

Haashir Lakhani
Professor Timothy Knepper
REL 125
5/14/15

An Argument against the Concept of Ineffability

Ineffability is something that seems to creep up in all walks of life; from trying to explain how much we love someone to experiences with a divine being, ineffability appears to be a fact of life. In the study of philosophy of religion, ineffability is often presented as a problem to understanding the various mystical traditions. This makes sense as if there is something you cannot talk about, it would make understanding said thing difficult to understand. However, there is an argument to be made against ineffability as a whole. People in various traditions seem to be able to describe supposedly ineffable things in impressive amounts of detail. Although many religious traditions claim ineffability in some part of their respective tradition, I would argue that any such claim is false and the supposedly ineffable part of the tradition must be effable. In order to see why I have this opinion, I will present examples of various degrees of ineffability found in mystical traditions and John Hick's and Robert Forman's theories on mystical experiences and show why they are, in fact, not ineffable.

Before we begin to discuss ineffability as manifested in the real world, it is important to fully understand what ineffability is as there is often some confusion on this matter. In the dictionary ineffable is defined as "too overwhelming to be expressed or described with words; inexpressible" or "too awesome or sacred to be spoken"¹ An important point to observe here is that ineffability depends on the one explaining; whether the receiver of the message understands fully is irrelevant. If the person relaying the information is able to describe the object with

¹ Guralnik, David B. Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language. 2d College ed. New York: World Pub., 1970. 719.

words, then the thing can no longer be considered ineffable. Ineffability necessitates a complete separation from language; if something is able to be described at all with words, even if it does not capture the meaning perfectly, than it becomes effable. The parameters for true ineffability are quite extreme and for this reason, it is so hard, even impossible, for something to actually be ineffable.

Ineffability Found in Religions

When talking about ineffability in religious traditions there are two categories that these supposedly ineffable things usually fall into: the divine beings themselves, and experiences of a mystical nature. In Judaism it is mentioned that God is “without origins, gender or form, a being utterly different from what has been created”² The word that is translated as ‘Lord’ used in the story of Moses is said to be too scared to say. It is instead written as YHWH or YHVH. This is interesting as it seems to say that because God is so inconceivable and difficult to imagine, the word used for him must have that attribute as well, otherwise, the word would not properly represent God. Here they are succumbing to God’s ineffability and instead of even attempting to make Him effable through language; they make the word itself ineffable as well. However, this seems rather contradicting as they say YHWH is ineffable, and yet they know that He is without gender, origin and is like nothing that we know of in this world; for an ineffable being, there is a lot said concerning his attributes. YHWH may be mysterious and different from the creatures we are familiar with, but He does not seem to fit the bill for ineffability.

Another place where ineffability is mentioned in Judaism is in the Kabbalistic tradition. The main issue of ineffability here is with Ein Sof, which is the name for God before any other

² Fisher, Mary Pat. *Living Religions*. 4th ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1999. 229.

creation. Ein Sof is understood to be infinite, transcendent and limitless and is said to be so unique and beyond understanding that you cannot even call it 'one' as one is the first number and stands for something. Ein Sof is so singular that nothing in existence can describe it. Since Ein Sof cannot be discussed, it is split into the Sefirot, which serve as a way for the mystics to know and grow closer to God. The Sefirot are a way for the Kabbalists to make Ein Sof effable so that they can know Him better. The Kabbalists have even come under criticism from other Jews who say that the Sefirot is too close to polytheism, "As one iconoclastic kabbalist, Abraham Abulafia, noted, some adherents of the sefirot have outdone Catholic adherents of the trinity, turning God into ten! The kabbalists maintain that the sefirot and Ein Sof form a unity, 'like a flame joined to a burning coal'"³ It is important to realize that the Sefirot are not separate from Ein Sof, rather they represent different aspects of the ultimate; Ein Sof. Because the Sefirot can be talked about with words we can clearly know that Ein Sof is not ineffable as the Sefirot represent part of Ein Sof. Even though all of Ein Sof may not be expressible through language, at least the parts described through the Sefirot are, which makes Ein Sof effable.

