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Expressing the Inexpressible:

Zen Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, and Ineffable Language

Ineffability can be defined as that which cannot be described or expressed in words because it is beyond human understanding, for it may be too sacred, too personal, too important, too beautiful, or the right words simply do not exist (class notes). This suspension of complete understanding is critical to many religions for various reasons individual to each practitioner and each tradition. But, ineffability becomes more complex when it is understood and analyzed from a more linguistic perspective. In this way, defining ineffability contradicts the very intent of the word—as the Poet Christopher Janke noted, if something can be called ineffable, then it has been at the same time removed from that very category for “we have described it as indescribable” (Janke lecture). This presents the possibility that nothing that is known is ineffable, and that everything that can be described or termed is, in some way, effable, which also suggests that only that which is not known is truly ineffable. Only those ideas, which have not yet been thought, can truly be ineffable. But this poses a contradiction to the ways in which Divine beings are perceived and described within religious systems. Various religious traditions attempt to explain the Divine, but in doing so, also attach a claim of ineffability to this description and attribute ineffability to the unknowable quality of the Divine in itself. Religious philosopher John Hick’s investigation of the Divine connects various religions through the distinction between the Divine, or as Hick terms it, the “Real” as various religions experience it and the “Real” as it

actually is (*an sich*) which is truly ineffable. However, in understanding the ineffability of these religious traditions, specifically Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, the inherent limitations present within language itself illustrate a more complicated understanding of how these religions are organized and practiced and how they relate to one another.

In his essay titled “An interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent” John Hick considers the ways in which religious traditions approach and describe divine beings, and he specifically seeks to understand how all of these religions relate to one another. One of the ways that he rationalizes this is by theorizing that all of the religious traditions pose interpretations of one same being—one “Real”. But the ways that these religions understand the Real is not necessarily the Real as it is, or the Real *an sich*, but rather it is the Real as thought and experienced. Hick explains:

We now have to distinguish between the Real *an sich* and the Real as variously experienced-and-thought by different human communities. In each of the great traditions a distinction has been drawn, though with varying degrees of emphasis, between the Real (thought of as God, Brahman, the Dharmakaya...) in itself and the Real as manifested within the intellectual and experiential purview of that tradition. (236)

The Real as experienced then is not truly ineffable because it can be explained in certain ways and it is not completely outside of the bounds of expression—it is embodied by the Divine of each individual religion. However, the Real *an sich* is what these various religions attempt to understand, through their interpretations of the Divine, but none of the representations are completely accurate because the Real *an sich* is completely ineffable. Hick’s analysis is a way of attempting to understand the ways in which the religions are so similar and often make claims of ineffability without actually making any judgments on legitimacy or accuracy in these claims. Hick is also able to reason that each of these perspectives is helpful because they are able to conceptualize and reason through ineffability, for “it would indeed not make sense to say of X

that *none* of our concepts apply to it. For it is obviously impossible to refer to something that does not even have the property of ‘being able to be referred to’”(Hick 239). So these various traditions are means of making that which is ineffable effable to a certain extent.

Hick also explains his reason for the Real in the singular form, despite the fact that he argues that the Real an sich is completely ineffable and therefore cannot be quantified because there is no thing to count. He reasons that the method of accounting for a plurality of religious experiences is through uniting them through one sort of ultimate, for if there are multiple ultimates then none can truly be ultimate (Hick 248). So the Real an sich is “the unique One without a second” (Hick 249). In this way, Hick is also able to unite the Real as the personal and the Real as the impersonal through a Real that cannot be described as either, and a Real that stands as one alone.

