“Nothing!” would be the ineluctable answer to the question: “what can be said of God?” For whatever God is—it is beyond the scope of human knowledge. Indeed, such a statement is very common not only in medieval Jewish philosophy but in medieval Kabbalah as well. However, beyond that shared consensus, hide different conceptions of negative theology; this and more, alternative conceptions present at times a real challenge to the very definition of negative theology. To better understand what kind of negation is at stake in a given theological system, one needs to understand what kind of limits, as well as what is off-limits, the work of negative theology comes to set. What is the meaning of that “nothing” will indeed broadly depend on the role given to the delimitation of knowledge.

This essay offers a general overview of the different role played by negative theology in medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah, in light of their different degree of commitment to negative theology. It is my intention to downplay the hegemonic tendency of negative theology and propose instead new ways to think about the interaction between negative and positive theologies. To my view, negative theology as a system that considers negation as the only possible approach is, as a matter of fact, marginal not only in Kabbalah but in Jewish philosophy as well. The main problem we encounter when attempting to assess the role of negative theology comes from its own paradoxical thinking and its hegemonic nature which, at face value, seems to leave no place for an alternative. It is nevertheless very rare to see negative theology eradicate all positive theology, for most of the time, it opens up or gives place to alternative theology. Whereas the role of what I propose to call “comprehensive negative theology” is better known, that of restrictive negative theology has not yet been properly assessed. However, even in the case of Maimonides, the main advocate of comprehensive negative theology, the extent of his negative theology is still an open question and scholarship offers a wide range of interpretations.
The role of negative theology in medieval Kabbalah is even more problematic for, contrary to the comprehensive Maimonidean theology, it develops a restrictive use of negative theology. In Jewish philosophy and even the more so in Jewish mysticism, the rational/theological inquiry is usually challenged by the performative and contemplative relation to God opening up to nonspeculative approaches. In Jewish mysticism, Gershom Scholem's understanding of the Kabbalistic theological structure is articulated on an ontological distinction between revealed God and concealed God.\textsuperscript{1} The problem raised by such a distinction is that it presupposes a theological system articulated on negative theology before we even get a chance to study the role of negative theology in a given system. Moshe Idel has pointed out the importance of thinking about theological conceptions in their diversity. This is not merely a call for pluralism, but also a revision of what is understood as the abstract and ineffable God.\textsuperscript{2} In the same vein but in a different perspective, in his pioneering article, Elliot Wolfson has also greatly unsettled our understanding of Kabbalah by challenging its negative theology in light of its positive assertions.\textsuperscript{3}

In what follows I wish to push further that inquiry into the role of negative theology in medieval thought and describe in large strokes the limits themselves of negative theology. To that purpose I will address the question by inverting the formula of Elliot Wolfson and discussing positive theologies in light of negative assertions. This change of perspective will help us to understand aspects of negative theology and its relation to positive theology in a more fundamental way beyond their apparent contradictions. To that task it is crucial to distinguish between theological systems dedicated to negative theology and theological systems where negative theology has a place but not necessarily a dominant one. To better understand the role of negative theology, I therefore propose to distinguish restrictive uses of negative theology from comprehensive negative theology. Restrictive because it cohabits with alternative positive conceptions that are not coming from within the work of negation. After a general overview of negative theology in philosophy and in Jewish philosophy, I will present the place of negative theology in medieval Kabbalah. The nature of the corpora discussed dictates that Jewish philosophy will be presented chronologically, whereas the Kabbalistic material will be organized thematically. While philosophical texts and authors present an organized corpus, this is not the case with Kabbalistic literature which is a much more fragmented and eclectic corpus.

In Jewish traditions, expression of negative theology goes back to Philo of Alexandria in the first century. Philo discusses the conception of God’s unknowability on the basis of Exodus 33:20 and its twofold Glory conception.\textsuperscript{4} However, the remote status of God does not disqualify every relation, since for Philo nonknowledge is the acknowledgment of human nothingness and as such presents a gateway
to an encounter with God: “for then is the time for the creature to encounter the creator when it has recognized its own nothingness.”5 This mixture of total inaccessibility and the possibility of access nevertheless through negation is the very mark of the comprehensive approach of negative theology.