It is mentioned that Ein Sof is so above us that the Jewish mystics only ever talk of Ein Sof in negatives, "Here the Jewish mystics adopted the negative theology of Maimonides, who had taught: The description of God by means of negations is the correct description- a description that is not affected by and indulgence in facile language... With every increase in the negations regarding God, you come nearer to the apprehension of God"⁴ This idea that the ineffable can only be talked about in the negative is something found in a variety of mystical

³ Matt, Daniel Chanan. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. 10.

⁴ Matt, Daniel Chanan. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. 7.

traditions. Again, this seems contradicting though as if Ein Sof can be talked about in negatives; it is still being described with words and therefore falls under the category of effable.

Ineffability does not take an obvious front stage in Buddhism. The practices of Buddhism seem to focus around very effable ideas and concepts; but the goal of Nirvana is often said to be indescribable. Nirvana itself, however, is almost the opposite of ineffability; by reaching Nirvana one finally sees the world for what it truly is; the world is made effable,

Dogen says, “The moon/ abiding in the midst of/ serene mind;/ billows break/ into light.”

This verse makes two important points. First, enlightenment is realized in calm stillness of a mind that has let go of grasping and aversion. Second, this enlightenment illumines the vast energy and richness of reality, just as the moonlight illumines the countless bits of light that divide and commingle as the waves break into millions of tiny droplets as they crash against the rocks.⁵

Despite some Buddhists’ claim that enlightenment is ineffable, many of them, including Dogen, describe enlightenment in detail with language. However, even Dogen, who defends the use of language in Buddhism, concedes that it cannot be completely expressed with words, “Be that as it may, when you use words to express what you have realized, you will leave unsaid whatever is inexpressible through words”⁶ However, such a light defeat to language does not render the experience ineffable. Although the consumer of the information might be unable to fully comprehend enlightenment through words without having experienced it, just by the act of describing enlightenment with words it has become effable.

⁵ Koller, John M., and Patricia Joyce Koller. *Asian Philosophies*. 3rd ed. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998. 313.

⁶ Nearman, Hubert. *The Shōbōgenzō, Or, The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teachings*. Mount Shasta, Calif.: Shasta Abbey, 1996. 511.

God, or Allah, in Islam bears many similarities to the Jewish Ein Sof; an all-powerful and all-knowing creator God. Also, like how they have the Sefirot in Judaism, Muslims have the 99 names of Allah where God's attributes are described. Like the Sefirot, this is done so that Muslims may better understand all the different parts to their God. The 99 names allow them to understand the attributes of God and then, from there, piece them together and have a more complete understanding of their creator. The multiple facets and transcendent nature of Allah make Him seem ineffable, but the goal of Muslims, in particular Sufis, is to draw nearer and to better understand Allah. In order to achieve this goal, Sufis have written extensively on Allah and how to grow closer to Him, which would make any claims of Allah being ineffable void.

The core of Sufism lies in the Muslim's yearning for a closer connection to God. Everything else in life is seen either as a hindrance or a tool towards this ultimate goal. This is why some Sufis even disregard orthodox Islamic law as they claim that it serves as a barrier between them and God. One of the main ideas in experiencing God in Sufism is fana, or annihilation. Junayd came up with this concept in Sufism, "He [Junayd] longed to be in union with God and to give up the things of this passing world. Yet no mortal, Junayd knew, could ever be united with the One; there must always be a distinction between God and his creatures. But if a person can die to this present self and life, then all that remains is God"⁷ It seems like this experience of God would most definitely be ineffable as there is no self to even remember the experience and then relate it to others. Junayd does refrain from describing the experience too much, however, he still does mention some facets of fana, "Paradoxically, one must be separate from God to appreciate and stand in awe of His majesty and unity. But in this separateness one can also be perfected by God and brought into communion with him, and this is

⁷ Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1994. 257.

what baqa was to Junayd”⁸ Junayd goes on to describe fana as “not an egoistic desire to rise to God; rather, it is a longing to be purified and sustained by and within God, with all base things annihilated and left behind”⁹ Here again we see quite a lot of description for a supposedly ineffable experience. Although fana is often talked about as being ineffable, it is clear that Junayd was able to describe certain aspects of the experience rendering fana effable.

