

Dissolving the paradox of ineffability

Peter van Elswyk, NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

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Sentences like ‘ δ is indescribable’ appear to state that the speaker is unable to do what the speaker just did. This is known as the PARADOX OF INEFFABILITY. An explanation for how such sentences can be true is widely thought to be a pre-requisite for showing the coherence of ineffability. This paper offers a dissolution of the paradox. I argue that the relevant sentences are always false. However, I show that the falsity of such sentences does not entail that ineffability is incoherent. That ‘ δ is indescribable’ can never be truthfully said does not entail that ineffability cannot be coherently explicated.

1 Introduction

Sentences like ‘ δ is indescribable’ appear to state that the speaker is unable to do what they just did. This is known as the PARADOX OF INEFFABILITY. The paradox has historical origins in both the East and the West. Kuiji, a Buddhist in the Yogācāra tradition writing in the 7th century, was committed to all concrete particulars being indescribable and posed the paradox as a question: “[A]ll real things being unspeakable, wouldn’t it be inappropriate as well to speak the word “unspeakable”?” (Ho, 2015, 72). Augustine of Hippo, a Christian theologian writing in the 4th century, wrestled with the paradox in connection to God’s ineffability:

God is unspeakable. But what I have spoken would not have been spoken if it were unspeakable. For this reason, God should not even be called unspeakable because, even when this word is spoken, something is spoken. There is a kind of conflict between words here: if what cannot be spoken is unspeakable, then it is not unspeakable because it can actually be said to be unspeakable. It is better to evade this conflict silently than to quell it disputatiously. (Augustine, 2008, §1.13)

The paradox surfaces whenever something is regarded as indescribable. Unlike other ancient paradoxes like *This sentence is false*, which is paradoxical but never sincerely said, ‘ δ is indescribable’ is paradoxical and sincerely said.¹ Indeed, it is

¹ I will use italics to mention words or sentences and corner quotes for open sentences containing variables. Throughout, I will also use *utter* loosely to describe any act of assertion including written acts.

paradoxical because it is sincerely said.

In the history of philosophy, such topics as God, particulars, sensory experience, the Dao, nothingness, and artwork are regularly characterized as ineffable.² As Moore (1992, 427) puts it, “Ineffability. . . has had one of the longest and most distinguished of philosophical histories.” The Corpus of Contemporary American English also contains many examples of speakers describing everyday things as indescribable. Examples include sex, emotion, wine, sexual orientation, film, pain, the passing of time, beauty, clothing, quantities, sunrises, and interpersonal connection (Davies, 2008-present). So the paradox of ineffability is topic neutral. Whatever stands-in for δ , we have it.

To solve the paradox is to explain how ‘ δ is indescribable’ can be true in a context. It is widely thought that a solution is a pre-requisite for explicating the coherence of ineffability because it is how one answers the SELF-REFUTING OBJECTION. If ‘ δ is indescribable’ cannot be true, nothing can be claimed to be ineffable without yielding a contradiction. As such, everything is describable. This objection is found regularly in the philosophy of religion (Alston, 1956; Yandell, 1975; Plantinga, 2000). It has ancient origins too. For example, Ānandavardhana, a 9th century Indian literary critic, objected to the view that the value of poetry was its ineffability by arguing that predicating ineffability of poetry was self-refuting.

These special [virtues] of words and meanings can be explained and have been explained in many ways. To imagine that there is some ineffable virtue over and above these is to admit that one’s power of analysis has ceased. For ineffability, in the sense of being beyond the range of all words, cannot be predicated of anything, because in the last analysis a thing can be designated by the word “ineffable.” (Ānandavardhana, 1990, §347a)

Like the paradox, the self-refutation objection is topic neutral. So any putative solution would need to be neutral too.

² For recent work on ineffability in the philosophy of monotheistic religion, see Scott (2017), Lebens (2014, 2017), Jacobs (2015), Keller (2018), Ahsan (2022), Fakhri (2021), van Elswyk (forthcoming), Pruss (forthcoming), and the surveys in Bennett-Hunter (2015) and Scott (2017). See Matilal (1975, 1990) on ineffability in Indian philosophy, and Deguchi et al. (2021) for East Asian philosophy. For comparative philosophy of religion on ineffability, see the rich essays in Knepper and Kalmanson (2017). For recent work in aesthetics, see Raffman (1988), DeClercq (2000), Luntley (2003), Spackman (2012), and the survey in Jonas (2017). For recent work on perceptual experience, especially in connection to olfaction, see Levinson and Majid (2014), Majid and Burenhult (2014), and Martina (forthcoming). Whether certain properties or propositions are inexpressible is discussed by Lewis (1986), Schnieder (2010), Shaw (2013), and Hofweber (2017). General philosophical discussions of ineffability are offered by Kukla (2010), Jonas (2016), and Gäb (2020).

