Religion without God? Approaches to Theological Reference in Modern and Contemporary Jewish Thought

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Abstract: Recent scholarship on both ancient and modern Judaism has criticized the identification of Judaism as a religion. From the perspective of the modern period, what has remained unaddressed is the very peculiar religion that Jewish philosophers and theologians have formed. Numerous scholars with varying philosophical and religious commitments depict Judaism as a religion in which belief plays a negligible role and reference to God is tenuous if not impossible. This article charts three trends in modern and contemporary Jewish thought on the subject of theological reference: restricted referentialism, ostensive referentialism, and theological referentialism. The article concludes by discussing new developments in the theory of reference that can further the work of the theological referentialists and help revitalize Jewish theology.

Keywords: Jewish theology; Jewish philosophy; modern Jewish thought; philosophy of language; reference; philosophy of religion

1. Introduction

Recent scholarship on ancient and modern Judaism has questioned the identification of Judaism as a religion.[1] To the extent that scholars are calling attention to the historicity of the concept of religion and its increasingly privatized account of the religious life, this research comes as a salutary and important corrective to the distortions that arise from a facile projection of modern categories on the past. Historians, and particularly historians of Judaism, principally encounter the past in the two-dimensions of a textual body that is often written by and for elites. The conceptual tools historians use to reconstruct the past from a limited and often ideological body of evidence play a decisive role in our ability to envision a world that is not ours. To argue that Judaism in the ancient world is not synonymous with modern conceptions of religion paves the way for a more nuanced account of Jewish life in the ancient world.

Transposing the critique of Judaism as a religion to the modern period alters the terms of the debate in significant ways. Imposing our conceptual categories on the past occurs automatically and unconsciously; we simply assume that the ancients carved out reality in the same ways as we do. In contrast, Jews in the modern period were aware of the evolving notion of religion and at times sought to present Judaism on these new terms. While the ability to trace these conscientious efforts to refigure Judaism appear to lend support to those who would criticize the reduction of Judaism to religion, the realities of the present impose themselves on the discussion in a manner that does not occur when one seeks to refine a mental reconstruction of the past. For instance, even if we accept the

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1 (Nongbri 2013; Barton and Boyarin 2016; Boyarin 2018; Batnitzky 2011).

claim that some scholars of Judaism sought to reduce Judaism to its religious content, we must ask ourselves what difference those efforts have made? According to the Pew Research Center's much discussed survey, "A Portrait of Jewish Americans," 62% of American Jews understand their Jewish identity as "mainly a matter of ancestry" while only 15% said it is "mainly a matter of religion."[2] Only 26% of Jews said that religion was very important in their lives[3] and only 31% of Jews claimed to belong to a synagogue.[4] Not surprisingly, 76% of the interviewees said they go to synagogue a few times a year or less.[5] If Jewish scholars have sought to reduce Judaism to a religion, it seems that their efforts have had little impact on contemporary American Jews.

This raises the question of what insight is meant to be gleaned from the critique of Judaism as a religion in the modern period. Leora Batnitzky argues that "before Jews received the rights of citizenship, Judaism was not a religion, and Jewishness was not a matter of culture or nationality. Rather, Judaism and Jewishness were all of these at once: religion, culture, and nationality."[6] Batnizky's account of Judaism's transformation into a religion runs parallel to the rise of the modern state and Jews' efforts to secure citizenship, a goal that required sacrificing Jewish political interests to those of the state. If the point of the critique of Judaism as a religion is to suggest that contemporary Judaism has naively abandoned the political interests of the Jewish people, it is difficult to make that claim square with reality. The rightward turn in Israel and the fact that institutionalized Judaism in America is deeply aligned with AIPAC (the American Israel Public Affairs Committee) suggest that for many Jews, politics and Jewish national interests remain intertwined.[7]

Leaving aside the questions of whether the critique of Judaism as a religion captures the complexity of contemporary Jewish identity or the political engagement of Jewish communities in America and Israel, it is certainly true that, among other things, we now identify Judaism as a religion. What is not often noted is what a peculiar religion philosophers and theologians have fashioned for the Jewish people. It is widely claimed that belief plays a subsidiary role in Judaism, a religion that we are told prizes action via the observance of the commandments over theology. This conception of Judaism is so pervasive that it appears in reference works and the popular press.[8] Rarely is the idea that belief has a negligible role in Judaism identified as a vestige of the process of transforming Judaism into a religion nor has the methodological soundness or the historical accuracy of this view received the scrutiny it deserves. The pertinent question, I maintain, is not whether Judaism has become, at least in part, a religion, that is an actuality I think scholars can agree upon, but what are

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[2]　(Lugo et al. 2013, p. 8).

[3]　Ibid., p. 72.

[4]　Ibid., p. 60.

[5]　Ibid., p. 75. For comparative purposes, it is helpful to look at a second Pew Research Center survey, "U.S. Public Becoming Less Religious," (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 3 November 2015). The survey is available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2015/11/03/u-s-public-becoming-less-religious/. In this survey, 31% of Jews said that religion is "very important" to them, whereas 66% of Christians made the same claim (Ibid., p. 11). Another 45% of Jews said they seldom or never pray, while that number was only 9% among Christians (Ibid., p. 13). Regarding belief, 41% of Jews said they held an "absolutely certain" belief in God while 80% of Christians claimed such belief (Ibid., p. 48). A statistic relevant to much of the discussion to follow is that only 25% of Jews claimed belief in a personal God, in contrast to 70% of Christians who believe in such a God (Ibid., p. 51). One might take this last statistic as an indication that Jews have come to adopt a more philosophical conception of God than Christians, for whom a personal God is linked to Jesus' incarnation. A more recent Pew Research Center survey suggests this is not the case. When asked if God is all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful, only 30% of Jews affirmed all three attributes while 74% of Christians do understand God on such terms. "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What do They Mean?" (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 25 April 2018), p. 25. The survey is available at: http://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/.

[6]　(Batnitzky 2011, p. 186).

[7]　An anonymous reviewer rightly points out that the majority of American Jews are registered Democrats and disapprove of the Trump Administration. All that I mean to suggest is that the institutions that represent American Jews and shape Jewish identity and interests remain invested in the political well-being of the Jewish people.

[8]　For reference works that minimize the role of theology in Judaism, see (Ford 2005, p. 73; Jacobs and Umansky 2007). The idea that belief plays a minimal role in Judaism is so pervasive that it has recently appeared in two articles in the *New York Times*. In the first article, "Judaism is Alive and Well, Just Evolving," (27 October 2013), J. J. Goldberg states that "in most understandings of Judaism, belief is far less important than action, participation and belonging." The second article is a conversation between Gary Gutting and the philosopher Howard Wettstein (Gutting 2014).

the contours of this new religion? The battle against essentialism that shaped much of 20th century Jewish historiography would suggest caution about construing Judaism, even if only in religious terms, in the singular. Nonetheless, one crucial feature unites depictions of Judaism independent of denominational commitments: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox theologians and philosophers have argued that either we cannot successfully refer to God, or that we can only do so in a highly limited manner, or that the function of Jewish theology does not entail theological reference.[9] I will refer to thinkers adopting such views as "restricted referentialists" with the understanding that the designation covers a spectrum of views, some that allow limited reference to God and others that reject theological reference altogether. To whatever extent Judaism is a religion, it is notable that so many Jewish scholars have adopted a position of restricted referentialism with the implication that Judaism has little to say about God and the divine–human relationship. That such a view would be the rallying cry for Jewish thinkers with such varied religious and philosophical commitments is, to say the least, unexpected.

One way to understand the reticence toward theological reference expressed by Jewish theologians and philosophers is that these thinkers are mindful of the legitimate limits of our theological language. From the Jewish perspective, 20th century philosophy appears as a series of attacks on metaphysics and theology that begins with Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantianism but then gains strength through logical positivism, phenomenology, Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, and postmodern philosophy. As many contemporary Jewish philosophers and theologians have worked within or been influenced by these philosophical streams, it is not surprising that they would see reference to God as problematic. If Jewish thinkers have aligned themselves with the dominant philosophical movements of their times, wherein lies the problem? Renouncing our ability to refer to God undercuts the possibility of a vibrant Jewish theology that can inform us about God and provide compelling accounts of the divine–human relationship. A further concern is that while Jewish thinkers may find philosophical critiques of metaphysics and theology persuasive and, thus, endorse them, they are seldom ready to give up all discussion of God. Often, a residual theology can be found in their writings that takes on a covert character and corrupts the philosophical arguments in which it is embedded. Diminishing theology to a covert enterprise prevents a full-fledged engagement with the theological issues that continue to challenge contemporary Judaism.

