in the mind. This provides a foundation for successfully referential practice while keeping the term ‘God’ appropriately devoid of content (given that God is transcendent and without representable properties). However, Benor’s account rests on an impossibility. One cannot fix the reference of a term “leaving no place for doubt concerning which entity one uses the word . . . to designate” (Benor: 352) where one is attempting to fix reference to an asymptote (or to something completely outside of the domain of discussion) via a finite series of negations.¹³ This problem also seems to apply to Lobel’s (2002, 58) view that the *via negativa* serves to fix reference to God and underwrite our positive worship of Him (rather than a figment of our imagination).¹⁴

There does seem to be one available repair of Benor and Lobel’s approach. This would be by not understanding reference fixing as coming through a series of individual negations. Instead, we might fix reference to God by negating the set of possible properties or objects in the non-divine domain and identifying God as that which remains after this set is negated. Given some permissible background assumptions, this might well successfully fix the reference extensionally. However, Benor and Lobel’s reading was meant to underwrite the production of negations seriatim, as recommended in I.60. The repaired account of reference fixing does not map onto I.60 at all. This serves to show that Benor and Lobel’s accounts fail as interpretations of I.60, whatever their other merits.

These approaches will not work, then, nor will (A) and (B), as explored above. Maimonides’s endorsement of (2) seems not only unmotivated by, but inconsistent with, his endorsement of (1).

1.4 A Faulty Parable

From the preceding, we see that the parable of the ship in I.60 is faulty. The source of this failure is simple. Concrete objects (like ships) have determinate properties and a set of possible combinations of such properties. So, collecting negations can indeed allow us to “come closer” to positive knowledge of them. God is not a concrete object; he is transcendent. He has no determinate properties, nor is there a finite set of possible combinations of those properties. The increase in negations does not “come closer” to positive knowledge in such a case. The parable of the ship in I.60 is thus fundamentally and clearly unsuited to its task.

2. Esotericism

It is our view that the endorsement of (1) and (2) together, as in I:60, is exoteric. The esoteric position is an endorsement of (1), and austere quietism. It is not possible to discuss Maimonidean esotericism without discussing Maimonides’s taxonomy of contradictions in the Introduction to the *Guide*. We will postpone this and first look at another interpretively vexed passage which also deals with degrees of piety and knowledge. This comes just after Maimonides’s famous discussion of the laws of

¹³ Yang (2022, 102 f.12) notes something like this issue in passing.

¹⁴ There remains the possibility of fixing reference to God as a regulative ideal. (We are grateful to Yoav Meyrav for suggesting this point.) However, it is not obvious that regulative ideals can operate in the context of pursuing transcendent (as opposed to asymptotic) targets.

sacrifice, in III.32. It will serve as supporting evidence in our interpretation of (1) and (2).¹⁵

2.1 Sacrifices

There is a rabbinical distinction between *Mishpatim* and *Hukkim*, derived from the interpretation of Leviticus 18:4–5.¹⁶ *Mishpatim* are statutes which have a rationally articulable function and benefit (for example, the prohibition on murder). *Hukkim*, by contrast, have no clear rational derivation or function (*sha'atnez*—the prohibition on mixing wool and linen—for example).

Animal sacrifice is among the more challenging of the *Hukkim*. Traditionally, animal sacrifices were meant to propitiate gods. This raises the question of why, if the God of Israel is entirely transcendent, such sacrifices are commanded.

Maimonides claims sacrifices were commanded as a “divine ruse” designed to help wean the Israelites off the pagan practices they had become accustomed to in Egypt.¹⁷ Maimonides distinguishes between God’s first intention, which is intended for its own sake, and God’s second intention, which is intended only as a means to realise the first intention. Maimonides claims sacrifices, together with the Torah’s general promise of reward and punishment in this life in response to one’s deeds,¹⁸ are examples of God’s second intention. Maimonides anticipates that one might object: Why does God simply not realise his first intention directly, either by eschewing intermediary steps or by changing humanity such that it would automatically bring about the outcome God desires? Maimonides responds by outlining features of human moral psychology which make second intentions necessary. He writes the following:

I return to my subject, and I say that as this kind of worship—I mean the sacrifices—pertains to a second intention, whereas *invocation, prayer, and similar practices and modes of worship come closer to the first intention* and are necessary for its achievement, a great difference has been made between the two kinds. . . . This dictum has been regarded as difficult by everyone whose words I have seen or heard. They say: How can Jeremiah say of God that He has given us no injunctions concerning burnt-offerings and sacrifices, seeing that the greater part of the commandments are concerned with these things? However, the purpose of the dictum is as I have explained to you. For he says that the first intention consists only in your apprehending Me and not worshipping someone other than Me.