At face value, however, Philo’s negative theology became the legacy of the Christian church and the extent of his influence on Jewish thought has not yet been properly evaluated. Following a renewed interest in Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophies, the unknowability of God will become a motto among the medieval philosophical traditions both Muslim and Jewish. The Middle Ages, with the renewal of philosophy in Islam and consecutively in Judaism, sees the question of the divine attributes at the center of the debate. In the Islamic tradition, Al Kindi, Al Farabi, Avicenna, Al-Gazali, and Averroes will all exacerbate the unknowability of God. The exaltation of the ignorance has also been at the heart of medieval texts such as in the Theology of Aristotle and those of Muslims thinkers.7

In the spirit of their time, Jewish philosophers adhere as well to the idea of unknowability. Following the philosophy of Kalam, David ibn Merwan al-Mukammas, Saadia Gaon, and Joseph ibn Zaddik reject the semantic validity of divine attributes; nevertheless, they would accept predication only if it truly reflects God’s essence.8 A common use of negation aims to establish what He is not. For Al-Mukammas, for example, when we affirm that God is alive, we are in fact denying that He is dead.9 However, this approach should be seen as a partial negative theological approach, for Al-Mukammas nevertheless follows the view of the Mu’tazilites, whom accept terms that are equivalent to God’s essence. This view stands in contrast to the more comprehensive and exclusive negative theology of the Book of Causes, in which nothing not even an attribute of essence can be predicated: “This is because description only comes to be by means of discourse, and discourse by means of intelligence, and intelligence by means of reasoning, and reasoning by means of imagination, and imagination by means of sense. However; the First Cause is above all things, since it is their cause; as a result then, it comes to be that it does not itself fall under sense or imagination or reasoning or intelligence or discourse; consequently, it is not describable.”10

For Saadya Gaon, rational knowledge and prophecy are equivalent, prophecy being superior only in virtue of its divine origin. Even though the epistemological dimension of the limit of knowledge is an important aspect of Saadya’s philosophy, the central point is still the divine unity in conformity with the philosophy of Kalam. In the controversy of his time between those who believe in attributes and those denying them, Saadya opt for a position that put forth the inner divine unity. Promoting the simplicity of God’s unity is meant to resolve the problem of attributes by refraining to resort to predication. Even though God cannot be known, the specific aspects of the divine unity are reflected in a formulation that
offers some solution to important semantic problems. For example, the notion of
divine simplicity excludes any differentiation in God and consequently gives an
account of God’s essence but not by means of real attributes, modes, or attributes
of essence. How can something partial be said about God without implying mul-
tiplicity in the Divine? For the problem of human-limited semantics lies in its
equivalent partial approach to God. Simple, undifferentiated unity is the best tes-
timony of His wholeness, since by denying multiplicity and attribution it affirms
indivisible unity.11

Accordingly to his Neoplatonic heritage, Bachya ibn Paquda will also profess
the unknowability of God. In the *Duties of the Heart*, the existence, unity, and eter-
nity of God as essential attributes are opposed to attributes of action, distinguishing
therefore attributes of God before and after the creation: "For He is exceedingly
close to you in His activities, but infinitely remote in any representation of His es-
sence or comparison with it. As already stated, we will never find Him in this way.”12
Through acknowledgment of God in the world, that is, of His actions, one can
nevertheless experience God. Negative assertions have therefore a limited action,
even if they are part of a process of purification of the soul and reason, worshiping
God can only come from another way. Apparently, God’s revelation in His actions is
a sufficient source of knowledge where the creature meets His creator, knows Him
intimately and worships Him: "With the knowledge of God that is in their hearts;
they serve Him as if they were with the holy angels in the highest heavens.”13

Shlomo ibn Gabirol, another central Neoplatonic philosopher, argues that
"direct knowledge of the primary Existent is impossible why . . . because it is
above and beyond all things and is illimitable."14 Such a view can be tracked back
to Isaac Israeli and his disciple Dunash ibn Tamim.15 For Gabirol, God is pure es-
sence, and we only perceive his essence through a composite of form and matter
such as it is reflected in God’s actions. Along with a notion of God’s essence as
being above of everything, Gabirol promotes a view that will influence Kabbalah
notably through its nachleben with Moshe ibn Ezra’s *Arugat ha-Bosem*. In *Fons
Vitae*, the Master declares that "because the knowledge of any knower requires
him to encompass what is known the illimitable cannot be encompassed by
knowledge.”16

