

# The Epistemology of Theological Predication

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A central question in philosophical theology concerns whether we can not only speak truly about God, but also whether our language is *univocal* when we do so. Our theological language is univocal just in case it has the same meaning as our ordinary non-theological language. But, given some common assumptions about the metaphysics of God, which include the doctrine that God is perfectly simple, there are straightforward arguments that no univocal predication to God can be true.

These arguments against univocity, which I will neither endorse nor reject here, are frequently used to motivate alternative theories of theological predication. A suitable alternative, in this framework, explains the meaning of theological predicates as non-univocal but compatible with the truth of predicative statements which make reference to God. One well-known alternative is the *analogical* view, as found in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* 1a A.13 Q.1-12. Others include equivocal views as found in al-Ghazālī, and the apophatic theology of Maimonides.<sup>1</sup> As I will emphasize below, these are primarily *metaphysical* doctrines, as they are concerned to show that theological predications can be true, given a simple, infinite God.

Truth, however, is not the only *desideratum* for a theory of theological predication. Since theological statements are also the objects of belief, it is possible for a theological belief to be true, and yet fail to be *knowledge*. Knowledge requires more than mere true belief: in ordinary cases, one can believe something true, but only via a lucky guess or unreliable reasoning, and thus fail to know it. The mere possibility of saying or believing something true about God should not satisfy us. A defense of univocity, or some alternative theory of theological predication, will have to do more than simply show true belief and assertion is possible. If these truths are not knowable, then unwelcome theological skepticism will follow.

This is not a purely technical point. I will argue that plausible accounts of what distinguishes knowledge from true belief make some recent accounts of theological predication fail on epistemological grounds. In developing the point, I cannot claim originality: Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, Moses Maimonides and John Duns Scotus all raised similar points against competing theories of theological predication. More recent discussions of theological predication run afoul of the same epistemological considerations.

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<sup>1</sup>See Aquinas (1920), al-Ghazālī (2013), and Maimonides (1974).

## 1 Preliminary terms and definitions

A *theological predication* is a sentence which is grammatically in subject-predicate form, where the term in the subject-position refers to God. Theological predications, in this sense, have the following form:

God is *F*.

It will be important in what follows to keep the distinction between sentences, and the truths or facts that those sentences stand for. A sentence has a clear grammatical structure; in the case of theological predications, the structure includes a subject and a predicate. We should not assume that the facts or truths stated by theological predications have the same structure, or any structure, however.

This is because in the debate over theological predications, the doctrine of *divine simplicity* looms large. Formulations of simplicity differ, but an especially strong commitment to simplicity can be found in Avicenna:

We also say it cannot be the case that the necessary existent has principles that are gathered together and the necessary existent is constituted of them. [In other words,] it has neither quantitative parts nor the parts of a definition and account, whether they are like matter and form, or in any other way as the parts of the account explaining the sense of its name, where each one of them would indicate something that is different essentially from the other with respect to the existence [...]

From this it has become clear that what exists necessarily is not a body, nor any matter of a body, nor a form of a body, nor an intelligible matter of an intelligible form, nor an intelligible form in an intelligible matter, nor divisible—whether in quantity, principles, or account—and so it is one from these three perspectives. (Avicenna, *Salvation* II.5; McGinnis and Reisman trans., p. 214)

Crucially, in denying the possibility of differentiation in God, Avicenna, and those following him, hold that God is not the bearer of properties or attributes. For example, God's being perfect cannot involve God's instantiating the attribute of perfection, where perfection is distinct in kind from whatever instantiates it. If this were the case, then there would be a distinction between God's perfection and the bearer of perfection. The upshot is that theological predications, such as

God is perfect.

do not predicate an attribute, property, or form of perfection. The grammatical structure of the sentence does not correspond to the metaphysical fact of perfection, given simplicity.

Divine simplicity places constraints on what makes theological predications true. It should also be possible to *know* the truths stated by theological predications. This is a separate, epistemological constraint: metaphysical considerations need to accommodate obstacles to theological predications being true, most notably obstacles stemming from divine simplicity. The epistemological constraints concern what it takes for theological *beliefs*<sup>2</sup> to not only be true, but knowledge. If a theory secures the truth of theological predications, but entails that theological beliefs are at risk of being false, the theory implies theological skepticism. Even if the metaphysical constraints on a theory of theological predication are satisfied, it might fail to be satisfactory on epistemological grounds, since knowledge requires more than truth. It is worth looking into whether a theory of theological predication can meet these additional demands.

## 2 Two epistemological constraints

In this section I will spell out two plausible epistemological constraints on a theory of theological predications. I do not intend to claim that these are non-negotiable constraints. But they are plausible as general guidelines to the features a theory of theological predications must have in order to avoid skepticism. I call the constraints a *general* derivability constraint and a *specific* derivability constraint. These constraints are not original; I will briefly note arguments from the medieval Christian, Jewish, and Islamic traditions that suggest similar epistemic constraints.