To be sure, not all contemporary Jewish philosophers and theologians have adopted forms of restricted referentialism. One intermediate position, exemplified by Buber and Heschel, acknowledges the philosophical problems associated with theological language but still maintains that we can refer ostensively to God, i.e., that we can point to God even if we cannot presume to speak truthfully about the divine. It would seem that what motivates Buber's and Heschel's positions is their adamance about the reality of God. For both thinkers, God is the most real being, a distinction that would prove empty were we not able to identify God in some limited way. In contrast to those who reject or sharply restrict theological reference or limit reference to ostension, a third trend exists within modern and contemporary Jewish thought that seeks to preserve theological reference. Highlighting the work of Jewish referentialists is significant for several reasons. First, in one important instance, the thought of Franz Rosenzweig, it is not uncontroversial whether one designates him a referentialist or not. Recent scholarship has depicted Rosenzweig's thought along non-referential lines, associating him with postliberal, postmetaphysical, Wittgensteinian, or apophatic thought.[10] With respect to Rosenzweig, identifying his implicit and explicit commitment to theological reference advances our understanding

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9   The pervasiveness of these views across all branches of Judaism is best illustrated by Jewish philosophers' and theologians' adoption of Ludwig Wittgenstein's non-theoretical account of religious language. A very partial list of these thinkers includes: (Altmann 1987; Borowitz 2006; Lurie 2012; Mittleman 2009; Putnam 2008; Ross 2004; Sagi 2009; Wettstein 2012). For more on the reception of Wittgenstein's thought among Jewish philosophers and theologians see (Fisher 2015).

10 For Rosenzweig as a postliberal thinker, see (Batnitzky 2000). On Rosenzweig and Heidegger, see (Gordon 2003). For presentations of Rosenzweig as an apophatic thinker, see (Franke 2005; Wolfson 2009).

of the core philosophical and theological positions that support his philosophical system, matters that remain in dispute. Second, drawing attention to the work of the referentialists opens up an important critique about how Judaism has fashioned itself as a religion. Given the categories currently at our disposal to make sense of ourselves and our social order, Judaism has become, at least in part, a religion. Much, of course, hangs upon how we understand religion. For more than two centuries, Jewish thinkers have depicted Judaism as a religion that requires no irrational beliefs and is thus ideally suited for the modern world. Despite being at odds with some contemporary philosophical trends, the referentialists, in my view, proceed from a more credible and accurate account of the Jewish tradition, i.e., that belief has played an important role in Jewish religious life even if not in a dogmatic and systematic form. Looking at the matter from a different angle, one can ask about how we construct and maintain our religious worlds. Within the monotheistic traditions, a religious world that made no claims about God would be a highly arbitrary and unstable structure offering little justification or motivation for its way of life. One is led to suspect that this is a truth that restricted referentialists cannot deny and so they make covert theological statements at the same time that they seek to limit theological language. In contrast, the referentialists bring theology out into the open where our theological truth claims can receive the scrutiny and the support they deserve. The final benefit of distinguishing the referentialists from their peers is that doing so opens up the possibility of new engagements with questions about God and the divine–human relationship.

As my discussion addresses a wide-range of thinkers from a narrow perspective, a few caveats are in order. Insofar as my goal is to identify alternative approaches to theological reference across modern and contemporary Jewish thought, I must forego the full exposition that each thinker is due. Questions regarding the philosophical status of theological language are inextricably bound up with the entire account of Judaism that each thinker has offered. While I aim to be fair to the philosophers and theologians I address, it is indisputable that more extended discussions would serve to better contextualize their positions on theological reference. It should also be said that my effort to plot different alternatives on theological reference cannot aspire to be a survey of the field on this issue. Similarly, while there are certainly points of influence among the thinkers I address, my goal is not to chart the relations among thinkers but to identify specific trends in modern and contemporary Jewish thought on theological reference. As a principle of selection, I will focus on thinkers who have set forth clear and influential positions on theological reference, but, without question, other thinkers have also made important contributions on this subject. Regarding reference itself, much discussion of the philosophical status of Jewish theological language has been undertaken independently of work on the theory of reference. In general philosophy, for the first part of the 20th century the question of reference revolved around the possibility of giving a definite description of an object. While Jewish thinkers tend not to address contemporary work on reference directly, the notion that reference is determined by our ability to make true assertions that uniquely pick out God is adequate to much of the material I will discuss. In the 1960s, a new account of reference called, causal or direct reference, emerged which emphasizes the processes by which names are attributed and transmitted. I will discuss causal reference more fully when it becomes relevant in the latter part of the section on theological referentialism. In the conclusion, I will argue that new developments in the theory of reference can resolve long-standing problems associated with Jewish theology and serve as an important resource for advancing the work of the theological referentialists, who sought to preserve and defend our capacity to think and speak about God.

2. Restricted Referentialism

In identifying the following thinkers as "restricted referentialists," I am not disclosing some hitherto unknown aspect of their thought. Most of the scholars I will discuss take great pains to make clear the sharp limits they place on theological language. What I take to be significant is not the identification of each thinker as a restricted referentialist, but rather the cumulative picture of how many contributors to modern and contemporary Jewish thought adopt a restricted view of theological

reference. Hermann Cohen's posthumously published, *Religion of Reason Out of the Sources of Judaism*, is a useful starting point for the discussion as analyzing his work on such terms makes evident both the utility and the challenges of focusing narrowly on the status of theological language. Whereas some Jewish thinkers take a defiant, almost hostile, stand toward theology, Cohen utilizes a deceptively traditional form of theological language that on the surface appears thick with theological reference and the knowledge of God that accompanies such reference. For instance, he says of the Torah that "it teaches not only the knowledge of God and man but also the care and encouragement of this knowledge."[11] Further along these lines, he states "through knowledge and in knowledge God enters into necessary correlation to man."[12] Beyond the matter of knowledge, he identifies God as the "Good One,"[13] and that, as such, "God is the individual God, the shepherd of the individual."[14] Cohen's God also appears to possess pathos as when he says, "God's humility is his willingness to stoop to help those who suffer"[15] or in the declaration "God loves man. And man loves God."[16] Cohen's motivation for using traditional forms of theological language in *Religion of Reason* was surely not to deceive his readers but to demonstrate that his thoroughly ethicized account of Judaism is not only compatible with the central practices and beliefs of Judaism but that Judaism is the first and fullest expression of the religion of reason. It is thus the case that identifying the limits Cohen places on theological reference also requires attention to how he refigures traditional theological language.

Philosophical and theological accounts characterized by restricted referentialism often proceed from their fundamental conception of God, e.g., claims that God is utterly transcendent or that God possesses divine simplicity place severe limits on theological language from the start. For Cohen, it is uniqueness that is God's defining characteristic. Divine uniqueness, he says, is the "essential content of monotheism."[17] According to Cohen, "there is only one kind of being, only one unique being: God is this unique being. God is the Unique One."[18] Identifying God as the "Unique One" has significant implications for theological reference. For instance, in paraphrasing God's reply to Moses' request to know God's name in Ex. 3: 13–15, Cohen says, "I am the One that is. I am the One, that can be named in no other way than by 'I am'."[19] Extrapolating on this point, Cohen argues that "the uniqueness of God consists in incomparability" and that "the incomparability points as much to nature as to every other concept of God."[20] If no concept other than incomparability is adequate to God, then what constitutes knowledge of God? Cohen's answer to this question is that "to have knowledge of God means to acknowledge God."[21] He expands on this point by saying:

> If God were only an object of knowledge, then he could not be the unique God, for knowledge also has entirely different objects and problems. The unique God, therefore, must determine a different attitude of the human spirit with regard to himself. Thus love becomes the requirement of this attitude toward the Unique One. Hence, the acknowledgment of love becomes a new deed of consciousness, an action, a primary act of the moral consciousness, of the will in its specific peculiarity, and in its distinction from the reason that aims at knowledge.[22]

11　(Cohen 1995a, 1995b). I will quote from the Kaplan translation and cite both the German and English texts. (Cohen 1995a, p. 29; 1995b, p. 25).
12　(Cohen 1995a, p. 105; 1995b, p. 90).
13　(Cohen 1995a, p. 243; 1995b, p. 208).
14　(Cohen 1995a, p. 245; 1995b, p. 210).
15　(Cohen 1995a, p. 311; 1995b, p. 266).
16　(Cohen 1995a, p. 470; 1995b, p. 405).
17　(Cohen 1995a, p. 41; 1995b, p. 35).
18　(Cohen 1995a, p. 48; 1995b, p. 41).
19　(Cohen 1995a, p. 49; 1995b, p. 42).
20　(Cohen 1995a, p. 51; 1995b, p. 44).
21　(Cohen 1995a, p. 58; 1995b, p. 50).
22　(Cohen 1995a, p. 58; 1995b, p. 50).

Cohen asserts throughout the work that the sole task of the religion of reason as expressed in Judaism is the correlation of God and humanity through the moral perfection of the individual. As the passage above makes evident, Cohen bifurcates moral and theoretical reason in a manner that sharply limits our ability to refer to God. According to Cohen, "the unique God can have no actuality" as attributing actuality to God would falsely associate God's unique being with characteristics of becoming that distinguish God and the created order.[23] Similarly, Cohen argues that "Jewish monotheism . . . removes from God all corporeality and every kind of sensibility."[24] Knowledge of God relates only to morality; God's essence is concealed from us and God's "attributes of action" are "moral archetypes" that refer to humans rather than God.[25] For Cohen, "the attributes, which are only moral attributes, do not give any knowledge of God's being. Because they are only ethical, and not at the same time logical attributes, they cannot be adequate to God's being."[26] Cohen, then, is, indeed, a restricted referentialist. God is the Unique One whose being is the origin of our becoming and who unifies natural and moral knowledge. Beyond that, whatever we have to say about God tells us only about the human side of the correlation and the process of moral perfection.

