

Jon Lueth
Philosophy of Religion
Dr. Knepper
15 May 2015

Hickean Philosophy and Ineffability: In Defense of an Imperfect Model

Philosophy of Religion. Despite the fact that the term itself was not born until sometime in the 19th century Philosophy of Religion is one of the oldest studied subjects in history. It covers a vast array of subjects concerning religious beliefs, practices, and experiences, the nature and/or very existence of an Ultimate¹. The beauty of Philosophy of Religion is that, while at first it may appear to be an overwhelming topic with far too broad a prospective reach, upon closer inspection it can be seen to break apart into many different “sub-conversations”². These “sub-conversations” then allow for a more in-depth analysis of the religious world around us, by allowing us to narrow our focus onto one or two specific pieces of the larger puzzle and examine it/them for what it/they are truly conveying. These “sub-conversations”, by their very nature as a piece of the Philosophy of Religion puzzle, can have a wide variance in specified topic, ranging from the life after death, to the topic of this essay, those “things” which are said to be ineffable.

Ineffability in and of itself is a sticky subject. To begin a conversation about it, one should first understand what it is. Ineffable, as described in the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means to be "incapable of being expressed in words, Indescribable", or “not to be uttered”. This raises several different questions, many of which Philosophy of Religion inherently finds itself confronting. For example, if something is ineffable, how is that humans still manage to discuss it? Further still, if something is ineffable does that mean it can't be described at all? Or does it

¹ Here I use the term Ultimate as a way to include those religions that are not monotheistic, or theistic at all to still be included in the forthcoming discussion. For the purposes of this essay it will be used to allow Zen Buddhism to enter into the conversation, thus allowing for a more complete discussion of those ineffable “things” that are said to exist.

² For the purposes of this essay the term “sub-conversations” is not meant to signify that any given conversation is inherently subordinate or less valuable to any other. Rather it is used as a way of showing how these conversations fall under the umbrella of Philosophy of Religion as a whole.

simply mean that it cannot be described to its full extent? Can something ever be understood if it lacks the ability to be effed? It is because of this very sticky situation that one can rapidly find oneself in upon embarking on the dreaded ineffability trail that many individuals choose to avoid it completely. It is my opinion however that a topic, no matter how sticky, cannot be ignored when it is so abundant in the very thing Philosophy of Religion is studying; religions. For despite their various differences nearly every religion appears to be tied together on some level by two very specific things. One being the idea, practice, and experience of mystical/spiritual events, the second being the existence of some Ultimate that is, at least in part, ineffable. It is the hope of this essay to explore three major religions (Islam, Zhen Buddhism, and Judiasm) via a Hickean lens as a manner of better understanding no just the religions but also the theory that John Hick has created. Finally it is the hope of this essay to make clear that while Hick's theory is not full proof, it should not be discredited for its one misstep but instead celebrated for its overwhelming successes.

John Hick and His Theory

Before we can begin a discussion of the three religions via a Hickean lens, we must first understand what Hick's theory states. John Hick himself is comes from a Christian Theological background. It is because of this that many scholars would attempt to discredit his theory stating that it relies too heavily upon a theistic, or more specifically a mono-theistic, religion. I would argue however that while his theory certainly does play more to the ideologies of the theistic religions it is absolutely still applicable to non-theistic religions as well. His theories entire purpose was to promote and advocate for religious pluralism as a peace keeping method between the various religions. Therefore, had he structured it in such a way as to block out those religions which are not (mono)theistic he would essentially be contradicting himself and his goal.

Instead Hick crafted a theory which not only allows for non-theistic religions, but could be said to promote them. Hick's theory states that there are two "versions" of one Ultimate. The true Ultimate in its pure form is what Hick calls the "Real as is". This "Real as is" is completely and totally ineffable in that nothing can ever be known of it as it exist outside of the realm of human comprehension, therefore if nothing can ever be known of it, nothing can ever be said or expressed of it³. The second "version" of this Ultimate is the "Real as thought-and-perceived". This "Real as thought-and-perceived" is in fact the same as the Ultimate, however it is a filtered version of the Ultimate. This is the way which multiple religions can exist, as this is how humans attempt to perceive and understand the Ultimate in their minds via their various cultures and traditions (Hick 236). Given this the "Real as thought-and-perceived" is necessarily effable in some respect, given that it must defined in a manner of traditions and values.