God’s first intention, defined by Maimonides directly, is for us to apprehend him and not to worship anything other than God. All the conventional features of Jewish worship

¹⁵ Some interpretations, such as Sadik’s (2002, 16–18), highlight the pedagogical role of Maimonides’s esotericism in guiding readers through layered meanings, but this overlooks the essential metaphysical issue: the inadequacy of language to encapsulate divine simplicity.

¹⁶ See BT *Yoma* 67b. For a helpful general discussion, including of Maimonides’s attitude to the distinction, see Schrader (2019).

¹⁷ III.32.

¹⁸ This aligns with Maimonides’s stated view of providence, which sees it as contingent not on behaviour, but on intelligence. (Like Nadler (2013) we take Maimonides to be sincere in this account of providence—and in his claim there is providential material protection from harm, stemming from the intellect’s ability to perceive and avoid it. For an opposed view, which sees providence as merely ‘perceptual’—bestowing a Stoic attitude to the hazards present in life it leaves untouched—see Verbin (2011, 16–19)). Thus, God does not reward and punish in this world in the way the Torah’s surface meaning suggests.

("prayer and similar practices and modes of worship") do not realise this first intention. They rather come closer to it and are necessary to prepare the ground for its realisation. If they do not realise this first intention, then apprehension of God, and the eradication of idolatry, must be beyond conventional means of worship and understanding, like liturgical and personal prayer. This suggests that God's first intention lies beyond language and rationality. Thus, its fullest realisation would entail silence, in a sense to be developed below.¹⁹ But is there any direct evidence that Maimonides would see silence as a higher and more developed kind of worship?

2.2 Silence

Maimonides openly endorses silence as a superior approach to the task of talking about or praising God. This happens in several places across the *Guide*. A useful example is his treatment of Psalm 4:5, which is cited three times for this purpose across the *Guide* as a whole.²⁰ The verse reads: "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still. Selah."

In all three of the psalm's appearances, Maimonides is eager to urge a distinction between knowledge of God (as a state in the mind) and talk about God (as a social practice). Speaking about God is allotted two permissible motivations. The first is liturgical: to worship through recitation of liturgy laid down by the Sages.²¹ The second is to "make it clear to another or to oneself *that* one has . . . apprehension" (II:5, emphasis ours). This second function of speaking about God is to communicate not the *content* of one's knowledge of God, but *that* one has this knowledge. This strongly suggests that knowledge of God is importantly incommunicable. If this were not so, the reference to the evidential use of talk about God (showing *that I know* as opposed to *what I know*) would be idle. Other things being equal, communicating *x* to you entails communicating that I know *x*—and not vice versa.

In connection with this, Maimonides remarks that "men ought rather to belong to the category of those who represent the truth to themselves and apprehend it, even if they do not utter it" (I:50). If such persons have apprehension of the truth, why should they refrain from uttering it? Maimonides continues, citing scripture to explain—but this citation is not straightforward:

Then you shall be one of those who represent to themselves the unity of the Name and not one of those who merely proclaim it with their mouth without representing to themselves that it has a meaning. With regard to men of this category, it is said: *Thou art near in their mouth, and far from their reins.*

The obvious sense of the verse Maimonides cites (Jeremiah 12:2, italicised above) is that people profess to love and know God, but their actions do not comply with God's laws and commands. The verse is thus warning us about moral hypocrisy. Maimonides, however, reads this as a warning about a different peril altogether. The danger for Maimonides is that speech can usurp the more important (and difficult) practice of representing to ourselves "the unity of the Name." It is not the absence of moral behaviour which is contrasted with speech about God, but the absence of an internal representation of the unity of God (a unity, recall, Maimonides claims language cannot capture!).

¹⁹ For a supporting reading, see Seeskin (2002, 19).

²⁰ I:50, I:59, II:5.

