

# In Defense of Negative Theology: A Reply to Steven Kepnes

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One has to admire Stephen Kepnes for bucking a theological movement that goes back at least as far as Maimonides and by some accounts even further. Whatever its merits, negative theology has always been a hard pill to swallow. In addition to putting up a logical roadblock to what we can say about God, it forces us to marginalize important features of Jewish self-understanding. To take an obvious example, Maimonides writes passionately about the love of God near the end of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (3.51), but he never mentions God's love for Israel. That raises the question of whether Maimonides' God *can* love anything other than his own perfection. If the answer is no, then much of Jewish liturgy would have to be reinterpreted.

Kepnes wants to counter what he terms "the God of absolute Being of Maimonides" with "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" as championed by Yehudah Halevi. Without rejecting Maimonides altogether, he proposes a dialectical tension, if not an outright contradiction, between these two conceptions of divinity. That tension can be seen most readily at Exodus 33, where we are told that God spoke to Moses "face to face" as one speaks to a friend (33:11) but also that no mortal can see God's face and live (33: 20). The former implies closeness to God, while the latter implies distance.

As one who is committed to negative theology, I see my task as pushing back against Kepnes' arguments. To that end, I want to look at how negative theology developed and why it still has proponents. We will see that it is not just a matter of Aristotelian logic chopping. In fact, it owes more to the Platonic tradition than to the Aristotelian. Leaving the ancient and medieval thinkers behind, I also want to get to Kant. Here I will try to show that Kepnes is much closer to Kant than he lets on and might want to consider hanging a picture of Kant in his office.

## 1. The Historical Background

It is useless to try to determine *the* theology of the Torah because, as even a casual reader can tell, there are several. In Genesis, God is directly involved in the affairs of the patriarchs, even to the point of giving Abraham martial advice (21:12). By Exodus, however, we have a God whose face cannot be seen directly, whose name is enigmatic, and whose likeness cannot be captured in wood or stone. This is the God who says that the people saw no form but only heard a voice at Sinai (Deuteronomy 4:12). By contrast, Exodus 24:10 indicates that the elders of Israel *did* see something at Sinai, a sentiment that gains support from the testimonies of Isaiah (6:1) and Ezekiel (1:26), both of whom claim to see God. In short, there is a real question of whether the Torah is committed to monotheism and, if so, what its monotheism involves. Note, for example, that even the *Mi Chamocha* prayer taken from Exodus 15:11 leaves us guessing whether YHWH is the only deity or just the most powerful one.

From my perspective, we do not get a clear statement of monotheism until Deutero-Isaiah, a post-exilic prophet about whom little is known. His monotheism is clearly stated at 44:6: "I

am the first and I am the last; /And there is no god but Me.”<sup>1</sup> If this is true, then it is not that the gods recognized by polytheistic religions are less powerful than YHWH but that they do not even exist. Accordingly: “See, they are all nothingness, Their works are nullity, /Their statues are naught and nil” (41:29). But this is not all, because Deutero-Isaiah also says something very important *about* God: “To whom, then, can you liken God, /What form compare to Him?” (40:18). The mightiest nations on earth are as nothing before God—indeed, less than nothing. I take this to mean that the mightiest rulers, warriors, or castles are as nothing as well. The same is true of tidal waves, thunderbolts, sea monsters, or heavenly bodies. Although mighty in their own ways, these things are part of the created order and therefore owe their existence to God. As the source of all existence, God is utterly unique, in a class entirely by himself.

It is the claim of uniqueness that provides the opening for negative theology. If nothing can be compared to God, then how should we describe God’s greatness? A simple answer is to say that we cannot; in the words of Exodus 33:21-23, all we can do is look at God’s backside because his greatness is beyond human comprehension. It is no accident, then, that the first proponent of negative theology was Philo, a Jew and a Platonist, who pointed to the importance of transcendence in both traditions:

Do not however suppose that the Existent which truly exists is apprehended by any man, for we have within us no organ by which we can envision it, neither in sense...nor yet in mind. So Moses the explorer of nature which lies beyond our vision, Moses who, as the divine oracles tell us, entered into the darkness, by which figure they indicate existence invisible and incorporeal, searched everywhere and into everything in his desire to see clearly and plainly Him...who alone is good. And when there was no sign of finding aught, not even any semblance of what he hoped for...he took refuge with the Object of his search and prayed in these words: “Reveal Thyself to me that I may see Thee with knowledge (Exodus 33:13).<sup>2</sup>

As we know, Moses’ request was denied, which Philo takes to mean that God is incomprehensible to the human mind.

