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Languages of ineffability: the rediscovery of apophaticism in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion

Abstract: I present and discuss recent work in analytic philosophy of religion on apophaticism and divine ineffability. I focus on three questions: how can we call God ineffable without contradicting ourselves? How can we refer to an ineffable God? What is the point of talking about an ineffable God?

Apophaticism is the claim that we can neither grasp God in conceptual thought nor express him in language: God is inconceivable and ineffable. He transcends our cognitive capacities and our concepts cannot be meaningfully applied to him. This is more than just believing that there are a lot of things we don't know about God – you can admit that you don't know a lot of things about God, and still believe that these things are in principle conceivable; you just happen to not know them. Apophatics believe, rather, that since God transcends our epistemic capabilities, we are unable to even conceive or understand certain facts about him. We don't know, because we don't understand what it is we don't know.[1]

Apophaticism has a long tradition which extends well back into antiquity and encompasses a multitude of Western and Eastern thinkers (not all of them theists). Among others, Plotinus, Proclus, and Pseudo-Dionysius held apophatic positions, as well as Cusanus, Maimonides, Al-Arabi, Nagarjuna, Laozi, or Zhuangzi. But although apophaticism is an important strand of philosophical thought, it has often been given a raw deal from analytic philosophy. Those who engaged with apophaticism (like Stace, Alston, or Plantinga) did so mainly to show that it is absurd to try to conceive of an inconceivable God and then moved on to problems they regarded as more worthwhile. There are three main points of criticism:

(1) The paradox of ineffability.[2] When apophatics claim that we cannot say anything about God or that our concepts don't apply to him, they have already said something about God, namely that we cannot say anything about him. And if we say that God is ineffable and that our concepts don't apply to him, we have thereby already applied a concept to him – the

[1] *Cf.* Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, proposition 6.5: "For an answer which cannot be expressed the question too cannot be expressed. *The riddle* does not exist. If a question can be put at all, then it *can* also be answered." If we don't know the answer, we could technically still express what we don't know – we just accidentally cannot, because we don't know.

[2] See Alston, 1956, 509 and Plantinga, 1980, 25.

concept of ineffability. So, apophaticism ends up in a self-referential contradiction: if we truly cannot say anything about God, we also cannot say this very thing – that we cannot say anything. But if we admit that we can say that God is ineffable, then there is at least one thing we can say about God – that we cannot say anything about him. In both cases, the claim cannot be true. It is falsified in the very act of making it.

(2) The impossibility of reference to an ineffable God. Who (or what) are we talking about when we use the name 'God'? Even apophatics will admit that it is not some unknown X but rather, well, God. But, according to Alston,[3] if we use the term 'God', we should be able to justify using it. There must be a reason why we say 'God' rather than 'Homer' or 'Louis XIV'. Now, identifying the object of our talk as God presupposes that we are able to distinguish God from other objects by giving a definite description of him, for example by saying that he is perfectly good, immaterial, and omniscient. But if God is ineffable and our concepts don't apply to him, we cannot employ these concepts to describe him – and therefore we could never identify something as the ineffable God. If God were truly ineffable, we could not even understand the term 'God', because we could never determine what it refers to. So, either we can refer to God using the term 'God' – but then God will not be ineffable, since successful reference depends on a definite description. Or we cannot refer to God, since we cannot describe him – then we could not meaningfully use the term 'God'. But of course, apophatics do use this term. So, the mere fact that we understand the term 'God' shows that God cannot be ineffable.

(3) The absurdity of purely negative language. One important consequence of apophatic theology is the language of *via negativa*. Since we cannot predicate something of God (*e.g.* that he is good or wise), all we can do is say what he is not: he is immaterial, infinite, not bound by space and time, neither body nor spirit. But Stace objects that there is no clear distinction between positive and negative predicates: 'heavy' seems to be a positive predicate, while 'not light' seems to be a negative one although their meanings don't differ. So, why regard them as two different predicates at all?[4] Plantinga adds that even though it is possible to distinguish negative *predicates* from positive ones, there is no metaphysical distinction between positive and negative *properties* (which is the only thing that should really matter to an apophatic theologian).[5] Moreover, even if we believe that the idea of

[3] Alston, 1956, 511–513 A similar argument can be found in Pouivet, 2013, 47.
[4] Stace, 1961, 289.
[5] Plantinga, 2000, 52–53.

