SAYING THE UNSAYABLE

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Prologue

The notion of ineffability recently became the focus of attention in philosophy of religion, mainly owing to John Hick's use of the notion for his pluralistic hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, the great world religions represent different authentic responses to an ultimate reality termed "the Real *an sich,*" yet the Real *an sich* exceeds all positive substantial characterizations in human thought and language and is not known as it is by any of the religious traditions, the divine objects of which are but its various empirical or phenomenal manifestations.[1] So, for Hick the postulated Real is ineffable or transcategorial, and we can only make purely formal statements about it. Scholars like William P. Alston, William L. Rowe, and Christopher J. Insole have challenged this latter view.[2]

Not unlike Hick, a number of traditional philosophers and religious thinkers in both the East and the West claimed that the ultimate reality or the mystical experience intuiting reality is ineffable,[3] well beyond the reach of human concepts and words. For the sake of brevity, I shall refer to them as *ineffabilists.* Most of the ineffabilists, like many contemporary philosophers of language, held that thought and (public) language are deeply interrelated such that whatever is thinkable is sayable, and vice versa. Yet, they voiced the limitations of language and advocated roughly the following Ineffability Thesis: that there is a transcendental reality or experience[4] of some kind that cannot be expressed as it truly is by human concepts and words.[5] But can we *speak* meaningfully of something by saying that it is *unspeakable*? Does not such a speech make the thing actually *speakable*? Though probably aware of the predicament involved in speaking of something as unspeakable, most ineffabilists have chosen to remain silent on this issue. However, the predicament has been exposed, with the thesis or the like consequently dismissed, by a number of eminent modern thinkers.

In this essay, I propose to show the consistency or noncontradiction of the ineffability thesis. I shall first introduce certain criticisms set forth by some critics of the thesis and examine the solution Hick offers to overcome the problems concerned. Then, I refer to a passage in Bhartṛhari's magnum opus, the *Vākyapadīya,* to see how this fifth-century Indian grammarian-philosopher tackled the main problem here. Bhartṛhari's strategy will afterward be enlarged and supplemented to deal with the criticisms and related issues.

The Criticisms

Can we say meaningfully of something that it is unsayable? By using the word "unsayable" for the unsayable thing we, it seems, inevitably make it sayable. Thus,

we run into an apparent self-contradiction. The medieval Christian philosopher St. Augustine knew this predicament well:

> … 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.[6]

On the other hand, Alvin Plantinga has criticized the claim that our concepts do not apply to God.[7] In his view, by making such a claim one must suppose that some of us grasp what it is for a thing to be such that our concepts do not apply to it, and so we have the concept *being such that none of our concepts applies to it.* Now, if the claim above is true, this concept applies to God, and then at least one of our concepts applies to God, in which case the claim is false. The claim, as a result, is absurdly both true and false. So, for Plantinga the "view that our concepts don't apply to God is fatally ensnared in self-referential absurdity" (p. 26). Needless to say, an assertion like "X is unspeakable" faces the same predicament: if the assertion is true, then it must at the same time be false, given that X is speakable by the predicate word "unspeakable." The Buddha, as a Chinese proverb goes, said "[It is] unspeakable, unspeakable," but the problem here is that even the word "unspeakable" is unspeakable!

Now, let's consider the subject in a sentence expressing ineffability. If one says "the Real is ineffable," one has already spoken the Real by the subject word "Real." Does it still make sense to refer to it as ineffable? The Indian Buddhist epistemologist Dignāga averred that a genuine perception is nonconceptual, that its object as a particular is ineffable.[8] Attributing to Dignāga the view that a genuine perception is ineffable, too, the Nyāya philosopher Uddyotakara set forth severe criticisms against the Buddhist, one of which may be phrased as follows:

> 1. If the term "perception" refers to the perception, then the latter is clearly sayable rather than unsayable. That would be a contradiction.

> 2. But if the term does not refer to the perception, then it is just a meaningless sound and the perception would be like a dumb person's dream.[9]

Likewise, by uttering the sentence "the Real is ineffable" either one contradicts oneself by using the word "Real" for the ineffable or the word is just meaningless.

In addition, Keith E. Yandell has voiced a criticism similar to, but deeper than, (1) above with respect to allegedly ineffable experiences.[10] He further contends that from the view that a given experience is ineffable it would follow that any description is equidistant from the experience with any other. This is because according to this view all descriptions will seem to be equally inappropriate or appropriate with respect to the ineffable experience. Consequently, the same experience would absurdly be as describable (or indescribable) by, say, "eating a hamburger" as by "attaining divinity."[11] These criticisms also apply to the cases of using phrases like "absolute nothingness" and "that which transcends human experience" for the inef-

fable concerned. These phrases, it may be noted, seem to convey substantial information about what their referents are in themselves.

An ineffabilist may claim that he or she uses the term in question, for example "God," "Brahman," or "Dao," simply as a proper name; since few would take such a name to have any conceptual meaning or content, its use in no way annuls the ineffability thesis. Against such a claim, let us turn to Alston's paper "Ineffability."[12] There Alston holds that though the word "God" in the statement "God is ineffable" may be regarded as a proper name not standing for any concept, we would not count anyone as understanding the statement if he or she is unable to use some identifying phrase, for example "the first cause," "He Who revealed Himself to the prophets" or "the father of Jesus Christ," to explain the word. Yet, any such phrase would constitute a characterization of God and so make God factually speakable.[13] The use or understanding of a proper name thus presupposes a certain expressible knowledge of the object named, but this inevitably implies the expression of the so-called ineffable.

Hick's Solution

We have seen that the ineffability thesis faces a number of difficulties. But why did so many thinkers in the past advocate the thesis? Did they actually indulge in rhetorical exaggeration? Or were they misguided by such ordinary usages as "Alan is unspeakable"? The fact is that many hearers and readers could follow this use of ineffability, and it seems groundless to say that the thinkers just lacked philosophical acumen. If so, we may instead look for a solution for resolving the difficulties.

