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Philosophy of Religion

15 May 2014

The Use of Paradox in the Works of Pseudo-Dionysius and the *Zhuangzi*

Paradoxes can be useful tools for describing entities that transcend human concepts because by both contradicting and affirming a statement, they have the power to indicate that rules of logic seemingly fail to operate in a particular scenario. Since they can help express a failure of language, they are effective tools in religious discourse—particularly in those religions that revolve around an ineffable entity. Pseudo-Dionysius, for instance, makes use of paradox in his corpus in order to explain the nature of God, and Chuang Tzu relies extensively on paradox to illuminate the concept of the Dao. Though both authors encounter the same tensions, they use paradox differently; Pseudo-Dionysius may be interpreted as resolving paradox and defending an ineffability of God that is relative and incomplete, whereas Chuang Tzu's writing seems to deepen the paradoxes surrounding the Dao in a way that suggests that the Dao is ineffable in a much stricter sense.

Steven Fanning, in *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, identifies tensions between what he thinks are “two different though intimately related Christianities that coexist uneasily within each other” (Fanning 1). These tensions emerge, in his opinion, due to one major difference: “One Christianity emphasizes human intellect and reason and is a theology, a set of beliefs to be accepted and rules to be followed, a creed that is proclaimed. The other Christianity is that of the mystics, who seek the experience of the God of the former and stress the inability of human reasoning to know the incomprehensible deity” (Fanning 1). The apparent paradoxes that

emerge in the works of Pseudo-Dionysius have their roots in the exact kind of division between Christianities that Fanning identifies, and they emerge mostly between the author's writings taken in combination. While *The Divine Names*, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* address Christianity in its theological form, making numerous verbal assertions about it and using reason and intellect, *The Mystical Theology* begins with experience of the divine and goes on to negate many of the affirmations about God that are made in the other works—particularly *The Divine Names*.

The Divine Names itself begins with a recognition of the tensions between the two conflicting ways of looking at Christianity:

“They say he is in our minds, in our souls, and in our bodies, in heaven and on earth, that while remaining ever within himself he is also in and around and above the world, that he is above heaven and above all being, that he is sun, star, and fire, water, wind, and dew, cloud, archetypal stone, and rock, that he is all, that he is no thing. And so it is that as Cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is” (Pseudo-Dionysius 55-56).

Assigning names to God—in fact all possible names—is defensible in Pseudo-Dionysius's view because of god's presence in worldly things, including our minds and souls, but it is indefensible for all names when it comes to God's transcendence of the world. Thus, he arrives at a God that must be both an emanating, linguistically expressible being and a transcendent, ineffable entity beyond being and knowledge. If we interpret Pseudo-Dionysius in Fanning's terms, he addresses one linguistic Christianity of rationality and theology, corresponding to the emanating God, and one mystical Christianity that resists language and seeks to understand God in his

transcendence. The complete equivalency of the two 'Gods' then results in a paradox because God must be both describable by language and utterly beyond it.

The use of the divine name 'Good' to refer to God is one example, and it is one of the first divine names Pseudo-Dionysius examines because it is "preeminently set apart for the supra-divine God from all other names" (71). He uses this divine name with great frequency in the section of the text that follows, taking it to indicate that "this essential Good, by the very fact of its existence, extends goodness into all things" (Pseudo-Dionysius 71). He also defends this description of God from the charge that if the creator of everything was really an essential Good, then there could be no such thing as evil. In *The Mystical Theology*, however, he negates this divine name alongside others with the claim, "It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness" (Pseudo-Dionysius 141). At first glance, these two claims taken together constitute a kind of paradox that exemplifies the paradoxical relationship between the two Christianities described by Fanning. If we attempt to understand the true meanings of Pseudo-Dionysius's affirmational and negational language, however, these paradoxes seem to resolve themselves.

In his defense of the goodness of God from the response that evil makes a good God untenable, Pseudo-Dionysius responds in a way that clarifies what he means when he ascribes the property of goodness to something:

"All beings, to the extent that they exist, are good and come from the Good and they fall short of goodness and being in proportion to their remoteness from the Good. ... True, there is God who is on a level above being and is therefore transcendental. But with entities generally, if a quality is lost to them, or was never there in fact, it is still the case that these entities possess being and

subsistence. However, that which is totally bereft of the Good never had, does not have, never shall have, never can have any kind of being at all” (87).

