

**AQUINAS AND MAIMONIDES: A CONVERSATION ABOUT PROPER SPEECH**

by *DAVID B. BURRELL*

One of the extraordinary features of medieval times was the shared spirit of inquiry. Not only were thinkers encouraged to press for formulations of issues whose import ranged over the universe itself, but in doing so they sought help wherever it might be found. The confidence in reason to carry us safely on the ways of argument to transcendent regions was coupled with a respect for rational argument, whatever its provenance. Hence while Jews, Christians, or Muslims would be taught to consider one another as infidels, the philosophers among them eagerly reach each other's work. Translators were prized companions to scholars everywhere.

Thomas Aquinas' (1227–1274) reliance on Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) is well known; it is documented in countless citations and textual borrowings. Louis Gardet has shown how beholden Aquinas is to the *Guide of the Perplexed* for what he knew of Islamic positions on key questions of philosophical theology.

---

David B. Burrell, C.P.C., who is Professor of Philosophy at Notre Dame University, recently completed a two-year stay in Israel, during which he served as rector of the Ecumenical Research Institute at Tantur, taught at the Hebrew University and was a member of Isaiah House. He was among the participants in a weekly colloquium on the thought of Aquinas and Maimonides held at Isaiah House during the 1981–82 academic year, led by Prof. Yeshayahu Leibovitz and Dr. Marcel Dubois.

This paper was the third in a series of three lectures on the thought of Aquinas and Maimonides given in May 1982 at the Swedish Theological Seminary under the auspices of the Israel Ecumenical Theological Research Fraternity.

Aquinas' own expositions, Gardet makes clear, retrace the expository chapters of the *Guide*.<sup>1</sup> I prefer to focus, however, on the celebrated disagreement between Aquinas and Maimonides regarding attribution *in divinis*, yet without accepting the *positions prises*. By comparing their parallel treatments of this issue central to philosophical theology, I propose to illuminate each by the other. The results will reveal significant differences in intellectual milieu — in characteristic conversation partners, if you will — yet noting these differences can bring to light an even more significant commonality between these thinkers in approach and in goals for seeking to understand divinity.

My comparison will be spelled out in a dialogue, an imagined construction of the extended conversation in which both time and space forbade Aquinas and Maimonides engaging. This ruse will allow us to see whence their respective presumptions come, for the presence inevitably requires one to explain why something is being said the way it is. That much historical clarification should allow us better to locate the potential meeting points between the two men, and so allow us to appreciate where mutual understanding might have ensued from such an exchange.

The speculative cast of this fabricated dialogue hardly qualifies it as a scholarly venture. Or might some creative efforts at comparison be precisely what is required to tease out our own presuppositions and to foster communication in the absence of an overarching universe of discourse? Could the very role of undertaking to construct a conversation be our only recourse, given the futile search for a neutral “foundation” for direct comparison?

Such is my conviction, shared by at least a few.<sup>2</sup> But I may fail to demonstrate it effectively by lack of imaginative capacity. So be it; a decent attempt may encourage others to endeavors at once creative and comparative. I am heartened by similar efforts recently in philosophy of science, a discipline particularly useful in offering patterns for philosophical inquiry into religious issues.<sup>3</sup> The very effort to

---

1. Cf. Louis Gardet, “Saint Thomas et ses Prédécesseurs Arabes,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas (1274–1974) Commemorative Studies* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 419–48. I shall normally cite from the Friedländer translation of *The Guide for the Perplexed* [revised edition, 1904] (New York: Dover, 1956), since he uses a more conventional philosophical vocabulary than does Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), and hence offers a more accessible working text, although Pines ought always be consulted.

2. Two recent works conclude to the appropriateness of conversation as a model for the kind of understanding we might hope for today, and do so out of quite different traditions of inquiry: Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); and David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

3. For recent examples, Gary Gutting, “The Strong Program: A Dialogue” to appear in Western Ontario series (ed. J. Brown); *idem.*, “Scientific Realism vs. Constructive Empiricism: A Dialogue,” *Monist* 65 (1982), 336–349; and Kenneth Sayre: *Starburst* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977).

simulate an actual conversation offers a challenging test of one's convictions. It also presents a way of putting into practice the fruitful suggestions of Wilfrid Cantwell Smith regarding the role which comparative religious study can play in clarifying theological positions by allowing criteria to surface.<sup>4</sup> For the exchange provides an opportunity to specify whence one is coming, and so display the paradigms one has in mind when employing a discourse notoriously ambiguous. It is only by identifying the primary analogates and discerning one's position relative to them that religious language can be disciplined to play a properly analogous role.<sup>5</sup>