This essay provides what I call a dissolution of the paradox of ineffability as opposed to a solution. I argue that ‘ δ is indescribable’ is always false in a context for any δ whatsoever (§3-§4). However, I further argue that a solution is not a pre-requisite for explicating the coherence of ineffability (§5). The self-refuting objection can be answered without finding a way for ‘ δ is indescribable’ to be true. A middleground is thereby charted: *contra* advocates of ineffability, ‘ δ is indescribable’ is always false in every context, but, *contra* critics of ineffability, this generalization does not show that ineffability is incoherent. Both of these conclusions follow, I argue, from paying close attention to how predicates like *indescribable* are gradable adjectives that express agentive modality. That such terms express agentive modality will help explain why ‘ δ is indescribable’ has truth-conditions that cannot be satisfied in a context. That they are gradable will help explain why ineffability *can* be explicated without solving the paradox. Accordingly, this essay begins with the natural language semantics of such adjectives (§2). It ends by discussing how the dissolution of the paradox relates to contemporary theories of ineffability developed in the philosophy of religion by [Jacobs \(2015\)](#) and [Keller \(2018\)](#).

2 The paradox

To build up to the paradox, let’s start with morphemes, the smallest building blocks of natural language. From most verbs \mathcal{V} , an adjective can be formed by combining \mathcal{V} with the modal suffix *-ible/-able*.³ The result is an adjective expressing that an agent is able to do the action denoted by \mathcal{V} . Examples include *readable*, *singable*, and *drinkable*.

These adjectives have a number of interesting semantic properties. Of central importance to the paradox is that they are AGENTIVE MODAL ADJECTIVES. These adjectives express that an agent can/is able to \mathcal{V} . To add precision to our discussion, I assume the semantics for agentive modals owed to [Mandelkern et al. \(2017\)](#). On their account, agentive *can* in ‘ S can ϕ ’ expresses that an action ϕ is a practically available action to S such that, in the closest worlds where S tries to ϕ , they ϕ . As such, agentive modals express a hypothetical guarantee. An agent

³ Not all adjectives with the *-ible/-able* suffix express agentive modality. Some like *flammable* express dispositional properties of the subject as opposed to what is doable for a relevant agent. Importantly, though, these adjectives do not morphologically contain what was once a verb. That *readable* is comprised of *-able* and the verb *read* that requires an agent is presumably why the adjective requires one.

may not try to ϕ . But if they can ϕ , they will ϕ in the closest worlds where they try. Applying this semantics to the suffix *-ible/-able*, agentive modal adjectives express that the action denoted by the relevant verb \mathcal{V} is hypothetically guaranteed. For example, *The book is readable* expresses that reading is practically available to the relevant agent such that if that agent tried to read the book, they would succeed at reading in the closest worlds.

But which agent? Constructions like ‘ S can ϕ ’ have the agent as the grammatical subject. But ‘ δ is \mathcal{V} able’ does not. Instead, modal agentive adjectives are PERSPECTIVE-SENSITIVE.⁴ They are interpreted with respect to the perspective of an individual or group who possesses the ability to \mathcal{V} .⁵ This perspective can be made explicit with a prepositional phrase such as *to S* in ‘ δ is \mathcal{V} able to S ’, or the perspective is implicit. When implicit, the perspective often defaults to that of the speaker. So the agent who can \mathcal{V} is the speaker who uttered the sentence ‘ δ is \mathcal{V} able’. But sometimes the perspective receives a generic interpretation. For example, *The sidewalk is walkable* is interpreted as walkable for a normal agent as opposed to walkable for the speaker.

The semantics adopted from Mandelkern et al. (2017) appeals to actions that are PRACTICALLY AVAILABLE. They do not define this notion but do provide a rough-and-ready gloss. An action ϕ is practically available to S just in case S could reasonably plan to ϕ in order to achieve a relevant goal. Some readers may not be satisfied with this gloss. However, it comes with the territory. Semantic explanations of agentive modality at some point introduce a notion to explain how some actions are accessible or not to the agent. For example, Maier (2015) appeals to actions that are OPTIONS, or are actions that figure in choice situations. Likewise, Lewis (2020), in a posthumously published outline, toyed with agentive modality being explained in terms of the absence of OBSTACLES, or something that “wouldn’t go away if things were just a little different.” I take all of these notions to be explicating the same intuition that an action an agent is able to do is an action

⁴ Perspective-sensitivity is widespread in natural language. Where it is most obvious is the semantics of taste adjectives such as *fun* or *delicious* (Laserson, 2005; Stephenson, 2007). See Silk (2021) for discussion of what he calls EVALUATIONAL ADJECTIVES, a category of perspective-sensitive terms that includes taste, aesthetic, moral, and epistemic adjectives. Agentive modal adjectives belong to this broad category as well.

⁵ We now have the requisite pieces to extend the formal semantics of agentive modal auxiliaries from Mandelkern et al. (2017) to agentive modal adjectives. To start, let $\mathcal{A}_{S_c, c, w}$ represent a set of actions that are practically available in context c and world w to S_c , or the speaker of context c . Next, let $f_c(A, w)$ be a selection function provided by the context c that delivers the world in which S_c tries to perform an action A in world w . Then $\llbracket \delta \text{ is } \mathcal{V} \text{able} \rrbracket^{c, w} = 1$ iff $\exists A \in \mathcal{A}_{S_c, c, w}: \llbracket \mathcal{V}(S, \delta) \rrbracket^{c, f_c(A, w)} = 1$.

that is open to agent. Any will do.

