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The Logic of Ineffability

In virtually all theistic religions, there is an apophatic strand that emphasizes the ineffability of God: it is said that God's nature cannot be put into words, that it transcends the limits of our understanding, and that the best we can hope for is to adumbrate what God is not, not what he really is. Examples are not hard to find. In *On Mystical Theology*, for instance, Pseudo–Dionysius claims that God's nature is 'beyond all negation and affirmation'.[1] Meister Eckhart, in one of his sermons, speaks of divine ineffability and explains: 'Everything in the Godhead is one, and of that there is nothing to be said'.[2] The unknown author of the medieval *Cloud of Unknowing* writes, 'All rational beings, angels and men, possess two faculties, the power of knowing and the power of loving. To the first, to the intellect, God who made them is forever unknowable, but to the second, to love, he is completely knowable'.[3] In a similar vein, Moses Maimonides says of God:

> We are only able to apprehend the fact that He is and cannot apprehend His quiddity. It is consequently impossible that He should have affirmative attributes. For He has no 'That' outside of His 'What' and hence an attribute cannot be indicative of one of the two. […] Accordingly He cannot have an affirmative attribute in any respect. As for the negative attributes, they are those that must be used in order to conduct the mind toward that which must be believed with regard to Him.[4]

It can scarcely be doubted, then, that claims about God's incomprehensibility and ineffability are widespread in theistic religions and are the basis of apophatic accounts of religious language given by theologians. From a semantic point of view, the challenge posed by

1 Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, Mystical Theology, 1000B (my translation).
2 Sermon No. 56 (Pfeiffer) in C. de B. Evans, Meister Eckhart, 143.
3 Anonymous, Cloud, 63.
4 M. Maimonides, Guide I, 58 (p. 135)

such claims (and the accompanying apophatic theology) lies in the fact that it is quite unclear what, exactly, they are meant to express – what does the statement 'God is ineffable' *mean*? Is it possible to make sense of this statement and explicate the semantic and epistemic assumptions that inform it? Or is a statement like 'God is ineffable' nothing more than rhetorics, a pious expression of our astonishment when faced with the unfathomable greatness of God – rather than a theological proposition? That is the question I will explore in this paper. I will begin by describing three problems that arise in any attempt to give a consistent analysis of what is meant by 'God is ineffable'. For each of these problems, I will present a number of solutions that have been proposed and then explain why these solutions fail. I will then give a sketch of an alternative theory of the logic of divine ineffability that I believe can overcome these difficulties.

1. Three Problems and Their Supposed Solutions

So let's begin with an overview of the problems that emerge when we try to analyze the meaning of statements like 'God is ineffable'. Those are: (1) The problem of *consistency*: Is there a way to interpret the meaning of these utterances that is not self-defeating? (2) The problem of *reference*: How is it possible to determine the object the term 'God' refers to without giving up the claim that he is ineffable? (3) The problem of *pragmatics*: What are negative or apophatic statements about God supposed to convey if, strictly speaking, nothing can be said about God at all?

1.1 The problem of consistency

The consistency problem is probably the most striking of the three. At first glance, it seems that claims of the form 'x is ineffable' are necessarily self-defeating. More precisely, they seem to involve a *performative* contradiction: in saying that God is ineffable, you already deny, through the very act of making a claim, the proposition you

want to assert.[5] This contradiction is not rooted in any mismatch between the object and what is said about it (as in 'The circle is square') but rather in the fact that the statement's truth is incompatible with the fact that it is uttered. If I say that God is ineffable, then the very fact that I have uttered this sentence already implies that the proposition it expresses is false. For if we take 'ineffable' to mean (provisionally) that it is impossible to say anything about the object in question, then the moment I assert that one cannot say anything about God, I have already said something about God – namely, that nothing can be said about God. And if we (alternatively) interpret 'ineffable' as meaning that no concepts can be applied to the object (regardless of whether we actually say something about it or not), then the same difficulty arises: if I say that no concepts apply to the ineffable God, I have already applied at least one concept to him, namely the concept 'ineffable'.[6] Evidently, claiming that God is ineffable leads to a dilemma: either we truly cannot say anything about God – in which case we cannot even *say* that we cannot say anything – and then those who take divine ineffability seriously must consequently remain silent; or we *can* say that we cannot say anything, in which case there is at least one thing that can be said – namely, that nothing can be said – and the original claim turns out to be trivially false. Paradoxically, then, it appears that making any true statement of the form 'x is ineffable' is impossible and the very speech act entails the falsehood of its own content. But what, if anything, is being expressed when you say that God is ineffable?

Various proposals have been made to resolve this problem, and they can be grouped into two broad categories. The first group takes

5 T. Lethen, Ineffability of God, 1–2 is technically correct when he argues that this is neither a paradox nor a contradiction in a *logical* sense. The contradiction arises only when the statement is actually made because the proposition expressed in the statement seems to imply that the necessary conditions for making the statement cannot in principle be met. This is similar to cases like Moore's paradox ('It's raining, but I don't believe that it's raining'): 'God is ineffable' and 'I say that God is ineffable' are not logically inconsistent, but it's still absurd to assert both of them at the same time.