Given this it is possible to see where many skeptics of Hick point to his theories tendency towards the theistic religions, however upon closer inspection of his theory we can realize that it in fact is still applicable to those non-theistic religions. By using the idea of an "Ultimate" that exist as both the "Real as is" and the "Real as thought-and-perceived" Hick is promoting the possibility that in fact there is no theistic being⁴ that comprises the Ultimate as it truly exist but instead that the idea of theistic being was created by some humans as a method of attempting to understand the Ultimate. By this logic his theory then complies with and advocates for the ideology of an Ultimate that is not a theistic being. His theory, though not perfectly, is compliant

³ The word choice here is absolutely vital to a proper understanding of both Hick and the ideology behind ineffability. As defined above ineffability is somethings inability to be expressed or put into words. The important distinction here is that ineffability has nothing to do with somethings inability (or ability) to be understood. Yes this is often times connected to ineffability but it is not a requirement of ineffability. This key difference has long sense been a problem for scholars of ineffability as often times readers/peers will interchange the definitions where they cannot be.

⁴ He is also not discrediting the possibility that the Ultimate is in fact a theistic being. This is the very purpose of his theory, to create a way in which all religions can live harmoniously by neither discrediting nor supporting any specific ideology as having the "right" answer to the question "what is the Ultimate?"

with such other religions as Buddhism, a non-theistic religion which views the Ultimate in the “Real as is” as Nirvana⁵. Now with a basic understanding of Hick’s theory developed this essay will now move to examining Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism through a Hickean lens. In other words this essay will now begin to examine these religions and applying Hick’s theory to them as a method of showing just how versatile the theory is.

Hick and Judaism/Jewish Mysticism/Jewish Scholars

Judaism, like all other religions, is one which houses several different interpretations as of the traditions and practices within. This variance in interpretations often times can cause issues not just when studying with a Hickean lens but when studying under any school of thought. For example within Judaism one scholar, Steven Katz, does not subscribe to the possibility that anything can ever truly be ineffable. Katz’s school of thought then complicates Hick’s theory in that it essentially calls its purpose pointless by uprooting the core of the theory. Despite the fact that Katz claims that nothing is ineffable he still makes statements that parallel Hick’s theory. For example, according to Katz the experiences had by mystics, which are then described by mystics, are shaped by prior linguistic influences and form patterns for which the experience is then had (Katz 5). This echoes Hick’s description of the “Real as thought-and-perceived”. Where Katz claims that these experiences, which are shaped by prior knowledge and influences and are then described, are evidence of a lack of ineffability. On the contrary, Hick would likely claim that this is merely how the mystics are “thinking-and-perceiving” the Real. Thus obviously these experiences are not ineffable, as the purpose of the “Real as thought-and-

⁵ Again while the Buddhist view Nirvana as the “Real as is” according to Hick, while it is possible that Nirvana is the “Real as is”, in this case it is actually the “Real as thought-and-perceived”.

perceived” is to be effable via the application of our traditions in an attempt to comprehend the “Real as is” (a feat which cannot be done until the end⁶).

While Katz attempts to completely uproot Hick and his theory are scholars of Jewish Mysticism which appear to subscribe more closely to the theory. Daniel Matt is one such scholar. Matt subscribes to the idea of a personal God of the sefirot, and a transcendent God of the Ein Sof. He continues to claim that while there are various “pieces” within the personal God but “Ultimately however, all of them are one; the true reality is infinite” (Matt 8-10). This is consistent with Hick’s overall theory. In this case the personal God of the sefirot would be parallel to the “Real as thought-and-perceived” in that it is somewhat effable, and the transcendent God of Ein Sof would be parallel to the “Real as is”⁷. The parallel continues in that the God of the sefirot is a “version” or “piece” of the God of Ein Sof, but in the end they are one infinite being. This is the same within Hick’s theory where the “Real as thought-and-perceived” is a “version” of the “Real as is”, which are not two separate Ultimate’s, but rather one infinite ineffable Ultimate. Matt goes on to later give an example of an impoverished person’s understanding of God as an old man with white hair who sits upon a throne. He states that this persons understanding of God is limited by his own imagination as “the divine is devoid of bodily categories” (Matt 22). This is again parallel to Hick’s theory in that humans can only perceive the Ultimate based upon their own thoughts and traditions because the Ultimate is devoid of those limitations that humans are bound by. Therefore the Ultimate exist as the “Real