In the ancient world, negative theology found its highest expression in Plotinus, who emphasized that, because the One is simple and cannot admit complexity, any attempt to characterize it with subject/predicate statements is impossible.<sup>3</sup> It follows that the One is ineffable and incomprehensible. The purpose of talking about it is to rule out misapprehensions and get to the point where language reveals its inherent limitations. As Plotinus says, there are times when a studied silence contains more truth than speech.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Also see 43:10-13 and 45:6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Philo, “On the Change of Names,” in *Philo: Volume 5*, trans. F.H. Colson and G.H. Whitaker (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1934; rpt. 1988), 144-147.

<sup>3</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 6.8.13.

<sup>4</sup> *Enneads* 5.5.6.

That brings us to Maimonides, who, though he did not read Philo or Plotinus, followed in their footsteps.<sup>5</sup> For Maimonides too, God is simple and cannot admit complexity in any way. Thus, any statement of the form “God is *X*” or “God is *Y*” is suspect because it contains two things. We can praise God for being just, merciful, or gracious—in effect, the goodness or “back side” of God that Moses was able to see—but when we do, we are talking about the effects of God’s creative action rather than God himself. Like Plotinus, Maimonides uses language to rule out misconceptions, e.g., that God is corporeal or that God is subject to change. But language can take only so far. In the end, it cannot pierce the veil of mystery that God refers to at Exodus 33.

I have belabored the issue of how negative theology developed because I want to take issue with Kepnes’ claim that what gave rise to it was reflection on Aristotle’s distinction between essence and existence. Aristotle himself never says that God is unknowable, and he ascribed multiple attributes without hesitation.<sup>6</sup> Rather, the origin of negative theology is to be found in deeply held convictions about the uniqueness of God. The most fundamental of these is the belief that once we make God a subject of predication so that “God is *X*” or “God is *Y*”, we compromise that uniqueness by talking about God the same way we talk about everything else. Let us recall that even in ancient times, talk about God was limited. The only person who was even allowed to pronounce the name of God was the High Priest, and then only on the holiest day of the year.

One more point about negative theology before moving on. None of the people in this tradition understood negative theology to be a simple denial that God can be the subject of a positive statement. Rather, they understood it to be a process by which one comes to recognize the full import of divine transcendence. The process begins with the recognition that God cannot be seen or represented in wood or stone. From there, it says that God is immaterial. If God is immaterial, then he cannot experience hunger, thirst, anger, exhaustion, depression, or sexual passion. Rather, God is characterized by mercy, graciousness, and slowness to anger. As we saw, these are not habits of character as they are in human beings, but qualities of the world that God created.

The next step is to recognize that God’s knowledge or power are not just bigger, better versions of finite knowledge and power, but that they are infinite so that the difference is one of kind rather than degree. Then and only then are we prepared to accept the fact that language cannot capture the transcendent nature of God. That leaves us with Plotinus’ observation that there are times in our inquiry when there is more truth in silence. In Maimonides’ words:

Glory then to Him who is such that when the intellects contemplate His essence, their apprehension turns into incapacity; and when they contemplate the proceeding of His actions from His will, their knowledge turns into ignorance; and when tongues aspire to magnify Him by means of attributive qualifications, all eloquence turns into weariness and incapacity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Although there is no evidence that Maimonides read Plotinus, he might have been exposed to Arabic translations of synopses of Plotinus such as *The Theology of Aristotle* or *The Book of Causes*.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072b14-31.

<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 1.58.