Given Cohen's efforts to preserve the terms of traditional Jewish theology, it is worthwhile to reflect on what is lost in his religion of reason and to what extent it is a religion without God. A God without actuality who is removed from "every kind of sensibility" is not a God one can encounter in experience nor is such a God an agent who can act in history. With respect to experience, Cohen rejects any sort of union with God and says that "if God were not the unreachable One my longing would have to find its end."[27] As for history, Cohen asserts that "God's entire relation to man is assigned to the domain of teleology."[28] Restricting God to our teleological goal undercuts any conception of Torah as historical revelation. Understood on such terms, God can only be an idea, but Cohen maintains that this is no drawback as we can only love ideas.[29] When Cohen says that "the love for morality is the love for God"[30] or that "only moral religion is truthful and true religion,"[31] he denudes religion of spiritual and intellectual virtues that are for many Jews constitutive of the religious life such as the tasks of growing towards God in knowledge, trust, and service. Equally important, the ethicizing of religion alters key religious concepts and shifts the dynamics of the divine–human relationship. When holiness is equated with morality, soteriology becomes a human affair. As Cohen says, "only man himself can actualize self-sanctification; no God can help him in this."[32] What is at stake is not just a shift from divine to human agency, soteriology for Cohen centers upon the perfection of humanity and not the preservation of the soul.[33] Similarly, divine providence, for Cohen, can only mean God's role as the "guarantor of the realization of morality on earth."[34] Cohen's philosophy retains the concept of God and utilizes traditional Jewish theological language, but his restrictive account of theological reference frames the divine–human relationship in ethical terms that eliminate or redefine the core features of Jewish theology.

Mordecai Kaplan's views on theological reference and Jewish theology more generally mirror Cohen's positions in certain ways but there are also differences that complicate the task of presenting his thought. The most significant overlap in their positions is their identification of religion with ethics. Kaplan in his work, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, says, "That religion is as

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[23] (Cohen 1995a, p. 185; 1995b, p. 160).
[24] (Cohen 1995a, p. 186; 1995b, p. 160).
[25] (Cohen 1995a, p. 411; 1995b, p. 353).
[26] (Cohen 1995a, p. 480; 1995b, p. 414).
[27] (Cohen 1995a, p. 248; 1995b, p. 212).
[28] (Cohen 1995a, p. 250; 1995b, p. 214).
[29] (Cohen 1995a, p. 186; 1995b, p. 160).
[30] (Cohen 1995a, p. 190; 1995b, p. 164).
[31] (Cohen 1995a, p. 156; 1995b, p. 135).
[32] (Cohen 1995a, p. 240; 1995b, p. 205).
[33] (Cohen 1995a, p. 358; 1995b, p. 308).
[34] (Cohen 1995a, p. 460; 1995b, p. 396).

inevitable a part of human civilization as is science or art derives from the fact that, with the progress of civilization, religion ceases to be utilitarian and becomes ethical."[35] True religion, and here Judaism outpaces Christianity which retains its focus on the salvation of the individual, is a religion which is fully ethicized.[36] According to Kaplan, "Jewish religion must identify God as the spirit that, immanent in human nature, urges men by means of their ethical insights to fulfill the destiny of the human race."[37] Like Cohen, Kaplan retains traditional sounding theological language, e.g., that God possesses a will to urge us, and uses this language in a manner that conceals how radical his conception of God is. What marks a significant difference between Cohen and Kaplan is that while Cohen relies on God's uniqueness as a fundamental principle that motivates his views, there is no overarching principle in Kaplan's thought that propels him toward restricted referentialism. The argument in Kaplan's thought that comes closest to serving such a role is his belief that modern science demolishes the possibility that God could be an immaterial person who acts miraculously in history in violation of natural law. For instance, Kaplan says:

> Modern science has again reconstructed our picture of the universe and destroyed the dichotomy of body and soul, matter and spirit, physical and metaphysical, which characterized the Middle Ages. We cannot conceive of God any more as a sort of invisible superman, displaying the same psychological traits as man, but on a greater scale. We cannot think of him as loving, pitying, rewarding, punishing, etc.[38]

Kaplan returned to this subject two decades later with the provocatively titled, *Judaism without Supernaturalism: The Only Alternative to Orthodoxy and Secularism*. At this juncture, Kaplan thinks the rejection of supernaturalism is a foregone conclusion and that arguing why supernaturalism must be abandoned would be a "superfluous undertaking." Alternatively, his goal in the book is "to show that Judaism can be revitalized and enhanced by being freed from supernaturalism."[39] In his view, not just "intellectual elite[s]" but "virtually most healthy-minded persons" can no longer subscribe to the view of God as a personal agent.[40] According to Kaplan, the idea of a personal God is an "antiquated notion of an earth-and-man centered universe, with God intervening in the world-order at any time He chooses to help, or hinder, human beings in their pursuits, in accordance with their obedience or disobedience to the laws said to emanate from Him."[41]

Kaplan's rejection of supernaturalism does not, by itself, make him a restricted referentialist as one could still refer to a God who is not a person. While there are good reasons to be open to alternative models of God, Kaplan's thought is best identified as a form of restricted referentialism for three reasons: his conflation of religion and ethics, his complete displacement of divine attributes and activity to the human realm, and his anti-theoretical view of Jewish theology. Taking these points in reverse, Kaplan anticipates a position endorsed by many Jewish Wittgensteinians that Jewish theology does not make theoretical claims about God. In *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, he writes:

> The Jewish religion, in which the prophetic impulse still throbs, is fundamentally not a system of metaphysical beliefs about God, His existence, His infinitude, omniscience, and the whole string of algebraic adjectives which fill the theological works of the Middle Ages. The Jewish religion is an attempt to set forth the God idea by selecting those purposes and possibilities in the life of the Jewish people in which there is most promise of good, and making God, as it were, sponsor for them.[42]

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35 (Kaplan 1937, p. 197).
36 Ibid., p. 269.
37 Ibid., p. 357.
38 Ibid., p. 88.
39 (Kaplan 1958, p. x).
40 Ibid., p. 25.
41 Ibid., p. 50.
42 (Kaplan 1937, p. 305).

It is possible to read this quote as innocuous as, of course, Judaism is not "fundamentally . . . a system of metaphysical beliefs about God." The anti-theoretical implications underlying Kaplan's position become apparent when he returns to this point in *Judaism without Supernaturalism*, where he says, "it is the business of religion not to give a metaphysical conception of God, but to make clear what we mean by the belief in God, from the standpoint of the difference that belief makes in human conduct and striving."[43] Kaplan's restricted referentialism is also evident in his naturalizing of Jewish theology by switching its reference to humans and the world rather than God. A partial list of such instances include: divinity,[44] unity,[45] redemption,[46] salvation,[47] miracle,[48] holiness,[49] sacredness,[50] covenant,[51] sovereignty,[52] justice,[53] and the world to come.[54] Finally, Kaplan is open to the same criticism I made of Cohen that ethicizing the religious life eliminates important features of Jewish religiosity, such as growing towards God in knowledge, trust, and service, particularly as those activities occur in forms of worship. Construing Jewish religion as reducible to ethics places Kaplan clearly in the camp of restricted referentialists.

Whereas Cohen restricts reference by defining God as the "Unique One" and Kaplan reshapes Jewish theology according to what he takes to be modern scientific and theological sensibilities, Yeshayahu Leibowitz mounts a more direct attack on theology by enshrining halakhah as Judaism's core religious principle while simultaneously diminishing the role of belief. Leibowitz begins an essay titled, "Religious Praxis: The Meaning of Halakhah," by declaring that his approach to Judaism is "not that of history or theology."[55] According to Leibowitz, not only do beliefs "petrify" over time but Judaism has maintained its unity "despite extreme differences in theological opinion."[56] He concludes from these points that "it was thus not beliefs or opinions that determined the identity of Judaism. Its continuity was that of its religious praxis."[57] It is not simply that theology is an epiphenomenon within Judaism producing highly variegated and antithetical accounts of God and the divine–human relationship. In Leibowitz' view, a religion structured around values and beliefs is a religion in service to human needs rather than to God. Leibowitz also adopts an account of belief as subjective. He argues that "since cognition and will are essentially personal, private, subjective, and individual, the religious community was not produced by beliefs or values."[58] Leibowitz was, in his professional life, a biochemist and a neurophysiologist, and thus his subjective account of belief would seem incompatible with his commitment to science. In an essay titled, "Religion and Science in the Middle Ages and in the Modern Era," he clarifies the relationship between religion and science in a manner that speaks directly to the issue of theological reference. There he writes:

> Our source of information is science. To the extent that we possess any real knowledge it is by way of scientific cognition. Psychologically, the information it supplies is forced upon the consciousness of all who understand it, for a human being is unable not to know what he knows. But the constitutive element of religious feeling and consciousness is not information which is derivable from religion. The essence of religion is not the information it provides

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[43] (Kaplan 1958, p. 26).
[44] (Kaplan 1937, p. 25).
[45] Ibid., p. 172.
[46] Ibid., p. 289.
[47] Ibid., pp. 26, 41, 55.
[48] (Kaplan 1937, p. 80).
[49] Ibid., p. 82.
[50] Ibid., p. 83.
[51] Ibid., p. 95.
[52] Ibid., p. 109.
[53] (Kaplan 1937, p. 123).
[54] Ibid., p. 44.
[55] (Leibowitz 1992, p. 3).
[56] Ibid., pp. 4–5.
[57] Ibid., p. 5
[58] Ibid., p. 11.

