

Metalinguistic apophaticism

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A conviction had by many Christians over many centuries is that natural language is inadequate for describing God. This is the doctrine of divine ineffability. Apophaticism understands divine ineffability as it being justified or proper to negate statements that describe God. This paper develops and defends a version of apophaticism in which the negation involved is metalinguistic. The interest of this metalinguistic apophaticism is two-fold. First, it provides a philosophical model of historical apophaticisms that shows their rational coherence. Second, metalinguistic apophaticism enables a minimal understanding of ineffability that is independently plausible given its minor commitments.

1 Divine ineffability

A conviction had by many Christians over many centuries is that natural language is inadequate for describing God. For example, in *Paradise*, Dante Alighieri starts his poem by informing the reader that what was seen in heaven were things “as man nor knows / Nor skills to tell.” And the poem ends, when Dante is finally in the presence of God, with the claim that he has reached a place “where speech is vanquished and must lag behind.” Let’s call this conviction DIVINE INEFFABILITY. To understand it, we should distinguish two separate but closely related questions.

EXPLICATION QUESTION

What does it mean to say that natural language is inadequate for describing God?

ACCEPTANCE QUESTION

Why should one accept divine ineffability?

This paper provides an answer to the first question that is compatible with nearly all, if not all, answers to the second question.

Such a focus might seem amusingly unambitious. In most settings, it would be. Matters are different here. It is hard to intelligibly explicate what it means to say that language is inadequate for describing God. Two immediate challenges face any attempt to do so. The first is the STATIBILITY PROBLEM. Many explications of divine ineffability are self-refuting or at least self-undermining (Alston 1956; Plantinga 2000). The second challenge I call the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM (Kenny 2006; Howard-Snyder 2017). A difference between theists in contrast to agnostics and atheists is that theists accept propositions about God that the others do not. Chief among them is that God exists, but the

list for Christian theists will also include the doctrinal contents of Creeds and Councils. Divine ineffability threatens to erase this doxastic difference. If natural language is inadequate for describing God, then doctrinal statements such as *God is triune* or ones that distinguish God as a perfect being like *God is omniscient* run the risk of being inadequate. Explications of divine ineffability must therefore explain how natural language is inadequate while leaving room for certain propositions to be expressed or possibly true such that they can be rationally accepted by Christian theists. Otherwise the explication of divine ineffability is not particularly Christian.

My answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION will be apophatic by giving a starring role to negation. In particular, ineffability is understood as it being justified or proper to negate all statements that describe God. Apophaticisms, though, have extra difficulty. In maintaining it is proper to accept negations about God, the apophaticist is committed to statements like (2) being acceptable. However, atheists will accept at least one interpretation of (2) as well. They concur that God is not omniscient because God does not exist. To avoid running into the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM, the apophaticist will often accept (1) too. That price appears steep.

(1) God is omniscient.

(2) God is not omniscient.

At least on the surface, the conjunction of (1) and (2) constitutes a contradiction. For apophatic attempts to answer the EXPLICATION QUESTION, then, the STATIBILITY and UNIQUENESS PROBLEMS act as constraints that it is difficult to find a way through without terminating in contradiction.

So merely answering the EXPLICATION QUESTION is not unambitious. It is not without interest either. Both of the problems noted above have epistemic consequences. Self-refuting views cannot be known because they are false, and they are difficult to believe rationally. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine how a Christian could rationally adopt a view that erases the doxastic difference between theists and non-theists. And yet, as contemporary work has stressed, divine ineffability was important to the early church (Scott and Citron 2016; Keller 2018; Hewitt 2020). One can find the conviction that natural language is inadequate in the writings of Anselm of Canterbury, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, Thomas Aquinas, Meister Eckhardt, and in Councils like the Fourth Lateran. So it is worth investigating whether divine ineffability, especially apophatic varieties, can be explicated in a manner that is rational. The charitable assumption is that it can be, and to theorize from that starting point.

In proposing an apophaticism, I am up to what McDaniel (2015, 644) calls PHILOSOPHICAL MODELING:

A philosophical model is a worked out philosophical position that has features that are analogous to the historical position of which it is supposed to be a model. But the philosophical model might have features that are ‘mere artifacts’ of the model, i.e., not part of the fully faithful account of the meaning of some statement of a historically important philosophical view. But still the philosophical model can be useful if the following conditions obtain. First, it is clear that the philosophical model is itself a coherent philosophical position, and second, when taken as a model for the historical position, it shows a way in which that historical position could be coherently maintained. This is especially important when the position in question is one whose coherence has often been doubted. . . And finally, there must be no elements in the model that are explicitly contradicted by elements in the theory that is being modeled; I take the importance of this to be self-explanatory.

The apophaticism I provide will fulfill these conditions. It offers an apophatic model of ineffability that is coherent by solving both the *STABILITY* and *UNIQUENESS PROBLEMS* and compatible with historical precursors. However, one important caveat is that I will not be modeling the apophaticism of a particular historical figure. My focus instead is on explicating apophaticism in a broad way that can model most, if not all, earlier apophaticisms. Since it will be compatible with most answers to the *ACCEPTANCE QUESTION*, the apophaticism is flexible in how substantive or minimal it is.

But the paper’s aim is not merely modeling. I will also show that model enables the development of a minimal apophaticism that can be widely endorsed. This minimal approach takes the form of an answer to the *EXPLICATION QUESTION* without an answer to the *ACCEPTANCE QUESTION*. This paper is therefore of two-fold interest. It advances a philosophical model of apophaticism that demonstrates its coherence and that model enables a minimal version of an apophatic view of divine ineffability that is independently plausible given its very minimal commitments.

The essay proceeds as follows. In §2, I develop metalinguistic apophaticism and explain how it answers the *EXPLICATION QUESTION* while solving the two problems that typically afflict attempts at doing so. Then §3 compares my answer to a number of recent attempts to explicate divine ineffability. I argue that metalinguistic apophaticism outperforms alternatives because either an alternative does not solve both the *STABILITY* and *UNIQUENESS PROBLEMS*, or it has other problems that my apophaticism lacks. I conclude in §4 with a brief discussion about describing God.

2 Metalinguistic apophaticism

My explication of apophaticism gives a starring role to *METALINGUISTIC NEGATION*. In §2.1, I introduce metalinguistic negation. Then §2.2 explains how it enables a new explication of apophaticism. In §2.3, I defend that metalinguistic

apophaticism provides a probative philosophical model of historical apophaticisms. I discuss in §2.4 how it is compatible with most, if not all, answers to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION and present the minimal version of metalinguistic apophaticism.