\*\*\*

Let us then displace ourselves, as we displace our interlocutors a bit, in space as well as time. The scene could be a villa in the Kingdom of Naples, made available to Brother Thomas for this encounter with the venerable Rabbi Moses, already a legend in his time among the Jews living in the Italian peninsula. He had only reluctantly agreed to this meeting, since his multiple duties in Cairo could not really allow it. But the lengths to which this friar had gone to assure his passage and conduct, as well as to arrange a neutral meeting place, had so touched Rabbi Moses that he agreed — provided he could remain incognito and so not also be pressed into service among the Jewish community in Rome. For he had no stomach for the role of itinerant counselor; there was enough of that at home and the rest was better dispatched by letter. In this Friar Thomas readily acquiesced; he had no reason to do otherwise. Nor could he stifle the intelligence network. Probably the Rabbi's visit was already known.

As the Friar and the Rabbi gathered for afternoon tea, each with a trusted interpreter, there was that quality of recognition between the two that can overcome countless public barriers to discourse. They had, of course, already read something of what the other had written. In fact it was Aquinas' prior perusal of the *Guide for the Perplexed* which had sparked the exchange that led to this meeting. Their host, after carefully prepared amenities, invited Rabbi Moses (as the elder) to speak first.

**Maimonides:** Friar Thomas, you know how grateful I am to you and to our host for this visit. If I dispense with the introductions customary to the people among whom I live, it is because we meet rather in the presence of the Holy One, blessed

---

4. *Towards a World Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1980). Cf. my review of his three latest books in *Journal of Religion* 62 (1982).

5. This is the thesis of my *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), adopted by David Tracy, *Analogical Imagination*, ch. 10.

be He, to whom many words are noxious. I have prayed enroute for our exchange, as I trust you have as well, so let us allow that presence to guide our words.

I have had your latest manuscript read to me by one of our community well versed in Latin — the first thirteen questions, I am told, of a treatise for those undertaking what you Christians have developed into an ordered study of God and God's ways with us creatures. I admire the orderly progression of topics; its composition reminds me much more of the way the Muslim people among whom I live expound their *sharia* ("Law," you would call it, I believe) than the way their philosophers proceed.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is their philosophers whom I must keep foremost in mind, since their arguments have proved so fascinating to the young inquiring minds in the Jewish community. Joseph and his friends, for whom the *Guide* was intended — not people like you, Friar Thomas — have little capacity for discriminating among the clever arguments of the Muslim philosophers, and so I had to do what I could to help them.

**Aquinas:** I am happy you did, Rabbi Moses, for your exposition of those thinkers proved immensely helpful to me as well. Indeed, I need to know what these Arabic philosophers are saying. I often marvel at their dialectical skills, yet I am kept from appreciating them by my ignorance of their language. So you — and your translator — have done us all an immense service.

But tell me, is there a way you might counter my criticism of your views on the attributes of God? I found them so easily refutable that I suspect your position must have disappointed Joseph as well. You left the young man no where to go. If anything we want to say about God can only be taken "by way of perfect homonymity" (*Guide* I:56), that is, sheer equivocation, what sense have the psalms we each pray?<sup>7</sup> That, as you know, was what continued to press me to find a way: "When a man speaks of the 'living God' he does not simply want to say that God is the cause of our life, or that he differs from a lifeless body" (*Summa* I:13:2). We want to address God, and speak of the One we address.

**Maimonides:** And I was both impressed and baffled trying to follow the path you have blazed. For your approach respects so many of the demands that I have

---

6. Cf. George Makdisi, "Scholastic Method in Medieval Education: An Inquiry into Its Origins in Law and Theology," *Speculum* 49 (1974) 640–61.

7. References to *Guide for the Perplexed* will be given by book and chapter; references to *Summa Theologica* by a simplified scheme: I:3:4:2 = Part I, Question 3, Article 4, reply to objection 2. I employ the English text from the Eyre and Spottiswoode/McGraw-Hill edition: *Knowing and Naming God*, Volume III (1964), by reason of the excellent translation by Herbert McCabe, which brings into clear relief Aquinas' reliance on grammatical inquiries.

placed on a responsible treatment of discourse about the Holy One, but somehow manages to arrive at a different place. I am still not sure how you do it. I was fully expecting you to explain how we can say many things about God by one of those tricks (Excuse me!) which we have found Christians employing to make the one to be three (*Guide* I:50). But your uncompromising insistence on the unity of God encouraged me to read on. No one who has dealt with those critical features of God's perfection, eternity and presence among us (*Guide* I:11), would then be able to have recourse to "modes" within divinity.<sup>8</sup>

So I became quite fascinated with your development, and found myself agreeing wholeheartedly with your general characterization of what we can know, both by our intelligence (*Summa* I:12:12) and by what you call "grace" (I:12:13). That "we know about His relation to creatures — that He is the cause of them all; about the difference between Him and them — that nothing created is in Him; and that His lack of such things is not a deficiency in Him but due to His transcendence" (I:12:12), I heartily support. I also concur that we can appreciate all this though our intellect, which is "the form and likeness of the Almighty" (*Guide* I:1). This is especially so when we "hold the conviction that God is One" (I:50).

