Knowledge and Theological Predication: Lessons from the

Medieval Islamic Tradition

Billy Dunaway

Jon McGinnis

University of Missouri—St. Louis

Abstract:

This paper explores several discussions of theological predication from the medieval Islamicate world, in order to outline ways in which these discussions can inform and redirect similar, more recent debates. One issue central to these debates among analytical philosophers of religion is whether predications are made of God and creatures univocally or analogically. The medieval Muslim theologian al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111) and the Jewish philosopher and theologian Moses Maimonides (1135–1204) addressed variants of this and other related issues and raised claims about the grammar and epistemology of divine predications which, we argue, would enrich the contemporary discussions.

1. Predication, Knowledge, and Skepticism

What are the constraints on an account of non-univocal divine predicates? Under what conditions can we say that a view, according to which what is predicated of God does not mean the same as what is predicated of creatures, is satisfactory? Non-univocal predication is one of the perennial issues in philosophy of religion. Motivations for thinking that divine predictions must be non-univocal have an impressive historical pedigree and the issue still exercises contemporary philosophers and theologians.[1] In this paper, we look at the constraints on non-univocal divine

predication and propose that an account should not only allow that such predicates can be *truly* predicated of God, but also must make *knowledge* of the relevant predications possible. We do so by drawing upon certain insights from historical predecessors within the medieval Islamicate tradition.

Our question is: what are some of the constraints on an account of non-univocal divine predication? The *motivations* for thinking that divine predication must be non-univocal are familiar. Frequently they start from claims about the *metaphysics* of God: divine simplicity, for example, is one of the most obvious. While not all theists ascribe to a doctrine of divine simplicity, it certainly is a feature of classical theism.[2] Consequently, to the extent one is committed to divine simplicity, it provides a drive away from a univocal account of divine predications. There are several reasons that the metaphysics of simplicity conflicts with a reading on which, for example, the predicate 'has power' is univocal with ordinary uses when predicated of God. Consider the sentence, 'Sally has power.' Here the power that is predicated of Sally is distinct from Sally; she is not identical with power, or anything else that is predicated of her. (If we think of power as what is called in contemporary parlance a 'property', the property is something that Sally instantiates but is not identical to her, most obviously because Sally could exist without instantiating the property.) Thus, unlike when one says, 'Sally has power' and the power is distinct from Sally, when one says, 'God has power', that power is identical with God, if God is simple.

Another reason that the metaphysics of simplicity conflicts with a reading on which 'has power' is univocal with ordinary uses concern the "mode of signification" of a proposition with subject-

predicate form.[3] Some hold that our mode of signifying is essentially tied to our mode of understanding, which is essentially characterized by our ability to compose a subject and predicate into a meaningful proposition. Thus, if the subject and predicate are not distinct, it is not clear how they are composed so as to form a meaningful proposition that we can understand. Consequently, if God is absolutely simple, application of ordinary predicates seemingly fail to represent God truly.

There are other metaphysical reasons to reject univocal predication: since God is eternal and infinite, any predicates that presuppose or imply that the subject is not eternal or infinite cannot be univocally applied to God.[4] Since these metaphysical considerations have been discussed in detail elsewhere, we need not rehash them here. Instead we highlight only a few general patterns that serve to frame our main discussion. First, these arguments concern primarily what can be *truly* predicated of God. Second, they rely on a metaphysical claim about the divine nature: for example, that God is simple or eternal, etc. They then aim to show that if this metaphysical claim is true, then univocal predications of distinct attributes to God are not true. Finally, these arguments simply *motivate* a non-univocal view of divine predications, by showing that a univocal view is unsatisfactory. Nothing in these arguments alone constitutes a positive account of *how* non-univocal predicates are true of God.

When turning to a positive account, considerations of truth and falsity are one, but not the only, constraint. In addition to showing how a non-univocal account of divine predication does better than the univocal account in yielding *true* predications, there is also the challenge of *theological skepticism*. This is the view that we cannot know anything about God. Someone who endorses

theological skepticism is not committed to denying that some claims about God are true: the theological skeptic does not necessarily deny that God exists, for instance. Rather the hallmark of skepticism is that, even if true, this and other theological claims cannot be *known*.

A non-univocal view of theological predication should not only entail that some divine predications are true; it should be consistent with the claim that they also can be known, on pain of entailing theological skepticism. In addition to avoiding the metaphysical pitfalls of univocal accounts of divine predication, additional epistemological constraints are natural.

The threat of theological skepticism enters into the Latin debate fairly late, when Duns Scotus criticized an analogical theory inspired by Aquinas (though his immediate target was Henry of Ghent).[5] Clarifying Scotus' assumptions will help frame our subsequent discussion. One assumption is that we have knowledge of God *naturally*: that is, we know God on the basis of inferences from knowledge concerning the created world.[6] A second assumption concerns a necessary condition on knowledge. Scotus makes the usual assumption that knowledge must be held on the basis of a *demonstration* which, at the very least, requires that what is known is the conclusion of a valid argument with known premises.

These two assumptions together make trouble for any non-univocal view of divine predications. If we have knowledge of divine predications, there is a proof on the basis of which these predications are known. If we can have the knowledge naturally, then at least one of these premises, by purely natural means, must be known of something existing in nature. So, what is

known naturally must be available to serve as a premise in a valid argument with a divine predication as its conclusion.[7]

But non-univocal predicates, including analogical divine predicates, function for the purposes of determining validity and invalidity as *equivocal terms*. If one premise in the purported demonstration contains a predication of a perfection to a creature, its occurrence does not mean the same thing as the divine predication in the conclusion. Thus, on a non-univocal view of divine predications, any purported proof of God's possession of a divine perfection equivocates. No demonstration is available and, consequently, Scotus' argument concludes, we cannot have any (natural) knowledge of God.[8]

Many candidate views of non-univocal divine predicates were proposed and developed in the medieval Islamicate world. While these will be familiar in their own right to many, we focus on two: the views of Abū Ḥāmid Al-Ghazālī (c. 1058–1111) and Moses ben Maimon, or more commonly, Maimonides (1135–1204). Both develop views of theological predication that are sensitive not only to the metaphysical concerns that motivate non-univocal views, but also to epistemological considerations.

We additionally show that the Islamic tradition contributes further epistemological constraints on a non-univocal theory of divine predication. While both al-Ghazālī and Maimonides are cognizant of epistemological constraints on the views they develop, these are not limited to the requirement that divine predications be demonstrable from naturally known premises. Instead

these discussions suggest additional ways in which epistemological claims can interact with metaphysical considerations in a discussion of divine predication.

