Knowledge and Theological Predication: Lessons from the Medieval Islamic Tradition

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Abstract: This article sketches how the debate over divine predications should be informed by the medieval Islamicate tradition. We emphasize the focus not only on the metaphysics and language of divine predications by al-Ghazali, Maimonides, and others, but also on the epistemology of divine predications. In particular, we emphasize the importance of a theory that explains not only what it takes to make a divine predication true, but also whether these predications are knowable. The epistemological element is central, because traditional views of theology aim to avoid theological skepticism, which is the view that, even if there are theological truths, these truths are unknowable. We pursue this point by emphasizing the role of substantives in al-Ghazālī's theory of divine predicates, and Maimonides's discussion of negative predications. In closing we apply these lessons to some recent discussions of theological predication.

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 propose to look at the constraints on non-univocal divine predication by emphasizing that an account should not only allow that such predicates can be *truly* predicated of God, but in addition must make *knowledge* of the relevant predications possible. We will do so by drawing

[1] For a discussion of divine predicates in medieval Islam, see Gimaret 1988 and Belo 2007; for contemporary instances see Wolterstorff 1991, Alston 1985, Alston 1993, Harris 2017.

Res Philosophica, *Vol. 98, No. 2, April 2021, pp. 353–376*
https://doi.org/10.11612/resphil.2035

upon certain insights from historical predecessors within the medieval Islamicate tradition in thinking of how we might meet these constraints on an account of the issue.

The question we are asking 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 ones. While it is true that 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 apparently provides one of the primary drives 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 apparently must be 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 concerns 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 can be composed so as to form a meaningful proposition that we can understand. Consequently, if God is absolutely simple, application of ordinary predicates will 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 what they are predicated of is not eternal or infinite cannot be univocally applied to God (Alston 1985, 221). Since these metaphysical considerations

[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, 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). It is our hope to look at contemporary discussions of divine simplicity in light of certain historical thinkers in an upcoming study.

[3] For discussions of the mode of specification, see Avicenna 2013, 1.5; Aquinas 1955, I, 30, 3; Alston 1993, 163; Wolterstorff 2005, 117–118; and Harris 2017, 36–37.

have been discussed in detail elsewhere, we will not rehash them here in any detail, and instead will highlight only a few general patterns that will 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. They then aim to show that if this metaphysical claim is true, then univocal predications of distinct attributes to God are not true. (Not all rely on simplicity; some take as a premise claims such as *God is eternal*, and derive the conclusion that predications which imply that God has a beginning 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 on 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 very natural.

The threat of theological skepticism enters into the Latin debate fairly late, when Duns Scotus leveled a criticism like this against an analogical theory inspired by Aquinas (though his immediate target was Henry of Ghent) (Duns Scotus 2016, 1.3.2.26). The argument makes some assumptions that will be helpful for framing our subsequent discussion. One of these is the assumption that we have knowledge of God *naturally*—that is, our knowledge of God is had on the basis of inferences from knowledge concerning the created world (Duns Scotus 2016, 1.3.2.38). 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.[4]

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.[5]

There are many candidate views of non-univocal divine predicates that were proposed and developed in the medieval Islamicate world. While these will be familiar in their own right to many, we will 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 will additionally show that the Islamic tradition contributes further epistemological constraints on a non-univocal theory of divine predication. While each of 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 a discussion of relevant passages from 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) with a focus on some points at which contemporary discussions would benefit from taking into account the full menu of options, including those represented in the Islamic tradition.

[4] 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.

[5] 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 will discuss options in this area in more detail in the concluding section.

2 Rejecting Univocity: Alternatives from the Islamic Tradition

2.1 Al-Ghazālī on the Divine Names

Within medieval Islam, a panoply of 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 is also a range of intermediate positions. Ghazālī develops one of these intermediate positions and in the course of 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 had argued that strictly speaking it is false, if not blasphemous, to predicate a plurality of 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 in some sense. To make sense of these religious claims, the Muʿtazilī theologians developed theories of senses (sg. *maʿná*) and modes (sg. *hāl*) within the context of a general theory of predication, which will not be discussed here,[6] whereas the philosophers, specifically Avicenna, appealed to a modal ontology to justify religious claims about God, which we consider briefly here.