purely negative predicates makes sense, we will get stuck in an infinite regress. We cannot just say that God is not spirit and leave it there; we should rather say that God is neither spirit nor not spirit. But this again is a complex predicate and should be negated: 'It is not the case that God is neither spirit nor not spirit'. Ultimately, we end up in an infinite regress of ever more complex negative predicates.[6]

For some time, these points of criticisms had remained uncontended and the general view in analytic circles had been that apophaticism is nonsensical. But recent years have seen a growing interest in the subject of ineffability and apophaticism, and several authors have come forward to defend the possibility of apophatic theology from an analytic point of view. I will describe some of these recent approaches and show how they try to answer these three challenges.

One caveat before I begin: Some commentators[7] have complained (justly, I think) that apophaticism is more than just a semantic thesis. The claim that God is ineffable usually does not occur in isolation, but is part of a wider, mystical approach to theology. Therefore, as Yadav argues, we need not just explain the semantics of ineffability, but also give an account of how God's supposed ineffability informs mystical experiences and gives these experiences the potential for spiritual transformation. I agree, but for reasons of space, I will confine myself to the linguistic part of the problem: the semantics (and pragmatics) of apophaticism.

Hick: formal and substantial predicates

John Hick was one of the first analytic philosophers to rediscover apophaticism. He believes that there is a transcendental religious reality (the Real) which manifests itself in religious experiences across different cultures and times. We cannot grasp the Real in human concepts – it is only experienced in a variety of disguises depending on the respective religious traditions: as triune God, or Allah, or Brahman. In itself, it is ineffable and inconceivable. Therefore, apparently conflicting religious beliefs in the world's religions don't actually contradict each other. They are merely incompatible descriptions of the Real's manifestations, not the Real itself. Hick is aware of the looming threat of paradox that comes with the claim of ineffability and tries to dispel it by introducing a distinction between

[6] Stace, 1961, 289.
[7] *E.g.* Yadav, 2016.

substantial and formal predicates.[8] Substantial predicates tell us something about the essence of the Real, formal predicates don't. For example, saying that the Real is an object of reference is a formal predicate; saying that it is personal or holy is not. Hick thus rejects the universality of apophaticism: it is not true that no predicates apply to the ineffable, only substantial predicates don't apply.

But why shouldn't apophaticism comprise formal predicates, too? After all, if ineffable means that no predicates apply, then formal predicates don't apply, either. Formal predicates are predicates, too. But maybe Hick means that ineffability should be defined exclusively for substantial predicates: something is ineffable if and only if no substantial predicates apply to it. Of course, we are free to define ineffability as we please, and maybe we need to do this in order to avoid the self-referential paradox. But this new definition in no way explains *why* there should be an exception in the first place. If the only reason we can give is that this exception solves the paradox, then we must reject it as *ad hoc*. Moreover, there is good reason to doubt that we can make a clear-cut distinction between substantial and formal predicates. Hick seems to think that we use formal predicates only to make metalinguistic statements (like giving the rules which govern our use of certain terms). But even purely metalinguistic statements already imply certain substantial presuppositions: if I say that the Real can be an object of reference, I imply something about its essence, namely that it is some kind of object or entity (in the broadest sense of the word). In other cases, it is not clear how to decide whether some predicate should be considered formal or substantial. What about 'real'? If by 'real' we mean that, for example, the city of Atlantis actually exists and is not just a fiction, then this is probably a substantial statement. On the other hand, if we merely mean that our statements about Atlantis are to be understood as true in a realist sense of the word, then it is clearly a formal predicate.[9] But the most important objection to Hick's solution is this: even if there were purely formal predicates, 'ineffable' would not be one of them. When Hick calls the Real ineffable, he is not just prescribing rules for using the term, but is rather explaining his concept of the Real. And being ineffable is part of this concept. The Real is a kind of thing which (in contrast to other things) must be called ineffable because of its nature. So, ineffability is precisely what

[8] Hick, 2000.

[9] We might, of course, mean both and specifically mean the former because of the latter. In this case, again, there is no useful distinction between formal and substantial predicates.

distinguishes the Real from other objects. But then being ineffable will clearly be one of its essential properties and therefore a substantial predicate.