To take another step closer to the paradox, consider agentive modal adjectives morphologically derived from verbs of saying such as *say*, *speak*, and *describe*. The result is adjectives like *sayable*, *speakable*, and *describable*. To take us all the way there, incorporate negation with the prefix *in-/un-* and we have an INEFFABILITY PREDICATE:

$$\begin{array}{rcc} & \textit{describe} & \\ \textit{in-} & + & \textit{sayable} \\ & \textit{speak} & \\ \textit{un-} & + & \textit{speakeable} \\ & \textit{say} & \end{array}$$

Like any negated agentive modal adjective, ineffability predicates are true when the action denoted by the verb \mathcal{V} is not practically available to the relevant agent. Since the verb is a verb of saying, an ineffability predicate is true when saying or describing δ , the grammatical subject in ' δ is indescribable', is not practically available to the relevant agent.

In what follows, I will continue to focus discussion on the adjective *indescribable*. I ignore *ineffable* because it is a loan word from Latin *ineffabilis* acquired either directly or by way of French (Harper, 2001-2022). As a result, the verb of saying from which it is derived—*effari*—is not itself in the English vocabulary. (Though this does not stop many from making effing jokes.) It is thereby difficult to elicit reliable linguistic intuitions about the meaning of *ineffable*. I will also not discuss *unspeakable* much because it is sometimes interpreted as a deontic modal adjective as opposed to an agentive modal adjective. For example, *What he did was unspeakable* is interpreted as what happened being too terrible or evil to permissibly be spoken about.

The paradox can now be unpacked. By default, the perspective to which the ineffability predicate is anchored in ' δ is indescribable' is the speaker. So ' δ is indescribable' entails that describing δ is not practically available to the speaker. But insofar as the speaker just performed an act of description with the predicate *indescribable*, describing is practically available to them. So using ' δ is indescribable' appears to be a performative contradiction. What is done by asserting ' δ is indescribable' is what its truth-conditions require to be practically unavailable.

3 Dissolution

It is a performative contradiction that cannot be avoided. A comparison with other performative sentences like 'I (hereby) say that p '—where p is any proposition whatsoever—is instructive. The semantics of these sentences is such that their utterance is self-verifying.⁶ To utter them is to create the event of saying that constitutes their truthmaker. That self-verification is owed to the statement being, in part, presently about the speaker. It disappears—along with the ability to insert the adverb *hereby*—when the tense or subject changes. Neither 'I said p ' nor 'Thanasis says that p ' is performatively self-verifying like 'I (hereby) say that p ' is self-verifying.

Instead of being self-verifying, ' δ is indescribable' is self-refuting. To utter it is to bring about the event of description that constitutes the truthmaker for its negation. That self-refutation is similarly owed to the statement being, in part, presently about the speaker. The contradiction disappears when the sentence is not presently anchored to the speaker. There is nothing amiss about ' δ was once indescribable (to me)'. This sentence entails that describing δ was not practically available at a prior time. But there is no conflict between an act being unavailable in the past and now being available to the speaker. Likewise, there is nothing problematic about ' δ is indescribable to Thanasis'. This sentence merely entails that describing δ is not practically available to Thanasis. What goes for whoever is talked about need not go for the speaker.

Another way to illustrate the performative contradiction is to show that a logical contradiction can be derived from the supposition that ' δ is indescribable' can be truthfully asserted. We need just two additional premises. Here is the first premise:

- (I) If ' δ is indescribable' is truthfully asserted by a speaker, then describing δ is a practically available action to the speaker.

Asserting is a complex action that consists in acts of referring and acts of predicating that correspond to the subject/predicate structure of a sentence (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). As such, a speaker cannot assert ' δ is indescribable' without predicating *indescribable* of δ . So if a speaker asserts p , they have described δ . If

⁶ See Searle (1989), Ginet (1979), Condoravdi and Lauer (2011), and Eckardt (2012). There is a tradition owed to Austin (1962) to understand performatives as lacking truth-conditions as opposed to having self-verifying truth-conditions. For reasons given in the previously cited, this is a mistake.

they have described δ , description is practically available to them. The second premise is this:

- (II) If describing δ is a practically available action to the speaker, then ' δ is indescribable' is false.

This premise results straightforwardly from the natural language semantics. Since the truth-conditions for ' δ is indescribable' require that the act denoted by the verb *describe* not be a practically available action, the sentence is false if describing is practically available to the speaker. To get a contradiction, we just need to suppose that ' δ is indescribable' can be truthfully asserted and modus ponens does the rest.

- (I) If ' δ is indescribable' is truthfully asserted by a speaker, then describing δ is a practically available action to the speaker.
- (II) If describing δ is a practically available action to the speaker, then ' δ is indescribable' is false.
- (III) ' δ is indescribable' is truthfully asserted by a speaker.
- (IV) Therefore, ' δ is indescribable' is false.

(III) and (IV) contradict. You cannot truthfully assert what is false. Since (I) is motivated by banal observations about speech acts, and (II) just elaborates the truth-conditions for agentive modal adjectives, (III) is what ought to be jettisoned of the three premises. ' δ is indescribable' cannot be truthfully asserted because it is always false.

4 Failed solutions

Once we appreciate that ineffability predicates are agentive modal adjectives, it is straightforward to see that an assertion of ' δ is indescribable' is a performative contradiction. However, solutions to the paradox have been developed, especially in the philosophy of religion. To complete the case that the performative contradiction is unavoidable, five solutions are discussed. Three have been proposed, two can be envisioned. None succeed in showing that ' δ is indescribable' can be true.