### 2.1 *The general derivability constraint*

First, a theological predication should be the kind of claim that which can be derived from non-theological premises. Our theological knowledge is often based on our knowledge of the natural world, and so arriving at knowledge of divine predications should not require having some antecedent theological (non-natural) knowledge. One especially secure way to acquire theological knowledge is to be able to deduce theological predications from naturally known premises, by means of a valid argument.

The *general derivability constraint* holds that there should be no in-principle barrier to deriving theological predications from (known) non-theological premises, and thereby knowing theological predications on this basis. Take as an example a version of “Perfect Being Theology” which holds that beliefs in theological predications are established by reference to the fact that they imply a maximal degree of perfection in God (viz., God would be less-than-perfect if these predication in question were false).<sup>3</sup> For example, one might come to know that God is powerful, according to Perfect Being Theology, by way of the following argument:

Having power (in creatures) is a perfection;

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<sup>2</sup>By a *theological belief*, I mean a belief in the content of a theological predication.

<sup>3</sup>See Leftow (2012) and Speaks (2014) for discussion.

God possesses every perfection in the highest degree;

Therefore, God has power in the highest degree (i.e., is omnipotent).

This argument does not ensure that the general derivability constraint is met if 'has power' does not have the same meaning throughout the argument, since the argument is not valid. According to an analogical view, 'power' in the conclusion does not mean the same thing as its occurrence in the first premise, since it 'power' applies to creatures in the premise, but to God in the conclusion. We can represent a non-univocal view with these general features without prejudging the details of its implementation, by saying that 'power' means  $\text{power}_{\text{creature}}$  in the first premise, and it means  $\text{power}_{\text{God}}$  in the conclusion.  $\text{Power}_{\text{God}}$  is something only God, as a simple and infinite being, has. God does not have  $\text{power}_{\text{creature}}$ , which properly applies only to complex, finite creatures. If the premises and conclusion are true, then the argument is invalid:

Having  $\text{power}_{\text{creature}}$  (in creatures) is a perfection;

God possesses every perfection in the highest degree;

Therefore, God has  $\text{power}_{\text{God}}$  in the highest degree (i.e., is omnipotent).

It is worth reiterating that the premises and conclusion in this argument are *true*. So the target of the present discussion is not whether an analogical theory can accommodate the truth of theological predications. That is granted. However, non-univocity means that we cannot ensure that knowledge of the conclusion is possible, since the argument is invalid. I will return to this issue in more detail in §3. For now, I will simply note the formal point which is captured by the general derivability constraint: without a valid argument for theoretical predications, we leave open the possibility of theological skepticism. Since a non-univocal treatment of theological predications entails that this is a common feature of all theological predications, failure to meet the general derivability constraint for a theory of theological predications closes off one important route to knowledge.

A version of this point is anticipated in argument found in Duns Scotus's *Ordinatio*. Scotus argues against a version of a Thomistic analogical theory of theological predications on the grounds syllogisms with theological conclusions are not valid on the analogical view:

[F]rom the proper notion of anything found in creatures nothing at all can be inferred about God, for the notion of what is in each is wholly different. We would have no more reason to conclude that God is formally wise from the notion of wisdom derived from creatures than we would have reason to conclude that God is formally a stone.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>*Ordinatio* I.3.2.40; Wolter (1987: 25)

Scotus's view is that, on the analogical view, the premises concerning creatures and their perfections give us "no reason" to reach theological conclusions such as that God is wise<sub>God</sub>. As far as a valid argument which yields a knowledge-producing demonstration goes, the claims that God is wise<sub>God</sub> is related to the premises in the same way the claim that God is a stone is related to the premises. Neither is a logical consequence of a set of premises which includes claims only about wisdom<sub>creature</sub>.

The essentials of this argument are: (i) if theological predication is analogical, we cannot have demonstrations of theological predications, and (ii) in the absence of a demonstration, we will not have the resources to reach theological knowledge, even if we do arrive at true beliefs. The conclusion Scotus recommends is to reject the antecedent of (i): (iii) if valid syllogisms are to provide knowledge of God, theological predication must be univocal.

This point is not necessarily limited to inferences through logically valid derivations, which would be required for the kind of demonstration Scotus has in mind. In the Islamic philosophical tradition, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Sharh al-Ishārāt wa-l-tanbīhāt*, presents a number of arguments in favor of the univocity of existence. Like Scotus, he introduces epistemological constraints, and argues that only a univocal theory of existence will satisfy these constraints. But he does not rely on the need for a demonstration for knowledge. For instance, in the following passage, he argues that without a univocal theory of existence, we will not be able to know of ordinary objects that they exist, without inspecting each individually:

[That is] because, since the existence in any thing is different from another's existence, there will not be one and the same thing about which it is judged that it is not something common. Instead, there will be infinitely many things understood and in order to recognize whether [existence] is something common or not it will be necessary that one consider each one of them.<sup>5</sup>