Even though apophatic approaches can be traced back very early in the
Middle Ages, only with Maimonides can one find a comprehensive system of
negative theology. According to his view, predication on God’s essence is strictly
impossible, and the only knowledge possible is that of His actions. Maimonides’s
negative theology rejects the ontological approach of his predecessors who while
adhering to negative theology would have nevertheless allowed some kind of
positive predication. Following the inner logic of negative theology, negative
assertions are more valuable than any positive assertions; therefore, the more we
predicate of something the more we know: “in a similar way, you come nearer to the apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, with every increase in the negations regarding Him.” By negating what is not true, one comes closer to the truth while emptying predication of any content, for what is beyond physics cannot be known with certainty. In this perspective, the greatest achievement of philosophy is in the understanding of God as principle of causality—by contemplating on the world and on the manner in which natural causality reflects God’s perfection. At crucial points of his metaphysical doctrine, Maimonides opts for ambiguous if not contradicted positions. The place of negative theology in Maimonides’s philosophy is no exception and has been the subject of numerous discussions.

On the one end of the spectrum, Maimonides’s negative theology leads to the so-called skeptic approach. Shlomo Pines offers to read Maimonides in light of Al Farabi with whom he agrees that the union with the active intellect is impossible for there is no resemblance between man and God even on this level. Following that lead, the result of the critic of theology is a comprehensive negative theology—not only is knowledge above the physical world impossible but, in contrast with other negative theologies that give place through negation to a mystical path, it is completely restrictive to personal fulfillment in that world. The skeptical approach lately received a new expression in a book by Micah Goodman, interpreting Maimonides in a modern relativistic perspective.

On the other end of the spectrum, as represented by two main schools of interpretation, we find the possibility nevertheless of some experience of what is beyond negation. Recently, Menachem Lorberbaum has offered to read Maimonides’s philosophy not as a critique of theology but rather as a critical theology, which cumulates in a state of illumination. Following this reading, Maimonides’s critique of language should be understood as a way to empty language from any content in order to make place for the experience of what is beyond the limits of language. This understanding of the role of negative theology in Maimonides’s philosophy is to be counted alongside the skeptical one, both presenting a comprehensive negative theology. Major differences are nevertheless to be noted, for whereas the “skeptic” offers a limitative and exclusive position, the other one is extensive since it seeks to experience what is above language. This reading is made possible by considering the poetic dimension of language. Following a number of conditions, the human intellect has access to divine knowledge, even if the price is silence. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Sufi tradition has been precisely the path taken by Maimonides’s son and grandson. An interesting example of this path of negative theology can be found in the words of the famous Andalusian Sufi and philosopher Ibn al-‘Arabi who promotes silence as an alternative to ignorance: “There are some of us who profess ignorance as part of their knowledge maintaining that: ‘to realize that one cannot know (God) is to know.’ There are
others from among us, however, who know, but who do not say such things, their knowledge instilling in them silence rather than [professions] of ignorance. This is the highest knowledge of God, possessed only by the Seal of Saints.”23 Of special interest here is the critique of the profession of ignorance as ultimate knowledge. The text introduces an important difference between ignorance as the highest degree of knowledge and the highest degree of knowledge that can only be acknowledged through silence. The comparison between the two gives us a good insight on different negative theological schools and eventually on the crucial difference between the two main streams of comprehensive negative theology: those of the “skeptic” and the “mystic.” According to the skeptical approach, the rational inquiry stops at the acknowledgment of its ignorance—since ignorance is the only insight possible, it is the highest level of knowledge. The mystical approach passes the limits of knowledge toward an apophatic experience, where the limits of knowledge are apprehended within a silent acknowledgment. The silence in this case is not ignorance; it is all together an acknowledgment of the limits and a state of indescribable knowledge.