6 I'm using 'concept' in its standard sense here: a mental representation that applies to a multiplicity of objects and is the meaning of a predicate. If I assert something about an object, my assertion expresses a proposition which contains concepts as its building-blocks, i.e. I apply these concepts to the object in question.

a 'bite the bullet' approach, accepting that any statement of the form 'x is ineffable' really does entail a contradiction while denying that this renders the claim meaningless or deprives it of any expressive value. The second group rejects the objection by modifying (or refining) the meaning of 'ineffable', restricting its scope in some way so that the concept no longer applies to the utterance itself, thus avoiding the contradiction.

One example of the first approach is Sam Lebens's interpretation of apophatic discourse as an 'illuminating falsehood.'[7] Lebens admits that, strictly speaking, the statement 'God is ineffable' is simply false, and even necessarily so, as it entails a contradiction. Thus, the problem of consistency can never be solved. Yet, from his perspective, it's not a problem that the statement is not true. He illustrates this point by referring to the well–known concluding remarks of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*:

> My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright.[8]

At the end of the *Tractatus*, it has become clear that if Wittgenstein's theory of the relation between language and reality is correct, then this very theory cannot itself be expressed in language. By its own standards, the *Tractatus* is nonsense – yet it is an *illuminating* kind of nonsense that makes it possible to show something that cannot be stated straightforwardly. In this respect, apophatic claims also bear resemblance to metaphorical language as Elisabeth Camp has described it.[9] According to Camp, metaphors point to properties or states of affairs that have no established label in our language and make them visible to us through their figurative nature, which

7 Cf. S. Lebens, Plantinga-proof Apophaticism and Principles of Judaism, 17–28. Another example along these lines can be found in C. Ho, Saying the Unsayable. He proposes to treat 'unsayable' as a predicate that does not ascribe any property to its object. Thus, the statement 'God is unsayable' does *indicate* God's ineffability (it makes it epistemically available), but it does not *ascribe* ineffability to God (for if it did, it would be false).

8 L. Wittgenstein, Tractatus, 6.54

9 Cf. E. Camp, Metaphor.

triggers a distinctive cognitive process – even if, taken literally, the metaphor is false. To borrow one of Camp's examples: 'When he finally walked out the door, I was left standing on the top of an icy mountain crag, with nothing around me but thin cold air, bare white cliffs, and a blindingly clear blue sky'.[10] Literally, the statement is false, but it can still deepen our understanding of the specific feeling the speaker experiences in that moment. What distinguishes (good) metaphors from trivial falsehoods like 'Strawberries grow on trees' is precisely that they illuminate something previously unarticulated rather than merely being uninteresting errors. Likewise, statements about God's ineffability should strictly speaking be considered as false, because they are self-defeating; yet their falsehood is *illuminating* in that they indicate an underlying truth that cannot be expressed by the means of our language. For Lebens, the utterance – though false in a strict sense – comes as close as possible to the truth which is itself inexpressible. An analogy might help illustrate his idea: I can point to a statue of Aristotle and say, 'That's Aristotle'. Of course, strictly speaking that's not Aristotle but a *statue* of Aristotle, so on the face of it, my statement is false – but it is an illuminating falsehood. The apparent falsehood ('this object is Aristotle') comes very close to an actually true proposition ('this object *represents* Aristotle'). So again, we have here an example of how a false utterance can still yield genuine insight, for instance if someone doesn't know whom the statue represents. When I say to them, pointing to the statue, 'That's Aristotle', they will come to learn something true, despite what has been said is literally false.

However, there is an important difference between 'That's Aristotle' and 'God is ineffable': in the case of the statue, we can replace the falsehood with a correct, more precise statement (namely, 'This object represents Aristotle'), whereas in the case of God, whatever is supposed to be conveyed through the literally false statement cannot itself be expressed. Unlike in the case of Aristotle's statue, then, there is no way of substituting a better, more accurate sentence for 'God is ineffable'. This is the fundamental problem with Lebens's solution: While in the one case we can explain what is illuminating about the falsehood by clarifying its relationship to an actual fact, in the case of God's ineffability, we cannot. But if we cannot do so – precisely

10 E. Camp, Metaphor, 11.

because the truth that these statements are meant to convey lies beyond the boundaries of our linguistic capacities – then why should we believe it's really an illuminating falsehood, not just a regular falsehood? It's not clear how we should distinguish illuminating from trivial falsehoods (which don't reveal any significant truth). A false statement is, after all, just a false statement; that it might also be illuminating is a separate claim requiring additional justification. Simply stating that 'God is ineffable' is an illuminating falsehood, without any further support, seems like an *ad hoc* solution. But then, Lebens faces a dilemma: either we can specify which truth is illuminated by this falsehood – in which case that 'ineffable' truth can apparently be expressed after all; or we cannot – but then it becomes impossible to know whether the falsehood is illuminating or just plain nonsense.