In this argument, al-Rāzī targets a view he attributes to Avicenna, which is that 'exists' means something different when applied to God and creatures. Avicenna holds that 'exists' is univocal when applied only to creatures. But al-Rāzī is asking whether it is possible to *know* ("recognize") that this is so, given Avicenna's commitments. The challenge he presents is intriguing, if not compelling, when it is read as follows: how can we know that any two creatures exist in the same sense, without examining them individually? If 'exists' is not univocal, as Avicenna holds, then there is always the possibility that an unexamined creature exists in a different sense. The argument is a *reductio*: suppose that 'exists' is not univocal. Then, there is a possibility that any two creatures exist in different senses. Since we don't have to examine creatures individually in order to know that they exist

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<sup>5</sup>al-Dīn al Rāzī (n.d.)

in the same sense, 'exists' must be univocal, even when applied to God.<sup>6</sup>

## 2.2 *The specific derivability constraint*

Even if theological predications, when believed, are not intrinsically incapable of being knowledge, we have not necessary done enough to secure theological knowledge and avoid skepticism. A theological predication which can in principle be demonstrated, but is not entailed by any knowledge we have, is also unknowable. Thus we need theological predications to satisfy what I will call the *specific derivability requirement* as well.

Maimonides famously holds that theological predications, if true, must contain (perhaps disguised) *negative* predicates.<sup>7</sup> For example, the true theological predication 'God is powerful' means roughly that God is *not limited*. This need not be the meaning of 'power' when predicated of creatures. Since creatures are complex, a positive attribute of power, and not merely what is captured by the negative statement, can be truly ascribed by such predications.

Maimonides is not satisfied simply to hold that the appropriate negative predicates are true of God. He also emphasizes the role having a demonstration plays in coming to know theological predications. For Maimonides, we can in general demonstrate that any true theological predication *must* be a negative predication, and moreover demonstrate relatively specific negative theological predications: that God is one (there is no multiplicity in God), that God is eternal (is not limited by time), that God is incorporeal (is not a body) and so on.<sup>8</sup> This is a more demanding desideratum than what the general derivability constraint requires. While the general derivability constraint requires that theological predications be logically capable of serving as the conclusion of a demonstration, Maimonides aims to show that specific claims about God can actually be derived. This is the *specific derivability constraint*.

Maimonides says someone who has grasped a demonstration that God is not a body is "nearer to God" than someone who does not grasp a particular of this fact, but that someone who in addition grasps the general proof that no "affection" can be predicated of God is more perfect still.<sup>9</sup> He goes one to say that the perfection is a certain epistemological status: one "ought to come nearer to an apprehension of Him by means of investigation and research: namely, in order that one should know the impossibility of everything that is impossible with reference to Him", whereas those that fail to do this "get further away from the knowledge of His true reality".<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Perhaps the argument is not completely compelling because there could be additional information available, which allows us to deduce that it is only God that would exist in a different sense, if 'exists' is not univocal.

<sup>7</sup>Maimonides (1974: Chs. 50-60)

<sup>8</sup>Maimonides (1974: Ch. 57, 132-3)

<sup>9</sup>Maimonides (1974: Ch. 59, 138)

<sup>10</sup>Maimonides (1974: Ch. 59, 139)

To take one of Maimonides's examples, consider the theological belief that God is one. Let us add to the case that the believer in this instance has not considered whether the theological predication 'God is one' is a positive predication, ascribing something like *oneness* to God, or rather simply denies that there is multiplicity in God. Call this a *naïve believer*. Following Maimonides, we can suppose that only the latter, negative, claim is true. Some off-the-shelf views about meaning and knowledge suggest that, in this case, the naïve believer has a true belief that God is one, but not knowledge.

On many theories of content-determination, this belief is *true*, even if one hasn't done the work to specify exactly how one understands its content. Take for instance the idea that interpretation is partly governed by a "principle of charity".<sup>11</sup> Such a principle favors interpreting the belief of the naïve believer as the true belief in the negative predication *there is no multiplicity in God*, because this is the most charitable interpretation. It is plausible that the naïve believer will have a true belief in a situation where the believer does nothing further to determine the content of the belief expressed by the sentence 'God is one'.<sup>12</sup>

In circumstances like these where the naïve believer has a true belief that there is no multiplicity in God, knowledge might well be absent. For Maimonides, the naïve believer does not arrive at the true belief by way of a demonstration that 'God is one' can only be true as a negative predication, and so is true because there is no multiplicity in God. Maimonides might well think this because he connects special epistemic value to believing on the basis of a demonstration, specifically. However, Maimonides's conclusion is plausible even if we don't attach special importance to having a demonstration for one's beliefs.

### 2.3 Generalizing the constraints

A demonstration is not necessary for knowledge. Knowledge, on the gloss I am relying on here, requires the absence of risk of a false belief. While a demonstration from known premises is one way to avoid this kind of risk, it is not the only way. Once we step back from a tight connection between demonstration and knowledge, however, analogues of the general and specific derivability requirements still stand. I will sketch the formal framework here, and then draw attention to two applications in the next section.