Jacobs: non-fundamental truths

Jonathan Jacobs attempts to solve the problems of apophaticism by introducing a conceptual distinction, too. Unlike Hick, he distinguishes between two different kinds of truths, fundamental and non-fundamental ones. Fundamental truths reflect the true nature of reality, while non-fundamental truths do not without being false. For example, imagine a rectangle which is half red and half blue. One fundamental truth about it is that it is half red and half blue. But we could also describe the square another way: imagine a line cutting it diagonally from corner to corner into a blue-and-red and a red-and-blue part. Let's call the first part 'blued' and the second part 'rued'. Then, it is true to say that the square is half blued and half rued. But though this statement is true, it is somewhat deficient compared to the first one, since it ignores the inherent structure of the rectangle. In Jacobs' words, the statement is true, but not fundamentally true. Its truth is based on the fundamental truth that the square is half red and half blue. Jacobs then employs this concept to elucidate the notion of divine ineffability: when we say that God is ineffable, we actually mean that there are no fundamental truths about God. All propositions about God's essence are non-fundamentally true.[10] This holds for negative as well as affirmative ones: neither 'God is p' nor 'God is not p' are fundamental truths. Saying that God is triune, for example, may well be true, but not fundamentally true. Understood this way, it is not self-defeating anymore to claim that God is ineffable. All we are saying is that there are no fundamental truths about God and this statement does not claim to be false (*that* would be self-defeating). It claims to be true, just not fundamentally true.

But though it seems to solve the problem, Jacobs' claim invites an unwelcome conclusion: if there are no fundamental truths about God, doesn't this simply mean that there is no God? How does Jacobs' apophaticism differ from atheism? After all, as Jacobs himself admits, there are no fundamental truths about God if and only if God is not part of the ontological furniture of the universe, and this seems to be little more than a cumbersome way to say that there is no God. Jacobs replies that this objection results from a misunderstanding of

[10] Jacobs, 2015, 165. Keller, 2018, 363 has a point when she argues that Jacobs seems to be putting the cart before the horse here: statements about God's goodness, for example, are *more* fundamental than statements about human goodness.

negations. It is not fundamentally true that there is a God, but that is not tantamount to saying that it is fundamentally *not true* that there is a God. The atheist claim ('there is no God') is not fundamentally true either. But even if he is right about this, doesn't Jacobs' apophaticism suggest some kind of reductionist atheism? The atheist might well accept that statements about God are not fundamentally true as long as their truth is based on some other, non-religious fundamental truths, for example: 'God is the human yearning for infinity'. If there are no fundamental truths about God and God is not part of the universe's ontological furniture, the atheist will not disagree. Jacobs replies that there is a crucial difference between apophaticism and atheism: the apophatic believes that non-fundamental truths about God are true *because of* God. Truths about God are not based on other truths, but rather on God himself. God is the ultimate truth-maker for all non-fundamental truths about him. But doesn't this mean that God is part of the ultimate furniture of the universe after all? How else could he make these propositions true? If so, there is at least one fundamental truth about God: that he exists. So, the only way to avoid the charge of atheism for Jacobs is to essentially give up his interpretation of apophaticism.

A further problem concerns his definition of ineffability. Something is ineffable, according to Jacobs, if and only if there are no fundamental truths about it. Thus, the concept of a fundamental but ineffable truth should be inconsistent. But the question whether all fundamental truths are effable is not obviously self-contradictory. If we believed that it is, we would have to accept that 'fundamental' implies 'effable'. But why should the fundamental structure of reality be necessarily expressible in language? This is a strong metaphysical hypothesis which might well turn out to be false. If reality perfectly matched our linguistic capacities to express it, the best explanation would probably be that our notion of reality is limited by these same linguistic capacities, not that fundamentality implies effability. If being fundamental and being expressible are not equivalent, then it is conceivable that there are ineffable fundamental truths. But what could this mean? Obviously not that they are non-fundamental. So, we end up in a dilemma: either there are fundamental, ineffable truths about God – then we have no idea what it means to call them ineffable. Or there are no fundamental, ineffable truths about God – then how could we still say that God is ineffable? Jacobs' interpretation of ineffability seems to miss the very point.

