The Ineffable, Inconceivable, and Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology

Jonathan D. Jacobs

> *Silence is a mystery of the age to come, but words are instruments of this world.*
>
> — Isaac the Syrian (*Ascetical Homilies*, 65)

The very theologians responsible for carefully formulating and vigorously defending the central doctrines of the orthodox Christian faith—those who, for example, went to great lengths to distinguish *homoousios* from *homoiousios*—also insisted that God is ineffable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible. In the liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, shortly after the participants affirm their belief in the truth of the central doctrines of the Christian faith by reciting the creed, the Priest prays to God:

> It is meet and right to hymn thee, to bless thee, to praise thee, to give thanks unto thee, and to worship thee in every place of thy dominion: for thou art God ineffable, inconceivable, invisible, incomprehensible, ever existing and eternally the same, thou and thine Only-begotten Son and thy Holy Spirit.

The Priest, in declaring God to be ineffable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible, echoes claims that are not merely part of some mystic sideshow. They are firmly entrenched in the mainstream of the Christian tradition.[1]

And yet such claims from apophatic theology are often shunned, or kept hidden from view in polite company. No doubt that is at least in part

---

[1] This tradition reaches at least as far back as Clement of Alexandria, and encompasses all the defenders of the Nicean faith in one *ousia* and three *hypostases*, including among many others Hilary of Poitiers, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Augustine. For an excellent account of the Nicean fathers, see Ayers (2004), who argues that divine incomprehensibility was indeed central to those responsible for expounding and defending Nicean orthodoxy.

because the claims are deeply puzzling, to put it mildly. First, the claims seem to be inconsistent in a narrow sense: Simply asserting them appears to commit you to a contradiction. If it is true that God is ineffable, then one can correctly describe him as ineffable, and so he is not ineffable after all. (Similar worries arise for other claims within apophatic theology, *mutatis mutandis*.) And, second, the claims seem inconsistent in a broad sense: Adding these claims to everything else orthodox Christians believe seems to commit them to all sorts of contradictions. If God is straightforwardly ineffable, then all of the claims, all of the doctrines that orthodox Christians believe—that saints throughout the ages have died defending—are false or at best meaningless.

As puzzling as the claims of apophatic theology are, I nevertheless aim in this paper to defend them. For ease of presentation, I will focus on claims of ineffability, but the defense I shall offer for ineffability can be marshaled in defense of inconceivability and incomprehensibility, as well as other claims of the apophatic tradition. I will therefore defend the consistency, both narrow and broad, of the claim that God is ineffable.

I will do so within two important constraints. The first constraint on my defense is that it must result in a *substantive* conception of ineffability, rather than a deflationary one. Apophatic theology is not merely in the business of claiming that God is difficult to describe, that we can conceive of God only with great effort, or that there are *some* truths about God we cannot comprehend. It is not mere "rhetorical flourish," as Alston's (1956) Philologos put it. The claims are substantive. Of course it is difficult to draw precisely the distinction between a substantive and a deflationary conception of ineffability; I'm not going to try. I will say only this about a deflationary conception: You know it when you see it.

The second constraint is that the defense must be consistent with the *truth*[2] of orthodox Christian[3] doctrines. It would be an odd project indeed that sought to show the consistency of a tradition within Christianity by providing a model on which all Christian beliefs were false. (I suppose I should, in this context, add that the second constraint requires that the doctrines be true and also *not false*.)

Together these constraints are rather severe. The second constraint re-

---

[2]This is to contrast with, for example, Alston (2005), who sought to make sense of how the doctrines, while strictly speaking false, might nevertheless be "close enough to the truth about God to serve as a guide" to the Christian life.

[3]This is not, of course, meant to imply that claims about ineffability are unique to the Christian tradition, which is of course false. It is only to say that it is the consistency of the particularly Christian version that I here aim to defend.

quires that it be true that, for example, there are three divine hypostases, since that is a central doctrine of orthodox Christianity. But the first constraint seems to require that it be false that there are three divine hypostases, since if God is substantively ineffable, we cannot describe the hypostases as three, or indeed as hypostases.

The only way for such a defense to work, it seems to me, is that, *in one sense*, it is true that there are three hypostases, but *in another* sense, it is not (and similarly for all the orthodox Christian doctrines). But how could that be? There is currently a good deal of work being done in contemporary, analytic metaphysics and meta-metaphysics dealing with how our representations of the world map onto the structure of the world. And a number of metaphysicians have proposed, quite independently of any issues in philosophical theology, that while all true representations map onto the world, some of them do so in a special way: they carve nature at the joints.[4] When a truth maps onto the world in that special way, we can call it a 'fundamental' truth; when not, 'non-fundamental'. In section 1, I shall explain the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental truths. Then, in section 2, I put the distinction to use to give a defense of divine ineffability. According to the defense I shall offer, all truths about how God is intrinsically are non-fundamental. He is ineffable in the sense that one cannot assert any true, fundamental propositions about Him. I end, in section 3, with some objections and replies.