Whereas the “poetic” reading of Maimonides’s philosophy and the Sufi approach open to the apophatic experience, the third way to interpret Maimonides’s theory of knowledge should be understood as a restrictive negative theology. If one is to understand in Maimonides’s philosophy the union with the active intellect as possible, then the negative theology plays only a role of limitation. Even though this way opens to noetic experience beyond regular knowledge, it does not belong to the comprehensive negative theology because it is not the result of the apophatic process. Following this school, if the conception of union is possible, this is only because it presumes the resemblance between God and Man. In fact, the possibility of union in its Averroistic tone has been the prevalent interpretation of Maimonides, shared by his translator and interpreter Shmuel ibn Tibbon, and medieval Kabbalah as well.24 It is important to mention yet another aspect of Maimonides’s philosophy that allows some positive theology and demands therefore to reassess the role played by negative theology in his metaphysic. This is his conception of the Tetragrammaton—the only name that resists Maimonides’s critique of divine predication. According to him, among all the names given to God, this is the only one that should be understood as a proper name, as His personal name.25 As such, just as the name of someone does not predicate anything about him but is simply attached to him, the Name of God is the only name that contains, even undisclosed, something of God’s essence, and therefore is a positive representative of God.

The motto of the negative theology, nothing can be said about God, being shared by all philosophical systems discussed herein is not sufficient to distinguish between one system of negative theology and another. The variety of negative
theological approaches in Maimonides's philosophy comes only to enhance the
importance in understanding the role of negative theology in a given system.
Interestingly enough, the three different readings of Maimonidean negative the-
ology covers the principal tendencies.26 The first two are the principal voices of
comprehensive negative theology: the skeptical one and the poetic/mystical one.
The third regards negative theology as a theological moment surpassed by the
union with the active intellect, which is made possible only because it supposes
reciprocity between God and man. Among these, the last one is the most prevalent
one from a historical point of view since it has been the line of interpretation of
Maimonides's negative theology in the Middle Ages while the other two represent
essentially modern readings.

It appears that in Jewish medieval philosophy, the prevalent view is a restricted
negative theology, for as we have seen, alongside the negative theological concep-
tion stands different aspects of positive theology that are considered legitimate.
Consequently, in most of the cases, negative theology is not the last word in terms
of metaphysics but a necessary metaphysical practice, which comes to set the
condition of possibility of a positive theology. A good example of this particularly
sensitive aspect regarding the interface between negative theology and positive
theology can be found in Hasdai Crescas's critique of Maimonides. In his view, to
stipulate that God's essence is not graspable is common knowledge and not a
philosophical achievement.27 Such a statement aims to relativize the role given by
Maimonides to negative theology, for it does not teach us anything that we did not
already know. For Crescas, positive attributes are possible. More so, taking on
Maimonides's conception of the Tetragrammaton, real names are possible but he
also rehabilitates attributes of relation, for in certain cases, the relation of recipro-
city between God and others is not incompatible with His perfection. For Crescas,
the necessity of essential attributes of God is ineluctable even though it only gives
access to partial knowledge of God.28

In the following, I will try to assess to what extent medieval theosophical Kabbalah
relies on negative theology. The different scholarly positions are a good starting
point to understand the complexity at stake. Our basic comprehension is still in-
debted to Gershom Scholem's distinction between deus absconditus and deus
revelatus—infering an ontic dichotomy between eyn-sof and the sefirot. At the heart
of this distinction is indeed our understanding of the notion of eyn-sof. This is the
term that the theosophical Kabbalah over the generations has chosen to represent
God in the mystery of His essence. It is also a term that has been mostly understood
by scholars as the main voice of Kabbalah’s negative theology. However, such a
distinction between an ineffable God and a revealed one has been seriously shat-
tered during the past decades, to the extent that it has become obsolete to our
understanding of theosophical Kabbalah. Moshe Idel, for example, has contrasted the apophatic notion of ein-sof with anthropomorphic notion of ein-sof. Elliot Wolfson’s research has also deeply contributed to rethinking our ways to address theological categories by questioning the relation between apophatic and cataphatic. What is left of negative theology’s reliability once we consider the Kabbalistic inclinations toward positive theology? What is there to be said of contradictory conceptions such as ineffable infinite and all-encompassing infinite? Since the mid-1990s, Wolfson has intensively researched the paradoxical hermeneutics that lay at the bottom of such contradictions as coincidentia oppositorum. For, only such a paradigm gives a sense of the mix of positive and negative assertions, and its paradoxical articulation. According to such a view, the tension between positive and negative assertions finds an answer precisely in the art of contradiction so peculiar to negative theology. However, alongside this understanding of negative theology that is equivalent to what I offered to call comprehensive negative theology, more temperate voices of negative theology can be heard.