Ho: indicating, not saying

Yet another attempt to solve the paradoxes of apophaticism can be found in Chien-Hsing Ho's paper *Saying the Unsayable*.[11] Drawing on some remarks from the Indian grammarian Bhartṛhari, he proposes a new, two-step interpretation of the act of predication. According to Ho, the relation between a predicate and an object is twofold: first, there is the relation between the word and the concept it expresses; this is what the word *says* (in Ho's terminology). Second, there is the relation between the concept and the object itself, through which we ascribe the property expressed by the concept to the object in question. Ho calls this relation *imposition*.[12] If, for example, I say that chocolate is tasty, I (1) say that the concept of tastiness applies to chocolate and (2) thereby impose the property of being tasty on the piece of chocolate I am talking about. In ordinary cases like these, according to Ho, the sentence expresses that chocolate is tasty. But saying that something is ineffable is not an ordinary case, because the predication process fails at the stage of imposition. Saying that something is ineffable can merely indicate the ineffable without expressing it. When the apophatics say that God is ineffable, they impose ineffability on him, but in the very act of saying this, they revoke this imposition (because God is, well, *in*effable). So, while they manage to say that God is ineffable (meaning they represent him as falling under the concept of ineffability), they cannot impose ineffability on him since the very nature of ineffability prevents this. In a way, saying that God is unsayable is like pointing your finger to show someone the way to a town far away. My finger indicates the direction in which the town can be found, but it doesn't make the town visible. Likewise, says Ho, the ineffable God cannot be said, but can only be indicated.[13]

On Ho's model, apophaticism is not running the risk of being self-defeating. If the word 'ineffable' only indicates the ineffable God without expressing his ineffability, no contradiction can arise since nothing is strictly predicated of God in the first place. And surely Ho is right when he notes that one important function of apophatic discourse is to point the reader to experiences of the ineffable which they then must have themselves. But on the other hand, I doubt whether it is possible to explain the indicative function of apophatic language without recurring to at least a minimum of predicative content. What exactly is it the apophatics indicate when they say that God is ineffable? The ineffable God, of course. Not the wise or powerful or perfectly good God, but the ineffable God. It seems as

[11] Ho, 2006; he further elaborates his position in Ho, 2017.
[12] Ho, 2006, 413.
[13] Ho, 2006, 415; Ho, 2017, 74–75.

if to explain what is indicated by calling something 'ineffable', we need to employ the term 'ineffable' in a predicative sense, too. So, when Ho claims that 'God is ineffable' indicates God's ineffability, he faces a dilemma: either he further claims that 'God's ineffability', too, is just an indication – which would lead to an infinite regress of ever more ineffabilities to be indicated; or he admits that 'God's ineffability' has some cognitive content and actually imposes a certain quality on God which is indicated – but then, why not just skip the whole indicative part and accept that ineffability claims do have a cognitive content[14] and in addition also function as a way of pointing to the reality they describe? So, while Ho's argument contains some important pointers to the function of apophatic claims, his approach doesn't suffice to dispel the air of paradox that surrounds them.

Lebens: illuminating falsehoods

In a recent paper, Sam Lebens proposes another way to deal with the problems of apophaticism. Instead of splitting concepts, he maintains that statements about the ineffable God are illuminating falsehoods. He explains this notion using Putnam's well-known brain-in-a-vat scenario: Putnam presupposes semantic externalism, according to which a term's meaning depends on its causal connection with reality. 'Water' refers to water because it is causally connected to water. So, if in Putnam's scenario I utter the sentence 'I am a brain in a vat', this sentence can never be true. It is obviously not true if I am not a brain in a vat. But even if I am a brain in a vat, the sentence is false, since as a brain in a vat, I have no contact with real brains, only with computer-generated simulations of brains. My concept of brain refers not to real, but to simulated brains. Thus, I cannot express what I want to say, because I lack the concept 'real brain'. Instead, I employ the concept 'simulated brain' and of course, I am not a simulated brain in a vat, I am a real brain in vat! So, when a brain in a vat says 'I am a brain in a vat', it will say something false. But for Lebens, this falsehood is different from the falsehood of 2+2=22. It is an illuminating falsehood, since it results merely from limited expressive capacities. Otherwise, it is as close to the truth as possible under the given circumstances. Apophaticism, he claims, is an illuminating falsehood, too. When the apophatic says that God is ineffable, she is actually

[14] Ho, 2006, 420 agrees that indication is "broadly cognitive" and "transmits knowledge about reality". In Ho, 2017, 76 he also maintains that indicative sentences may be correct or incorrect, though not true or false. But then, what is the content of this knowledge and how do we check for correctness? How could we state the indicative sentence's content without assuming that the term 'ineffable' actually ascribes some property to whatever we call ineffable?

saying something false (so the paradox of ineffability will not arise in the first place). But this falsehood is illuminating and therefore interesting.

