

## Ineffability and Religion

Timothy D. Knepper & Leah E. Kalmanson (eds), *Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion*, Comparative Philosophy of Religion 1 (Cham: Springer, 2017. \$109.00. pp. x + 288. ISBN: 978-3-319-64163-8).

This volume is the latest in a flurry of recent philosophical books about ineffability. The reader is offered an impressively wide-ranging and interdisciplinary collection of comparative and occasionally empirically inflected studies originating in the 2013–15 theme of The Comparison Project at Drake University. Timothy D. Knepper bookends the collection with introductory and concluding editorial statements of the project’s philosophical underpinnings.

Knepper describes his concluding essay an attempt not only to serve as the ‘comparative conclusion’ to the collected essays, but also to ‘compare over and philosophise about them’, answering philosophical questions about ineffability in the context of comparative philosophy of religion (257). This is important, because it informs the reader that they are being presented with a clear statement of the theoretical context in which the collection is intended to be read.

The philosophical questions addressed by Knepper are ‘Are there ineffable things?’ and ‘Does the practice of religion involve the knowledge or experience of such things?’ Perhaps surprisingly, Knepper’s current answer to both questions is ‘No.’, owing to two assumptions with which he approaches the topic: that ‘nothing is ineffable insofar as everything can be minimally described’ (5) and that ‘no thing that is claimed to be ineffable can actually be ineffable’ (7).

The familiar self-reference antinomy apparently involved in ineffability claims leads Knepper to conclude that both ‘absolute’ and ‘relative’ concepts of ineffability are logically incoherent. We must be able to say enough about the putatively ineffable object (or putatively ineffable aspect of an object) to secure reference to it, identifying it as that to which the ineffability applies. And if this can be said of an object (as it must of all putatively ineffable objects), that object cannot, by definition, be ineffable.

Knepper acknowledges the tension between this conclusion and ‘our common phenomenological experience of ineffability’ (287). We may not be able to make logical sense of the idea of ineffable objects, but experiences of ineffability abound. So, ‘for the sake of scholarship’ he leaves us with this ‘paradox’ that he thinks ‘it would be wise not to resolve’ (258, 287). But this is far too fragile a philosophical basis on which to rest the volume as a whole.

Recent work on ineffability, which Knepper doesn’t appear to have read, further illuminates this ‘paradox’ between supposedly ineffable objects and manifestly ineffable experiences—which reduces to the tension between subject and object that permeates rational discourse. Alongside ‘properties’, ‘propositions’, and ‘content’, Silvia Jonas thoroughly dismisses ‘objects’ as plausible candidates for ineffability in her *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics* (2016). But she convincingly argues that the metaphysics of ineffability be explained in terms of ‘Self-acquaintance’: an experience in which the ‘object’ is nothing other than the ‘subject’—our primitive point of view on the world, for which there are any ‘objects’ at all. From a different, complementary angle, my own *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (2014) draws on Karl Jaspers’ philosophy to argue that experiences of ineffability shipwreck the subject–object split [*Spaltung*], which is best viewed—with John Dewey—as a useful distinction to be transcended rather than a dichotomy.

Knepper’s statement of the philosophical basis for this gratifyingly expansive collection on ineffability could have been much improved if he had consulted the most recent work on the subject.

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