As Hick himself subscribes to a form of the ineffability thesis, he has proposed a way of responding to some criticisms leveled against the thesis. Hick distinguishes between substantial properties such as "being good" and "having knowledge" and purely formal properties such as "being ineffable" and "being such that our substantial concepts do not apply." For him, what the ineffabilists wanted to affirm was that our positive substantial characterizations do not apply to the Ultimate in its true nature—but *not* that we cannot ascribe formal properties to the latter.[14] He then applies this solution to his postulation of the Real in itself and claims that though the Real cannot be said to be person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, and so forth, we can make purely formal statements about it, with only formal properties being ascribed to it.[15]

Dubious about this formal/substantial distinction, Insole argues that Hick in fact takes his postulated Real to have the presumably substantial properties of being "authentically manifested within human experience," of being "the noumenal ground of" experiences of the *brahman* and Christ, and so forth, and so "Hick sets up a distinction (formal/substantial), with a prohibition against speaking substantially about God, which he is unable to obey himself."[16] Hick's strategy against such an objection is to insist that properties such as those mentioned above are not really attributes of the Real but are attributes of our human nature. He asks, "Is it an attribute of objects that they appear coloured to some, but not to the colour-blind, or is it not rather an attribute of the different perceivers?"[17] As there could be the same objects

but no perceivers, for Hick the attribute concerned must inhere in the perceivers. By the same token, it is an attribute of different finite perceivers that the Real is capable of being experienced as benign by humans, as malign by others, and so forth. The aforesaid properties are, we may say, *relational* properties, representing how we humans relate ourselves to the transcendental Real. But one wonders why they inhere *solely* in human beings and not also somehow in the Real. Here Alston's criticism is noteworthy: "Hick never tells us what it takes for a phenomenal manifestation of the Real to be an *authentic* manifestation. Indeed he could do so only on the basis of some characterization of the Real, which his position proscribes."[18] Perhaps Hick would be led to hold that an authentic manifestation, the god or absolute, is one that can mediate the salvific function of the Real by promoting salvific transformation in its believers,[19] but insist that "having a salvific function in relation to human (and possibly some non-human) beings" is not an intrinsic attribute of the Real. This is a hard issue. Is it an intrinsic attribute of wine that it functions to intoxicate us, or is it rather an attribute of us drinkers that we once in a while get drunk? Anyhow, I shall refrain from delving into the issue.

Whereas Hick's solution may be tenable regarding his pluralistic hypothesis, it, contrary to his passing remark, does not explain much of the traditional thinkers' intention in presenting the ineffability thesis. Unlike Hick, most ineffabilists did not avoid using expressions like "consciousness," "supreme good," and "one and simple" to refer to their Ultimate, though they might offer the caveat, say, that the simplicity of the Ultimate is not what we normally understand by "one and simple." The ineffabilists, indeed, often favored the use of negative expressions for the Ultimate, and this has prompted Hick to ascribe to them his formal/substantial distinction.[20] However, they sometimes spoke affirmatively about that which they viewed as ineffable. Even the figurative expressions used by them, such as "God is a consuming fire" and "My heart-and-mind is like the autumn moon," often seem to convey significant information about what their ineffable is. Thus, they generally did not attend to Hick's distinction and did occasionally speak substantially about the ineffable. To safeguard the thesis against the charge of self-contradiction, then, we need to find another way out. For our purpose, I shall discuss and expand on Bhartṛhari's solution without claiming our approach to be acceptable to all the ineffabilists.

Bhartṛhari's Solution

Bhartṛhari was a fifth-century philosopher of the Hindu Grammarian (Vaiyākaraṇika) school. Though a grammarian, he "trespassed" into the area of philosophy and became the central figure of the school's philosophical development. Now, in the third chapter of the third volume of his *Vākyapadīya,* Bhartṛhari claims that the word-object or signifier-signified relation is ineffable. But can we say meaningfully of the relation that it is ineffable? Bhartṛhari expresses the predicament of the notion of ineffability in this passage:

> If one holds that what is to be said by the word "unsayable" can be *said* to be unsayable, then it would become sayable. (3.3.20)

> But if one admits that it cannot be said this way by the word "unsayable," then that state (i.e. its unsayability) which one intends (to convey) is not understood. (3.3.21)[21]

One intends to convey the unsayability of the unsayable thing. But if the thing cannot be expressed by "unsayable," its unsayability would not be understood and the hearer would not know the thing to be unsayable.
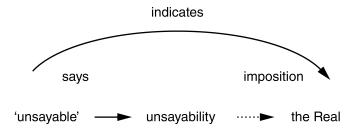
Now, Bhartṛhari's solution:

> If a thing is said to be unsayable, someway or another or in all ways, by some words, then its state of being unsayable (i.e. its unsayability) is *not* denied by those words. (3.3.22)

> Indeed, a doubt with regard to a given object does not function toward the dubiousness attached (to that object) without giving up its own nature. (3.3.23)[22]

Let us expound 3.3.23 first. Suppose I suspect that Alan stole my money; then, to me, Alan is dubious, that is, he bears dubiousness. Unlike such attributes as cunning and muscularity, dubiousness, let's assume, does not inhere in Alan but is only imposed upon him by me. Now, on my thinking that Alan is dubious, his dubiousness is at the same time made free from doubt. If, however, my doubt functions not toward Alan but toward Alan's dubiousness, then he is made free from doubt and my doubt gives up its original nature of rendering him dubious.