It was, however, the second mode of knowing — "through grace," as you put it — which fascinated me. For you insist that the Holy One "strengthens the intellectual light," actively perfecting the divine form and likeness, if you will; while "at the same time prophetic visions provide us with God-given images which are better suited to express divine things than those we receive naturally from the sensible world" (I.12.13).

The wise certainly receive more of that "emanation sent forth by the Divine Being through the medium of the Active Intellect" (*Guide* II:36), though in their case "the influence of the (Active) Intellect reaches only the logical and not the imaginative faculty" (II:37), whereas in prophets the imaginative faculty is influenced as well. Yes. But I lay greater stress than you on the conditions required on our part to receive this "divine influence" (II:37). Thus I would not propose it as a "grace." Of course, it is impossible to assure that we possess the requisite attunement of all the faculties (II:36), and God could keep us from using the faculties with which we have been endowed and which we have developed, although "to my opinion, this fact is as exceptional as any miracle, and acts in the same way"

---

8. I have underscored the central role played by questions 3–11 in the *Summa in Aquinas: God and Action*. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), ch. 2. Harry A. Wolfson shows the role which "modes" played in the Arabic discussion of God's attributes, in *Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976) 147–205.

(II:32). So I find myself acting out the role in which you discovered me: somewhere between the philosophers who hold prophecy to be a necessary effect of the emanations from Intellect, and you who speak of “grace.”<sup>9</sup>

To be sure, I cannot accept your example of the sort of thing Christians hold the Holy One has revealed: “as for instance that he is both three and one.” But I can certainly concur with the status you accord to our prophetic books: “although in this life revelation does not tell us what God is, and thus joins us to him as to an unknown, nevertheless it helps us to know him better in that we are shown more and greater works of his and are taught certain things about him that we could never have known through natural reasons” (I:12:13:1). That is clearly the role the Torah plays in Jewish lives, and the one to whom it was revealed, and through whom it comes to us, certainly exemplifies “grace” for us. I have insisted on this point in a book you have not yet seen, commenting on a verse you know: “God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man to his friend” (Ex. 33:11).<sup>10</sup> And I have never tired of reminding those who accept Moses’ teaching as their guide, that it “joins us to [the Holy One] and to as unknown.” That is where we concur most strikingly and what strikes me most about our concurrence. For the philosophers whom I ordinarily consult pretend to know so much about the One, while their opposite numbers, the Mutakallemim, annoy me with their partisan arguments. But let us examine where we disagree, for that part simply baffles me.

**Aquinas:** We already disagree, but let it pass for the moment. I meant what I said when I presented revelation as a grace: a gracious act of God calling *every* person to be what Moses was: God’s friend. For that is precisely what is offered us in Christ. I mention this, however, not to argue the point so much as to remind myself how startling an offer it is. We Christians also venerate Moses, as Gregory of Nyssa’s treatise shows, but not so single-mindedly as you, since we believe Jesus to be the prophet whom he promised “your God will raise up..., a prophet like myself, from among you” (Deut. 18:15).<sup>11</sup> And it was that faith which led us inevitably to affirming God to be “three and one.” But since you have not seen my treatment of that (I have just completed it), I can only assure you that nothing I say there contradicts or compromises the treatment of God’s oneness which encouraged you to read on.

---

9. For the views of Muslim *falasifa* on prophecy, see Ibrahim Madkour, *La Place d'al Farabi dans école philosophique musulmane* (Paris: Librairie d'Amérique et d'Orient, 1934) 181–209; and Louis Gardet, *La pensée religieuse d'Avicenne* (Paris: Vrin, 1951) 112–21.

10. Cf. Maimonides, *Commentary on Mishnah: Helek*, (Sanhedrin, ch. 10) — in I. Twersky, ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972) 419–20.

11. Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* (New York: Paulist, 1978).

But let me return to our subject. I suspect I know why my treatment may baffle you, much as I find your countless excursions into biblical interpretations often distract me from your argument. For though we share (to a point) the same sacred writings, our communities have expounded them differently over the years. I am not simply referring to different interpretations, like the one about Moses already noted, but rather to different ways of approaching sacred writings to render an interpretation. Our Saint Jerome spoke of consulting your Rabbis on difficult passages. I know others of us have also done that over the years, but so many things have divided Jews and Christians that singular contacts could never bridge the gap.