Avicenna's strategy for making sense of theological predications is to identify 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 (Avicenna 2005, 1.6–7 [29–34]). Here it is important to note that Avicenna does not think of necessary existence as something additional or beyond 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 (Avicenna 2005, 8.4–6 [273–290]).

As for all the other traditional attributes like having knowledge, will, life, and power, for Avicenna, they are no different from necessary existent 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

[6] Classic studies are Wolfson 1976, ch. II, "Attributes," and Frank 1978.

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 (Avicenna 2005, 8.6 [283–290]); and for his argument that intellect must be immaterial see (Avicenna 2007, 5.2 [188–192]). 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 (Avicenna 2005, 9.1 [299–307]). 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, to show that predicating different attributes (*ṣifāt*) of God is not as problematic as these two groups suggest, and second, to show that any attempt to reduce talk about God to a single attribute yields an impoverished account of theological knowledge.[7] 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 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, in such a way as to replace the abstract, universal attribute with a particular. Thus, 'God has knowledge' becomes 'God (is a)[8] knower' (*al-dhāt ʿālima*, literally, 'That very one, knower'), and '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.[9] Unlike the abstract noun 'knowledge,' which can also serve both as a predicate ('God has knowledge') and a subject

[7] al-Ghazālī 2013, treatise 2, part 2, "First Characteristic" (129–136).

[8] 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.

[9] In English, these substantives often need to be accompanied by an article, such as, '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

('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 in his discussion of attributes, 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.[10] 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 is drawing upon a theory of *tashkīk*, which we understand as meaning '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 (*mafhūm*, literally, "the thing understood"), 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.[11]

expressions 'seer,' 'willer,' 'hearer,' and 'knower.' These are referential expressions, which have the function of referring to a particular thing that is a seer, willer, hearer, or knower.

[10] For instance al-Ghazālī 2013, treatise 2, part 1, "power" (99), "knowledge" (104), "will" (109), "hearing and sight" (112), and "speech" (115).

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

For Ghazālī, the substantive predicates refer to God in a primary way, for God's existence, knowledge, will, life, and the like 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.[12]

The above provides a sketch of the first part of Ghazālī's project—namely, to show that the metaphysical reality is 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 aims to show that divine attribution cannot refer to some single feature, like necessary existence through itself, as Avicenna had claimed. Ghazālī begins with a statement that he takes to be a bit of natural knowledge—namely, substantive predications like Necessary Existent, knower and willer all have different meanings or senses (*ma'ānin*). To say that all the divine predications just mean the same thing, such as 'the necessary existent in itself'—a position he attributes to Avicenna—is to fly in the face of a bit of common sense.

Worse than that, Ghazālī continues, Avicenna's conception of divine simplicity would render 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* (*zā'id*) 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

[12] 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.

insists, the divine predications do not refer to the same description (*waṣf*),[13] 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 that 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 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 it is to God 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 "the object of our reflection is the eternal attributes, which transcend the understanding of mankind."[14]

2.2 Maimonides on Negative Attributions and Proof

While Maimonides is well known for his negative theology and his criticism of *kalām*—that is, Islamic theological speculation—it might be less known that chapters 50 through 60 of his *Guide for the Perplexed* read as if they were a direct attack on Ghazālī's theory of divine attributes, particularly presented in the latter's *Economy of Belief*. Recall that Ghazālī had a twofold project: the metaphysical project, which is to show how simple attribute predications could be paraphrased into substantive predications so as to minimize the apparent challenge presented to divine simplicity, and the epistemological project, which is to argue that there must be differences

[13] Here it is worth noting that *waṣf* (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).