This does not mean that we have to abandon prayer or that a person errs as soon as she opens her mouth to speak about God. All of the negative theologians that Kepnes mentions—Maimonides, Cohen, and Levinas—had important things to say about prayer.<sup>8</sup> All wrote extensively about God and the human effort to come to grips with transcendence. What it means is that, however necessary, discourse about God can take us only so far. Having been brought to the precipice of human understanding, the proper response is to follow Job in bowing our heads to something too great to fathom.

## 2. Kant to the Rescue

Despite everything that has been said about negative theology thus far, Kepnes gives voice to a long-standing criticism according to which it is still a theology manqué. In this section, I will try to show that Kant came to roughly the same conclusion. But before getting to that point, it is necessary to clear up some misapprehensions.

Although generations of skeptics applauded Kant for arguing that none of the traditional proofs for the existence of God are valid, Kant is not a skeptic when it comes to God. As he says in the preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Bxxx), his purpose in denying knowledge is to make room for faith (Glaube). Granted, this is not a leap of faith à la Kierkegaard but a rational faith founded on what he took to be our basic moral sense. Simply put, religion is not like geometry. If a person turns to God, it should be the outcome of a choice rather than a deduction. In regard to his own choice, Kant says near the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A828/B850) that nothing can shake his belief in the existence of God and a future life because to do so would undermine his moral principles and render him “abhorrent in my own eyes.” These are hardly the words of a skeptic.

It is true, as Kepnes says, that Kant’s commitment to the thing-in-itself led him into skeptical puzzles that he could not resolve. If the only thing I can experience when looking at an external object are phenomena, then there is no way I can establish the validity of those phenomena by comparing them to a noumenon. While this criticism has merit, I think it overlooks the reason Kant introduced noumena in the first place.

Although the subject of noumena in Kant’s epistemology is too complex to be dealt with adequately in this space, as I see it, his reasons for introducing it were practical rather than theoretical. Phenomena exist in the spatial/temporal continuum and are governed by the same causal laws that explain why unsupported objects fall to earth and planets travel in elliptical orbits around the sun. If phenomena are all that exist, everything would be subject to strict causal necessity. In this scenario, there would be no room for the kind of spontaneity that Kant thought was required by freedom. It follows that if morality is possible, there must be something that is not the effect of a prior cause. The only thing that can satisfy this requirement is a noumenon.

I am not saying that the postulation of noumena is unproblematic. Kant is left with the conundrum of how a moral principle not subject to causal necessity could initiate action in the

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<sup>8</sup> For a thorough study of Maimonides view of prayer, see Ehud Benor, *Worship of the Heart: A Study of Maimonides’ Philosophy of Religion* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995). For Cohen’s view of prayer, see *Religion of Reason out of the Sources of Judaism*, trans. Simon Kaplan (New York: Ungar, 1972), 371-399. For Levinas, see “Prayer Without Demand” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Sean Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 227-234.

phenomenal world by speaking or acting. My only claim is that his primary motivation was to leave space for moral judgments.

Again, Kepnes is right to object that Kant's understanding of the natural world is based on Newtonian physics. Suppose, however, we replace Newtonian physics with a modern version of quantum theory. It would still be open for Kant to claim that natural laws have no bearing on moral agency. If determinism is incompatible with freedom, so is randomness. Freedom involves the self-imposition of a moral principle. I fail to see how we can shed light on the decision to act for the sake of a moral principle by referring to the random motion of particles. In short, nature and freedom still seem to be distinct, and with them phenomena and noumena.

To return to God, Kant was sympathetic to negative theology *up to a point*. As he saw it, the virtue of negative theology is that it removes any empirical content from our idea of God and thus frees us from anthropomorphism. But he is clear that negative theology is not enough. As I indicated earlier, he shares Kepnes' conviction that unless we have something positive to say about God, we will end up with a theology manqué, which is to say an idea of God that "is wholly idle and useless and makes no impression on me if I assume it alone."<sup>9</sup> The reason behind this is that I need the idea of a highest good to make sense of my obligation to strive to be like it. If all I had were the idea of something that resists characterization, there would be nothing to ensure that my striving had some hope of success.