I suspect that my preoccupation in question thirteen — *de nominibus Dei* — with just that: names, terms, expressions — parts of speech and the various roles they play — must have seemed uncommonly odd to you. Why should one endeavoring to show how we might be able to talk about the Holy One spend his time belaboring how we talk? Put that way, of course, the question answers itself, but I certainly emphasize this far more than you. You distinguish *definitions* from *descriptions* (*Guide* I:52) and note how a straightforward description said of God can be so misleading that the one who uses it “unconsciously loses his belief in God” (I:60). These arguments call attention to the structure of our discourse, reminding us that attribution is normally a sign of composition, since I am called upon to say something *about* something. Yet by simply presuming the standing way in which language reflects the way things are, you overlook that we language users may have some leverage on how we use the language we inherit by closely attending to its structures.

That is what I have learned from those teachers of ours writing in the generation just preceding my own, who were preoccupied with the many languages we find in the scriptures. They developed a speculative study of grammar to account for the different uses to which these biblical writers put the language at their disposal.<sup>12</sup> As a result, we all became more conscious of how we can use the languages we have learned, some politically, others more analytically, and each one quite consciously. So following their example, and gesturing to their work as well, I called attention in the very first article to a very useful distinction between concrete and abstract terms: as in “white” and “whiteness”. Or better, between “wise” and “wisdom.” Concrete terms convey subsisting things and also remind us of their composite character. When we use them of God, as we do when we say that God is just, we will then realize we are speaking out of our experience.

---

12. The classic description of the period is found in M-D. Chenu, *La Théologie au deuxième siècle* (Paris: Vrin, 1957), most of which was translated by J. Taylor in *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968).

For the statement not only stems from our minimal experience of just individuals but even reflects their *manner* of being just: it is something-attributed to them. Here is where your critique derives its force, of course, but there is more to say.

We can also construct sentences with abstract nouns, like “God is justice.” Such terms signify the form alone, and so have the advantage of conveying God’s simplicity. Yet when we speak so, our statements fail to convey subsistence: that is what we mean by calling them *abstract* terms. My proposal, then, is that we remind ourselves how different God is from our experience — as “both simple, like the form, and subsistent, like the concrete thing” — by using both expressions in a complementary fashion. That would alert us to the fact that “neither way of speaking measures up to his way of being, [and that] in this life we do not know Him as He is in Himself” (*Summa* I:13:1:2).<sup>13</sup>

**Maimonides:** *Baruch hashem!* Ingenious! That might well accomplish what I had recourse to negation to secure; an awareness of how our ordinary discourse falsifies the situation if we are not careful. For I realized how logically radical a procedure negating is, and your objections occurred to me as well. But I could see no other way. Yet I am still afraid of the terms themselves: living, knowing, omnipotent, wise — even existing (*Guide* I:57). How can we proceed out of our experience to use them properly of God without so negating that experience that we no longer know that we are saying? Do you not also “necessarily arrive at some negation, without obtaining a true conception of an essential attribute” (I:60)? Doesn’t your treatment, properly understood, so carefully incorporate negations that we do in fact agree, but on my terms — however unsatisfactory they may be? Believe me, I’m not trying to “win” here; I can simply see no other way out.

**Aquinas:** At least you understand the spirit of my treatment, as I felt you would from reading what I have of yours. That is why I wanted so much to meet with you. The attributes you mention are of course the ones considered “essential” to God by your philosophical conversation partners.<sup>14</sup> And they will do; my standard ones are “good”, “wise”, and “living” (*Summa* I:13:2) and the psalms provide us with a yet richer list. The ones I select for proper use are those which you identify yourself “as expressive of the perfection of God, by way of comparison with that we consider as perfections in us” (*Guide* I:53). You freely acknowledge, in

---

13. I deliberately turn Aquinas’ observation about the respective ways in which we can consciously employ different sorts of terms into a *proposal*, so assimilating it to a more modern context of complementary explanatory modes.

14. Cf. Harry A. Wolfson, “Maimonides on Negative Attributes,” in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Religion II* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1973) 195–230. Maimonides uses life, power, wisdom and will.



the promised explanation of this feature of our discourse, that “His essence includes all perfections” (I:59). Yet you expressly eschew (and forbid) “asserting that He has a certain perfection, when we find it to be a perfection in relation to us” (*Ibid*). And what keeps you from licensing such assertions is your appreciation that “perfections are all to some extent acquired properties” while “He does not possess anything superadded to this essence” (*Ibid*).