The religious tradition of Buddhism poses one opportunity through which Hick’s theories may be understood. More generally, Buddhism is a nontheistic religion without a personal God, or as Buddhists at the 1993 Chicago Parliament of the World’s Religions stated, it “is a religion of wisdom, enlightenment and compassion” (Fisher 134). Buddhism focuses on a path of understanding the teachings of the Buddha in order to reach a state of Enlightenment, often termed “Nirvana”. The man who became the figure of the Buddha, who has been historically identified as Siddhartha Guatama, most likely lived for approximately eighty years during the fifth century BCE, though he is not a deity by any means for ‘the Buddha’ is actually a generic term meaning “Enlightened One” (Fisher 129). The Buddha has been “portrayed as the reincarnation of a great being who had been born many times before and was drawn to earth once again by his compassion for all suffering beings” (Fisher 130). He is not a deity to be worshipped but a leader who explains the path to Enlightenment through explaining the Four

Noble Truths about suffering and the Eightfold path for liberation from *samsara*, or the wheel of birth and rebirth (Fisher 131). Enlightenment, then, is the realization of Buddha Nature (or Buddha Dharma) which is the way that things are, the ‘suchness’ of things—the inherent goodness and balance that is present within all things. It is also the understanding of the temporality of all things—the letting go of conceptions of permanence which cause suffering. The Dharma is not external, however, because it is actually inseparable from the self (Dogen 41). In Enlightenment there is totality and there is unity in all things. However, Enlightenment is not necessarily a place or a time or any sort of solid concept—it is not necessarily a thing to be reached, but a process in itself.

While there are many forms of Buddhism practiced, Zen Buddhism more specifically seeks to preserve a sort of essence of the teachings of the Buddha through dismissing scriptures and other Buddhas and instead experiencing the Dharma, the way that things are in themselves and the impermanence of everything. One of the foremost philosophers on Buddhist thought is Dogen, who interprets and expands on many of the theories of the Buddha through a set of fascicles that address specific teachings, which are all compiled into Dogen’s *Shobogenzo*.

In the 9th fascicle ‘On ‘Refrain from All Evil Whatsoever’ Dogen explains what Buddha Nature is and why it is important to Zen Buddhism. Dogen states that Buddha Nature is “being impermanent, it is being subject to causality, and it is being free, because it is letting go” (Dogen 81). Buddha-Nature is a sort of inherent ‘suchness’ of all individuals and all things, even inanimate objects, and realizing that is critical to reaching Enlightenment. Dogen’s explanation speaks to how Buddhism is a practice that focuses on non-duality—on recognizing a sort of unity between the self and all things, and that “the Buddha Dharma consists above all in practice that strives to eliminate views that distinguish self and other” (Dogen 26).. However, there is an

important distinction to be made that recognizing Buddha Nature in the self is not the same as understanding that “the self is the Buddha” for that assumes a sort of label and permanence to the self, and a distinction between the self and others (27). In what appears to be a contradiction, Dogen further illustrates the means by which Buddhism is non-dualistic, and how dualistic thought can be limiting. Realizing nonduality allows an individual to see beyond the absence of all things and the concrete existence of all things to understand how everything is temporal. The Buddha way, then, is to let go of dichotomies and see a oneness and see things as they are—to see entities as interconnected and nondual. Within this is a process of understanding the dichotomies and, to a certain extent, looking beyond them to see totality (Kopf lecture).

The process by which an individual reaches Enlightenment focuses on understanding the self and the unity of the self with all things, and experiencing such unity through *zazen*, or sitting meditation. This practice of *zazen* is extremely rigorous and focuses on proper techniques of sitting with an upright posture, staying still, breathing properly, and clearing the mind. In some schools of Zen Buddhism, *zazen* can allow an individual to experience a sort of “thusness” that “comes in a sudden burst of insight, or *kensho*” (Fisher 158). Dogen places great emphasis throughout his teachings on the importance of the proper path to Enlightenment, which is through *zazen* and correct meditation. When Dogen explains the proper method of *zazen* meditation in the 54th fascicle ‘On the Dharma That Nonsentient Beings Express, even the means by which he explains the process is very similar to the realization of Enlightenment:

when just one person does *zazen* even one time, he becomes, imperceptibly, one with each and all of the myriad things and permeates completely all time, so that within the limitless universe, throughout past, future, and present, he is performing the eternal and ceaseless work of guiding beings to enlightenment. (Dogen 13)

There is a sort of transcendence of all that is physical that Dogen uses to describe the process of meditation—a sort of unity which again illustrates the importance of non-duality and of rejecting

a concrete conception of time in order to recognize Buddha Nature and realize Enlightenment. But reaching this is also very difficult, and Dogen very specifically notes that a teacher, one who has been “stamped with realization” must guide a student in the proper practice of zazen and of realizing Buddha Nature (Dogen 17).

