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### Ineffable Relationships and the Relationship with the Ineffable

Religion is a uniquely human activity. It has helped give meaning and understanding to those who practice it in all of its various forms. Many of these forms of religion have discussed the concepts of ultimacy and ineffability. Often the two concepts merge and the ultimate becomes ineffable in several different religious traditions. For example, the religions of Daoism, Sikhism, and mystical traditions in Christianity have all postulated an ineffable ultimate. When one compares these three religions, one notices that they all employ language indicating a desire to somehow experience or relate to (in a similar way in which humans relate to each other) their religion's ineffable ultimate. One can explain this phenomenon of religions seeking to experience or relate to the ineffable ultimate by a combination of anthropological principles and the concept of ineffability itself.

The religion Daoism originated in ancient China. According to the *Shiji*, the philosopher Lao-Tzu was a contemporary of Confucius and created Daoism (Komjathy 20). Lao-Tzu is also said to have written one of the primary religious texts of Daoism, the *Daodejing* (Komjathy 19). However, modern scholarship suggests that Lao-Tzu, at most, is a "pseudo-historical" figure (Komjathy 19-20). And the text of the *Daodejing* is a composite work, more akin to an anthology of various Daoist writers (Komjathy 20). Another primary Daoist religious text is the *Zhuangzi* (Komjathy 19-20). The *Zhuangzi* has historically been viewed solely as the work of Zhuang Zhou (Komjathy 19). But, like the *Daodejing*, scholars contend that the *Zhuangzi* is comprised of

the work of many different authors (Komjathy 20).

Daoist “theology” is centered on the mysterious Dao. Theology is to be understood loosely here; the Dao is not a god or divine being (Komjathy 110). Louis Komjathy makes this important observation about the Dao, “From a Daoist perspective, that which is referred to as “Dao,” has four primary characteristics: (1) Source of all existence; (2) unnamable mystery; (3) All-pervading sacred presence; and (4) Universe as cosmological process” (112). It is the second reason why Komjathy uses the phrase “that which is referred to as “Dao.” He quotes the *Daodejing*’s opening line which says, “The *dao* that can be spoken is not the constant Dao/ The name that can be named is not the constant Name” (111). Komjathy thus states, “From a Daoist perspective, veneration of the Dao and commitment to realizing the Dao involves both recognition of the [Chinese] character [for the Dao] as a place-holder for [ ]...” (111). Further, “To mistake “Dao” for [ ] is either idolatry or a mistaken view,” because “labelling ... [ ] as “Dao” limits its suchness” (Komjathy 111).

Statements like those above have lead Daoists to suggest that the [ ], represented as “Dao,” is ineffable. Evidence for this position comes from the *Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* has several means of arguing that the Dao is ineffable. One way it does so is through the metaphor of Nonexistent Existence. In Chapter 22, section 8 of the *Zhuangzi*, it says:

Resplendent Light inquired of Nonexistent Existence, saying, “Master do you exist or do you not exist?” Not getting an answer to his question, Resplendent Light looked at the other’s sunken, hollow appearance intently. For a whole day, he looked at him but couldn’t see him, listened to him but couldn’t hear him, groped for him but couldn’t grasp him. “The ultimate!” said Resplendent Light. “Who else could attain such a state? I can conceive of the existence of nonexistence, but not the nonexistence of nonexistence.

And when it comes to the nonexistence of existence, how could one attain such a state?"

(220)

Thus, just as Nonexistent Existence is indescribable (i.e. ineffable) and ultimate, so is the "Dao." Another way in which the *Zhuangzi* argues that the Dao is ineffable is by comparing language to the chirps of birds (14-15). If speech is as meaningless as bird chirps, how can language convey anything, much less the ultimate? These are only two of the ways in which the *Zhuangzi* argues for the ineffability of the Dao.

Sikhism, roughly two-thousand years after Daoism began in China, emerged in India-Pakistan. Historically, Sikhism traces its origins to Guru Nanak (Cole 310). Guru Nanak was from the Punjab region of India and lived from 1469-1539 CE (Cole 310). At the age of thirty, Nanak disappeared for a few days and had some sort of mystical experience (Cole 312, 314). Regardless of the particulars of his experience, when Nanak reappeared, he made the statement, "There is neither Hindu nor Muslim, so whose path shall I follow? I shall follow God's path. God is neither Hindu nor Muslim and the path I follow is God's" (Cole 314). Thus Sikhism was founded. According to W. Owen Cole, following his religious experience, "for over twenty years Guru Nanak travelled widely, encouraging women as well as men to follow 'God's path'. (Sic) He felt inspired to establish *sangas*, communities of people who shared his beliefs" (314). Upon his death, Guru Nanak bestowed authority to a disciple, Guru Angad (Cole 315). This transfer of authority would happen several more times so that there were 10 Gurus from circa 1500 to 1708 (Cole 315). "The last Guru's final act was to install the *Adi Granth* [the sacred book of Sikhism] as his successor. Since then it has been called the *Guru Granth Sahib*, though the name *Adi Granth* is still used almost as a synonym" (Cole 319).