Likewise, with regard to 3.3.22, if someone says "the Real is unsayable," then the word "unsayable" directly and properly expresses the unsayability of the Real. This unsayability does not really inhere in the Real itself, yet by being superimposed on the Real it makes known what the Real is, namely that it is unsayable. On the one hand, the word "unsayable" does not *touch* the Real and make it actually sayable. On the other hand, the word *denies* only the Real itself but not also its unsayability; that is—to clarify the meaning of the verb "deny" here and in 3.3.22—the word "unsayable" conveys that the Real is unsayable but not that its unsayability is unsayable. Just as a doubting act does not doubt the dubiousness of its object, likewise "unsayable" does not convey the unsayability of the unsayability of its referent, and this makes possible the expected understanding of the utterance "the Real is unsayable." We may, using the term "indicate," say: the word "unsayable" *says* (i.e., directly and properly expresses) the unsayability *of* the Real and so, with the unsayability being superimposed on the Real, *indicates* the Real such that one comprehends that the Real is unsayable. Thus, the purpose of making known that the Real is unsayable is achieved, without thereby making it sayable. The concerned relations may be illustrated as follows:

indicates

says   imposition

'unsayable' ⟶ unsayability ┄┄▶ the Real

Before attending to the significant notion of superimposition, we need to know in what sense words can be said directly and properly to express (i.e., to describe) their objects. I take the semantic object of a word to be what the word is invariably and referentially connected with in each of its literal uses in a sentence and with the same meaning. And the semantic structure of words forming a sentence can be understood *mutatis mutandis.* Now, I submit that words forming a sentence directly and properly express a thing if and only if their semantic structure conforms to and overlaps with the thing, in which case we may say that the words *touch* the thing. But if the semantic structure does not conform to and overlap with the thing, then the words fail to describe or touch it, with the structure being solely conceptual, in no way residing in the thing. A Christian theologian, for instance, may consider God ineffable on the ground that the structure in the subject-predicate form of our language connotes a semantic structure in the form of a distinction between a substance and its attributes, yet God is altogether one and simple in Himself. The semantic correlate of language is structured, with distinctions due to word meanings, yet the transcendental reality or experience is often said to be void of distinction and structure.

Since language operates in the realm of generality or semblance, its semantic structure being somehow generic, words also fail to touch concrete sensible objects in their specific aspects. In *Vākyapadīya* 2.434 and its auto-commentary *(Vṛtti)* Bhartṛhari puts forth an ineffability thesis in relation to sensible things:

> As an *indicator (upalakṣaṇa)* of a thing, a word cannot *tell* any real functioning rendered by the thing. It is unable to *touch (saṁspraṣṭum)* the intrinsic capacities of its referent. (2.434)

> The thing in itself, bearing indeterminate capacities, endowed with inapprehensible intrinsic attributes, cannot be known through the convention-based word. The word is unable to tell, *by its own operation,* the functioning of the capacities inhering in the thing. *(Vṛtti)*[23]

I understand that the phrase "by its own operation" concerns the word's functioning of expressing its semantic object, and some may claim that by its own operation the word "cow" directly and properly expresses the generic aspect, say, cowhood, of a cow but not its specific or intrinsic aspect. Bhartṛhari's position as to the reality of the generic or extrinsic aspect of a thing seems ambiguous. Yet, for an ineffabilist like Dignāga, cowhood, as the semantic object of the word "cow," is clearly unreal, not an integral part of a cow, and so the word fails to *touch* any particular cow. Now, unsayability can be said to be the semantic object of the word "unsayable," and it does not reside in the thing to be meant by the word. The word "unsayable," as mentioned above, does not touch the unsayable thing, nor does it express the unsayability of the thing's unsayability. If the word touches the thing, one falls upon the contradiction that the thing is sayable as well as unsayable, and our opponents will win the day. On the other hand, if a linguistic skeptic contends that even the unsayability of the thing is unsayable, then one may need to use the word "unsayability" to express unsayability-*ness* with a view to making known the unsayability, and an infinite regress would seem inevitable. Linguistic skeptics ask us to

pass over the unspeakable in silence, while critics of ineffabilism deprecate the "X is unspeakable" talk, but perhaps both groups fail to see how language functions.

The notion of superimposition comes to our aid when the semantic object of a word stands *apart* from its referent. In Bhartṛhari the notion means that a word-correlated conceptual item (as the semantic object of a word) is intentionally placed (as the object meant as such) upon the thing (as the object to be meant) that one intends to refer to by the word concerned. Given the intentional, but not actual, closeness between this conceptual item and the thing, we may say that the item *presents* the thing as such and such; for example, unsayability *presents* the thing in question as unsayable. The superimposition has the function of revealing, as it indirectly makes known the thing such that one knows the latter to be, say, ineffable. But it simultaneously performs the function of concealing, for it covers up the real form of the thing. So, we need to negate what is imposed, taking it as just an imposition, whereas some dim, residual apprehension of the thing survives the negation.

The point, then, is that the imposition and its negation must go hand in hand: they are but two phases of the same event.[24] In the use of the word "unsayable" we become aware of the unsayable through the imposition on it of unsayability and the negation of this imposition. Without the imposition nothing about the unsayable would be intimated; without the negation the unsayable would erroneously become sayable. With the imposition the unsayability "of" the unsayable is comprehended; with the negation the unsayable is not taken as bearing such unsayability as meant by the word. This, let's say, *imposition-cum-negation* method is involved in the functioning of indication as construed here.

The way the ineffable is known may also be explained through this imagined dialogue:

> M: I have to reach X town by night. Would you please tell me where it is?
> N: *[Pointing southwestward with a finger]* Sure, the town is over there.
> M: But I see no town *over there.*
> N: Well, it is just across the southwesterly horizon.