The second approach – restricting the scope of 'ineffable' – is more common and might at first glance seem more attractive, for it allows us to maintain that statements like 'God is ineffable' are genuinely true and can thus capture a potentially important insight into religious reality. A good example of this strategy can be found in John Hick's distinction between *formal* and *substantial* predicates.[11] In his theory of religious pluralism, Hick posits a transcendent 'Real' behind all individual religions as their ultimate object. By drawing a Kantian distinction between the Real as it is in itself and as it appears to us in its various, culturally shaped forms, he makes it possible to understand all (or most) of the world's religions as equally oriented towards the same transcendent reality. This approach allows him to sidestep the problem of conflicting truth–claims among individual religious traditions and reveal them as merely apparent contradictions. The price that needs to be paid for this pacification is that we must understand the Real as lying beyond all human conceptual categories and thus as unsayable: our concepts do not apply to it, and when we try to speak of it, it is only in the particular, culture–bound terms taken from the specific religious tradition we are familiar with (for example, Mahayana Buddhists will experience the Real as 'emptiness', whereas for Christians it appears as a

11 Cf. J. Hick, Ineffability, and J. Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, xix–xxii. Other examples of this kind of approach include J. Jacobs, Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology, who argues that 'God is ineffable' means that no truths about God are fundamental.

monotheistic God). Hick is aware that positing an ineffable ultimate reality might lead into trouble and draws a distinction between substantial and formal predicates in order to forestall that risk. Substantial predicates, he claims, tell us something about the nature of a thing (e.g., that God is good or holy), whereas formal predicates do not. For Hick, saying that God is, for example, an object of linguistic reference would be a formal statement. This distinction then allows him to assert that the ineffability of the Real consists in the impossibility of *substantial* claims about it, while still permitting *formal* claims – such as that no substantial claims are possible.

The trouble with this solution (and, indeed, with all approaches that limit the scope of 'ineffable' to avoid ineffability claims becoming self-defeating) is that it requires a convincing rationale for why any such restriction is warranted in the first place. Normally, one would assume that 'x is ineffable' means 'nothing can be said about x', not 'some things cannot be said about x'. Likewise, we would ordinarily take 'x is invisible' to mean 'no one can see x', not 'Occasionally, x cannot be seen'. Thus, if you want to restrict the scope of 'ineffable', you will need a reason. Otherwise, we might try to solve the problem of consistency by simply stipulating that 'God is ineffable' means 'Nothing can be said about God *except* that he is ineffable' – but why should this one claim qualify as an exception?[12] Absent a good reason, this maneuver, too, looks like an *ad hoc* solution. Moreover, on Hick's own account, the distinction between substantial and formal predicates is not really clear. Hick's examples imply that formal predicates are, in essence, metalinguistic attributions describing the semantic rules that apply to a term, rather than statements about the thing itself. But is it truly possible to keep those two levels separate? If Hick says that the Real is an object of reference, does that not already imply the substantial claim that the Real is a kind of *entity* (as opposed to a *property*, for instance)? And

12 Cf. S. Hewitt, Negative Theology, 23 f., who makes use of this solution by arguing that a predicate such as 'indescribable' is not reflectively semantic. In other words, applying this predicate to something does not imply that the indescribable object either does or does not possess predicates. Yet this, too, renders the statement 'God is indescribable' paradoxical: on the one hand, it is meant to say that the object in question neither fulfills nor fails to fulfill any predicates, while at the same time 'indescribable' itself is supposed to be a predicate that is fulfilled.

when you assert that the Real cannot be characterized by substantial predicates, doesn't that supposedly formal statement also imply something substantial about the Real – namely, that it has some quality such that these predicates do not apply?

Any solution to the problem of consistency that restricts the scope of the term 'ineffable' must therefore face two challenges: (1) it must provide a compelling motive for imposing that restriction, and (2) it must show that the proposed restriction actually succeeds in removing the contradiction which results from the use of the term 'ineffable'. Like other theories that pursue this line, Hick's theory, too, ultimately fails to meet both demands.[13] So, the first requirement we should place on any theory of divine ineffability is that it must explain how it is possible to say of something that it is ineffable without lapsing into contradiction, and why claims of divine ineffability don't apply to themselves.

1.2 The problem of reference

Our next issue is the problem of reference: how can we determine the object we are referring to when we make statements like 'x is ineffable'? How is it possible to refer to something ineffable at all? Apophaticists do not simply say that some indeterminate 'I know not what is supposed to be ineffable; rather, they specifically claim that it is *God* who is ineffable. Yet this poses a problem: 'God' is a singular term whose semantic function is to identify a particular individual. Standardly, singular terms are divided into three subclasses: definite descriptions, indexicals, and proper names. Linguistically, the term 'God' works most like a proper name ('Mount Everest') or a title ('the pope').[14] That does not necessarily mean, however, that the term 'God' must be understood as a proper name in a strict sense. The problem of reference will arise in any case, as long as 'God' is understood as a singular term, whatever type of singular term it

13 See S. Gäb, Languages of Ineffability, for a discussion of alternative solutions.

14 It remains unclear whether titles constitute their own category of singular terms or whether they are a particular variety of descriptions or proper names. However, as far as the problem of reference is concerned, this question is not relevant here.