⁶ The end here signifying death, the destruction of the world, the end times, etc. For Hick one will not know anything of the “Real as is” while a human but will one day receive their answer in the end. I use the term the end here so as not to alienate non-theistic religions or religions which do not subscribe to an afterlife in the same manner as I may due to my Christian background.

⁷ It should be clear that these are only parallels and Hick himself would not be willing to call Ein Sof the “Real as is”. In fact in the overarching theme of Hick’s theory Ein Sof is actually a “Real as thought-and-perceived”. This parallel is merely being pointed out so as to show how Hick’s theory applies even within the confines of Judaism alone.

as thought-and-perceived” in the minds of the human, while truly existing as the “Real as is” which is a being that is incomprehensible.

It should be noted that these above correlations and parallels are heavily present within the confines of Judaism, however as stated in the introduction to this essay, they do not perfectly align. Followers and scholars of Judaism would attempt to assert the claim that Ein Sof is the Ultimate, Hick would not be willing to make this assertion. Hick would point out that by his theory Ein Sof, even as it exist in the realm of prescribed ineffability and is seemingly very similar to the “Real as is”, it necessarily cannot be confirmed as such. This is because, while the Jews may view Ein Sof as the Ultimate, it is merely their perception of the Ultimate based upon their traditions and values. Therefore there still exist, according to Hick, a “Real as is” Ultimate that is effable or perceivable in its true form. This however does not create a problem for Hick or his theory, but rather a problem for the followers of Judaism. Hick’s theory remains unscathed in that it prescribes such instances of the “Real as thought-and-perceived” and understands them as a basis of all religions. Now with the application of Hick’s theory to Judaism completed we will move our focus to the application of Hick’s theory to a non-theistic religion: Buddhism.

Hick and Buddhism/Zen Buddhism/Buddhist Scholars

Out of the three religions that this essay will be examining Buddhism is in theory the one that complicates Hick’s theory the most. This is because Buddhism is a perfect representation of those religions which skeptics claim Hick’s theory alienates. Unlike Judaism and Islam Buddhism is not a theistic religion, and in fact Zen Buddhism adds onto the complication in that it does not view Nirvana as a great trance like experience. Instead Zen Buddhism describes that the person who has reached Nirvana is the one who immerses within his daily life and work. Buddhism also takes issue not just with Hick’s theory but with ineffability in general. In

Buddhism it is possible to express things like say realization non-verbally. This is seen in the story when the Buddha steps up to teach his pupils but merely holds up a flower. One of his pupils looks up and smiles at him, at which point Buddha proclaims that he has had realization. Narratives like this take issue with ineffability because now one must ask themselves if that counts as being ineffable. We must remember that the definition of ineffability is something that is incapable of being expressed in words. So with the true definition of ineffability in our minds we can dismiss these scenes and focus on how Hick's theory does in fact apply to Buddhism.

As stated earlier Hick's theory does reign more harmoniously with those religions which are theistic. However upon closer inspection we can see that just because it is primarily associated and harmonized with those theistic religions it does not necessarily negate or alienate those non-theistic religions. This portion of the essay will work to show the elements of Hick's theory within Buddhism, more particularly within Zen Buddhism, much in the same fashion as was done above for Judaism.

