

## **Divine Ineffability**

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### **Abstract**

Though largely neglected by philosophers, the concept of ineffability is integral to the Christian mystical tradition and has been part of almost every philosophical discussion of religious experience since the early twentieth century. After a brief introduction, this article surveys the most important discussions of divine ineffability, observing that the literature presents two mutually-reinforcing obstacles to a coherent account of the concept, creating the impression that philosophical reflection on the subject had reached an impasse. The article goes on to survey some more recent work, which draws on the conceptual resources of existential phenomenology, pragmatism, and the later Wittgenstein. It shows that this work has made possible a new philosophical account of divine ineffability that surmounts the obstacles, overcomes the impasse and makes divine ineffability, once again, a live option in philosophy of religion. The article concludes with some brief remarks on how this alternative approach reflects recent trends in the discipline as a whole and has the potential to make a valuable contribution to live research questions in epistemology of religion.

### **I**

Largely neglected by philosophers, the thought that God is incomprehensible, and that the divine nature therefore eludes literal linguistic articulation, is a commonplace in the Christian mystical tradition, especially in the works of writers at the fringes of orthodoxy, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (fl. c. 650–c. 725) and Meister Eckhart (1260–1328). Such thinkers are part of what is known as the apophatic tradition, practitioners of negative theology. Anthony Kenny describes this tradition (whose founder he takes, according to common perception, to be Dionysius) in terms of the writings of the various theologians who have ‘maintained that God was ineffable and indeed inconceivable ... [and that w]e humans ... cannot speak appropriately about God, and ... cannot even think coherently about him’ (Kenny, 443). Many such theologians have preferred to restrict themselves to negative statements (about what God is *not*), thinking that such statements are less prone to error than positive ones. With a few notable exceptions, mainstream theologians tend to be wary of this apparently inauspicious theological point of departure and, if they

allow for it at all, tend to take a very different view of (what they prefer to call) divine ‘mystery’.<sup>1</sup> But philosophers of religion, who are, for the most part, less concerned to ensure a constructive theological outcome, have typically taken the apophatic premise stated by Kenny as the inspiration for their reflections on divine ineffability.

As a result, the relevant meaning of ‘ineffable’, and the sense in which I shall be using it in this paper, is a reference not just to the idea of that which is inexpressible or in practice unknown but to the concept of what is *in principle* resistant to conceptual formulation and (therefore) literal linguistic articulation. ‘Ineffability’, in this sense, includes a non-disparaging sense of ‘mystery’.

## II

Ineffability attracted renewed attention in philosophy of religion at the very beginning of the twentieth century when, in his 1901-2 Gifford Lectures, William James designated it as one of the five ‘marks’ of mystical experience (292-3). Since James’s lectures were delivered and published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, philosophers have followed his lead, typically addressing the notion of divine ineffability in the broader context of reflections on mysticism and on the nature of religious experience. In what follows, I summarize the most important of those discussions, considering their implications for contemporary philosophical reflection on divine ineffability. In particular, I highlight two major obstacles to making philosophical sense of the idea, before considering an alternative approach that may help to surmount those obstacles.

In his early, 1956 paper, ‘Ineffability’, William Alston carried out what one commentator has called a ‘nearly definitive analysis’ of the concept of divine ineffability (Kukla 3). He begins the paper by quoting several versions of the claim that God is ineffable, as it is found in various religious and philosophical traditions. Alston interprets the meaning of this claim, after W. T. Stace (1886-1967), in the following way: ‘To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that he is without qualities ... Thus to the intellect He is blank, void, nothing.’ (‘Ineffability’ 507). Alston’s main aim seems to be to demonstrate a first major obstacle, namely, the fact that the unqualified claim ‘God is ineffable’ appears to be self-refuting (519, 522). This is because its content, the assertion that God cannot be described, is apparently contradicted by its logical form, which seems to imply that

something is being asserted about God, namely his ineffability. The problem of self-refutation that Alston highlighted has been noticed by other philosophers and, for example, is referred to by Leszek Kołakowski as a ‘self-reference antinomy’ (44) and by David Cooper as a ‘paradox of ineffability’ (*Ineffability and Religious Experience* 193). Whatever it is called, as we shall see, this problem of self-stultification calls into question the possibility of securing reference to an ineffable God, which even the bald claim that ‘God is ineffable’ apparently has to presuppose.