So the most we can do, as I read you, is to use such terms generically, as it were, to gesture towards God as all-perfect, negating *them* (as we must do in any case [I:56]) and by such negative asseverations come to appreciate that “none but Himself comprehends what He is, and that our knowledge consists in knowing that we are unable truly to comprehend Him” (I:59). Yet here, where we seem most to differ, our strategies all but converge.

For I too want to insist that “in this life we cannot understand the essence of God as he is in himself” (*Summa* I:13:2:3), and have insisted elsewhere that “the mind has made most progress in understanding when it recognizes that God’s essence lies beyond anything that the mind in its state of being-on-the-way can comprehend.”<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, one can do more with perfection-terms than negate them, and here I feel you failed to attend to a decisive feature of these terms. That, by the way, is partly why I countered your position so crudely, remarking that one might just as well negate ‘God is a body’ as ‘God is just’, and by the same token affirm one as the other. I realize, of course, that it is *perfections* which you wish to negate, but negating itself is so wholesale a procedure that it inevitably diverts our attention from the reason we gravitate to perfections when thinking of — or praising — God. Your own insistence that “His essence includes all perfections” (*Guide* I:59) encourages me to explain my next step.

Like the earlier one, this move asks us to attend to the ways we use perfection terms. These ways will also reflect the very reason we have recourse to such terms. For noting that something (and especially someone) is good does not simply remark that they meet a standard, as ascertaining something to be one cubit in stature would do. Assessing something to be good also engages our aspirations, as I noted earlier in trying to establish how we can say that God is good (*Summa* I:5–6). We say it so often, or even presume it, and in fact quite appropriately. For saying God is good is significantly close to a tautology, since we certainly cannot be *commending* God! My attempt to locate a sense for ‘goodness’ prior to any ethical consideration, thereby adding nothing to our in-

---

15. *In Boethio de Trinitate Expositio*, 1.2.1., translation mine.

sistence that God is One, led me to note how the entire family of perfection terms evoke our inbuilt capacity for aspiring. There is a sobering side to that, for (as Socrates is reported to have discovered) one who is really wise will be the first to realize that he is not wise.<sup>16</sup>

This arresting formula, in fact, yields the grammar for any perfection term, as substituting candidates in place of 'wise' will readily show. That realization allowed me to draw once more on my grammatically-minded predecessors and press into use a device they were wont to employ in less exalted regions: distinguishing the thing signified from our mode of signifying. They had normally involved it to forestall quibbles about minor grammatical changes altering the sense of a proposition. But I saw how we could use the same device to remind ourselves of the incredible surplus meaning available to perfection terms, and ingredient to our use of them.<sup>17</sup>

Perfection terms play the role they do in our language *because* they can be parsed as Socrates discovered. As human beings aspiring, beyond our immediate horizons, we need such terms. And while we may be more or less conscious of their penumbra of "surplus meaning" as we employ them, our use of these terms presumes that very semantic structure.

Not that I was able to spell all this out in the *Summa*, of course; beginning students can be so easily distracted. But the essentials are there. For the result is, you see, that "so far as *the* perfections *signified* are concerned the words are used literally of God, and in fact more appropriately than they are used of creatures... But so far as the *way of signifying* these perfections is concerned the words are used inappropriately, for they have a way of signifying that is appropriate to creatures" (*Summa* I:13:3). The reasons they can be used quite literally (*proprie*) of God, of course, is that "these perfections belong primarily to God and only secondarily to others." and that affirmation we share, my friend. But it is your fear that such terms will be "applied to Him in the same sense as they are used in reference to ourselves" (*Guid* I:59 *ad fin*) that keeps you from realizing their evident "surplus meaning."

You, Rabbi Moses, cannot but rely on this transcendent dimension of our discourse when you want to characterize the task to which we aspire: "to obtain a knowledge of a Being that is free from substance, that is most simple, whose existence is absolute and not due to any cause, to whose perfect essence nothing can

---

16. On 'God is good', see my *Aquinas*, *op.cit.*, 27–31; and for an explicit treatment of perfection-terms as reflecting human aspiration, see my *Analogy*, *op.cit.* 215–51.