2.1 Metalinguistic negation

The familiar meaning of *not* is truth-conditional.¹ It has the simple task of flipping truth-conditions. For a proposition p , *not* p is true iff p is false. But that is not the whole story about *not*. Once we step outside of logic to consider how competent speakers use negation in natural language, another use is noticeable. This use is for expressing disapproval. Consider the following examples from Horn (1989, 370-371).

- (3) James is not a bastard—he is a nice guy!
- (4) I didn't manage to trap two *mongeese*—I managed to trap two *mongooses*.
- (5) Suzie didn't call the [pólíce]. She called the [políce].

Another pair of examples is owed to Almotahari (2014, 488).

- (6) I'm not a *secretary*; I'm an *administrative assistant*.
- (7) For a pessimist like him, the cup isn't half full.

These six examples demonstrate what is now widely known as METALINGUISTIC NEGATION. In each example, the *not* or negation clitic *n't* is denying that something subsequent is correct or appropriate. What exactly is the target of this denial varies considerably.

Consider them top to bottom. In (3), the *not* targets the noun *bastard*. It negates to reject or protest the use of the offensive term. In (4), the clitic *n't* targets the morphology of the term *mongeese* to indict it as the incorrect term for referring to more than one mongoose. In (5), the negation clitic corrects the pronunciation of *police*. In (6), *not* targets and objects to the connotation that being a secretary is a diminutive position (in contrast to an administrative assistant). And, finally, the clitic *n't* in (7) targets the whole phrase *the cup is half full* to object to it for being an inaccurate description of a pessimist's attitude.

¹ By *familiar* I also mean *classical* and *static*. One can find other meanings for negation in paraconsistent logics and dynamic semantic theories that are not metalinguistic and yet still different from the familiar meaning. Since my aim in this paper is exploring how metalinguistic negation enables us to understand apophaticism, I overlook other non-metalinguistic meanings. For an explication of ineffability in Buddhist thought that relies on non-classical logic, see Priest (2015).

So our non-exhaustive list of targets includes: the meaning of, morphology of, pronunciation of, connotations of, and applicability of an uttered term or sentence. That variety of targets is then why metalinguistic negation is not the familiar meaning. The truth-conditional *not* can only target the meanings of other expressions. Morphological or phonological properties, connotations of, or applicability for an expression are not part of its semantic meaning. They are ineligible targets for the usual negation.

So what is metalinguistic negation? I proceed on the assumption it is a pragmatic ambiguity (Horn 1985; Burton-Roberts 1989; Pitts 2011). In particular, it is an atypical use of a negation term that, as opposed to flipping a term's truth-conditions, expresses the speaker's disapproval of an utterance or an aspect thereof. Though pragmatic, we can model metalinguistic negation with an operator $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$. We can loosely think of $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ as taking scope over an utterance to express disapproval with it or one of its parts. The narrowness of intonational stress often determines the exact target. From here, $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ expresses that the speaker disapproves of some property of the target. Recall example (4). The stress on *geese* in *mongeese* targets morphology as opposed to a bigger constituent of the sentence. The speaker then disapproves of *geese* as the plural morphology for *mongoose*.

Often metalinguistic negation is followed by a correction that illustrates what the proper or appropriate meanings, morphology, pronunciation, connotations, and so forth are. Each of our examples illustrated as much. The correction provides a reason for the speaker's disapproval. It rights what is wrong with the target utterance. But the correction is not mandatory for metalinguistic negation to be felicitous (Horn 1989; Kay 2004). It may be clear from context what the speaker's reason for disapproval is or, as Martins (2020, 350) observes, metalinguistic negation can be used by speakers to merely express disapproval. In other words, correcting is not the purpose of metalinguistic negation. Expressing disapproval is. In describing $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ as expressing disapproval, I proceed on the assumption that $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ does not express a propositional content. It expresses an attitude in the way that phrases like *What a game!* or terms like *Damn!* do. The attitude of disapproval is exclaimed as opposed to asserted by $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$.²

A consequence of metalinguistic negation merely expressing disapproval is

² A referee wonders whether positing metalinguistic negation requires one to confront any of the usual problems confronted by expressivism about moral terms. It does not. Problems like the Frege–Geach problem concern how moral terms that are supposed to express attitudes semantically compositionally integrate into complex sentences that do not express attitudes (e.g. negation, conditionals, attitude verbs). Understood as a pragmatic ambiguity, metalinguistic negation is owed to a post-semantic reinterpretation of *not* that speakers impose on a sentence as opposed to a semantic interpretation that is compositionally derived. So such problems do not arise.

that discourses that might appear to be contradictions are not. Consider (5) without the extra intonation: *Suzie didn't call the police—Suzie called the police.* It looks like a contradictory pair. But when it is clear via the difference in pronunciation—[pólíce] versus [políce]—that the negation is metalinguistic, the contradiction disappears. To put it schematically, the speaker isn't asserting *not p* via an utterance *u* and then asserting *p* via *u**. The speaker is disapproving of *u* via negation in *u*, and then asserting *p* with *u** partly to explain the basis of the prior disapproval.

2.2 Metalinguistic apophaticism

Apophaticisms maintain that divine ineffability consists in it being justified or proper to negate all statements that describe God. I propose to understand the negation involved as being metalinguistic. Accordingly, apophaticism expressed with metalinguistic negation can be understood as the following claim about utterances.

METALINGUISTIC APOPHATICISM (ML)

For every utterance *u* describing God in a context *c*, $\mathcal{M}(u)$ is proper in *c*.

By *proper*, I mean that there is an explanation for how the disapproval expressed by $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ is sincere. So ML states that there is no description of God uttered that can be uttered that cannot also be metalinguistically negated. Every statement about God merits disapproval.

There are a variety of reasons one might use metalinguistic negation to express disapproval about an utterance. Likewise, there are a variety of reasons one might have to express disapproval with an utterance about God. This is why metalinguistic apophaticism provides an answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION but not the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. The view does not require elaborating why metalinguistic negation can be proper; it just claims that it can be for any description of God we may utter.

A selling point of ML is that it solves or avoids each of the problems that tend to afflict answers to the EXPLICATION QUESTION. Start with the STATIBILITY PROBLEM. The theory is not self-undermining in at least two important ways. First, ML is defined only over utterances that describe God. It itself as a statement is not about God; it is about a type of utterance. So ML cannot self-undermine by negating itself because it does not apply to itself. Second, even if ML did apply to itself, nothing contradictory or epistemically amiss would result. Since metalinguistic negation only expresses disapproval, the result would be presenting a thesis that one disapproves of. As long as the reason for disapproval is not that ML is false, statibility is secured.

Take the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM next. As noted earlier, apophaticists risk committing to a contradiction when they state or accept any description about God. But a pair like (1) and (2) only constitutes a contradiction if the *not* is truth-conditional.