Lebens' strategy requires a criterion to distinguish illuminating and trivial falsehoods. Otherwise, how could we know that 'God is ineffable' is not a boring old falsehood like 'Hamburg is the capital of Germany'? In Putnam's scenario, we feel that the sentence 'I am a brain in a vat' is not simply false, but close to the truth, because the true sentence and its false counterpart are syntactically indistinguishable. If I, as an external observer, say 'Joe is a brain in a vat', I am correct (given that Joe actually is a brain in a vat). If Joe himself says 'Joe is a brain in a vat', he is wrong, because his term 'brain' doesn't mean the same as my term 'brain'. The true and false sentences are deceptively alike. But not all occasional homophones are illuminating falsehoods. Rather, illumination results from the fact that the false sentence misses the truth by just an inch. When I say that Joe is a brain in a vat, I am referring to some state of affairs S_1 – that Joe is a real brain in a vat. When Joe on the other hand says the same thing, he is unintentionally referring to a different state of affairs S_2 – that he is a simulated brain in a vat (which doesn't obtain). But there is a direct connection between S_1 and S_2: S_2 is a simulation of S_1. This is not unlike me showing you a picture of Joe and saying: 'This is Joe. Of course, this is not Joe; this is a picture of Joe. What I am saying is false, but illuminatingly false, since the picture and Joe stand in some kind of causal and representational relationship. So, if 'God is ineffable' is supposed to be an illuminating falsehood, it should stand in a similar relation to some other state of affairs. But which state of affairs could that be? Either we know – then we could be sure that the falsehood is really illuminating, but uttering the falsehood would be pointless. We could just state the truth it is supposed to illuminate, since we know it already. Or we don't know – then the falsehood might be illuminating, but we cannot be sure if it actually is. Lebens is probably right when he claims that there are falsehoods closer to the truth than others. But for those who don't know which truth they are supposed to illuminate, they are indistinguishable from trivial falsehoods. And for those who can distinguish these two, the falsehoods are not interesting, since they already know the truth they are supposed to illuminate.

Alston: direct reference

Back in 1956, without doubt under the impression of a then vigorous logical positivism, William Alston harshly criticized apophatic theology. One of his key arguments then was the

impossibility of referring to an ineffable God mentioned above: if we use the term 'God', we must at least be able to give a minimal description of God, or else we would not even know what we are talking about. Therefore, as soon as we admit that we (however vaguely) understand who God is supposed to be, God cannot be ineffable. A few decades later, Alston had changed his mind. In his 1988 paper *Referring to God*, he advocates abandoning the descriptive model of reference on which his former argument against apophaticism was based. He claims that direct reference as described by Kripke (i.e. reference based on an initial baptism during an experiential encounter and causally transmitted among speakers) is the fundamental mode of reference, for in order to understand that something fulfills a certain description, we must be able to pick out this very something – but not via descriptions or else we end up in an infinite regress.[15] This directly affects the referential argument against apophaticism. On the direct model, we can successfully refer to some object without being able to describe it correctly.[16] If I believe that Columbus was the first man who sailed around the globe, I can still refer to Columbus even though I obviously know nothing about him as long as I stand in the correct causal relations to other speakers. Otherwise, how could I look up Columbus on Wikipedia and then learn that *he* was not the first to sail around the globe? I was not referring to someone else when I said 'Columbus' – I was referring to him, I just had wrong ideas about him. Likewise, the apophatics could still refer to God even if God is ineffable. Being able to describe God correctly (or to describe him at all) is in no way required for successful reference. All we need is someone, not even ourselves, who made an initial encounter with God, subsequently named him and then passed the term on to other speakers. But we might ask, is it not necessary to give at least a minimal description? Should we not be able to say that by 'God' we mean whatever we encountered during that experience? Towards the end of his life, when he began to doubt the confidence of current analytic philosophy in our capacities to actually understand what God is like in himself, Alston rejected this minimal requirement, too. Instead, he argued that apophaticism (or the Divine Mystery Thesis, as he calls it) might be a viable approach to theological thought.[17] Drawing on ideas outlined earlier by Ian Crombie, he claims that talk about an ineffable God can still be useful as a means to guide our lives if it is close enough to the truth. Alston gives an example to illustrate this idea: if I want to explain to a three-year-