²¹ This is Maimonides's discussion of the tale of Rabbi Haninah in BT *Berakhot* 33b, found in I:59.

Putting this together, we find that Maimonides is asking us to understand that the possession of knowledge is imperilled by the use of language. Note that nowhere in these passages does Maimonides exempt negative language from these warnings. *All* language about God stemming from anything other than liturgy or the demands of teaching is called into doubt, without qualification.

So, in these passages, we find an endorsement of (1) alone. Language about God is tolerated, if at all, when required by a need to instruct others (to show them that one has a certain comprehension) or to conform to the liturgy our sages have declared for us.²² Maimonides pointedly notes that the “perfect ones” are enjoined to simply lie on their bed and be still and silent. To be closer to God is thus a matter of the inner apprehension of God, and in no way tracks the collection of more sentences about God.

This stands in significant tension with Maimonides's endorsements of (2), in which the acquisition and expansion of language use about God (albeit negative language) is both incumbent on us and praiseworthy. Indeed, where Maimonides endorses (2), the collection of negations is given as a means of coming closer to God.

These two treatments contradict each other. We now need to look at Maimonides's account of the source of contradictions.

2.2.1 *Two Sources of Contradiction*

In the Introduction, Maimonides gives a list of the seven sources of contradiction. Contradictions are to be typified not according to their formal structure but by their aetiology. In other words, contradictions of two differing forms—from a logical point of view—might be identical in origin. Conversely, contradictions of differing causal origins might exhibit similar schematic features.²³

Maimonides informs us that his *Guide* contains contradictions. Five of the seven possible causes of contradiction are due to authorial error. Maimonides assures us that none of the contradictions present in the *Guide* stem from any of these five sources.²⁴ This leaves two sources of contradiction, which Maimonides gives as the fifth and seventh. It is these we should look to, he says, as the source of any contradictions in the *Guide*.

The seventh source—infamously read by Leo Strauss as endorsing the promulgation of false doctrines and concealment of genuine doctrines for socio-political reasons²⁵—is deeply interpretively vexed. We are convinced by Lorberbaum's (2002) dissenting examination of the original Judeo-Arabic and so find no appeal in an even broadly Straussian approach.²⁶ Fortunately, we need not enter into this dispute, as the present case fits the fifth source of contradiction almost precisely. We will now show this.

2.2.2 *The Fifth Source of Contradiction*

²² See further Lobel's (2002: 44–50) helpful discussion of *tasāmūḥ* in the *Guide*.

²³ For example, Priest's (1995) identification of an Inclosure schema across contradictions to do with the limits of thought would not necessarily be decisive, on Maimonides's account, in explaining the source of their appearance in a text. See further Lorberbaum (2002, 735–736).

²⁴ There very possibly are contradictions in the *Guide* which are due to authorial error of which Maimonides was unaware. But the fact remains that Maimonides is aware of and preserves some contradictions in the *Guide* for some further purpose.

²⁵ See Strauss (1988, chapter 3).

²⁶ Interpretations broadly in line with Strauss's interpretation can be found in Pines (1979), for example, or Melzer (2014).

The fifth source of contradiction is the difficulties involved in making known an “obscure matter.” These obstacles derive from the difficulty of the notion in question. Maimonides describes it like this (we have added headings for later use):

[*Obscurity*:] For there may be a certain obscure matter that is difficult to conceive. [*Employing the Obscure as a premise in teaching the simple*:] One has to mention it or take it as a premise in explaining something that is easy to conceive and that by rights ought to be the former, since one always begins with what is easier. The teacher, accordingly, will have to be lax and, using any means that occur to him or gross speculation, will try to make that first matter somehow understood. [*Looseness in expression of the Obscure which engages the imagination and leaves matters incomplete*:] He will not undertake to state the matter as it truly is in exact terms, but rather will leave it so in accord with the listener’s imagination that the latter will understand only what he now wants him to understand. [*Final statement in exact terms*:] Afterwards, in the appropriate place, that obscure matter is stated in exact terms and explained as it truly is.

Maimonides’s use of the ship parable in I.60 to motivate acceptance of (1) and (2), and his statement elsewhere of (1) and the primacy of silence, follows this model nearly exactly. Using the headers we introduced in square brackets above, we will now show this.