We begin by sketching these points in the context of discussions drawn from al-Ghazālī and Maimonides (Section 2). These discussions are interesting in their own right, but additionally contribute to contemporary discussions of accounts of theological predication. We highlight some of these contributions (Section 3) focusing on some points where contemporary discussions would benefit from taking into account all options, including those represented in the Islamic tradition.

2. Rejecting Univocity: Alternatives from the Islamic Tradition

2.1: al-Ghazālī on the divine names

Within medieval Islam, numerous approaches were taken toward divine predications. These approaches include on one extreme a type of fideism, namely that God has attributes (*ṣifāt*), that is, things that can be truly predicated of God, and those attributes can be known only on the basis of scripture, where reason simply must not pry into the why and what. On the other extreme is the view that divine predications can be known through our natural faculties, and in fact a high grade of knowledge can be had, on the basis of a demonstration from naturally known premises. In between these extremes, there were also a range of intermediate positions. Ghazālī develops

one of these intermediate positions and in doing so treats the metaphysics of simplicity, the logical and grammatical structure of predication, and a host of epistemological issues, including skepticism.

To contextualize Ghazālī's project, he is responding to earlier Muslim theologians, like the Muʿtazilī, and philosophers like Avicenna. Both groups argued that strictly speaking it is false, if not blasphemous, to predicate multiple, different attributes of the divine essence (*dhāt*). Both groups, albeit applying different arguments, ultimately held this belief because otherwise it would violate God's simplicity. For if we say, 'God has power,' there is both the entity (*dhāt*) that possesses the attribute and the attribute (power) that is possessed, and possessor, and possessed are distinct. Still there are religious and other reasons for wanting to say that such claims as 'God has power' and the like apply truthfully to God. Both the theologians and philosophers developed their own theories to make sense of these religious claim. Here we consider only Avicenna's appeal to a modal ontology to justify religious claims about God.

Avicenna's strategy for making sense of theological predications identifies God with the necessary existent through itself (*wājib al-wujūd bi-dhātihi*), which on independent grounds Avicenna believes can be demonstrated to be absolutely simple and unique.[9] Importantly, Avicenna does not think of necessary existence as something additional to God's essence. Indeed, in places, Avicenna denies that God even has an essence so as to avoid such a confusion; rather, Avicenna's God is that very one (*dhāt*) that is identical with the Necessary Existent in itself.[10]

For Avicenna, all the other traditional attributes, like having knowledge, will, life, and power, are no different from necessary existence in itself, once unpacked, for they refer to either negations (sg. *salb*) or relations (sg. *iḍāfa*) involving God as Necessary Existent. Thus, for example, God is immaterial because matter requires form to exist and the Necessary Existent is not composite; however, to exist immaterially just is, for Avicenna, to be an intellect and so a knower.[11] Or again, the Necessary Existent in itself is said to have causal power because all possible existents when they actually exist are related to the Necessary Existent as their cause.[12] Similar accounts are given for the other attributes.

Ghazālī's own project, which again is a response to both the Muʿtazilī and Avicenna, is twofold: first, show that predicating different attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God is not as problematic as these two groups suggest, and second, show that any attempt to reduce talk about God to a single attribute yields an impoverished account of theological knowledge.[13] Toward explaining why divine predications need not be problematic, he begins by looking at the grammar of such predications as:

God has knowledge

God has power, etc.

In all of these cases, there is some substantive, God, which is a particular, and some property or attribute, which is said of God, and which is an abstract or universal notion in some way. It is the fact that particulars are distinct from universals that gives rise to the appearance of complexity,

suggests Ghazālī, for certainly a particular cannot be identical with a universal on pain of contradiction. Call these cases of predication, "simple attribute predications."

In response, Ghazālī observes that all simple attribute predications can be paraphrased, at least in Arabic, so as to replace the abstract, universal attribute with a particular. Thus:

> 'God has knowledge' becomes 'God (is a)[14] knower' (*al-dhāt 'ālima*, literally, 'That very one, knower')
>
> 'God has power' becomes 'God (is a) powerer' (*huwa qādir*, literally 'He, powerer')

In this form of predication, the alleged complexity does not arise, at least not immediately, for there is an identity relation between the subject and predicate. That is because the -er ending in English makes some predicates particulars or substantives, which in both English and Arabic can serve as the subject of a proposition.[15] Unlike the abstract noun 'knowledge', which can also serve both as a predicate ('God has knowledge') and a subject ('knowledge is good to have'), the substantive 'knower' refers to a particular, concrete thing who knows. We call the use of particular substantives in predicate position "substantive predication".

For Ghazālī, the grammar of substantive predication primarily and correctly conveys the metaphysical reality about the deity, unlike the surface grammar of simple attribute predications, which, given divine simplicity, are literally false.

One might complain that while substantive predicates like 'knower' and 'willer' can pick out

particular knowers and willers, they still can be predicated of many as in 'Sally is a knower,'

'Peter is a knower,' etc. Thus, these predicates remain universal and the original problem

remains. While Ghazālī does not directly address this objection in a general way, he does

consider specific instances of the objection when considering particular attributes that are said of

God, like power, knowledge, will, life, hearing, seeing, and speech.[16] Within these specific

contexts, he suggests that when these attributes are said of God, they are done so in an infinite,

eternal, and perfect way, which is unique to God, whereas they are said of creatures in a finite

and temporally limited way. Consequently, the substantive predication, 'God (is a) knower'

properly should be understood to convey that God is the unique and only infinite, eternal

knower. When 'knower' is said of anything other than God, it is said by reference or relative to

the divine infinite knowledge, for as predicated of creatures this attribute indicates some finite or

limited knowledge when compared with complete and perfect knowledge. In predications to

creatures, the substantive predicate 'knower' can indicate more than one individual, because

multiple finite creatures can share in some limited degree of the divine infinite knowledge.

Hence, in these predications the substantives are in a way universal, but are not universal when

properly used in reference to God.

Here Ghazālī draws upon a theory of *tashkīk*, which means 'ambiguous' or 'causing ambiguity'.