According to Sikh theology, God, Akal Purakh, is ineffable. Nikky Singh, in her book,

*The Name of My Beloved*, includes a translation of the Sikh poem the *Japji* (45). Her introductory note about the *Japji* says, "It is the first prayer in the Guru Granth, and encapsulates the fundamental philosophical and ethical beliefs of the Sikhs" (45). As early as the second stanza of the poem/prayer, the *Japji* portrays Akal Purakh as ineffable. "By the divine Will, all forms were created;/ what that Will is, no one can say" (Singh 48). The fifth stanza repeats the claims of ineffability, "Were I to comprehend, I'd still fail to explain,/ for That One is beyond all telling" (Singh 49). Other parts of the *Japji* which deal with the ineffability of Akal Purakh are the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, and seventh stanzas (51-53). Regarding stanzas 13 through 15, they all end with the lines, "So wondrous is the immaculate Name,/ It is known only by those who hold It in their mind." If the wondrous nature of the immaculate Name can only be known by those who hold It in their mind, then the name is beyond communication and thus words.

Concerning Christianity, its history is intertwined with mysticism and mystical practices. Steven Fanning, in *Mystics of the Christian Tradition*, notes that the Gospel accounts have several similarities to the mystery religions of the Greco-Roman world (6-10, 14-17). He proceeds then to document the mysticism in the rest of the New Testament (17-20). Thence, Fanning examines the mystical strands of Christianity in the early and medieval Eastern Church in the second chapter of the book. Examples of such mystics include: Clement of Alexandria, Origen, the "Desert Fathers," Gregory of Nyssa, Pseudo-Macarius, John Climacus, Pseudo-Dionysius, and others (22-44).

For many, if not all, of these mystics, God was considered to be ineffable. Fanning quotes Clement of Alexandria saying, "God is invisible and beyond expression by words" (23). He includes a quote from Origen which says, "God is incomprehensible, and incapable of being

measured... whose nature cannot be grasped or seen by the power of any human understanding, even the purest and brightest” (25). Part of a sermon by the desert father John of Lycopolis reads: For no one can suppose that he can behold the being of God himself, but he shapes for himself some kind of appearance or image in his heart in some corporeal likeness” (Fanning 29). According to John’s sermon, then, God is ineffable since His being is not like any conceivable thing. Similar quotes are to be found in the writings of the other mystics. Hostile witnesses, if they agree on a particular thing, are often the best evidence in favor that something is the case. Interestingly, Fanning summarizes an argument against the Christian mystics about the ineffability of God (41-42). Therefore, there is ample evidence that ineffability has been an essential part of mystical Christian theology.

The short summaries hitherto provided are nice, but what do they mean? This question can only be answered by the comparison of the religions. However, this process of comparing religions isn’t as straightforward as it may first appear; it has been met with opposition. The scholar of African religions Benjamin Ray writes in the book *A Magic Still Dwells* a short defense of the practice of comparing religions (101-115). He summarizes and argues the argument of cultural particularism (102-106). Ray defines the theory as “the view that different societies are culturally unique and hence fundamentally unknowable by outsiders and incomparable” (102). Ray goes on to critique the argument noting that in order for one to argue that different societies are truly unknowable by outsiders, one would have to know the different societies (102-103). Ray also points out another argument against cultural comparison:

The basic problem is the widely held assumption that cultures constitute independent epistemic domains with their own languages and standards of meaning and truth.

Outsiders should not talk of truth or engage in moral evaluation of other cultures because

that would only privilege the outsider's cultural domain. (104)

He responds that scholars “can only check [their] *understanding* of other people's languages by living in [another's] society, developing linguistic competency, and assessing their statements about the world” (104). I would contend that there is another response—translation. There is no special reason why someone from one culture cannot go into another person's cultural domain and translate his/her original culture into the new culture's terms. Thus using translated materials, like I am, is perfectly legitimate, though not ideal, to compare cultures.