4.1 Proposed solutions

Nonclassical logic. We can reason from the supposition that ‘ δ is indescribable’ is truthfully asserted to a contradiction between (I) and (IV). In doing so, the incoherence of maintaining that ‘ δ is indescribable’ can be truthfully asserted is illustrated. But if contradictions are true, the incoherence is *merely* apparent: ‘ δ is indescribable’ can be true and false.

A nonclassical solution has been argued to sit well with historical thought. Priest (2015) explores such a solution, and argues that it fits with ideas in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, a text in the Mahāyāna tradition. Matilal (1990, 151-152) mentions a similar view in Jainist texts where the ineffability predicate *avaktavya* “is systematically interpreted as the simultaneous application of the contradictory truth-predicates... saying ‘yes’ and ‘no’... in the same breath in the same sense.” Likewise, Deguchi et al. (2021, 20-21) raise the question of why Wang Bi, a 3rd century Confucian philosopher, never confronts the paradox in his writings on the Dao’s ineffability and hypothesize that “The most obvious and compelling reading is simply that the author of the *Laozi* and Wang Bi accepted the contradiction.”

The problem with this solution is that it treats the contradiction involved with the paradox of ineffability as merely semantic. Though we can reason to a semantic contradiction, as I did above, the contradiction is fundamentally a performative one. Asserting ‘ δ is indescribable’ performs the action that the truth of what’s asserted rules out. As such, the conflict is between an action in the world (what the speaker did), and the content of the sentence (what the speaker said). In moving to a nonclassical logic where ‘ δ is indescribable’ can be both true and false, this conflict is not addressed. The logical contradiction of (I) and (IV) is. But the performative contradiction of performing an action while asserting that very action cannot be done remains.⁷

⁷ The defender of such a solution might persist by moving contradictions into the world. For example, see Mares (2004) for helpful discussion of the difference between semantic and metaphysical dialetheism. On such approaches, $\neg F(\delta)$ and $F(\delta)$ can both be facts in the world. Perhaps, then, it is a fact that describing is practically available and a fact that it is not. But much more is required to show the coherence of such a suggestion. For instance, remember that practical availability is defined modally: in the closest worlds where S tries to ϕ , they ϕ . If there are worldly contradictions about what is practically available, it follows that S does and does not ϕ in the closest worlds. However, I lose my grip on how closeness can be determined once we countenance contradictory facts. Additional problems like this crop up too. As such, it is beyond the scope of this paper explore the coherence of nonclassical ontology. I will limit myself to noting its lack of appeal.

Metalinguistic ascent. Pseudo-Dionysius regularly characterized God as being beyond all statements that could be made about God. To give one example, Dionysius (1987, 147) writes that “We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion. . . it is also beyond every denial.” In recent years, Scott and Citron (2016), Gäb (2017), and van Elswyk (forthcoming) have pursued metalinguistic approaches to religious language. It might be hoped that one or more of these approaches has the resources to solve the paradox.

Aiming for a solution, Gäb (2017) proposes that *God is indescribable* is not about God; it is about propositions one can express about God. Accordingly, Gäb defends that *God is indescribable* is equivalent to *Some propositions containing the term God are inexpressible*. This solution constitutes a denial of (I). By proposing a different meaning, it severs the link between the truth-conditions of ‘ δ is indescribable’ and whether describing is an action that is practically available to the speaker.

But these sentences plainly have different meanings. One way to see this is to note that *God is indescribable* can be false even if *Some propositions containing the term God are inexpressible* is true. Such a combination of truth-values holds in any situation where God is describable but not completely describable. To illustrate, suppose God can be described with *God is omniscient*. Suppose further that we then tried to state God’s omniscience as a conjunction where each individual conjunct took the form ‘God knows p ’ for every true proposition p . This conjunction would be inexpressible in the situation for the boring reason that the relevant sentence is too long for its utterance to be practically available. As such, *God is indescribable* would be false but *Some propositions containing the term God are inexpressible* would be true.

A different way to see the difference in meaning is to observe that there is no means to transform the initial sentence into Gäb’s paraphrase via known operations that can alter the logical form of a sentence while leaving the surface grammar intact. The initial sentence would somehow need to be transformed into a sentence where an existential quantifier takes wide-scope and *God* leaves subject position to be enclosed in quotes.

However, a metalinguistic approach is appealing. It is worth considering whether there is an empirically constrained way to get ‘ δ is indescribable’ to be about propositions about δ . There is. But, as I will show, it does not solve the paradox. In ‘ δ is indescribable’, the δ is a variable for DETERMINER PHRASES, the

kind of phrase that is the subject of a sentence. Sometimes determiner phrases are interpreted as if they were questions. To illustrate, here is an example from Heim (1979).

- (1) John's favorite drink is obvious.
- (2) What John's favorite drink is is obvious.

In (1), the phrase *John's favorite drink* does not refer to a drink. A drink is not what is obvious. Instead, what is obvious is what John's drink is. This is why (2) appears to be synonymous. To account for such interpretations of determiner phrases, the common proposal is that a referring term δ has its meaning shifted by a covert operator to a question like $?F(\delta)$ where F is a contextually determined property (Aloni and Roelofsen, 2011). Questions are often identified with sets of propositions that comprise candidate answers (Hamblin, 1973). As such, if δ is a concealed question, ' δ is indescribable' would not be about δ but a set of propositions about δ . But solutions oriented around a meaning shift merely push the problem back. The performative contradiction remains between what the truth-conditions of ' δ is indescribable' require to not be practically available and what is available to the speaker in uttering the sentence. It does not matter what δ is as long as *indescribable* is predicated.