In Buddhism, ineffability largely surrounds the concept of Buddha Nature or Buddha Dharma, but these concepts are not necessarily ineffable because of the inherent complexity of the ideas themselves—rather, they are ineffable because, according to Dogen, they are not linguistic concepts (class notes). Dogen plays with language quite a bit in expressing non-duality, using it in often-contradictory ways in order to illustrate the limitations of a dualistic approach of language, though he does not necessarily privilege silence over language because the Buddha does not appear to do so (Kopf lecture) Dogen specifically notes the disjoint between words and concepts in the Diamond Sutra, and reasons, “A” is A, “A” is not A, therefore we call “A” A. Through this logic, Dogen argues that a word can only embody an idea to a certain extent because the reality of the term is separate from the concept, but this concept is still best expressed by the term so it should continue to be expressed as such. Dogen illustrates the ways in which language is limiting and contributes to ineffability, but ultimately reasons that language is still necessary to communication (Kopf lecture). Kopf further explains this approach as a means by which Dogen can “destabilize conceptual language” (Kopf 254).

In Hick’s analysis, another depiction of the Real as experienced is evident in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. Hinduism is practiced by approximately 80 percent of the people in India and is an extremely diverse religion which reflects the diversity of geography, culture, and language across India. Within these types of Hinduism, Advaita Vedanta is one of the most influential and is described as “nondualism in the Vedic tradition” (Ellwood and McGraw 59,

83). Advaita Vedanta looks to the Four Vedas as sources of authority while particularly focusing on the Upanishads, which are the last sections of the Vedas centering on a dialogue, and the principal exponent of Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is the (philosopher) Shankara (alternatively Sankara) of the 8th century (Rambachan lecture). One major difference between Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is regarding valid sources of knowledge—this is not as specifically addressed in Buddhism, though it is termed *pramāna*, which is not necessarily scripture and instead must have information that is not accessible in any other way and must satisfy non-contradictedness. Rambachan argues that even the Upanishads are a limited source of authority in these requirements, and supports his theory with Shankara, who believed that the Vedas were not unique in defining the knowledge of Brahman, “but proposed personal experiences as superior to the Vedas” (Rambachan 1).

In Advaita Vedanta, Brahman is perhaps the concept with Hick would describe as the somewhat ineffable Real as experienced, which attempts to explain the Real an sich. Brahman is “the true being, the ultimate selfhood of the world and the human being” but the ignorance of Brahman is what causes human suffering (Rambachan Lecture). It is also the “intelligent” cause for the creation of the universe and the material cause for the creation of the universe (Rambachan 70). Brahman is ineffable within Hinduism because it is beyond time, beyond expression, and beyond any sort of understanding. According to the Kena Upanishad, Brahman cannot be expressed because it is also doing the expressing; “That which one does not see with the eyes, but by which the eyes are seen” (Rambachan Lecture). It is the Subject that cannot become an object, it cannot be examined because it is necessary for being able to examine and to understand. And in this sense, Brahman is ineffable and beyond complete comprehension and beyond expression. Brahman is also understood very uniquely even throughout the Advaita

Vedanta tradition as it can be worshipped through a God of an individual's choosing, but Gods are also created by Brahman and are present in the wheel of birth and rebirth known as Samsara (class notes). This sort of connection to Brahman through another divine being that is still not 'The Divine' or Brahman itself is another way in which Hinduism varies from Buddhism, which relies on a more specifically direct experience with Enlightenment and lacks any sort of intermediaries.

Brahman is also Atman, and Atman is the self or a sort of cosmic soul, or even "the innermost self, the "soul"" though it is not the individual self but a sort of shared selfhood (Ellwood and McGraw 69). When Brahman and Atman are understood, then, a sort of unity is reached. Rambachan explains that understanding Brahman does not cause the world to disappear, but the erroneous understanding of the world separate from Brahman disappears and an understanding of Brahman *as* reality is reached (Rambachan 83). It is the realization "that there is only One—Brahman, Universal Being, God beyond all personalities—and that "Thou art that"—that Brahman is Atman and Atman is Brahman (Ellwood and McGraw 62). When this understanding is reached, then, samsara, or the wheel of birth and rebirth, gives way to moksha, or release.