- (1) God is omniscient.
- (2) God is not omniscient.

When it is metalinguistic, no contradiction appears. (1) utters a sentence to assert that God is omniscient, and (2) expresses disapproval of this utterance type. What part of the utterance is the exact target for disapproval, and what reason motivates or justifies the disapproval will vary between contexts. But still no contradiction will be produced. Nothing irrational will be required either as long as the reason for disapproval is not that (1) is false. So ML enables an apophatic theist to rationally believe and state every description of God found in the Creeds and Councils. It just requires that such descriptions be sincerely disapproved by the apophaticist.

Another selling point of ML is that it is actually pretty hard to articulate an apophatic claim without using metalinguistic negation. Horn (1989) notes that, unlike truth-conditional negation, metalinguistic negation cannot be expressed with a negation prefix like *-im* or *-un*. Once incorporated, negation remains truth-conditional.

- (8) It is not possible—it is *actual*.
- (9) It is impossible—it is *actual*.

Compare (8) and (9). The negation in (8) is metalinguistic, but (9), which attempts to provide the same correction with negation incorporated through the prefix *-im*, expresses a contradiction. When attempting to make an apophatic claim with a negation prefix, the same limitation is expressed. (10) is an intelligible claim an apophaticist would make about describing God with the adjective *just*.

- (10) God is not just—God is beyond that!
- (11) God is unjust—God is beyond that!

The same cannot be said for (11). It sounds confused, and is very difficult to recover an intended meaning from.³ Explicating apophaticism as the view

³ As an apophaticism, ML does not try to make special sense of predicates like *ineffable* or *unsayable* that are especially paradoxical. A natural proposal continuous with ML is to treat these as metalinguistic predicates that describe talk about God. For example, see Gäß (2017). But the prefix data causes some trouble for this approach. It rules out the motivating argument that these predicates are metalinguistic because the negation involved is. I explore a different explanation in van Elswyk (2021).

all descriptions of God are eligible for metalinguistic denial captures this fact. Apophatic claims require metalinguistic negation because apophaticism is a metalinguistic view.

2.3 Metalinguistic apophaticism as a philosophical model

Let's turn to how ML models apophaticism as a historical view of divine ineffability. We have already seen in §2.2 that ML is coherent. But it is worth showing that it can explain other apophatic theses. Though my aim is to offer an explication of divine ineffability that broadly models a range of apophaticisms, I will not walk through many particular theses. Instead, I will just focus on how ML explains the three-staged notion of apophatic ascent that is found in Gregory of Nyssa, Psuedo-Dionysius, and others.

Metalinguistic negation is importantly iterable. The operator $\mathcal{M}(\cdot)$ can be applied to an utterance that involves either metalinguistic or truth-conditional negation. As a result, we can stack disapproval. We can disapprove of what we disapproved when we disapproved. Though speakers rarely have cause to iterate metalinguistic negation, its iterability provides a way to understand ascent. We begin with a catophatic description like *God is omniscient*. Then we ascend to the second stage by metalinguistically denying that description. The sentence *God is not omniscient* is endorsed to express disapproval of describing God with the natural language predicate *is omniscient*. Finally, we arrive at the third stage by denying that denial by uttering *God is not not omniscient*. Here the double *not* serves double-duty. It first clarifies that the *not* used in the second stage was not truth-conditional. In denying that God omniscient, a negation is not being asserted. Disapproval is being expressed. But the double *not* also enables second-order disapproval to be conveyed. The disapproval expressed at the second stage is disapproved of at the final stage.

Disapproving of what one disapproves of may be an uncomfortable position to be in cognitively. But it is neither contradictory nor epistemically defective. Here are a few examples. Suppose a person disapproves of drinking coffee with milk. It hides the notes of the underlying bean, and they are bothered whenever they see people doing so. But suppose they also recognize that this disapproval is snobby; they wish they weren't so judgmental. In this case, they disapprove of what they disapprove. Another example is moral. Suppose someone long ago internalized that eating meat is wrong. The person has since surprisingly changed their mind, but a byproduct of that internalization is that they disapprove whenever they see someone eating meat. The person knows they should no longer feel this way. They disapprove of what they disapprove.

What remains to be seen is whether there are elements in ML that contradict elements in historical apophaticisms. I will consider two objections that it does.

In their brief discussion of metalinguistic negation as a concept which might be useful in understanding historical apophaticisms, Scott and Citron (2016) argue that the resulting apophaticism is too thin. Many early apophatic figures were not merely committed to descriptions of God being worthy of disapproval. They maintained more. For such figures, ML is inadequate as a model. However, this objection misses the mark. ML answers the EXPLICATION QUESTION. It does not answer the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. At worse, then, ML is incomplete as a model of historical apophaticisms. But it can always be supplemented with an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION to be a complete model. I shortly discuss how ML is compatible with various answers in §2.4. So ML carries no commitment that *contradicts* the commitment of a historical apophaticism. By only being an answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION, it might just lack a commitment that is key to modeling a particular apophaticism.

The next objection is more on-target. Scott and Citron (2016) argue that historical apophaticists would reject understanding their view with metalinguistic negation because they regarded God as being beyond negation. To motivate this claim, they provide two excerpts that I repeat below. The first is from Dionysius (1987, 141):

It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.

The second is from Palamas (1983, 57):

The excellence of Him Who surpasses all things is not only beyond all affirmation, but also beyond all negation; it exceeds all excellence that is attainable by the mind.

I submit that neither excerpt proves that ML contradicts their respective apophaticisms. In fact, a closer read shows its compatibility. Consider the line *we make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it*. As stated, ML is not about God. It is about utterances. It therefore does not assert or deny anything about God. Instead it ascends to state that every assertion or denial about God is eligible for disapproval via metalinguistic negation. In this way, it accommodates the Palamas line that God is *beyond all negation*. If we understand the negation in question to be truth-conditional, ML states that such negation is to be disapproved of. Or, if we understand such negation to be metalinguistic, ML states that such disapproval is to be disapproved of. Though there may be other passages from historical apophatic thinkers that are harder to square with ML, these two excerpts are easily accommodated by ML.

As the earlier quote from McDaniel (2015) noted, models may introduce ARTIFACTS, or elements that are not present in the historical theories or statements

being modeled. Metalinguistic negation is that artifact in the model I have proposed. Metalinguistic negation as a pragmatic ambiguity was first theorized by Horn (1985). Historical figures would not have understood themselves as deploying an operator on utterances.