Deduction is a means of extending one's knowledge<sup>13</sup> because deducing

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<sup>11</sup>Davidson (1974)

<sup>12</sup>Charity is not the only interpretive principle that delivers this result. Two other plausible constraints on interpretation are worth mentioning here: first, an *eligibility* constraint, on which certain interpretations are more eligible than others: this, for instance, is what some hold makes *green* a more eligible interpretation than *grue*. (Lewis 1983) Second, communal *deference* may play a role: Putnam reports not being able to tell the difference between beech and elm trees (Putnam 1981) but presumably means *beech* by his word 'beech' because he defers to a linguistic community which includes experts which can tell the difference. That either of these resources will help to explain why the naïve believer means *there is no multiplicity in God* is worth exploring further.

<sup>13</sup>Williamson (2000: 255)

a conclusion from known premises is *guaranteed* to produce knowledge of the conclusion. If one believes the premises of a valid argument without any relevant risk of a false belief, then there is no risk of a false belief in the conclusion, since it must be true if the premises are. Deduction is “globally reliable”.<sup>14</sup>

To illustrate, take any valid argument whose premises  $p_1 \dots p_n$  are known. Since the premises are known, this means that they are both true, and one’s belief in them is free from the risk of false belief. That is, one could not easily have falsely believed  $p_1$ , one could not easily have falsely believed  $p_2$ , and so on. The conclusion,  $C$ , that these premises logically imply also could not easily have been falsely believed.<sup>15</sup> The reason is that deduction is guaranteed to preserve truth. So, deduction preserves not only the actual truth of one’s belief in the conclusion; it also guarantees that one does not falsely believe the conclusion in nearby worlds as well. It thereby preserves knowledge in addition to true belief.

Not all methods for acquiring knowledge are globally reliable. Some belief-forming processes are “locally reliable”: even perception could, in the right circumstances, be unreliable. It takes more than the failure of global reliability to show that knowledge is absent in a particular case. Instead, we can accuse a theory of theological predication of failing to accommodate knowledge only if theological beliefs fail to be even locally reliable. The distinction between global and local reliable processes is not the same as the distinction between the general and specific derivability constraints: our abductive inferences are locally reliable only, but when we use them to come to know e.g. the laws of physics, we know propositions that are generally derivable, since they are the kinds of claim that can be known. If there is a possibility that ‘exists’ is not univocal as applied to individual creatures, then as al-Rāzī points out, the inference from the fact that all observed creatures exist in once sense ( $\text{exist}_1$ ) to the conclusion that some unobserved individual exists<sub>1</sub> is unreliable. It could be that it exists<sub>2</sub>. Believing the conclusion that a specific individual exists<sub>1</sub> without observing the individual cannot be knowledge.

A theory of theological predication will violate a version of the general derivability constraint if it holds that theological predications are the type of claim that must be accompanied by risk of a false belief, if believed at all. Roughly, a theological predication  $t_1$  fails the general derivability constraint if, whenever  $t_1$  is believed, one could easily have falsely believed  $t_1$ . But this is only very rough: risk can be realized even if the proposition one believes could not easily have changed its truth-value.<sup>16</sup> This raises an important refinement to the anti-risk constraint on knowledge, which will be important below: one can have a true belief that

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<sup>14</sup>Goldman (1986)

<sup>15</sup>So long as it is believed on the basis of a valid deduction from the known premises  $p_1 \dots p_n$ —I will leave this qualification implicit below.

<sup>16</sup>For instance, I might believe the mathematical claim that  $735 + 1,599 = 2,334$ . I could not easily have believed precisely this proposition falsely, since necessarily  $735 + 1,599$  equals  $2,334$ . But mathematical knowledge is not so easy to come by; if I had happened to guess the correct sum, my guess doesn’t amount to knowledge just because  $735 + 1,599$  is necessarily  $2,334$ .

fails to be knowledge by being at risk of falsely believing a sufficiently *similar* proposition.<sup>17</sup> So, risk in believing  $t_1$  is not limited to nearby scenarios where one believes  $t_1$  and  $t_1$  is false. One can be at risk in other ways as well, for instance by believing some similar theological claim  $t_2$  in a nearby scenario where  $t_2$  is false but  $t_1$  is true.<sup>18</sup>

Even if a theological predication does not make theological beliefs intrinsically subject to this kind of risk, a theory of theological predication might entail that common ways of arriving at a theological belief will generate risk. This is what gives rise to Maimonides's criticism of those who do not arrive at theological beliefs through a demonstration that the belief must be a belief in a negative proposition. One could truly believe that there is no multiplicity in God, but if one believes this as a naive believer, Maimonides holds, one has no knowledge. This is not an intrinsic feature of the theological predication. Instead, knowledge is absent only for the naive believer, and not for someone who believes the theological predication with an accompanying demonstration.

