CHAPTER 7

"Whereof One Cannot Speak"

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7.1 Maimonides' Theory of Divine Ineffability

Maimonides is one of the most radical defenders of apophaticism, the view according to which no positive attribute can be truthfully applied to God, and that God is consequently ineffable.[1] His apophatic theology has several important dimensions, and it is in the *Guide for the Perplexed* that he offers the most elaborate account of his views.

The starting point of his theory is a metaphysical one, relating to God's particular form of existence:

> God . . . is existent of necessity and . . . there is no composition in Him . . . We are only able to apprehend the fact that He is and cannot apprehend His quiddity. It is consequently impossible that He should have affirmative attributes. For He has no "That" outside of His "What," and hence an attribute cannot be indicative of one of the two; all the more His "What" is not compound so that an attribute cannot be indicative of its two parts; and all the more, He cannot have accidents so that an attribute cannot be indicative of them. Accordingly He cannot have an affirmative attribute in any respect. (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 135)

There are two central claims here. The first one is:

(1) God exists necessarily.

Necessary existence is a fundamentally different way of existing than anything else we are acquainted with in this universe; all other concrete things and beings exist merely contingently. Thus, already at this point, an essential difference between God and everything else that exists in God's universe is established.

[1] Apophatic views have also been defended, amongst others, by Philo of Alexandria (2013), Gregory of Nyssa (2007), Pseudo-Dionysius (1987), Maximus the Confessor (1985), Ibn al-Arabi (2005), and Meister Eckhart (1981).

The second central claim is that:

(2) God is simple (non-compound).

Maimonides argues that God cannot be compound because that would compromise God's absolute metaphysical and logical priority. For if God were compound, there would have to be some cause holding God's parts together, which is equal to saying that there is a cause that is prior to God. So God cannot be compound:

> A thing composed of two elements has necessarily their composition as the cause of its present existence. Its existence is therefore not necessitated by its own essence; it depends on the existence of its two component parts and their combination. (Maimonides 2002b, 2. introduction, proposition 21: 147)

It follows from (1) that God has no accidents; it follows from (2) that there are no parts of God of which an attribute can be indicative. Hence, neither can God have an affirmative attribute in any respect, nor can we provide any positive description of God:

> When the tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity! (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 137)

This immediately raises the question how we are to understand religious claims about God, such as claims about God's qualities and characteristics made in the Torah, but also in the remaining parts of the Hebrew Bible, the exegetical commentaries of the Talmud, and of course in the daily prayers all Jews are obligated to say. Maimonides' answer is as follows:

> The terms "knowledge," "power," "will," and "life," as applied to Him, may He be exalted, and to all those possessing knowledge, power, will, and life, are purely equivocal, so that their meaning when they are predicated of Him is in no way like their meaning in other applications. Do not deem that they are used amphibolously. For when terms are used amphibolously they are predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect to some notion. (Maimonides 1963, 1.56: 131)

Maimonides thus claims that religious language as applied to God is purely equivocal. As such, it cannot and must not be interpreted literally. However, this does not mean that statements like 'God is powerful' or 'God is all-knowing' are nonsensical. Rather, Maimonides offers two possible ways to interpret such statements.

The first possible interpretation is as disguised negations (*Guide* 1.58). For example, 'God is powerful' should be read as 'It is not the case that God is powerless'; 'God is all-knowing' should be taken to mean 'It is not the case

that God is ignorant'; etc. However, unlike in ordinary speech, a double negative applied to God does not indicate a positive. A statement like 'God is powerful' – which, according to Maimonides, is correctly interpreted as 'It is not the case that it is not the case that God is powerful' – does not amount to an affirmation of the statement 'God is powerful.' Rather, it amounts to an affirmation of the fact that God does not possess power in a way that would make God's power comparable to the power possessed by other beings, or that would make God comparable to other powerful beings (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 136). Maimonides thus draws the radical conclusion that:

> We have no way of describing Him unless it be through negations and not otherwise. (Maimonides 1963, 1.58: 134)

In fact, however, Maimonides does offer a second possible way to interpret apparently positive descriptions of God, namely as descriptions of God's actions:

> Whenever any one of His actions is perceived by us, we ascribe to God that emotion which is the source of the act when performed by ourselves, and call Him by an epithet which is formed from the verb expressing that emotion. We see, e.g., how well He provides for the life of the embryo of living beings; how He endows with certain faculties both the embryo itself and those who have to rear it after its birth, in order that it may be protected from death and destruction, guarded against all harm, and assisted in the performance of all that is required [for its development]. Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness called mercy and pity. God is, therefore, said to be merciful; e.g., "Like as a father is merciful to his children, so the Lord is merciful to them that fear Him." (Maimonides 2002b, 1.54: 76)

So the idea is that it is appropriate to say that God is merciful to the extent that the world created by God exhibits merciful characteristics. However, this does not mean that God is indeed merciful, but only that the effects of God's actions in the world resemble the effects of human actions we would call 'merciful.'