Religions contain many intense beings and experiences that are difficult to describe to people who have not experienced them for themselves. This is a problem we often find with language; try explaining the feelings you have when you hike to the top of a mountain, or the taste of your favorite food. Our feeling that language lacks the ability to properly tell others how we feel is definitely a real issue; however, this issue should not be called ineffability as even if we feel it to be inadequate, words remain a possible, and probably the best, way for us to communicate ideas and experiences to others.

Language and Ineffability

One of the most obvious places where most people see ineffability during their introduction to the concept lies in the everyday shortcomings of language. We often find ourselves unable to fully express how we feel. As mentioned earlier, we often say “I can’t tell you how much I love you” or another example, “I’m starving, I can’t even explain how hungry I am right now”. These common shortcomings of language seem like perfect examples of ineffability, “Yet those who show the most artful mastery of words, the poets, often complain, like old Plato, that words are inadequate to express exactly what they would like to say”¹⁰

⁸ Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1994. 258.

⁹ Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1994. 258.

¹⁰ Scharfstein, Ben. *Ineffability the Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993. 1.

Before we describe such things as ineffable though, it is important to remember that ineffable means that it cannot be described *at all* with words. Even though we may deem our description with language as inadequate at times, we are using words and therefore it is not truly ineffable. If nothing else, we use words to say how we cannot describe something with language and therefore, describe said thing through negation. Although language may seem to serve as a barrier to what we want to say and make things ineffable at times, it is actually what makes things effable as once something is put into words it is, by definition, no longer ineffable.

The power of language is something that is brought up in various religious traditions. In Judaism, the Hebrew language is seen as being full of divine power. In his lecture, Stephen Katz mentioned that the Torah is a book of divine wisdom and that the Hebrew language is God's language. Since the Torah is God's words, by drawing knowledge from them, one can begin to know their author (God) better. One can even, through the mastery of the Hebrew language, possess the power to cause creation. Also mentioned is the power of prayer, particularly divine names, in drawing nearer to God in the Jewish tradition, "Abulafia instead recommends focusing on the pure forms of the letters of the alphabet, or on the name of God"¹¹ Prayer serves as a powerful tool in Judaism, particularly the Kabbalah tradition, to draw closer to God.

The use of language in Sufism is similar to Kabbalah in many ways. They too have a sacred language, Arabic, and use various forms of prayer to have religious experiences with God. Arabic is seen as the divine language and the Quran is the very word of God. They also hold the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in extremely high standing, "The Sufis see their beloved Prophet as thoroughly saturated by the Quranic message, and they believe that in reading it

¹¹ Matt, Daniel Chanan. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. 12.

Muhammad's soul is made manifest"¹² The Sufis always look at the Quran not just at the surface, but at a deeper, more spiritual level. Here language clearly serves as a tool to overcome the perceived ineffability of God by using the Quran and the prophetic tradition to know Him better.

Another way language is used in Sufism is through dhikr. Dhikr means 'remembrance'; referring to the remembrance of God as during dhikr, Sufis will repeat names of Allah or other phrases in order to remember God and thereby attain a religious experience with Him, "It [dhikr] took on a variety of forms, some musical and ecstatic, others quiet and inward, and in the case of the Mawlawis of Jalal al-Din Rumi, centered in a sacred dance performed by 'whirling dervishes', as they are romantically called by tourists"¹³ Language plays such a huge part in a Sufi's, really any Muslim's, path to growing closer to Allah that to say that language is seen as a cause for ineffability in Islam seems ludicrous.

