

Worship, Apophaticism, and Non-Propositional Knowledge: A Creative Retrieval of Moses Maimonides

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the alleged tension between the kind of strong apophaticism endorsed by Maimonides and his view of worshiping God. After considering some extant resolutions to this problem, I offer a proposal that utilizes the role of silence and imitative activity in Maimonides. While this solution may not have been one that Maimonides would have offered, I argue that Maimonides had conceptual resources for offering a promising solution within his theological framework.

Worship often involves making ascriptions of God that acknowledge God's high value or honor. "Good and upright is the Lord" (Psalm 25:8). "The Lord is righteous in all His ways, gracious in all His works" (Psalm 145:17). "The mighty God, even the Lord, has spoken, and called the earth from the rising of the sun to the going down thereof" (Psalm 50:1). These proclamations appear to imply that certain predications are true of God—that God is good, that God is righteous, that God is mighty, that God has spoken, etc. Some of these attributions, however, seem to come into tension with certain theological positions that adopt an apophatic approach to religious language and religious knowledge, especially the theological framework of Moses Maimonides, which will be the focus of this paper.

According to Maimonides, some ways of talking about God employ a "looseness of expression," which yields defective and inaccurate speech concerning God, thereby impeding knowledge of God. Given the kind of apophaticism that Maimonides espoused, what human beings are left with in describing God are attributions of divine actions and negative attributions, that is, stating what God is not. And so knowledge of God and especially of God's nature appears to be quite limited. Yet for Maimonides, the aim of worship is nearness to God, where such nearness requires knowledge of God. But it is difficult to see how human beings can even have adequate knowledge of God given Maimonides's version of apophaticism. Thus, the strong form of apophaticism appears to come into tension with worshiping God (which is especially problematic if one believes that such worship has been commanded by God).

In this paper, I address this puzzle and attempt to offer what I take to be a broadly Maimonidean resolution to the problem. After briefly presenting the apophatic approach of Maimonides, I lay out the alleged conflict between the strong apophatic approach and worship. I then consider some of the extant proposals to resolve the problem and raise some worries for these solutions. While many commentators of Maimonides recognize the place and importance of silence and imitative activity, the significant epistemic role that silence and imitation can play in addressing this problem has not been adequately developed or

appreciated. More specifically, I hope to show that there are indications of different types of non-propositional knowledge latent in Maimonides's theological framework, where one can increase in such knowledge of God without relying on positive attributions concerning God's nature. Such cognition arises from second-person experiences and imaginative identification, and I suggest that silence and imitative actions can yield greater knowledge of God, thereby mitigating the concerns of conflict between worship and the strong form of apophaticism.

While Maimonides did not explicitly address or endorse the resolution I offer, I hope to show that there is within Maimonides' works the conceptual resources to resolve the problem in the way that I am suggesting. Hence, I offer a creative retrieval of Maimonides to address the apparent puzzle concerning the strong apophatic approach and worship of God.

1. Maimonides and Religious Language

Apophaticism comes in different degrees. For example, Thomas Aquinas was a proponent of a relatively weak form of apophaticism. Aquinas did reject positive predications concerning God's nature if such predications are understood univocally; however, he claimed that some of these positive attributions could legitimately be made when understood analogically (*Summa Theologiae* I.13.a5). Maimonides's version of apophaticism is much stronger such that no positive attributions about God's nature can be made. There are two main arguments that Maimonides offered for this conclusion. The first is that such attributions would threaten the unity or absolute oneness of God. Suppose we were to claim that 'God is powerful' or 'God is merciful,' and suppose that both are (in some sense) *in* God. Then complexity in God would be introduced. Moreover, there would still be a distinction between God's power and God, which is a kind of complexity that may imply that God is not absolutely one, thereby threatening divine simplicity. The second reason offered against positive attributions concerning God's nature is that such attributions undermine divine transcendence. For Maimonides, there is nothing in common between God and any created thing. But to say that 'God is merciful' with a predicate that means the same or something similar to the predicate in the claim that 'Moses is merciful' would imply that there is something in common between them, which leads to a kind of conceptual idolatry since it regards God as being like a created thing.¹ Accordingly, Maimonides claimed that such attributions would lead people further from God (*Guide* I.59).² These predications have "a certain looseness of expression" (*Guide* I.57) and hence are to be understood equivocally, having "in common only the name and nothing else" (*Guide* I.56).

Maimonides's strong form of apophaticism does allow for two types of attributions: attributions of divine action and negative attributions. Concerning the former, positive attributions can be made provided that they are over God's actions. The reason is that attributes of divine action are "remote from the essence of the thing predicated" (*Guide* I.52). Such acts do not imply complexity within God's nature, since "all of them [are] carried out by means of His essence" (*ibid.*). So positive attributions such as "God has spoken" or "God has rescued" can be true and legitimately uttered.

The other kind of permissible predication is negative attribution, where a negative attribution is an attribution which "do[es] not give us knowledge in any respect whatever of

¹ For more on this worry, see Halbertal (2014, 290-291), and Burrell (1986, 63).