To sum up, statements that look like positive descriptions of God are to be understood either as disguised negations, or as descriptions of God's actions in terms appropriate for the description of human actions. This is especially important to keep in mind during the mandatory recital of daily prayers, since any praise of God that takes descriptions of God as literal is a sin bordering on idolatry (*Guide* 1.36).[2]

[2] It is important to note that, according to Maimonides, taking positive descriptions of God literally can nevertheless have important societal functions. As Scott and Citron explain (citing Maimonides 1963, 3.28: 315), "false representational beliefs about God's benevolence and justice [can be] of instrumental moral value not to the apophatics who know that they are false, but rather, only to the

Moreover, a believer's spiritual maturity is directly proportional to her increasing understanding of the futility of any attempt to talk about God:

> Every time you establish by proof the negation of a thing in reference to God, you become more perfect, while with every additional positive assertion you follow your imagination and recede from the true knowledge of God. Only by such ways must we approach the knowledge of God. (Maimonides 1963, 1.59: 84)

The important fact to note from the preceding explanations is that, although Maimonides defends a radically apophatic position, it is not the case that he disqualifies prayer or other ways of speaking of God as nonsensical. Rather, he offers interpretations of such talk that are, at least on the face of it, coherent with his apophatic stance.[3] Hence, another central claim of Maimonides' theology has become visible:

(3) God is indescribable; it is possible to praise God merely indirectly.

However, even indirect descriptions of God must ultimately be acknowledged as inappropriate. The deeper a believer's understanding of God is, the clearer it will become to her how little can be achieved even by indirect praise of God. Maimonides follows this thought through all the way to the end:

> Whatever we utter with the intention of extolling and of praising Him, contains something that cannot be applied to God, and includes derogatory expressions; it is therefore more becoming to be silent, and to be content with intellectual reflection, as has been recommended by men of the highest culture, in the words "Commune with your own heart upon your bed, and be still" (Ps. iv. 4). (Maimonides 2002b, 1.59: 84f)

From this emerges yet another central claim of Maimonides' theology:

(4) Silence is the most appropriate praise.

So religious language has a place in Maimonides' view, and it even plays a crucial role in a believer's ascent from a basic to a more advanced understanding of her faith, culminating in the insight that the total absence of

unsophisticated masses who do not know that they are false (and who are not able to follow the arguments of the apophatics). As [Maimonides] says, some beliefs expressed in the Bible are 'only the means of securing the removal of injustice, or the acquisition of good morals' such as 'the belief that God is angry with those who oppress their fellow-men . . . or the belief that God hears the crying of the oppressed and vexed'" (Scott and Citron 2016, p. 43, ft. 24).

[3] For a comprehensive discussion of apophatic views of God, cf. Scott and Citron (2016).

words is the most appropriate way of praising God. Now, what does all this imply for our knowledge of God? After all,

> Negation does not give knowledge in any respect of the true reality of the thing with regard to which the particular matter in question has been negated. (Maimonides 1963, 1.59: 139)

Since Maimonides' theological view precludes any description of God or God's attributes, a believer's conviction that she has knowledge of God becomes utterly mysterious. What does she have knowledge of? What is it that she knows? Or more precisely, what exactly constitutes her knowledge of God, if not knowledge of what God is like? Maimonides' answer is not entirely illuminating:

> Since it is a well-known fact that even that knowledge of God which is accessible to man cannot be attained except by negations, and that negations do not convey a true idea of the being to which they refer, all people, both of past and present generations, declared that God cannot be the object of human comprehension, that none but Himself comprehends what He is, and that our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him. (Maimonides 2002b, 1.59: 84f.)

Maimonides is of course committed to the possibility of knowing God; however, his apophatic convictions preclude any further characterisation of what is involved in having knowledge of God. So Maimonides is forced to resort to the final principle of his apophatic view, which is that

(5) God can be known but not comprehended.