Here one cannot have a glimpse of the town, much less be inside it, but one is able to locate it and know how to go toward it. The town cannot be seen, but can be located in thought. Likewise, even if words do not properly represent the ineffable, much less make us intuit it, they yet point *toward* it, locate it on the other side of a segment of our semantic horizon, or tell us the direction for intuiting it.[25] The ineffable cannot be said, but can be indicated. Some may claim that just as if we set a limit to our knowledge, we must have transcended the limit in thought; similarly, we need to represent in thought the ineffable to draw a line between it and the effable, but this unfortunately makes it representable and so sayable. We do need to think of the ineffable somehow—not straight but through imposition—and so a thesis of absolute ineffability in one sense is impossible (see below). Nevertheless, unlike drawing a line on a board where both sides of the line are seen, we needn't and indeed can't "represent" in the same way the two sides of our semantic horizon.

Significantly, the imposition-cum-negation method applies also to such expressions as "supreme reality," "absolute nothingness," and "transcending human experience," insofar as the language-user has in his/her mind something akin to the method. Much depends on the user's intention rather than on the linguistic mode, whether literal, figurative, or negative, of the language used.[26] Even so, the linguistic context may help us in deciding whether or not the language-user follows the method.

Knowing More than We Can Tell

The discussion above, it is to be noted, does not imply that sensible things are verbally "untouchable," that they are endowed only with specific aspects. But if we follow Dignāga in dismissing the reality of generic aspects or universals, will we end up holding that sensible things are as ineffable as the ineffabilist's ultimate reality? That would be a blunder, for we generally do not feel great difficulty in expressing sensible things. To clarify this issue, further expositions are needed even though that will take us to the realms of Chinese philosophy.

It is extremely hard to spell out to what extent words mean their objects. Word meanings are admittedly flexible and are not quite context-free. We learn the meaning of a word mainly in the perceptual context, and perceptual experience somewhat delimits our notion of word meaning. Given the affinity between this notion and that of semantic object, then, it seems advisable to modify the latter notion to do justice to the context-dependent nature of language. Here, rather than complicating the matter, we may just listen to the words of Zhuangzi, the famous Daoist philosopher:

> Before we can speak of coarse or fine, however, there must be some form. If a thing has no form, then numbers cannot express its dimensions, and if it cannot be encompassed, then numbers cannot express its size. We can use words to talk about the coarseness of things and we can use our minds to visualize the fineness of things. But what words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing—this has nothing to do with coarseness or fineness.[27]

Zhuangzi here distinguishes between the coarse and fine aspects of a sensible thing, which is always "formed." The fine aspect roughly accords with the aforesaid specific aspect. The coarse aspect, nevertheless, is different from the generic aspect, and it presumably accounts for our perception of the semblance between a given thing and another thing of its class. We generally do not see any commonness in things of the same class, yet we see resemblance therein. While the generic aspect is the object of a philosopher's abstract thought, the coarse one is apprehended by common people's nonabstract, vague thought of daily life. Parallel to our context-dependent understanding of the notion of word meaning, then, we have a moderate notion of semantic object, according to which the semantic object of the word "cow," for instance, is not cowhood but the coarse aspect of a cow. Such aspects of things are, as noted in the quotation, describable by words.

The fact that we generally do not feel great difficulty in expressing sensible things can be explained by two reasons. First, the describable coarse aspect of a thing, most people would agree, is indeed an integral part of the thing. Second, even if the fine aspect of a thing cannot be described by words, it may be "reached" by the mind by virtue of certain nonsemantic factors aroused by the words. Standing in contrast to the semantic operation of words and the apprehension of their semantic structure, the word-aroused nonsemantic factors include the remembrance of past sense experience, subtle imagination, knowledge of the discourse situation, and so on. For example, if Mr. A, beside me, tells Mr. B what the bamboo grove facing my study looks like, his words may arouse in my mind a vivid image representing the grove. Here I can use my past sense experience to "visualize" the fine aspect of the grove in a way that B cannot if he never sees it, more so if he never sees bamboos at all. Thus, the fine aspect of a thing may be "reached" not by the semantic operation of words themselves but by the mind, by virtue of word-aroused nonsemantic factors. The result is that as we go beyond the semantic confines of the words, *we know more than we can tell.*

Metaphorical expression, when sensibly used, may arouse a good comprehension as a nonsemantic factor for knowing a thing in its fineness. So, it has been claimed that whereof one cannot speak directly, thereof one may express metaphorically. This explains why the ineffabilists occasionally resorted to metaphor or simile to express their ineffable reality. I shall not here inquire into the functioning of metaphor. But we need to consider a view in this regard. Noting the expressive power of metaphor, some scholars have come to hold that though the so-called ineffable cannot be literally described, it can be *said* by metaphorical expression. This view is problematic. A good metaphor makes us *know* better without *saying* more. It makes us know better, for it arouses some nonsemantic factor in our mind; it does not say more because this factor is not semantic. It is now widely accepted that a metaphor is intrinsically unparaphrasable. I take this to mean that metaphorical "meaning" (i.e., what we know when we understand a metaphor) contains a fine aspect that cannot be described. The "meaning" has a literally sayable coarse aspect, too, for the (live) metaphoric expression "He was burned up" can, after all, be *partially* paraphrased by "He was very angry." Now, a metaphor figuratively says or tells the coarse aspect or the like,[28] while the expressive power of metaphor mainly concerns the fine one, which can only be visualized by the mind. A metaphor merely says the coarse aspect, though it simultaneously intimates the fine aspect or a thing in its fineness. Hence, metaphor just cannot *tell the tale* of the ineffable.