First Zen Buddhism almost certainly allows for the idea of ineffability. According to the religion Zen is not a graspable thing. This then means that it must be ineffable in that any attempt to describe it with words would be an attempt to grasp it. Thus instead of ever actually grasping Zen followers find themselves grasping to descriptions of what Zen is, not actual Zen. This is perfectly aligned with Hick's theory and his description of the "Real as is". Hick states we humans form their "Real as thought-and-perceived" via the use of our traditions. These descriptions, which are meant to be possible descriptions of the "Real as is" are not formed by actually describing any part of the "Real as is" for what it is. Rather they are formed by describing parts of the "Real as is"⁸ for what it is not. For example, nearly every religion places

⁸ It should be noted though that these "descriptions" are never actual descriptions of the "Real as is" for Hick because the "Real as is" is completely and utterly ineffable to humans.

their “Real as thought-and-perceived” (i.e. their understanding of the “Real as is”) as being a transcendent Ultimate. According to Hick this is not because we know that the Ultimate is transcendent of human space and time, but instead because we know that it is not in front of us in our realm of space and time, therefore it must be transcendent of our perceptions of space and time.

Continuing with the application of Hick’s theory within the confines of Zen Buddhism we will also look at the description that John Koller gives on Page 315-316 of his book *Asian Philosophies 5th ed.* Stating that according to Zen and Bodhidharma discursive thinking dilutes us and moves us farther away from the reality. This “discursive thinking” is what Hick would call the “Real as thought-and-perceived”, and the reality that he refers to is what Hick would call the “Real as is”⁹.

Koller then appears to be further supporting Hick’s theory when he states that “...intellectual understanding is incapable of understanding things in their true nature as interdependent arising” (Koller 317). This once again parallels Hick’s theory in that he argues that humans cannot understand the “Real as is” for its true nature and must therefore only attempt to understand it via our perceptions that shape our “Real as thought-and-perceived”. Hick would likely also endorse the ideology that Bodhidharma and Zen promote which states that these “Real as thought-and-perceived” notions are moving us away from the “Real as is”. I argue that Hick would endorse this based upon the basis of his overall theory which states that no religion is necessarily wrong, but also that no religion is necessarily right either. In other words based upon Hick’s overarching theme of defending pluralism by saying that all religions, unbeknownst to them, are all worshipping the Ultimate. Therefore it is plausible to conceive of

⁹ Again this is only in the context of applying Hick to Zen Buddhism, not necessarily how it fits into Hick’s theory overall.

Hick endorsing the idea that the variations on the “Real as thought-and-perceived” are moving us farther away from what the “Real as is” actually is¹⁰.

Now that we have seen the way in which Hick’s theory is directly applicable within the confines of Zen Buddhism, we can now look at how Zen Buddhism fits into the overall picture of Hick’s theory. While the Zen Buddhist would parallel the state of Zen with Hick’s “Real as is” and all other discursive thinkings and descriptions of the state of Zen with Hick’s “Real as thought-and-perceived”. Hick himself would see that the state of Zen is in fact a notion of “Real as thought-and-perceived” that may or may not be the possible Ultimate/“Real as is”.

Hick and Islam/Sufism/Islamic Scholars

We now turn our attention to the third and final religion to be examined in this essay. Islam, and more specifically the Sufi sect of Islam. Islam being a theistic religion naturally fits into the mold of Hick’s theory. In fact with Islam worshipping the same God of Abraham as Christianity and Judaism, it should in theory match exactly. The way in which Islam complicates Hick’s theory however, is that there is very little, at least in respect to the Sufi sect, of Islam that is said to be ineffable. However, like its counterparts Christianity and Judaism, Islam understands that there is One Ultimate (God/Allah) that is transcendent to humans (Denny 257). This is again correlated with Hick’s theory and the “Real as is”.

One of the most interesting correlations between Islamic beliefs and Hick’s theory comes in the form of their practices and beliefs concerning their Christian and Jewish brethren. First and foremost Islam teaches its followers to be understanding of other religions. Primarily this applies to their teachings of understanding towards the Christians and the Jews. Islamic belief is that the Christians and the Jews are both worshipping the same God of Abraham that Islam worships.

¹⁰ I recognize that this is not a perfect statement in that Hick endorses the fact that the “Real as is” is outside the realm of human comprehension. However, I would argue that just because we are not able to comprehend or “eff” the “Real as is” does not mean that we cannot come close or move farther away from it.