Another way one might try to advance a metalinguistic solution to the paradox is by appealing to metalinguistic negation. Ineffability predicates morphologically consist of a negation prefix *un/in-* attached to an adjective that consists of a verb of saying \mathcal{V} and the modal suffix *-able/ible*. But there are multiple kinds of negation. In addition to truth-conditional negation, there is METALINGUISTIC NEGATION. On most understandings, metalinguistic negation is a non-lexicalized way to use negation to convey that there is something defective about an utterance. For example, the *not* in *Thanasis did not eat some of the spanakopita—he ate all of it* conveys that *some* is the wrong scalar term to use. Were the *not* interpreted truth-conditionally, the sentence should ring as a contradiction because *all* entails *some*. Perhaps, then, the negation contributed by *un/in-* is metalinguistic. Then ' δ is indescribable' would have a different pragmatic meaning, a difference that would position us to deny premise (I) and (II) alike.

A solution along these lines has a decisive problem. Metalinguistic negation is never incorporated morphologically as a prefix (Horn, 1989). It is only a non-lexicalized way that the adverb *not* can be used. To illustrate, consider (3) and (4).

- (3) It is not possible—it is probable.
- (4) # it is impossible—it is probable.

The only difference between them is how negation surfaces. But that difference is enough. While (3) is consistent because the *not* is interpreted metalinguistically, (4) is a contradiction because the negation prefix *im-* must be interpreted truth-conditionally. Since the negation associated with an ineffability predicate is prefixed, it cannot be metalinguistic.

Irreflexive predicate. A variety of solutions have been proposed that attempt to secure that ineffability predicates do not apply to themselves. On this way of thinking, 'δ is indescribable' entails that describing δ is not practically available for a range of predicates F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n but *indescribable* is not in this range. Such solutions deny (II). Though describing δ is a practically available action to the speaker (because it is describable with *indescribable*), it does not follow that 'δ is indescribable' is false (because this sentence is restricted to F_1, F_2, \dots, F_n).

A familiar example of this solution is owed to [Hick \(2000\)](#). He suggests that two kinds of predicates apply to the Real. There are SUBSTANTIAL PREDICATES that disclose what the Real is like qualitatively, or in itself. Then there are FORMAL PREDICATES that do not. If ineffability predicates are formal predicates that only concern what actions are practically available to a speaker with substantial predicates, then uttering 'δ is indescribable' is not a performative contradiction. A recent version is suggested by [Hewitt \(2020, 24\)](#). He characterizes the meaning of *indescribable* as the non-applicability of predicates from a set P where no ineffability predicate is a member of P .

However, ineffability predicates do not have such a natural language semantics. As agentive modal adjectives, their meaning is derived compositionally from a negation prefix, a verb \mathcal{V} , and a agentive modality suffix. The action denoted by \mathcal{V} is what adjectives of the form *unVable* predicate is not practically available to the speaker. There is no higher-order quantification over a set of predicates involved in the meaning of such adjectives generally. So there is none involved for ineffability predicates either.

There is also independent evidence that ineffability predicates are not irreflexive. If they were, sentences that attempt to make the exemption explicit should be, at best, synonymous and, at worse, redundant because they convey the same semantic content. However, synonymy or redundancy is not what we encounter. Consider a sentence like 'δ is indescribable except with the adjective *indescribable*'

or ‘ δ is otherwise indescribable’. These sentence have plainly different meanings from the original sentence. More than that, the addition of the exemption makes the sentences sound more contradictory to numerous native speakers I have consulted.

4.2 Envisioned solutions

Atypical copula. Our schema ‘ δ is indescribable’ contains a copula. Tinkering with the meaning of a copula is a time-honored tradition in philosophy for quelling problems. Perhaps, then, the copula in such sentences is not predicative. It is a different copular construction, and this difference creates space for denying premise (I) in my earlier argument.

Unfortunately, the *is* has all the tell-tale signs of a predicative copular construction. It is preceded by a determiner phrase and followed by an adjective. It pronominalizes like one too. With predicative constructions, adding a tag question like *Isn’t it/he/she/they?* to the end requires the pronoun to match the grammatical features of the subject (Mikkelsen, 2012). We see that with ‘ δ is indescribable’. For example, *The Devī is indescribable, isn’t she?* requires the pronoun *she*. However, the more serious problem is that predication does not require a copula. Adjectives within the determiner phrase like *The ineffable God* or the *The indescribable experience* still compose with the adjacent noun as predicates. So any copula-based solution would at best work only for sentences exactly instantiating the schema ‘ δ is indescribable’, and have nothing to say about the variant ‘The indescribable δ is *F*’.