but the demand made of man to worship God. Undoubtedly this aspect of religious faith has always been the essence of Judaism, but today it is likely to be more conspicuous than in the Middle Ages, when informative significance was attached to religion.[59]

According to Leibowitz, religious language is not theoretical and does not tell us anything about God and the divine–human relationship. "Religious faith," he says, "is not knowledge that such and such is the case. It is a decision made by the man of faith."[60]

That Leibowitz is a restrictive referentialist is uncontroversial. He explicitly says that the halakhically oriented religious practitioner "tries to refer minimally to God, who has no image at all, and makes an effort to direct his religious consciousness to himself as recognizing his duty to God."[61] The claims that Jewish theology has no cognitive content and does not refer to God resurface among the Jewish Wittgensteinians, whom I address below. The concern that dogs these positions is whether we can speak of God at all on such terms. Leibowitz attempts to circumvent this issue by sundering faith and cognition. He says:

> I, however, do not regard faith as a conclusion. It is rather an evaluative decision that one makes, and, like all evaluations, it does not result from any information one has acquired, but is a commitment to which one binds himself. In other words, faith is not a form of cognition; it is a conative element of consciousness. Faith, therefore, cannot be taught. One can only present it in all its might and power.[62]

In my view, it makes little sense to say that we can make an "evaluative decision" absent any cognitive content. Leaving my criticism aside for the moment, it is necessary to consider whether Leibowitz is fairly depicted as promoting a religion without God. One might argue that Leibowtiz defends the most assertive God possible, a God who is pure imperative. This, however, is a God whom we cannot know anything about; as Leibowitz avers, we cannot even teach about this God. Every aspect of our relationship to this God is subsumed by our commandedness. According to Leibowitz, "faith, in Judaism, is the religion of mitzvot, and apart from this religion Jewish faith does not exist."[63] Before such a God, praise and petition are nought; indeed, all of our spiritual needs are rendered illegitimate. As with all the restricted referentialists whom I address, the provocation that they are tendering a religion without God may go too far but the God who is circumscribed within their restricted reference falls far short of the type of being who can sustain the rich spiritual life that is common to much of the Jewish tradition. Furthermore, to whatever extent it is true that Jewish thinkers conceive of Judaism as a religion, it can hardly be said that their goal is merely to conform Judaism to Christian forms of worship. On the contrary, restricted referentialists avidly distinguish Judaism from Christianity by using the limits on theological reference to purify Judaism of its purportedly irrational content.

The work of Emmanuel Levinas also appears to belong among the restricted referentialists. Levinas' central philosophical objective is to displace metaphysics and ontology and to establish ethics as "first philosophy." In his view, metaphysics and ontology are totalizing forms of thought that conceal our encounter with and responsibility toward other human beings, whom he refers to as "the Other." A central feature of Levinas' philosophy is his redefining of philosophical and religious terms. He replaces traditional metaphysics and ontology with a "metaphysics of desire" that is open to the Other. For Levinas, the relationship with the Other is asymmetrical in that the demand of the Other and our responsibility toward her places the Other at a height that Levinas associates with transcendence and infinity. Levinas refers to this height between oneself and the Other as the

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[59] (Leibowitz 1992, p. 136).
[60] Ibid., p. 136.
[61] Ibid., p. 76.
[62] Ibid., p. 37.
[63] Ibid., p. 38.

"curvature of intersubjective space" and suggests that it is perhaps "the very presence of God."[64] As part of his effort to undermine the totalized thinking of traditional metaphysics and ontology, Levinas advocates for an atheism understood as "a position prior to the negation and the affirmation of the divine, the breaking with participation by which the I posits itself as the same and as I."[65] What Levinas seeks to accomplish with his notion of "atheism" is a rejection of any reduction of God to thought or experience. As he says,

> Transcendence is to be distinguished from a union with the transcendent by participation. The metaphysical relation, the idea of infinity, connects with the noumenon which is not a numen. This noumenon is to be distinguished from the concept of God possessed by the believers of positive religions ill disengaged from the bonds of participation, who accept being immersed in a myth unbeknown to themselves. The idea of infinity, the metaphysical relation, is the dawn of a humanity without myths. But faith purged of myths, the monotheist faith, itself implies metaphysical atheism.[66]

For Levinas, conceptualizing God and making God an object of human experience are distortive activities, akin to myth, that are at odds with true monotheism. In contrast to religious views that cognize and participate in God's being, Levinas argues that monotheism properly understood holds that "the dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face."[67] Levinas' ethicizing of Judaism has significant implications for theological reference: "The atheism of the metaphysician means, positively, that our relation with the Metaphysical is an ethical behavior and not theology, not a thematization, be it a knowledge by analogy, of the attributes of God." He goes on to add:

> The comprehension of God taken as a participation in his sacred life, an allegedly direct comprehension, is impossible, because participation is a denial of the divine, and because nothing is more direct than the face to face, which is straightforwardness itself. A God invisible means not only a God unimaginable, but a God accessible in justice.[68]

In rejecting metaphysics and ontology and elevating ethics, Levinas places a ban on theology that undermines our referential capacity. Religion, he says, is just the "relation between the being here below and the transcendent that results in no community of concept or totality."[69]

For a variety of reasons, it is worthwhile to ask to what extent Levinas is offering a religion without God? At first pass, it does seem that his thought is accurately described on such terms. In *Totality and Infinity*, he says, "Everything that cannot be reduced to an interhuman relation represents not the superior form but the forever primitive form of religion."[70] As Levinas sought to distinguish his philosophy and his writings on Judaism, one might argue that a full response to this question must look beyond his philosophy. In the essay, "Ethics and Spirit," that begins his collection *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, Levinas says that "the infinite is given only to the moral view" and he goes on to say that "it does not return to its point of departure to become self-contentment, self-enjoyment, or self-knowledge."[71] Similar to Leibowitz, religion is not in the service of personal spiritual needs,

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64 (Levinas 1969, p. 291). An anonymous reviewer has suggested that the presence of God within the ethical relation should place Levinas among the ostensive referentialists rather than the restricted referentialists. In support of this position, the reviewer cites the following passage from *Otherwise than Being*: "'Thanks to God' I am another for the others. God is not involved as an alleged interlocutor: the reciprocal relationship binds me to the other man in the trace of transcendence, in illeity. The passing of God, of whom I can speak only by reference to this aid or this grace, is precisely the reverting of the incomparable subject into a member of society." (Levinas 1991, p. 158). I take this suggestion as a helpful point of caution that certain figures may straddle the approaches to reference that I am laying out. For the reasons that follow and in particular his reduction of theology to ethics, I continue to see Levinas as a restricted referentialist.
65 (Levinas 1969, p. 58).
66 Ibid., p. 77.
67 Ibid., p. 78.
68 Ibid., p. 78.
69 Ibid., p. 80.
70 (Levinas 1969, p. 79).
71 (Levinas 1990, p. 10).

however those are construed. In the subsequent essay in *Difficult Freedom* titled, "A Religion for Adults," Levinas dissociates Judaism from any conception of the sacred or the numinous.[72] Further on in *Difficult Freedom*, he characterizes "the feeling of divine presence and mystical ecstasy" as a "seething, subjective mass of forces, passions, and imaginations."[73] In a statement that would astound aggadic and kabbalistic thinkers, Levinas asserts that "The supernatural is not an obsession for Judaism. Its relationship with divinity is determined by the exact range of the ethical."[74] On the issues of reference and the priority of ethics, there seems to be little that separates Levinas' philosophy and his explicitly Jewish works. While in the concluding pages of *Otherwise than Being*, Levinas cites approvingly the words of Jehuda Halevi that "God speaks to each man in particular," his critique of metaphysics and ontology that leads him to reject theology as a false cognition and participation in the divine radically undermines our ability to know and experience God.[75] How are we to hear the voice of a God whom we can neither think of nor encounter?

Among contemporary Jewish thinkers, a number of restricted referentialists cite the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein as playing a decisive role in their philosophical and theological views. With his discussion of "language games" and "forms of life" and his emphasis on how we use language, Wittgenstein's philosophy contains significant resources for thinking about Jewish theology. Curiously, what has drawn many Jewish thinkers to Wittgenstein's work is his anti-theoretical account of religious language. In his 1931 essay, "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*," Wittgenstein sets forth an account of religious language and belief that denies religion any theoretical function, a position he maintains and develops throughout his subsequent writings. In order to defend religion against Frazer's depiction of primitive religious beliefs as absurd scientific claims, Wittgenstein divorces religion from theory. Wittgenstein argues that theories rest upon opinions and are thus susceptible to error but he goes on to claim that "No *opinion* serves as the foundation for a religious symbol."[76] In 1938, Wittgenstein lectured on religious belief and the content of his lectures has been preserved in his students' notes. Here Wittgenstein depicts religious belief as "unshakeable" and says that such beliefs are evident in a practitioner's life "not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for in all his life."[77] According to Wittgenstein, belief functions differently in the religious context and it can neither be supported nor refuted by reason. He says: "Reasons look different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive. The point is that if there were evidence, this would in fact destroy the whole business. Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me."[78] Wittgenstein's point is not to diminish the role of belief in religion but to insist that religious belief is not propped up by reason nor does it tell us about the nature of reality; rather, the purpose or religious belief is to guide and transform the religious practitioner. Regarding the mode of belief particular to religion, Wittgenstein says, in *Culture and Value*, "You can fight, hope and even believe without believing *scientifically*."[79] Wittgenstein's views on religious belief have significant implications for theology, which can be seen in his idiosyncratic presentation of Christianity: "I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your life. (Or the direction of your life.)"[80]