All beings, he thinks, including those who are described as evil, have some share of God’s goodness, though their shares are proportionate to their distance from God. Elsewhere in *The Divine Names*, he compares God to the sun, which sheds light on everything in greater or lesser degrees, to achieve the same effect in an image (Pseudo-Dionysius 74). When we say something is good, then, the claim is always a relative term that depends on how far away the being who uses it and the being they describe exist from the Good. In *The Celestial Hierarchy*, it becomes clear that humans are at several levels of removal from God, and as such, our understanding of goodness can be thought of as incomplete. When we refer to God as Good, Pseudo-Dionysius seems to be saying in this passage, we have to recognize that he is good to a different extent than the things with which we are immediately familiar. When he mentions God in the passage, he does so comparatively, and references him on the transcendent level. By being above being, God is above goodness as well, at least as humans conceive of it. This clarification about how affirmational language should be understood when applied to God can then be extended to the other divine names more generally. It also explains why angels are said to have a better understanding of God than humans in *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* (as they are nearer to God).

There is a corresponding clarification to be made about negational language in the Dionysian corpus as well. Pseudo-Dionysius describes negational discourse in *The Celestial Hierarchy* in the following way:

“There is the scriptural device of praising the deity by presenting it in utterly dissimilar revelations. He is described as invisible, infinite, ungraspable, and other things which show not what he is but what in fact he is not. This way of talking

about him seems to me much more appropriate [than representing him symbolically or through the divine names], for, as the secret and sacred tradition has instructed, God is in no way like the things that have being and we have no knowledge at all of his incomprehensible and ineffable transcendence and invisibility” (Pseudo-Dionysius 149-150).

Here, Dionysius compares affirmational and negational language as tools to describe God. Most crucial, perhaps, is his reasoning for preferring to show what God is not rather than what he is. Quite clearly, his preference is for negational descriptions because descriptions are relative, pertaining for “the things that have being” to things that have being, rather than managing to accurately capture the transcendent God beyond being and all concepts that pertain to it. He finds that negations capture this relativity in concepts more clearly than affirmations do. In this sense, to say that God is ineffable, as Pseudo-Dionysius does in the passage, is to say that he is beyond the terms of things that have being, since these things that have being necessarily understand these terms to mean something imperfect and incomplete in comparison to how the God beyond being would understand the corresponding concepts.

It makes sense, then, to extend the reasoning behind Pseudo-Dionysius’s preference for negation in *The Celestial Hierarchy* to explain his use of it in *The Mystical Theology*. If we understand negation on Pseudo-Dionysius’s terms, we understand it to mean not that the negated property is inapplicable to God, but that the extent to which God holds the property is beyond human understanding (God transcends the human conception of the property, or God is beyond the property as humans understand it). In *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius prefaces his negations of the divine names with the following, which makes the alternative, more literal reading of his negations indefensible:

When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. Is it not closer to reality to say that God is life and goodness rather than that he is air or stone? Is it not more accurate to deny that drunkenness and rage can be attributed to him than to deny that we can apply to him the terms of speech and thought? (139-140)

In this passage, Pseudo-Dionysius explains his strategy for negating the divine names: to start by denying those properties of God that are furthest from the truth and then go on to deny those that come closer to describing him. Implicit in this strategy is the fact that some words come closer to describing God than others. If the God described in *The Mystical Theology* was to be truly ineffable, it would have to be equally unlike all possible descriptions. Instead, Pseudo-Dionysius tells us, God is more closely described by the terms of understanding than he is by the terms of drunkenness and rage. It is therefore more correct to say certain things about God than it is to say others, so God must be at least partially describable. Though this is not consistent with a reading of negation that means God has no properties whatsoever, it is consistent with the view that a negation for Pseudo-Dionysius functions by pointing to God's ultimate transcendence of any human concept. Some of our concepts (i.e., the divine names) come closer to capturing God than others, and Pseudo-Dionysius's careful ordering of negations therefore preserves the meaning of affirmations about God—at least to a certain extent. Denying that God is good does not mean that God is evil. Rather, it means that God's goodness transcends the way humans

encounter and think about it; the concept of good is relative to human understanding because humans are distanced from God, but the Good is absolute and transcends this concept.