17. Cf. my *Aquinas*, 9–10.

be superadded, and whose perfection consists... in the absence of all defects” (I:58 *ad fin*). Indeed, it is precisely as you characterize in what that knowledge may consist that I find that our summary formulae nearly match.<sup>18</sup> The one I have come to use, in fact, seems even more austere than yours. Thus we really differ in the strategies we employ to render divine transcendence, and in that I believe we in the West have been better served by our speculative grammarians than you have by your more ontologically inclined Arab-speaking interlocutors.<sup>19</sup> For despite your concern with reconciling religious and philosophical discourse through “the principle, ‘the Torah speaketh in the language of men’,” that principle only makes you insist the more “that the object of all these terms is to describe God as the most perfect being, not as possessing those qualities which are only perfections in relation to created living beings” (I:53). Yet by distinguishing the perfection signified from our way of signifying it, I have been able to use these very perfection terms to assert what we both want to assert regarding the Holy One. And I am able to do that while insisting as strongly as you that the mode of realization of perfection terms is quite other in God. Their mode of realization in God is, in fact, governed by the utterly austere grammar *in divinis* with which you so heartily concurred (*Guide* I:3–11).<sup>20</sup>

, And that fact brings our respective programs even closer, despite the difference in strategies. For I want to (and do) counter the very formal features you want to negate regarding our talk about God. Nonetheless, I can continue to use perfection terms to carry the sense. God is not just as we are just, but God can still be said to be just: precisely so long as we appreciate divine justice not to be an “extraneous thing added to His essence” (I:52 *ad fin*). In this sense, of course, you

---

18. Maimonides: “All we understand is the fact that He exists, that He is a Being to whom none of His Creatures is similar, who has nothing in common with them, who does not include plurality, who is never too feeble to produce other beings, and whose relation to the universe is that of a steersman to a boat...” (I:58 *at fin*). Aquinas: “In this life... we only know [God] from creatures; we think of Him as their source, and then as surpassing them all as lacking anything that is merely creaturely” (I:13:1).

19. David Kolb’s remark that, “Any Aquinas who looks more like Wittgenstein than Avicenna should give us pause,” accurately reflects my growing perception of the difference in *Weltanschauung* between Christian philosophical theologians in the West and their Muslim counterparts — cf. “Language and Metalanguage in Aquinas,” *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981) 428–32.

20. To distinguish questions 3–11 from question 13 was the point of my study, *Aquinas, op. cit* Thomist tradition tended to list God’s simpleness, goodness, limitlessness, unchangeableness, and oneness as attributes along with the ones we find more prominently in the psalms: fidelity, loving kindness, justice, forgiveness (13) — and most philosophical theologians have followed suit. Aquinas in fact separated his treatment; and I found in that separation a useful grammar of divinity, which may also clear up some of the confusions which have led otherwise discriminating people to think one ought adopt a version of “process thought” (cf. especially ch. 5, where I apply these findings to counter such a temptation).

are correct in remarking that we both must “necessarily arrive at some negation,” and in your terms also justified in complaining that *we* do so “without obtaining a true conception of an essential attribute” (I:60). But you are misled in thereby believing that my strategy, at least, comes to the same issue as yours. (I realize, of course, that you were not familiar with our western treatments when you delivered your opinion; but allow me to fix *our* differences as carefully as I can, without presuming to include your interlocutors.) As logicians rightly insist, it makes an immense difference just *where* one puts the negation sign; and I would say, *when*, as well. In the measure that your wholesale use of negation leads you to assert that “the terms Wisdom, Power, Will, and Life [as well as Existence] are applied to God and to other beings by way of perfect homonymy, admitting of no comparison whatever” (*Guide* I:56), I submit that you could not have made the characterizing statements you have. And nothing in your text suggests we can take these as metastatements. By using our grammarians’ strategy, on the other hand, I have been able to appeal to a more discriminating use of negation. A use, in fact, with which we are familiar in having recourse to the same genre of terms to assess different dimensions of our own experience or as a lever to criticize our own conceptions.<sup>21</sup>

Every difference between us, I believe, turns on our respective views regarding similarity — on what may count as a “true conception” of a relevant perfection. And that is heartening, really! Our differences thus can be explained by our diverse philosophical climates rather than our religious differences, which allows our discussion to continue. I say “heartening” because it is this feature of our shared discourse that keeps me engaged in philosophical argument as intensely as I am: it can often open up areas we might otherwise be prevented from helping one another to explore. In fact, Rabbi Moses, I may be sanguine in presuming it, but I suspect that my account of the devices I have adapted from our grammarians may already have suggested how you might amend your explicit treatment of *similarity* (I:56). That telling chapter purports to offer “decisive proof that there is, in no way or sense, anything common to the attributes predicated of God, and those used in reference to ourselves, [so that] they have only the same names, and nothing else is common to them.” But the chapter can conclude in that way only because your interlocutors, as you read them, are undecided whether the attributes in question share a common definition when used of us and of God, whereas they “should know that these attributes, when applied to God, have not the same meaning as when applied to us.” (*Ibid*).

---

21. Cf. *Analogy and Philosophy Language*, pp. 248–51, where I try to show how connatural such a use is. It is rather like Aristotle’s genial use of ‘proportion’ in elucidating *justice*. For proportional discrimination is endemic to our life with others, and so we are asked only to extend a skill which we are reminded we possess. And ‘proportion’, after all, translates ‘analogy’ into latinate languages.