² All references and quotes from *The Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from Pines's translation in Maimonides (1963).

the essence” (*Guide* I.58). And such attributions do “not imply any deficiency with respect to God” (*ibid.*), unlike the positive attributions that employ a looseness of expression. Accordingly, such an attribution can be truly predicated of God that God is not lacking in power or that God is not absent from us. But from such negative attributions, it cannot be inferred that God is powerful or that God is present, and hence the complement of negative attributions are not to be predicated of God.³

What are we to make of religiously sanctioned language that appears to make positive attributions concerning God’s nature? Maimonides suggested that such predications should be interpreted as disguised attributions of divine actions, and hence Scriptural or devotional language need not be considered as suspect when appropriately understood.⁴

2. The Conflict

Worship often involves offering praise to God (i.e., offering great respect, often in the form of ascriptions concerning the excellencies of God).⁵ Such praise typically employs positive attributions concerning God. But for the strong form of apophaticism, this is problematic since “[p]raise of God is impossible, because we have neither the language nor the knowledge to speak about Him in any meaningful way” (Fox 1990, 306).

Furthermore, worship consists “in nearness to God and being in His presence” (*Guide* III.51), which on the part of human beings requires love of God. But there is a tight connection between love and knowledge for Maimonides, as he claimed that “[o]ne only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love. If the former be little or much, so will the latter be little or much” (*Mishneh Torah*, “Laws Concerning Repentance,” 10:6). The relationship between love and knowledge for Maimonides is so strong that he “understands love of God as a function of knowing him” (Frank 2008, 546). Knowledge, then, is crucial for being in the right standing with God, for “those who do not know Him are objects of His wrath and are kept far away from Him” (*Guide* I.54).

But the strong form of apophaticism that Maimonides espoused yields a severe restriction not only on religious language but also on religious knowledge, and such a restriction putatively conflicts with creaturely worship of God. Shlomo Pines nicely summarizes this tension:

One of the most perplexing problems posed by the *Guide of the Perplexed*—and to my mind a fundamental one—relates to two apparently irreconcilable positions held by, or attributed to Maimonides. On the one hand, he sets very narrow limits to human knowledge; on the other, he affirms that man’s ultimate goal and man’s felicity consist in intellectual perfection, that is, in knowledge and contemplation (Pines 1979, 82).

Of course there can be knowledge over God’s actions, but that does not tell us about God’s nature. And since the complement of negative attributes cannot be applied to God, it is unclear how we can have any substantive knowledge of God. Accordingly, this places a severe limit on the love we can have for God, and therefore a limit on creaturely worship of God. But

³ See Halbertal (2014, 299). See also Foster (2015, 57-58) and Turner (1998).

⁴ Considerable attention has been paid to Maimonides on religious language. For some more extensive discussion, see Benor (1995b), Buijs (1988), Manekin (1990), and Wolfson (1973).

⁵ For more on this understanding of worship, see Swinburne (2016).

Scripture commands that we give total love (Deuteronomy 6:5), which seems to imply possessing a proportionate degree of knowledge. As Baris succinctly states the problem, “herein lies the paradox: while one is commanded to the total love of God, full knowledge of God is unattainable” (Baris 2012, 4 typescript).^{6,7}

3. Some Extant Interpretations

Maimonides’s theological framework requires that we worship God, which requires love and therefore knowledge of God; but his theological account also severely constrains our knowledge of God, which thereby impedes our ability to know and love God, and therefore undermines the endeavor to worship God. Now one could of course adopt a weaker form of apophaticism or endorse a position that allows for univocal predications, but to do so would be to abandon a key tenet of Maimonides’ theological framework. So how can Maimonides resolve such a problem?

Some commentators interpret Maimonides as advocating a skeptical approach.⁸ This approach has been advanced because of the way it appears to follow from Maimonides’s commitments to an Aristotelian approach to knowledge, where the paradigm form is demonstrative knowledge (*ilm*)⁹, and a dominant interpretation of his epistemological framework regards this form as the only kind of knowledge.¹⁰ One reason is due to the nature of human beings and the world. Human beings are comprised of intellectual form and matter, however matter is an obstacle to the full actualization or perfection of the intellect. Given human nature, then, apprehension of metaphysical truths concerning God (and the *intelligibles*) is not possible. This need not imply full-blown skepticism for Maimonides, as his critique “specifically concerns *scientific* knowledge... [and] does not challenge weaker kinds of knowledge or belief” (Stern 2013, 5-6). Under this skeptical interpretation, Maimonides rejects the possibility of *ilm*, or scientific knowledge, but such intellectual perfection may still be construed as a way of regulating the epistemic life of human beings, and therefore it yields prescriptions of certain practices.¹¹ Since we know nothing substantive or positive about God’s

⁶ There is a related puzzle for the strong form of apophaticism raised by Maimonides:

[W]hat respect can there be superiority or inferiority between those who apprehend Him? If, however, there is none, Moses our Master and Solomon did not apprehend anything different from what a single individual among the pupils apprehends, and there can be no increase in this knowledge. Now it is generally accepted by the men of the Law, nay even by the philosophers, that there exist numerous differences of degree in this respect. Know, therefore, that this is indeed so and that the differences of degree between those who apprehend are very great indeed (I.59).