might be, because the problem stems from the question of how the reference of a term like this can be determined.[15] If we use the term 'God', we should be able to explain which individual we mean by it. If you could not explain what 'God' refers to, there would be no reason to use the term 'God' in the first place, rather than, say, 'Zeus' or 'Brahma'. We therefore ought to be capable of identifying God or at least explaining how someone unfamiliar with the term could learn to identify the individual in question. Basically, there are two ways this can be done. Either we provide an unambiguous (or at least sufficiently precise) description of the individual, or we make the person acquainted with it through direct experience. If, for instance, I want to explain to someone which object the term 'Mount Everest' refers to, I can do so by describing it as the tallest mountain on Earth, a summit in the Himalayas on the border between Nepal and Tibet, and so on. Alternatively, I could bring that person to Nepal, walk with them to the base of Mount Everest, point to the mountain, and say, '*This* is Mount Everest'.[16]

This, however, is precisely the problem. To identify an object, you must describe it in a way that singles it out uniquely, or at least attribute to it the properties that distinguish it from other objects in a given context. You can explain what 'Mount Everest' refers to only to someone who already understands other terms like 'mountain', 'high', or 'summit'. And even if you show them Mount Everest directly, you must (at least implicitly) rely on descriptive terms to make your act of pointing understandable. The word 'This', accompanied by a hand gesture, could mean anything. What are you pointing to – your hand, the mountain, or maybe the clouds shrouding its peak?

15 Cf. M. Scott, Religious Language, 86. By contrast, S. Hewitt, Negative Theology, 106–108, advocates treating the term 'God' as a singular term *sui generis*. Consequently, Hewitt's way of circumventing the problem does not succeed: in Negative Theology, 34 f., he concludes that, on an apophatic understanding, the term 'God' cannot have a reference, meaning 'God' is not a proper name. He accepts this result and concedes that the term 'God' lacks a referent – as we should expect, because it is not a proper name in the first place. However, this does not solve the issue, for even if the term 'God' is not a proper name, it still *functions* like a singular term, and the function of a singular term is to identify objects— which presupposes that the term can at least refer to something.

16 For a more detailed account of the problem of determining the reference of a singular term, see E. Tugendhat, Traditional and analytical philosophy, 310–322.

Hence, even an ostensive 'this' depends on an implicit or explicit description that relies on sortal predicates to specify what 'this' is referring to. To delineate the reference of the term 'God', we also usually rely on descriptions, for instance by saying that 'God' refers to the being that is perfectly good, omnipotent, and omniscient – i.e., the being that possesses all the properties a perfect being should have.[17]

Yet if God is ineffable, and thus no statements about God are possible, we cannot ascribe to God any properties that would allow us to identify him. We could not even understand the term 'God', for we would have no idea what we are referring to when we speak of God. And if reference is determined by means of explicit or implicit descriptions, how could a term that is supposed to name an ineffable being refer to anything at all? The term 'God' would effectively go nowhere, for ineffability rules out identifying anything whatsoever as the referent of that term. Once again, a dilemma emerges: either we can successfully refer to God using the term 'God' – but then God cannot be ineffable, since reference requires that a definite description is possible; or we cannot refer to God at all (because God is ineffable) – yet in that case, we could not even use the word 'God' in any meaningful way. But this is precisely what people do when they claim that God is ineffable. So, the mere fact that we understand the word 'God', entails that God cannot be ineffable.

An obvious reply is that we are presupposing a descriptive theory of reference (in the style of Frege or Searle),[18] which claims that singular terms are essentially abbreviations of definite descriptions (or bundles of descriptions) identifying the individual. But there are well–known, striking objections to these descriptive theories – for instance, that competent speakers don't need to be able to provide a definite description of an object to use a proper name correctly. Someone who knows nothing more about Aristotle than that he was a Greek philosopher can still speak meaningfully about him, despite the fact that this description is far from definite. Another objection

17 Of course, this depends on one's particular concept of God—anyone who subscribes to a different conception of God will have to use a different description. Still, it remains impossible to use the term 'God' without *any* description in the background.

18 Cf. G. Frege, Sense and reference; J. Searle, Proper Names.

is that not every object necessarily admits of a single, unambiguous description, and that even false descriptions can sometimes be enough to ensure successful reference. Someone who believes that Picasso was an Italian painter can still successfully refer to Picasso (for example, by looking him up on Wikipedia and thereby discovering that Picasso was not, in fact, Italian).[19]

The alternative is a direct or causal theory of reference, chiefly developed by Saul Kripke.[20] According to this theory, the reference of a term is not fixed by a description but rather by a sort of 'baptism': on first contact with the object, a name is coined and linked with that object (Kripke calls them *rigid designators*). This rigid link between name and object is subsequently passed on within the linguistic community, so that in principle we could trace back the causal chain of events leading to the original act of naming; this causal chain then fixes the term's reference. The advantage of such a theory is that the rigid link is an independent, external fact of which speakers need not be aware, and which persists even if they are unable to identify the object that the rigid designator denotes. So, it's not necessary for users of the term 'God' to be able to supply a precise or correct description of the being to which the term refers. It's enough that they have acquired the term from a linguistic community that stands in the proper causal relation to the original baptism, i.e. that the real God was involved in the naming event at the beginning of the causal chain. In this way, successful reference to an ineffable God would be possible, provided only that at some point in the past, an experiential encounter with God took place which forged the rigid link between God (the individual) and the term 'God.'