The thresholds of gradable adjectives. Agentive modal predicates are also importantly GRADABLE ADJECTIVES. Their gradability is easily seen by witnessing how they interact with modifier like *barely*, *mostly*, and *entirely*. Sentence (5) illustrates below.

$$(5) \text{ The Dao is } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{barely} \\ \text{mostly} \\ \text{entirely} \end{array} \right\} \text{ describable.}$$

Gradable adjectives denote relations between individuals and degrees.⁸ As such, a sentence like (5) indicates that the degree of the Dao’s describability is above

⁸ I am assuming a degree semantics for gradable adjectives. See Cresswell (1977), von Stechow (1984), Heim (2000), and Kennedy (2007) for an introduction. Integrating a degree component into the earlier formal semantics for agentive modal adjectives inspired by Mandelkern et al. (2017)—see fn.5—is not something I will attempt here. The main challenge is figuring out what

a contextually determined threshold on a scale. What the modifiers contribute is information about where on that scale the Dao is located. For example, *barely* indicates that the degree to which the Dao is describable is minimally above the threshold on the scale. In contrast, *entirely* indicates that the amount of describability is at the top of the scale.

In recognizing that agentive modal adjectives are gradable, a possible solution to the paradox emerges that is worth considering. When such adjectives are negated, the relevant sentences can sometimes just mean that the relevant individual fails to be at or above the threshold associated with the term. For example, *Thanasis is not tall* does not mean that Thanasis has no degree of height. It means only that he does not meet the relevant height threshold. Perhaps 'δ is indescribable' is similar. It entails that δ is not at or above a threshold for describability which is still compatible with δ being describable to some lesser degree. If so, the solution to the paradox would be to deny (II). While describing with *indescribable* is practically available, it does not follow that 'δ is indescribable' is false. Similar to Thanasis's height, the object may be degree of describability that is below the threshold.

This solution does not pan out. It will take some effort to see why. Gradable adjectives differ according to their scales. Scales can be open at both ends, closed at only one end, or closed at both ends. An adjective like *tall* is associated with a scale that is completely open. The linguistic evidence is that neither *tall* nor its antonym *short* combine with modifiers which place an individual at the maximum endpoint.

$$(6) \# \text{Thanasis is } \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{perfectly} \\ \text{fully} \\ \text{entirely} \end{array} \right\} \left\{ \begin{array}{c} \text{tall} \\ \text{short} \end{array} \right\}.$$

For such gradable adjectives, the threshold individuals must meet to be *F* cannot be define in relation to a fixed endpoint. They cannot be because they are not any. In contrast, gradable adjectives with closed scales can have a threshold defined in relation to one of its endpoints. These are known as ABSOLUTE ADJECTIVES (Kennedy, 2007). An example is *clean*. Unlike *tall* or *short*, *clean* does combine with

to make degree. Practical availability is not itself a good candidate because it is all or nothing. Formally, either $\exists A \in \mathcal{A}_{S,c,w}: \llbracket \mathcal{V}(S,\delta) \rrbracket^{c.f.(A,w)} = 1$ or not. However, one natural option for some adjectives like *countable* or *describable* is for the scale to consist of a different quantity of \mathcal{V} -ings that are practically available. Then to be more \mathcal{V} able is to be able to engage in a greater quantity of distinct acts of \mathcal{V} ing.

modifiers placing an individual at the maximum endpoint. Compare (7) below to the earlier (6).

(7) The table is $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{perfectly} \\ \text{fully} \\ \text{entirely} \end{array} \right\}$ clean.

A difference in scale effects how gradable adjectives interact with negation. When a non-absolute adjective is negated, it can still be true that the individual is on the scale somewhere when the threshold is not defined in relation to an endpoint. This is why *Thanasis is not tall* is consistent with Thanasis still having a degree of height. But when an absolute adjective is negated, this possibility is ruled out because the threshold is set at an endpoint. Consider *The table is not clean*. By having a different underlying scale structure, its truth is not consistent with the table still having a degree of cleanliness.

What this digression clarifies is that the solution under consideration works only if ineffability predicates are not absolute adjectives, i.e., if they are more like *tall* than *clean*. But they are absolute adjectives. Incidentally, the evidence for this came earlier from example (5). Compatibility with each of the modifiers provides independent evidence that adjectives built out of a verb \mathcal{V} of saying and the *-able/ible* suffix are absolute. For example, *mostly* is a proportional modifier. Proportional modifiers only work with adjectives that have scales with endpoints. No endpoints, no proportions about the distance between endpoints. Likewise, *entirely* only composes with adjectives that have a scale with a maximum endpoint. Finally, *barely* only composes with adjectives that possess a minimum endpoint (Kennedy and McNally, 2005). Since the adjective *describable* composes with all three modifiers, it must be absolute.

Since *describable* is an absolute gradable adjective, so is *indescribable*. Negating an absolute adjective does not alter the open/closed structure of the underlying scale. Instead, negation works with the same endpoint. Accordingly, if something does not meet the threshold for being describable, it is not still a degree of describability. The nuances of gradable adjectives are therefore no help in solving the paradox of ineffability.

4.3 Summary

We have explored numerous ways of squinting at ‘ δ is indescribable’ to see how it could be true. The solutions either tinkered with the notion of truth or tinkered

with the meaning of the sentence or one of its terms (*e.g.* the subject, the copula, the predicate). Though undoubtedly there are and will be other attempts to solve the paradox, these five are representative of what could be tinkered with by such attempts. The shortcomings of these attempts is therefore representative of how resistant the paradox is to solutions.