The problem is generally agreed to be insoluble and, in apparent reaction to it, later discussions (including the one carried out by Alston himself (*Perceiving God* 31-2)) have taken a different course, applying the concept of ineffability to objects other than God. One philosopher, for example, suggests that the mystical literature allows for the application of ineffability to (1) a being but also to (2) a truth, (3) the self and, most importantly (in a return to William James’s thought), (4) mystical experience (Kellenburger 307). This fourth, Jamesian option is the one that Alston appears to prefer in his early work. Rather than taking the claim of divine ineffability as equivalent to the claim that God has no properties, it has been suggested that it amounts instead to the claim that God does have properties, but that these are so ‘extraordinary’ that they cannot be understood or spoken of (Kukla 3). Kukla, for example, advances an argument for ineffable facts ‘from mysticism’, i.e., from the view that some human beings have ineffable knowledge about, or experiences of, some religious state(s) of affairs, perhaps involving God. A. W. Moore has provided a bolster for such arguments in the form of his sophisticated recent defence of the idea of ineffable knowledge and the religious register in which such knowledge is linguistically expressible (*Ineffability and Religion* passim). Arguments from mysticism of this kind can be seen as reacting to the supposedly insoluble problem of self-stultification.

In an important but neglected paper in the field, David Cooper summarizes this line of argument in a way that brings out the inseparability of our first obstacle (the apparently self-refuting nature of the claim that God is ineffable) from the second: the problem of the possibility of experiencing such a God. After helpfully distinguishing *divine* ineffability from other, more familiar and prosaic forms, Cooper sets out the implications of the self-stultification problem for discussions of divine ineffability:

Let us grant that a totally ineffable God is an absurdity. What we are assuming to be ineffable is not God himself, but experiences of him. Clearly there is much we can say about him. He is one, perfect, omniscient, and so on. This is enough to support the claim that it is experiential encounters with him, and not something else, which are ineffable. ('Ineffability and Religious Experience' 193-4)

According to the argument from mysticism so far, enough can be said about God as the object of reason to identify that it is *he* who is encountered in the ineffable states of knowledge or experience. But, as Cooper argues, it is not clear that the God of reason is as articulable as the argument requires. The terms used to describe him are either unhelpfully obscure ('One' or 'Absolute) or are admitted by theologians to be intractably non-literal, analogical or figurative (Cooper, 'Ineffability and Religious Experience' 194). However, it is not immediately clear that we can form a viable concept of a being that can *only* be described in such ways since, intuitively, it seems that we 'need a straight description of something before we can identify it as that which can be analogically or figuratively depicted' (Cooper, 'Ineffability and Religious Experience', 194). Since, therefore (as is implied by the meaning of 'ineffability'), we can provide no such 'straight description' that would allow us to secure reference to that which can, at best, be figuratively described, a common response has been to return, with James and Alston, to the God of experience. This strategy is motivated by the thought that 'if we can directly experience God, then the fact (if it is one) that reason can capture him only figuratively is not devastating' (Cooper, 'Ineffability and Religious Experience' 194-5).

But, in fact, this response gets us no further:

The problem assumed earlier was precisely the ineffability of God as an object of experience. The idea, a short while ago, was to blunt the edge of this problem by appeal to the God of [reason], a being about whom we could say enough to explain his experiential ineffability. Clearly that idea falls apart once we concede that sense can be made of this being only via experiences of him. The circle would be complete: we can allow an ineffable God of experience only if we can identify an effable God of reason, but we can do the latter only if we can first make sense of, and therefore communicate, the former (Cooper, 'Ineffability and Religious Experience' 195).

This clear and perceptive summary indicates that the ‘experiential turn’ will provide no escape from the self-reference antinomy created by the unqualified claim of divine ineffability. Clearly this antinomy (which problematizes the possibility of securing reference to an ineffable God) and the problem of making sense, instead, of an ineffable *experience* of God are deeply interconnected and reinforce each other in the vicious circle that Cooper described.