Based on the summaries of Daoism, Sikhism, and mystical Christianity given above, all three posit the existence of an ineffable ultimate. In Daoism, as has been noted, the thing which we call the Dao is ineffable, but it is also an Ultimate (i.e. that than which there is no greater) thing (if thing is an acceptable term to use here). Komjathy says of Daoist cosmogony that, “One dimension of the Dao manifests in and as the universe as cosmological process (“Nature”). ... The foundational Daoist cosmogony involves the spontaneous transformation that led from primordial nondifferentiation to differentiation” (102). That is to say, the Dao is the source of, and, in one sense is, the universe. Thus the Dao is viewed as ultimate. Akal Purakh and the mystical Christian god are similarly viewed as ineffable and ultimate. Singh includes what appears to be a Sikh creed before the text of the *Japji* (47). It reads, “There is One Being/ Truth by Name/ Primal Creator/ Without fear/ Without enmity/ Timeless in form/ Unborn/ Self-existent/ The grace of the Guru” (Singh 47). Certainly these are the attributes of an ultimate. Finally, for the Christian mystics, Fanning says this about their belief in God as the ultimate, “God can be known only through direct revelation because, ... God is transcendent” (23). Transcendence goes beyond all categories thus it is greater than those categories. If God is greater than every category, then God must be ultimate.

Because the three religions of Daoism, Sikhism, and mystical Christianity all have an ineffable ultimate in common, it is worthwhile to investigate if they have any other element in common. As it so happens, they do; in these three religions, practitioners try to unite, or deeply relate, to the ineffable ultimate of their respective religion. In the mystical traditions of Christianity, many of the mystics try to relate to God through various means. Fanning provides a quote from Pseudo-Macarius' Great Letter, "Such a person [who has completely renounced bodily desires and is in constant prayer] shows himself to be a pure dwelling place for the adorable and Holy Spirit, from whom he receives the immortal peace of Christ, through whom he is joined and united with the Lord" (32). Singh notes that in Sikhism (and various other religions) a recurring metaphor for the believer has been that of the bride (90-91). The reason why the bride metaphor is used, according to Singh, is that humans "urge for union with the Divine" (90). As for Daoism, desire to reunite with the Dao is expressed through the concept of nonaction. Chapter 11 (traditionally numbered 48) of Victor H. Mair's translation of the *Daodejing* says, "The pursuit of learning results in daily increase./ Hearing the Way leads to daily decrease./ Decrease and again decrease,/ until you reach nonaction./ Through nonaction,/ no action is left undone" (16). It is by cultivating the way of the Dao that one practices nonaction. And by practicing nonaction, one becomes more the Dao. Thus it is through nonaction that a Daoist tries to unite with the Dao.

With all this talk about various religious conceptions of an ineffable ultimate, and the common religious desire to unite with the same, warrants a discussion of ineffability itself. The term "ineffable" is an adjective, which when applied to a noun, means that the noun is beyond words. The term beyond lends itself to the question of how far beyond something is from another thing. Thus there are various degrees of ineffability: absolute ineffability; partial ineffability; and

its opposite, effability. Concerning absolute ineffability, an example of something which is claimed to be absolutely ineffable is the state of speechlessness. From time to time, people utter the phrase, "I'm speechless." However a problem immediately arises if one understands the phrase as expressing an absolute—through speech, the person described their speechlessness. Thus if someone claimed that the object which they perceived was absolutely ineffable and they said of the object that it is absolutely ineffable, they would likewise contradict themselves. Understanding ineffability, or in the case of the first example, speechlessness, absolutely implies a contradiction and is an incoherent concept. It is for this reason that many philosophers are skeptical of ineffability as a concept.

Regarding effability, unlike its contrary, absolute ineffability, does not imply a contradiction and is thus coherent as a concept. The argument that everything conceivable is completely effable runs something like this. If something is conceivable, it can be symbolized. The symbol expresses all the relevant facts of the thing which is symbolized. For example, saying that a ball is a sphere completely describes the shape of the ball. If the ball is red, the symbol red completely denotes the color of the ball. And so forth with other words. Because words are symbols, and symbols fully express the thing symbolized, and anything which is conceivable can be symbolized, it follows that everything can be entirely expressed in words.

As for the third and final category, partial ineffability, it too is a coherent concept insofar as it does not imply a contradiction. There are two reasons why something may be considered to be partially ineffable. The first reason has to do with the fact that communication depends upon a shared system of communication. Suppose that two sentient beings are to trying to communicate with one another. If one tries to communicate via a system which the other does not comprehend, then the thoughts of the communicator are ineffable, the things expressed in words fail to convey



their intended meaning. Because the particular words fail to express the thoughts of the communicator, the thoughts are beyond words. The second reason, relying on David Hume's *Of the Origin of Ideas*, is that: imagination and perception are different experiences. Closely related to the first reason behind partial ineffability, communication is contingent upon shared experience. A person who has been blind all his/her life has no notion of the various colors which others perceive. Thus when a person who can perceive colors is communicating with a person blind since birth, he/she can symbolize the colors for the blind person. However, no matter how hard the sighted person tries, he/she cannot get the blind person to experience the colors themselves. The symbol only works because memory, through imagination, recreates the experience of perception. Since the blind person has never experienced the multitude of colors, memory and imagination return a null result. But now, let us suppose that two different people are conversing and have experienced similar events. The subjective experiences of perception by the two fail to be fully conveyed in communication. For the experience of memory and imagination working together to create a mental image cannot do so to the degree that senses are able to. Thus we can confidently say that subjective perceptions are partially ineffable—they can only be hinted at in words.