Some explanation for the difference in epistemic position between the great prophets and the masses is needed.

⁷ The conflict is less problematic for the weaker version of apophaticism, for even if the weaker version is committed to lack of knowing God’s essence, analogical language can serve as pointers or icon to God in a way not available for the strong form of apophaticism (see for example Smith 2000).

⁸ For examples of such an approach, see Stern (2002) and Klein-Braslavy (1977). Stern situates Maimonides along classical skeptical approaches that not only seek to recognize our epistemic limitations but also to achieve mental tranquility (*ataraxia*).

⁹ It seems that the term *ma’rifa* can sometimes be employed to denote such knowledge, but *ilm* appears to be the central term that captures the notion of scientific knowledge.

¹⁰ For more on Maimonides’ epistemological framework, see Hyman (1989) and Stern (2001; 2005).

¹¹ For more on this, see Stern (2013, chs. 5-6).

nature, the focus is to be shifted away from theoretical or doxastic considerations to more practical or experiential matters—that is, the focus is over how worshipers should live, not what they should believe. While no commentator of Maimonides would disagree that his theological position rejects the legitimacy of positive attributions concerning God’s nature, there is some tension between the skeptical interpretation and the fact that Maimonides seems to think that some individuals, such as Moses and the prophets, possessed greater knowledge of God than others, such as the philosophers (*Guide* I.59). But both cannot legitimately make positive attributions over the divine nature. So in what way do the prophets have greater knowledge? The skeptical interpretation appears to yield epistemic parity between the prophets and the philosophers, but Maimonides admits of differences in their epistemic standings.¹²

Another common approach to interpreting Maimonides holds that knowledge of God beyond divine actions is acquired and increased through negative attributions only. As Maimonides states, we “[k]now that the description of God...by means of negations is the correct description—a description that is not affected by an indulgence in facile language and does not imply any deficiency with respect to God” (*Guide* I.58). In fact, he claims that we can even increase our knowledge of God by negative attributions, and that “you come nearer to the apprehension of Him...with every increase in the negations regarding Him; and you come nearer to the apprehension than he who does not negate with regard to Him” (*Guide* I.59). The more negative attributions that are made concerning God, the greater knowledge of God.

But there is a problem with this suggestion. Increased knowledge with negative attributions can occur only if we are capable of forming some positive concept of whatever we are trying to know. For example, consider the child’s game where someone thinks of an object and the rest of the group tries to answer what it is by asking a maximum of twenty (or however many) questions. In the game, we can rule out some conceptions of the thing someone has in mind (say, the person is thinking of a chair) when we learn that “it is not a fish” or “it is not alive.” But it is impossible to guess what it is if no positive conception can be made of it. The problem, then, is that negative attributions “cannot provide information about what exactly the nature of the object to which they are attributed is...Ontologically, they are not attributes at all” (Davies 2011, 62).¹³

Another solution that has been proposed is to interpret Maimonides as a proponent of a contextualist view of knowledge such that the epistemic or justificatory standards can shift depending on the context (Baris 2012). Given our epistemic context, total knowledge of God is not possible, and hence the required kind of love that needs to be had by the worshiper will be proportionate. This solution, however, needs considerable development and elaboration if it is to be serviceable as a solution. For unlike the way contextualism is typically employed as a response to external world skepticism (where there is a somewhat clear way of distinguishing between ordinary contexts and skeptical contexts), it is unclear what the different contexts are supposed to be with respect to knowledge claims concerning positive predications about

¹² Another concern is whether one can refer to God given the inability to know or speak about God. Benor claims that human beings can nevertheless refer to God since our minds can be directed to God even if we are not able to form an idea of God because there is no adequate description or experience (Benor 1995b). However, a natural worry arises with regards to fixing the reference, especially if there can be no experience of God.

¹³ The problem appears to be aggravated if God is considered as having infinite attributes as Spinoza claims, for then narrowing or excluding attributes in negative predications does not diminish the number of negative predications that can be made (e.g., “God is not two, God is not three, God is not four,...”), and so one would not get closer to knowing *what* one is thinking or talking about.

God's nature. In fact, even under the proposal offered here, there appears to be only a single context for human beings, a context of epistemic deficiency. And given the commands to love, know, and worship God, the standards for these will be significantly lowered given the deficient cognitive capacities of human beings. But if this is right, the commandment to love, know, and worship God is a bit strange since an increase in these cognitive capacities doesn't seem possible. And with the skeptical interpretation, the contextualist interpretation does not fit well with Maimonides' acceptance of epistemic disparity between the great prophets and others.

To be sure, I am not claiming that these interpretations of Maimonides completely fail to provide a resolution to the conflict, and no doubt proponents of these views would seek to provide responses to the worries I have raised for each view. However, my aim is to show that there is another solution to the conflict that is Maimonidean in spirit, even if it is not one actually endorsed by Maimonides. Thus, the proposal I make here is not an interpretation of Maimonides, as it may be likely that Maimonides would have rejected the proposal. However, I will argue that there are intimations of certain epistemic concepts in Maimonides's thought that when brought to light provide a satisfactory resolution to the alleged conflict between worship of God and strong apophaticism, and hence such an approach can be valuable for those who share substantive commitments with Maimonides, especially his form of apophaticism.