In what has been given above, Zhuangzi especially mentions that which is beyond coarseness and fineness, which "words cannot describe and the mind cannot succeed in visualizing." This would be his ineffable, formless Dao. Here, we immediately realize why sensible things, even in their fineness, are not ineffable in the sense that an ultimate reality like Dao is: sensible things can be properly visualized by the mind, whereas the formless ultimate cannot. This is not to brush aside the value of metaphor for expressing, or of visualization for knowing, the higher reality. We may know the reality better by imposing on it what is figuratively known or visualized than

by mere literal semantic imposition. Yet, the point is that what is thus known or visualized, to recall the imposition-cum-negation method, needs to be negated as well.[29]

Apart from what has been said, we can further construe indication as functioning with the aid of nonsemantic factors and as involving the visualization, when feasible,[30] of the ineffable and the negation, if required, of the visualization. We may, in the meantime, broaden the notion of a nonsemantic factor to include the vivid recalling of one's past intuitive experience of an ineffable higher reality. After all, a mystic having intuited a formless reality knows it better than a layman from another mystic's expression of the same reality, though none can succeed in visualizing the reality. But here the reality is at most reached by the mind, never by language itself. Thus, an indicative expression cannot, by its own semantic operation or by any non-semantic factor, *say* what can only be indicated.

Responses to the Criticisms

We have seen that indication construed as an expressive mode involving the imposition-cum-negation method may help to resolve the philosophical conundrum that the ineffabilists faced. To Wittgenstein we owe the famous notion of *showing* as another expressive mode for expressing the ineffable: one may say that the ineffable can only be *shown* but not *said* in language. In some of the post-Wittgensteinian uses of the notion,[31] the point is that we state one thing and the expression used indirectly makes known another that for some reason cannot be stated or described. Such a showing, however, may not function through imposition-cum-negation, and so I shall here confine myself to indication but excluding showing. Standing against indication and so forth is *description,* a rather different type of expressive mode in which the method is absent and which is best used when the semantic structure of the words conforms to and overlaps with their objects. While perhaps few would question the existence of non-descriptive expressive modes, many do not seem to realize that the ineffabilists, or some of them at least, might be using words, say, indicatively rather than descriptively.

We can now respond to the criticisms leveled by some modern thinkers against the ineffability thesis.[32] When the word "unspeakable," as has been shown, is taken indicatively in regard to the ineffable X, the sentence "X is unspeakable" faces no self-contradictory predicament. Now let's consider again the claim that our concepts do not apply to God. For Plantinga, one has the concept *horse* if one grasps the property of being a horse; and that concept applies to something if that thing is a horse or has the property of being a horse.[33] So we have the concept *being such that none of our concepts applies to it* if we grasp the property of being such that none of our concepts applies to it, and that concept applies to God if God has that property. If, of course, the concept really applies to God, then at least one of our concepts applies to God, in which case the claim is false. But one who makes the claim needn't take the property to inhere in God: the property can well be an imposed one whose inherence in God is simultaneously negated. And as God does not possess the property, the concept *being such that none of our concepts applies*

to it does not really apply to Him (or, its application is indirect, of the indicative kind). Consequently, one who implies the imposition-cum-negation method while making the claim needn't acknowledge its falsity for the reason that one of our concepts applies to God.

Similar things can be said of sentences employing such phrases as "absolute nothingness" and "divine being" to refer to the ineffable, and of any expression given for explaining the ineffability of the ineffable. Even if these expressions seem to convey substantial information about their referents, they may be used indicatively. This may account for the practice that has puzzled some critics of the thesis, namely the occasional use by the ineffabilists of affirmative or nonfigurative expressions to express their ineffable. After all, such expressions can be intended indicatively such that no word-correlated property is really ascribed to the ineffable. Now with respect to Yandell's criticism, even though the ineffable experience of attaining divinity is as *indescribable* by "attaining divinity" as by "eating a hamburger," the expression "attaining divinity" certainly functions better than "eating a hamburger" in *indicating* the experience. Hence, while all descriptions are equally inappropriate for expressing an ineffable mystical experience, our mystics would still be selective in using (indicative) expressions for the experience.

As to Alston's criticism to the effect that the understanding of a proper name like "God" presupposes the ability to use some identifying phrase to explain the name, we note that though a certain expressible knowledge of the object named is required, the identifying expression in question can well be indicative in nature. Our purpose is served, indeed, if the identifying expression helps one locate the object on the other side of a segment of our semantic horizon.

Ineffabilists often make use of negative expressions when referring to their ineffable reality. Some may aver that every negation is an affirmation, involving the use of concepts, and so by applying negation to the so-called ineffable the ineffabilist automatically falsifies his/her ineffability thesis. Endorsing a similar view, Rowe, criticizing Hick's use of ineffability, contends that he cannot see how Hick's Real can avoid having one or the other of two contradictory properties—for example being good or non-good or being personal or nonpersonal—that if the Real is not personal it must have the property of being nonpersonal.[34] Since Rowe thinks if Hick held that the Real is nonpersonal he would be taking sides with religions favoring nonpersonal absolutes, it is obvious that Rowe considers the property of being nonpersonal a substantial property to be attributed to the Real if the latter is not personal. It is difficult to see why the matter should be as Rowe depicts it, why if it is true that the Real in itself is not personal it must of necessity be nonpersonal. Of course, if I say "Alan is not polite," I am attributing to Alan something akin to impoliteness, which must be a substantial property. But if I say "the number two is *not* green," I may simply make a *noncommittal* denial of any substantial relation between the number two and the color green apart from implying that there is such an item as designated by the phrase "the number two"; I just exclude the possibility of the number's being green but do not predicate any property of the number.[35] Overall, Rowe's contention seems to be prescriptive in nature.

Rowe's view is not incorrect, however, if we take the sentence "the Real is not personal" *descriptively.* For then, for the phrase "is not personal" to conform semantically to the Real it must predicate of the latter the property of not being personal or simply of being nonpersonal. But I see no reason why we cannot use the sentence nondescriptively such that no real predication is effected. It is true that the use of the phrase tends to impose on the object the negative property of not being personal, yet this imposed property will simultaneously be negated if the imposition-cum-negation method is attended to.[36] The method can be conjoined to negative expression alongside indication to ensure that no word-correlated property, negative or positive, is really ascribed to the ineffable. The main function of such a negative expression, nevertheless, consists in (saying and) negating what the referent is not, with the method playing only a minor role. It seems advisable, then, to regard, as is the case with metaphor, negative expression as a distinctive expressive mode. In any case, Rowe's view would not hold here unless the method or the noncommittal denial can be proved to be impossible.