Buddhists often look at language as a hindrance to the transfer of sacred knowledge and because of this are often seen as 'language haters'. They mention the story of when the Buddha held up a lotus flower at a sermon and no one except Mahakasyapa reacted as a reason why language is not needed. In the story, Mahakasyapa simply smiled and the Buddha knew this to mean that he had understood the sermon, which could not have been done with words as it was ineffable. However, even here, the Buddha goes on to explain, with words, what information had been transferred to Mahakasyapa. Perhaps the realization itself could not be brought about simply with words, but it could be explained with words and therefore could not be considered ineffable. Dogen explains how this works in his writings, "Even though it is said to be beyond

¹² Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1994. 245.

¹³ Denny, Frederick Mathewson. *An Introduction to Islam*. 2nd ed. New York: Macmillan Pub., 1994. 244.

the power of our body and mind, we will, nevertheless, spontaneously express what we have realized”¹⁴ What Dogen is saying here is the undisputed fact that sometimes we feel that language does fail to express exactly what we feel. This does not make the matter ineffable though as even if we feel it to be inadequately done, we have described the experience with words; making it effable.

Language is something that we as humans often struggle with. Intense feelings, emotions and experiences carry so much weight that we feel, perhaps rightly so, that language cannot possibly do it justice and so we slap the label of ‘ineffable’ onto such things. Ineffable however is too extreme a word as even though we may struggle with language, it remains one of the best ways to transfer knowledge. Even in Judaism and Islam there is sometimes a sentiment that language can never truly describe the divine in all its majesty. The Sufi master Rabia, known for her love of Allah, had a line of poetry that went, “The one who tastes knows;/ the one who explains lies”. Although there is truth in this poem, to label the topic of the poem as ineffable would be incorrect as though it may be difficult to find words to properly explain it, Rabia, like numerous other mystics of various traditions, did find words to describe her feeling.

Robert Forman’s Ineffable PCE’s

For Forman, not all religious experiences are ineffable, just his pure consciousness events (PCE’s). Forman describes PCE’s as being experiences with low levels of cognitive and physiological activity, not to be confused with a dreamless sleep or other states of unconsciousness. Forman comes up with this model in an effort to explain the supposed ineffability of mystical experiences, claiming that people throughout time of all different

¹⁴ Nearman, Hubert. *The Shōbōgenzō, Or, The Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teachings*. Mount Shasta, Calif.: Shasta Abbey, 1996. 511.

religions and cultures have undergone such experiences. He claims that because language is not present in his PCE's, they are not able to be described with words, "This model also accounts nicely for the well-known ineffability of mystical experiences...According to the forgetting model, however, during the PCE, language, *all* language, is forgotten. Therefore, any language used to describe or report on that experience is *not* language that was employed in the primary event."¹⁵ In short, Forman argues that the lack of language during the PCE accounts for the lack of ability to describe the experience with words, making PCE's ineffable.

This argument is flawed though as just by labelling the experience as a PCE one is making it effable, as Forman has a set description of what a PCE looks like. There have been legitimate accounts of people having PCE's, which seems impossible if they really are ineffable.

But even if Forman could produce testimonials of PCEs from all places and all times, this wouldn't change the fact that these testimonials would necessarily be testimonials of *something*—of some particular kind of experience that is somehow differentiated from other kinds of experience. No testimonial, even the testimonial one makes silently to oneself, can be a testimonial of that which is absolutely ineffable, for every testimonial is a testimonial of something that is somehow said.¹⁶

Here lies the fatal flaw in Forman's claim that PCE's are ineffable; he provides examples of them, which, if they were truly ineffable, would be impossible to do. The very act of acknowledging a PCE as a PCE makes them effable, thus rendering Forman's claim that PCE's are ineffable void.

¹⁵ Forman, Robert K. C. *The Problem of Pure Consciousness Mysticism and Philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997. 41.

¹⁶ Knepper, Timothy. *Against Absolute Ineffability*. 7-8.