The idea can probably be traced back to Aristotle's account of *pros hen* equivocation, but

certainly to Avicenna who says of it:

Tashkīk expresses a single concept, but the things that that concept includes differ with respect to it in priority and posteriority--like "existence," since [existence] belongs to substance primarily and to the accidents secondarily.[17]

For Ghazālī, the substantive predicates refer to God in a primary way, for God's existence, knowledge, will, life, etc. are always prior to those simple attributes as they are found in creatures. That priority is precisely because God again infinitely and eternally exists as a knower, willer, etc., while the corresponding attributes are found in creatures in a finite and temporally limited way.[18]

The above provides a sketch of the first part of Ghazālī's project, namely, to show that the metaphysical reality is best reflected by substantive predications, not simple attribute predications. This part of his project is squarely within metaphysical theorizing about divine predications--and in particular, theorizing about what it takes for these predications to be true, identifying their truth as consisting in identification of God with a substantive.

The second part of his project brings in epistemological constraints. It maintains that divine attribution cannot refer to some single feature, like necessary existence through itself, as Avicenna claimed. Ghazālī begins with a bit of natural knowledge, namely, substantive predications like Necessary Existent, knower, willer all have different meanings or senses (*ma'ānin*). To say that all the divine predications just mean the same thing, such as Avicenna's 'necessary existent in itself' is to fly in the face of a bit of common sense.

Worse than that, Ghazālī continues, Avicenna's conception of divine simplicity renders all knowledge of God empty or tautological. To say, 'God (is) God' or 'God (is) that very thing (*dhāt*)' tells us nothing about God. In contrast, 'God (is) the Necessary Existent through itself' tells us something *more* or *additional* (*zāʾid*) about God, and to say, 'God (is a) knower' says something more again than 'God (is) the Necessary Existent.' If all the divine predications have the same meaning, then 'God (is) the Necessary Existent' and 'God (is a) knower,' etc., all just mean 'God (is) God.' They all become different ways of stating a tautological truism. The threat is not theological skepticism per se, since strictly speaking one can know something. In fact, the problem appears to be on the opposite end of the epistemological spectrum. Once we have a trivial bit of theological knowledge (expressed by 'God (is) God'), we thereby know *everything* that there is to be known. Instead of charging his opponents with theological skepticism, Ghazālī charges them with endorsing *theological omniscience*.

Certainly, 'Necessary Existent,' 'knower,' 'willer' and the other divine predicates might all refer to the same entity (*dhāt*) just as 'morning star' and 'evening star' refer to the same entity, Venus. But, and here Ghazālī insists, the divine predications do not refer to the same description (*waṣf*),[19] whether Necessary Existent or the like. 'Morning star' means something different from 'evening star' just as 'knower' means something different from 'Necessary Existent.' We learn something new when we learn that God's self is the Necessary Existent and again something new and different when we learn God is a knower or God is a willer.

Ghazālī again insists that while the idea of God's self and the divine substantive predicates are all different, none of them is "other than" (*ghayr*) God. He gives the example of Zayd's hand. Is

the hand other than Zayd? Certainly, the hand is not Zayd's very self but neither is it *other than* Zayd. Similarly, the divine substantive predicates are not God's self but neither are they *other than* God. They are some (*ba'd*) of what God is but not the whole (*kull*) of what God is.

When an imaginary objector presses how this might be, Ghazālī responds not with a metaphysical argument, but with an epistemological claim. He says that it is enough to show that there is a difference in the divine substantive predications and to explain away the negative implications of that view without explaining how there is no multiplicity in God. One has a source of knowledge that the metaphysical facts must work out this way, since these claims are affirmed by a reliable source: holy scripture, which says that God is a knower, willer, hearer, etc. In short, for Ghazālī we have reliable knowledge *that* these predications of God are true, even though we do not know the metaphysical *why* and *how* of that fact. Seeking a complete metaphysical account of how it is that the non-univocal predicates apply to God is beyond our epistemic powers. That a finite mind cannot fully comprehend and grasp all of God, should be of no surprise since, as al-Ghazālī concludes, "the object of our reflection is the eternal attributes, which transcend the understanding of mankind".[20]

2.2 Maimonides on negative attributions and proof

While Maimonides is well known for his negative theology, it might be less known that chapters 50–60 of his *Guide for the Perplexed* reads as if they were a direct attack on Ghazālī's theory of divine attributes. Recall that Ghazālī had a twofold project: the metaphysical project, which

shows how substantive predications can paraphrase simple attribute predications so as to minimize the apparent challenge presented to divine simplicity; and the epistemological project, which argues that there must be differences among the senses or meaning of divine predications, since our knowledge is not tautological. Maimonides addressed both aspects of Ghazālī's project, drawing upon Avicennan resources but modifying them significantly to his own ends.

Let us begin with Maimonides's critique of Ghazālī's paraphrase strategy. The issue Ghazālī addressed is the problem that simple attribute predication creates for divine simplicity. If God has some attribute, like knowledge, then there is the divine self, which is the subject of that knowledge, and the knowledge, which is something different from the divine self. God would be a composite of his self and the attribute. Ghazālī suggested a way to paraphrase away simple attribute predications, as substantive predications. Maimonides responds by showing that positive attributions to God cannot be true, regardless of whether they are interpreted as simple attribute predications or substantive predications. Maimonides's strategy is to identify the general kinds of attributes, and then argue that no kind can be attributed to the divine self itself without leading to theologically false, even blasphemous, claims about God.

Maimonides lists five general kinds of attributes: (1) essential definitions consisting of genus and difference, e.g., 'Human is a rational animal'; (2) genus or difference taken individually, e.g., 'Human is rational'; (3) the various accidents, e.g., 'some humans are knowers' and 'some humans are weak,' etc.; (4) (simple) relations (*nisba*) and (comparative) relations (*iḍāfa*), e.g., 'Zayd is the father of ʿAmr' and 'Zayd knows more than ʿAmr '; and finally (5) actions, e.g. 'Zayd built the house.' Of these five kinds of predicates, Maimonides allows only the last kind of

predication, namely, predications of actions. Even then one must be careful not to think that the different actions said of God indicate differences within God. Maimonides makes this point with an analogy: just as the sun can bleach and blacken or soften and harden, without requiring four different sources for these different actions, so likewise neither do distinct divine actions indicate differences within the divinity.[21]

As for the remaining kinds of attributes, Maimonides rejects predicating the first three kinds of attributes of God because they require that God be caused in some kind of way. In the case of (1) essential definitions and (2) the parts of an essential definition, the genus and difference are causes for the existence of the essence. Thus, just as matter and form are the internal causes constituting a concrete particular, so genus and difference are thought to be the internal causes constituting an essence or species. Similarly, for (3), accidents, God has no quantity and the other accidents involve privations, passivities, and dispositions that need to be causally realized. In short, predicating essential definitions, their parts, or accidents of God all entail that God is in some way caused.