The different poles of negative theology in medieval theosophical Kabbalah evolved alternatively or consecutively around a number of statements expressing God’s inconceivability. Among the principal anchors to negative theology we count the conceal (ne’elam), the neant (‘ayn), the One, and the ein-sof. The first two are more peculiar to Kabbalah and the mystical tradition, whereas the simple and transcendental unity as such as the infinite (ein-sof) are also central to philosophical systems. The differences in the philosophic and Kabbalistic approaches, as we will see, lie in their respective positive theologies, and more particularly in their alternative conceptions of unity and infinity. However, as I shall argue, the divine unity and infinity, contrary to what can be expected, contribute only to restricted negative theological views, whereas a full-range negative theology is more likely to develop within the conception centered around the ne’elam and the ‘ayn.

Ha-ne’elam (concealed) or ha-nistar (hidden) refers in theosophical texts to God in his essence. Such a view goes back to the conception of the double kavod, where nistar designates the upper part. Nachmanides was a major medievalist scholar and ha-ne’elam plays a major role in his Kabbalistic work, in which it becomes the principal appellation for God essence. His reluctance to name at all the unnamable together with his specific view on torah ha-sod and the absence of occurrence of the term ein-sof in his writings, conjecture to a comprehensive negative theological position. This point is crucial to understand the differences between Kabbalistic negative assertions. For, choosing the ne’elam over the One and Infinite not only posits ne’elam as the most adequate and apparently only designation, but also views the One and the infinite as irrelevant, because they seem to say too much already. In more than one aspect, this position represents one of the most extreme negative theological positions among the Kabbalistic schools mostly
because of its uncompromising position. However, Nachmanides’s conception was not to become the dominant one among theosophical Kabbalah where reference to infinite and God’s unity are numerous.35

Alongside the conception of pure ineffability conveyed within the conception of ne’elam, nistar and ‘ayn (neant) represent another major voice in Kabbalah advocating for complex hermeneutics of negative theology. Even though the nistar conception cannot properly be called skeptical it recalls nevertheless the skeptical views of negative theology, mainly because of its absolute submission to the ontological difference and its total noetic abstention. By contrast ‘ayn conceptions offer a full-range negative theology hermeneutic, that is, a work of negation that enables paradoxical ontology.

This can be sensed within the coexistence of contradictory stance where ‘ayn designates altogether the total absence of (graspable) essence and ultimate divine presence. As argued by Daniel Matt, the ‘ayn is not empty, on the contrary it is the ultimate being because of its inaccessibility.36 The very metaphysical status of ‘ayn as expressing the summons of negative theology is nicely exemplified in a passage of Moshe de Leon’s that offers a radical interpretation of Ecclesiastes 3:19. Whereas there is no (=‘ayn) difference between men and animals, in that very nondifference (=‘ayn) lies all the difference.37 The “no (‘ayn) difference” is therefore the acknowledgment of the superiority of the ‘ayn precisely in this paradoxical statement that gives to ‘ayn “substance.”