But the natural language phenomenon Horn identified is by no means new or recent. It is a robust, cross-linguistic phenomenon that has been present for a long while (Martins 2020). A fitting historical illustration is that metalinguistic negation can be found in Scripture. Consider the emphasized portion of Mark 9:37 ESV: “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and *whoever receives me, receives not me* but him who sent me.” When the negation is interpreted descriptively, the passage expresses a contradiction. One receives and does not receive Jesus. But a better interpretation is produced if the negation is read metalinguistically. One use of metalinguistic negation is blocking scalar inferences.

(12) Dean didn’t choose *some* of the records to play—he chose *all* of them.

An illustration is provided by (12). Uttering the sentence *Dean chose some of the records to play* invites the inference that Dean did not choose all of the records to play. But the metalinguistic negation in (12) cancels this inference. The subsequent correction *he chose all of them* strengthens what is asserted. Following Craigmiles (2016, 264-270), the negation in Mark 9:37 should be understood similarly. It blocks the scalar inference that only Jesus will be received as opposed to both Jesus and whoever sent Jesus.

It is therefore plausible that historical apophaticists used negation metalinguistically, especially given that, as argued earlier, it is very difficult to express apophatic denial of a particular description without using metalinguistic negation. To claim as much is not to claim that they did so intentionally. They might not have been consciously aware that they were exploiting a pragmatic ambiguity in expressing their conviction.

One might be puzzled by the claim that a historical figure could have used negation metalinguistically without being aware of doing so. Another example helpfully illustrates.

(13) One shouldn’t make *resolutions*; one should have *goals*.

To explain the significance of this metalinguistic negation, Almotahari (2014, 499) is worth quoting in full:

I encountered [(13)] while watching CNN shortly after New Year’s Day. A commentator was invited to talk about lifestyle choices for the new year. She began by uttering [(13)]. She then tried to explain that the contrast is substantive. Her explanation failed. Insofar as there is a contrast, it’s a

contrast at the level of connotation. Perhaps ‘goal’ connotes something a little more flexible, something that needn’t constrain one’s behavior daily. It might be that ‘resolution’ lacks this connotation. The speaker simply wanted to emphasize that it’s ok to occasionally indulge one’s bad habit; it will improve one’s chances to actually stick with one’s new lifestyle choice in the long-run. . . . What’s interesting about the example is that the speaker took herself to be drawing a substantive distinction, not merely a terminological contrast. This suggests that ordinary speakers aren’t always sensitive to the difference between metalinguistic and descriptive negation. That’s not surprising, since it took some amount of theorizing to appreciate the difference. So competent language users might detect that it would be unacceptable to utter a particular sentence, choose to reject the sentence by exploiting metalinguistic negation, fail to recognize that the negated sentence is actually true, and thereby draw unwarranted conclusions.

Almotahari’s key insight is that speakers can use metalinguistic negation and fail to recognize they are doing so. With (13), the speaker was detecting something unacceptable with *resolutions* as the term for what people should make for the new year. This compelled her use of metalinguistic negation. Since the speaker then started reasoning as if her negation was descriptive as opposed to metalinguistic, it shows her lack of awareness.

Since it is plausible that historical apophaticists used negation metalinguistically, ML is an especially probative model. It coherently models an apophatic approach to divine ineffability without resorting to concepts or frameworks that would have been entirely foreign to historical figures. With respect to the project of philosophical modeling, ML is therefore preferable to other models that answer the EXPLICATION QUESTION.

2.4 Reasons for apophaticism

Many reasons have been given that motivate why natural language is inadequate for describing God. Here is a casual reconstruction of five that are loosely inspired by recent work (Keller 2018; Hewitt 2020; Fakhri forthcoming). I do not lay them at the feet of anyone, nor assess their merits. They are just illustrations of answers to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION.

ARGUMENT FROM SIMPLICITY

God is simple. Simple things don’t have properties. Descriptions like *God is omniscient* ascribe the property *being omniscient*. So descriptions in natural language are inadequate.

ARGUMENT FROM OTHERNESS

God is wholly other. So we are not acquainted with God. Description requires acquaintance with what is being described. So descriptions in natural language are inadequate.

ARGUMENT FROM INFINITUDE

God is infinite. Infinite things cannot be comprehend by a finite mind. What cannot be comprehended cannot be described. So descriptions in natural language are inadequate.

ARGUMENT FROM PERFECTION

God is perfect. Perfect things cannot be described with terms created for describing imperfect things. Terms in natural language were created for describing imperfect things. So descriptions in natural language are inadequate.

ARGUMENT FROM CONTAINMENT

God cannot be contained. So God is not in the extension of any predicate nor a constituent of any structured proposition. So descriptions in natural language are inadequate.

Perhaps when formally rendered, the differences between the arguments disappear and they merge into a smaller number. But, as is, they highlight reasons for accepting that language is inadequate.

I advertised at the outset that ML would be compatible with most, if not all, reasons for accepting divine ineffability. We can now see why. What ML requires is that the disapproval expressed by metalinguistic negation be sincere. One leading way that disapproval can be sincere is because it is based in one or more of these arguments. For example, one might disapprove of an utterance of *God is omniscient* because one is wary of describing God with the adjective *omniscient*. Perhaps the meaning of that adjective, as per the ARGUMENT FROM PERFECTION, is inadequate because it is an imperfect term. Or, perhaps one disapproves, as per the ARGUMENT FROM CONTAINMENT, of limiting God to what *omniscience* ascribes. Either way, these reasons as answers to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION can underwrite the disapproval required by ML. Accordingly, ML can be supplemented as an answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION with any of the reasons above to fully model a historical apophaticism. Together, they provide a philosophical of model what an apophatic conception of divine ineffability consists in, and why someone would accept such a conception.

In defending earlier that ML models historical apophaticisms, I considered the objection that it was too thin to provide a suitable philosophical model. My response was that ML answers only the EXPLICATION QUESTION. To model the full commitments of a particular figure, ML would need to be supplemented with a particular answer to ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. The arguments above illustrate such answers. However, one may want to press the objection again by reasoning as follows.⁴ Even with one of the arguments, ML remains too thin. The reason why

⁴ I am indebted to a referee for pressing this objection.

is that the arguments support a stronger conclusion than the conclusion that descriptions about God meriting disapproval. For example, one understanding of the ARGUMENT FROM INFINITUDE supports the conclusion that describing God is not intelligible. So ML fails to model apophaticisms committed to stronger conclusions about language's inadequacy.

My response remains the same. ML answers the EXPLICATION QUESTION. Its aim is to provide a model for what apophaticism is that does not have the STATIBILITY and UNIQUENESS PROBLEM. This explicative aim is prior to and independent of any reasons for accepting apophaticism. Any stronger conclusions about language's inadequacy are modeled by answers to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. As just discussed, the arguments sketched are fully compatible with ML. They are what makes the disapproval sincere.