[14] al-Ghazālī 2013, treatise 2, part 2, "First Characteristic" (133).

among the senses or meaning of divine predications, since our knowledge is not tautological. Maimonides addresses 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 wanted to address was the problem that simple attribute predication seemingly creates for divine simplicity. If God has some attribute, like knowledge, then there is the divine self, which is the subject of that knowledge, on the one hand, and the knowledge, which is something different from the divine self, on the other. 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's response is to show that attributions to God cannot be true, regardless of whether they are interpreted as simple attribute predications or substantive predications. Maimonides's specific strategy is to identify the basic 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'); (4) (simple) relations (sg. *nisba*) and (comparative) relations (*iḍāfa*) (e.g., 'Zayd is the father of 'Amr' and 'Zayd knows more than 'Amr'); 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 his 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 (Maimonides 1963, 1.52–1.53).

As for the remaining kinds of attributes, Maimonides rejects predicating the first three kinds of attributes of God because they would all 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 would 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* Umar, *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.[15] It is perhaps for this reason that Maimonides is somewhat conciliatory toward 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.[16]

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" or a "a hundred miles is longer than [hotter than] the hundred Scoville heat units of this pepper." In the case of God and creatures, there is no common species or category that would allow 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' (Maimonides 1963, 1.58 [135]). 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 must be done so in an equivocal fashion.

It is on the basis of this argument that Maimonides denies that divine predications can be ambiguous (*tashkīk*) predications, in the sense that

[15] Avicenna 2005, 8.4 [1–2].
[16] Maimonides 1963, 1.52 (trans. after Pines, 118).

Ghazālī allowed.[17] 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 does allow that God performs actions that resemble (*shabīha*) human actions (Maimonides 1963, 1.54 [124]). 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 when done by us. Maimonides gives the example of God's creating a world that can bring forth new life, providing for that life and offering it protection from harm. These are the actions we associate with mercy "as a father is merciful to his children."[18] 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 emphasis on this point is almost certainly directed towards Ghazālī and is a response to his tautology argument, the second aspect of Ghazālī's project. Recall that Ghazālī's argument begins by observing that, while the claim, 'God is God' is uninformative, the claim, 'God is the Necessary Existent' is informative. 'Necessary Existent,' Ghazālī observed, tells one something additional about God's self. With the predicate 'Necessary Existent' in place, Ghazālī used it to leverage 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, only applies 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.'

[17] Maimonides 1963, 1.56 (131).
[18] Maimonides 1963, 1.54 (125), citing Ps. 103:13.

In addition to negative attributions being different in meaning, they can be *informative*. To know that one cannot predicate *nonexistence* or *privation* (*'adam*) 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's protestations to the contrary), that God has no cause, that God is neither inattentive nor negligent, and that God is not limited, 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. However, on Ghazālī's view, there is no demonstration that substantive predications could not be 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 (Maimonides 1963, 1.57–1.58). In developing this view in subsequent chapters, Maimonides takes epistemological considerations very seriously. For now, we will simply note the claims that he makes on this front, and then develop them in their own right 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 (Maimonides 1963, 1.54) or as stating negative facts about God (Maimonides 1963, 1.58).

Second, and as a qualification, Maimonides does not simply hold, on this basis, that it is acceptable to believe these superficial positive predications 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, it is acceptable to believe the negative predication only if we have a demonstration for that negative predication. In fact, he says explicitly that it is better not merely to believe the negative predicates, but to believe them on the basis of a demonstration that the truths concerning God must be negative facts. Literally, his claim is that having the demonstration results in an increase in perfection in the knower, as "you come nearer to the apprehension of Him" (Maimonides 1963, 1.59 [138]). Finally, Maimonides identifies one of the defects of not believing on the basis of a demonstration: by not negativizing predicates, one might come to believe on the basis of the surface

form that positive attributes can be truthfully ascribed to God. (That is, one might not realize that the reinterpretation is necessary to make these attributions literally and explicitly 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 a polytheist 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. (Maimonides 1963, 1.60 [145])

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, but 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 will give a bit of clarification on the central epistemological notion—knowledge—and on 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.)[19] Of course, a demonstration typically 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

[19] See Hawthorne 2004, 1–50 for discussion.