More recently, Alston has been in danger of falling into this circle, as is shown by some later work in which, contrary to his earlier position, he offers a defence of divine ineffability. In his 2005 Taylor Lectures delivered at Yale,<sup>2</sup> he defends the ‘Divine Mystery Thesis (DMT)’, which is initially formulated in the following terms: ‘No concepts in the human repertoire can be truly applied to God as he is in himself’. However, Alston immediately qualifies the DMT, acknowledging that it cannot be true of negative concepts, for as all apophatic theologians are well aware, we must be able to make negative statements about God, no matter how mysterious we otherwise take God to be. In addition to this relatively uncontroversial qualification, Alston believes that the self-reference problem requires him further to qualify the DMT, conceding that it cannot hold for absolutely all positive concepts. For, if it did, we would be left with no way of ensuring that our denials were directed to God, rather than to something else.

Alston adopts a Kripkean view of reference that does not require a uniquely applicable description of the referent but depends on the ongoing practice of reference, one’s involvement in a continuing chain of communication, which originates from an initial perception or experience of the referent. In the case of God, Alston defends this possibility by appeal to the arguments in his earlier book, *Perceiving God*. But he finds that even this relatively congenial view of reference requires that some concepts are applicable to God.

For how could it be the case that I directly perceive a baby, God, or anything else without thereby being able to use some of my concepts to characterize what is perceived? If it is a baby, I could say that it is chubby or emaciated, awake or asleep, and so on. If it is God, I could say that he is powerful or loving or good at communicating a certain message to me, or whatever (Alston, *Divine Mystery and Our Knowledge of God I*).

Alston's defence of the possibility of referring to an ineffable God depends on the possibility of experiencing such a God. And, as Cooper predicted, this latter possibility requires Alston to weaken the DMT to the extent that he is forced to admit that some concepts are applicable to God after all. He does not feel forced to admit that a uniquely applicable description is applicable to God, nor to specify which concepts are applicable to God. So he reformulates his thesis so that it allows for the application of the smallest set of concepts whose true application has to be assumed in order to secure reference to God. And he clarifies that if there is more than one equally small set of concepts that fulfils this function, then the reformulated version of the DMT is compatible with only one such set being truly applicable to God.

The structure of Alston's argument suggests that Cooper's initial description of the philosophical difficulties was accurate: Alston only avoids getting caught up in the vicious circle by weakening his initial thesis that God is ineffable. In order to secure reference, he appeals instead to the God of direct experience. But this move cancels the original claim of ineffability, since concepts can clearly be applied to an object of the kind of experience that Alston has in mind. But if concepts cannot be applied to such a God, and the *experience* of this God is ineffable, then God's nature must be minimally articulable in rational terms to ensure that it is experiential encounters with him, and not something else, which are ineffable. Either way, the strong claim of divine ineffability does not survive. Since the purpose of Alston's third and final lecture was to make the DMT give ground to its antithesis and to reconcile both into a synthesis, this result no doubt suited Alston's aims very well. But, less helpfully for the present purposes, it created the impression that arguments to divine ineffability, in explicit defence of a main implicit assumption of the Christian mystical tradition,<sup>3</sup> had reached an impasse.

### III

Some more recent philosophical work has revisited the concept of ineffability, applying insights not only from analytic philosophy but also from phenomenology and pragmatism to indicate that a doctrine of ineffability may yet be a live option in philosophy of religion and elsewhere. So how does this work surmount these mutually-reinforcing obstacles to divine ineffability? To start with the problem of self-stultification: Cooper maintains that the supposed contradiction between the function

of the assertion ‘X is ineffable’ (asserting that nothing can be said about X) and the act of making the assertion (thereby asserting something of X) can be dissolved by distinguishing between levels of language: that which talks about things and that which talks about language (‘Ineffability and Religious Experience’ 193). In a similar vein, A. W. Moore has suggested that ‘A is shown that *x*’ means ‘A has ineffable knowledge and when the attempt is made to put what A knows into words, the result is *x*’. The implication of this suggestion is that the speaker’s uttering *x*, which might just be a nonsensical sentence, does not violate the claim that the knowledge or experience in question is ineffable (*Points of View*, 157).<sup>4</sup> If we apply Cooper’s distinction in the religious case (where the ‘X’ in question is ‘God’), we find that the statement ‘God is ineffable’ can be interpreted as being about the sense, rather than the referent of the word ‘God’. ‘God’ does not of course refer to the ineffable but rather evokes the ineffable by referring to the concept of ineffability. Although Alston was well aware of this possible solution, he did not seem to think that it could be a robust enough basis for the other, experiential mystical claims that were his main concern (‘Ineffability’ 519).