[15] Alston, 1989, 109–110.
[16] Alston, 1989, 105.
[17] Alston, 2005.

old what a philosopher does, I might say she builds or creates things. Not in the same way the three-year-old builds houses with toy blocks, of course – but building philosophical arguments is not completely different from this. Presumably, the three-year-old will not understand exactly how these two activities are similar, but even though he doesn't really grasp the matter, his understanding will be more than zero. Likewise, saying that God is neither wise nor not wise sounds paradoxical and cannot be strictly true, but it can be close enough to the truth for us to guide our interactions with God. So, even if our descriptions of God are not true in the full sense of the word, we can still use our not-quite-true descriptions to successfully refer to him. We might question, though, if God on Alston's account is actually ineffable. After all, we should at least be able to say that even though it is neither true nor false that God is wise, he has some qualities we don't fully understand, but which are in some way analogous to wisdom and power. And this is still something we might say about God. Whether this falsifies the ineffability thesis depends crucially on what 'ineffable' means: does it mean ineffable *for us* or *absolutely* ineffable (*i.e.* for every conceivable being or every conceivable language)? Only in the latter case Alston's model would clash with apophaticism. Lack of space prevents me from pursuing this difficult question here further,[18] but suffice it to say that most apophatics implicitly reject the idea, since they usually would not go as far as claiming that not even God can talk about himself.[19]

Scott and Citron: understanding negation

We have not yet addressed the problem of the *via negativa*: what is the point of speaking about the ineffable God only in negative terms? Should we not rather refrain from speaking about God at all to avoid running into the logical errors of universal negation Stace and Plantinga warned us about? Michael Scott and Gabriel Citron point out that apophatics usually did exactly the opposite and discuss two possible interpretations of negative speech which might solve the problem: (1) metalinguistic negation and (2) category mistakes. According to (1), the negations employed in apophatic talk are not simply truth-functional, *i.e.* they are not just used to negate certain states of affairs. Their function is not to deny that certain predicates apply to God, not even complex negative predicates. Rather, their point is to express the refusal of affirmation – not the affirmation of a negative state of affairs. Metalinguistic negations don't function as statements of what is not the case but

[18] See Hofweber, 2005 for an elaborate discussion which suggests that absolute ineffability is impossible.
[19] But *cf*. Scott & Citron, 2016, 27–28.

rather as expressions of an unwillingness to affirm a (positive or negative) statement. If, for example, I say about someone: 'He didn't die, he *fell*.', then I don't want to say that this person did not die (although these exact words appear in my statement). I just want to express my unwillingness to affirm the statement, maybe because it might be prone to misunderstanding or because I feel that it doesn't do justice to the facts. Apophaticism should then be understood in the same way: when apophatics say that God is neither great nor small, they are not affirming a complex negative (and inconsistent) state of affairs, but rather expressing their refusal to affirm either of these statements about God's greatness. Scott and Citron criticize this approach claiming that it vastly reduces the expressive capacities of religious language: all the apophatics could say would be reduced to the claim that it is inappropriate to speak in such and such a way about God.[20] But why should that be a problem? Is the inappropriateness of ordinary speech about God not the core tenet of apophaticism? After all, apophatics do believe that religious language can say very few meaningful things about God. Maybe what Scott and Citron have in mind is that it is not just inappropriate to speak about God but rather impious (who are we – mere mortals - to dare to speak about the infinite God?) and understood this way it is surely frustrating when apophatics say no more than that it is out of place for us to speak about God. But even though there seems to be an undertone of pious humility in the apophatics' negations, I doubt that this is the heart of the matter. For why is it impious to speak positively about God? Presumably, because we thereby exceed the boundaries of human reason. It is not so much inappropriate or impious to speak about God, but impossible: positive speech is epistemically inappropriate. Our attempts to speak affirmatively about God contain the implicit presumption that whatever it is we want to say is actually sayable. But if God is ineffable, we cannot say it, neither affirmatively nor negatively. The statement that God is great and the statement that he is not great are both inappropriate because they presuppose the illegitimate assumption that statements about God's greatness are possible at all.