What virtually every commentator of Maimonides will agree upon is the importance of silence for Maimonides. Many even find in Maimonides's thought the progression from positive attributions to negative attributions and ultimately to silence. Silence would be the natural end of the strong form of apophaticism since a limit of negative predications is saying nothing at all. For the individual who understands the full import of the strong form of apophaticism, silence appears to be the only form of proper worship, especially given Maimonides citation of Psalm 65:2, that "silence is praise to Thee" (*Guide* I.59).¹⁴ As Benor notes:

[I]f God is unknowable, if the divine essence is inconceivable, then the case for meditation will be just as difficult, or even more difficult, to defend because of the inescapable danger of worshiping in one's mind an entity that is other than God. The only apt form of worship in that case is, according to Maimonides, the one designated by the Psalms' dictum that he highly praises: *Silence is praise to Thee* (Benor 1995a, 75).

Silence as proper worship has been suggested by several commentators, but the epistemic role that silence can play has been missed. For example, Kenneth Seeskin highlights the importance of silence in worship for Maimonides, suggesting that "silence actually contains more truth than speech" (Seeskin 2002, 15) and perhaps can lead to flashes of insight, but there is no explanation of how knowledge of God can be acquired or increased in the silence. Diana Lobel goes a bit further in recognizing the connection between silence and awe, such that worshipers

¹⁴ This notion can even be found in the Christian tradition. For example, consider Aquinas' remarks:

[D]ivine mysteries are honored by silence; wherefore Dionysius says... "honoring by silence the hidden truth which is above us"; and with this there agrees what is said in Psalm 64... "Praise grows silent before You, O God," that is, silence itself is Your praise, O God; therefore we ought to refrain ourselves in silence from searching into divine truth (*Exposito super librum Boethii De Trinitate*, Q.2, a.1, arg. 6).

can have an experience of God's presence through love and awe (Lobel 2002, 46-48), but the cognitive role of silence is at best merely suggestive and not fully developed.

4. Worship and Second-Person Knowledge

Given such a strong form of apophaticism, how can one have greater knowledge of God, the kind of knowledge that is necessary for worship of God? Commentators of Maimonides have recognized that love and awe are crucial elements of worship, but the way in which it can aid in resolving the problem have not been fully developed. Part of the problem, so it seems, is the exclusive focus on third-person, propositional knowledge—knowledge of claims such as “God is merciful” or “God is powerful.” But the history of philosophy in western and non-western strands is replete with non-propositional forms of knowledge, such as relational knowledge (in Chinese thought) or second-person knowledge (what Eleonore Stump has labeled as “Franciscan knowledge”). The latter has garnered much attention in recent philosophical literature and will be relevant to the solution offered here. Another distinct form of knowledge is one that is acquired from a first-person perspective. Now it seems that one cannot literally share such knowledge with another in the exact same way. But recent work on empathy indicates how there can be a kind of sharing of a certain perspective, which arguably can yield a distinct form of knowledge. What is important is that second-person knowledge and the knowledge that arises from empathy is very difficult if not impossible to put in words, or at least in third-person propositions.

While it would be anachronistic to suppose that Maimonides would have advanced a theory containing such forms of knowledge, it seems that there are intimations of these types of knowledge in the conceptual framework of Maimonides. While permitting such forms of knowledge would conflict with several approaches to interpreting Maimonides (such as the dominant interpretation that treats scientific knowledge as the only form of knowledge for Maimonides), some commentators have advanced a mystical interpretation of Maimonides's philosophical framework.¹⁵ The mystical interpretation highlights the notion of the union between God and human beings, and hence such an approach admits of experiences of God and perhaps other modes of knowledge. Now some regard this mysticism as coming into tension with Maimonides' commitment to rationalistic or Aristotelian philosophy, and so Blumenthal (1997, 2006) regards Maimonidean mysticism as post-rationalistic. However, others have argued for the compatibility between mysticism and rationalism, construing Maimonides's approach as a “rational mysticism” (Freudenthal 2009). Under this approach, the model of union is based on the intellect's union between the knower and what is known. Now to be clear, I am not claiming that second-person and empathic knowledge is within the scope of Maimonides's aims or projects. However, there appear to be intimations of such modes of knowing, and hence my goal is to engage in a creative retrieval of ideas that appear to be latent in Maimonides's thought, and I hope exploration into these types of knowledge within his framework can be worthwhile.