A notable consequence of distinguishing the EXPLICATION QUESTION and ACCEPTANCE QUESTION cleanly is that variants of the STATIBILITY and UNIQUENESS PROBLEMS may surface for the latter question even if solved for the former. In other words, the *reasons* for accepting apophaticism may still be self-undermining or erase the difference between theists and non-theists. As a philosophical model, ML does not therefore show that the reasons or arguments for historical apophaticisms are coherent. It shows that apophaticism generally as a particular explication of divine ineffability is coherent.

What about us contemporaries? The substantivity of ML as an explication of apophaticism depends on the explanation why the disapproval expressed by metalinguistic negation is sincere. Pairing ML with any of the above gives us a substantive theory. The reason explains the disapproval, and accepting that reason will yield implications that ML lacks on its own. Importantly, though, ML does not require or presuppose an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. Disapproval can be sincere without having to endorse an argument like the above to explain that disapproval. In other words, we can adopt ML while letting the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION go unanswered.

To illustrate sincere disapproval without a reason that constitutes an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION, we should turn to other topics that are hard to describe. I will focus on art objects and emotion. For both subject matters, we often experience what I will call DESCRIPTIVE RELUCTANCE. Here is an aesthetic example of such reluctance. Suppose a person visited the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art and viewed Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931). Then suppose they were describing the artwork to a friend. There is much they could say about the surrealist painting with its melting clocks and dripping watches. But either at the end of the description, or mid-way through describing, it would be natural to use metalinguistic negation to deny what was said. For example, they might describe it as being like a hallucination and follow that with *And yet, it is not like a hallucination*. They may even follow every description with a metalinguistic

negation of that description.

Here now is an emotional example of descriptive reluctance. Suppose someone is processing with a therapist their complicated divorce. It has taken months of sessions just to lay the foundation for talking about how they are currently feeling. There is much they could say about what transpired between them and their ex-spouse. But either at the end of the description, or mid-way through describing, it would be natural to use metalinguistic negation to deny what they said. For example, they might describe themselves as feeling relieved and follow that with *And yet, it is not that I am relieved*. One may even follow every description with a metalinguistic negation.

I think both examples of descriptive reluctance are cogent and ordinary. Two further observations are worthwhile. First, the metalinguistic denials in these examples are not retractions. The speaker is not taking back the description of the Dalí painting as being like a hallucination. They are merely disapproving of that description to express reluctance. What they want to communicate to their addressee is that the painting was like a hallucination and that they are uncomfortable with that very description. Likewise, the speaker denying their self-ascription of feeling relief is not retracting that ascription. What they want their therapist to know is that they feel relief and yet are uneasy about saying as much. Second, the metalinguistic denials in these examples are not hedges. Following Benton and van Elswyk (2020), hedges are expressions like the parenthetical verb *I think* that can be used to weaken the epistemic position a speaker represents themselves as occupying. In contrast to *It is raining*, the sentence *It is raining, I think* represents the speaker as thinking as opposed to knowing that it is raining. The denials in our examples do not weaken the epistemic position of the speaker. Though the person describing the painting or their feelings about the divorce are qualifying their descriptions by further conveying disapproval, they are not hedging.

Descriptive reluctance is thus a distinct state of mind. It explains why metalinguistic negation is sincere in the examples. It can also explain why metalinguistic negations concerning God can be sincere. One may think that every description of God is eligible for disapproval because one is experiencing reluctance. What explains and underwrites the disapproval is not that one is signed up for one of our five arguments for divine ineffability. One may even believe that there is no answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION because there are no good reasons for divine ineffability. It is just that, when it comes to describing God, one encounters unease or discomfort. Metalinguistic negation is how that reluctance is expressed as disapproval.

Another basis for sincere disapproval that is not an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION is wonder. Here I follow Yadav (2016). Yadav argues that apophaticism is a type of mystical theology. Accordingly, an explication of apophaticism

must account for how apophaticism plays a regulative role in the life of the apophaticist. In part, an explication needs to specify what attitude an apophatic theist takes. His proposal is that the attitude of wonder can play this regulative role. To wonder at something is to possess the enduring feeling that one lacks the ability to understand that thing. In this manner, wonder contrasts with curiosity. Curiosity is an attitude directed at a question that involves a desire to know the answer to that question (Whitcomb 2010). Once an answer is known, curiosity disappears because the desire is satisfied. Wonder persists as one continues to be amazed or astonished by the thing.

Like descriptive reluctance, wonder directed at what is being described can make the disapproval expressed by metalinguistic negation sincere. What underwrites the disapproval is not that one accepts one of the arguments for divine ineffability. It is just that, when it comes to describing God, one experiences an awe or felt inability to understand God. Metalinguistic negation is one way of voicing this wonder. It enables one to affirm statements like *God is triune* while disapproving of that description as a way of sincerely conveying that one is in a state of wonder at God.

The apophaticism that results from pairing ML without an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION but with descriptive reluctance or wonder is very minimal. It is committed to every description of God meriting disapproval. But what justifies that disapproval are facts about the speaker's psychology as opposed to facts about God. Nothing more. Let us call this APO-MINIMALISM. Apo-minimalism is clearly not what many historical apophatic figures endorsed. As discussed, they are committed to some argument for divine ineffability like one of the five I sketched. However, apo-minimalism does strike me as a view that most contemporaries can accept. It requires metalinguistic negation, a well-attested pragmatic phenomenon in natural language that one should already acknowledge, and experiencing descriptive reluctance or wonder when it comes to God.

3 Alternative explications

I have advanced ML as both a model of historical apophatic views of divine ineffability and to motivate apo-minimalism, an apophaticism where disapproval is based in a speaker's attitudes. This section compares ML to other recent explications of divine ineffability.

My discussion is not exhaustive. First, I do not discuss general theories of religious language. For instance, theories that treat statements about God as metaphorical or analogical are overlooked. Since analogies and metaphors are still used to express propositions, I do not regard these theories as explicating how language is inadequate as opposed to defending that language is different

when used to describe God. Note that such views of religious language are argued to still fail to solve the STATIBILITY and UNIQUENESS PROBLEMS (Howard-Snyder 2017). Second, I do not discuss theories that are broadly incompatible with model-theoretic semantics in the generative grammar tradition.⁵ Though I lack space to defend as much, I regard such compatibility as a necessary condition on plausible explications. In what follows, I focus on four recent accounts of divine ineffability owed to Jacobs (2015), Keller (2018), Lebens (2014, 2017), and Pruss (forthcoming).