As for (simple) relations and (comparative) relations, Maimonides concedes that these sorts of attributions do not necessarily entail multiplicity in the relata. For example, Zayd can be *father of* ʿAmr, *husband of* Zaynab, *partner of* ʿUmar, *master of* Khālid, *friend of* Bakr, etc. and in all cases, it is one and the same Zayd who enters into the relations. In fact, precisely because attributes of relation (*iḍāfa*) do not necessarily entail multiplicity or change in the relata, Avicenna himself had allowed them to be said of God.[22] It is perhaps for this reason that Maimonides is somewhat conciliatory towards those who use them, writing:

Relation is an attribute with regard to which it is more appropriate than with regard to the others that indulgence should be exercised if it is predicated of God. [That is] because it does not entail the positing of a multiplicity of eternal things or the positing of a change taking place in His essence (May he be exalted) as a consequence of a change of the things related to Him.[23]

Despite recognizing why people predicate relations of God, Maimonides still insists that one cannot meaningfully do so, as, for example, in saying, "God has infinitely more knowledge than humans." His reason is that it is impossible to do so in any meaningful way, for such predication always involves some form of category mistake.

The key premise in his argument is that if any relation holds meaningfully between two or more things, then the relata must belong to the same species or at least category of things. In other words, the relata in relational attribution are on some kind of equal standing with one another (*takāfuʾ*). It is for this reason that one cannot compare colors and tastes or distances and heat simply because they are not the same kind of things. For example, it makes no sense to say, 'the sweetness of this apple is more intense than [sweeter than, brighter than, etc.] its color.' In the case of God and creatures, there is no common species or category that allows for a relation between them. Maimonides goes so far as to claim that not even existence is shared between God and creatures, for God is the Necessary Existent, whereas all creatures are merely possible existents. Even the claim, 'God is the Necessary Existent' is not strictly speaking accurate; rather, one should say, 'nonexistence is impossible of God.'[24] Thus, concludes Maimonides, if

God and creatures are not even related by way of existence without any other qualification, then God can have no relational attributes. In short, even a predication of existence to God and creatures is equivocal.

On the basis of this argument Maimonides denies that divine predications can be ambiguous (*tashkīk*) predications, in the sense that Ghazālī allowed.[25] For at a minimum Ghazālī's ambiguous predication requires some likeness or relation between the two analogues. God, according to Ghazālī's view, is the unique and infinite knower, while Zayd, for instance, is a knower only to some limited degree. This presupposes that both God and Zayd share something, which allows them to be related by degree. As we have just seen, however, no relation whatsoever can be found between God and creatures. These arguments apply independently of the precise nature of divine predications. A fortiori they show, if successful, that we have reason to reject even the partial sketch of ambiguous substantive predications that Ghazālī gives.

Still, Maimonides allows that God performs actions that resemble (*shabīha*) human actions.[26] That does *not* mean that God has aptitudes in himself resembling ours, but again only that the divine *actions* resemble certain merciful, gracious, long suffering actions of ours. Maimonides gives the example of God's creating a world that brings forth new life, provides for that life and offers it protection from harm. These are the actions that we associate with mercy "as a father is merciful to his children".[27] The main point, however, is that even granting ambiguous predication in Ghazālī's sense, such predication can hold only of actions and never between the divine self and creatures.

Maimonides's point is directed towards Ghazālī and a response to his tautology argument, the second aspect of Ghazālī's project. Recall that Ghazālī observes that, while the claim, 'God is God' is uninformative, the claim, 'God is the Necessary Existent' is informative. 'Necessary Existent,' Ghazālī continues, tells one something additional about God's self. With the predicate 'Necessary Existent' in place, Ghazālī leveraged other attributions, for 'God is a knower' likewise provides further information about the divine self in addition to 'God is a Necessary Existent.' Maimonides blocks the first step: existence, even in the ambiguous sense that Ghazālī allows, cannot be predicated of the divine self; rather, all that one can positively state about God's self is *that* there is a divine self. Any further positive claims about God--that God is a knower, God is a willer--are, as Ghazālī understands them, false in Maimonides's eyes.

Ghazālī's tautology argument, Maimonides holds, applies only to one who both (1) predicates positive attributes of God's self or essence (*dhāt*) and (2) reduces all of those attributes to one and the same single positive divine attribute, like Necessary Existent. Maimonides's solution is to deny (1), and instead to allow only negative predications of God. The tautology argument does not arise, for '*im*material' means something different than '*not* ignorant'.

In addition to negative attributions being different in meaning, they can be *informative*. To know that one cannot predicate *nonexistence* or *privation* (*ʿadam*) of God is a non-tautological piece of knowledge, even if it does not predicate anything positive of God. Similarly, to know that God is not a body, that God is not dead (despite Nietzsche protestations to the contrary), that God has no cause, etc. involves knowing something different in each case. All are informative and yet do not particularize or indicate some part of the divine self or positively assert anything of God.

These are metaphysical points about the nature of God and what kind of predications can truly be made of God (viz., no positive ones). Ghazālī held that we could *demonstrate* that no simple attribute predications are true of God, but not that substantive predications are true of God. Instead, for Ghazālī, we know that the substantive predications are true of God only on the basis of Scripture, even if we do not know *how* they are true. Maimondes accepts Ghazālī's strategy of denying what can be demonstrated to be false. But now he argues that we can demonstrate that substantive predications fail to be true of God, in the same way that Ghazālī had granted that simple attribute predications fail.

In place of Ghazālī's substantive predications, Maimonides holds that only negative predicates are (literally) true of God's essence.[28] In developing this view in subsequent chapters, Maimonides takes epistemological considerations very seriously. For now, we simply note the claims that he makes on this front, and then develop them more fully in the next section.

First, Maimonides says that claims which have the superficial structure of positive predications can be *true*. They can be true, because they can be reinterpreted as making claims about actions that have their source in God,[29] or as stating negative facts about God.[30]

Second, and as a qualification, Maimonides does not hold, on this basis, that believing these superficial positive predications is acceptably simply because they can be reinterpreted negatively. Without knowing the demonstration that a superficial positive predication is true only if reinterpreted negatively, one fails to believe something true. Moreover, believing the negative

predication is acceptable only if we have a demonstration for that negative predication. In fact, he explicitly says that it is not better merely to believe the negative predicates, but to believe that the truths concerning God must be negative facts on the basis of a demonstration. Having the demonstration results in an increase in perfection in the knower, as "you come nearer to the apprehension of Him".[31]

Finally, Maimonides identifies one of the defects of not believing on the basis of a demonstration: by not negativizing predicates, one might erroneously believe that positive attributes could be truthfully ascribed to God on the basis of the surface form. (That is, one might not realize that the reinterpretation is necessary to make these attributions true.) Someone who comes to believe that predications are positive does not become less perfect by having false beliefs about God. Rather, they fail to have a belief that references God at all.