The idea that belief functions differently in the religious context has been a welcome insight for many Jewish philosophers and theologians who are drawn to a position of restricted referentialism. Alan Mittleman, for instance, argues that "The word *God* does not make a claim about the furniture of

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72 Ibid., p. 14.
73 Ibid., p. 102.
74 Ibid., p. 49.
75 (Levinas 1991, p. 184).
76 (Wittgenstein 1993, p. 121).
77 (Wittgenstein 1966, p. 54).
78 Ibid., p. 56.
79 (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 60).
80 Ibid., p. 53.

the universe. Rather, to speak of God is to underwrite a form of life that allows us to respond with love and courage and hope to the mystery out of which we come and toward which we progress."[81] According to Mittleman, theological language does not tell us anything about God. Similarly, Tamar Ross suggests that theological claims occurring within the context of religious practices are not about God but instead indicate the practitioner's desire "to establish a much stronger claim that will regulate her entire life."[82] The consequences for Jewish theology in endorsing Wittgenstein's non-theoretical account of religion are particularly explicit in Avi Sagi's aptly titled, *Jewish Religion after Theology*. He asserts that "The Key question concerning God, then, is not his objective character, his existence or identity, but the way in which human beings, in their language and in their lives, use the concept of God."[83] One could argue that the Jewish philosophers and theologians who embrace Wittgenstein's non-theoretical account of religious language are better described as non-referentialists than restricted referentialists. As Sagi forcefully argues, "Truth claims about the world, about God, and about crucial events such as the Sinai theophany, are religiously irrelevant. In other words, religion is a value system that neither relies upon nor reflects metaphysical assumptions or factual data that could be translated into truth claims."[84] Sagi is undoubtedly correct that doing away with the ideas that we can refer to God and that our theological beliefs inform us about the divine–human relationship marks the end of Jewish theology.

Alongside the Wittgensteinians, contemporary apophaticists represent a second strong form of restricted referentialism that is more properly identified as non-referentialism. If apophaticism is simply the claim that God ultimately eludes our reflective capacities, then all theologies should conclude in apophaticism. In recent years, scholars of Judaism have set forth stronger accounts of apophatic theology that deny the possibility of any positive knowledge of God. There is, of course, good precedent for such a position in the thought of Maimonides as Kenneth Seeskin's work attests. Seeskin sets forth what he takes to be a standard view of Maimonides on theological language that divine simplicity leads to the claim that we can know God's actions but not God's essence and that God's transcendence of our cognitive categories prohibits positive assertions about God, leaving us with negative theology. Seeskin, however, goes further and argues that what the standard account leaves out is that "even negations introduce some degree of distortion."[85] He goes on to say:

> To say that God does not lack power or intelligence is still to put a boundary around God and view God under a description. To return to the proposition "God is wise," even the negative rendering cannot be taken at face value. To interpret it correctly, we would have to point out that while it is true that God does not lack wisdom, we should not think that we have an identifying description of God. In truth all we have is the claim that, whatever it may be, God's wisdom is unlike anything else. It could be said therefore that the most negative predicates provide is an approximation, a set of very general directions for how to think about God. In Maimonides' opinion, they take us to the limit of what the human mind is capable of understanding but stop short of literal truth.[86]

Seeskin argues that the function of theological language "is not referential but heuristic."[87] The goal of theological language is to discover its own inadequacy and to lead us to a silent contemplation of God.

Like Seeskin, Elliot Wolfson advocates for a strong form of apophaticism, an "apophasis of apophasis," that not only renounces all positive theological language but also critiques previous

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81 (Mittleman 2009, p. 17).
82 (Ross 2004, p. 194).
83 (Sagi 2009, p. 132).
84 Ibid., p. 27.
85 (Seeskin 2002, p. 13).
86 Ibid., p. 14.
87 Ibid., p. 9.

accounts of negative theology.[88] According to Wolfson, a "theolatrous impulse . . . lies coiled in the crux of theism" in its insistence on cognizing the transcendent.[89] In his view, divine transcendence "cannot be enclosed within the boundaries of what may be experienced or comprehended."[90] With respect to the cognition of God, Wolfson argues that "incomprehensibility" is part of the "formal definition" of God making all assertions about the divine, positive or negative, idolatrous.[91] Regarding experience of God, he claims that "no justification exists to postulate an experience of revelation by means of which one could chance upon a transcendent being in the phenomenal sphere of becoming."[92] Borrowing a term from Buber, Wolfson says it is "theomania" that compels thinkers to turn the transcendent into an object of thought and that this "theolatrous" tendency extends to apophatic theology. Along such lines, he argues that "What is necessary, although by no means easy, is the termination of all modes of representation, even the representation of the nonrepresentable, a heeding of silence that outstrips the atheological as much as the theological, the saying of an unsaying that thinks transcendence as the other beyond theism and atheism." On multiple occasions, Wolfson says that this elimination of all discourse about God is the "exigency of the moment."[93]

In surveying restricted referentialism, I have intended to illuminate a persistent trend within modern and contemporary Jewish thought to limit theological language. The cumulative picture I have sought to present is partial at best but it raises two important issues. If Jewish thinkers depict Judaism as, at least in part, a religion, then it is worth thinking about what sort of religion they envision. On offer are versions of Judaism that are reducible to ethics, radically limit what we can know about God and the divine–human relationship, renounce the possibility of religious experience, pathologize the spiritual needs of the laity, and, in several cases, all the above. While it would be naïve to think that theology is a panacea to the problems facing contemporary Judaism, it is not surprising that forms of Judaism that deny cognitive and experiential access to God would prove uncompelling. Fortunately, there are also resources in modern and contemporary Jewish thought for overcoming the allergy to theology expressed in restricted referentialism, ostensive referentialists who defend our ability to point to God and theological referentialists who seek to preserve our linguistic capacity to refer to God.

3. Ostensive Referentialism

I would like to cautiously describe two important modern Jewish thinkers, Martin Buber and Abraham Joshua Heschel, as ostensive referentialists. Ostensive reference is the form of reference we use when we point to an object to indicate what we are speaking of. On the surface, God would seem to be the least likely candidate for successful reference via ostension. Nonetheless, both Buber and Heschel appeal to the mechanism of pointing as a way to preserve our ability to speak about God. As it appears to me that Buber and Heschel are motivated by similar considerations in their recourse to ostensive reference, I will treat their thought in tandem.

Buber and Heschel express concern that we are living in a period marked by scientism and empiricism that banishes the divine–human relationship. In response, both thinkers affirm the reality of God in the strongest possible terms. Buber, in *Eclipse of God*, says, "If one dares to turn toward the unknown God, to go to meet Him, to call to Him, Reality is present."[94] Further on in the work, he adds "I-Thou finds its highest intensity in religious reality, in which unlimited Being becomes, as absolute person, my partner."[95] Heschel is equally adamant about the reality of God. In *Man is not Alone*, he

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88　(Wolfson 2011, p. 32).
89　(Wolfson 2014, p. 260).
90　(Wolfson 2014, p. 30).
91　Ibid., p. xx. Wolfson is here in conversation with Jean Luc Marion but he cites Marion's position approvingly.
92　(Wolfson 2011, p. 32).
93　(Wolfson 2011, p. 30; 2014, pp. 152, 235).
94　(Buber 1952, p. 28).
95　Ibid., p. 44.

says, "The existence of God is not real because it is conceivable; it is conceivable because it is real."[96] Even more forcefully, he asserts that "God is one means He alone is truly real."[97] Writing at the height of logical positivism in the early 1950's, Buber and Heschel counter the mounting criticisms of religion by defending God as that which is most real.

Buber and Heschel, however, share more than just a commitment to God's reality; they are both also extremely skeptical about theological language, so much so that one might easily mistake their positions as either non-referential or, perhaps, fictionalist. Buber appears to deny our referential capacity when he says that God "eludes direct contemplation."[98] Elsewhere, Buber's position seems closer to fictionalism as when he says that God "does not despise all these similarly and necessarily untrue images, but rather suffers that one look at Him through them."[99] In *Man is not Alone*, Heschel identifies God with the ineffable, which he repeatedly claims transcends human thought and language, a position that would seem to commit him to non-referentialism. For instance, he says that "no thing can serve as a symbol or likeness of God–not even the universe."[100] Like Buber, Heschel also appears at times to be a fictionalist about theological language as when he asks (and does not answer) the following poignant question:

> We are driven to know God in order to conform to His ways. But to know Him we would have to attain the nearly impossible: to render the ineffable in positive terms. The question, then, arises: If, in order to be known, the ineffable has to be expressed, does it not follow that we know it as it is not?[101]

Buber and Heschel would then seem to assume an intermediary position between the restricted referentialists with their negative assessments of theological language and the theological referentialists with their affirmation of God's reality.