This is a surprising – some might even say paradoxical – conclusion:

> Given his metaphysical and religious principles and repeated recommendation of silence about God, it seems that Maimonides either contradicted himself in allowing positive speech about God or failed to derive the semantic implications of his epistemological thesis, which maintains that, although it is possible to know that God is, we can only know what God is not. (Benor 1995, p. 342)

The question thus is: how can we know something without comprehending it?

7.2 The Puzzle of Incomprehensible Knowledge

We typically assume that knowledge and comprehension go hand in hand: when we know something, we take it to be implied that we comprehend what we know. Why do we assume that?

Comprehending some X is equivalent to understanding the nature or meaning of X. For example, comprehending redness is equivalent to understanding that those apples over there are red, that red and green are complementary colours, that mixing red and blue water colours produces a shade of purple, etc. In other words, comprehending redness means understanding that a number of statements about redness are true. Of course, it would be much too strong a condition on comprehension to say that comprehending X requires us to be aware of *all* true statements about X, not only because the set of all true statements about any X is infinitely large, but also because the way in which we use the concept of comprehension suggests that something less than omniscience about X is sufficient for comprehending X. For example, comprehending the concept of a triangle will probably require understanding that triangles have exactly three sides, that every two sides form an angle, that the length of the sides and the size of the inner angles can vary to a certain extent, etc. However, comprehension of triangles certainly does not require understanding every single geometrical theorem entailed by the properties of triangles. Probably it does not even require being aware of any of its mathematical properties (children grasp the concept without knowing that, for every triangle, the sum of its angles is 180 degrees). It may or may not be an interesting philosophical question how many statements about X one must recognise as true in order to comprehend X (most likely, there will not be a definite answer). What is important to note for the purpose of this paper is that comprehending X means understanding that *some* statement S about X is true. So a person A comprehends X if and only if (i) A holds the belief that S is true, (ii) S is true, and (iii) S is a statement about X.

The belief component is precisely what states of comprehension are thought to share with states of knowledge. Consider the JTB model of knowledge that has become somewhat canonical over the last decades, according to which knowledge consists of justified, true belief (JTB) plus some extra component C (e.g. safety, warranted assertibility, reliability, etc.) that is intended to prevent Gettier cases. On this model, a person A knows X if and only if (i) A holds the belief that S is true, (ii) S is true, (iii) S is a statement about X, and (iv) A came to believe S in a way that is justification-conferring and not vulnerable to Gettier-undermining. So comprehension and knowledge share conditions (i)–(iii), but knowledge also requires condition (iv) to be fulfilled. It is now fairly easy to see why we assume that knowledge and comprehension go hand in hand: both states of comprehension and states of knowledge require conditions (i)–(iii) to be fulfilled, such that, if A knows X, A comprehends X. Note

that the converse does not hold, i.e. if A comprehends X, it does not mean that A knows X. In order for A to know X, the additional condition (iv) has to be fulfilled. Hence, it is possible to comprehend X without knowing X, but it is not possible to know X without comprehending X. It is this epistemological principle that explains our puzzlement with Maimonides' view: his principle (5) states precisely the opposite, namely, that it is possible to know God without comprehending God.

The JTB analysis of knowledge raises an additional question about Maimonides' principle (5).[4] Consider the following example. Assume that the statement 'Paula knows the capitals of all member states of the United Nations' is true, and let's assume that the correct way to analyse knowledge is as justified true belief plus some X that prevents Gettier cases. It then follows that Paula's knowledge must consist of her justifiedly holding a number of true beliefs (in a non-Gettiered way). What are those beliefs? Clearly, they are beliefs about the capitals of different sovereign states. For example, Paula's knowledge must involve the beliefs that Paris is the capital of France, that Berlin is the capital of Germany, that Kigali is the capital of Rwanda, and so forth. In fact, if it is true that Paula knows the capitals of *all* UN member states, then Paula must hold a set of 193 true beliefs, each one about a sovereign state and its corresponding capital. Paula's knowledge of the capitals of all member states of the United Nations thus consists in her believing (truly, justifiedly, and in a non-Gettiered way) that Paris is the capital of France, Berlin is the capital of Germany, Kigali is the capital of Rwanda, and so forth. A different way of putting this is to say that Paula comprehends what her knowledge of the capitals of all member states of the United Nations entails: it entails that Paris is the capital of France, that Berlin is the capital of Germany, that Kigali is the capital of Rwanda . . . This example clearly demonstrates that, if knowledge is indeed justified true belief plus X, then every state of knowledge must entail either one particular true belief, or an entire set of true beliefs, which the believer came to hold in a non-Gettiered, justification-conferring way.