I hope that the distinction I employed to highlight the peculiar structure of perfection terms has helped you to see how misleading talk of “same meaning,” and even of “definition” can be in regard to them. For any satisfactory definition I can give of such terms will include expressions of a similar structure; so the very search for a definition to clarify even our use of these terms, therefore, would show how your notion of similarity must be expanded.<sup>22</sup> (I suspect we each would profit from Plato’s reported effort to do that with ‘justice’ in one of his lost dialogues.)<sup>23</sup> Aristotle offers a way, you know, between synonymy and homonymy. But from what I have seen and heard of your customary sources, they never managed to map this route very well. They even differed among themselves, I believe, in naming this middle way. As a result you cannot see that it would help at all to think of perfections as “amphibolous terms,” and from the way you characterize them I can hardly blame you.<sup>24</sup> But I have gone on long enough. I trust you will forgive my lapsing into exposition here. I felt there were some developments, linguistic ones especially, which you simply had not encountered.

**Maimonides:** And in that you are certainly correct, Friar Thomas. I cannot rightly assess their import, but I can see that we shared the same concerns about how to speak properly of the Holy One — and that heartens me. I would certainly have preferred a more subtle way of handling negation, and I am pleased to see that you utilize it as well. Moreover, you are right that I do in fact use such terms of God, and I must. So let me ponder your way as you expound it. I suspect I came close to it in my presentation of negation in practice (*Guide* I:59). What I described there sounds very like the procedure you prescribe — of denying our manner of signifying as we affirm the perfection signified. I did not insist on the latter step, of course, as I would not have been able so to describe the steps. But I have insisted throughout that it is precisely perfection terms which we must negate. I have, therefore, implicitly affirmed their propriety! That is why I found your criticism somewhat wide of the mark. Nonetheless, it must be said that I focused more on negating these expressions than in explaining why these are the very ones we should negate.

---

22. That any definition of an analogous term will include analogous expressions argues to their irreducibility. Cf. *Analogy*, 9–20.

23. Medievals knew the *Laws* but not the *Republic*. Cf. my “What the Dialogues Show about Inquiry,” *Philosophical Forum* 3 (1972) 104–25, for a reading of the *Republic* in these terms.

24. Cf. Harry A. Wolfson, “Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy, and Maimonides” in *Studies in History and Philosophy of Religion I* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 455–77. Friedländer obscures the discussion here (1.56) by the opaque rendering, “hybrid terms,” while Pines employs the categorial expression current in Maimonides’ time of “amphibolous terms.”

My remaining difficulties are two. I feel you have met the first, but the second lingers as a fear. To the first: I have insisted throughout “that we comprehend only the fact that [God] exists, not his essence” (I:58).<sup>25</sup> From this I concluded “that He has no positive attribute whatever,” yet that “the negative attributes... are those which are necessary to direct the mind to the truths which we must believe concerning God” (*Ibid*). The way you have parsed the behavior of perfection terms, I can see how one can even better use them — suitably negated, from within — to direct the mind and to avoid implying that we know more than we do. I find your strategy more subtle, and perhaps more effective, than simple negation. For the continued use of the same terms, employed in such a way as to show their inner differentiability, would also effectively affirm what we believe about God: that “His essence includes all perfections” (I:59).

I would appreciate an illustration of how this process might be carried out, as I tried to do with simple negating (*Ibid*), because I fear that your proposal may in fact be too subtle and so in the end less effective than mine. (You will excuse me if I speak as a rabbi here; for you too are a teacher and will understand my preoccupations. In fact, I can only marvel at your clarity in teaching!) You remember how my final argument against using positive attributes was of this sort: that the very construction used (as you might put it) would lead one to “[believe] in the reality of the attributes [and so] to say that God is one subject of which several things are predicated...”. Since this belief, however qualified, “would ultimately lead us to associate other things with God, and not to believe that He is One,... [one] who affirms attributes of God... [would] unconsciously lose his belief in God” (I:60). In short, those licensed by your question 13 so to talk about God will before long lose sight of the elegant demonstration of God’s ineffable simplicity and oneness in questions 3 through 11. The pressure to think we know something will be as strong as ever, and the disarmingly positive appearance of perfection terms too alluring to resist. And so, in spite of yourself, you will have contributed to gross misunderstanding — and even, dare I say it, to idolatry — by offering to one and all an analysis too subtle for many to sustain.<sup>26</sup> That’s my nagging fear.