> I shall not say that he who affirms that God, may He be exalted, has positive attributes either falls short of apprehending Him or is an associator or has an apprehension of Him that is different from what he really is, but I shall say that he has abolished his belief in the existence of the deity without being aware of it.[32]

These beliefs that involve positive predications are *empty* beliefs: they do not have a subject, and so do not manage to be true or false at all. They have no content. The reason is that what one is describing is an impossible entity, and in fact one that can be proved to be impossible: while God can be proved to be absolutely simple, predicating a positive attribute of God entails that God is

not absolutely simple. Like the belief that Vulcan is the nearest planet to the sun, it has no referent.

3. Connections: Adding Epistemological Constraints to Current Debates

The views of Ghazālī and Maimonides are interesting in their own right. They also contribute to new ways forward for contemporary theorizing about the same issues. In this section, we highlight a few of these contributions. First, we briefly clarify the central epistemological notion--knowledge--and the metaphysics-focused contemporary debates.

3.1 Is Univocity necessary for knowledge?

3.1.1 Demonstrations and knowledge

Let us begin with the emphasis in both the Latin and Arabic traditions on the epistemic value of having a *demonstration* of one's conclusion. In contemporary parlance, we might say that a proof from known premises guarantees that the conclusion of the proof is known as well. (This is related to a "Closure" principle.)[33] Of course, a demonstration requires more than a sound argument for a conclusion. But we can start with a simple sketch of why a valid proof can generate new knowledge of the conclusion, if its premises are known. The machinery is couched in terms from contemporary epistemology, and while it would be anachronistic to read it into

medieval debates, it provides some indication of the epistemological value of a proof and by extension (part of) the value of a demonstration.

What is missing when one believes a truth on the basis of an invalid argument? Even though the conclusion is true, the invalidity of the argument introduces a kind of *risk* in believing the conclusion.[34] One does not know that a coin that is flipped tomorrow will land heads (when one is merely guessing at the result), or that a dogma of some religious tradition that agrees with one's personal convictions is true (when one is prepared to reject any dogma that conflicts with personal conviction). In all of these cases, one might believe something true, but fail to have knowledge. One fails to have knowledge because one is at risk of believing something false.

This explains why the epistemic constraints on a theory of divine predication generate additional requirements beyond a metaphysical account of how divine predications can be true. On this simple anti-risk model, knowledge requires more than just true belief, since knowledge requires a true belief that is not at risk of being false--true belief in all nearby worlds, as it were. So even if there is an available account of the metaphysics of divine predication, which shows the possibility of having true beliefs in the relevant predications, we might not have knowledge, if the methods we employ to arrive at these beliefs put us at risk of believing falsely. A proof or demonstration of a conclusion from known premises eliminates this risk. If one knows the premises, one believes them without risk. Since they entail the conclusion, one can believe it without risk as well, and so have knowledge.

We can apply this framework fruitfully to elaborate on the epistemological points raised in Section 2. Ghazālī's metaphysical account of how divine predications can be true is only partial. He holds that true predications, in their most perspicuous form, are not simple attribute predications. Instead they are substantive predications; i.e., 'God has knowledge' is reinterpreted as 'God (is a) knower'. When the substantive is understood as referring to the knower that is the unique and only, infinite, and eternal knower, it signifies a single entity, viz., God. Ghazālī holds that different substantives (knower, powerer, etc.) have different cognitive significance, and therefore constitute new, non-trivial knowledge in the one who knows them. He makes no specific metaphysical claims about how the substantive predications, applied to God, can be both cognitively significant and true.

Instead, he goes epistemic: Ghazālī defers to scripture, which provides a reliable source of which attributions, properly understood, are correct. Ghazālī does not elaborate further and is content with simply defending his view against charges of incoherence. The claim is that the source is sufficient for knowing substantive predications without giving a full account of how it is that these predications are true.

In defense of this position we can point to other cases where (broadly) testimonial sources of evidence give us knowledge, without also putting us in a position to know the why- or how-facts. For example: if Peter testifies that he won't be able to finish his contribution to a project by tomorrow, his colleagues can know (assuming Peter is not lying, deceived about his own future actions, etc.) that Peter will not finish by tomorrow. However, in the absence of further testimony or evidence, his colleagues do not know why this is: it could be because Peter is being

lazy, or because he is sick, or because his spouse has told him he has more important tasks to take care of, etc. One does not need to know which of these explains the delay, in order to know that the delay will occur.

Ghazālī is, however, not simply making the point that belief based on a reliable source can be knowledge. He also thinks that we cannot rely on a simplistic interpretation of certain claims in Scripture, when we have a demonstration that, on the simplistic interpretation, these claims are false. So, Ghazālī thinks, one can know broadly that 'God has knowledge', but the source of this knowledge is not simply a reliance on Scripture. It relies in addition on having a demonstration that, as a simple attribute predication, it is false, but no similar proof is available (Ghazālī thinks) when reinterpreted as a substantive predication. There is a sense in which this position allows that we can have knowledge without understanding. It opens the way for knowledgeable theological beliefs, but requires that one must be content with some mysteries along the way. An account of knowledge which requires the absence of risk of a false belief can explain how this is possible. If the source reliably states the truth--which divinely inspired Scripture does--then someone who believes what the source says can believe without the risk of a false belief. But in this case one also needs a demonstration that the source cannot be interpreted in certain ways--absent the demonstration, one is at risk of being misled by the reliable source.[35]

3.1.1 Substantives and analogical predication

Another aspect of Ghazālī's view is noteworthy. In Section 1 we presented some respects in which epistemological considerations favor a univocal view of divine predication. This required

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two assumptions in order to avoid theological skepticism: first, that theological knowledge can be had naturally, i.e., without supernatural intervention, and, second, that knowledge requires a demonstration with the known theological predication as its conclusion. If the predicates in the claims we know naturally about creatures are univocal with the predicates in the claims that we can know about God, then it is possible to have the requisite demonstration: a syllogism with naturally known premises and a conclusion about God that does not contain equivocal predicates.