Unfortunately, even a direct theory of reference cannot dispense entirely with a minimum of descriptions and so, too, clashes with the ineffability thesis. The problem lies in how the initial baptism is supposed to be possible in the first place. Plausibly, this requires that it must be possible to identify the object to which a name is being assigned. While definite descriptions may not be necessary once the reference of a term is established, how can the object of reference be identified *for the first time* without the help of descriptions? We

19 Cf. M. Scott, Religious Language, Ch. 7 for a discussion of problems and possible solutions regarding the function of the term 'God'.

20 Cf. S. Kripke, Naming and Necessity.

find ourselves in a situation analogous to the one outlined above, in which we try to explain the meaning of 'Mount Everest' by pointing to the very mountain. It is not enough to point and say, 'This is called "Mount Everest"', for it must be clear what you are referring to by 'this'. As mentioned, this is accomplished by narrowing the object down to a particular spatio–temporal location and applying sortal predicates to it that distinguish it from other items within your field of experience. I might, for example, say: 'This mountain there, which you now see before you, is Mount Everest'. But in doing so, I must say at least that it is a mountain and that you perceive it in a particular place at this specific time. Direct reference thus still presupposes that the object of reference is, in principle, unambiguously describable – even if not by all speakers, but at least when the rigid link between term and object is forged. But then, our original question remains unresolved: how is it possible to designate an ineffable God as referent of 'God' without applying any concepts to him? The second requirement, then, for a plausible theory of ineffability is that it must explain how it is possible to refer to the ineffable and to identify it as the ineffable entity that it is.

1.3 The problem of pragmatics

Our third issue is the problem of pragmatics: if some objects of religious discourse are supposed to be ineffable, what, then, is the function of religious language? What are statements about ineffable entities supposed to communicate, assuming that nothing can be said about these entities? Clearly, even those who believe in God's ineffability do not stop talking about God. Typically, the language employed to describe the ineffable is purely negative or metaphorical, and each of these modes of speech poses its own version of the problem of pragmatics. For reasons of space, I shall limit myself here to the problem of the function of negative discourse.[21]

There are two fundamental objections that cast doubt on the very possibility or meaningfulness of purely negative predication. First, one might argue that ultimately there is no relevant distinction be-

21 For a promising account of the meaning of metaphorical speech about the ineffable, see J. Hesse, Linguistic expressibility.

tween positive and negative predicates: 'dead' seems to be a positive predicate, while 'no longer alive' is negative – but at least from a perspective of truth–conditional semantics, the two do not differ in content. 'The king is dead' is true under precisely the same conditions as 'The king is no longer alive', so the two could be considered as having the same meaning. The only difference lies in the way the same fact is framed linguistically. But if there is no substantial (i.e., semantically significant) difference between these two predicates, then there can be no distinguishably *negative* type of religious discourse. Second, it appears that negative theology inevitably leads to an infinite regress, since negative predicates are still predicates. If we claim that no predicates can be applied (positively) to God, then we must, consistently, also deny God any negative predicates. One cannot simply stop at denying a single predicate, for instance by saying 'God is not spirit', because 'not spirit' is itself a predicate, which must likewise be denied: 'God is neither spirit nor not spirit'. But even this predicate – 'neither spirit nor not spirit' – would itself need to be negated, so that we find ourselves caught in an infinite regress of ever more complex negations.[22]

A possible solution is to improve our understanding of the function of negation in negative discourse. On this account, the negations used in apophatic discourse are not truth–functional negations that simply invert the truth value of a proposition; rather, they are *metalinguistic* negations.[23] The purpose of metalinguistic negations is not to deny certain predicates or assert a negative state of affairs, as e.g. the 'not' does in 'It is not raining' ('It is not raining' is true if and only if 'It is raining' is false). Instead, a metalinguistic negation has a pragmatic (rather than semantic) function, namely to reject the assertion of a particular claim, regardless of whether it is framed positively or negatively. I might say, for instance: 'It's not raining, it's pouring'. The difference between the two statements is crucial, for this is the difference between semantic negation and pragmatic (metalinguistic) negation: if I say, 'It is not raining'. I really do mean that it is not raining. But if I say, 'It's not raining, it's pouring', I

22 Both problems where classically brought up by W. Stace, Mysticism and Philosophy, 289.

23 See P. van Elswyk, Metalinguistic Apophaticism, and M. Scott / G. Citron, Apophaticism, for examples of this approach.

do *not* mean that it isn't raining (even though I use precisely those words); rather, I refuse to accept that description – in this case because I regard it as inadequate for describing the actual situation. More precisely, van Elswyk explains that metalinguistic negation is an operator that expresses an attitude towards a propositional content but does not itself contain any such content – similar to an interjection like 'Go home? Bah!'.[24] On this interpretation, apophatic statements such as 'God is not spirit and not body' are likewise not supposed to deny that God is spiritual or physical, nor do they assert any complex negative fact (that God is neither spirit nor non–spirit, which would itself be contradictory). Instead, they convey the speaker's refusal to apply either predicate to God. No contradiction arises here because the negation is metalinguistic and does not target the semantic content of the predicate itself. By analogy, I can say that the number five is neither yellow nor not yellow without making a contradictory claim; all I express is my refusal to apply the predicate 'yellow' to the number five. I do not negate any statement in a truth–functional sense.[25] In other words, my negation does not deny that the number five has the property 'yellow'; it simply expresses that I am not willing to ascribe predicates of the sort 'yellow' to numbers.