Properly understood, then, Pseudo-Dionysius's affirmations of the divine names and his negations of them have the same meaning, though his preference is for negations because they call attention to how the meaning should be understood. Both refer to God's transcendence of human concepts while protecting a human understanding of God that captures God as closely as humanly possible. The works of Pseudo-Dionysius, by seeking to recognize a defineable limit of human understanding that makes God's ineffability relative, therefore give us a way of resolving the paradox that forms around Fanning's notion that the eminent, describable God of Christian theology is equivalent to the transcendent, ineffable god of Christian mysticism.

A similar paradox arises in Daoism, though it is reached and dealt with in quite a different way in Daoist texts like the *Zhuangzi* than Pseudo-Dionysius reaches and deals with paradox in his works. Louis Komjathy characterizes the Dao in terms of four interrelated characteristics: source of all existence, unnameable mystery, all-pervading sacred presence, and universe as cosmological process. The first two of these characteristics are linked, as are the second, and a paradox emerges between the two sets of characteristics just like it does in the case of Christianity. Komjathy writes:

“everything emerged from and through the Dao's spontaneous and impersonal process of cosmogonic unfolding and emanation. In this respect, the Dao represents an unrepresentable and incomprehensible before. ... At the same time, the Dao is an all-pervading sacred presence in the world. It can be directly experienced and participated in, and humans can cultivate a greater sensitivity to its presence, in whatever form it takes” (Komjathy 112-113).

The Dao seen as the undifferentiated source of all differentiated things, then, cannot be represented or understood, but the Dao as it pervades the world can be experienced and sensed by humans. This parallels the attributes of God that come into tension for Fanning: a mystical and ineffable transcendent God and a theological, representable version of God that is based on his emanating presence in the world. However, Daoism seems much less quick to equate these two sides of the relevant ultimate with one another: “From a Daoist perspective, veneration of the Dao and commitment to realizing the Dao involves both recognition of the character as a place-holder for [] and reflection on Daoist theological views. To mistake ‘Dao’ for [] is either idolatry or a mistaken view” (Komjathy 111). Dao, for Komjathy, captures the theological concerns centered on how the Dao pervades the world, while [] makes reference to the Dao as the “unrepresentable and incomprehensible before.” There is a tension between them when we think about how they might relate to one another, but Daoists begin by drawing a distinction between them, rather than by equating them to talk about a single God as Pseudo-Dionysius does. While Pseudo-Dionysius starts at paradox and works to reach a coherent, nonparadoxical view of God, then, the Daoists begin with a paradox that is hidden in the relationship between two different, though related ultimates, and seek to bring that paradox to light.

One story from the *Zhuangzi* that seems to have the goal of uncovering paradox is that of Dumb Nonaction, Mad Stammerer, and Yellow Emperor in chapter 22 of the text. The protagonist in that story, Knowledge, encounters three other characters who represent various outlooks on knowledge and speech: Dumb Nonaction, Mad Stammerer, and The Yellow Emperor. When he asks each of them about the Way, Dumb Nonaction does not answer and does not claim to know how to answer, Mad Stammerer claims to know but is unable to speak about it, and the Yellow Emperor tells Knowledge a variety of things about the Way, including

many truths that are upheld elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*. Included in the Yellow Emperor's speech about the Way is the assertion that Dumb Nonaction gave the most correct response to Knowledge's questions and that Knowledge and the Yellow Emperor are most incorrect (Chuang Tzu 210-212). The story closes in the following way: "The reason Dumb Nonaction was truly right,' said the Yellow Emperor, 'is because he didn't know. The reason Mad Stammerer seemed to be right is because he forgot. The reason you and I came last and were not even close is because we knew.' Mad Stammerer heard of this and considered the Yellow Emperor someone who knew how to speak" (Chuang Tzu 212). As a result, Knowledge finds himself in a tenuous position with respect to who describes and knows the Dao most correctly. If he trusts the Yellow Emperor, he must conclude that what the Yellow Emperor tells him is misleading; and because the Yellow Emperor endorses the wisdom of Dumb Nonaction and Mad Stammerer endorses the speech of the Yellow Emperor, all possible options result in the same paradox. The story thus quite literally begins with Knowledge and ends with an articulation of the paradoxical relationship between the Dao as unintelligible source and the Dao as intelligible emanating presence through the different characters that it does not attempt to resolve or reason away. In fact, the Yellow Emperor's attempts to articulate both sides of the paradox lead to a position that is not logically navigable from any direction. Readers play the role of the Mad Stammerer if they choose to trust the Yellow Emperor's analysis of the situation.