They teach that the Jews and Christians are merely misunderstanding the ways in which they are meant to practice worship with God¹¹. Essentially they are saying that the Jews and the Christians have simply misinterpreted God and how they are to follow/worship him. This is directly parallel to the overarching theme of Hick's theory. The followers of Islam are essentially saying that the Jews and Christians "Real as thought-and-perceived" is not a correct interpretation of the One true God (Hick's "Real as is"). The Islamic faith goes on to encourage its followers not to condemn the Jews and Christians but to respect them and their interpretation while not accepting them as correct, as only the Qur'an is correct in its understanding of the "Real as is". Obviously Hick would not be willing to take the same stance that the Qur'an/Islamic faith has solved the mystery of the ineffable "Real as is". It is plausible though that Hick would subscribe, and I would argue in fact does subscribe, to the same teaching of understanding and co-existence of other religions. It seems that both Hick and the Islamic faith share the ideology of there being one Ultimate, with various interpretations of it¹².

Now that we have seen a few small instances of how Hick's theory is applicable within the confines of the Islamic faith we can now move into how Islam fits into Hick's overall theory. As was previously stated the Islamic faith has very little that it considers to actually be ineffable. Some scholars would then assume this mean that it cannot fit within Hick's theory as his theory requires the existence of a completely ineffable being. This is not the case. Hick would likely argue that his theory perfectly encompasses Islam in the same manner that it does the other religions discussed in this essay. In other words, One true God of Islam (Allah) is still not necessarily the "Real as is", but rather it is the Islamic version of his "Real as thought-and-perceived". Therefore it is perfectly acceptable that the Islamic faith is not littered with

¹¹ They go on to say that the Qur'an tells the only correct way of worshiping. More on this to follow.

¹² Obviously the Islamic faith is not as open as Hick's theory in that Hick's theory wants to apply this to all religions whereas Islam is only willing to make this applicable to Judaism and Christianity.

ineffability in the same manner as some other religions, as they are thinking and perceiving the “Real as is” in a mostly effable manner. Hick would say that there is still the existence of an ineffable “Real as is” that exist outside of the Islamic “Real as thought-and-perceived”.

Conclusions and Defense of Hick’s Theory

Now that we have had a brief summary of Hick’s theory and examined how it operates within the confines of three specific religions, one of which is non-theistic, we can now begin to examine the theory as a whole. It should now be clear that, despite what some authors and scholars would argue, Hick’s theory absolutely is applicable to the wide variety of religions, both theistic and not, that exist in the world today. The fact that all three of the religions which this essay chose to examine carried numerous similarities, as well as the fact that Hick’s theory operates in some manner within the confines of these three religions, is testimony to the brilliance of this theory. Had his theory failed to be applicable to these three religions, or failed to bring about similarities within them, I would be willing to concede that his theory is highly flawed. However, since it did not fail to do these things it should be clear that his theory has succeeded. His theory’s entire purpose is to give an answer to the “problem” of pluralism. By showing similarities and showing that it exist within the confines of specific religions it has successfully shown logic behind it. In other words, I am arguing that the fact that it succeeded in these respects propels the success of the theory as a whole.

However, I am not above acknowledging that Hick’s theory is not perfect. As was seen in Zen Buddhism there are areas in which it fails to answer some key questions. These small moments of “failure to explain” should not be the downfall of this theory. This very concept is seen daily in our lives and is not the downfall of various other theories. One prominent example that comes to mind is the theory of evolution. The theory of evolution is a widely accepted

theory, with few people disavowing it based upon its scientific logic. However the theory of evolution is not perfect. I am remembering a time in my own studies with a professor at Drake University where we discussed the theory of evolution. This discussion centered on the idea of human evolution. One common misunderstanding of the theory is that humans evolved from apes. This is not the case, the theory states that humans and apes shared a common ancestor and at some point the genes split and led down two distinct evolutionary tracks, one which led to humans, the other to apes. One this theory does not have an answer for however is what caused the split to occur. Why did the genes after years and years suddenly split and go down two different tracks of evolution? This is a hotly debated topic, but at the end of the day is the theory of evolution still upheld? Yes. I propose we grant Hick the same treatment. Though it may come up short in some respects, the theory as a whole should be celebrated for its overall successes that clearly outweigh the shortcomings.