Metaphysical considerations, by contrast, appear to favor a non-univocal view of divine predicates. Traditionally, at least in the West, these views are understood in terms of *analogical* theories of predication. Divine simplicity, a metaphysical claim, is the primary motivator here. If God is absolutely simple, then predicates which predicate distinct attributes to creatures, like knowledge and power, cannot be said univocally of God. Analogical views attempt to rescue the idea that divine predicates are related to creaturely predicates in some ways, but fundamentally these predicates work differently: in the case of creatures there are distinct bases for the predication, while in God one and the same basis underlies the predication.

Ghazālī's view of divine predicates cannot be squarely categorized as either a purely univocal or purely analogical view. There are, as we discussed in Section 2, two important features to his view. First, the divine predicates involve *substantive* predications, not simple attribute predications. Indeed, Arabic allows substantive predications which are lacking a copula altogether, e.g., 'God (is a) knower'. Second, Ghazālī employs the notion of *tashkīk* to explain what is different in divine and creaturely predications: God (is) the *unique infinite* knower; Zayd (is a) *finite,* i.e. *less-than-infinite,* knower.

Ghazālī's view is not an analogical view, since substantive predications can be applied to both God *and* creatures. There is nothing in the form of a substantive predication that, metaphysically speaking, requires that it apply only to God, or only to creatures. However, Ghazālī's view is also not a univocal view, since the doctrine of *tashkīk* implies that a true predication to God is not strictly univocal with a creaturely predication: 'unique infinite knower' is a predicate that, necessarily, applies only to God, and never to creatures.

While Ghazālī's view is neither a purely univocal nor a purely analogical theory, it promises to retain the metaphysical and epistemological advantages of both theories. Begin with metaphysics: divine simplicity appears to motivate an analogical theory, on the grounds that true predications to God cannot imply any multiplicity in God. Substantive predications do not entail a multiplicity, when applied to God *or* to creatures. The basis for Zayd's being a knower and the basis for Zayd's being a willer might be different, but nothing in the form of substantive predication requires this. Similarly, this does not come with costs in epistemology, and in particular does not preclude demonstrations with naturally known premises about creatures, and with conclusions containing divine predications. *Tashkīk* implies that divine and creaturely predicates necessarily involve different *degrees* of, for instance, (being a) knower or (being a) willer, and yet they are the same in kind. Thus, when used in arguments with the degrees made explicit, the epistemological threat of equivocation does not arise.

As a concrete case, consider the following argument:

That Zayd (is a) knower is a finite perfection of Zayd.

Any finite perfection of Zayd is an infinite perfection of God.

Therefore, that God (is a) knower is an infinite perfection of God.

The first premise can be known naturally. It involves a substantive predication to a creature.

Next, owing to *tashkīk*, the substantive predication comes in a certain degree--in this case, a

finite degree. The second premise connects perfections in creatures with God's perfection. While

there is ambiguity in degree in the substantive predicate 'knower', the degree can be made

explicit, and as a result the argument avoids equivocation: the premise is explicit that from facts

about finite perfections in creatures, we can infer *infinite* predications of God. Even with this

disambiguation in place, the premise is still true (and, plausibly, can be known by natural

means). Finally, the conclusion follows as a valid inference from the premises. Since valid

arguments preserve knowledge by preserving the absence of risk, we can know that God (is a)

knower. It does so without violating the metaphysical constraints imposed by divine simplicity,

but simultaneously avoids equivocating, and so can serve as a source of natural knowledge.

3.1.3 Substantives, empty beliefs, and risk

Despite the strengths of Ghazālī's position, his appeal to substantive predications potentially

introduces another kind of knowledge-destroying risk. Here, we can extend a problem that

Maimonides raises to raise new epistemological concerns for Ghazālī's view. Recall that

Maimonides takes a hard line on the consequences of being misled by the surface structure of

divine predication. For instance, someone who is misled by the surface form of the predication

so as to imagine that God has a positive attribute, would not even rise to the level of having a false belief. Instead, according to Maimonides, such a person fails to have any belief at all in virtue of this mistake.

Maimonides's point again is that a deeper problem, beyond mere false belief about God, looms in these cases. Maimonides will not concede that the one who believes that God has positive attributes manages to have a *false* belief; instead, he thinks they have *no* beliefs about God *at all*. We can extend this to an epistemological point: there is arguably an even more troubling kind of risk, even for those who manages to account for how some beliefs about God are in fact true. To attempt to have a belief about God, but fail to have any at all is to fail even more drastically than to have a belief about God, but to believe falsely. The failure is that of having an *empty* theological belief, which is akin to the belief that Vulcan is hot. Just as one does not have knowledge when one is at risk of believing something false, it is plausible that one does not have knowledge when one is at risk of having an empty belief. If risk of a false theological belief is incompatible with knowledge, then risk of an empty theological belief is as well.[36]

A further question is who exactly succeeds at having knowledge of God, if risk of empty beliefs is incompatible with such knowledge. Maimonides says that those who affirm that "God, may he be exalted, has positive attributes"[37] do not have true theological beliefs; their beliefs are empty. But Maimonides has claimed that, when properly understood, a predication like 'God has knowledge,' can be reinterpreted as a negative predication (perhaps like, 'God is not ignorant,' so as to be *true* and *knowable*. What characterizes someone who has knowledge of this truth?

Maimonides answers this question when he distinguishes between those who simply apprehend (*idrāk*) theological truths, and those who genuinely know them. He countenances various degrees of human perfection according to which those who are in a better epistemic state with respect to divine predications are thereby more perfect:

> [I]n every case in which the demonstration (*burhān*) that a certain thing should be negated with reference to Him becomes clear to you, you become more perfect, and that in every case in which you affirm of Him an additional thing, you become one who likens Him to other things and you get further away from the knowledge of His true reality.[38]

There is a natural way of elaborating why this is so. Having a demonstration that only negativized predications are true allows one not only to believe the relevant truth, e.g., that God is not ignorant, but also to *know* that any positive predication is not true ("impossible"), because it conflicts with the absolute simplicity of God's essence. The demonstration eliminates a risk of empty beliefs: one could not, while possessing the demonstration that only negativized predications are true of God, simultaneously believe a positive attribution.