The same paradox is expressed in different ways through other stories in the *Zhuangzi*, and sometimes more explicitly. Nonbeginning gives a speech to Exalted Purity later in the same chapter, telling him: "Not knowing is deep and knowing is shallow; not knowing has to do with what's intrinsic, knowing has to do with what's extrinsic" (Chuang Tzu 219). The same paradox emerges clearly in the response of Exalted Purity, who seems to realize that Nonbeginning

himself is claiming to know: “Then not to know is to know? To know is not to know? Who knows the knowing of not knowing?” (Chuang Tzu 219). Once again, the paradox is revealed and remains unresolved, perhaps hinting at its inability to be resolved.

Like Pseudo-Dionysius, Chuang Tzu examines the relative merits of affirmational and negational language, and he may be interpreted as coming to the same conclusion about them as Pseudo-Dionysius when he claims that “To use a finger as a metaphor for the nonfingerness of a finger is not as good as using nonfingerness as a metaphor for the nonfingerness of a finger ... All things are possessed of that which we may say is so; all things are possessed of that which we may affirm. There is no thing that is not so; there is no thing that is not affirmable” (16). The passage starts with a preference for negational language that recalls Pseudo-Dionysius’s and then condenses negational and affirmational language into a common, affirmational case in a very similar way. However, unlike in Pseudo-Dionysius, the passage in the *Zhuangzi* clearly restricts itself to talking about things, while positing the Dao as a non-thing. Rather than resolving the tensions between negational and affirmational language and going on to apply that language to the ultimate reality, Daoism recognizes that claims about language—either negational or affirmative—are closely connected to things, all of which join in the Unity that follows from differentiating the Dao. The Dao itself is “a stage before there were things”—one that affirmations and negations fail to apply to (Chuang Tzu 17).

A few paradoxes in the *Zhuangzi* seem to stem from the realization that the Dao is a non-thing, one that cannot be referenced by the terms ‘this’ and ‘that’ and therefore has to transcend language. The narrator of the text, while thinking about the unity that is differentiated to reveal the myriad things, wonders, “Since all things are one, how can there be anything to talk about? But since I have already *said* that all things are one, how can there be nothing to talk about? One

and speech makes two, two and one makes three” (Chuang Tzu 19). The differentiated nature of speech seems to generate paradoxes here by concluding both that unity is a thing and that it cannot be a thing. Language and concepts, it seems, fail to accurately describe the Dao because they force us into viewing the Dao as either a concrete, existent thing, or as failing to exist, when in fact neither are true of it. “Therefore,” the text concludes, “she who knows to stop at what she does not know has attained the ultimate” (Chuang Tzu 19). This claim itself is somewhat controversial because of the story of Dumb Nonaction, Mad Stammerer, and the Yellow Emperor. It seems to advocate a view that would see Dumb Nonaction as responding best to Knowledge’s questions about the Dao, despite the paradox present in the story and the tensions between the Yellow Emperor’s assertions and Dumb Nonaction’s nonassertions. However, it seems to come closest to representing how wisdom is defined in the *Zhuangzi*. The work of the text is to generate paradoxes, not to resolve them, and it seems to do this in order to point to a limit of what is humanly knowable—one that is not relative like it is for Pseudo-Dionysius. The text itself recognizes the limit with the final summation:

“The Way cannot be held to exist, nor can it be held to be nonexistent. ‘The Way’ as a name operates as a supposition which is premised. ... If words were satisfactory, we could speak the whole day and it would all be about the Way; but if words are unsatisfactory, we can speak the whole day and it will all be about things. The Way is the delimitation of things. Neither words nor silence are satisfactory for conveying it. Without words and without silence, our deliberations reach their utmost limits” (Chuang Tzu 267).