Indeed, even if this solution is accepted as providing an acceptable, non-self-stultifying sense to the statement ‘God is ineffable’, we are still left with our second obstacle: the problem of the possibility of religious experience. In philosophical terms, we are dealing with what I call a tension between ineffability and answerability ([reference deleted] 14). There is a tension, in other words, between the ‘work’ that the concept is required to do in order to be worth invoking and the concept itself. Why invoke the concept of ineffability in *any* context, presenting it for human evaluation, when its content, or rather its lack of cognitive content, entails that it cannot do any ‘work’ and thus in principle precludes such evaluation? In religious terms, this tension ramifies as the problem of the possibility of religious experience. It is obviously problematic, in this apophatic context, to affirm the strong concept of divine ineffability and also to insist that there are ways in which human beings are answerable to the ineffable in, say, various kinds of experience and in religious practices - hence Alston’s wish to avoid, or at least attenuate, the strong sense of divine ineffability in the DMT’s initial formulation.

John Hick nicely summarises this second problem in his description of the theological predicament of Dionysius, whom he believes is

caught in the dilemma which faces everyone who affirms the ultimate divine ineffability but who is also required, by the practice of worship and the religious life generally, to think of God as a personal being with whom a personal relationship is possible. For how could we worship the totally transcategorical? And how could [Dionysius], as a faithful Christian monk, allow the scriptures, liturgies and theologies of the church to be undercut by an unqualified divine ineffability? (38)

The theologian David Brown acknowledges the same tension, which, in his view, ‘exists in almost all forms of religion ... that between explanation and mystery, between the conviction that something has been communicated by the divine (revelation) and the feeling that none the less God is infinitely beyond all our imaginings’ (22). In the following two sections, I take a brief look at some very recent philosophical work that takes an alternative approach to this problem, pointing to a way in which this philosophical and theological tension might be resolved.<sup>5</sup>

#### IV

On the philosophical side, Cooper’s more recent work has defended a doctrine of ineffability in a way that arguably resolves the tension between ineffability and answerability.<sup>6</sup> The arguments for divine ineffability already considered share the premise that there is, if not some ‘ineffable object’, then at least a state of affairs which, if not itself ineffable, is the ‘object’ of ineffable knowledge or experiences. By contrast, the originality of Cooper’s argument lies in its alternative, existential phenomenological approach to the topic (though it also has strong affinities with pragmatism),<sup>7</sup> which dispenses with such problematic absolutist ideas of the ineffable as an object or state of affairs.

The existential phenomenological background to Cooper’s argument owes to the humanistic view that any ‘discursable’ (conceptualizable or articulable) world is a human world, ‘one that is the way it is only in relation to the human perspective’ (51). He has in mind Heidegger’s notion of ‘being-in-the-world’, according to which ‘ours is the existence of creatures whose being – whose practices, structures of thought, and forms of life – is not even notionally separable from the world in which we are’ (57).

But he views such humanism as impossibly raw and hubristic since it erroneously attributes to human beings the capacity to live with the belief that none of our concepts, values, beliefs and commitments are answerable to anything beyond this commitment itself since there is nothing ‘beyond the human’ (53). If we really believed this, Cooper argues, it could not have mattered to us if the concepts and meanings with which we happen to invest the world, the commitments and decisions we happen to make, had been different. This amounts to the belief that nothing is more or less worth believing or doing than anything else, a belief with which Cooper does not think it genuinely possible to live. Given that, when immersed in the stream of ‘Life’,<sup>8</sup> it is difficult, if not impossible, for us *not* to behave as though some things were more worth believing or doing than others, those who claim that human concepts and activities are answerable to nothing beyond these ‘cannot really believe what they are saying’ (53). An apparent impasse results from the rejection of both ‘absolutism’ (the view that there is a discursable way the world is independently of the human contribution) and this uncompensated humanism (that there is nothing beyond the human which could provide measure for our lives). Cooper finds the resolution in what he calls a ‘doctrine of mystery’, the thought that ‘there is a way the world anyway and independently is, but this way is not discursable’, that ultimate reality is ineffable (54). According to this thought,

[a]bsolutists...are right to insist that reality is independent of the human contribution, but wrong to suppose that this reality can be articulated. Humanists, correspondingly, are right to maintain that any discursable world is a human one, but wrong to equate reality with this world (54).

The notion of ineffability involved is that of a reality beyond the human that is, for that reason and in principle, literally unconceptualizable and inarticulable. This notion plays the strategic role of both compensating for, without jettisoning, the recognition that the only discursable world is a human one and providing measure for human Life, something beyond itself to which that Life can answer.