The criticisms discussed here, as it now turns out, imply or tend to imply that language has only one cognitive function, namely to *describe* objects. Language, to be sure, is used noncognitively to arouse the hearer's feelings, to give an order, to make a request, to make what is said a fact, and so on. Yet, indication differs from these noncognitive uses in that it is broadly cognitive, being used to transmit knowledge about reality. And it seems not ponderous to speak of truth and falsity in application to indicative sentences. To boil it all down, the ineffabilists, or at least some of them, might actually intend their words indicatively, and an indicative sentence can *gesture* toward some ineffable reality without, if true, thereby touching the reality.

Absolute Ineffability

Our discussion has so far assumed the ineffabilists' ineffable reality to be somehow indirectly expressible. Now this question may be raised: if the reality is after all indirectly expressible, why did the ineffabilists take it to be *absolutely* ineffable? To my knowledge, few ineffabilists claim that his or her transcendental reality is absolutely ineffable. But in the case where such a claim is made, it may not be self-defeating. Indeed, the phrase "absolutely ineffable" is ambiguous, as it can mean either of two things: (1) the thing said to be absolutely ineffable can *in no way* be linguistically expressed or conveyed, or (2) the thing said to be absolutely ineffable can in no way be linguistically expressed or conveyed *as it truly is.*

If an ineffabilist takes something to be absolutely ineffable in the first sense, then by uttering the word "ineffable" he either runs into self-contradiction or the word uttered is just a meaningless sound. He cannot meaningfully present an ineffability thesis. He cannot resort to indication or the like to evade severe criticisms, and if body language counts as language, gestures like waving a hand (Cratylus) or lifting a finger (some Chan masters) are to be barred, too. The critics are surely all correct in this regard!

The second sense of "absolutely ineffable" accords with the way we understand the ineffability thesis. The ineffable can never be touched, in part or in full, by human concepts and words. The ineffable can only be indirectly and rather vaguely expressed and conveyed. Though, with respect to the aforesaid method, no affinity exists between the imposed item and the ineffable thing, for the hearer or reader to have any inkling of the thing at all, some far-fetched semblance between them is indeed required. The relation between the ineffable thing and what is intimated of it through the imposition may be compared with that between a scene vividly seen and a watercolor depicting the scene. In spite of some slight semblance, the watercolor can be at best misleading and at worst mistaken, for knowing what the scene actually is. Likewise, what language conveys can be at best misleading and at worst mistaken, for knowing what the thing actually is; in such cases one is justified in considering the latter ineffable. Advancing the thesis also means to stress that mere linguistic knowledge is no substitute for the true experience of the ineffable (no more than the ability to recite a book on swimming is a good substitute for the ability to swim), that the ineffable is not such as dictated by our intellect, and so whatever is superimposed on it needs to be negated. The thesis induces us to go farther to reach the place across our semantic horizon.

Epilogue

This essay began with an introduction to the ineffability thesis together with the difficulties it faces. Whereas Hick's solution does not help much here, our overall approach should suffice to show that the thesis, when properly understood as I believe is the case with at least some ineffabilists, implies no self-contradiction. According to the thesis, some transcendental reality or experience cannot be expressed as it truly is by words. Our discussion reveals that the formulation of the thesis or any reference to the ineffable can be made consistently through the expressive mode of indication construed as involving the imposition-cum-negation method.[37] Can we say the unsayable? The answer is yes if by "say" we actually mean "indicate" or some other nondescriptive expressive mode. This, however, simply affirms that one can *noncontradictorily* gesture toward the ineffable. Indicatively or otherwise, the ineffable in itself remains beyond the reach of words.

Apart from indication, clearly there are other expressive modes capable of "saying" the unsayable, though we could not in this essay delve into them. We have so far briefly discussed metaphor and negative expression, and slightly referred to showing. Standing almost in contrast to indication is evocation as another nondescriptive expressive mode. An evocative expression, as what we can find in Chan discourse, aims at breaking through the regular operation of linguistic cognition. It "therapeutically" counters one's habits of conceptual substantiation, and refreshes and lifts up one's consciousness, such that one comes to experience that which presently transcends one's experience.[38] Unlike indication, evocation is cognitive only in a far-fetched sense. Not for transmitting knowledge about reality, an evocative expression is meant to call up some existential, often "awakening,"

knowing of the true nature of the hearer and the world. And it is ponderous to speak of truth and falsity in application to evocative sentences. One can just speak of efficacy and inefficacy in application to them, and even here it much depends on the hearer's level. Somewhere between evocation and indication (and/or negative expression) lies paradox. Despite its diverse forms,[39] a paradoxical expression roughly performs two functions: (1) to highlight the incapacity of our ordinary ways of thinking and verbalization for representing the ineffable reality/truth, and (2) to lead the reader beyond the customary understanding of the expression for comprehending its deeper and subtler "meanings" in relation to the reality/truth.

One expressive mode seemingly articulating the imposition-cum-negation method is known in Indian philosophy as *adhyāropa-apavāda* (attribution-cum-denial). This mode consists of first stating a literal or figurative attribution and then explicitly denying the attribution. It figures in a passage in the *Bhagavadgītā* (verses 13.13–14) as interpreted by Śaṁkara, who ascribes to his Advaitic tradition the dictum that "the Unmanifest is (linguistically) manifested by means of attribution and denial."[40] The same mode is likewise utilized by some Chinese thinkers and is beautifully illustrated in the following poem by the Chan poet Hanshan:

> My heart-and-mind is like the autumn moon,
> Brightly reflected in a crystal-clear lake;
> Nothing can make a good comparison,
> How then shall I put it into words?

