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For better or For Worse: a look at the role of Ineffability in Religion.

Why is it that our society talks in code? Why is literature written in such a way that the reader must read between the lines? Why is that military operations and information are often cryptic messages? In all of these cases, the speaker cannot speak candidly or cannot express something adequately. There are some instances where speaking information will endanger yourself and the lives of others. It is also true that once someone says something, there is this belief that those words are “out there”, they’ve become a part of the cosmos and it is difficult to retract the statement made, and almost impossible to amend it. The question then becomes why, with the multitude of communication methods available, do we sometimes feel like we cannot adequately state something? Whether that something be a mystical experience or an everyday occurrence. It seems counter intuitive to consciously label something as ineffable, so it would stand to reason that things are not always purposely labeled ineffable, but spontaneously become ineffable.

Language evolved alongside the development of the human brain throughout time because of humanity’s desire and need to communicate. Prior to verbal and written language, communication was inadequate – reduced to symbolic gestures, pheromones, and facial expressions. It left some things out and in other cases added things that were not meant to be there at all. Now we have art, music, literature, and a multitude of other mediums that set out to satisfy our innate desire to explain, express, and understand things. So why do things become ineffable, difficult next to impossible to “say”? Ineffability seems to argue that for all our advancements in communication we have only made so much progress. Since our brains co-

evolved with our development of language it is possible that we are not mentally capable of understanding the divine, and thus we are unable to sufficiently express it. There must be a motive, or several, that drives humans to say that something is inexpressible. Ineffability seems to serve three major roles; to reaffirm the divinity or sacredness of something, to compensate for the lack of comprehension, and to serve as a symbolic representation of subconscious, oceanic desires. These roles are in no way meant to be viewed as separate entities, but rather as groupings that mix and mingle between one another. Nor are these roles meant to decide whether ineffability is valuable or invaluable. These purposes of ineffability will be identified within Judaism, Islam, Zen and Buddhism, by first looking at what is ineffable, how and to what extent is it ineffable, and which of the above roles does it fulfill.

Before any progress can be made in this paper, some foundations must first be set. In summation, ineffability can be explained as being “dependent on the speaker’s ability to state adequately what they intend to express, not the listeners inability to listen” (Knepper and Kalmanson). There are two important things to pull from here; first that in ineffability it is important to focus on the speaker, not the listener, and second that that speaker feels as though they sufficiently said what they wanted to convey. It can be easy to fall in the paradoxical trap that ineffability lays when it is defined in other ways, or when these two things are ignored. For instances, it is easy to think that just because something is expressed through words or through other modes, it has become effable. As long as the original speaker believes that this expression is insufficient then it is still ineffable, at least partially. Next is the obvious differentiation in ineffabilities. Throughout everyday conversation and religious texts it is clear that not all ineffabilities are identical. Furthermore the way ineffability manifests self across different religions, and thus different cultures, is also somewhat different. While I believe it is not

necessary to form a hierarchy, a classification of the ineffable is in order. There are two precursors to ineffability, first is the “how” and second is the “how much”. The “how” is dependent on the situational context, for instances someone may be unable to speak about something because of an oppressive force, for instance The Holocaust. A situation can also be characterized by the speaker’s beliefs, traditions, and own comprehension of what they are attempting to express. “How much” is often represented by the intensity or the intimacy of the thing being expressed, things that are more intimate and personal tend to be more ineffable. It should be emphasized here that these classifications of ineffability only serve the purpose of clarification in this paper, they are explanations of the vastly different ineffabilities seen in religion and daily life.

### **The Goldie Locks Syndrome of Words**

“An impoverished person thinks that god is an old man with white hair, sitting on a wondrous fire that glitters countless sparks.... But if you are enlightened, you know God’s oneness, you know that the divine is devoid of bodily categories—these can never be applied to God” (Matt 22). The first, and perhaps most obvious role that ineffability plays, is to increase the value of something. To make more divine, that which is meant to be the holiest. This is achieved by contrasting effable and ineffable things, and by over using language or avoiding language. In the quote above, it is said the “the divine is devoid of bodily categories” suggesting that the ideals we have conceived and perhaps perpetuated are not enough to express the divine. There is a subtle renouncement of the usage of language itself to describe what is holy, or spiritual in the Kabala “The crude complacency of imagining divinity as embodied in words and letters alone puts humanity to shame” (Matt 34).