This final paradox of Chapter 25 is one that reiterates clearly the key problem at the heart of the story about Dumb Nonaction, Mad Stammerer, and the Yellow Emperor. The Way is both a

nondifferentiated origin and a presence behind differentiated things, a nonthing and a thing. It might be said to be absolutely ineffable because the same paradoxes involved in the claim that something is absolutely ineffable are the ones that are so definitive of the Dao: it is spoken about, but cannot be spoken about. It exists, when it is spoken of, as “a supposition which is premised,” a kind of posit that Daoists find necessary for explaining the origins of the universe. The paradoxical relationship between Komjathy’s Dao and [] remains unresolved in the context of the chapter and in the larger text itself; rather than taking on the task of resolving the paradox, the text works to uncover it, reaching an acknowledged limit of knowledge and language.

Although there are a number of structural similarities in the Daoism of Chuang Tzu and the Christianity of Pseudo-Dionysius, then, particularly with respect to the dual, paradox-generating nature of the ultimates in each, the authors respond very differently to these paradoxes. Pseudo-Dionysius resolves the paradoxes in favor of a familiar, relative ineffability that describes God; Chuang Tzu deepens the paradoxes and favors an absolute ineffability in his descriptions of the Dao. In order to explain this difference in the degree of ineffability, it helps to consider Ben-Ami Scharfstein’s hypothesis that “hierarchical thinking of all fundamental kinds tends to favor the belief in an ineffable beginning related in ways we cannot easily understand to whatever follows from it” (139). Taking this into consideration, it is reasonable to explain the different degrees of ineffability by the nature of different types of hierarchical thinking.

For Daoism, the relevant hierarchy is one of differentiation. Komjathy explains how Daoists see the Dao as a reasonable posit to account for the many differentiated concepts one finds in the world (104). The hierarchy of varying levels of differentiation that leads back to the Dao is also represented in the *Daodejing* and the *Zhuangzi*:

“The Dao generated the One,
The One generated the two,

The two generated the three,
 The three generated the myriad beings
 The myriad beings carry yin and embrace yang,
 And it is empty qi that harmonizes these” (Komjathy 102).

In this hierarchy, the Dao must be posited as the nondifferentiated source that is responsible for the undifferentiated source that is in turn responsible (through many divisions) for all differentiated things. Concepts and words necessarily refer to differentiated things, so they struggle to describe the undifferentiated unity and fail entirely at describing or even referencing the nondifferentiated Dao. The Dao as source is seen as necessary to complete the hierarchy, and when we try to understand its relationship to the Dao that pervades the world of differentiated things, we fail to do so and end at necessary paradoxes. Absolute ineffability then explains the Dao well.

On the other hand, Pseudo-Dionysius’s relative ineffability emerges because of a hierarchy of experience, much like the kind of ineffability Scharfstein favors. According to Scharfstein, to call something ineffable is to make “a declaration that one judges other things in the light of these cherished experiences, and not the opposite. The ineffable is then the experiential criterion that one refuses to judge in terms that one feels are alien to it and contradict its finality” (185). When Pseudo-Dionysius treats both affirmations and negations about God as having a common meaning in order to reconcile the paradoxical relationship between the two conflicting ‘Christianities’, he does this by seeing language—along with ineffability—as relative. When he affirms and negates the divine name ‘Good’ of God, he is really saying that the human concept of good does not compare to the goodness of God. God, for Pseudo-Dionysius, is then ineffable precisely to the extent that it is not judgeable by the ordinary terms of human experience. By recognizing the relativity of language and experience, as Scharfstein does, he arrives at a God that is relatively ineffable.

Daoism and Christianity share tensions between an ineffable, transcendent ultimate and an understandable and speakable ultimate that pervades the world. While the works of Pseudo-Dionysius offer one possible way of resolving the linguistic paradoxes that stem from these tensions, the *Zhuangzi* serves to deepen and draw them out in the hopes of expressing the paradoxes themselves more clearly. The result is that for Pseudo-Dionysius, ineffability is relative; for Chuang Tzu, ineffability is best described as absolute. One possible explanation for the differences in degree of ineffability between the traditions (despite the similarity in the tensions surrounding the ultimate) is the different kinds of hierarchy that each religion makes use of in exploring why the ultimate is ultimate. The Dao, as the ultimate in a hierarchy of differentiation, is beyond all differentiated things, including concepts; Pseudo-Dionysius's God, as the ultimate in a hierarchy of experience, is only beyond the common human experience of these concepts.

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