John Hick's Theory of the Real and Ineffability

John Hick proposed his theory of the Real-in-itself as a way to explain the plurality of religions found throughout the world. He attempts to make peace between the different religions of the world by saying that they are all correct, “Nor can we reasonably claim that our own form of religious experience, together with that of the tradition of which we are a part, is veridical whilst the others are not.”¹⁷ We must give just as much validity to other’s beliefs as we do our own “For the only reason for treating one’s tradition differently from others is the very human, but not very cogent, reason that it is one’s own!”¹⁸ Hick’s theory seems to explain the variety of religions found in the world, but relies on the idea of the ineffable Real-in-itself, which he says is the source of all religious experiences, “But what the traditions severally regard as ultimates are different and therefore cannot all be truly ultimate. They can however be different manifestations of the truly Ultimate within different streams of human thought-and-experience-hence the postulation of the Real *an sich* as the simplest way of accounting for the data.”¹⁹ Hick proposes that the Real is absolutely ineffable and cannot be comprehended by humans, which allows for him to label all religions as legitimate interpretations of the Real. Although his intentions behind the theory are honorable, Hick’s theory hinges on the Real being ineffable, which, as I will show, simply isn’t true.

Hick’s the Real is supposedly absolutely ineffable, except Hick himself says that how religions see the Real are authentic interpretations, “In so far as the heavenly Father and Brahman are two authentic manifestations of the Real, the love and justice of the one and the

¹⁷ Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 235.

¹⁸ Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 235.

¹⁹ Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 248-249.

consciousness and bliss of the other are aspects of the Real as manifested within human experience.”²⁰ If the way that different religions see the Real are authentic manifestations of the Real, then that would make the Real effable as these manifestations are effable. As Knepper states in his argument against the ineffability of Hick’s Real, “But it is also to say that the Real-as-humanly-thought-and-experienced bear some relation of similarity to the Real-in-itself—that the Real-as-humanly-thought-and-experienced are real or genuine appearances of the Real-in-itself by which the Real-in-itself can be really or genuinely experienced and known.”²¹ If how religions see the Real in this world are genuine representations of the Real, then the Real cannot possibly be ineffable and Hick’s argument becomes contradicting. It’s similar to looking at an iceberg in the ocean; the parts we can see stand for what experiences we can have with the Real and what is below the surface is the Real that we cannot know. Even if the parts of the iceberg below the surface are ineffable, the parts above water are still a part of the same iceberg, or the Real, which makes those parts of the Real effable and therefore neutralizes the idea of the Real being ineffable at all.

Conclusion: The Problem with Ineffability

Ineffability is something that has been a topic among scholars of religion for quite some time. It serves as a way to explain parts of religion that seem too awesome to properly describe with words. However, when these ineffable deities and experiences found in religions are looked at more closely, we find that they are in fact talked about quite frequently. As Steven Katz points out “The main legacy we have of the great mystics is their writings and related linguistic

²⁰ Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989. 247

²¹ Knepper, Timothy. *Against Absolute Ineffability*. 25.

creations. We have no access to their special experience independently of these texts.”²² There is, without a doubt, a kind of knowledge that comes with experiencing things first hand; however, this does not render such topics ineffable as they can still be, and are, described with words. Hick came closest to stumping this argument against ineffability as he claims his ineffable being is unknowable by anyone of this world. However, he undoes his theory by claiming that the manifestations of the Real in this world are authentic parts of the Real. Despite many things found in religion, especially among the mystics, being dubbed as ineffable, we find that these same things are talked about in depth using words. People seem to have an awful lot to say about those things which they claim cannot be put into words.

Even if something seems ineffable, it remains a fact that it is impossible for something to be truly ineffable. In order for something to be truly ineffable, it must, by definition, be indescribable with words. However, the very act of saying something is ineffable contradicts the label that you have just attributed to the supposedly ineffable thing as you have just described said thing as ineffable. In short, the word ineffable is itself a paradox; one cannot call something ineffable without describing it with words, therefore making it effable.

²² Katz, Steven T. *Mysticism and Language*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 4.