Some sources have suggested a sort of hierarchical separation between various types of Brahman, in order to better explain and understand it. Para is the higher Brahman (also termed "Nirguna Brahman") and it has been described as "the absolute, non-dual Brahman, transcending time, space, causation, and relations. It is beyond all change and action and free from all names and forms" though it is not the cause of the world because it is beyond causation (Rambachan 84). In this hierarchical system, there is also Apara or lower Brahman, also explained as "Saguna Brahman" which is "God as appearance and not as reality" (Rambachan 84). This relationship is

a sort of illustration of Hick's hypotheses within a singular religion, with Nirguna Brahman illustrating the Real an sich as something completely ineffable and devoid of any possible explanation, while Saguna Brahman is more representative of the Real as expressed and experienced. However, Hick might also argue that Nirguna Brahman is still, to a certain extent, effable and is a perspective by which a religion attempts to explain the Real an sich, and therefore is not a completely accurate representation of the ineffable Real as it is. Ultimately, however, Rambachan argues that this "hierarchical bifurcation in the nature of Brahman" is not actually necessary to preserve Brahman as that which is limitless" (Rambachan 86). Brahman in itself is already beyond all concepts, and thus does not require a split definition to account for the way in which it operates. Brahman defines everything, but is not defined by anything.

Hinduism also advocates a certain level of non-duality similar to that explained by Dogen, and the very definition of Advaita means "non-two" (Rambachan lecture). This non-dual perspective places a similar emphasis on the rejection of time and temporal concepts as that in regards to Enlightenment; "To Hinduism, the meaningful dualism is not of man and nature, or of mind and body, but of the infinite or unconditioned and the finite or conditioned" (Ellwood and McGraw 60).

The way in which Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is practiced is often through meditation, which is quite similar to the zazen meditation described by Dogen. Yoga is one method of a sort of meditation, by which the mind and body are controlled and again the concept of non-duality arises through the unity of mind and body (Ellwood and McGraw 78). Brahman can also be expressed through the mantra or the sound "OM" "whose recitation can give rise to his consciousness" (Ellwood and McGraw 71). However, these practices differ from zazen meditation in the way that Advaita Vedanta does not suggest that there is any sort one proper

method of reaching moksha as Dogen asserts zazen to be the only proper method of realizing Enlightenment. However, both religious traditions emphasize the importance of a teacher, as Shankara likens the guidance of an instructor to a struggling student to removing a blindfold, and “pointing out his identity with the limitless Brahman” (Rambachan 33). Rambachan continuously returns to the idea of identity because the Atman is the self, and he notes that many still focus on the question, “Who am I?” It appears that this is precisely where a teacher can provide assistance—as one who knows the student personally, a teacher can guide a student out of a focus on the external and the temporal and focus on the internal self, to “appreciate the nature of the “I” (atman)” (Rambachan 33).

Ineffability within Advaita Vedanta Hinduism largely surrounds Atman and Brahman and in the non-dual experience of the knowledge of Atman and Brahman because of the finitude of language and the infinitude of the concepts and experiences. Ineffability here does not seem to rest within language as it does within Buddhism, but rather in the very concepts themselves. However, language is still crucial in the way that this ineffability is expressed and understood. In realizing Atman and Brahman, the Upanishads describe a sort of ultimate oneness of unity where separations no longer exist. This lack of distinctions is then rooted in the experience rather than language—without distinctions, the senses cannot truly sense themselves, as Rambachan noted that the eye cannot see itself (Rambachan lecture). Because of this complexity, negation is often used as a form of understanding—*neti neti*, not—not—, provide a means by which these concepts can be grasped (class notes). But all of these descriptions provide some way of understanding that which is claimed to be ineffable, and thus it cannot be completely ineffable.