However, this approach faces a serious difficulty: it is incompatible with the assumption that God is ineffable. If we accept a purely metalinguistic account of negation, statements in negative theology contain two essential components: a metalinguistic operator (M) and a propositional content (p), where M expresses the speaker's refusal to assert p. A statement like 'God is neither spirit nor non–spirit' thus has the form $M(p\&\neg p)$, where p means 'God is spirit'. But the propositional content of p must be expressible because otherwise, it would be incomprehensible how the speaker could adopt any stance toward it. Accepting a metalinguistic interpretation of negative theology thus forces us to reinterpret the original ineffability thesis: saying that God is ineffable no longer means we cannot say anything about God – we *can* say a great deal – rather, it means we are unwilling to *affirm* what we could say. Yet that is something entirely different from insisting that one cannot say anything about God, if by 'saying' we mean nothing more than 'expressing some

24 P. van Elswyk, Metalinguistic Apophaticism, 143.
25 P. van Elswyk, Metalinguistic Apophaticism, 144.

state of affairs in language'. Moreover, on this reading, statements such as 'God is neither body nor spirit' primarily tell us something about the speaker, not about God (at least not directly). All we could learn from negative theology is that the speaker does not regard God as the sort of entity to which such expressions may be applied.

So we have arrived at the third challenge for a convincing theory of divine ineffability: we need an explanation of what function negative discourse about an ineffable subject can fulfill – how it can avoid undermining the ineffability thesis or rendering those negative utterances themselves meaningless.

2. An Alternative Approach

How might these three problems be solved? Is there a theory of ineffability that can successfully address all three challenges? In what follows, I will outline (in broad strokes) what such a theory might look like.

The first step towards a solution is to consider what it is, precisely, that is being described as 'ineffable.' In other words, what is the object to which we ascribe the property of ineffability? Up to this point, we have assumed that the statement 'God is ineffable' need not be understood any differently from comparable statements like 'God is omniscient', and that it works in a similar way, both semantically and syntactically. It seems that in both statements, we are ascribing a particular property – ineffability or omniscience – to a particular individual – God. We seem, then, to be dealing with a straightforward predication of the form *F(a)*. Yet on closer inspection, it becomes apparent that this interpretation is in fact misconceived. After all, what could it possibly mean to say of an object (be it God, a stone, or a car) that it is ineffable? Trivially, all particular objects are 'ineffable'. No one would be surprised if one were to claim that a stone is unsayable, for a stone is not the kind of thing one would expect to be sayable in the first place – it is impossible to imagine what a 'sayable stone' would be. Of course, this doesn't mean that I couldn't say anything about the stone (e.g. 'the stone is grey'). But what I say is a *proposition* about the stone, not the stone itself. Facts can be expressed in language, but stones cannot. Likewise, we cannot

readily assign meaning to a statement like 'The president is sayable' if we assume that it is used to attribute a property to an object. The same applies to God: taken as a predication, neither 'God is sayable' nor 'God is ineffable' really makes sense. Why? Because the only entities that can be described in a non–trivial sense as 'ineffable' are those that are, by their very nature, *linguistic* or *propositional* in character. These are facts or states of affairs (or, depending on your preferred metaphysics, propositions) – in other words, sets of objects and their relations. 'Ineffable', then, is a special kind of predicate, one that involves implicit quantification. Saying of some object x that it is ineffable is, strictly speaking, a statement about a set of facts or propositions that involve x.[26] The situation is analogous to Frege's analysis of universal statements, such as 'All humans are mortal.' This statement is not a predication attributing mortality to some obscure entity like 'the set of all humans'; rather, it is a quantification over claims involving objects falling under the concept 'human'. In other words, it means: for every x, if x is a human, then x is mortal. Similarly, 'ineffable' functions as a metalinguistic predicate by which we express that certain facts about God cannot be put into words. This also clarifies why 'God is ineffable' can be paraphrased as 'God is indescribable': if God is indescribable, there are certain facts concerning God that cannot be described or articulated. The first principle of a theory of ineffability thus should be: ineffability is a property of facts or propositions, not of objects.

Next, we must ask what it really means for a given state of affairs to be ineffable. Here, we should distinguish two fundamentally different meanings of 'ineffable'.[27] First, something can be ineffable *relative to a particular language* because, for contingent reasons, that language lacks the terms this would require. This leaves open the possibility that the fact in question, which is unsayable in language L_1, might well be sayable in language L_2. A simple example: in English, it makes perfect sense to say 'My computer has crashed', yet the

26 P. Van Elswyk, Metalinguistic Apophaticism, 146, objects that negations expressed by a prefix (un-) can only be truth-functional rather than metalinguistic, so that 'unsayable' cannot convey a metalinguistic negation. That may be true, but does not change anything, because the predicate is intended to express implicit *quantification* rather than negation. What is negated (in a truth-functional sense) is the sayability of certain propositions about God.