3.1 Ineffability and fundamentality

Jacobs (2015) takes an approach to ineffability that distinguishes between two ways a proposition can be true. A proposition can be TRUE or FUNDAMENTALLY TRUE. Where $\mathcal{F}(\cdot)$ is an operator that applies to a proposition when it is fundamentally true and \mathcal{P} is the set of all propositions describing God intrinsically, we can state his view thusly.

FUNDAMENTAL INEFFABILITY (FI)

For all propositions $p \in \mathcal{P}$, $\text{not}(\mathcal{F}(p))$ and $\text{not}(\mathcal{F}(\text{not-}p))$.

Note that FI has the consequence that there are no propositions about God whatsoever that are fundamentally true. If there are any true propositions about God, they are non-fundamentally true.

Jacobs's theory solves both problems afflicting answers to the EXPLICATION QUESTION. Start with the STATIBILITY PROBLEM. FI is about whether certain propositions are fundamentally true or not. As such, it cannot undermine itself because it does not apply to itself. Next consider the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM. The propositions contained in the Creeds and Councils are true. They just are not fundamentally true. What grounds the truth of these propositions is God, full stop. So these truths are not made true by nor do they supervene on a base of additional fundamental truths about God.

The differences I want to highlight between ML and FI are their metaphysical commitments. By itself, ML has none. Commitments can be incurred depending on what answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION one adopts. But ML does not require any as an *explication* of divine ineffability. In contrast, FI does. It requires a fundamentality-theoretic approach to metaphysics, and a particular application of that approach that some find objectionable because of how it leaves certain truths about God ungrounded (Lebens 2014; Fakhri forthcoming). For this

⁵ For this reason, I do not engage with Hewitt (2020). Hewitt expresses sympathy for inferentialism as an alternative approach to syntax and semantics. But inferentialism is well-known to have serious failures like the inability to explain compositionality. See Fodor and Lepore (2001, 2007).

reason, ML is preferable as an explication. It can explain what divine ineffability consists in without taking on controversial commitments. As a result, ML cleanly distinguishes the question of whether divine ineffability is an intelligible doctrine from the further question of whether one should accept or endorse divine ineffability.

3.2 Ineffability and semantic incompleteness

Keller (2018) offers an explication of divine ineffability that turns on subtle issues at the interface between semantics and pragmatics. She starts with RADICAL MINIMALISM, a controversial view about meaning owed to Bach (2006). Radical minimalism holds that some declarative sentences fail to have propositions as meanings because they contain a semantically incomplete term. Putative examples include *ready*.

(14) Pim is ready.

Assessed in isolation, (14) is difficult to interpret. *Ready for what?* is the natural follow-up. Adding context eases interpretation. When (14) is an answer to the question *Is Pim ready for dinner?*, a proposition is communicated. However, incomplete terms are not context-sensitive. Even relative to a context, declaratives like (14) are incomplete. What the addition of context facilitates is world knowledge that conversational participants can draw on to construct a proposition. To get to a proposition from a sentence like (14) therefore requires a post-semantic pragmatic process.

Call this ENRICHMENT. For Keller, a necessary condition for enrichment is that the speaker uttering an incomplete sentence intends to convey a proposition expressed by a complete counterpart of that sentence. So an utterance of *Pim is ready* is enriched into a proposition only when the speaker intends to convey the content of a counterpart like *Pim is ready for dinner*. Without such an intention, some declaratives remain incomplete.

With these two assumptions in place, we can appreciate what Keller calls the FRANCISCAN-THOMIST VIEW (FT). It maintains that sentences ascribing positive, intrinsic properties to God do not express propositions. To the extent that any sentences about God express propositions, they ascribe extrinsic and/or negative properties. To elaborate, consider a sentence ascribing a positive, intrinsic property to God.

(15) God is good.

This sentence contains the gradable adjective *good*. For Keller, such adjectives are incomplete. As a result, (15) fails to have a proposition for a meaning as

per radical minimalism. More than that, speakers uttering (15) cannot intend to express the proposition of a counterpart sentence because there is no counterpart sentence about God that speakers can grasp.⁶ So a sentence like (15) cannot be enriched into a proposition either. For contrast, compare example (15) with (16) below.

(16) God is maximally/perfectly good.

Keller holds that such a sentence does express a proposition. But she adds two qualifiers. The first is that sentences like (16) ascribe a negative property. To be maximally or perfectly good is to deny or negate that God is limited in goodness. The second qualifier is that, to the extent that we can grasp the proposition expressed, we understand it dimly because of non-propositional, personal knowledge we have of God.

Keller's view solves the STATIBILITY PROBLEM straightforwardly. Insofar as sentences used to state FT involve incomplete terms, we can enrich those sentences to express propositions. The failure to enrich only happens with sentences about God because speakers cannot form intentions about what they cannot grasp. FT solves the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM by allowing propositions to still be expressed about God. What differentiates the theist from the non-theist is that the theist believes propositions that ascribe extrinsic and/or negative properties God that the non-theist does not.

However, FT is not without problems given the assumptions about semantics and pragmatics that Keller adopts. I am not a radical minimalist. Indeed, few are. But FT requires it. To illustrate, consider a minimalism that is not radical (Borg 2004; Cappelen and Lepore 2005; Schoubye and Stokke 2016). On this alternative, sentences with incomplete terms like *ready* express a minimal proposition. But then ineffability cannot result. Sentences ascribing positive, intrinsic properties like (15) would express minimal propositions. Even if those propositions are never enriched into perhaps more determinate propositions, sentences about God would still have propositions as meanings. Or, consider a contextualism where alleged incomplete terms are context-sensitive. That is, the terms contribute a variable to the logical form of the sentences in which they appear that needs to be saturated in a context before the sentence has a proposition for a meaning (Stanley 2000; King and Stanley 2005). Then there is a further question about how that variable gets saturated. But an increasingly popular view is that, even if the saturation process is itself incomplete, sentences hosting context-sensitive terms express a range of propositions (von Fintel

⁶ Note here that Keller adopts something akin to what I called the ARGUMENT FROM INFINITUDE in §2.4. Accordingly, her answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION requires a particular answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION.

and Gillies 2009; King 2017). The idea is that each proposition in the range corresponds to a particular resolution of the variable. With cloudy contextualism, ineffability cannot result. Instead of one proposition about God being expressed by a sentence like (15), a cloud of them are for each resolution of the context-sensitivity of *good*.

Turn next to Keller's discussion of gradable adjectives like *good*. She takes sentences like (16) to express negative properties as opposed to positive properties. Since the only difference between (16) and (15) is the addition of an adverb like *maximally* or *perfectly*, Keller is committed to a semantics for these adverbs on which they convert positive properties into negative ones. This commitment is a highly controversial one.