It is a common philosophic view to discuss divine unity as a unity that is not in number but precedes every other unity/number.38 In the same vein, Joseph Gikatilla distinguishes between the absolute One equal to itself and the mundane singular unities: “Nowhere, is the One truly (one) be found, except only in God.”39 Indivisibility is another aspect of the divine unity in philosophy as such as in Kabbalah. Such a conception finds its expression already at an early stage of theosophical Kabbalah in the notion of equal unity (aḥdout shavah).40 In another formulation, that goes back to Maimonides, God’s equanimity is describe as an unity that is equal on all sides.41 We read, for example, in Jacob ben Sheshet’s book: “The wisdom comes forth from Neant (‘ayn); that is, from a subtle essence that the thought cannot grasp for the word Neant (‘ayn) designates an essence equal on all sides that cannot be thought of or suggested since it is so subtle and pure that it is impossible to think about it or to polemicize on its signification” [my translation].42 This conception of equanimity endorses at first glance the total transcendent divine unity; however, and this is what makes this Kabbalistic version interesting, it ultimately gives ways to an alternative conception—that of a dynamic divine unity. Indeed, along with that common consensus on simple divine unity, Kabbalah endorses a very different notion of unity—a conception of a divine unification.43 Equal unity (aḥdout shavah) needs to be understood in theosophical Kabbalah in
light, principally, of its power of unification, as it results from many texts, the same is true for the notion of unity that is equal from all sides. We read therefore in the iyyun literature: “No creature can truly comprehend the essence of His existence and His nature, since He is in a state of balanced unity, for in His completeness the higher and lower beings are united. He is the foundation of everything that is hidden and revealed. . . . He comprises all sides, hidden and revealed. He begins above and ends below. . . . He is One being unified in the balanced unity.” The coexistence in theosophical Kabbalah of two contradictory models of unity—simple unity versus unified unity—has been a subject of theological tension, the discussion of which goes beyond the scope of this chapter. It suffices nevertheless to say that if, on the one hand, this tension is answered apologetically, then, on the other hand, it is also understood as the sign of Kabbalah’s superiority over philosophy. For if they share the knowledge of the simple unity, philosophers, claim Kabbalists, have nevertheless no knowledge of the complex inner articulation of its parts.

Infinity is also to be counted among the principal notions in philosophy and Kabbalah to express God’s essence and ineffability. Its remoteness and inaccessibility makes eyn-sof a great candidate for the negative theology. Following a saying found in different sources, eyn-sof is the most appropriate name to designate the unnamable. His highly esoteric status is meant to explain why there is no reference to eyn-sof in Jewish traditional books. Nevertheless, this conception of eyn-sof is not very dominant among the theosophical literature. Whereas in philosophy infinity is subordinate to the divine unity, in Kabbalah infinity will find a different ground for its development and will soon become the principal denomination for God’s essence. Such a conceptual autonomy explains also the theological liberty taken with the theosophical notion of eyn-sof and the alternative positive conceptions that it offers to the more notorious view of apophatic infinity. Not only, as has been stipulated, is eyn-sof sometimes described in anthropomorphic terms, but also, as regards the sefirotic system, the remoteness of eyn-sof needs to be seriously reassessed. Furthermore, the ontic separation between eyn-sof and the sefirot meets several contradictions and is in fact not found easily. The principal reason is that eyn-sof and the sefirot belong to the same ontological realm. This is what resorts from the historical development of the theosophical notion of eyn-sof, which cannot be separated from the notion of sefirot itself, for they form, at the beginning of the theosophical Kabbalah, one entangled notion. Therefore, it would be a mistake to see eyn-sof as a pure transcendental notion remote from everything. Instead of a pure transcendence, eyn-sof, because of its intimate relation with the sefirot, needs to be understood as the vertical prolongation of the sefirotic world and an extension of the mundane world.

It is not surprising therefore to see the first sefirah keter in direct prolongation of eyn-sof, for in some Kabbalistic tradition, keter is not only coexistent with, but
also identical to *eyn-sof*.

Moreover, the inaccessible status of God extends sometimes not only to *keter*, but also to at least the three first *sefirot*. At the very early stage of the theosophical Kabbalah, “that which thought cannot attain” was one of the very first appellations given to the first *sefirah*. This formulation recalls another one, found in Shlomo ibn Gabirol’s writing, that the intellection by way of encompassing cannot grasp what is infinite. Between the first generation and the second generation of theosophical Kabbalists, as pointed out by Scholem, “that which thought cannot attain” is translated into “the annihilation of the thought” (*Afissat ha-Machshava*) or ‘*ayn (Neant), the latter becoming, from the second third of the thirteenth century, the major appellation for *keter*.

Such a turn in the terminology points to a move from a mere descriptive epistemological statement to something more abstract and substantive. The reference to the cognitive process does not nevertheless disappear, the specific entanglement between the cognitive process and the emanative one is in fact very indicative of the theosophical lore. Such a move is crucial to assess correctly the role of negative theology in that theosophical system. Where the investigation stop is precisely where God’s realm starts and it is not by accident that ‘*ayn, machshavah, machshavah tehorah, hoḥnah, and binah refer to stages of human cognition as well as to *sefirot*.