27 For a more thorough discussion of this point, see S. Gäb, Concept of Ineffability

same fact would have been ineffable in Ancient Greek, because it lacks expressions corresponding to 'computer' and 'to crash.'[28] Likewise, in a mathematical formalism that does not include negative numbers, it would be impossible to express the result of '3 – 5 = ?' This *relative* or *weak* form of ineffability is largely unproblematic, for it is always in principle possible to remove it: if a fact is unsayable in some language L_1 but sayable in a more powerful metalanguage L_2, then L_2 can be used to introduce a new expression into L_1 that renders the formerly ineffable content expressible. As long as the fact remains principally expressible (in *some* language), one can always find ways to close such gaps in sayability.

On the other hand, 'ineffable' can also mean *fundamental* or *absolute* ineffability. This means that some state of affairs or proposition is absolutely unsayable, not just unsayable in a particular language. This obtains if there is no language – nor could there be – in which the fact is expressible. This would be the case if describing the ineffable state of affairs would require the possession of a concept that cannot be formed; that is, if a speaker not only *lacks* a certain concept for contingent reasons but *cannot possibly* possess such a concept. This absolute or strong form of ineffability would thus apply wherever the fact in question cannot be conceptualized at all. As opposed to a weak ineffability that arises from the contingent limitations of a given language, strong ineffability arises from the limitations of thought: the speaker (or the type of being the speaker is) simply does not have the requisite cognitive capacities to form the concepts necessary for expressing the fact.[29]

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28 It would, of course, be possible to formulate a sentence in Ancient Greek that one might consider a translation (for instance: ὁ λογιστής μου συμέπεσε); yet that by itself would not suffice, for a state of affairs is only expressible in a language if the terms employed to express it are actually *used* with that meaning in the language. It is not an arbitrary decision on my part but rather actual usage that would allow me to regard this sentence as an adequate translation; and since no such usage can exist for a dead language, the proposition remains, in the strict sense, unsayable.

29 One might argue that even strong ineffability can be relativized, not in terms of language, but rather in terms of the cognitive capacities of a particular type of being. Thus, certain facts might be ineffable for humans or for finite beings, but not for God. It is an interesting question whether absolute ineffability is even possible or whether it involves a contradiction – whether there can be something that has linguistic structure but still can never be expressed by no one

Is there an example for this strong form of ineffability? No, at least not explicitly – any example would already be something sayable. If we could provide examples, they would not truly be examples of something ineffable. Nonetheless, we can imagine beings whose cognitive capacities are more limited than ours and identify facts that would be ineffable in a strong sense for them but not for us. Suppose we picture a species of two–dimensional beings (like in Edwin Abbott's novel *Flatland*): it would be impossible for them even to form a concept of 'space'. They might have a grasp of 'in front', 'behind', 'right', and 'left', but without a concept of space, expressions such as 'above' or 'below' would be nonsensical to them. No such being could express that 'a bird is flying *above* me'. We might try to explain to them that 'above' means 'in the same place, but elsewhere – not to your right or left, nor in front of or behind you, and also not in the same place as you, but on a different plane – *above* you'. But sadly, they would be unable to understand this (and probably accuse us of talking nonsense), for they have no cognitive capacity to imagine a third dimension; presumably, they would dismiss our explanations as absurd mysticism.

Now, which of these two types of ineffability is the one we talk about when we speak of divine ineffability? If the claim that God is ineffable is supposed to have any significant meaning, then clearly it must be the second type: God (i.e., some facts about God) must be ineffable in the strong sense. The problem cannot merely be that a particular human language fails, for contingent reasons, to include adequate expressions to describe God. Rather, it must lie in the fact that God appears to be a being not fully graspable by human thought. This observation leads to a crucial consequence: namely, that the ineffability thesis cannot be a general thesis applying to *all* facts about God; it can apply only to those that outstrip the speaker's cognitive capacities. The mere fact that some proposition includes the term 'God' does not suffice to render the entire proposition ineffable. Hence statements like 'Many people believe in God' are obviously unproblematic, for nothing in the relevant fact about God here exceeds cognitive limits, and so no ineffability arises.

(see T. Knepper, Against Absolute Ineffability, for arguments against this claim) – but I will not pursue that matter further here, as it does not directly bear on our present inquiry.

From this starting point, we can articulate a fairly straightforward response to the first challenge (the problem of consistency): how can we avoid the contradiction that seems to arise when we say, 'God is ineffable'? We must realize that when we speak of God as ineffable, the real claim is not about God (which runs the risk of performative contradiction) but rather an implicit quantification indicating that *some* facts regarding God are unsayable because they exceed the speaker's cognitive capacities. This does not entail any contradiction, for on this analysis, the statement need not refer to a fact that is included in the set of facts that outstrip the speaker's cognitive capacities. The fact that there are ineffable facts concerning God is itself not an ineffable fact.