Here, the poet first compares his heart-and-mind to the autumn moon, and then denies what he has said, taking the former to be beyond words and comparisons. The whole poem embodies a simile-natured attribution followed by its denial. But if the "denial" portion is only implied, not explicitly stated, then we will have an expression involving the imposition-cum-negation method. This in a sense suggests the soundness of our overall resort to the method. From here we also see that the use of metaphor regarding an ineffable ultimate reality actually involves two negations, not just one. Of the metaphoric expression "God is a consuming fire," the ineffable God is, to be sure, *not* a consuming fire, yet He is also *not* what we know or visualize through the metaphor of fire. The point here is that what is metaphorically known, given the method, needs to be negated. As is the case with indication, however, some dim, residual apprehension of the ineffable survives the negation.

The ineffability thesis notwithstanding, language continues to be our very important access to reality. And perhaps some ineffabilists erred in trying to abandon language and rest in sheer silence. Abandoning language would unwisely sever our relationships with others and with the world around us. We indeed ought to value language as well as this very world. Whenever we can we should do our best, adopting the fittest way of expression, to express what seems to be ineffable; and we have seen that our language is endowed with various expressive modes for gesturing toward the ineffable.[41] But, with due respect to language, we must not think language knows no limits, as we must not think that we can capture the fresh gust of actuality in the box of convention. Insofar as the present essay is concerned, at least,

the charge of self-contradiction leveled against the thesis is anything but well-founded.

Notes

1 – John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 236–249.

2 – William P. Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 38 (1995): 37–60; William L. Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies* 35 (1999): 139–150; Christopher J. Insole, "Why John Hick Cannot, and Should not, Stay Out of the Jam Pot," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 25–33.

3 – I shall use the words "ineffable," "unsayable," and "unspeakable" interchangeably.

4 – The sense in which a reality is ineffable need not, or could not, be the sense in which an experience is ineffable, though the ineffabilists may differ on the precise distinction between the two senses. In any case, I shall here neglect the issue, for this essay is not meant to bring up the distinction, and the neglect would not affect the main line of our argumentation.

5 – In this essay, by "the thesis" I shall always mean the ineffability thesis. I use the word "transcendental" to refer to a state higher and truer than the conventional one. It differs from "transcendent" in that the transcendental, not the transcendent, can also be immanent in earthly beings or human experiences. The transcendental may bear conceptual transcendence but not metaphysical transcendence. An ineffable but intensely felt mystical experience is then a *transcendental* experience.

6 – *Augustine De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. and trans. R.P.H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 17.

7 – Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980), pp. 20–26.

8 – So, for Dignāga language can by no means "touch" the percept. Two reasons given are: (1) the particulars are unlimited in number, and (2) words are errant with respect to any given particular. The point is that language operates in the realm of likeness or generality, yet the perceptual object belongs to the realm of differences or particularities.

9 – *Nyāyabhāṣyavārttika of Bhāradvāja Uddyotakara,* ed. Anantalal Thakur (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1997), pp. 39–40.

10 – Keith E. Yandell, "Some Varieties of Ineffability," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (3) (1975): 167–179.

11 – Ibid., p. 177.

12 – Alston, "Ineffability," *Philosophical Review* 65 (4) (1956): 506–522.

13 – Ibid., pp. 511–517.

14 – Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* p. 239.

15 – Ibid., p. 246. Hick, it seems, is of the view that the Ultimate or his Real *an sich* falls within the range of our "formal" categories of thought, that the Ultimate is not unspeakable in purely formal language. See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* p. 352, and Hick, "Ineffability," in *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 42. In his "Ineffability," formal properties are said to be "trivial or inconsequential in that nothing significant follows from them concerning the intrinsic nature of the Godhead" or the Real in itself (p. 41). Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, incidentally, has no intrinsic tie to ineffabilism: one can defend the thesis and not be a pluralist. We refer to the hypothesis simply for introducing Hick's use of ineffability and his ingenious solution.

16 – Insole, "Why John Hick . . . ," pp. 26–27. Similar objections have been raised by Alston ("Realism and the Christian Faith," p. 56) and Rowe ("Religious Pluralism," p. 146).

17 – Hick, "Ineffability," p. 44.

18 – Alston, "Realism and the Christian Faith," p. 57.

19 – Cf. Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* pp. 248, 300, 353, 373.

20 – For this point and the passing remark, see Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion,* p. 239.

21 – *Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari,* Kāṇḍa 3, part 1, ed. K. A. Subramania Iyer (Pune: Deccan College, 1994), p. 137:

> avācyam iti yad vācyaṁ tad avācyatayā yadā,
> vācyam ity avasīyeta vācyam eva tadā bhavet.
> athāpy avācyam ity evaṁ na tad vācyaṁ pratīyate,
> vivakṣitāsya yāvasthā saiva nādhyavasīyate.

The passage and the next verse (3.3.22) were mistakenly interpreted by some scholars as presenting an insoluble paradox. Recently, Terence Parsons expressed his qualms about the adequacy of the interpretation in his "Bhartṛhari on What Cannot Be Said," *Philosophy East and West* 51 (4) (2001): 525–534. For better expositions of the paradox and its solution, see Jitendra Nath Mohanty, *Reason and Tradition in Indian Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 94, and Jan E. M. Houben, *The Saṁbandha-samuddeśa and Bhartṛhari's Philosophy of Language* (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1995), pp. 213–227.

22 – *Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari,* Kāṇḍa 3, part 1, p. 138:

> tathānyathā sarvathā ca yasyāvācyatvam ucyate,
> tatrāpi naiva sāvasthā taiḥ śabdaiḥ pratiṣidhyate.
> na hi saṃśayarūpe 'rthe śeṣatvena vyavasthite,
> avyudāse svarūpasya saṃśayo 'nyaḥ pravartate.