Let's now turn back to Maimonides' principle (5) and the much less trivial case of knowledge of God. Let's assume that the statement

[4] The literature on how we ought to analyse the concept of knowledge is vast, of course, and discussions are far from settled. For the most recent and comprehensive overview, see Ichikawa and Steup (2018). For a view that rejects the possibility of analysing knowledge, see Williamson (2000). However, it does seem appropriate to measure Maimonides' apophatic view against the most common account of knowledge, rather than to assume a theory of knowledge that accommodates Maimonides' needs more conveniently from the start.

'Maimonides knows God' is true, or perhaps, formulated more appropriately, 'Maimonides has knowledge of God.' Let's further assume that the correct way to analyse knowledge is as justified true belief plus some X that prevents Gettier cases. It then follows that Maimonides' state of knowledge must entail one or several true beliefs.[5] But this is exactly what Maimonides denies. On his account, there is not a single true positive proposition about God, and hence, not a single positive proposition that could constitute the content of a true belief about God. In other words, if both Maimonides and the JTB analysis of knowledge are correct, then knowledge of God seems either vacuous or simply impossible.[6]

7.3 Non-propositional Knowledge

It is clear now that Maimonides' apophatic views are impossible to square with a JTB analysis of knowledge. A straightforward way to save Maimonides' position is to reject a JTB analysis. However, as indicated earlier, that would constitute an exceedingly radical attempt at saving Maimonides from self-contradiction. The JTB-account of knowledge may still lack a Gettier-proof formulation, but it is doubtless the most established (if yet incomplete) account of propositional knowledge.

However, as I will argue in the following, it is not necessary to reject the JTB-account of knowledge in order to render Maimonides' position coherent. Rather, the solution lies with the acknowledgement that not all knowledge can be brought into propositional form, or put differently, that not all forms of knowledge involve belief in a proposition. In other words, the JTB-account does not cover all forms of knowledge. Of course, it would be *ad hoc* to defend this claim only to save Maimonides, but as I will argue in the following, there are at least three examples that demonstrate the existence of non-propositional forms of knowledge. Once it is established that the concept of non-propositional knowledge is consistent, the claim that apophatic knowledge of God belongs into the category of non-propositional knowledge starts to look attractive.

[5] And, of course, that Maimonides came to hold these beliefs in the right way – for brevity's sake, and since what matters is the implication of *belief* in states of knowledge, I will no longer mention the additional qualifications henceforth but take them to be implied in JTB accounts of knowledge.

[6] See also Benor (1995) for the closely related discussion of how to secure reference without comprehension.

7.3.1 Knowledge-how

The first kind of non-propositional knowledge is knowledge how to do something.[7] Take, for example, knowledge how to write. Writing requires knowledge of how to hold a pen, how to move the pen across a sheet of paper, how to form letters, etc. One can bring those pieces of knowledge into propositional form:

- In order to perform a successful act of writing, one must hold the pen between one's thumb and index finger.
- In order to perform a successful act of writing, the angle between pen and paper may not be smaller than 30 degrees.
- In order to perform a successful act of writing, the pressure exerted by the fingers holding the pen may not exceed 47 newtons.
- ...

Let's assume that it is possible to write down a complete list of propositions about what it takes to write (a 'Writing Manual'), and let's imagine a person who knows the Latin alphabet, knows how to read, knows which letters stand for which sounds, but has never written anything by hand – all her life, she has been writing on computers only. Would this person know how to write a letter by hand after reading (and understanding) the Writing Manual? Intuitively, it is very unlikely that she would. In order to learn how to write, she would need to practice how to hold a pen, how to move it across the paper, etc. Propositional knowledge alone cannot teach her how to write. Also conversely, it is very unlikely that all people who know how to write know all the propositions listed in the Writing Manual. In fact, it is very likely that most competent writers do *not* know all the propositions listed in the Writing Manual. Nevertheless, they know how to write.

The anti-intellectualist explanation of our intuitions about cases like the Writing Manual is that knowledge-how cannot be reduced to knowledge-that, or put differently, that not all knowledge can be reduced to knowledge of *propositions*.