Let us first consider second-person knowledge. According to Stump, there is a form of knowledge distinct from third-person knowledge. Such knowledge can arise from having a second-person experience, which involves awareness of another conscious person, where the interaction with the other person is direct and immediate (Stump 2010, 75-76). To motivate

¹⁵ For more on Maimonidean mysticism, see Kellner (2006).

this claim, Stump borrows from Frank Jackson's (1982) well-known thought experiment in defense of qualia, but she modifies the case as follows:

Imagine then that Mary in her imprisonment has had access to any and all information about the world as long as that information is *only* in the form of third-person accounts giving her knowledge *that*...She knows that there are other people in the world, and...she knows all that science can teach her about them. But she has never had any personal interactions of an unmediated and direct sort with another person. She has read descriptions of human faces, for example, but she has never been face-to-face with another conscious person...In short, Mary has been kept from anything that could count as a second-person experience, in which one can say 'you' to another person. And then suppose that Mary is finally rescued from her imprisonment and united for the first time with her mother, who loves her deeply. When Mary is first united with her mother, it seems indisputable that Mary will know things she did not know before, even if she knew everything about her mother could be made available to her in non-narrative propositional form...Mary is learning something she did not know before the personal interaction (Stump 2010, 52-53).

What Mary learns, according to Stump, cannot be acquired through third-person accounts (e.g., through a list of third-person propositions). Now second-person knowledge is not limited only to those who have had the relevant second-person experience. Stump maintains that one can acquire this type of knowledge through a second-person account, which is often presented in narratives (though not all narratives will count as a second-person account). Unpacking such a second-person account cannot be done in typical, analytic fashion, as it will likely reduce the content of such an account to third-person propositions. What Stump suggests is rather some combination of philosophical reflection and literary analysis.

I suggest that Maimonides engages in exactly this kind of reflection on a second-person account in the *Guide* I.54. In that section, Maimonides reflects on the dialogue between God and Moses in Exodus 33, where Moses is having an encounter with God and asking to know God in God's essence. While Moses does not (and perhaps cannot) receive an answer in propositional form, there is a sense in which Moses is improving his epistemic position with respect to God through a second-person experience. Maimonides even accepts that there is a sense in which Moses possessed a unique and privileged knowledge of God, a kind of knowledge that "has not been apprehended by anyone before him nor will it be apprehended by anyone after him" (*Guide* I.54). And after what appears to be the mixture of philosophical reflection and literary analysis of Exodus 33:13, Maimonides links knowledge with nearness to God (and ignorance with separation from God). Thus, the salient form of knowledge is one having to do with presence, and second-person experiences are foundational for the kind of knowledge relevant to personal presence.¹⁶

Recall that for Maimonides, love is an integral aspect of worship, where love seeks to be in the presence of the beloved, and hence the primary aim of worship is to be near and present to God (*Guide* III.51). Now the kind of knowledge related to presence does not seem to be propositional but personal. But as Stump has claimed, second-person experience is not enough for what she calls "significant personal presence." What more is needed is what some psychologists have called "joint attention" (or "shared attention")—that is, an awareness of

¹⁶ For more on second-person knowledge, see Talbert (2015) and Pinsent (2013).

another's awareness of the world (Stump 2010, 113). Here is a more elaborate description of joint attention:

[J]oint attention is a primitive phenomenon of consciousness. Just as the object you see can be a constituent of your experience, so too it can be a constituent of your experience that the other person is, with you, jointly attending to the object. This is not to say that in a case of joint attention, the other person will be an object of your attention. On the contrary, it is only the object that you are attending to. It is rather, that, when there is another person with whom you are jointly attending to the thing, the existence of that other person enters into the individuation of your experience...The object attended to, and the other person with whom you are jointly attending to that object, will enter into your experience in quite different ways...the individual experiential state you are in, when you and another are jointly attending to something, is an experiential state you could not be in were it not for the other person attending to the object. The other person enters into your experience as a constituent of it (Campbell 2005, 288-289).

Joint attention, then, does not require that the other person be the object of attention, only that the other person is a constituent of the experience. This is relevant when we find that in Maimonides' explication of Exodus 33, God is pointing Moses's attention to God's activity in the world so that it would be made "known to him that they are His actions" (*Guide* I.54), which appears to be an invitation to engage in joint attention—Moses is to make the created order the object of his attention, but he is to recognize God's presence insofar as such order is due to God's acts in the world.

So far, then, we have seen that there are intimations in Maimonides's thought of something like second-person knowledge of God, which can be bolstered by experiencing God's personal presence through joint attention to God's actions. But we have not yet considered the significance of silence, especially since it is regarded as the proper form of worship for Maimonides. To get a better grasp of the epistemic role that silence can play, a closer examination into silence is required.

Silence is powerful; it can make people feel very uncomfortable—think about the uncomfortable silence that leads some individuals (usually from the U.S.) into saying 'awkward' in a funny way to break the tension in a group setting. Silence in a classroom can make students—and even some teachers—squirm. One type of silence is merely the absence of sounds or noise; but there is another sense that distinguishes being silent from saying nothing (Dauenhauer 1980), and it is this latter sense that is salient in this discussion. It is the kind of silence that arises when one individual gives another the so-called "silent treatment"—it is active and intentional. There is the mere lack of speaking from an instructor who does not know what to say next and the intentional silence of a seasoned instructor who is willing to wait after asking a question, allowing the students to wrestle through the discomfort. This intentional silence cannot be the mere absence of noise, for even deaf individuals can experience such silence; one can give the silent treatment to a deaf individual, thereby making that person feel isolated or excluded (*ibid.*).