Risk provides a framework for filling out this second epistemological constraint. Inferring that one's belief in the theological predication 'God is one' is a belief in the proposition that there is no multiplicity in God eliminates any risk of a false belief. Since one knows that the proposition must be negated, one is not at risk of believing that 'God is one' predicates an attribute of God. Not everyone is shielded from this risk, however; the naive believer does not possess this demonstration and so is at risk of believing the (false) positive predication. This false belief is not *identical* to the true belief that there is no multiplicity in God. However, if it is similar enough, the possibility of forming such a belief can make a true theological belief fail to be knowledge.

These generalized epistemological constraints on theological predication can be summarized as follows. One is the *general knowability constraint*, which holds that theological beliefs must be beliefs in propositions that can in principle be known. Given the refinements above, the general knowability constraint amounts to the requirement that theological beliefs can in principle be beliefs that are free from the risk of being false beliefs in similar theological propositions.

The second is the *specific knowability constraint*, which requires of theological predications that there be some specific way of coming to believe the relevant predications, which does not entail that theological beliefs arrived at in this way could easily have been false. There might be no in-principle source of risk for a theological predication, which allows it to satisfy the general knowability constraint. But if a proposed process for coming to believe the theological predication introduces risk, then we are like Maimonides's naive believer, and fail to know the relevant theological claims. The way to satisfy the specific knowability constraint is to propose, like Maimonides, a process for coming to

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<sup>17</sup>Thus, correctly guessing a mathematical sum is not a route to knowledge, because one is at risk of guessing e.g., that  $735 + 1,599 = 2,198$ , and thereby having a false belief which is sufficiently similar to the belief that  $735 + 1,599 = 2,334$ .

<sup>18</sup>Cf. Williamson (2000), Hawthorne (2004)

believe theological predications which allows for those predications to be believed without the risk of a false belief.

### 3 Theological knowledge

We can now turn to applying these constraints to some more recent views about theological predication that have appeared in the philosophy of religion literature. I will argue that recent recent attempts at a theory of divine predication fail on the epistemological constraints. Some fail to provide an account of theological predications which makes them knowable by any normal belief-forming process.<sup>19</sup> These violate the general knowability constraint. Other accounts of theological predication do not imply that theological beliefs are not intrinsically unknowable. But these accounts are not out of the woods, since they violate the specific knowability constraint. Typical ways in which humans come to belief theological truths, so understood, will introduce knowledge-destroying risk.

In making these criticisms I am, in one way, not addressing these views on their own terms. Discussions of theological predication are, in the contemporary literature, almost exclusively metaphysical discussions. They aim to characterize what the truth of a theological predication consists in. These theories might be successful in this aim; I am not contesting the metaphysical adequacy of the accounts I discuss below, and instead am evaluating them in light of an additional epistemological constraint. I have suggested in previous sections that epistemological constraints are plausible and are, moreover, constraints that have historically been recognized in some form. Perhaps there is no ideal theory that can meet both the metaphysical and epistemological constraints on a good theory; I will not argue that all *desiderata* can simultaneously be satisfied. In that case we will have to choose between competing virtues for our favored theory of theological predication. I will briefly return to this point in the conclusion.

#### 3.1 *The general knowability constraint*

In applying the general knowability constraint to contemporary discussions of theological predication, the central complaint I will raise is that contemporary proponents of analogy fail to articulate a view on which theological predications can be known, because they fail to articulate an adequately precise view of what true theological predications are. A simple negative characterization, on which theological predications are not univocal, is not enough: there are multiple ways in which predications can be analogous, and most of the analogous meanings for these predications will be false when applied to God. A simple denial of univocity,

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<sup>19</sup>'Normal' belief-forming processes include deduction or abductive inference from naturally known premises, and other ways of using normal belief forming processes which eliminate the risk of a false belief. I do not include belief-forming processes that involve supernatural intervention, which many in the illuminationist tradition hold is necessary for theological knowledge. I have discussed the epistemology of illumination in Dunaway (2018).

supplemented with some vague gestures at what the “analogy” relation amounts to, will fail to eliminate the risk of false theological beliefs. There are too many candidate meanings for theological predicates that satisfy the theory.

Here are two examples. Wolterstorff (2005) says that the analogical treatment of theological predications found in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae* is not a doctrine according to which theological *predicates* such as ‘wise’, ‘good’, and ‘powerful’, have different meanings when applied to God. (Wolterstorff 2005: 128-9) Instead, Wolterstorff argues, the view of the *Summa* is that these predicates are predicated of God in a “different way” than ordinary predicates. Wolterstorff says, “It is the *act of predicating* that is not univocal—or, if you prefer, the force of the copula”, and concludes “Those contemporary theologians who hold that no terms apply literally to God have no support for their contention in Aquinas, nor do those slightly more guarded ones who hold that predicate terms that apply to God never have the same sense as those that apply to creatures”.<sup>20</sup>

Wolterstorff does not intend to endorse the analogical view found in Aquinas, as he interprets it. If, however, it is on the right track as an interpretation of Aquinas’s view, his doctrine is inadequate on epistemological grounds. Wolterstorff claims to find in Aquinas would have significant epistemological difficulties. If the nature of theological predication involves a distinct way of predicating, as Wolterstorff describes, then theological predications cannot be known.