While both Advaita Vedanta Hinduism and Zen Buddhism both make different claims regarding the source of ineffability and how ineffable ideas can be expressed (or if they even *can*

be expressed), what is key to understanding their ineffabilities is the role that language plays in shaping that which can be expressed and that which cannot be expressed. Ultimately, it is language itself which is limiting—it is language which is unable to capture concepts as they are experienced, and it is language that is unable to fully communicate the individual perspective, and therefore “ineffability is relative” (Scharfstein 3). Because of this, ineffability is to a certain extent, inevitable and inescapable—it is always present. But it is not only the language itself that can be ineffable—it is the way in which it is communicated; writing and speech are both very different forms of communication, for “speech is not only spoken but performed” and it “is not as a solo performance but, at the least, a conversational duet” (Scharfstein 7). Language in itself can then become a sort of inexpressible experience which is quite variable, as the writing on this page differs from the way these words would play into a discussion. Language is also very contextual and dependent upon circumstances—Dogen specifically notes these sorts of limitations of language and even uses language in contradictory ways to create a sort of juxtaposition between the inability to completely explain a concept because of the limits of expression.

Scharfstein argues that ineffable concepts are labeled as such because of four principles: hierarchy, affinity, authority, and intimacy (Scharfstein 138-140). Of those, authority poses a specific relation to Advaita Vedanta Hinduism because it predicates on a need for a superior concept of ineffability—one that cannot be expressed to account for the many other ideas that themselves are difficult to express. It is a concept that is so ultimately complex that it is not only language, but it is by nature ineffable—much like Hick’s Real an sich. But, this need for a hierarchical structure is dependent upon Freudian oceanic experience, which Scharfstein uses to describe a longing to return to a prelinguistic state (Scharfstein 138-140, 185). So, while Advaita

Vedanta Hinduism more specifically appears to depend upon concepts as ineffable, rather than the limitations of language, it is ultimately dependent on both, and upon a frustration with the limitations of language. Rambachan even investigates this concept, and argues that names may be necessary as labels, but they cannot define a person's fundamental nature (Rambachan 33).

Silence, as an absence of language, is also, then, a sort of expression. Words can be so limiting that recognizing their temporality and even refraining from using them can be more appropriate. Dogen recognizes the expression in silence and states that “when you use words to express what you have realized, you will leave unsaid whatever is inexpressible through words” (Dogen 51). Words can only gain context for what they are, but they are unable to express everything at once—without this same limitation, silence may be better than language for explaining that which is ineffable. Schopenhauer also recognizes this constraint within language, but instead of silence, presents music as the ultimate mode of communicating that which is otherwise ineffable. He relies on understanding a reality within the individual that he calls the *nooumenon*—that which doesn't appear, which is similar to Hick's *Real an sich*—and argues that perception is rich and is able to more accurately capture reality, but that it cannot be communicated in the same way that abstractions can be communicated. Art, then, is the way that abstract ideas can be experienced and perceived, and music specifically can do what words cannot (Scharfstein 110).

Scharfstein argues that “we must think less of ineffability in the singular and more of ineffabilities of every kind” (Scharfstein xviii). Ineffability exists in the Divine that various religions attempt to describe, from the ineffable experience of Enlightenment and Buddha Nature in Zen Buddhism to the ineffable experience of Moksha and of understanding Atman and Brahman in Advaita Vedanta Hinduism. But ineffability does not only exist because these

concepts are divine and in themselves attempting to describe what Hick deems as the Real an sich, or the Real as it is which is completely ineffable—ineffability exists in the way that these ideas are expressed and shared and understood. Ineffability is in the very dialogue that surrounds these ideas and the way that language is able, or unable to properly describe them and it is in the everyday. Language in itself contributes to the ineffability in Buddhism and Hinduism because it is unable to completely and accurately describe concepts because of the divide between ideas and reality, between experience and expression. Language can be so limiting that other, more abstract modes of expression are better able to convey ideas and experiences, such as silence, or art and music for Schopenhauer. Or perhaps what is most ideal for both understanding the Real and the everyday is realizing the limitations of language, of accepting that language in itself is limiting, and cannot fully express anything, but that it is necessary nonetheless.

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