Perhaps this need to denounce language as being sufficient in expressing what is spoken or written is born out of multiple scriptures and mystical experiences being written down after generations of oral translation. As can be seen through Abu Yazid al-Bistami in Sufism and through Jewish scripture and tradition, writing became a form of protecting the things being destroyed, as many of the people who passed on the oral tradition were dying or were being killed. Regardless of the reasons, whether it is the exoteric minded against the esoteric Sufis, or the oppression and dispersion of the Jewish people, writing down what was usually conferred orally allowed these groups to preserve, protect, and to study their scriptures. When information is oral, a connection is made between the speaker and the listener, it is easy to add anecdotes and explain which parts are more symbolic and which are more tangible. However, when information is written, that connection is severed, the reader is often left to their own devices to draw conclusions. Thus it appears at times that language is denounced in part because of its inability to justly explain things on its own. Meaning, language alone is not enough to convey something. Thus the emphasis of ineffable things within the written text, serves as a reminder that the scripture is holy, or is about the divine, and that the words written may not always provide absolute clarity or perfection. It is a simple message, like an author's note to a student's messy study guide. This denouncement of language should be viewed more as a warning or an acknowledgement that the things verbalized will inevitably lack and fall short of their intended goal. Without the recognition that written texts are often incomplete, that language is often not enough, then humanity falls into the possibility of misunderstanding what was written. It makes sense then, that the written portion is often seen as *the tip of the ice burg*, and that further meanings are usually speculated from what the text may imply or leave out. For instance the Qur'an is seen as having three layers within its writings. Abdullah Yusuf Ali explains that

mystical messages are often broken down into “1) a reference to a particular person or situation, 2) a spiritual lesson, and 3) a deeper mystical significance” (Fisher 371). More importantly the usage of language can lead to misguided attachments. It is said that “Every definition of God leads to heresy; definition is spiritual idolatry....Were it not for the subtle awareness that all these are just sparkling flashes of that which transcends definition—these, too would engender heresy” (Matt 32); this shows that there is a recognition of words only being able to accomplish so much.

In particular, renouncing a specific name for the divine, or the spiritual, allows for the focus to shift from the name and the definitions that come with that word, to the divine itself. In the Kabala it is also explained that “the greatest impediment to the human spirit results from the fact that the conception of God is fixed in a particular form, due to childish habit and imagination. (33)”. For Buddhism and Zen, it prevents attachment to what nirvana is and isn't. If you have words attributed to something it becomes harder to let go of. You give a definition to nirvana, or to the Buddha way, and instantly you are accomplishing the opposite, as those definitions and words serve to attach and anchor you. If It is “beyond the power of our body and mind” then certainly any words used to conjured up to express nirvana will ultimately be lacking, “when you use words to express what you have realized, you will leave unsaid whatever is inexpressible through words” (Dogen 511). As best exemplified in the Lotus sermon, there is a place and time for language, and a place and time for other forms of expression and communication. This is not to say that language is bad, but that words and definitions are things that are easy to cling to, as they are often a constant state. Therefore less language, or no language, results in less possibility for error, “‘Not expressing It through words’ is a way of expressing It that is correct from beginning to end” (513).

In the case of Islam, language is over expressed. There are over 100 names for Allah, and one of the most famous Sufis, Rabi'a, consistently uses language when expressing her desires for the Beloved, although it is said that she, herself, never wrote (Albertine). Rabi'a's manipulation of the Arabic language in order to form new words as a way to express her undying love for Allah is not the result of Allah's effability, but rather the elusiveness of language and the complexity of Allah and her devote love. In other words there are so many terms for Allah, because not a single one of them is right. Think for amount, about a time when something was difficult to explain, a multitude of comparisons were probably made, an abundance of words used, all in an attempt to explain something. This is the same scenario for Rabi'a and the numerous names for Allah. Rabi'a's love and desire for Allah is so great, that ordinary words are simply not enough; I doubt that if Rabi'a were here today that she would believe that her word for love was enough to express her true feelings and wants. It is likely that a multitude of words are used as a way to draw attention away from any one word or definition, again pulling focus away from the meaning of the word. Furthermore it is most symbolic that Rabi'a's name is not really a name at all, but a way for people to refer to her (Albertine). Just as God, or the One, or Allah, are most likely not the actual names of the first cause. Over use of language shows the inability of a single word to express something adequately, while the lack of use of language can show the inability of words to explain anything at all. Regardless, the overall amount of language used, whether it is an extensive amount or dismal amount can be used to show why something is ineffable in a particular circumstance.

### **Explaining the Ineffable and Understanding the Incomprehensible**

It is unfair to state, that by having the ability to write or speak about something makes it that thing entirely effable. It is fair to say the things partially expressed through words, and other

modes, are only partially ineffable, but again, it is unfair to say that these things are not ineffable at all. The abundance of mystical texts are not abundant because the material is effable, or easy to explain, but because it is difficult to understand, and thus difficult to explain adequately. The lack of comprehension, and thus adequacy of expression, can be explained through Plotinus' metaphysics.