The simple reason for this is that Wolterstorff does nothing to tell us what the alternative mode of predication is. It cannot be identity. It is true that many analogical theories of predication hold that God is identical with his goodness, and with his wisdom, and so on. Since, on Wolterstorff’s view, the predicates ‘wise’, ‘good’, etc. themselves mean the same thing when applied to God and creatures, and it is only the “mode” of predication that differs, then the “mode” of predication cannot be one according to which ‘God is wise’ means that God is identical to (God’s) wisdom. If this were so, then ‘Socrates is wise’ would predicate, in the ordinary way, God’s wisdom to Socrates. Ex hypothesi, God’s wisdom is identical to God’s goodness, and God himself. But these latter things are not predicated of Socrates by ‘Socrates is wise’. So, contra Wolterstorff, the meaning of the predicates ‘wise’, ‘good’, etc. would also differ from their ordinary meanings if the ‘is’ in theological predications was the ‘is’ of identity. If we are to retain Wolterstorff’s interpretation, a more sophisticated theory of the mode of predication is needed.

Wolterstorff offers none. This is unsatisfying for basic philosophical reasons, as we might wish to know, in some detail, what theological predications mean. But the problems go beyond this, if we take the general knowability constraint into account. If there is nothing more to be said about what the copula in the true predication ‘God is wise’ means, then there is no method available to us to reliably *believe* the true theological predication, rather than a false predication with a meaning for the copula that is inappropriate to predications of perfections

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<sup>20</sup>Wolterstorff (2005: 130)

to God.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even assuming Wolterstorff's analogical theory is true, it does not make theological predications knowable.

As a second example, Bonevac (2012) similarly offers a theory of theological predication that fails the general knowability constraint, even though he explicitly acknowledges the relevance of epistemological considerations.<sup>22</sup> Bonevac says that the "function" of theological predications is "epistemological", and although he is not clear about what he means by this, he does say that his non-univocal theory of theological predication serves the function of "reducing, from an epistemic point of view, a highly complex and indeed practically unmanageable problem to a more manageable problem, one we can solve by means available to us." (Bonevac 2012: §3)

As he frames it, the central aspect to the proposal is a "Turing reduction" of divine predicates to creaturely predicates, which consists in a method for deciding whether a predicate applies to an infinite God, given that a distinct predicate applies to a finite creature. The method which is relevant for Turing reductions is the logical notion of *computability*: "Say that *G* is *Turing reducible* to *H* if and only if there would be an algorithm for solving *G* if a subroutine were available to solve *H*." (Bonevac 2012: §3) Bonevac concedes that the applicability of a divine predicate, on this account, does not deductively follow from the fact that a related creaturely predicate applies: because verifying that the Turing-reduced predicate applies would require completing an infinite task, no finite creature will possess a deduction. Still, he claims that, though defeasible, beliefs about theological predications on this account can produce knowledge.

But Bonevac provides no picture of what the "reduction" of divine to creaturely predicates looks like. There is nothing analogous to an algorithm we employ to decide whether the creaturely concepts of wisdom, goodness, and so on apply to a particular individual. Thus, there is no clear sense in which theological predications of wisdom and goodness, even in principle, could be decidable on the basis for the routine for applying creaturely predicates. We could, of course, relax the presupposition that in ordinary cases, concept application involves the application of an *algorithm*. Clearly there is *some* procedure for deciding whether Socrates is good, wise, and so on. But this does not help: being told that application of the divine concepts of wisdom and goodness is

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<sup>21</sup>Wolterstorff does have something to say about what the mode of predication to creatures amounts to—he says "In assertively uttering "God is alive" and assertively uttering "Joe is alive," we are predicating the same "form" of two different things. But given our other conviction, that God "participates" in perfections as a simple being whereas Joe participates in them as a complex being, we would say that we are claiming a different relationship to hold in the two cases—though not entirely different, since in both cases we can describe the subject as "participating in" what is designated by the predicate term. (Wolterstorff 2005: 126) This perhaps gives some clue as to what creaturely predication amounts to, but "participation" is not a helpful description of the relationship between an absolutely simple God and his perfections.

<sup>22</sup>Bonevac, as the title of the paper suggests, actually proposes two unrelated theories of analogical predication. The first theory, which relies on the logical notion of a "homomorphism", does not raise the epistemological problems that I aim to discuss in this paper, so I will not discuss it here.

decided by procedures that “reduce” to the procedures used in the creaturely case simply provides almost no guidance. There are many candidate concepts of divine perfections that are applied in a manner that has some relationship to the application of a concept of a creaturely perfection. If some of these concepts express truths when applied to God, we will need to be told more about how they reduce to the creaturely concepts, in order to reliably ensure that we use the right concepts in our theological predications.