If Maimonides is right about this, then there is an epistemological problem for Ghazālī's view-- even if we grant that the substantive predications can be true. Recall that Ghazālī does not provide a demonstration for the truth of substantive predications as applied to God; rather, he simply relies on the absence of a demonstration that they are false, and points to scripture as sufficient justification for accepting them. Maimondes denies that Ghazālī's view secures knowledge of the relevant predications. In the absence of a demonstration, there is nothing to

guarantee that one avoids the mistake of construing the divine predications falsely, and so true

beliefs can be accompanied by knowledge-destroying risk.[39]

3.2 Contributions to the Alston-Wolterstorff Debate from the Islamic Tradition

3.2.1 Demonstrations and winnowed concepts

Let us close by making a few further remarks about the contemporary literature on divine

predications, which appears to have largely ignored an epistemological constraint which requires

a theory to explain how believers can *know* central theological truths. Alston (1985) held that

divine predications can be univocal because, while our actual creaturely concepts of knowledge,

goodness, etc. cannot be truly predicated of God, we can modify these concepts to arrive at a

single concept that does have both divine and creaturely application. For instance, it is plausible

that our actual concept of knowledge requires belief and responsiveness to evidence. God,

however, does not form beliefs in response to evidence. Alston's suggestion is that there is a

related concept--call it a *winnowed concept*--that does not have these requirements: it is like our

ordinary concept of knowledge, but it applies to beings that know by other means, e.g., through

an act of creation. By using this winnowed concept, we can form a true belief about God with a

predicate that applies univocally to creatures.[40]

While Alston's view is a univocal account of divine predications, which allows *true* predications,

it does not secure knowledge of the predications. The winnowed concept is one possible

modification of our actual concept of knowledge. There are countless other modifications. Most

of these alternative concepts cannot be truly predicated of God. If one is at risk of using one of these alternative concepts, one is at risk of having a false belief--even if one actually manages to use to correct winnowed concept. Since using the right winnowed concept is no easy task, the relevant risk of false belief is one that most of us would face. The univocal view does not, by itself, guarantee success on the epistemological front.

Perhaps Alston could take a page from Maimonides, and hold that true predications that use the right winnowed concept are properly known only when one has a demonstration that the winnowed concept applies to God. This development of the view bears some similarity to Maimonides's view, and so it might eliminate the risks of false belief that are incompatible with knowledge in the same way.

There is, however, one significant difference worth mentioning. For Maimonides, what can be demonstrated is a general conclusion, covering all possible divine predications: no non-negative predications are true. Alston's view does not allow for such a general conclusion. This is because Alston's reason for thinking that we need winnowed concepts for divine predications is not, like Maimonides's, motivated by simplicity: the need to use alternative concepts derives, for Alston, from other metaphysical differences between creatures and God. Maimonides, by contrast, is strongly committed to divine simplicity. Given simplicity considerations, no positive predications, whether winnowed or not, are true of God. Maimonides can rely on knowledge (by way of proof) of this general fact to eliminate risk of false (or empty) theological beliefs.

Alston's winnowed concepts need proof on a case-by-case basis that they can be truthfully predicated of God. For example, he says that our concept of belief does not apply to God, since the ordinary concept refers to a state that is responsive to evidence. But God does not need to respond to evidence in the same way. So, we need a winnowed concept of belief for which, perhaps, it could be proved that the concept applies to God. We also need to do the same for the concept of being alive—God is living, but the ordinary concept of being alive suggests a dependence on organic processes that is not appropriate to God. Again, perhaps it could be proved that a winnowed concept of being alive applies to God. In this case the proof is very different and wholly unrelated to the proof for the winnowed concept of belief. Exactly analogous points go for other predications to God.

At best, these proofs are available but are very difficult to come by, even for the theologically informed. Maimonides holds that his demonstration is difficult to grasp: "These subtle notions that very clearly elude the minds cannot be considered through the instrumentality of the customary words, which are the greatest among the causes leading unto error."[41] This is downright simple compared to the proofs of the applicability of each winnowed concept that we would need to grasp on Alston's view. Theological knowledge would be available, but extremely rare. That is the good case. We must also face the more pessimistic conclusion, on which the requisite proofs are not even available. In that case theological knowledge isunavailable, even if true beliefs with univocal predicates are possible.

3.2.2 Ambiguity in the copula?

Ghazālī's discussion provides its own lessons. In the background of Ghazālī's discussion is the metaphysics of Avicenna and Avicenna's doctrine of divine simplicity. In the Latin West Avicenna's position influenced St. Thomas, who developed an analogical view of theological predications in response to the metaphysical problems presented by simplicity. In developing St. Thomas's views, Wolterstorff claims the following:

> The "is" in "God is wise" necessarily has a different force, a different *ratio*, from the "is" in "Socrates is wise"—assuming that we are using our words in such a way that in each case what we say is true. But the force (*ratio*) of the copula in the two cases is not completely different and unconnected; the copula is not being used *purely* equivocally. Its force (*ratio*) when used to speak of creatures is *analogical* to its force (*ratio*) when used to speak of God; in both cases one is claiming some mode of participation in the perfection by the entity referred to.[42]

While Wolterstorff does not develop what the different but analogically related forces of the copula might be, in each case, there is a more penetrating objection to this development of the analogical view that becomes salient when we recall Ghazālī's position. Ghazālī exploits the *absence* of a copula in Arabic to explain the relationship between divine and creaturely predications. The relationship lies in the different types of "substantive" predications that apply to God and creatures. That Wolterstorff's version of analogy relies on a notion of a copula, which is embedded in Indo-European languages but absent from Semitic languages, is perhaps damning enough. But we can push the contrast with Ghazālī further, and note that the metaphysical mysteries that go unexplained are, while present in Ghazālī, not nearly as extensive

as the mysteries with which Wolterstorff leaves us. Ghazālī gives a partial metaphysical account

to his satisfaction that substantive predications are not inconsistent with what we know about

God's essence, since when applied to God they state something like identities. He then

supplements the missing pieces of this account with the claim that we can know divine

predications, by reliance on scripture.

Wolterstorff does nothing to show that a different sense of the copula 'is' relieves any of the

metaphysical considerations that make its ordinary predicative sense inappropriate for

theological predications. Wolterstorff is clear[43] that Aquinas, whose views he purports to be

developing, was aware that predication of attributes to God is incompatible with God's

simplicity. So, a different kind of predication is needed, in order to have an account of divine

predications that is compatible with divine simplicity.

Even if such an account is available, the situation as it stands is disastrous for the potential to

know any divine predications. We close by mentioning two problems for Wolterstorff's view

that do not affect Ghazālī's similar development of a non-univocal view. First, absent any

guidance concerning the meaning of the copula that *does* provide us with true theological

predications, there remains a substantial risk that one fails to latch on to the requisite sense. The

risk of doing so begets a risk of a false (or empty) theological belief, and precludes knowledge.