To the limits of the thought and to its annihilation echoes the infinite of God’s depth since “that which thought cannot attain” is also the thought that “extends to the infinite.” For, the infinite that is beyond the limits of the thought is also the thought that extends to *eyn-sof*. Truly the ambiguity between the two levels of thought, human and divine, is meant to blur precisely their differences. This and more, pointing to the limits of the cognitive process, place nonetheless the unlimited in the prolongation of the limited. Moreover, alternatives to the limitative cognitive process are offered. The suction, for example, is presented as superior to the process of cognition because of its direct access to *eyn-sof*.

Scholars have constantly pointed to the contradictions that accompany negative theology’s conceptions, focusing their research on negative theology’s inner hermeneutics and on its fascinating paradoxical statements. Such an approach to negative theology surely shows the most striking mechanism of negative theology and teaches us about negative theology in its most accomplished form, but it tends to dismiss moderate forms of negative theology. The survey of different philosophical and Kabbalistic trends of negative theology offered in this chapter, though not exhaustive, intend to show that beside the classical form of negative theology other tendencies not only exist, but are in fact more commonly encountered. Moreover, the ability to distinguish between comprehensive and restricted approaches of negative theology reflect an important change of methodology. All in all, negative assertions agree that God cannot be known; there precisely lays the difficulty, in the ability to break that consensus and in the fact that such a statement
is already an act of knowledge. For, it is a fact that beyond that apparently unbreakable consensus, the degree of unknowability differs from one system to the other. Furthermore, only a few systems will embrace fully the consequences of human intellectual limits. It is more likely, as we have seen in this chapter, to find negative theological assertions that nevertheless go along with positive ones. Therefore, only the study of the interaction between negative and positive theologies has permitted us to better assess the differences underlying the shared consensus. There is an important difference between the deconstruction of positive theology in the negative theological process and the positive theology generated by that very process; for negation can be fully weighted only in its interaction with positive theology, not only at its starting point, but also precisely at the end of the theological hermeneutic process.

For this reason, I have proposed to restrict what we generally understand as negative theology to negative theology in its full range, that is, comprehensive negative theology relying only on negation as a trigger for higher stages of knowledge. Besides this high form, we need to recognize limited uses of negative theology as presenting a different approach to negation. Although also beginning with a critique of knowledge, these nevertheless allow for positive theology when it seems to answer to the new noetic standard. For, if the first step of negative theology is to realize that human knowledge cannot properly apprehend God’s essence, then the next step will determinate whether it is a comprehensive negative theology or a restricted negative theology. In this second step, the former avers that nothing can be said about God except by negation, whereas the latter opts for positive conceptions alongside those of negation. Indeed the beauty of the comprehensive negative theology is to be able to reach beyond the negation from within the negation. The impossible, to know the unknowable, is exactly in the power of negative theology (with the exception of the skeptical trend). For such secrets are meant to be disclosed, and the epistemological process of negation is meant to be replaced and overcome by alternative hermeneutics. Only the skeptical approach of negative theology abrogates from that spectacular turnaround. For unlike other classical negative theologies that articulate anew the void created by negation, skeptics understand the limits of knowledge as what cannot be overcome.

Another striking outcome of this survey is that among the different systems presented, only Maimonides seems to offer a whole system of negative theology. The question as to how his apophatic conception should be understood, whether as a comprehensive theological system and to what extent, is a matter of interpretation. Among the three interpretations presented, two represent main versions of comprehensive negative theology, the skeptical and the poetic/mystical version. The third type of interpretation, for whom the union with the active intellect is
possible, should in my view be understood as a restricted negative theological system. For union with the active intellect is possible only because it relies on identification between the human and the divine intellect. Therefore, since the union with the active intellect is not the effect of negation, it should not be considered as such but rather as a positive theological model that stands alongside the work of negation. Moreover, this school of interpretation was dominant throughout the Middle Ages, which in my view tends to speak in favor of a restricted negative theology even for Maimonides.