Buber and Heschel face a shared conundrum in response to which they adopt similar solutions. Both thinkers want to uphold the reality of God as forcefully as possible but at the same time they believe that the limits on theological language are essentially total. How can Buber and Heschel affirm God's reality while at the same time placing severe limits on theological language? The solution they land upon is to defend ostensive reference of God despite the failure of theological reference. Along these lines, Buber says:

> The religious communication of a content of being takes place in paradox. It is not a demonstrable assertion (theology which pretends to be this is rather a questionable type of philosophy), but a pointing toward the hidden realm of existence of the hearing man himself and that which is to be experienced there and there alone.[102]

Heschel makes the following similar point:

> . . . while we are unable either to define or to describe the ineffable, it is given to us to point to it. By means of indicative rather than descriptive terms, we are able to convey to others those features of our perception which are known to all men.[103]

To be sure, Buber's and Heschel's suggestions regarding our ability to point toward God are embryonic and fall short of constituting a theory of ostensive theological reference. Given the fact that Buber and Heschel both intend this pointing toward God to occur linguistically and not as a

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[96] (Heschel 1951, p. 91).
[97] Ibid., p. 117.
[98] (Buber 1952, p. 14).
[99] Ibid., p. 46.
[100] (Heschel 1951, p. 34).
[101] Ibid., p. 98.
[102] (Buber 1952, p. 43).
[103] (Heschel 1951, p. 21).

gesture, perhaps it is better to speak of ostensible reference rather than ostensive reference. However one resolves these challenges in understanding their positions, what sets Buber and Heschel apart from their restricted referentialist colleagues is their unyielding insistence on the reality of God and their desire to preserve the idea that God is a being whom we can encounter and to some extent communicate about. While Buber and Heschel share the concerns of the restricted referentialists about the philosophical status of Jewish theological language, their efforts to preserve the divine–human relationship push them closer to the theological referentialists who provide further resources to that end.

4. Theological Referentialism

In attempting to delineate three trends regarding theological reference within modern and contemporary Jewish thought, I settled upon the terms restricted, ostensive, and theological reference. While the terminology is helpful schematically, it is also problematic. Restricted reference, for instance, combines thinkers who place sharp limits on theological reference with those who are more aptly described as non-referentialist. Additionally, Buber's and Heschel's ostensive reference represents a linguistic act that presumably goes beyond a deictic gesture or the use of a demonstrative pronoun. Perhaps the most serious problem with the categories is that the term "restricted reference" implies that those advocating for theological reference are theologically unfettered. Restricted referentialism is motivated by a sensibility that modern and contemporary Jews have acquired epistemic scruples unavailable to earlier strata of the Jewish tradition that renders prior discussions of God embarrassingly naïve. This is far from the case. Judaism, from the Hebrew Bible forward, has always been deeply concerned about the limits of Jewish theological language. It should come as no surprise that thinkers such as Franz Rosenzweig, Eliezer Berkovits, and Yehuda Gellman, who defend our ability to refer to God, are also intensively aware of the limits of our theological language.

Given the dominance of restricted referentialism in modern and contemporary Jewish thought, it is worthwhile to begin the discussion of theological referentialism by noting its compatibility with strong limits on theological language. While I intend to demonstrate that Rosenzweig, implicitly and explicitly, defended our capacity to refer to God, it is important to note that this is not an uncontroversial reading of Rosenzweig's thought. Rosenzweig reflects so deeply and persistently on the limits of theological language that William Franke has dubbed him "the preeminent apophatic thinker of modern times."[104] While I think there are good reasons to reject apophatic readings of Rosenzweig's work, it can hardly be denied that he placed sharp limits on theological language. One representative passage from *The Star of Redemption* is the following:

> We learn that God loves but not that he is love. He draws too nigh to us in love for us to be yet able to say: he is this or that. In this love we learn only that he is God, not what he is. The What, the essence, remains concealed. It is concealed precisely by being revealed. A god who did not reveal himself would not permanently hide his essence from us, for nothing remains concealed from man's far-reaching learning, his capacity for conceptualization, his inquisitive intellect. But God pours forth over us in revelation; with us he turns from stationary to active God. Precisely thereby he forges the fetters of love around our free intellect, which is irresistible for everything stationary. Bound by such bonds, summoned thus by name, we move in the orbit in which we found ourselves, and along the route on which we are placed. We no longer reach beyond this except with the powerless grasp of empty concepts.[105]

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[104]　(Franke 2005, p. 164).

[105]　(Rosenzweig 1976). *Der Mensch und Sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften*, [henceforth *GS*]. *The Star of Redemption* is collected in *GS* 2. I will quote from Hallo's translation of *The Star* and give German and English page numbers. (Rosenzweig 1970). *Stern*, p. 424/*Star*, p. 381.

In the experience of personal revelation, God overrides our cognitive abilities; we do not learn anything essential about God or God's attributes only that God loves. Rosenzweig's language is striking. God "forges the fetters of love" around our intellects and overwhelms our conceptual abilities. Berkovits also stresses the importance of a personal encounter with God but he, too, limits the knowledge of God that arises from the divine–human relationship:

> This is the deeper significance of our previous assertion that only the hiding God may be known to man. He is certainly not known by his essence. After all, God must hide his essence for the relationship to be possible; only by means of the relationship may he be known. He is known by the will with which he relates himself to finitude—a will that presupposes an act of self-abnegation. The relational attributes say nothing about the divine essence; rather, they describe the will of divine self-denial and self-limitation.[106]

Despite significant differences between Rosenzweig's and Berkovits' accounts of theological language, Berkovits charts a similar path to Rosenzweig's in declaring that the knowledge of God we acquire through the divine–human relationship tells us nothing about God's essence. Yehuda Gellman also goes to great lengths to acknowledge the limits of our theological language. His reflections on the topic are helpful in that he makes clear what is at stake in affirming the little we can and must say about God:

> I do not believe that any human knows much about what God is really like, or what in our language corresponds to what God is really like. On the other hand, while I acknowledge that God is covered in mystery, I do not suffer from what William Alston once called "transcendentitis," which is the condition of people who maintain that God is absolutely unknowable (at least by any positive predicate). This condition does not do justice to the nature of the religious life, and too often is the last safe-house for those who find it difficult to believe in God at all. My view of God finds a middle path between literalism and transcendentitis.[107]

It should be evident from these comments that preserving our capacity to refer to God in no way implies a theological-logorrhea. Theological referentialism is fully compatible with significant limits on theological language.

Despite recent suggestions that Franz Rosenzweig is best construed as a postliberal or a postmetaphysical thinker or as espousing an apophatic theology or a position akin to Wittgenstein's anti-theoretical account of religion, presentations of his thought that restrict or eliminate theological reference, on my reading, Rosenzweig clearly defends our capacity to refer to God. The most explicit evidence in Rosenzweig's magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption*, supporting the identification of him as a theological referentialist comes near the beginning of the work where he rejects negative theology and declares that he seeks to establish the "absolute factuality" or "positivity" of the three elements of his philosophical system: God, World, and the Human Person.[108] In his subsequent writings, Rosenzweig goes on to make additional explicit claims supporting theological reference. However, assessing the role of theological reference in *The Star of Redemption* is largely a matter of attending to how he uses theological language. Although a comprehensive overview of Rosenzweig's use of theological language in the *Star* exceeds the scope of the present discussion, I will briefly identify parts of Rosenzweig's philosophical system where theological reference plays a crucial role.[109]

It is well-known that the architecture of Rosenzweig's system involves two overlapping triangles forming a Star of David with one triangle representing God, World, and the Human Person and the

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[106] (Berkovits 1959, p. 66).

[107] (Gellman 2013, p. 20).

[108] (Rosenzweig 1970, 1976). *Stern*, p. 25/*Star*, p. 23.

[109] For further analysis of Rosenzweig's theological language see (Fisher 2011, 2012a, 2012b, 2016, 2019).

other Creation, Revelation, and Redemption. What has been less well attended to is the form of argumentation that allows Rosenzweig to construct his system. With respect to God, it is significant that Rosenzweig appeals to divine perfection throughout the work. For instance, Rosenzweig refers to God's "infinite essence, his infinite factuality, his Physis" in Part One to establish the irreducibility of God to the World or the Human Person.[110] Similarly, he also identifies God in this section of the *Star* as that which is "quintessentially and infinitely affirmed"[111] and he defends God's aseity by asserting that God "is dependent on nothing outside of himself, and appears to require nothing outside of himself."[112] Rosenzweig's critique of idealism in Part One of the *Star* has been the subject of much interpretive dispute. One might think that Rosenzweig's appeals to divine perfection are a ploy to undermine idealism and that such metaphysical claims are at odds with the philosophical system he constructs in Part Two and Part Three. In fact, divine perfection continues to play a crucial role in Rosenzweig's argumentation throughout the remainder of the work. For instance, despite God's command "Love me!" in the revelatory encounter, divine transcendence prevents the individual from offering thanks directly to God. Rosenzweig says:

> If the object of love gives thanks, its thanks cannot be directed toward the lover. Rather, it must seek outlets in other directions, symbolic outlets so to speak. Love would bring thank-offerings because it feels it cannot give thanks. With respect to the lover: it can only allow itself to be loved, nothing more. And it is thus that the soul receives the love of God.[113]

Although Rosenzweig often leaves his reasoning implicit, it is evident that divine transcendence shapes the divine–human relationship in such a way that its fulfillment is only possible in communal worship. One can see a similar pattern of argument to the previously cited passage in which God's immanence overwhelms our cognitive capacity. Simply put, divine perfection, a rich source of uniquely identifying descriptions of God, is a crucial resource in Rosenzweig's construction of his philosophical system and claims of divine perfection rest upon an act of theological reference.