If ultimate reality is to provide measure for Life, as Hick realized, ‘one cannot be content simply to announce that [it] is the mysterious and then stay *stumm*.’ (55) Although it would be dissonant with the ineffability of ultimate reality to try to speak about it in literal terms, some kind of intimation of or attunement to the

ineffable is required, to underwrite the view that ‘lives led in certain ways do answer to, are consonant with, the way of things’ (55). Cooper thinks this requirement can be answered by non-literal forms of language, ‘rhetorics’ and ‘poetries’ of ineffability found in the writings of various religious and philosophical traditions (such as Heidegger’s later philosophy) which deploy vocabularies that gesture towards ‘a sense or vision of the mysterious’ (55). However some such poetries, ones that encourage a disjunctive or dualistic vision of the relation of ineffable ultimate reality to the human world, are to be criticized. Although the ultimately real must be thought of as ineffable and independent of the human perspective in order adequately to provide measure for the *Lebenswelt*, it would be wrong to visualize it as disjoined from that world. In that case, we would be too prone to envisage the ineffable as a transcendent Kantian realm or a thing, like a cosmos or god, no less discursable than the human world itself because invested with (at least some of) the very concepts and meanings for which it was supposed to provide measure precisely by not being so invested, for example, that of existence.

Hick’s neo-Kantian vision of the ineffable (which he sometimes refers to in religious terms) as a ‘joint product of [the divine] presence and our own conceptual systems and their associated spiritual practices’, falls into this error (‘Ineffability’ 40-1) and, from Cooper’s viewpoint, is incoherent. The Kantian position, inherited in philosophy of religion by Hick, allows, as Cooper points out, a very major exception to the general claim that the world depends for what it is on human beings (for example, the *a priori* structures of the mind), namely, human existence itself. The question is then raised what place we ourselves could have in such a world, so much of our own making. This view requires us to be, ‘so to speak, ... already there, up and running, ... responsible for the world taking on the contours it does’ (Cooper, ‘Life and Meaning’ 134). This is simply incoherent according to the alternative, existential phenomenological view that human existence is being-in-the-world, and not even notionally separable from the world with which we are engaged. (Cooper, ‘Life and Meaning’ 134).

The solution to such problems, in Cooper’s view, is a non-literal vocabulary that encourages a vision of intimacy between the human world and its ineffable measure or ‘source’. Following the vocabulary of the later Heidegger, we should think of the

human world as the ‘epiphanizing’ or ‘presencing’ of ultimate reality - a mysterious ‘gift’. (passim; Cooper, ‘Life and Meaning’ 136; [reference deleted], 29-38). ‘This world,’ Cooper writes, ‘is not simply a human world unthinkable in isolation from us, but at the same time a realization of, a coming forth of, something to which we can strive to answer and measure up.’ (‘Mystery, World and Religion’ 58). Cooper’s argument for the ineffability of ultimate reality, then, is intended to provide a kind of answer to the question of the meaning of Life. Its existential phenomenological approach, which differently construes the nature of the relationship between human beings and the world (and between the human world and its ineffable ‘source’), allows it to answer this question in a way that resolves the tension between ineffability and answerability, indicating a possible way of surmounting our second obstacle: the problem of the possibility of experiencing an ineffable God.

## V

There is clear affinity between Cooper’s argument for the ineffability of ultimate reality and the idea of divine ineffability. ‘God’, after all, is the name given by the religious to that which is ultimately real and, is appealed to in religious explanations of the meaning of human Life. On this basis, my own work has applied Cooper’s alternative approach to philosophy of religion, developing in some detail a new philosophical account of divine ineffability. While it will be impossible to do justice to the arguments in the available space, I would like to use this final section to draw attention to some key points that I hope will guide the ongoing debate.<sup>9</sup>

First of all, in order to avoid the self-reference antinomy, I suggest that the word ‘God’ be understood as a religious reference to the concept of ineffability alongside philosophical terms such as ‘ultimate reality’, ‘absolute’, and ‘Being’. An important implication, as is made clear by the above criticism of Hick’s neo-Kantian position, is that the idea that the word ‘God’ refers to an objective, existent entity should be rejected. ‘God’ is understood to refer to the concept of what explains the meanings and concepts of the human world precisely by not being invested with those concepts and meanings. And, from the perspectives of existential phenomenology and contemporary pragmatism, the concept of existence must be included among these ([reference deleted] 166, n. 51). Therefore, contemporary theologians have revisited the mystical tradition, carrying out thoroughgoing critiques of ontotheology, critiques

whose main aim is to question (with Dionysius and Eckhart) the idea that the word ‘God’ properly refers to something that exists.<sup>10</sup> Such theologians have realised the theological implications of the phenomenological point made above: that ‘God’ can be understood as a reference to the concept of ineffability, which explains the meaning of Life, only if we give up the reassuring thought that ‘God exists’.