Kant therefore maintains that we need to bring together the idea of a creator of the world with that of an author of the moral law. Only then can we assure ourselves that the world is not so constituted as to resist our efforts at moral improvement. In this way, he has moved from a purely deistic understanding of God to one that makes room for life, intelligence, and will. Unless I have misunderstood Kepnes, he wants to do the same thing. Rather than a God who is reached purely by negation, he wants a God who can be praised and serve as the basis for hope in a future redemption.

Once again I am not claiming that Kant solved every problem he faced. There is still a world of difference between God's will and ours. He still has to account for how will and intelligence are related in God if God is simple. My only claim is that he is not a skeptic in regard to God and that broadly speaking, he and Kepnes share many of the same intuitions.

### 3. Experiencing God

My final topic concerns people who claim to have experience of God. It should come as no surprise that I will not be defending radical epistemologies that question our belief in the past or in the reality of an external world. What I do want to question is the claim that people can have direct access to God. On this topic, Kepnes, following Plantinga, writes:

Like our memories and belief in the past for which we do not have incontrovertible evidence, we ought to trust our own perceptions, thoughts, experiences in the world and church as basically reliable bases to build our beliefs about God. This is not to say that we ought to accept every and all of our theological perceptions

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<sup>9</sup> Kant, *Lectures*, 30.

and experiences as true; indeed we ought to test them carefully. Here theological tradition and teachers have an important role in helping to clarify, correct, refine, and develop given theological sensibilities and experiences into rational beliefs. Thus religious doubt has a productive role to play in theology.

The question is: What criterion should we use to test our theological perceptions?

Unfortunately, human responses to God run the gamut from tenderness and compassion to cruelty and violence. The ancient Israelites thought God wanted them to kill sabbath violators, rebellious sons, adulterous women, and the entire Amalekite nation. One would not have to go far into the histories of any of the Abrahamic faiths to see “divine” commandments mandating the most reprehensible forms of behavior imaginable.

How do we know which experiences of God are authentic and which not? Empirical criteria such as lightning, thunder, angelic voices, incense, or golden thrones will not work. Neither will feelings of sincerity. Whatever their moral failings, terrorists are perfectly sincere about what they are doing. Kepnes lists tradition and teachers as guideposts, but history shows that they too are fallible. Orthodox Jews still maintain that there is no divinely sanctioned remedy for the *agunah* (chained woman). To what then should we appeal?

For the second time I suggest that Kant comes to our rescue. Having removed any empirical content from our idea of God, we have no choice but to consult morality. This means that anyone who claims that God approves of cruelty, injustice, or the sacrifice of human life cannot be telling the truth no matter how sincere or how respected they might be. As Martin Buber puts it, “In the realm of Moloch honest men lie and compassionate men torture.”<sup>10</sup>

The perceptive reader will notice that this takes us back to Moses’ encounter with God at Exodus 33. The only part of God that Moses could apprehend was his goodness or backside. We are left with a God of mercy, graciousness, faithfulness, and forgiveness. I suggest that any experience that departs from these qualities is bogus, whether the theology that supports it is positive or negative.

#### 4. Conclusion

I have not commented on everything that Kepnes has argued, because a paper this rich would take me well beyond my spatial limitations. Although I have pushed back, I have tried to do so in the spirit of finding common ground. Negative theology does not rule out everything we say to or about God. Rather, it is concerned with our final approach to God. Kant’s project is better understood as an attempt to transform theology from a theoretical to a practical subject than an attempt to discredit it altogether. As a practical matter, a purely negative conception of God lacks relevance. People’s experience of God can be trusted only if it is consistent with moral standards like those articulated at Exodus 33. Simply put, there is no divinity without morality. I am sure that I speak for more than myself when I say that I learned much by reading Kepnes’ article and look forward to more exchanges in the future.

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<sup>10</sup> Buber, *Eclipse of God* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1952; rpt. 1988), 120.