In a sense, Nachmanides should be structurally compared with Maimonides. First, his system is also in a minority position and, second, because his comprehensive negative school resembles the skeptical version. Comprehensive because the concealment of God is absolute, and skeptical because he is very reluctant to use any appellations at all. For the other systems, philosophical ones prior to Maimonides and after him, as for the other theosophical schools beside Nachmanides’s, the role of negation and thus the extent of negative theology should be understood mostly in a restricted sense. In these Kabbalistic systems, the use of negative theology is mostly an isolated moment that gives way rapidly to alternative approaches that are not produced through negation. Even the conception of 'ayn, which is apparently the only voice given to apophatic theology in Kabbalah, does not stand as the last moment of theology for Azriel of Gerona, Moshe de Leon, or even Shem Tov ibn Shem Tov.

My sense is that skeptical or apophatic systems, even if they represent the two most important paradigms, they do not reflect common use of negative theology in medieval systems of thought. Instead, one can see in medieval Kabbalah and even in medieval Jewish philosophy a variety of systems whereby the way of negation is integrated into alternative positive theologies. If one considers the most popular reading of Maimonides, his conception should also be understood as belonging to a restrictive conception of negative theology. All in all, the importance of negative theology in the Middle Ages should not be underestimated, though it should be understood within the boundaries of its limited applications, for positive theology seems to prevail most of the time. We can then conclude that recent interest in medieval negative theologies reflects a contemporary intellectual development that found a paradigm for modern and postmodern theologies.

Notes


6. For Al Kindi, the unknowability of God follows from its definition as simple unity, for such simplicity excludes every definition. The true One is not an intelligible object and is therefore unknown; Al Kindi’s Metaphysics, ed. and trans. Alfred L. Ivry (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974), 96–114.


13. Ibid., 2:375.


16. *The Fountain of Life*, 8; Paul Fenton, “’Traces of Moseh ibn Ezra’s ’Arugat ha-Bosem’ in the Writings of the Early Qabbalists of the Spanish School,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky and J. M. Harris, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 62–63. A similar view is expressed by Johannes Scotus Eriguena: “If, then, no wise man asks of all essence in general what it is since it cannot be defined except in terms of the circumstances which circumscribe it, so to speak within limits . . . when he understands very well concerning it that it cannot be defined and is not any of the things that are and surpasses all things that can be defined?” *Periphysein*, II 586b–587d. Emmanuel Falque, “Théologie négative et théophanie chez Jean Scot Erigène,” in *La théologie négative*, 539–554.


25. Menachem Lorberbaum, “Mystique mythique et mystique rationnelle.” A similar position can be found in Zohar hadash, 112.


27. Or Adonay, I, III 1, 3; Zeev Harvey, *Hasdai Crescas* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Zalman Shazar Center, 2010).


30. See note 2.

31. Elliot R. Wolfson, “Megilat ‘Emet we-’Emunah, Contemplative Visualization and Mystical Unknowing.” *Kabbalah* (2000): 60–61; see also his important article, “Via Negativa in Maimonides.”


35. On that topic, see *Concealed and Revealed*.


41. Mishney Torah, hilkhot yesod torah 2:10; Moreh Nevukhim (trans. Alharizi) 1:51; Jonathan Dauber, “Competitive Approaches to Maimonides in Early Kabbalah,” *The Cultures of*
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*Maimonideanism*, ed. James T. Robinson (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 80. Latter too in Isaac ibn Latif we find similar expression of the limits of the thought, whereas His unity is said to be equally equal in all directions: see *Sha’arey Shamay*, chap. 2–4, ms. Vatican 335 (F375).


49. This particular aspect of *eyn-sof* has a historical ground, for the development of *eyn-sof* needs to be understood in the context of the *Sefer Yetzirah*, where *eyn-sof* and the *sefirot* are an undissociable notion, rather than stemming from philosophical sources. Sandra Valabregue, “The Concept of Infinity (‘Eyn-sof’) and the Rise of Theosophical Kabbalah,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 102, no. 3 (2012): 405–430.


53. See notes 19 and 21.


55. “The inner power is called *ayn* because neither thought nor reflection grasps it. Concerning this Job said wisdom comes into being out of *ayn.*” Abrams, *The Writings of R. Asher ben David*, 105.


58. For example, Isaac the blind speaks of a status of suction that replaces the cognitive approach. A similar idea can already be found in his father’s writing, stressing out that even if God is hidden from the eyes, he is nevertheless present in every heart. Abraham ben David of Posquiere, *Sefer Baaleh ha-nefesh*, ed. Yosef Qafih (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1965), 127.