Relatedly, if we are to contemplate the possibility of religious experience after the rejection of ontotheology, we will have to be very clear just what we mean by ‘experience’. I agree with Cooper that, at least in this demesne, it is unreasonable to demand that ‘experience’ has to involve the application of concepts, which would entail that the ineffable cannot, by definition, be experienced. I agree that the distinction between subjective and objective dimensions to the notion of experience may be ‘badly drawn’ (Cooper, ‘Ineffability and Religious Experience’, 198) since, in any case, the existential phenomenological and pragmatist approaches are generally critical of the dualistic construal of the subject-object distinction as a dichotomy ([reference deleted] 67-8). With regard to the concept of experience, such a dualistic construal of the distinction entails the vagueness and ambiguity in the phrase ‘what I experienced’, which could refer equally to the object of an experience as to the experience itself. So, in order to understand the nature of religious experience in the light of divine ineffability, we have to contend with a very different understanding of experience: one that does not require the application of concepts nor a dualistic distinction between its subjective and objective dimensions. While some theologians who are sympathetic to the notion of divine ineffability have tried to account for religious experience in symbolic terms,<sup>11</sup> I have argued that this concept of symbol reinforces that unhelpful dichotomy ([reference deleted] 67-75). I find an alternative and more helpful concept to be Karl Jaspers’s ciphers. For, whereas symbols are objective realities that intend other realities (whether or not these other realities exist outside the symbol) and objectify them in a symbolic representation, ciphers, for Jaspers, are irreducible to either pole of the dichotomy. They are not themselves purely objective, but are understood as subjective and objective at once and hence like the ‘language’ of a reality that can be experienced only in and through the cipher and in no other way ([reference deleted], 79, 91, 85-8). Therefore, while a symbol can only symbolise something within the subject object distinction, a cipher can embody what Jaspers calls ‘Transcendence or God’, by which he means the ineffable ultimate reality

that is unconditioned by that distinction. Although I take issue with some of the detail of Jaspers's account of ciphers ([reference deleted] 95-104), I have argued that, on this basis, religious experience should be interpreted as the experience of something like 'religious ciphers': parts of the (natural or cultural) human world that are experienced as transparent to, or intimate with, the ineffable, divine source of that world ([reference deleted] 129).

Finally, how might religious expression be understood in the light of divine ineffability? Broadly, I suggest that religious expression be understood as a set of linguistic and non-linguistic practices that can function as the kind of attunement (of oneself and others) to the ineffable that Cooper describes. I have argued that some reflections on the nature of art, by certain phenomenologists and the later Wittgenstein, are instructive here, especially on the nature of religion's pragmatic dimension and, specifically, on religious rituals ([reference deleted] 133-54). Firstly, the thought that such rituals performatively evoke what cannot be literally stated parallels the phenomenologists' arguments for the inexhaustibility of aesthetic meaning ([reference deleted] 139-141). Secondly the later Wittgenstein's account of art gives us a clue as to how the meaning of linguistic and non-linguistic religious practices operates.<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein repeatedly observes the inseparability of the meaning or effect of the art-work from the work itself, stressing that the two are logically interdependent. This explains why we do not typically treat works of art that evoke similar emotional effects as interchangeable. For Wittgenstein, the sense of an art-work is not independent of its formal characteristics, any more than the sense of a sentence is a process that accompanies its utterance or perception (Budd, 'Wittgenstein, Ludwig' 595 cf. Cooper, *Meaning* 68ff.; [reference deleted] 141-2). I have argued that, given the notion of divine ineffability, both linguistic and non-linguistic forms of religious expression should be understood in parallel to this ([reference deleted] 150-153). Like Jaspers's ciphers, which are understood as at once subjective and objective concrete forms in which the expression is indistinguishable from what is expressed, they challenge the dualistic construal of the subject-object distinction. So I agree with Cooper that the complaint that a mystic has not described the 'object' of her experience is 'like complaining that a musical performance has not conveyed the sense of a piece because it was not punctuated by statements about that sense' ('Ineffability and Religious Experience' 198). Wittgenstein is clear that the proper explanation of