[7] The question whether all kinds of knowledge, and specifically, instances of knowledge how, can be reduced to propositional knowledge has been a topic of discussion for decades. The canonical formulation of the intuition that (non-propositional) knowledge-how and (propositional) knowledge-that are two distinct, mutually irreducible forms of knowledge is due to Ryle (1949, p. 29). The view, called 'anti-intellectualism', has been attacked by 'intellectualists' like Stanley (2011) and Stanley and Williamson (2001). For a recent defense of anti-intellectualism, see Jonas (2016).

7.3.2 Phenomenal Knowledge

But this is not the only example of non-propositional knowledge. A further example is phenomenal knowledge, i.e. the kind of knowledge that can be gained exclusively through sense perception. The classic examples intended to demonstrate the existence of such knowledge are due to Nagel (1974) and Jackson (1982).[8]

Nagel asks the rhetorical question what it is like (for a bat) to be a bat, and argues that humans, given their restriction to a human cognitive apparatus, do not have access to a bat's phenomenal knowledge and its corresponding particular perspective on the world, which are accessible only from a bat's point of view. He then argues that the inaccessibility of facts about what it is like to be a non-human organism poses a difficulty for (though not necessarily a refutation of) physicalism:

> If the facts of experience – facts about what it is like for the experiencing organism – are accessible only from one point of view, then it is a mystery how the true character of experiences could be revealed in the physical operation of that organism. (Nagel 1974, p. 442)

Jackson goes even one step further and argues that the existence of phenomenal knowledge refutes physicalism. To see why, he asks his readers to imagine Mary, a neuroscientist who has spent her entire life in a black-and-white environment and who knows every physical fact about colours and colour perception (including facts about the human visible spectrum, the wave lengths associated with specific colours, the functioning of retina receptors, the neural processing of visual input, etc.). Jackson then invites us to imagine that Mary steps out of her black-and-white environment and sees the colour red for the first time. He argues that in this case, Mary's knowledge about colours would be enhanced, i.e. in addition to knowing all the physical facts about red wavelengths, etc., she would learn what it is like to see the colour red. In other words, she would gain phenomenal knowledge of redness, i.e. a kind of knowledge not expressible in physical (or any other) language. Jackson's argument is mainly directed against physicalism, but it serves equally well as a refutation of the view that all knowledge can be reduced to knowledge of propositions.

[8] Jackson's argument about Mary has come to be known as the 'Knowledge Argument' and plays a central role both in debates about qualia, and in the debate about physicalism, i.e. the view that all facts about the universe, including facts about our mental lives, are physical facts. Also here it should be noted that debates about the (non-)existence of phenomenal knowledge are far from settled; cf. Stoljar (2017); Tye (2018); Van Gulick (2018). It is worth noting that, according to Lewis, phenomenal knowledge is a variety of knowledge-how; cf. Lewis (1988).

7.3.3 Indexical Knowledge

The final example of non-propositional knowledge I want to mention is indexical knowledge, i.e. the kind of knowledge that enables us to integrate our propositional knowledge in such a way as to be able to identify ourselves and our spatiotemporal location in the world. A canonical example that illustrates this kind of knowledge is discussed by John Perry:

> An amnesiac, Rudolf Lingens, is lost in the Stanford library. He reads a number of things in the library, including a biography of himself, and a detailed account of the library in which he is lost. He believes any Fregean [descriptive] thought you think might help him. He still won't know who he is, and where he is, no matter how much knowledge he piles up, until that moment when he is ready to say, '*This* place is aisle five, floor six, of Main Library, Stanford. *I* am Rudolf Lingens.' (Perry 1977, p. 492)

Perry's example illustrates that, in the scenario he sketches, mere propositional knowledge isn't enough for Rudolf Lingens to figure out who and where he is. Even if Lingens were given an exhaustive list of facts about himself and his environment (assuming, for the sake of argument, that such a list could be compiled), and even if Lingens read, understood, and believed all the propositions listed on that list, he still would not be able to infer the knowledge necessary to realise that he is Rudolf Lingens, and that this is aisle five, floor six, of Main Library, Stanford. David Lewis, discussing this example in the context of his theory of *de se* beliefs, summarises the situation as follows:

