

The via negativa

| | | |
|---|------------------|---|
| 1 | Pseudo-Dionysius | God is beyond assertion. Any attempt anthropomorphises God. Negative language preserves the otherness of God. |
| 2 | Maimonides | The only positive statement we can make is 'God exists'. |
| 3 | Examples | God is different to humans: invisible, immortal, timeless. |
| 4 | Strengths | Prevents anthropomorphism and links to ineffable religious experience |

If God is beyond everything we experience and know, how can we be sure that the words we use to discuss God are meaningful? The question of meaning is different to accuracy: this unit is about whether we can say anything, right or wrong, about God. The Philosophy unit is the prelude to religious language in the 20th Century and also links to the Nature of God and Plato's Form of the Good

Key Vocabulary

| | |
|--------------------|--|
| Analogy | Comparison between two things to aid understanding |
| Anthropomorphic | Describing something in human terms |
| Apophatic | Speaking negatively about God. <i>Via negativa</i> |
| Attribution | Something is caused by something else |
| Cataphatic | Speaking positively about God. <i>Via positiva</i> |
| Cognitive | Statements that are either true or false. |
| Equivocal | The same word has multiple meanings, e.g. 'flat' |
| Non cognitive | Statements that are opinion based. |
| Proportion | Something is measured in relation to something else |
| Religious language | Language about divinity |
| Symbol | A word or image represents something or sheds light on further meaning |
| Tautology | Statements that are true by definition |
| Univocal | A word only has one meaning. |
| Via negativa | Speaking negatively about God. Discussing what God is not |
| Via positiva | Speaking positively about what God is |

The via positiva – Aquinas

| | | |
|---|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | Types of language | Religious language is not univocal or equivocal: it is analogical |
| 2 | Analogy? | Words when applied to God have a partial resemblance to their normal use |
| 3 | Analogy of attribution? | 'If the urine is good, the bull is good.' God created us, and so there is a causal relationship between us and God. Human attributes of love and wisdom are pale reflections of divine attributes. |
| 4 | Analogy of proportion? | Qualities are relative to the object. A dog is as loyal as a dog can be, a human as loyal as a human can be and we infer that God is loyal is a greater sense. (Hick's example) |
| 5 | Strengths | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Avoids anthropomorphism and apophatic talk It allows learning and discussion through modes like parables |

Symbolic Language - Tillich

| | | |
|---|-----------------|---|
| 1 | Why? | We cannot speak literally about God because our language comes from experience of the physical world, but symbolic language can point beyond the physical |
| 2 | Sign or symbol? | Signs show information Symbols participate in that to which they point and have deeper meaning |
| 3 | How? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> We know God is the 'Ground of Being' – source of everything Symbols aren't arbitrary – they express subconscious belief Symbols have a limited lifespan and change in meaning over time Symbols unlock 'hidden depths of our own being' and culture. |
| 4 | Strengths | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Preserves transcendence and mystery Recognises the contribution language has to our identity and understanding of the world. |



| The <i>via negativa</i> | | |
|-------------------------|------------------|--|
| 1 | Pseudo-Dionysius | |
| 2 | Maimonides | |
| 3 | Examples | |
| 4 | Strengths | |

What is at stake?

| Key Vocabulary | |
|--------------------|--|
| Analogy | |
| Anthropomorphic | |
| Apophatic | |
| Attribution | |
| Cataphatic | |
| Cognitive | |
| Equivocal | |
| Non cognitive | |
| Proportion | |
| Religious language | |
| Symbol | |
| Tautology | |
| Univocal | |
| Via negativa | |
| Via positiva | |

| The <i>via positiva</i> – Aquinas | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| 1 | Types of language | |
| 2 | Analogy? | |
| 3 | Analogy of attribution? | |
| 4 | Analogy of proportion? | |
| 5 | Strengths | |

| Symbolic Language - Tillich | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------|--|
| 1 | Why? | |
| 2 | Sign or symbol? | |
| 3 | How? | |
| 4 | Strengths | |