aesthetic meaning has a performative character. The ineffable meaning of an art-work cannot be definitively captured in statements but only evoked (or ‘shown’) by the way a person who ‘understands’ it performs the work itself: the way they read out the lines of poetry or play, hum or whistle the musical phrase (Wittgenstein 70e; [reference deleted] 143-4). Similarly, I argue, religious language and ritual practices are not best understood as obviously bad attempts to describe the ‘religious object’ experienced,<sup>13</sup> but rather as evocations of what cannot be described: through the *way* in which the story is told and the *manner* in which the rite is performed, rather than primarily through their cognitive content ([reference deleted] 22, 151-2).

In conclusion, these alternative perspectives on divine ineffability and on its continuing importance in philosophy of religion have not been taken in a vacuum. My own arguments owe much to Cooper’s recent work and also to that of existential phenomenologists, classical and contemporary pragmatists, and the later Wittgenstein as well as to ‘analytic’ philosophers. They are based on the idea, articulated by William James, that the experiential dimension to religion is deeply interconnected with the pragmatic dimension, much more so than with the doxastic dimension. In this respect, they are part of the recent turn, in philosophy of religion, away from the restricted focus on belief (of the propositional, ‘I believe that p’, kind) and on purely linguistic forms of expression, towards experience and practice. They are part of what has been called the ‘humane turn’ in philosophy of religion, which is also associated, among others, with the names of John Cottingham and Mark Wynn ([reference deleted] 5; 155, n. 18). I suggest that they also have the potential to illuminate contemporary Wittgensteinian debates about the possibility of religious certainty and the implications of those debates for understanding the nature of religious disagreement, conversion, and extremism ([reference deleted] 185, n. 144). For all these reasons, I sincerely hope that ineffability in general, and divine ineffability in particular, will continue to attract renewed philosophical attention.

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<sup>1</sup> Space does not permit an extended discussion of this theological view and its contrasts with the philosophical understanding of divine ineffability that I am discussing here but, for a detailed overview, see [reference deleted], pp. 7–13.

<sup>2</sup> The transcripts of these three lectures (collectively entitled *Divine Mystery and Our Knowledge of God*) appear to be no longer available, either in print or online. However, video recordings have been published on the YouTube channel of Yale Divinity School, to which the main text refers, giving the number of each lecture.

<sup>3</sup> I restrict my comments to Christianity for pragmatic reasons, but it is likely that at least some of them will apply to the mystical traditions of other religions as well.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Cooper, *The Measure of Things* 291 & n. 26.

<sup>5</sup> As for Hick's own suggested resolution, the reasons why it is unsatisfactory will become clear below.

<sup>6</sup> This argument is complex and sophisticated, and can only really be caricatured in the space available here. For more detail, see, *inter alia* the following works by Cooper: 'The Inaugural Address: Ineffability'; *The Measure of Things*; 'Life and Meaning'; 'Mystery, World and Religion'. In this section, I refer mainly to the last paper, which provides the most succinct, and recent, expression of the argument.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Pihlström, *Structuring the World* 123.

<sup>8</sup> This capitalized term is meant to convey Dilthey's sense of *das Leben*, life as the 'permanent subject' of meaning. It is also intended to rule out any purely biological senses of the world (Cooper, 'Life and Meaning' 126).

<sup>9</sup> Readers who are interested the detail of these arguments are referred to my [reference deleted].

<sup>10</sup> A vast catalogue of names could be cited here. For an overview, see [reference deleted] 41-55.

<sup>11</sup> Tillich, 'The Meaning and Justification of Religious Symbols'; 'The Religious Symbol'.

<sup>12</sup> Wittgenstein's aesthetics is a badly neglected area of study, but Budd has provided a useful survey ('Wittgenstein on Aesthetics') and Lüdeking has perceptively explored his affinity with the phenomenologists, especially Merleau-Ponty (Lüdeking).

<sup>13</sup> Recall that, after the rejection of ontotheology, 'God' is no longer understood to refer to such an object.