My discussion of the attempted solutions and why they fail is animated by a common assumption: that a solution to the paradox must be consistent with the syntax and semantics of natural language. This assumption is what gives teeth to the objection that proposals have different truth-conditions, that tag-questions pronominalize in a certain way, that metalinguistic negation does not incorporate as a prefix, that ineffability predicates are absolute gradable adjectives, and so on. Others in philosophy do not always operate with this assumption when theorizing about language. As [Stanley and Szabó \(2000, 246\)](#) observe,

In general, it is hard for philosophers to part from the idea that one can freely construct alternative semantic structures for various natural language sentences without being constrained by empirical evidence from linguistics. Such a view, however, is tantamount to the endorsement of the hypothesis that syntax is a superficial feature of language, detached from the way we understand the utterances of others.

But the hypothesis that syntax is superficial is a non-starter. Natural language is the way it is because of the conventions that determine words meanings and the biologically endowed rules of grammar that are used to put those meanings together. If we are not constrained by syntax and semantics when attempting to solve a puzzle like the paradox of ineffability that arises because of the natural language semantics of particular predicates, we are not solving it. We are stipulating or acting as if there is not a paradox.

As a parallel, consider the Liar paradox. Sentences like (8) through (10) are thoroughly paradoxical. The source of the paradoxicality is the alethic predicates *false* and *true*.

(8) This sentence is false.

(9) (9) is not true.

(10) (a) (10b) is true.

(b) (10a) is not true.

The variety in the examples above shows that self-reference via a demonstrative or a name is not necessary ([Yablo, 1993](#)). Nor is *not* required given that the

predicates are antonyms. Accordingly, what solutions to the paradox make sense of is whether and how a language could contain its own alethic predicates (Tarski, 1944). But, if we are unconstrained by the syntax and semantics of natural language, solutions abound that do not require making sense of such things. We can stipulate that *false* means *false except if applied to a Liar sentence* or that Liar sentences are equivalent to the unproblematic *Some sentences are false*. These solutions are plainly unsatisfying. They indirectly stipulate there is not a paradox as opposed to solving the paradox. I submit that solutions to the paradox of ineffability that are unconstrained by syntax and semantics are equally as unsatisfying.

5 Dissolution continued

We should accept that ‘ δ is indescribable’ is always false. This follows from the natural language semantics of *indescribable* (§3), and is further confirmed after the survey of various solutions that we just completed (§4). But what does this tell us about ineffability in general?

The answer given is usually bleak. At the essay’s outset, we saw how Ānandavardhana understood this result for the ineffability of poetry. Here is how Plantinga (2000, 5-6) similarly answers a question about whether the ineffability of God is coherent:

[T]he answer seems to be no; one who makes the claim seems to set up a certain subject for predication—God—and then declare that our concepts do not apply to this being. But if this is so, then, presumably, at least one of our concepts—*being such that our concepts don’t apply to it*—does apply to this being. Either those who attempt to make this claim succeed in making an assertion or not. If they don’t succeed, we have nothing to consider; if they do, however, they appear to be predicating a property of a being they have referred to[.]

As such, accepting that ‘ δ is indescribable’ is always false seems to be tantamount to conceding that the self-refuting objection against ineffability is successful. I suspect this is why many have been motivated to solve the paradox. Hewitt (2020, 19), for example, suggests that the absence of a solution “fatally undermine[s]” the view that God is ineffable.

In considering the self-refuting objection, we must distinguish two questions. The SEMANTIC QUESTION concerns how to understand the natural language semantics of sentences like ‘ δ is indescribable’. The EXPLICATION QUESTION concerns

whether ineffability can be explicated without internal contradictions that reveal incoherence (van Elswyk, forthcoming).

A widespread assumption in the existing literature made by advocates and critics of ineffability alike is this: if an answer to the semantic question finds that 'δ is indescribable' is always false, then the answer to the explication question is *no*. However, this assumption is false. We can see why it is false by revisiting how the falsity of 'δ is indescribable' is owed to a performative contradiction and that *indescribable* is a gradable adjective.

Ineffability predicates result in self-refuting truth-conditions only when anchored to the speaker in the present tense. This is why asserting 'δ is indescribable' is a performative contradiction. As a result, there is nothing incoherent about predicating indescribability *non-performatively*. As mentioned earlier, there is nothing self-refuting about 'δ is indescribable to Thanasis', which anchors the perspective to someone else. Nor is there anything amiss with 'δ was indescribable' or even 'δ will be indescribable', which avoid the present tense. The reason why is that the speaker's present act of describing is not relevant to what is describable for someone else or what is describable for the speaker at different times. So there is nothing like premise (I) in my earlier argument to allow us to reason to a contradiction. The assumption that the unavoidable falsity of 'δ is indescribable' tells against the coherence of *ever* predicating ineffability is therefore a mistake. It is a mistake that results from considering only ineffability predicates in performative constructions.

In fact, predicating indescribability non-performatively happens frequently in cross-cultural research into the language of sensory experience. Languages starkly differ in their vocabularies associated with particular senses. For example, Yéli Dnye (Papua New Guinea) lacks terms for any colors other than black, white, and red (Levinson, 2000). In contrast, English has more terms than that just for blue such as *periwinkle*, *ultramarine*, *cobalt*, and *azure*. On the flip side, English lacks a dedicated smell lexicon. We can use general evaluative adjectives like *good* or *bad*, or we comment on the source of the smell such as *floral* or *rotten*. After that, our descriptive powers quickly run out. But languages such as Cha'palaa (Ecuador) have 15 dedicated terms that are even incorporated into the language's grammar as nominal classifiers (Floyd et al., 2018). These fascinating differences make it perfectly intelligible to predicate indescribability of other speakers and to generally talk about the differential ineffability of sensory experience for other speakers (Levinson and Majid, 2014).