In contrast to Jewish philosophers and theologians who espouse restricted referentialism, what makes Rosenzweig's work so compelling is his embrace of multiple forms of theological language, a move that draws his thought closer to the theological language found in classical Jewish sources. Most notably, engagement with scripture and his reflections on religious experience are productive sources of theology within his philosophical system. Here I will focus on the latter as the connection to the question of reference is particularly evident. In Rosenzweig's view, the full content of revelation is the divine command, "Love me!" Rosenzweig conceptualizes religious experience such that God's self is made available to consciousness. It does not matter how we interpret this part of the *Star*, i.e., whether Rosenzweig is giving a transcendental account of the possibility of religious experience, a phenomenological description, or speaking from personal experience. However one understands the philosophical status of the revelatory encounter, its content remains the same: the disclosure of God's self makes possible a distinct path to successful theological reference. It does not matter that Rosenzweig places extreme limits on the cognitive content of this encounter that prevent us from knowing whether love is a divine attribute. God's loving act and the divine Me still stand. Rosenzweig speaks to the tension between our limited knowledge of God and the positive content of the divine–human encounter in his commentary on the poems of Jehuda Halevi:

> But just as we have to heed the limits of our knowledge, so too, and not less, the limits of our not-knowing. Beyond all our knowledge, God lives. But before our not-knowing begins,

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[110] Ibid., *Stern*, p. 29/*Star*, p. 27.
[111] Ibid., *Stern*, p. 30/*Star*, p. 28.
[112] Ibid., *Stern*, p. 36/*Star*, p. 33.
[113] (Rosenzweig 1970, 1976). *Stern*, p. 189/*Star*, p. 169.

your God presents Himself to you, to your call, to your assent, to your readiness, to your glance, to your life.[114]

For Rosenzweig, as for the other theological referentialists, our capacity to refer to God is a constitutive feature of the divine–human relationship—the absence of which would render us bereft of our basic ways of speaking about God.

Scholars have noted a shift in Rosenzweig's thought after the publication of the *Star*. This shift is not, as some have maintained, a move away from philosophy; rather, the persistent theme throughout Rosenzweig's course notes, letters, and writings after the *Star* is the unexpected presentation of his thought as a form of common sense.[115] Although Rosenzweig's use of the term, "common sense," is idiosyncratic, his turn to common sense lends further support to the view that Rosenzweig is best viewed as a theological referentialist. The individuation of God, World, and Human Person, for which he laboriously argues for in Part One of the *Star*, is now depicted as a fact that we know intuitively as a product of common sense. Furthermore, common sense also mirrors Parts Two and Three of the *Star* in the belief that God, World, and the Human Person can only be known in their relations. Accompanying Rosenzweig's emphasis on common sense in his post-*Star* writings is an insistence that God is both far and near. The far God, for Rosenzweig, is the one who can be known through reason while the near God is the God of experience.[116] Affirming the validity of both forms of cognition, Rosenzweig says:

> Even in the most dreadful nearness the human can look away and then does not know in the least what has happened to him. And in the farthest distance the glance of God and of the human can burn into one another, so that the coldest abstractions become warm in the mouth of Maimonides or Hermann Cohen—more than all our distressed prattle. Near, far, it doesn't matter! What does matter is that here as there, what is spoken is spoken before His countenance—with the You of the refrain of our poem, the You that never turns away for a moment.[117]

For Rosenzweig, whether we approach God through reason or experience is irrelevant; what matters is the sincerity and directness with which we seek God.

A second proponent of theological referentialism among modern and contemporary Jewish thinkers is Eliezer Berkovits. Methodologically, Berkovits moves in the opposite direction from Rosenzweig; this, despite the fact, that the two thinkers end up defending similar positions on the question of reference. Whereas Rosenzweig relies heavily on metaphysical claims about divine perfection to individuate the elements God, World, and the Human Person in Part One of the *Star* and then charts the relations of the elements in Parts Two and Three, Berkovits makes the divine–human encounter primary and only legitimates metaphysics to the extent that it comes out of or supports the cultivation of the divine–human relationship. The primacy of the divine–human encounter is evident in Berkovits' claim in *God, Man and History* that:

> The foundation of religion is not the affirmation that God is, but that God is concerned with man and the world: that, having created this world, he has not abandoned it, leaving it to its own devices; that he cares about his creation. It is of the essence of biblical religion that God is sufficiently concerned about man to address him and that God values man enough to render himself approachable by him. In the Bible, God and man face each other, as it were. God wants something of man, and man may entreat God.[118]

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[114] *GS* 4: 1, 57–58/(Galli 1995, p. 200).
[115] On the role of common sense in Rosenzweig's thought see (Fisher 2016).
[116] On the subject of God's proximity and distance in Rosenzweig's thought see (Fisher 2019).
[117] *GS* 4: 1, 71/(Galli 1995, p. 206).
[118] (Berkovits 1959, p. 15).

On Berkovits' view, the core message of the Hebrew Bible is that God enters into relationship with humans. As Berkovits repeatedly insists, this encounter with God cannot be relegated to the past; it is the very condition of the divine–human relationship. Accordingly, he says, "without the encounter there can be no Judaism. Without it, there is no religion."[119] Further on, in language that amplifies the importance of theological reference for the religious life, he adds: "The encounter as the basic religious experience means that all religion must be personal. Unless God is accessible to me, unless I am able to confront him myself, unless he is concerned about the way I live and behave, however insignificant I may otherwise be, religion is not possible for me."[120] It is only through the divine–human encounter that God becomes accessible to us and the fundamental condition for that access to God is our ability to refer to God. Berkovits speaks to the cognitive fruits of the divine–human encounter when he says, "We derive from the encounter the most relevant part of our knowledge and understanding of God."[121]

While there are many similarities between Rosenzweig and Berkovits, there are also important differences. Whereas Rosenzweig is highly reticent in his discussion of God's attributes, Berkovits criticizes the move of medieval Jewish philosophers to restrict discussion of God to negative theology and he emphatically endorses God's positive attributes. Berkovits claims that "The negative attributes will never do. Religion cannot forgo the love and the mercy of God, or even his justice and anger. Such attributes have to be related to him in a positive sense, or else there is no basis for a living God of religious relevance."[122] Berkovits, as I have already mentioned, is by no means profligate in his theological discourse. Although he insists that we have knowledge of God's relational attributes, he rejects the idea that we have knowledge of God's essence. As I suggested above, a second area where Rosenzweig and Berkovits diverge is on the subject of metaphysics. Berkovits' position on metaphysics is complex. In response to the negative theology of Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers he says "that the essence of religion is in truth independent of metaphysics."[123] While the essence of religion does not lie in metaphysics, in the aftermath of the encounter, metaphysics does have a contribution to make to religious life:

> But for the man for whom the encounter has laid the foundations of religion and who, possessed of its memories, is in search of the hiding Presence, the 'most likely hypothesis' of a religious metaphysics becomes a source of continuous encouragement in the quest and a signpost for guiding him to the threshold of the Presence. The 'most likely hypothesis' by itself has little convincing force, but if one comes upon it in one's search for the 'lost' encounter, the hypothesis may be a potent factor in leading man to the form of re-cognition that he attains in an act of faith.[124]

In the effort to process what has transpired in the encounter, metaphysics allows for a "re-cognizing" of that which was originally recognized in religious experience. This thinking through of the encounter has the potential to support and enrich faith. Berkovits goes so far as to say "There is no path from the metaphysical Absolute to the God of religion, but there is one from the revealed God of religion to the Absolute of metaphysics and its incorporation into the body of religious affirmations."[125] Despite important differences in the positions of Rosenzweig and Berkovits, they both affirm our capacity to refer to God, particularly as that relates to religious experience and metaphysics. Needless to say, the contours of the divine–human relationship look much different on such proposals. God is a personal agent who acts in human lives and expresses love and concern and humans have the

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119 Ibid., p. 18.
120 Ibid., p. 43.
121 Ibid., p. 20.
122 Ibid., p. 56.
123 (Berkovits 1959, p. 9).
124 Ibid., p. 47.
125 Ibid., p. 55.

cognitive capacity to know and speak about these affairs, even if only to a limited extent. These are views that restricted referentialism is purposefully designed to eliminate or suppress.

In the decade after Berkovits wrote *God, Man and History*, a significant development occurred in philosophical discussions of reference. Whereas for the first part of the 20th century reference was taken to occur through definite descriptions that uniquely pick out their objects, in the 1960s, scholars like Ruth Barcan Marcus, Saul Kripke, and others began arguing for a causal or direct form of reference that occurs through an initial baptism of a name the knowledge and use of which can then be transmitted. On this view, names function as tags or rigid designators. While I do not want to suggest that Berkovits anteceded future philosophical developments, his comments on testimony resonate with contemporary philosophers of language and epistemologists as well as with Yehuda Gellman's appeals to the importance of causal reference for Jewish theology. Regarding the possibility of reference being transmitted, Berkovits writes: "One can know friendship only by the original experience. One must participate in friendship without reservation and without ulterior motive, or else one has to learn about it from others who were participants themselves and are able to tell about their experience. So it is with the encounter: It must be the original experience or it cannot exist."[126] As Berkovits makes clear in a subsequent comment, his principal point is to defend the legitimacy of the divine–human encounter. Denying the possibility of the encounter renders the Hebrew Bible and the tradition built upon it fraudulent:

> Without the encounter, the prophetic claim is confounded and the prophet becomes a charlatan or a deluded dreamer. But to assume either of these possibilities of Isaiah or Jeremiah or Hosea or Micah, let alone of all of these men of unique greatness and spiritual authenticity, would be absurd. If these men were misleading their people knowingly, there is no honesty on earth. But if they were themselves deluded, then we have to conclude that the condition of man in general must be one of essential delusion, and one may not trust even one's own eyes.[127]

To be sure, Berkovits' comments regarding the conditions for successful testimony are only suggestive; his inclinations, however, push in a direction that is ripe for further exploration.