There are different types of active and conscious silence, some of which not only evinces intimacy but can even bolster intimacy between lovers. For example, there is the comfortable silence that can exist between lovers, what has been called "the silence of intimates":

The conversation among intimates has no specific achievement as its primary goal. It is not primarily an exchange of information, though probably some information must be exchanged. Nor is the conversation well defined in the sense of having clearly demarcated beginnings and ends. Intimates take up their conversation where they left off....[I]ntimates stand in an abiding, settled-though-unsettleable silence which is interwoven or interspersed with utterance (Dauenhauer 1980, 17).

Moreover, engagement in certain activities, even silently, can display the mutual awareness of joint attention that can communicate in a way much more profoundly than words can. Consider the following example of silent joint attention:

Alex and Rachael have been married for 50 years. On their first date, Alex cooked Rachael a steak with peppercorn sauce and green beans. Recently, they have been having difficulties in their marriage, but decide to devote the evening to spend together. Alex comes in the room, looks at Rachael, and presents her with a plate of steak with peppercorn sauce and green beans. Rachael looks back at Alex, without saying anything and smiles at him, whilst placing her hand over her ring finger (Cockayne et al. 2017, 17).

There is significant communication occurring without anything being said. In fact, speaking up would likely ruin the moment.

Similarly, worship of God in silence can express and even bolster the intimacy between God and worshipers through second-person experiences and joint attention. In such intimate interactions, knowledge can be gained, but in a form different than third-person propositions. That is, “you learn something...and this ‘something’ you just cannot put into words. In a slogan—you have learned something that goes beyond what you can say” (Cockayne and Efirid 2018, 302). Such an account provides a way of explaining how Moses and the great prophets can have greater knowledge of God than others even under the strong apophatic framework. For even if Moses does not have more information about God than others, Moses’s unique second-person experience and joint attention with God increases his second-person knowledge of God.

The role of silence in worship can even turn the problem of divine silence—construed as divine hiddenness—on its head. As Michael Rea has argued, God’s aim in interacting with us may not be communication but communion, so that God’s silence to us does not entail absence; rather, silence may be one way for God to exercise God’s peyorative or to express God’s personality (Rea 2011). Worship, then, can be understood as an occasion of reciprocal silence, where lovers are intimately aware of each other in silence.¹⁷

¹⁷ Silence can even be seen as a commitment to trust, as Stump notes:

Abraham’s silence after God’s demanding the sacrifice of Isaac is eloquent...it seems to make clear that Abraham understood the nature of the test God was setting him and the reasons for that test. That is why Abraham does not ask for any explanation of God’s command or any confirmation that God’s earlier promises are true. That is why Abraham does not try to talk God out of his command or try to bargain with him for Isaac’s life, as he bargained in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah. Furthermore, Abraham’s silence also shows us how painful the ordeal is for Abraham. Not only does Abraham not object to God; he does not complain to anyone else either...the very act of complaining might dissipate his own willingness to act. And so he is silent both regards God and as regards the

Though Maimonides does not explicitly consider the epistemic significance of silence as a way of promoting second-person experiences and joint attention, construing this role for silence in worship does cohere with his understanding of Moses's privileged epistemic standing and unique discourse with God in Exodus 33. In the dialogue between God and Moses, we recognize a second-person account and become privy to something occurring there that cannot be easily translated into third-person propositions. Silence can even enhance the union. After all, Job's epistemic position does not improve until after it is stated that the "words of Job are ended" (Job 31:40). And attending to God's actions in the world and recognizing God's presence may engender the kind of joint attention that can achieve the end of worship for Maimonides, which is nearness to God and being in God's presence (*Guide* III.51).

Of course some may raise the objection that this approach does not fit with Maimonides's framework, especially for those that take *'ilm* or scientific knowledge as the only kind of knowledge for Maimonides or for those that reject any possible experience of God. However, the approach I advance here can opt for the mystical interpretation of Maimonides mentioned earlier. The mystical interpretation allows for other modes of knowledge besides scientific knowledge and permits unifying experiences with God. For example, Freudenthal's mystical interpretation adequately addresses the epistemic disparity between the Prophets and the philosophers, such that the former has greater closeness to God:

[G]reatest proximity, an immediate bond, is achieved by the Patriarchs and Moses. This immediate bond is accompanied by love its most intense form, desire, and by the highest joy or bliss... The idea of a bond or union with the divine spoken of here can be understood in two ways: as the peak of religious experience, but also as the epitome of knowledge (Freudenthal 2009, 113).¹⁸