The same principle – that ineffability is a statement about a certain set of states of affairs or propositions – can also help us address the second challenge: How can an ineffable object be identified as the referent of an expression if we cannot rely on descriptions to pick it out? We have seen that it is not the object that is ineffable, but rather some of the facts about it. True, this still rules out the possibility of determining the referent by means of a definite description, for such a description would presumably have to include statements expressing facts that are themselves ineffable. Yet a direct theory of reference remains feasible, for it is perfectly possible to say certain things about the ineffable entity, as long as those statements do not concern any of the ineffable facts – i.e., as long as they do not exceed our cognitive capacities. As soon as the facts we can say about God suffice to identify God as the referent of the term 'God' in a specific act of naming, that is enough to ensure that the term has secured its reference. Successful direct reference requires that an important condition be met: it must be possible to *recognize* God as the object of an initial encounter that fixes the reference. This condition is fulfilled if we can name certain qualities of the experience that justify regarding it as an encounter with God. In mentioning such qualities, we are expressing propositions about God that need not belong to the realm of the ineffable. For instance, I can say that God is that which I encountered on a particular occasion. I can also describe the phenomenal qualities of the experience and attribute them to the object of my experience, noting that God is this holy, perfectly good being whose presence I experienced – a presence that moved me more than anything else. Or I could be more prosaic, saying merely

that 'God is this I-know-not-what I just encountered', because my spiritual teacher told me so. These few statements suffice to secure the reference of the term 'God', even if the being referred to has further properties that lie beyond our conceptual grasp, and even if it remains possible that we are mistaken about the true nature of the referent.

Two interesting implications follow from this account of reference. First, adopting an apophatic view of God and holding that some propositions regarding God are ineffable implies a sort of epistemic primacy of mystical experience (broadly understood as any experiential approach to the divine) over theological speculation. The meanings of key theological terms such as 'God' are then established in the context of certain experiences, rather than by theoretical reflection. In a very broad sense, theology then takes on some characteristics of an *empirical* science. Second, if reference is determined via experience, it becomes possible to be mistaken about the actual referent of the term 'God'. If this term is introduced through a particular experiential situation, it may later turn out that the entity so named does not have the properties we have subsequently associated with the concept of God. For example, I can successfully refer to a distant person by saying, 'That man over there', only to discover later that the individual is, in fact, a woman. The concept of God, then, must in principle remain open to revision based on further experiences, in case we discover that the entity we have been calling 'God' is different from what we thought previously. Positing an ineffable God who manifests in particular experiences always carries the risk of misidentifying him and applying the term 'God' erroneously.

Finally, the third challenge remains: how can we understand the negative statements of apophatic theology without abandoning the ineffability thesis or dismissing such statements to nonsense? It might seem that interpreting negative statements metalinguistically entails a tacit rejection of the ineffability thesis, since all that is being denied by the apophatic is their willingness to assert certain sayable propositions (rather than the possibility of making any statements at all). The solution, however, lies in recognizing that this consequence need not be a problem. Let's take another look at the formalism outlined in section 1.3 for modeling metalinguistic statements: An utterance of the form $M(p)$ indicates the speaker's refusal to affirm p.

An analogous utterance of the form *M(¬p)* indicates the same reluctance to affirm *not-p*. Taken together, these two utterances express a refusal to affirm either *p* or *not-p*, that is, any '*p-like*' states of affairs. At the same time, by refusing to do so, they point beyond both *p* and *not-p* to some other fact which is not captured by either *p* or *not-p*, but only indicated (though not expressed) by these two negative statements. Suppose I say, 'No (*M*) – five is not green (*p*), and it's also not *not* green (*not-p*)!'. In doing so, I do not merely express my reluctance to apply 'green' to the number five. I also indicate (but don't say) that the number five has a property that makes it impossible to apply color predicates to it at all. Yet this property itself cannot be described by either *p* or *not-p*; expressing it requires a different statement altogether.

If we transpose this model to talk about an ineffable God, and if we are willing to accept that there can be ineffable facts about God, then we can assume analogously that the double negatives of apophatic theology indicate further, ineffable facts about God, from which they derive their legitimacy. Incidentally, this where the approach laid out here fundamentally differs from the metalinguistic accounts described above: it doesn't require that what is indicated by the metalinguistic statements is also *expressed* (or expressible at all) in language. A statement like *M(p&¬p)* requires that *p* be expressible (which conflicts with the ineffability thesis). But assuming that the ineffability thesis is not a general claim about all propositions about God, it's not a problem to accept that *p* is expressible as long as the whole statement *M(p&¬p)* indicates a further, inexpressible proposition *q*. This is what metalinguistic statements do: by expressing an attitude towards expressible propositions, they point to ineffable others. So, the meaning of negative theology lies in its *pragmatics*, not its semantics. The function of negative utterances is not to make a particular kind of statement about the ineffable object, but rather to *disengage* us from the practice of affirmation and negation – from the very practice of 'saying' something – at least insofar as we try to articulate ineffable facts in doing so. It does not seek to tell us how God is not, but only to indicate what is ineffable. Our normal way of speaking about God rests on the erroneous assumption that every fact about God is sayable. But if certain facts about God are genuinely ineffable, we cannot express them either positively or negatively, for they must be inexpressible in our language. Negative

theology, then, is a form of *protreptics* – it admonishes us to let go of our presumption that we can speak about the ineffable God in the same way we speak about any other object, and instead calls on us to abandon our usual modes of thinking and speaking.

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