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.[20] One doesn't know that a coin that is flipped tomorrow will land heads (when one is merely guessing at the result), that the used car one is buying is free of accidents (when one is trusting a used car salesman who will say anything to sell cars), 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 these cases, one might believe something true, but will 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, which we mentioned in the introduction, 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 that it is possible to have 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 would eliminate 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—that is, '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 wishes to hold that different substantives (knower, powerer, etc.) have different cognitive significance, and therefore constitute new, non-trivial knowledge in the one who knows them. But he also makes no specific metaphysical claims about how it can be that these claims about how the substantive predications, applied to God, are both cognitively significant and true.

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

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 that God (is a) knower, etc., 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 wife has told him that he has more important tasks to take care of, etc. One doesn't 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 that 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.[21]

[21] 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 will be dispreferred.

3.1.2 Substantives and Analogical Predication

It is worth noting one other aspect of Ghazālī's view. In Section 1, we presented some respects in which epistemological considerations push in favor of a univocal view of divine predication. This required 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 will 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 that 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. But 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. And, 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, the appeal to substantive predications in this position potentially introduces another kind of knowledge-destroying risk. Here, we can take a problem Maimonides raises, and extend it 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 understand it to say of God that God has an 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 there is a deeper problem, beyond mere false belief about God, in these cases. Maimonides is not willing to 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 philosopher or theologian who manages to account for how some beliefs about God are in fact true. To make an attempt at having a belief about God, but failing to have any at all ("He has abolished his belief in the existence of the deity")[22] 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.[23]

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" (Maimonides 1963, 1.60 [145]) 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 draws a distinction 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. (Maimonides 1963, 1.59 [139])

There is a natural way of elaborating why this is so. Having a demonstration that only negatived 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 would conflict with the fact that God's essence is absolutely simple. The demonstration eliminates a risk of empty beliefs; one could not, while possessing the demonstration that only negatived predications are true of God, simultaneously believe a positive attribution.

[22] Maimonides 1963, 1.60 [145].
[23] Hawthorne 2002, 260–261, Manley 2007, 403–404.

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 of 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 will not grant that Ghazālī's view secures knowledge of the relevant predications. In the absence of a demonstration, there is nothing to guarantee that one will avoid the mistake of construing the divine predications falsely, and so true beliefs can be accompanied by knowledge-destroying risk.[24]

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 that 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.[25]

However, while this is a univocal account of divine predications, which allows that such predications can be *true*, 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 the 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 will face. The univocal view does not, by itself, guarantee success on the epistemological front.

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

[25] 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.

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 we might expect that it will 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, 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 doesn't 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. But 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. But 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" (Maimonides 1963, 1.57 [132]). This is downright simple compared with the proofs of the applicability of each winnowed concept that would need to be grasped on Alston's view. Theological knowledge would be available, but extremely rare. That is the good case, but we must also face the more pessimistic conclusion, on which the requisite proofs are not even available. In that case, theological knowledge will be unavailable, even if true beliefs with univocal predicates are a possibility.

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 in particular 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. (Wolterstorff 2005, 226–227)

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 Semetic languages, is perhaps damning enough. 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 very clear (Wolterstorff 2005, 120) that Aquinas, whose views he purports to be developing, was aware that predication of attributes to God is incompatible with God's simplicity; therefore, 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 in fact available, the situation as it stands is disastrous for the potential to know any divine predications. We will close by mentioning two problems which, it is worth emphasizing, 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 will be 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 any proof of how such a copula does not produce false predications in the same way as the ordinary copula. Believing in this way is a very risky process, and it again precludes knowledge.

4 Conclusion

In this discussion we have highlighted how epistemological constraints informed theories of theological predication in the medieval Islamic tradition, how related epistemological considerations can—and should—inform contemporary discussions of the issue. Some of the very 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. For those of us who wish to avoid theological skepticism, this metaphysical issue needs to be treated with epistemological considerations in mind, of which the medieval Islamic tradition was keenly aware.

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