Returning the comparison of Daoism, Sikhism, and mystical Christianity, judgment can be given about the ineffability of the three ultimates. The rhetoric surrounding the Dao appears to be that of absolute ineffability. If it is the case that the Dao is to be understood as absolutely ineffable, then the Dao is not a coherent concept. However, the argument against Daoism is only conditional and thus if one can show that which is called the Dao is to be understood as partially ineffable, then Daoism retains its intellectual respectability. As for both Sikhism and mystical Christianity, Akal Purakh and the Christian God, appear to be rhetorically framed as being

partially ineffable. Therefore they are not in the same predicament that Daoism finds itself. Regardless of the coherency, or lack thereof, of the various religions' ineffable ultimate, an account must still be given as for why believers of the three religions hitherto discussed try to unite with their ineffable ultimate. Perhaps an investigation into human social and psychological constitution will reveal the answer.

As many have noted, humans are very social beings. At the beginning of life, a human has a profoundly intimate relationship with his/her mother. As the child advances in years, the child forms more and more relationships with other people. Some of the first non-maternal relationships which a child forms are those of other family members—the father, siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents, etc. Afterwards, as the child continues to explore its world, it will start to develop relationships with family friends and neighbors. Further, other children and care-givers to whom the child is entrusted will forge a relationship with the child. The course of development of these relationships doesn't have to follow this sequence, nor is the creation of relationships ended in a person's childhood. Instead, the above demonstrates that relationships are an integral part of a person's development from the earliest parts of that person's life.

All the relationships which a person forms with others are likely the source behind the process of anthropomorphizing. It seems that just about everything has been anthropomorphized by various individuals. Animals, especially as they appear in literature, are a prime example of this anthropomorphizing tendency. The many similarities between humans and mammals may be posited as why they are anthropomorphized. However anthropomorphizing is not only limited to animals similar to humans, insects and fish are also anthropomorphized. Further, plants have been anthropomorphized too. Inanimate objects have been the recipient of anthropomorphizing

as well. Finally, thoughts themselves have been anthropomorphized through the phenomenon of “imaginary friends.” Some reason must be given for why things are so commonly anthropomorphized. The most likely contender which explains anthropomorphization is that humans, as social creatures who desire relations with humans, will anthropomorphize non-human things to fulfill that desire.

Further inquiry into the ineffability of experiences and relationships will complete this anthropological investigation. Feelings, given the name and their qualities, seem to be known through some type of perception; or they may be somehow related to the awareness of perceptions. Regardless, insofar as feelings are perceptible, they are just as ineffable as other perceptions like color. Further, feelings are the basis for the continuation or cessation of many relationships. For example, the irrational feelings and sentiments commonly called “love” are the basis for romantic relationships. The feeling of pleasure (in part responsible for desire) is a broader expression of the common feeling which motivates relationships. Consequently, relationships and the desire to form relationships with others are also partially ineffable.

It is the combination of these anthropological principles and their properties which explain why practitioners of Daoism, Sikhism, and Christian Mysticism, seek to unite or relate to the ineffable ultimate. As has been said, humans are social animals, who often try to relate to something by anthropomorphizing that something. Given the partial ineffability of perceptive experiences, emotions among them, it isn't very surprising that the concept of an ineffable ultimate exists. Less surprising still is that humans, cognizant of the partial ineffability of emotions, would try to unite to the ineffable ultimate through a relationship. The only difficulty that I can see for this theory as to why people try to unite or relate to an ineffable ultimate is Daoism because the Dao is impersonal. However, it is quite likely that the human quest to form

relationships is responsible for the desire to unite with the Dao. What makes Daoism differ from Sikhism and mystical Christianity in this regard is that the Dao isn't anthropomorphized. Nonetheless, Daoists, as they cultivate the way of the Dao through nonaction, do so to unite with the Dao. This desire for unity has parallels in human relationships with the idea of "closeness." Therefore Daoism does not refute the idea that it is anthropological principles which govern religious desires to relate to and unite with the ineffable ultimate.

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