No contemporary Jewish philosopher or theologian has done more to defend and advance our understanding of theological reference than Jerome (Yehuda) Gellman. In numerous articles on theological reference, theological realism, religious language, religious belief, two monographs on religious experience, and a recent trilogy addressing key theological issues, Gellman defends theological reference and demonstrates the crucial role it plays in Jewish religious life.[128] His work sheds light on a problem accentuated by Buber and Heschel that upholding the reality of God requires the ability to refer to God. As Gellman's oeuvre clearly demonstrates, realism about God and theological reference go hand-in-hand. Theological realism, the idea that God exists independently of our thought about God and that we have the ability to know something of God's independent existence, has theological reference as a fundamental requirement. While much of Gellman's work deals with the issue of theological reference, two of his essays, "Naming, and Naming God" and "The Name of God," make particularly important contributions to the topic. For purposes of brevity, I will focus on the former.

In "Naming, and Naming God," Gellman has two principal objectives. The first objective is to demonstrate that names can be understood as both definite descriptions and rigid designators. The second objective is to analyze and further our understanding of the conditions for initial baptisms, through which names are fixed according to theories of causal reference. Although Gellman's concern in the essay is principally with causal reference, the first objective is important in that it leaves open

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126　(Berkovits 1959, p. 24).
127　Ibid., p. 28.
128　See (Gellman 1977a, 1977b, 1981, 1982, 1985, 1993, 1995, 2000, 2001, 2006, 2013, 2016, forthcoming).

the possibility of referring to God through definite descriptions. Given the prevalence of restricted referentialism in modern and contemporary Jewish thought, it is no small matter to defend the possibility of offering a definite description of God. Gellman's main contribution, however, comes in demonstrating that the conditions for successful causal reference do not preclude theological reference. Although Gellman acknowledges that descriptive and causal references can be complementary, an equally important fact is that the fixing of a name as a rigid designator does not presuppose the use of a description. Reference to God can succeed even when there is no adequate or agreed upon definite description. Central to this part of his argument is his separating the semantic meaning of a name from its pragmatic use. As he says, "the *meaning* of a name as a description does not determine the pragmatic issue of how the speaker intends to use the name: as a rigid designator, or to refer to what satisfies the description, whatever it may be."[129]

Gellman's effort to clarify the conditions of the initial baptism in which a name is fixed render causal theories of reference far more amenable to theological reference. As Gellman argues, there must "be a 'path' from namer to the object" in order for direct reference to succeed.[130] Alternative presentations of causal reference have construed this path as requiring conditions that would preclude theological reference, such as that the object must be perceived or ostensively pointed to. Gellman shows that neither condition holds. Causal reference can occur through a representation rather than through a direct perception of the object. He further argues that "In order to be picked out, it is sufficient if the baptizing act has a way of ending up at, or leading to the unique object named."[131] This opens up the possibility that God could be referred to as Creator or eschatologically in the future even though God has not been so perceived. He thus holds that "initial baptisms can involve direct, indirect, and deferred references."[132] A central concern for Gellman is that when the conditions for initial baptisms appear to exclude theological reference, it locks us into the view that God can only be referred to by means of definite descriptions. Limiting theological reference to definite descriptions faces two significant challenges. First, as the restricted referentialists attest, it has been the subject of much disagreement about what if any description we can give of God. Second, the idea that we only refer to God via definite descriptions does not reflect how we learn and use religious language. Taking Anselm as a paradigmatic example, Gellman says:

> No doubt, when Anselm became initiated into the religious life at an early age, he learned to refer rigidly to God before knowing any descriptions about God. He heard the name, learned how to worship God, and, going along with religious practices, came to invoke the name himself. He linked up with an existing referential practice that led back to initial baptisms with the name.[133]

While the real fruit of Gellman's work on reference is evidenced by the constructive theology it has allowed him to undertake, more narrowly, I would point to two significant benefits of his approach to the topic. First, Gellman's emphasis on the multiple "paths" to successful reference that includes both descriptive reference and his expanded notion of causal reference including direct, indirect, and deferred modes mirrors the diverse forms of theological language in classical Jewish literature. Such an expansive notion of reference is precisely what is needed to address the different forms of theological predication arising from scriptural interpretation, reflection on divine perfection, religious experience, and prayer. Second, the discussions of reference in modern and contemporary Jewish thought have tended to constrain theological reference to the epistemological problem of whether finite beings are capable of speaking of a transcendent one. The intellectual elites who

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129 (Gellman 1993, p. 197).
130 Ibid., p. 193.
131 Ibid., p. 202.
132 Ibid., p. 206.
133 (Gellman 1993, p. 210).

have devoted themselves to this question have often come to the negative conclusion that we cannot say much, if anything, about God. Gellman's highly creative engagement with causal reference reverses the course of previous discussions and defends the standard ways that we all learn and utilize theological language.

5. Conclusions

While the marginalization of theology in modern and contemporary Jewish thought has numerous causes, the limits restricted referentialists have placed on theological language are surely a factor in the widely-embraced view that belief plays a negligible role in Judaism. Furthermore, Buber and Heschel adopt a position of theo-realism that affirms the reality of God while remaining skeptical about our ability to speak truthfully about the divine. In their embrace of restricted referentialism's doubts about theological language, their work also presents significant barriers to reflection on God and the divine–human relationship. If we accept that we now conceive of Judaism as, at least in part, a religion, it is worth considering how vital a religion can be that either prohibits discussion of God and the divine–human relationship or construes the divine–human relationship so narrowly that it is equatable to ethics. Contemporary Judaism faces many challenges and, to say it again, theology is no panacea. Nonetheless, excessive limits on theological language prevent us from doing the work of preserving and revitalizing the Jewish tradition that falls upon every generation. Modern and postmodern philosophy with their critique of metaphysics and theology have sharpened a point that was already evident to Maimonides and other medieval philosophers, that the theological enterprise hangs on our capacity to refer to God. For good reason and to good effect, theological referentialists like Rosenzweig, Berkovits, and Gellman have sought to defend our ability to refer to God while at the same time remaining cognizant of the limits of our theological language.

Fortunately, new resources are available to Jewish philosophers and theologians to further advance the efforts of the theological referentialists. New theories of reference developed by John Perry, Kepa Korta, Francois Recanati, and Imogen Dickie emphasize the social and communicative function of reference rather than reducing reference to the mere picking out of objects.[134] Reference, for these philosophers, is a communicative tool we deploy in order to shape the beliefs and actions of others. These are significant shifts in how to think of reference that would allow Jewish philosophers and theologians to move away from the beguiling questions surrounding divine transcendence and instead focus on the role of reference within discourse. Several of these philosophers envision reference functioning as a file system in which each file has an epistemic relation to its object that secures reference. Understanding reference on such terms could advance Jewish theology in multiple ways. To give just a few examples, a person using a mental file for reference does not need to know that the file refers to its object; rather, it just needs to be the case that the file has the right epistemic relation to its object. Adopting such an approach to reference, preserves the capacity for non-expert users of a file (i.e., the laity) to successfully refer. A second benefit of conceiving of reference as a file system is that an active file is in a "buffering" state as it continues to collect information about its object.[135] The idea of an ever-expanding "God-file" fits well with much Jewish theology that has a more recursive form than the systematic and dogmatic character of other traditions. Finally, multiple files with their unique epistemic relations to their object can be grouped under an "encyclopedic file" in a manner that could unify the different ways of thinking and speaking about God within Judaism and allow the epistemic merits peculiar to each form of theological predication to combine in mutual support.[136] In short, these new theories of reference provide significant resources for Jewish scholars to arrive at better

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[134] (Perry 2001; Korta and Perry 2011; Recanati 2012; Dickie 2015).
[135] (Perry 2001, p. 131).
[136] (Recanati 2012, p. 73).

understandings of the structure of Jewish theology and the place of theological reflection within the religious life.

If the depiction of Judaism as a religion by modern and contemporary scholars is in need of critique, then the pivotal issue is not that Jewish culture and politics have been eclipsed. Instead, the central problematic is that Jewish philosophers and theologians have wed their notion of religion to philosophical rejections of metaphysics and theology that either sharply limit or deny our ability to refer to God, reduce religion to ethics, and pathologize spirituality. This results in accounts of Judaism as a religion that seem both untenable as a form of religious life and deeply distortive of the contribution theological reflection has made in earlier strata of the tradition. Contrary to what the critique of Judaism as a religion presupposes, in identifying Judaism as a religion, Jewish philosophers and theologians have been more motivated to distinguish Judaism from Christianity than to assimilate the two. To be sure, the work of restricted and ostensive referentialists is not reducible to polemics; these thinkers were attempting to synthesize Judaism with what they took to be the most credible philosophical views on theological language. I would urge with the theological referentialists that the time has come to consider whether new philosophical approaches would not produce more historically adequate and constructively richer accounts of Judaism.

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