The three fundamental principles of Plotinus' metaphysics are the One, Intellect, and Soul (Gerson). There is also matter, but for the purposes of this paper that will be left undiscussed. The human body is viewed as an inferior vessel which holds the soul. While the One is the ultimate first principle being both "self-caused and the cause of being for everything else in the universe" (Gerson). For the function of this paper it matters not how many metaphysical categories there are, if there are more or less than Plotinus' four, nor how these principles are arranged. What is important is that soul, or its equivalent, is unable to act upon principles that are beyond its own. The One is able to act and interact with intellect and soul, whereas the soul is unable to interact with principles above it; this is the result of the One being the ultimate first cause. Those things are on a plane that is "unreachable" for it. None the less all mystical experiences claim to transcend that barrier, or claim an interaction with the One. In Islam it is Fana, the sweet annihilation of being, best depicted in a simile used by the prophet Muhammad, "the moth that flies ecstatic into the flame and, as it is burned up, realized Reality"(390 Fisher), Reality here is God. Fana is not an everlasting state though, when Sufis return to their bodies they are left with a great sorrow, according to Al-Junayd "it is like the suffering of being separated from a loved one, the sweet pain of lovers longing to be united over vast distances" (Denny 257).

For unity with God in Judaism, it is stated to think of oneself as Ayin, nothingness, and forget oneself completely. If this is accomplished then unity with God is possible, but this unity is blocked if you are attached to “the material nature of this world”. Thus it is necessary to avoid materialistic attachment, “if you think of yourself as something, then God cannot clothe himself in you, for God is infinite. No vessel can contain God, unless you think of yourself as Ayin” (Matt 71). Ein Sof is equally inconceivable, our understanding of it is barred, and thus our ability to speak adequately about it is also poor. As the Kabala explains “Whatever conception of it enters the mind is an absolutely negligible speck in comparison to what should be conceived, and what should be conceived is no less negligible compared to what it really is” (32).

Lastly is Nirvana, acquired through a multitude of steps, but perhaps most important – at least for this paper – is the notion of letting go. “When we attempt to let go, our skin, flesh, bones, and marrow alike strive to let go (Dogen 511)”, this letting go that is emphasized, more so in Zen, is the same as letting go of the self in Judaism and Islam in order to reach a union with God. The main difference is that instead of God there is this spiritual and intellectual awakening. Although Nirvana, unlike Fana, is a lasting experience, its ability to be described is still lacking. As a continuation from an earlier quote on language and nirvana, “if you have not realized that not all things can be verbally expressed, then you will lack the look of the Buddhas and Ancestors” (511). Nirvana cannot be adequately expressed through language, and if one finds themselves able to explain Nirvana through words, then it is not Nirvana they are speaking about. Ultimately, each religion has a way of leaving behind the body, the mind, the things that tether and tie the soul to this world, in an attempt to unite with the One. Yet, as the Sufi comes back from fana, or when the Buddhist explains nirvana, there is much difficulty. Ineffability is the way that we overcome that metaphysical barrier. It is a way of explaining why we don’t



understand, or why we are unable to “tag” the other word. As things from this world cannot be used to describe anything that occurred in the other principles, since the soul is below the one that was supposedly transcended to, the One.

**Realizing we know what we don’t know: the subconscious has secrets it is not sharing.**

I will admit here, that these last two contentions are very similar, one being philosophical and the other psychological, but it is important to understand the distinction between the two. The first discusses philosophically why we may be mentally unable to express things that are trans-principle, or other worldly. While the latter confers psychologically why we might feel these desires overall. Consequently there may be less to say here, as much of which can be quoted or referenced to here, has already been mentioned above.

“All the divine names, whether in Hebrew or any other language provide merely a tiny dim spark of the hidden light for which the soul yearns when it says ‘GOD’” (Matt 32). “For which the soul yearns when it says ‘GOD’”, maybe this yearning of the soul, is more attributable to the yearning of the mind, or more specifically the subconscious mind. Oceanic experiences, first presented by Romain Rolland, but expanded upon by Freud, explains the overwhelming desires to be united with God as being a result of psychological needs. There will be deviation from Freud here, in the sense that Freud attributes these psychological needs to desires of protection from the father. I find this deviation, or expansion, necessary because in light of modern psychology, much of Freud’s theories are incomplete or are slightly off target. Scharfstein’s description of the Oceanic and how it relates to language is better suited, stating that ‘This experience [Oceanic] is extremely hard to put into words because it is at its most powerful when we are still in a prelinguistic state. Although it is universal, its nature and effects

take forms that accord with the differences in the intimate life of different societies” (185). Once that separation occurs, the loneliness of the universe becomes imposed upon us in extensive and depressing ways. An overwhelming desire, or experience, to become one or united again, to be brought back to a time before separation, is easily viewed in each of these religions as the Unity with the Supreme Being. This, on its own seems to be able to account for how ineffability can differ so much between cultures, yet remain similar, but I think there is a need to assess this prelinguistic state more.