Obscurity: On the reading of Maimonides we have recommended, his genuine position is that God is beyond linguistic capture and that it is thus incumbent on us to be silent unless we are engaging in liturgy or displaying to others *that* we have knowledge of God. The writing of the *Guide*, then, would fall under the latter—it is written to communicate *that* Maimonides has this knowledge but not what such knowledge is. This notion is ‘obscure’ because communicating, in language, that one must be silent about God involves us in performative contradiction.

Employing the Obscure as a premise in teaching the simple: Maimonides recommends a dialectical reversal, where we use an obscure notion as a premise, in order to support an argument to establish a simpler conclusion. Presumably, part of the function of this is that the full complexity and difficulty of the obscure notion is not immediately apparent—the ‘conclusion’ serves as a simplified gloss on the full significance of the ‘premise.’ As we have seen, Maimonides does precisely this. He introduces (1) as supporting and entailing (2). Just this is the function of I.60. The full consequences of (1) do not in fact entail (2)—but (2) is a helpful initial gloss on what is demanded of a proper relationship to God. Progressively resiling from positive language about God will never take us to full comprehension of quietism—we will require a kind of incommunicable insight for that, as we will see below—but it does distance us from the pitfalls of positive theology. The pitfalls of positive theology are explained by Maimonides’s metaphor of the elephant: one fails to refer to, and hence talk about, God at all.

Looseness in expression of the Obscure which engages the imagination and leaves matters incomplete: The use of the ship parable engages our imagination to suggest a sense in which grasping the necessity of negation might be like drawing nearer to a sought object. This leaves matters incomplete, as it fails to confront the problems with scalar negativism and the inaptness of the parable when applied to a transcendent God rather than a concrete object.

Final statement in exact terms: Maimonides states at various points in the *Guide* that silence is the pre-eminent way of worshipping and conceiving God. It is not practicable by everyone; however, only the elite.²⁷ However, there is a problem with our

²⁷ See, e.g., I:59.

interpretation here. Notice that Maimonides uniformly gives an account of God's ineffability in negative terms. I.59 provides an emblematic statement of Maimonides's approach:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity!

What Maimonides does not give is a positive account of how God—as that beyond language—can be known. Nor does he give any indication about what, if anything, there is to be known in this fashion. If his position was solely that we are irredeemably ignorant about God, then the only difference between the ignorant and the sages would be their recognition of their ignorance. This would render Maimonides a kind of Jewish Socratic, whose only professed wisdom would be the depth of the recognition of his ignorance. Just this reading does have some adherents, who choose to see Maimonides primarily as a theistic sceptic.²⁸ We would like to recommend an alternative.

The alternative is to see Maimonides as holding that there are certain kinds of truths only available through extra-linguistic and extra-dialectical means. It is our hope that the preceding has shown good reasons to think that for Maimonides, there is a further mode of knowing, not capturable in language.²⁹ However, Maimonides does not give an explicit endorsement of the existence of extra-linguistic and extra-dialectical means of drawing closer to God. Nor does he use parables, images, or metaphors to try and directly disclose this position. This is a problem for the account argued for here. Why does Maimonides not state his positive position directly (even if via images and parables), as his account of the fifth source of contradiction would suggest?

2.3 Saying and Showing

Maimonides is careful to point out in the Introduction that there are truths which can only be comprehended in 'flashes.' It is the function of the *Guide* to facilitate these flashes of insight. However, the *Guide* cannot express them directly. Or, more accurately, anything which the *Guide* (or any text) expresses cannot be what is disclosed by such a flash. It stands outside of clear and conventional ratiocination.³⁰ So, there are deep truths which, in Maimonides's view, do not admit of direct expression. At best, precursors to such insights can be placed in a text, which helps us to prepare for or catch a glimpse of such truths.

Maimonides explicitly makes space, then, for truths that the *Guide* cannot contain but is intended to help us towards. So, we can ask: What would be a good candidate for a truth which emerges "in flashes," and can be prepared through language but cannot be expressed in language? Quietism is a very strong candidate. A resolute quietism would involve a commitment to the idea that certain matters of importance are not communicable in language. However, the need to go beyond language can be shown through language itself—we might demonstrate internal contradictions, insufficiencies, or paradoxes within our store of theories to attempt to show that there is some realm of

²⁸ See Stern (2013) for a sophisticated argument for this view.