Second, even assuming that we do use a copula that expresses true claims about God, we do so

without proof of how such a copula avoids false predications in the same way as the ordinary

copula. Believing in this way is a very risky process, and again precludes knowledge.

4. Conclusion

In this discussion we have highlighted how epistemological constraints informed theories of theological predication in the medieval Islamic tradition, and we have highlighted how related epistemological considerations can--and should--inform contemporary discussions of the issue. Some of the same motivations and arguments that appear in Ghazālī and Maimonides re-appear in a full evaluation of Alston and Wolterstorff's debate. Theological predication is, as these recent figures have appreciated, primarily a metaphysical issue that is concerned with God's essence and what is true of that essence. But for those of us who wish to avoid theological skepticism, this metaphysical issue needs to be treated with epistemological considerations in mind, a point the medieval Islamic tradition was keenly aware of.

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[1] For a discussion of divine predicates in medieval Islam see Gimaret 1988, and Belo 2007; for contemporary instances see Wolterstorff 1991, Alston 1955, 1993, Harris 2017.

[2] While in the current study we assume divine simplicity as a desideratum of a successful theory of divine predication, we also recognize that this assumption is controversial, and that both historical and contemporary theists

have both felt a need to argue for the assumption and to reject the assumption. Notably, al-Ghazālī challenged the efficaciousness of the proofs for divine simplicity (al-Ghazālī 2000, discussions 6–8), and more recently, Alvin Plantinga has challenged it (Plantinga 1980, II). Divine Simplicity.

[3] For discussions of the mode of specification see Avicenna 2013, 1.5; Aquinas 1955, I, 30, 3; Alston 1993: 163; Wolterstorff 2005: 117–18; and Harris 2017: 36–7.

[4] Alston 1985: 221.

[5] Duns Scotus 2016: 1.3.2.26.

[6] Duns Scotus 2016: 1.3.2.38.

[7] On some uses, 'demonstration' applies only to valid arguments that have *necessary first principles* as premises. That cannot be the requirement on theological knowledge here. The natural knowledge that we have of creatures, which includes knowledge via our sensory faculties, is not knowledge of first principles. (Plausibly, what is known are not necessary truths either.) While we can insist on the proof of a demonstration as the basis for natural theological knowledge, we cannot be too stringent in what the premises are when applying the demonstration assumption.

[8] Strictly speaking this is only a proof that no *natural* knowledge of God is available, and so leaves open the possibility of knowledge by illumination or other supernatural means. It does not directly establish theological skepticism, but it does eliminate one route to the acquisition of theological knowledge. We discuss options in this area in more detail in the concluding section.

[9] Avicenna 2005: 1.6–7.

[10] Avicenna 2005: 8.4–6.

[11] Avicenna 2005: 8.6; and for his argument that intellect must be immaterial see 2007: 188–92.

[12] Avicenna 2005: 9.1.

[13] Ghazālī 2013: treatise 2, part 2, "First Characteristic" (pp. 129–136).

[14] It is perhaps worth nothing that unlike Indo-European languages, Arabic nominal sentences do not require a copula except to indicate tense or aspect. Thus, while in English, 'Zayd knower' sounds downright neanderthal, a word-for-word translation into Arabic would be a well-formed nominal sentence.

[15] In English these substantives often need to be accompanied by an article, e.g., 'the knower is here'. We assume that this is an artifact of English grammar, since in other languages, including Arabic, the article is not always necessary. Also, we have coined the substantive 'powerer' for consistency with our earlier examples, using the model of the English expressions, 'seer', 'willer', 'hearer', and 'knower'. These are referential expressions, which have the function of referring to a particular thing which is a seer, willer, hearer, or knower.

[16] For instance, Ghazālī 2013: Treatise 2, part 1, "power," (p. 99), "knowledge," (p. 104), "will," (p. 109), "hearing and sight," (p. 112), and "speech" (p. 115).

[17] Avicenna 2009: 2.2 [6]; except where no modern translation exists, all references to primary sources are given to the translations.

[18] We can analyze substantive predications to creatures as simple attribute predications: 'Sally (is a) knower' means the same thing as 'Sally has knowledge'. It is only when the substantive predicates refer to God that the substantive predicative form must be treated as primitive, and not analyzable as or equivalent to a simple attribute predication.

[19] Here it is worth noting that *wasf* (description or attribution) is etymologically related to *ṣifa*, the standard Arabic term for 'predicate' or 'attribute'. Thus, Ghazālī wants to distinguish between 'attributes' (which are not different in God) and 'attributions' (which may be different when applied to God).

[20] Ghazālī 2013: treatise 2, part 2, "First Characteristic" (p. 133).

[21] Maimonides 1963: 1.52–3.

[22] Avicenna 2005: 8.4 [1–2].

[23] Maimonides 1963: 1.52 (trans. after Pines, p. 118).

[24] Maimonides 1963: 1.58 (p. 135).

[25] Maimonides 1963: 1.56 (131).

[26] Maimonides 1963: 1.54 (p. 124).

[27] Maimonides 1963: 1.54 (p. 125), citing Ps. 103:13.

[28] Maimonides 1963: 1.57–58.

[29] Maimonides 1963: 1.54.

[30] Maimonides 1963: 1.58.

[31] Maimonides 1963: 1.59 (p. 138).

[32] Maimonides 1963: 1.60 (p. 145).

[33] See Hawthorne 2004: Ch. 1 for discussion.

[34] Williamson 2000: 98–102. See also Pritchard 2005, Sosa 1999, and applications in Dunaway 2017.

[35] We might push more on whether this position is ultimately satisfactory. Interpreting 'God has knowledge' to read 'God (is a) knower' is not the only possible understanding, as Maimonides illustrates. If I hear an utterance from a reliable testifier that has multiple interpretations, I might be forced to choose between the most reasonable interpretation, and interpretations that leave metaphysical mysteries are dis-preferred.

[36] Hawthorne 2002: 260–261, Manley 2007: 403–404.

[37] Maimonides 1963: 1.60 (p. 145).

[38] Maimonides 1963: 1.59 (p. 139).

[39] Notably, on Ghazālī's view the failure to know Arabic would likely result in failures to believe true divine predications, since one is forced to use a copula in the attempt to state the relevant theological facts.

[40] The winnowed concept of knowledge does not presuppose that the beings it applies to do not respond to evidence in forming beliefs. Instead, it is silent on the matter.

[41] Maimonides 1963: 1.57 (p. 132).

[42] Wolterstorff 2005: 226–7.

[43] Wolterstorff 2005: 120.