Now the kind of union that is achieved according to Freudenthal is based on the Aristotelian conception of union of the intellect between knower and what is known. However, I suggest that such a paradigm be dropped (especially since there may be tensions as pointed out by Blumenthal) and instead offer a different mode of knowledge, viz. second-person knowledge, and a different mode of experience, viz. joint attention. Indeed, the notion of joint attention is not too far from Blumenthal's view that some human beings can move from loving (or intellectually apprehending) God to worshipping (or intellectually comprehending) God, which is the "transition from thinking-about-God to being-in-the-presence of God" (Blumenthal 2006, ch. 5). This is not to say that Maimonides would have had the notion of joint attention, but Blumenthal's interpretive framework appears to make conceptual space for joint attention. While experience of God is precluded in many of the interpretive approaches to Maimonides's thought, the mystical approach can make space for such experience, and the kind of experience that "is not typically thought of as something that can be adequately expressed in propositions" (Freudenthal 2013, 116), which fits quite well with second-person knowledge. So given that the mystical interpretation allows for a kind of knowledge that is different from *'ilm* or scientific knowledge, there appears to be conceptual space for second-person knowledge in Maimonides' framework.

human persons around him, because he understands, and because he is holding his breath in the struggle with himself to trust Isaac to God (Stump 2010, 299).

¹⁸ Blumenthal (1977) also offers an intellectual mysticism that explains why Moses and the Prophets had a greater epistemic standing with respect to God.

5. Worship and Perspective-Shifting

We have seen the relation of love and presence, and how knowledge of God and close presence can be acquired through second-person experiences and joint attention. What about the role of awe in worship for Maimonides? Again, Maimonides emphasizes the importance of attending to divine action, for when “a person contemplates His great and wondrous works...he will immediately love Him, praise Him, glorify Him, and long with an exceeding longing to know His great name” (*Mishneh Torah*, “Laws Concerning the Foundations of the Torah,” 2:2). Attending to divine action should lead people to praise God with a sense of awe, which is to be accompanied by silence—the silence of awe (Lobel 2002, 46). Such praise is recorded in Scripture as being offered by inanimate objects. For example, the psalmist declares that the “heavens declare the glory of God...Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge...There is no speech, nor are there words, whose voice is not heard” (Psalm 19:1-3). The skies are offering worship to God, with knowledge being revealed, and yet it is occurring silently, or at least non-linguistically. And after a condemnation of idolatry, one of the prophets states that “the Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before him” (Habakkuk 2:20). The imagery of the Lord in the temple connotes worship, and the earth offers its worship in silence. How do the skies and the earth worship if they are inanimate and incapable of speech? They do so by their activities that accord with their natures. The skies worship in repetitive activities, as the motions of the heavenly bodies are uniform and without deviation (or so would have been believed during the time of Maimonides).^{19,20}

Just as the skies and the earth stand silently in awe of God’s actions in the world, so too should human beings be engaged in the same kind of silent awe. But attending to God’s activity in the world should engender more than being in awe of God. It should also bring about the desire to imitate God. As Maimonides claimed:

The utmost virtue of man is to become like unto Him...as far as he is able; which means that we should make our actions like unto His, as the Sages made clear when interpreting the verse, *Ye shall be holy*. They said: *He is gracious, so be you also gracious; He is merciful, so be you also merciful* (*Guide* I:54).

¹⁹ The role of repetitive (bodily) practices is also emphasized in feminist reflections on worship and contemplation, see for example Coakley (2009, 282).

²⁰ Maimonides even recognized that inanimate objects are able to worship God without words:

For the true way of honoring Him consists in apprehending His greatness. Thus everybody who apprehends His greatness and His perfection, honors Him according to the extent of His apprehension...Those beings that have no apprehension, as for instance the minerals, also as it were honor God through the fact that by their very nature they are indicative of the power and wisdom of Him who brought them into existence... Accordingly it is said of that which is devoid of apprehension that it praises God (*Guide* I.64).

Maimonides also considered elsewhere the tight connection between speech and activity in Scripture, such that “the dictum *written with the finger of God* is equivalent to its saying *by the word of God*” (*Guide* I.66). If expressions of speech and actions are (on some uses) co-extensive, then perhaps it is fair to construe the actions of the heavens as a way for them to “pour out speech.” Thus, inanimate objects can offer worship or praise while being silent.

Scripture teaches that human beings are to imitate God, to be holy just as God is holy (Leviticus 19:2). Moreover, as we stand in awe of God's activity in the world, it would be natural to form the emotion of admiration for God, and admiration can give rise to the desire to imitate the admirable person (Zagzebski 2017, 34-35).

Maimonides's notion of the imitation of God is where the epistemic upshot lies, for imitation can produce empathy, not only to understand or grasp the first-person perspective of another but to some extent share in it. Now this will be difficult for Maimonides, who argued that there is nothing in common between God and creatures. However, Maimonides seems to have recognized a way for humans to grasp something like God's perspective:

[W]henver one of His actions is apprehended, the attribute from which this action proceeds is predicated of Him...and the name deriving from that action is applied to Him. For instance, one apprehends the kindness of His governance in the production of the embryos of living beings...Now actions of this kind proceed from us only after we feel a certain affection and compassion, and this is the meaning of mercy. God...is said to be merciful...It is not that He...is affected and has compassion. But an action similar to that which proceeds from a father in respect to his child and that is attached to compassion, pity, and an absolute passion, proceeds from Him (*Guide* I.54).