²⁹ For a different, compatible, set of arguments for this view see Blumenthal (2006, chapters 2–6).

³⁰ See further Lorbebaum (2002, 743–749). For an opposed, deflationary reading of these 'flashes,' see Benor (1995, 346).

truth (or a non-semantic equivalent of truth) beyond conventional means of discussion. This would both bind us to language (I need to demonstrate to you that the right way to address your perplexity is to go beyond language) and render us incapable of succeeding in directly articulating it in language (I cannot *say* what is beyond language, without falling into falsehood, if not nonsense). We could at best—through various means—attempt to prepare and encourage a flash of insight into that which cannot be expressed.

In the preceding, we have given evidence internal to the *Guide* to support the claim that Maimonides holds, quietistically, that there is incommunicable knowledge of and closeness to God. In closing, we will offer some supporting reflections from Maimonides's theory of reference and from philosophy of language.

2.4 Poetry and Reference

Many religious thinkers have recognised the ineffability of God as the impossibility of making literal assertions about God, but made use of allusion, poetry, and paradox as a means of attempting to convey, in language, the existence of something beyond language.³¹ An important difference between Maimonides and these others is that they frequently make use of linguistic devices to convey the ineffability of God, while Maimonides refuses to do so.

Maimonides's *Guide* is not without its literary devices (the use of disorganised chapters, the admission of contradictions, and parables) but nowhere uses rhetorical techniques to attempt to positively communicate the incommunicable. This is because Maimonides has an exacting understanding of reference and is superlatively concerned with the propensity of language to stand in for comprehension of God. As we saw previously in the second parable in I:60, the attribution of 'fantastical' properties to an object suffices to prevent us from successfully referring to it at all. Similarly, he explicitly states that the use of positive, descriptive language about God would lead us to discuss something other than God—a figment of the imagination. This substitution of misleading words and images for successful reference to God is conjoined to a broader note of caution throughout the *Guide* that people are inclined to mistake intermediaries (images, concepts, words) for God himself. Such substitution is idolatry—and Maimonides identifies the core task of the Torah to be the eradication of idolatry.³²

For these reasons, poetic descriptions of God's unknowability cannot be employed by Maimonides. It is this which renders his quietism austere. He can state the negative side to this quietistic position (which can be interpreted as scepticism simpliciter). The 'positive' side of quietism—the notion that there is knowledge outside of reason and language—Maimonides cannot articulate or even represent analogically. We have found numerous indications that there are truths beyond language for Maimonides—he simply cannot, without fatal inconsistency, inform us what those truths are. So, then, Maimonides states his austere quietism as directly and completely as he can. With this caveat in mind, Maimonides's discussion can be seen to conform to his description of the fifth source of contradiction, as his contradictions themselves enact, rather than merely illustrate, the collapse of language under the weight of divine transcendence.

Conclusion

³¹ The first four chapters of Priest (1995) give a helpful summary of this tradition.

³² III:29.

This paper has introduced a novel interpretation of Maimonides's use of negation and his parabolic discourse within the *Guide*, focusing on the dual aspects of negativism he proposes: categorical and scalar. Our analysis has shown that the presumed advocacy for scalar negativism conflicts with the categorical negativism required by Maimonides's commitment to divine simplicity and the inherent impossibility of positive theological assertions. The parable of the ship initially appears to advocate an incremental approach to understanding God, but a deeper examination reveals its self-undermining structure. This structure, based on the impossibility of positive attributions to the divine and the fundamental insufficiency of human language, compels us to recognise that each negation reshapes our understanding of theological discourse more qualitatively than quantitatively. While Maimonides's ostensible endorsement of scalar negativism serves as a pedagogical strategy on the exoteric level, it ultimately recognises that divine ineffability transcends human comprehension, rendering silence the highest form of understanding.

The conclusion that emerges from our discussion is that Maimonides's true philosophical position might best be described as an 'austere quietism.' This quietism is not merely a passive resignation but an active acknowledgement of the limits of language and thought concerning the divine. It recognises that the truest engagement with the divine lies beyond the reach of discursive intellect and enters into a space where knowledge is not apprehended through the traditional modalities of rational inquiry but through an experiential encounter that transcends linguistic expression.

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