To illustrate, let us consider the leading semantics for gradable adjectives. It is a degree semantics on which adjectives denote relations between individuals and degrees (Cresswell 1977; von Stechow 1984; Heim 2000; Kennedy 2007). On this semantics, *Nick is tall* states that the degree of Nick's height is above a certain standard along a scale that orders comparable objects. The comparison class is context-sensitive. *Nick is tall* may be true when the comparison class is professors at state universities but false when the comparison class is professional basketball players who play the center position.

One important way in which gradable adjectives differ is with respect to the structure of the scale. Scales are either OPEN or CLOSED. Open scales have no maximal or minimal element. For each object along the scale, there is a higher and lower object. In contrast, closed scales have a maximum or minimum. Compare *full* with *tall*.

(17) The glass is full.

(18) The glass is tall.

A closed scale is evoked by *full* whereas an open scale is evoked by *tall*. For *full*, there is a maximal degree of fullness, a degree at which the glass cannot be more full. Not so for *tall*. There is not a degree of height at which the glass cannot be taller. Gradable adjectives with open scales are RELATIVE ADJECTIVES (RAs) whereas gradable adjectives with closed scales are ABSOLUTE ADJECTIVES (AAs). Since they differ in the associated scale structure, RAs and AAs also differ in how the standard is determined. The scale is context-sensitive for RAs but not for AAs. The standard for *tall* regularly shifts in a context with comparison classes while the standard for *full* does not.

Within a degree semantics for gradable adjectives, many adverbs receive a semantics as DEGREE MODIFIERS. They specify where along the scale evoked by an adjective an object falls. *Nick is almost tall*, for example, indicates that the degree of Nick's height falls on the scale below the standard for tallness

given the comparison class. Some degree modifiers are what Kennedy and McNally (2005) call MAXIMALITY MODIFIERS. They compose exclusively with AAs to indicate that an object has the property denoted to a maximal degree. Examples include *totally*, *maximally*, and *perfectly*.

Let's circle back to (15) and (16). *Good* is an AA with a closed scale. *God is good* therefore states that the degree of God's goodness is at or above the standard for goodness. The addition of *maximally* or *perfectly* in (16) does not change anything about the property ascribed. It clarifies that the degree of goodness is at the top of the scale. Accordingly, the degree semantics is at odds with Keller's claim that *is good* ascribes a positive property but *is perfectly good* somehow ascribes a negative property. The modifier does not change the underlying property ascribed nor involve negation or denial in its meaning.⁷ Since a degree semantics is the leading semantics, accepting FT requires us to abandon the leading semantics. In the absence of an alternative semantics that is equally explanatory and which explains how modifiers convert a property from positive to negative as the outcome of semantic composition, FT is a very costly explication of ineffability to adopt.

So far, the problems pressed have concerned FT's consequences for how we theorize about natural language. But there are more theory-neutral concerns too. FT is at odds with linguistic judgment to maintain that (15) does not express a proposition. Consider entailment data. It appears that *God is good* entails *Someone is good*. But Keller cannot accommodate this intuition. Since the former sentence fails to express a propositional content and content is what enters into entailment relations, the former cannot be understood as entailing anything. The intuition must be denied. Or, consider data involving propositional anaphora. Sentences that express propositions license the use of dedicated expressions in subsequent sentences that refer to those propositions (van Elswyk 2019). For example, consider the reply in (19B).

- (19) (A) Pim is ready for dinner.
(B) I think so too.

It features the anaphor *so*. This expression refers to the proposition that Pim is ready for dinner that is expressed by (19B). As a result, what (19B) states is that

⁷ Notice that the modifier will not convert a positive property to a negative one even with a different semantics. For example, one might deny that *good* is an AA. Then there's a question about what modifiers like *perfectly* could mean. The natural answer suggested in Kennedy and McNally (2005, 354) is that they are akin to other modifiers like *very*. This semantics would not place God at the top of the scale with *God is perfectly good* because there is no top. But it would still place God high along a scale. Similarly, one might pursue a mereological interpretation of *perfectly* on which it ascribes a property to all the parts of the grammatical subject (Burnett 2014). Applied to *God is perfectly good*, it would state that all parts of God possess goodness to the degree that is at or above the standard. But this again would still place God along a scale just in multiple ways.

the speaker thinks that Pim is ready for dinner. Statements describing God also license anaphors.

- (20) (A) God is good.
(B) I think so too.

Like (19B), it appears that the *so* in (20B) refers to the proposition expressed by the prior sentence. What (20B) states is that the speaker thinks that God is good. Again, Keller cannot accommodate this intuition. Her proposal predicts that (20B) also fails to express a proposition because *so* fails to refer. Notice that the need to deny these and related linguistic intuitions are not problems with merely radical minimalism. Bach can respond that *God is good* is enriched into a proposition that entails or which provides the antecedent for downstream anaphors, but Keller with FT cannot.

I conclude that the costs of FT are not worth paying. In comparison, adopting ML as an answer to the EXPLICATION QUESTION does not require any stance on the boundary between semantics and pragmatics, the compositional semantics of gradable adjectives, or when declaratives enter into entailment or license anaphors.

3.3 Ineffability and illuminating falsehoods

The next theory I discuss is owed to Lebens (2014, 2017). Leben's proposal is that all statements of divine ineffability are false. To state that God is ineffable or transcendent or not omniscient is to state a falsehood. And yet, they are ILLUMINATING FALSEHOODS. No definition or criterion is given of this category. But Lebens motivates the category with examples. The basic idea is that to entertain a statement of ineffability is to do something more than represent the world as being a certain way. It is to highlight something about God, the world, and one's place in the world in a way that is beneficial.

One benefit noted by Lebens is epistemic. Entertaining a false yet illuminating statement like *God is ineffable* need not compel one to believe as much because doing so would quickly be self-refuting. Nevertheless, entertaining it may compel one to lower one's credence in the proposition expressed by statements like *God is just* out of discomfort or unease that the predicate involved applies to God. Or perhaps entertaining such a statement does not direct one's credences downward but it does prompt one to be reminded to talk or theorize about God with increased epistemic humility.

Leben's view effortlessly answers the EXPLICATION QUESTION. It explicates ineffability in a manner that is not self-refuting because statements of ineffability are not taken as true. They are explicitly identified as false. So the STATIBILITY

PROBLEM is solved immediately. Likewise, his view imperils the truth or intelligibility of zero propositions about God. The UNIQUENESS PROBLEM is therefore solved because there is an abundance of propositions that theists can believe to distinguish themselves from non-theists.

His view and the one I have developed are also importantly similar. I argued that ML could be coupled with what I called apo-minimalism. Apo-minimalism differs from more robust versions of metalinguistic apophaticism by not offering an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION to explain disapproval. What makes the disapproval expressed sincere or proper is just descriptive reluctance. The benefits of expressing merely disapproval are presumably the same as entertaining an illuminating falsehood. For example, one might maintain that every utterance about God is eligible for disapproval in order to remind oneself to speak about God with humility.