**Aquinas:** And you may well prove accurate. I can only hope that religious thinkers would continually be constrained “by the facts themselves” (as Aristotle

---

25. In an ironic article originally published in *Judaica* 2 (1955) 65–83, K. Harasta notes that Aquinas realized that *das* must imply some sort of “*was*-erkenntnis”: “Die Bedeutung Maimons für Thomas von Aquin,” in Jacob I. Dienstag, ed., *Studies in Maimonides and St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Ktav, 1975) 206–78.

26. That such proved to be the fate of both varieties of scholasticism — medieval and eighteenth century (Protestant) — as well as a constant temptation of theological tractates *de Deo*, can hardly be countered.

was wont to say) of divine transcendence; and if not, that God will raise up another prophet like yourself — if I may dare to put it so, Rabbi Moses! But let me describe a bit of the process of “negating from within,” as you put it, recapitulating some things already said, and anticipating how a teacher might offset your fears. The strategy involves reminding ourselves how it is that we can put certain expressions to use, so *intending* them to *signify* as we see they should in this domain (*Summa* I:13:5). For when we realize that “the different and complex concepts that we have in mind correspond to something altogether simple,” then we will only expect them to “enable us imperfectly to understand [it]” (I:13:4).

These connected activities of using expressions to “intend to signify” what we realize they can only enable us “imperfectly to understand” do offer the way, I believe, to keeping us intellectually faithful to the Holy One, about whom we presume to be speaking. Allow me to illustrate how they can be practiced. I have already mentioned how one might keep reminding oneself how misleading is the very form of our statements, by complementing each concrete positive affirmation with an abstract one: “God is just/God is justice”. And in doing so, one could explicitly attend to a hidden feature that I did not need to recall to you: that the structure of the predicate is thereby altered... “is just” calls for a predicative “is”, while “... is justice” demands the “is” of identity. So by a simple maneuver we have displayed how the ordinary assertive form proves inadequate here.

More positively, we can recall the conditions for a responsible use of Aristotle’s “middle way,” noting that we may only claim to be employing terms like “wide” in various senses that are analogous one to another when we can speak “in accordance with a certain order [among] them” (*Summa* I.13.5). So when we leap from using the term variously of creatures to using it of God, we must pay particular attention to the order between the two domains of creatures and creator. And since “we cannot speak at all except in the language we use of creatures,... whatever is said both of God and of creatures is said in virtue of the order that creatures have to God as to their source and cause in which all the perfections of things pre-exist transcendently” (*Ibid.*). Now how ought we translate that stiff requirement into our acts of asserting, so that we properly intend to signify what we realize we can only imperfectly understand? For the order between a transcendent cause and its effects explicitly defies all our categorical schemes.

It is of course this unbridgeable gap which led you (and others) to insist that we can at best speak of divine actions or of the ways of God relating to creatures (*Guide* I:53).<sup>27</sup> I resisted that by insisting that this “is not what people want to say

---

27. Seymour Feldman, “A Scholastic Misunderstanding of Maimonides’ Doctrine of Divine Attributes,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 19 (1968) 23–39; reprinted in Dienstag, *Studies*, 58–74; and Harry A Wolfson, “Avicenna, Algazali, and Averroes on Divine Attributes,” in *Studies* I, 143–69.

when they talk about God” (*Summa* I.13.2). Yet if I am right, how can we be assured that we properly intend to mean what we want to say? By devising ways, I suggest, of reminding ourselves that we will always be speaking out of “*a way of signifying* that is appropriate to creatures,” yet intending to use such expressions (“wise” and the rest) “primarily of God and derivatively of creatures, for *what the word means* — the perfection it signifies — flows from God to the creature” (I.13.6).

Among the ways which serve as powerful reminders to me, Rabbi, is the daily practice of praying the psalms. That recurring pattern makes me aware how different addressing God is from talking about divinity. I have often entertained the fears you expressed about my own work, and I have no doubt they would probably be realized were this other dimension absent from my life. My friends who are better acquainted with Jewish communities in our midst have told me how powerful an influence is the regular observance of *shabbat*. Prayer recalls us to a God who “possesses these perfections transcendently” (*Summa* I.13.6) by also reminding us how far beyond our grasp such possession lies. Should we cut ourselves off from practice, then I suspect there is little we could *say* to assure we intend to mean what surpasses our understanding.

**Maimonides:** That is enough of an illustration for this teacher, Friar Thomas, for it returns our discussion to the source of our desire to meet one another and to converse: the clear realization that our individual work of clarification unfolds in a living context. You have your community, and I mine. Mine calls me now, as it has each day for many years. And I dare not escape, lest the very condition for speaking appropriately of the Holy One be denied me. I go to them now the richer for our conversation — and may the blessing of that Holy One be on us all.

*Immanuel* 16 (Summer 1983)