Although these feelings occur at a prelinguistic state, so do a multitude of other emotions, yet a child learns to label those. Surely the child could learn to call oceanic desires as such, if they were taught the vernacular. Again, perhaps what is important is that whatever word would be used to define oceanic experiences, would not be sufficient in expressing this intense and intimate desire. As mentioned earlier, language coevolved with our other mental capabilities. It did not exist before us, it does not exist without us; the same is true for art, music, and other modes of expression. The vocabulary created and used was and is directly correlated to our understanding of the world and our inhabitation of it. Thus ineffability serves as a way to express this oceanic, prelinguistic state of being, without really meaning to or realizing it. Despite the inability to understand this need there are overwhelming instances of yearning, of desires, and longings to be united, in the religions discussed. It is as if we are obsessively determined to explain what the mind, or as it may sometimes be phrased the heart or the soul, is feeling, wanting, desiring, yearning for. This desire can be seen manifested in several ways, from the description of God, to the instances of intimacy with him, and the ability to “say” God’s name. In Jewish mysticism God himself is ineffable; the vowels are absent, leaving the skeleton structure of his name, YHWH. What’s more is that we are given some letters but not others; it is the

vowels which are removed, but not the consonants. Regardless of our ability to know God's name we still strive to attain unity, to reach a place of oneness. Like that moth drawn to the flame, entranced, driven by psychological pulses it doesn't yet understand. We are drawn toward an Ultimate until the day we die, until the day we supposedly reach it. Scharfstein explains that even the metaphysical man himself talks about these intense longings, naming them Beauty. When Plotinus talks of beauty, he first speaks about where beauty occurs, and that its ultimate source is the One. Even here there is an intense yearning and want to be connected with the origin. Plotinus' longings of the One are as follows, "If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it what a shock of delight! .... he laughs at all other beauties and despises what he thought beautiful before" (165).

Perhaps this is easiest to explain this through the Sufi who practically invented loving of the Beloved. As Rabi'a explained to a scholar of Basra, who told her stories and tales of the world, "you love the world very dearly... if you did not love the world, you would not make mention of it so much.... As it is, you keep mentioning it because, as the proverb says, whoever loves a thing mentions it frequently" ( Attar and Arberry 51). The scholar mentions the world frequently, just as Rabi'a and other Sufis frequently mention God. Like the hormone ridden days of puberty, one cannot stop thinking about the things they love and desire the most. It might be the case that the longings for an intimate closeness or a wholeness – regardless of what we are becoming whole with – are echoed throughout the entirety of our lives, and thus throughout all of religion, as an inexplicable need. Just as was the case with metaphysics, ineffability serves as a way to momentarily satisfy that desire, to quell the drive.

**Conclusion: An inevitable Catch-22**

It was challenging to separate things of ineffability, and at the end of it I find myself nauseas because for all my efforts there is still little independence of each role. I am doubtful that there is a single piece here that is completely separate, as all of the categories and definitions are so closely intertwined. Like separating the yolk from an egg that has already been scrambled, there is only so much separation that can occur. As a result, I believe that perhaps these roles that I have spent so much time lying out, should not be seen as independent entities and are better understood as coexisting circumstances. Because of this, I believe it unreasonable to say that ineffability serves any one role or purpose. Regardless of whether or not ineffability is good or bad, whether it hinders scholarly progress, or helps explain mystical experiences, in an odd sort-of roundabout way, it is clear the ineffability has a role. If this were not the case then there would be many without a topic to write on, to study, or to learn. It is likely that if ineffability didn't have a place here we would either express everything with absolute clarity, or we would be so hopelessly confused that we would not know where to begin.

Instead of focusing on arguing whether there is a place for ineffability, it is more beneficial to understand why ineffability is used at all and how its role may affect other things. I've contended that ineffability's roles are more simplistic than the things they surround. Overall, ineffability increases the sacredness of something that is divine or holy by making that divine or holy object unattainable or unreachable, whether conceptually or verbally. Ineffability is also shown to be present in times where language is both over expressed and under used, suggesting that language is not the only component to this machine; That an overabundance of words can be just as impractical as a lack of words. In a broader sense, ineffability becomes that bridge to transcend metaphysical principles and allows us to attempt to explain what we are unable to

cognitively understand. Even broader, is the reductive notion of these experiences being attributable to a psychological need. In this last case ineffability, again, is used as a place holder to understand that which we have not scientifically fully realized. It is because there is such a natural and innate desire to explain the curious things of this world and of the things we interact with or witness, that ineffability holds a very important position in our language. Oddly enough, this paper could be summed up into one explanation: Ineffability's role is to make more comprehensible, more effable, that which incomprehensible and ineffable.

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