Still, I think there are two reasons for preferring ML. First, it succeeds better as a philosophical model of historical apophaticisms broadly construed. Consider the earlier excerpts from Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Palamas on which God is described as *beyond assertion and denial* and *beyond all negation*. Lebens treats apophatic statements like *God is not omniscient* as truth-evaluable. That is how they can be false. But this does not move beyond assertion or denial like ML does by evaluating statements only according to whether they are worthy or not of approval. One way to see as much is to reconsider the three-staged apophatic ascent. Lebens's view cannot accommodate the third stage. For example, to deny that *God is not omniscient* is so state something true because the statement of ineffability at the second stage is false. But to state something true is to crash back down to the first stage where one makes catophatic statements. ML stays at the third stage of ascent by treating the relevant instance of negation as metalinguistic as opposed to descriptive.

The second reason for preferring ML is that it is a more flexible explication of divine ineffability. Though ML enables apo-minimalism which is akin to Lebens's view as a minimal approach to divine ineffability, ML does not mandate deflation. It is compatible with most, if not all, answers to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION. Once paired with one of these answers—like the arguments in §2.4—ML becomes a more substantive theory of ineffability. Lebens's view does have this same flexibility. It is committed to the falsity of all statements expressing divine ineffability.

3.4 Ineffability and misleading

Linguistic deception comes in two forms: lying and misleading. Both involve the communication of a proposition that is false or at least not believed by the speaker. The exact boundary between them is a point of controversy (Saul 2012;

Stokke 2016; van Elswyk 2020). But generally the lying/misleading distinction tracks whether the disbelieved proposition is what the speaker said with a sentence, or another proposition communicated by the sentence's utterance. A classic example is a scalar implicature. Some words order on scales. When they do, the use of a word that is lower on the relevant scale typically implicates that a sentence featuring stronger words on the scale are false. An example is provided by (21).

(21) Dean chose some of the records to play.

Since *all* > *some*, (21) carries the scalar implicature that Dean did not choose all of the records to play. To turn this into example of misleading, imagine that Dean did choose all of the records to play and the speaker uttering (21) knows as much. Then what is said by (21) is not a lie; it is a truth known by the speaker. But the associated scalar implicature is false and known to be false by the speaker. As a result, they mislead by uttering (21).

Pruss (forthcoming) proposes that all descriptions about God are misleading. This proposal solves both the STATIBILITY PROBLEM and the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM. It solves the former in at least two ways. First, it is defined over utterances of descriptions about God as opposed to being a description of God. So it does not apply to itself. Second, even if it did apply to itself, its truth would not be threatened. Statements expressing truths can mislead. His proposal solves the UNIQUENESS PROBLEM in a similar manner. One can affirm whatever propositions about God that one likes. The qualification that one's affirming utterances are misleading just needs to be added.

Pruss's proposal is akin my own in that it is pragmatic. It does not tinker with the semantic content of terms used to describe God. Such tinkering quickly leads to problems, as I argued when discussing FT. Our views are also very complementary. One might appeal to the generalization that all uttered descriptions about God are misleading to explain why all such utterances merit the disapproval expressible with metalinguistic negation. The result of combining our views would plausibly constitute another form of apo-minimalism because one would not need to embrace a substantive answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION like the answers sketched in §2.4.

Nevertheless, I am skeptical that all uttered descriptions about God are misleading. Since an utterance is misleading only if it communicates a false or disbelieved proposition, Pruss's proposal is committed to all utterances about God communicating a secondary proposition that is false or disbelieved. But it is not clear that they do. Reconsider scalar implicatures as a kind of secondary proposition. Whether an utterance carries a scalar implicature is a very contingent matter. It depends on whether scalar terms appear in

the sentence uttered, and the structure of the broader discourse in which the sentence appears (van Kuppevelt 1996; Asher 2013). On the traditional explanation owed to Grice (1989), the implicature also has to be calculated, or worked out by the hearer. Other secondary propositions that are communicated in a non-semantic manner are similar. So contingent features about every utterance describing God would need to align just right for them to be misleading utterances.⁸

4 Conclusion

This paper defended metalinguistic apophaticism or ML as an explication of divine ineffability. What ML offers is a way of modeling historical apophaticisms within the Christian tradition that shows their coherence. Of special note is that ML is compatible with a range of different arguments that conclude God is ineffable. Indeed, it is also compatible with the denial of these arguments. The minimal view that results is apo-minimalism, a view that is of broader interest than just philosophical modeling. Yadav (2016, 17) notes that apophaticism “tends to make theologians and philosophers of religion with analytic sensibilities queasy.” Apo-minimalism need not have the same effect. In concluding, I want to highlight a feature of apo-minimalism.

A separate conviction from divine ineffability is that describing God with natural language is somehow different. When we predicate goodness with *God is good* that statement perhaps involves metaphor or pretense or the predicating is analogical as opposed to ordinary. This conviction constitutes the denial of what Scott (2017) calls the FACE-VALUE THEORY. The face-value theory holds that language used to describe God can be understood the same as language used to describe other persons and objects. Importantly, the theory is not committed to all descriptions about God being literal. Metaphor, pretense, and analogy are used to describe God because they are part of everyday language use too. The core of the theory is that a distinctive semantic and pragmatics are not required to understand talk about God.

Most denials of the face-value theory treat denial as a cost of possessing either the conviction that God is different or that God is beyond language. But ML

⁸ Pruss provides a number of examples where what is said by a sentence prompts a hearer to draw an extra conclusion. *God is a Trinity of persons* illustrates. He describes it as being apt to mislead hearers into falsely believing that God is not one. But the proposition that God is not one fails to qualify as a secondary proposition communicated by an utterance. This false proposition is one the hearer arrives at independently after adding what was said by an utterance to their existing beliefs. Accordingly, such examples do not involve misleading utterances. They are examples of mistaken inference. Since any utterance whatsoever has the power to prompt a mistaken inference, appealing to such a general effect is not enough to distinctively answer the

EXPLICATION QUESTION.

shows that divine ineffability is compatible with the face-value theory. When ineffability consists in the eligibility of all utterances about God for metalinguistic disapproval, one can still proceed to analyze those utterances at face-value. To do so, one needs to refrain from endorsing an answer to the ACCEPTANCE QUESTION that is itself incompatible with the face-value theory. That can be done by endorsing apo-minimalism. What is facilitated by apo-minimalism is therefore a way to reconcile two claims: that God is ineffable and that describing God is done ordinarily.⁹

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