> Book learning will help Lingens locate himself in logical space. The more he reads, the more he finds out about the world he lives in, so the fewer worlds are left where he may perhaps be living. The more he reads, the more propositions he believes, and the more he is in a position to self-ascribe properties of inhabiting such-and-such a kind of world. But none of this, by itself, can guarantee that he knows where in the world he is. He needs to locate himself not only in logical space but also in ordinary space. He needs to self-ascribe the property of being in aisle five, floor six, of Main Library, Stanford; and this is not one of the properties that corresponds to a proposition. (Lewis 1979, p. 521)

According to Lewis, Lingens is missing a piece of non-propositional knowledge, i.e. knowledge that cannot be rendered in propositional form and thus, does not involve belief in a proposition.[9]

[9] It should be stressed that all three examples of non-propositional knowledge I gave in this section are subjects of intense philosophical debate, including debates about whether the kind of knowledge

7.4 Non-propositional Knowledge and Apophaticism

Let us now turn back to Maimonides and the question how best to make sense of his claim that God can be known but not comprehended. In Section 7.2, I argued that the reason this claim raises eyebrows is that comprehension is often thought to be implied in knowledge. The reason for this is that the belief component involved in states of comprehension is what those states share with states of knowledge, at least if knowledge is modelled on the very firmly established JTB account. In Section 7.3, I questioned the comprehensiveness of the JTB account of knowledge by introducing three kinds of knowledge that do not involve propositional belief. I will now offer some positive reasons to think that knowledge of God, as conceived of by Maimonides, is best thought of as an instance of non-propositional knowledge.

In order to see why knowledge of God, as conceived of by Maimonides, is best thought of as a kind of non-propositional knowledge, it is helpful to point out what the three examples of non-propositional knowledge just discussed have in common. Knowledge-how enables us to perform certain actions we intend to perform – riding bikes, writing letters, singing songs. Phenomenal knowledge as acquired through our senses enables each individual's intrinsically subjective perspective on the world, thereby marking us as conscious beings and distinguishing us from mere information-processing machines. Indexical knowledge helps us to locate ourselves in the world by enabling us to self-ascribe properties and processing information that relates to us as individuals. In other words, all three kinds of non-propositional knowledge are *enabling states* that crucially contribute to our ability to interact as individuals with the external world.[10]

Now consider the role that religious believers ascribe to their knowledge of God – what does knowledge of God add to their lives? Typically, religious believers claim that having knowledge of God has a profound impact on their *perspective* on life. For example, many former atheists who

in question is really non-propositional (Stanley and Williamson 2001). However, that instances of knowledge-how involve something over and above propositional knowledge is very widely accepted, just like the intuition driving the Mary-example, i.e. that what we receive through our senses cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge. The case of indexical knowledge has been less widely discussed – a notable exception is Cappelen and Dever (2013) – but also here at least the intuitive force of the Rudolf Lingens example is beyond question, and has also been discussed in the philosophy of mind (Seager 2001).

[10] For a detailed discussion of the possibility of defining knowledge in terms of enabling states, and of what distinguishes knowledge thus defined from mere physical abilities, see Moore (1997, 166–194).

became religious believers at some point report that their knowledge of God caused a profound change in the way they evaluate the different dimensions of life, which often involves a shift in focus from primarily material to primarily emotional, ethical, and spiritual aspects of life. In other words, coming to believe in God entails a re-evaluation of one's entire body of (propositional) knowledge about the world. Importantly, this does not usually involve the acquisition of new propositional knowledge (gaining new propositional knowledge, for example about religious scriptures, may be part of what it means to become religious, but the core element of becoming religious is arguably a shift in one's attitude towards what is already known). Rather, knowledge of God enables us to adopt a particular *attitude* towards the world, a religious attitude that will express itself in the way we see and interact with the world. According to Maimonides, a religious attitude towards the world crucially involves, for example, a continuous effort to increase one's knowledge of the things humans are capable of knowing, but also in refraining from the attempt to gain knowledge of things that are beyond the reach of human intellectual capabilities (*Guide* 3.51). It is this fact, i.e. the fact that knowledge of God is a state that enables the subject to relate to the world in this particular way, that explains why knowledge of God is best understood as a kind of non-propositional knowledge.

At this point, a problem of identification arises for Maimonides: how do we know that the knowledge in question, i.e. the non-propositional knowledge that expresses itself in the described attitude towards the world, amounts to knowledge of *God* (rather than, say, knowledge of the ethically optimal way to relate to the world)? After all, non-propositional knowledge does not involve belief in a proposition, so it is not by coming to believe a proposition *about God* that a believer knows that *God* is the object of her knowledge.