Option (2) for interpreting negative speech is to regard it as a denial of category mistakes. What apophatics mean by saying 'God is not great', then, is that the category of greatness is unsuited to God, just like the category of color is unsuited to numbers. 'God is neither body nor mind' would be as odd as 'two is blue and three is green'. Scott and Citron criticize this

[20] Scott & Citron, 2016, 37.

approach by arguing that the sentences of negative speech must be either false, lack a truth-value, or be literally senseless.[21] The first two options fail because if sentences containing a category mistake are false or neither true nor false, their negations will be true. So, while 'God is great' is as false as 'God is not great', 'It is not the case that God is either great or not great' would be true. And thought this statement is not very informative, it still says more than nothing which makes it incompatible with the claim that God is ineffable. Regarding category mistakes as senseless will not work, either, since it clashes with the compositionality of language: 'two is blue' contains no grammatical errors, and all its terms are perfectly meaningful – and why should a sentence composed correctly from meaningful parts suddenly become senseless? Moreover, even if this logical obstacle can be overcome, it seems that this account misinterprets the apophatics' intentions. Their idea is not that talk about God is meaningless – far from it! – but that it is inadequate.

Scott and Citron conclude that although metalinguistic negation and category mistakes "offer theoretical options to apophatics for interpreting negative sentences about God that do not commit the speaker to a position on what God is like",[22] neither of them seems to capture what is meant in negative speech. In contrast, I see no reason to be that pessimistic. Two points should be noted: (1) the metalinguistic approach and the category-mistake approach are not mutually exclusive. If we understand metalinguistic negations about God as refusal to affirm propositions about him because one rejects the implicit assumption that speaking about God is possible at all, we may be implying that these sentences contain category mistakes. If we say that God is not great, we refuse to affirm his greatness, because the category of greatness doesn't apply. The only difference to 'two is blue' is that there are categories which could apply to two (like *even*), while there are none which could apply to God. We are stretching the concept of a category mistake very far here: after all, it seems that if there are mistakes, there should also be a way not to make them, which is impossible in the limiting case of God. (2) What matters about these two approaches can be preserved if we regard negative speech as *protreptic*. Apophatics resort to the language of *via negativa* because language is inappropriate to capture God's nature and it is inappropriate because it relies on our categories of thought which will never apply to God. Thus, the function of negative speech is not to state trivially true negations about God, but to alter our ways of thinking about him. Apophatics are not trying to make statements about an ineffable object,

[21] Scott & Citron, 2016, 39–41

[22] Scott & Citron, 2016, 41.

but to dissuade us from the practice of affirmation and negation altogether. Negative speech is not intended to say what God is not like, but to make us give up the habit of speaking factually about God at all, since it rests on the error of believing that all facts about God are expressible in the first place. This is the protreptic function: making us reject our claim of being able to speak about God like any other object and leading us to relinquish our ordinary modes of speaking and thinking.

Consequences

As this discussion has shown, there is a variety of different approaches among analytic philosophers of religion to the problems of apophaticism. Yet though these approaches differ, there are a couple of recurring themes in them, a set of core problems around which the debate circles:

(1) The universality of apophaticism: is there really nothing we can say about God or do we need to restrict this claim in any way? Hick draws the boundary line within the notion of concepts, Jacobs within the notion of truth, while Ho splits the notion of saying. Still, they all agree that being unable to speak about God does not mean that we can say *absolutely* nothing about him, let alone have to remain in complete silence. What is unclear though is where the line should be drawn.

(2) Missing the truth: There is something odd about trying to speak of God. Utterances about God miss the mark of truth, although they are not simply false. Lebens calls them illuminating falsehoods; Alston thinks that we can still know something about God even though our beliefs are strictly speaking false. The common denominator is that there may be more to being false than just being not true, although it is not exactly clear what it is. While apophatics don't seem to say something true about God, it doesn't seem as though they are making mistakes, either.

(3) The non-factual use of language: God may well be beyond the bounds of language, but this doesn't mean that we cannot talk about him. The apophatics reject factual statements about God, since we cannot say about him what he is, but that won't keep us from using language in other ways. Instead of stating facts about God, the apophatics gesture at him or try to get us to give up our ordinary ways of thinking and speaking about him. Keep in mind that apophaticism is intimately bound up with mysticism – the experiential encounter with God – and although there are several

different attempts to explain what precisely the function of apophatic language is, they have one thing in common: language is not just descriptive language. What these further uses are and what their logic is, is still open for debate.

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