The lack of specificity on this point generates a violation of the general knowability constraint. The epistemological question of whether we can know theological predications depends on a method for reliably determining which theological predicates are “Turing reducible”, in the appropriate sense, to creaturely predicates. There are, in principle, many analogues of wisdom that could be predicated of God. Call these ‘wisdom<sub>1</sub>’, ‘wisdom<sub>2</sub>’, and so on. Even if one of these analogues of the creaturely predicate ‘wise’ does apply to God, there is no way of generating even defeasible reason to believe that this is so by referring to the relationship between criteria for applying these predicates. We have some criteria for deciding whether ‘wise’ applies to creatures, but as long as ‘wisdom<sub>1</sub>’, ‘wisdom<sub>2</sub>’, etc. all have some criteria for application that resembles those for ‘wise’, this expanded notion of “Turing reducibility” does nothing to help us know which of these truly apply to God. This is not a reiteration of Bonevac’s concession that the conclusions of an analogical process of reasoning are defeasible. Instead, since the theory gives no almost constraints on which of the potentially analogically related predicates ‘wisdom<sub>1</sub>’, ‘wisdom<sub>2</sub>’ produce truths, anyone believing a theological predication will be at risk of forming a false belief.<sup>23</sup>

### 3.2 *The specific knowability constraint*

Even if theological predications are not *intrinsically* unknowable, it does not follow that they are known, even by those that manage to have true theological beliefs. Recall that, for Maimonides, someone who truly believes a theological perfection but does not have a demonstration for it, is less perfect than someone who believes the same thing, but on the basis of a demonstration Maimonides’s point is an epistemological one; knowledge of a theological predication that comes by way of a demonstration is better than mere true belief.

The specific knowability constraint extends this idea to ways of acquiring knowledge aside from demonstrations. I will illustrate the importance of this constraint in connection with Willam Alston’s view in “Functionalism and Theological Language”. Alston puts forward a univocal theory of theological predication

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<sup>23</sup>The risk that is incompatible with knowledge in this case consists in the nearby presence of false theological beliefs that are similar, but not identical, to true theological beliefs. Suppose one believes that God is wise<sub>1</sub>, and that this belief is true. Nonetheless ‘wise<sub>1</sub>’ is not any more privileged in its analogical relationship to wisdom than other predicates such as ‘wise<sub>2</sub>’, ‘wise<sub>3</sub>’, etc., and one could easily have falsely believed the similar but false theological predication that God is wise<sub>2</sub>’ instead.

which is designed to accommodate the fact that ordinary predicates, as we actually use them, do not truly apply to God. The key insight behind Alston's proposal is that even if our ordinary concepts do not truly apply to God, there are other, related concepts, which are such that we can use the *same* concept to express truths about both God and creatures.

The key to Alston's view is a *functionalist* account of concepts. This is the claim that our concepts specify a functional role, and refer to something only if there is something that satisfies the relevant role. Alston's main example is the concept BELIEF, which is used to formulate the true theological predication *God has beliefs*. But our ordinary concept BELIEF will not do this job. The ordinary concept specifies a particular functional role which involves the following components:

**Responsiveness** *b* is a state that tends to be formed in response to evidence;

**Production** *b* is a state that tends to produce other similar states that are entailed by it;

**Behavior guidance** *b* is a state that, when held in conjunction with appropriate desires, is such that it is part of the causal explanation for action.<sup>24</sup>

To illustrate why Alston thinks the functionalist view of concepts allows for univocal theological predication, begin with what Alston says of the **Production** component of the belief-role in the following passage:

One of the functions that makes a belief that *p* the state it is, is its tendency to enter with other beliefs into inference that generate further beliefs. Thus the belief that Jim is Sam's only blood-related uncle tends to give rise to the belief that Sam's parents have only one brother between them; it also tends to combine with the beliefs that Jim is childless and that Sam has no aunt to produce the belief that Sam has no first cousins. (Alston 1985: 288)

As Alston is aware, this gloss on **Production** as a component of the functional role of belief implies that on orthodox theological views, God cannot strictly speaking have beliefs. For instance it is an implication of **Production** that the BELIEF-role is only satisfied by someone who forms beliefs in the implications of other beliefs over time and, moreover, believes these implications on the basis of their relationship to other believed claims.

For a number of reasons, the implication that God forms belief via inference is false on orthodox views of God. It implies that God is contained in time, and changes, among other things. This means that the **Production** component of the

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<sup>24</sup>This is just part of a first-pass at the components of the functional role for belief; according to the functionalist theory, once we fill out the role with additional components, *belief* will be the unique state that satisfies the conjunction of these claims. Moreover, this account of concepts is supposed to be quite general. Similar characterizations are available for the concepts of KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM, and so on.

functional role associate with our belief concept does not apply to God. This is just one problem with applying one component of the functional role of BELIEF to God. Similar problems could be raised for other components of the BELIEF-role, and for application of other concepts to God as well. Alston mentions similar difficulties arise in light of God's timelessness (p. 226), incorporeality (p. 225), infinitude (p. 226), the relationship between value and God's action (p. 227), and omniscience (p. 228). The upshot is that the functional roles associated with most of our concepts do not apply to God. Strictly speaking, God doesn't have beliefs. The same goes for any other theological predication we would state using our ordinary concepts.