It is not obvious that Maimonides can answer this question in a way that is consistent with his apophatic theology, since any attempt to identify the object of one's knowledge is bound to result in a false statement. However, it is also not clear that this puts Maimonides in a worse position than defenders of 'standard' propositional accounts, according to which knowledge of God involves the true belief that some proposition about God is true. This is because defenders of such accounts face the closely related question of how we can know that that a particular proposition about God is true.

In fact, it is possible to argue that defenders of propositional accounts are in a worse position. This is because any claim that a certain statement

S about God is true immediately cries out for an explanation of how we know that it is true. Defenders of a Maimonidean account, on the other hand, do not affirm any statements about God as true, and hence, do not need to explain their methods of verification – a clear advantage over standard accounts.

7.5 Conclusion: Apophaticism and Objectivity

I have argued that it is the fact that knowledge and comprehension can come apart – given that not all knowledge involves belief in a proposition – that supports Maimonides' initially puzzling principle (5). I have further outlined why thinking of knowledge of God as a kind of non-propositional knowledge, i.e. an enabling state, not only explains why such knowledge must necessarily be ineffable, but also appropriately captures what being a religious believer is crucially about. I would like to conclude with a few words about the consequences of this account for the objectivity of knowledge of God.

Objectivity is an epistemological ideal, something all scholarly enquiry should strive for. It is also a property we ascribe to statements about a given subject matter, as well as the methods we use in order to generate those statements. Only statements that are not influenced by a person's individual perspective, interests, unconscious biases, and normative convictions (to name only a few relevant objectivity-distorting factors) may count as objective.

However, if knowledge of God is indeed non-propositional – i.e. does not involve statements to which we could ascribe the property of objectivity – and if it is furthermore an enabling state of an individual person – i.e. entirely entrenched in a subject's individual perspective – then what consequences does this have for its objectivity? Does it mean that there is nothing about our knowledge of God that can be represented objectively?

In one sense there is, in another there isn't. Just like there is a lot we can say in relation to our phenomenal knowledge of the colour red – for example, that red is Pippa's favourite colour, that red Gummi Bears are the best, that red and green are complementary colours, etc. – there is also a lot we can coherently say in relation to our knowledge of God, for example, under which circumstances we acquired knowledge of God, in what way it shapes our way of living, what we take to be the most important implications of there being a God, etc. We can say all these things without it constituting an attempt to 'eff' the ineffable, i.e. without contradicting ourselves. Moreover, it is even conceivable that there is some

objective truth about, say, what the most important implications of there being a God are. So in this sense, the objectivity of knowledge of God is not jeopardised by an account that explains knowledge of God in terms of the concept of non-propositional knowledge.

However, nothing we could say in the way just described would ever suffice to pass our knowledge of God on to another person, thereby bringing that person into a state that enables her to relate to the world in a religious way. Getting into that state, just like learning how to ride a bike, is more a matter of practice than instruction, and no matter how many religious wisdoms we heave upon a person, the reasons a person ends up acquiring knowledge of God are entirely subjective. So in this sense, there is nothing about knowledge of God that can be objectively represented and passed on. But this is not a problem for Maimonides. Rather, it is a natural consequence of his apophatic theology. Maimonides is adamant that, concerning our knowledge of God, what can be achieved by means of language is severely restricted. Language only serves to demonstrate the complete inadequacy of human concepts for grasping the nature of God. What can evoke religious knowledge, however, is religious practice,[11] or more precisely, the 'many kinds of knowledge' (Maimonides 2002b, 3.28: 246) we acquire by acting in accordance with the laws of Halakha:

> The true Law, which as we said is one, and beside which there is no other Law, viz., the Law of our teacher Moses, has for its purpose to give us the twofold perfection. It aims first at the establishment of good mutual relations among men by removing injustice and creating the noblest feelings ... Secondly, it seeks to *train us in faith*, and to impart correct and true opinions *when the intellect is sufficiently developed*. (Maimonides 2002b, 3.27: 246) (my italics)

Living an observant life as a Jew can thus be understood as an ongoing, lifelong attempt to follow the divine commandments in order to reach a state of knowledge that enables us to relate to the world in a religious way.

[11] Cf. *Guide* 3.27–28.