By divine impassibility, God will not have any passions. However, divine impassibility does not necessarily imply that God has no emotions whatsoever—as even some of the strongest forms of divine impassibility have distinguished active emotions (*affectiones*) and passive emotions (*passiones*), where only the latter are denied as being possessed by God (Scrutton 2011, ch. 2).

To be sure, under the strong form of apophaticism, the sense of the predications in “Moses is merciful” and “God is merciful” turn out to be equivocal. Thus, the kind of empathy that the worshiper can have for God will not be like the empathy one human being can have for another since the emotion will not be the same nor sufficiently similar. However, empathy also has the aspect of imagining the first-person perspective of another, to imaginatively identify with the other (Zagzebski 2013, 28).²¹ While we cannot have the kind of emotions that God has (if God has any at all) or identify with the perspective of God, it seems that we can still imagine to a limited degree the perspective that God may have when God engages in certain actions.

Consider a more mundane case. Suppose members of a community are told stories of an individual who performs a large number and variety of beneficent acts, and many times the members of that community are recipients of the benefits of these actions. They do not know the individual's name and they do not know anything about who she is (i.e., if asked “who is she” or “what is she like”, they would say “I don't know”). So they come up with a name for her: Clara. Tales of the noble and generous deeds of Clara are spread and re-told to the community, where several members develop a profound admiration for her. Now suppose some of these admirers begin to imitate the kinds of actions that Clara has performed. Not much cognitively may be gained if one does this a few times. But if one practices these acts in such a way that the performance of these kinds of magnanimous deeds becomes a deeply entrenched habit, it seems plausible that the imitator can acquire the emotions or motives similar to what Clara has when she is motivated to perform such actions. Moreover, imitators may begin to see the world in the way that Clara does—that is, they come closer to seeing it

²¹ For more on empathic identification and perspective-taking, see Wiseman (1978) and Breyer (2020).

from her perspective. And this can happen even if the members of the community still know nothing about Clara other than her actions.

Similarly, imitators of God's actions—especially for those who practice them until they become habits or virtues—might begin to understand something akin to the subjective or emotive life of God, or they will be able to better imagine seeing the world in a way that comes closer to God's perspective. And it appears that this can happen even if such imitators know nothing about God other than God's actions. Even so, it appears that a type of knowledge of God can be acquired, a knowledge not easily expressible in third-person propositions. For often times what is learned in empathy is difficult if not impossible to articulate, especially given the subjective aspect of the experience.²²

The suggestion here can assimilate insights, such as the ones from Stern (2013), which suggest that Maimonides is centrally concerned with praxis or a way of life. For living a certain way, especially in a way that imitates God, is paramount for the follower of God. But my suggestion here is that there is also an epistemic upshot to doing so, as it allows for something akin to imaginative identification. Moreover, this once again fits nicely with the mystical interpretation, since there is an intimate connection between knower and what is known.

Though Maimonides repudiated positive predications, his emphasis on imitative activity opens up a way for worshipers to see the world from a perspective that is closer to the way that God sees the world (though obviously in a constricted way). By engaging in the kind of activities that Scripture and revelation depict God as undertaking—at least the kinds of activities that are expressive of God's moral nature²³ (at least in human terms)—worshipers may then be able to imagine the perspective that God may have, which allows worshipers to understand the kind of person God is, even if they are unable to express anything about God's nature. This fits well with the strong form of apophaticism, since speech about God does not yield greater knowledge of God, and so silence is appropriate. But even within this apophatic framework, one can know God more by imitating God—that is, by engaging in some of the kinds of actions that God undertakes, thereby being able to imaginatively identify with God and to understand things from God's perspective. And it seems that such imaginative identification can be epistemically significant.²⁴

No doubt that much of what has been presented here is suggestive and needs considerable development. But I hope to have at least shown that there are types of non-propositional knowledge that can be acquired even within a view that maintains a strong form of apophaticism. The proposal offered here does make sense of why Maimonides would prescribe silence as the proper mode of worshiping God, for silence can make space for intimate second-person experiences and joint attention which yields greater closeness with God. Moreover, one can engage in silent actions that imitate divine actions, which can give rise to a kind of imaginative identification with God, thereby producing deeper understanding of God's perspective. While such forms of knowledge were not explicitly endorsed by Maimonides, I hope to have shown that some of these ideas may have been lurking, perhaps inchoately or in rudimentary form, within his theological framework. Thus, even if one

²² Imitation of God can also engender moral transformation, which is tied to Maimonides' view of human wisdom (Frank 2008, 553). Sin, which is the primary problem for human beings, yields intellectual and moral erosion. To experience union with God, a person must be internally integrated towards the Good (Stump 2010), and hence personal knowledge of God is not possible without moral formation (Kenney 2013, Foster 2015).

²³ This qualification is necessary since God is engaged in whole host of activities that are not imitable (e.g., sustaining the world in existence).

²⁴ For recent work on the epistemic significance of imagination, see Kind (2018) and Kind and Kung (2016).

subscribes to a strong form of apophaticism, one is able to worship God by knowing, loving, and drawing near to God.²⁵

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