23 – *The Vākyapadīya of Bhartṛhari,* Kāṇḍa 2, ed. Iyer (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983), p. 312:

> vastūpalakṣaṇaḥ śabdo nopakārasya vācakaḥ,
> na svaśaktiḥ padārthānāṃ saṃspraṣṭuṃ tena śakyate.
> vastumātram anāśritaśaktiviśeṣam aparigṛhītasvadharmakaṃ yena saṃvijñānapadena
> nopalabhyate na tad vastukṛtānāṃ śaktīnāṃ yad upakārirūpaṃ tat svavyāpāraṃ svakā-
> rthena (read svakāryena) śaknoti vaktum.

24 – Cf. Julius J. Lipner, "Śaṃkara on Metaphor with Reference to Gita 13.12–18," in *Indian Philosophy of Religion,* ed. Roy Perrett (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), p. 181.

25 – The last phrase here reminds us of the famous Buddhist metaphor of Dharma-language as a moon-pointing finger. The finger tells us the direction for seeing the moon without in any way representing it. Incidentally, Eastern ineffabilists generally took their ineffable reality/truth to be knowable. They might say that it is unknowable, but this usually means that it cannot be known by intellect or that it is not known as an *object.* This surely differs from Hick's proposal.

26 – Thus, the method is also connected with negative expression, metaphor, and so forth. One may take to be a form of indication whatever expression that involves the method, and then we would have negative *indication,* metaphor in its *indicative* use, and so on. I am indecisive here, but this could be just a matter of terminology. For certain reasons I shall in this essay take indication as figuring only as positive and nonfigurative expressions, including words like "unsayable." Negative expression and metaphor, then, would not be forms of indication, though they may need to involve the method in order to refer, noncontradictorily, to an ineffable higher reality.

27 – *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu,* trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968), p. 178.

28 – So, the metaphor "He was burned up" *figuratively* says that which is *literally* said by "He was very angry." Donald Davidson is more "conservative" than us, as he claims that a metaphor says only what it literally says or means, usually a patent falsehood; see his "On Metaphor," in *On Metaphor,* ed. Sheldon Sacks (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), pp. 29–45. This claim is as unconvincing as the opposing claim that a metaphor says what is otherwise unsayable.

29 – If we are just to express a sensible thing in its fineness, then the negation may not be effected. Because of the unique nature of metaphor as a *linguistic* mode,

we shall in this essay regard metaphor as an independent *expressive* mode distinct from indication and description. When construed as involving the imposition-cum-negation method, metaphor is fit for expressing an ineffable higher reality. Meanwhile, I do not intend to imply that the formlessness, if any, of the higher reality is the key reason behind *all* the ineffability claims about reality. It is not my task here to specify the reasons behind the ineffability thesis, just as it is not my task to ask whether God, Brahman, or Dao may not really be ineffable.

30 – The indicative use of the word "unsayable," for example, would not itself involve visualization. In passing, we can also have a notion of unsayability as the object of common people's nonabstract, vague thought of daily life.

31 – For example, Michael Dummett, *The Interpretation of Frege's Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 129, and B. K. Matilal, *The Word and the World* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 152, 154–155.

32 – Let me make it very clear that my responses are directed to the criticisms precisely as stated in this essay, and nothing more. It is always probable that I misunderstand the views of the critics referred to here, and the critics may have other significant views on the topic that I fail to mention. In any case, the criticisms presented here are instructive and really worth our attention.

33 – Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?,* p. 21.

34 – Rowe, "Religious Pluralism," pp. 146–150.

35 – Indian grammarians had long ago differentiated these two types of negation, and the noncommittal denial was especially emphasized by some Mādhyamika thinkers of Indian Buddhism. Rowe, as a matter of fact, is aware of the existence of different types of negation and appeals to a Russellian account to settle the issue. But he does not expound the account.

36 – Some ineffabilists assert that a sentence like "the ineffable is real" actually means "the ineffable is *not* unreal." One would just annul the move if one takes this "the ineffable is *not* unreal" to ascribe to the ineffable the property of being real.

37 – Perhaps most hearers and readers of the thesis are implicitly aware of this use of indication, and this may explain why many of them could well follow the thesis. Of course, it takes some philosophizing to make the matter explicit.

38 – Cf. Steven T. Katz, "Mystical Speech and Mystical Meaning," in *Mysticism and Language,* ed. Steven T. Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 5–8. For a Daoist notion of evocation in relation to Zhuangzi, see Kuangming Wu, *Chuang Tzu: World Philosopher at Play* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), pp. 33–36.

39 – Here are some of the examples: "the Ray of Divine Darkness," "The Good Cause of all things is eloquent yet speaks few words, or rather none" (Pseudo-

Dionysius); "It (Brahman) is not known by one who knows It. It is known by one who knows It not" *(Kena Upaniṣad);* "He is unmoving as also moving. . . . He is far away and yet is He near" *(Bhagavadgītā);* "What are said to be all *dharmas* are not all *dharmas,* and so are called all *dharmas*" *(Diamond Sūtra);* "Everything is real, not real, both real and not real, and neither real nor not real" (Nāgārjuna); "The greatest sound is hardly sounding, and the greatest image is formless" (Laozi); "Who knows the knowing of not-knowing?" (Zhuangzi).

40 – See Lipner, "Śaṁkara on Metaphor with Reference to Gita 13.12–18," pp. 177–181. The Sanskrit of the dictum, *"adhyāropāpavādābhyāṁ niṣprapañcaṁ prapañcayate,"* is quoted therein on p. 181 n. 46.

41 – The existence of these expressive modes shows how rich our natural language really is. But a seemingly perplexing fact is that while many ineffabilists in the past were admirably skillful in employing diverse expressive means for their purpose, they yet stuck to the thesis, come what may. This essay may shed light on how this perplexity can be resolved.