One other thing I would like address before concluding this essay is the critique of Hick's theory that Dr. Timothy Knepper presents. Dr. Knepper's paper *Against Absolute Ineffability* presents an argument in against the idea of absolute ineffability and in favor of a multi-level idea of ineffability. Dr. Knepper's argument is that absolute ineffability is an impossibility in that "something can only be an object of awareness for us if it is for us in some way, token of some type, a something that is not something else" (Knepper 4). Essentially he is saying that if we are aware of something, it must exist as itself, and not as something else. In other words, if we are aware of something, say Hick's "Real as is" then it must exist within our minds as itself, not as something else and because we are then aware of it as itself it cannot be absolutely ineffable. I argue that this is an incorrect application of the word ineffability and is therefore a null and void argument. As was described earlier, ineffability does not require a lack of comprehension or

awareness, but rather a lack of ability to express in words. This is a distinction that I believe Dr. Knepper himself is well aware of and would subscribe to. Further I would argue that these “manifestations” are not necessarily that of the “Real as is” but in fact a product of the “Real as thought-and-perceived”. These manifestations exist within nearly every religion, but like the religions themselves vary heavily. They vary because they are influenced by the traditions and expectations of any given religion. Because of this heavy influence, these manifestations clearly fall within the confines of Hick’s “Real as thought-and-perceived”.

He goes on to argue that Hick’s theory rests upon the idea of the “Real as is” transmitting itself and giving humans religious experiences via its various “Real as thought-and-perceived” forms. Therefore if the “Real as is” is transmitting itself through the experiences, it must be in some way effable. While at first this appears to uproot the basis of Hick’s “Real as is” I believe that Dr. Knepper has failed to acknowledge one key part of Hick’s theory. Hick states that “We are unable to apprehend [the divine substance] by knowing what it is. Yet we are able to have some knowledge of it by knowing what it is not” (Hick 239). I imagine Dr. Knepper’s response would be that this then implies that we must know something about the “Real as is” and that we are able to speak to these things. I again would like to point out that ineffability does not require a lack of knowledge. With this in mind I would argue that while yes Dr. Knepper would technically be correct, he is not giving enough credit to Hick’s theory. Hick’s theory rests upon the idea that we cannot apprehend the “Real as is” for what it is but for what it is not. I gave an example of this earlier on in the essay by stating that because we do not see the “Real as is” operating within the confines of our concept of space and time we understand that it is not necessarily bound by them. We then assume that it operates outside of our concept of space and time. We have not actually said anything of the “Real as is” for what it is, we have merely said

something of it for what it is not, it is not, as far as we can tell, bound by our concept of space and time. Often times religions will then take this a step further and say that their “Real as thought-and-perceived” is therefore not bound by any concept of space and time. By Hick’s logic we cannot say that, we do not know and cannot speak to the “Real as is” acting free of space and time. Therefore, I believe Hick is able to preserve his argument for a “Real as is” via his use of “negative knowledge” in that we do not speak of the “Real as is” itself but instead we speak of it only in the terms of no.

Ultimately, I am arguing that while Hick’s theory is in no way perfect, its benefits overwhelm its shortcomings. Because of this I feel that Hick’s theory should and does in fact persevere and succeeds in its original goal of providing an answer to the “problem” of pluralism. In the end it is my hope that this essay has in some way shed new light on the perceptions of Hick’s theory and solidified its place in the study of Philosophy of Religion.

Works Cited

Hick, John. *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent*. New Haven:

Yale UP, 1989. Print.

Katz, Steven T. *Mysticism and Language*. New York: Oxford UP, 1992. Print.

Knepper, Timothy. "Against Absolute Ineffability". Web. Accessed 5/14/15

Koller, John. *Asian Philosophies*. 5th ed. Print.

Matt, Daniel Chanan. *The Essential Kabbalah: The Heart of Jewish Mysticism*. San Francisco,

CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995. Print.