Instead of treating this as a reason to retreat to a non-univocal view of theological predication, Alston claims that we can simply modify our existing concepts to remove functional roles that do not apply to God. For instance even if the **Production** component of the BELIEF-role doesn't apply to God, there are still be other aspects of the functional role that do apply to God. At the very least this involves having states that serve the role of accurately representing how things are, and are related to each other by relations of logical implication. This is a stripped down functional role for belief—it includes only a part of the full functional role of what we call "beliefs" in humans—but it is one that in principle applies to both, and satisfies the criteria for univocity.

To emphasize, the concept we apply to God when we ascribe beliefs is not one that includes **Production** in its functional role. Instead it includes a "stripped down" version of **Production**, and the same goes for the other components of the functional role of belief, such as **Responsiveness** and **Behavior guidance**. The stripped down functional role will not require that the things they apply to exist in time, undergo change, and the like. We can truly say 'God has beliefs', using 'belief' in a sense that also produces a truth when applied to humans. This works, so long as we are using a concept BELIEF that includes only the stripped-down role, and not the full role that is associated with 'belief' in ordinary English.

Let us grant that this secures the truth of certain univocal theological predications. Still, the account violates the specific knowability constraint.

There are many other functional roles besides the full role that consists in **Responsiveness, Production, and Behavior Guidance**, and the stripped down role outlined above. By simply removing dimensions from the full functional role, we can arrive at any number of alternative functional roles that are both distinct from the full functional role and distinct from the fully stripped down role. Each of these characterizes an alternative notion of "belief". To take one example: there is also a *slightly less* stripped down functional role that denies **Production** but leaves **Responsiveness** and **Behavior guidance** in the role in original form. This is a *partially stripped down* functional role for belief. Many others are available as well; for instance another partially stripped down concept removes the temporal aspect of **Production** but leaves in place the implication that some beliefs are based on others.

Partially stripped down roles also characterize belief-like concepts that are distinct from ordinary belief. They apply to human beliefs (since they are logically weaker than the full belief-role), but do not apply to God. If one were to use a concept characterized by the a partially stripped down role to believe 'God has beliefs', one would believe something false.

Partially stripped down concepts have epistemic consequences for Alston's view of theological predications. If knowing that God is good, God is wise, etc., requires not being at risk of having a similar false belief, then many theological beliefs will, given Alston's view, fail to be known. Any theological belief that is formed with a merely partially stripped down concept will be false: we need to reach all the way to a fully stripped concept in order to arrive at a concept that truly applies to God. Since there are numerous concepts like this, there will be many ways to form false theological beliefs.

Someone who forms a true theological belief using a fully stripped down concept could easily have used only a partially stripped down concept. For most, it will be incredibly easy to use one of the concepts characterized by a partially stripped down role, instead of using the concept characterized by the fully stripped down role. Reliably using the fully stripped down role to form theological beliefs requires serious theological acumen. For instance, it requires knowing that God is timeless, that God's knowledge is immediate, and so on, and then using this knowledge to pare down the functional roles associated with our ordinary concepts, in order to arrive at new concepts that univocally and truly apply to God. Almost no one will successfully do this. And most of those that do this successfully will rely on a significant amount of luck to get it right.

The specific knowability constraint requires that, even if theological predications are in principle knowable, we use an appropriate method for coming to know them. Theological beliefs, on Alston's picture, are not inevitably at risk of being false. So they do not fail the general derivability constraint. Alston's view does imply, however, that the usual ways of forming theological beliefs will not generate knowledge. Alston has, in other words, attempted to show that a univocal view of theological predication is consistent with the *truth* of common theological predications for most. But if he has succeeded, he has done so at the cost of knowledge of these predications. Very few of those who form theological beliefs will not only use the right stripped down concepts, but also arrive at them in a way that eliminates the risk of using the wrong, partially stripped down, concepts. Theological knowledge, on this view, is not impossible, but it is rare.

#### **4 Conclusion**

The literature on theological predication is right to focus in the first instance on the metaphysics of predications of perfections to God. However, the metaphysics of theological predication is not the only relevant consideration. I have argued that medieval discussions of theological predication from Maimonides, al-Razi,

and Duns Scotus also took the epistemology of theological predication seriously. Their accounts are not only intrinsically compelling to some extent; they also have been ignored by more recent discussions of theological predication. With some fairly simple assumptions about what knowledge requires—in particular, the assumption that knowledge requires the absence of a risk of false belief—it is straightforward to show that recent accounts of theological predication that are focused on the metaphysics of theological predication entail that such predications are impossible or very difficult to know. This may not be a fatal flaw; it is consistent to hold that theological predications are true but unknowable, or very difficult to know. However, if this is the right response—and I am not suggesting that it is—then the

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