What these considerations show is that ineffability can be explicated coherently. There is nothing about the concept of ineffability that is confused or internally inconsistent. This is true even though instances of 'δ is indescribable' are always false. The difference-maker is that assertions made in such cross-cultural research are non-performative. They are not about what is practically available to the speaker conducting the research. Nor do they have any immediate consequences for the speaker. So what remains to be discussed is whether ineffability can be explicated from a first-person perspective, or a manner that does have consequences for the speaker.

That 'δ is indescribable' is always false does carry the consequence that 'δ is describable' is always true for any δ. Such a consequence might seem significant. It seems to bring everything within the reach of description. It does—but only in the most minimal possible way.

As a gradable adjective that is absolute, *describable* has a closed scale. The threshold for being true of an object is set to the minimum endpoint on the scale. For 'δ is describable' to be true is for δ to be at the lowest degree of describability on the scale. The lowest point is very low. Just as 'δ is indescribable' is performatively self-refuting, 'δ is describable' is performatively self-verifying. In asserting it, the speaker engages in an act of description with *describable*. The sentence cannot therefore fail to be true when uttered because describing is a practically available action in that moment. The minimum endpoint, in other words, is describing with *describable*.

As a result, maintaining that 'δ is indescribable' is always false only brings everything within reach of the predicate *describable*. Whether δ is mostly or entirely describable is a separate issue. The truth-conditions of 'δ is mostly describable', for example, are markedly different. The adverb *mostly* moves δ higher on the describability scale past the threshold set at the minimum endpoint. For that sentence to be true requires much more than one description. In this way, the self-refuting objection establishes very little. It does not show that other descriptions are practically available.

It also does not show that the *no* answer to the explication question is forced when explicating from a first-person perspective. As long as one's explication can accommodate the minimum describability that makes 'δ is indescribable' always false and 'δ is describable' always true, the explication will be coherent just as it is in cross-cultural research into the language of sensory experience. Of note is that many contemporary attempts at explication can. I will illustrate with two

examples from the philosophy of religion.

The first example involves views according to which some class of predicates apply to an object and others do not. An example is Keller (2018). She explicates ineffability as the view that only predicates ascribing extrinsic or negative properties apply to God. Predicates ascribing intrinsic properties do not. Strictly speaking, the falsity of 'God is indescribable' is compatible with Keller's approach. Let's unpack why. Our sentence is false because describing is a practically available action. But this is compatible with Keller's view if description is accomplished with predicates that ascribe extrinsic or negative properties. And, in this case, it is. Describing with *describable* is what is practically available. However, the property *being describable* fits the bill as extrinsic property. It is a relational properties between an object and a speaker that does not reveal anything qualitative about the object. Accordingly, Keller's explication of ineffability is not fatally undermined.

Next, let's entertain views according to which some sentences about an object can be true but not true in a special way. Our example here is Jacobs (2015). He draws a distinction between TRUTH and FUNDAMENTAL TRUTH. A sentence is fundamentally true when it carves reality at its joints. He explicates ineffability as the view that no sentences about God are fundamentally true. At most, sentences can be non-fundamentally true because there is no joint-carving when it comes to God. Again, strictly speaking, the falsity of 'God is indescribable' is compatible with Jacobs's view. Its falsity does not mean that there are fundamental truths. We have explored that its means that 'God is describable' is true. But Jacobs does not need to be committed to this being fundamentally true. Nor is it a good candidate for being a joint-carving truth. Jacobs' explication of ineffability is also not fatally undermined.

This survey of views of ineffability is far from exhaustive. But the compatibility of these explications with ' δ is indescribable' always being false cements that a *no* answer is not forced to the explication question. Admittedly, it is hard to avoid saying some self-refuting instance of ' δ is indescribable' when developing these approaches. But such slips do not reveal a deep incoherence with ineffability. Instead, they reveal the hazard of speaking about the limits of a language with that very language. Taking a step back to theorize about the nature description or truth more generally, as Keller's and Jacob's approaches do, enables an explication that accommodates minimal describability. As a result, neither requires a denial of (I), (II), (III), or (IV).

6 Conclusion

This essay has not followed the advice in §1 from Augustine of Hippo. My approach to quelling the paradox of ineffability has been disputatious. His diagnosis was that the paradox is a “conflict between words.” My diagnosis is that the paradox is a conflict between words and action. Seeing it as such follows from taking the semantics of ineffability predicates like *indescribable* seriously. That ‘ δ is indescribable’ is always false and ‘ δ is describable’ always true is the result of a agentive modal adjective being used in a performative sentence. But the fact that ineffability predicates are gradable is why ‘ δ is describable’ always being true is nearly trivial. Its truth does not secure that δ can be described with something other than *describable*.

A question to end with is why speakers then and now assert ‘ δ is describable’ if it is always false. Though some speakers may think it is not a performative contradiction, or that ineffability can be coherently explicated in some manner, as I have suggested, the natural answer for others is that such statements serve a pragmatic purpose such as revealing piety or personal affection (Stace, 1960; O’Meara, 2000; Lebens, 2017). Whatever the purpose of such assertions, there is much we do with language beyond express truths. It should not come as a surprise that, in grappling with how our powers of description are limited, speakers move beyond semantic content.

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