As is fitting for a discussion of negative theology, it is important to say what my defense of the claims of the apophatic tradition is *not*. First, my defense is *not* an interpretation of any claim or set of claims by a particular historical—or, for that matter, contemporary—figure. No doubt the conception of ineffability I offer differs in many ways, minor and substantive, from those of the central figures in the apophatic theological or mystical tradition. But such differences are not relevant for present purposes because, second, my defense is *not* an account of ineffability. It is a *defense*. I shall not attempt to tell you what it *is* for God to be ineffable, but rather only what it *might be*. My aim is not to defend the *truth* of the claims, but rather only their *possibility*. This rather more limited project is difficult enough.

The defense would fail, then, if the view I propose turned out to be inconsistent. But I also hope, and think, that the view offered is consistent with what is central to the apophatic tradition. (You might call it a rational reconstruction of what is important to the tradition.) I would also, therefore, consider the project to have failed if it did not capture what is central to

---

[4]See, e.g., Fine (2009), Cameron (2008), and Sider (2012).

the apophatic tradition, but I shall not here argue that it does so.

1 Fundamentality

Consider the following example, a modified version of one given by Sider (2012). Imagine a rectangle formed by conjoining two squares, the left of which is white and the right of which is black.
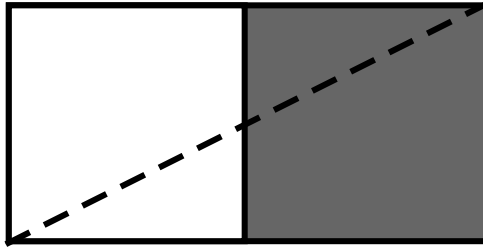
We could say, truthfully, that the rectangle is half white and half black. We could say truly that the area of the rectangle that is black is equal to the area of the rectangle that is white.

But consider a different linguistic community. This community does not have our concepts of black and white. They have different color concepts. Instead of conceptualizing the rectangle as divided in half, top to bottom, they conceptualize it as divided color-wise in half by a line from the lower left corner to the upper right corner, the dotted line in the figure. They have a concept for the color of the top left triangle, 'whack', and a concept for the color of the lower right triangle, 'blite'.

Suppose one of members of this alternate linguistic community said, "The area of blite is equal to the area of whack." Would she have spoken truly? I think it's plausible to say "Yes." Given the concepts she is using, what she has said is correct. The area of blite isn't larger than the area of whack; it isn't smaller; and it does have an area. So it's the same.

But, as Sider puts it, "[i]t is nearly irresistible to describe these people as *making a mistake*." Even though they may assert truths using their color concepts, they are "*missing something*" about the objective structure of reality. If a person speaks in this way, she may speak truly, but she's got the wrong concepts. The propositions she expresses using her concepts don't get at the ultimate, or fundamental, structure of reality. They are gerrymandered. They don't, as Plato put it, carve nature at the joints.

The task of using the most ontologically perspicuous concepts, of getting

at the fundamental structure of reality, of carving nature at its joints, is the task the metaphysician gives herself. It is not necessarily the task ordinary folks give themselves.

Note that the truth that the area of blight is equal to the area of whack is not a metaphorical truth (e.g., "Blight is a fluttering butterfly...."). The terms are used literally, and so it is a literal, not metaphorical, truth. The concepts might have precise definitions. We might be able to understand them, and we might know many truths expressed using them. Such truths could be very important, matters of life or death, even. Their failing, such as it is, involves only their failure to carve nature perfectly at the joints.

I've so far spoken loosely in order to get the basic idea across. There are a number of ways one might fill in the details. Kit Fine, for example, introduces a propositional operator, 'In reality'. We could then express the idea that a proposition, P, carves nature perfectly, by saying "In reality, P." Ted Sider, on the other hand, introduces an operator, '$\mathscr{S}$' for "structure", that can be applied to linguistic items of arbitrary grammatical form, so that we could say $\mathscr{S}(P)$ or $\mathscr{S}(loves)$. In either case, whether it be InReality(P) or $\mathscr{S}(P)$, the expression indicates that the proposition, P, carves nature at its joints, or represents reality in a perfectly ontologically perspicuous way. And, on either view, it might be true that, for example, P but not(InReality(P)).

For present purposes, most of the differences between many of the ways of making the basic idea of fundamentality explicit will make no difference. So I will here use the locution 'fundamentally' in a way consistent with both Fine and Sider. I leave unsettled most issues that separate the two. But I stipulate that 'fundamentally' is a propositional operator, or an operator that attaches to representations or truth bearers,[5] not things or bits of the world. I leave the nature of such representations open. You might, for example, think that representations are abstract entities, linguistic items, or even concrete, intentional mental states. As both Fine and Sider do, I take the idea of reality or the structure of reality as primitive, and say that '$\mathscr{F}(P)$' when P perfectly maps onto, or carves, or gets the structure of reality.

Here's another way to think about it. Suppose that propositions or representations themselves have structure. Then a proposition, P, whose structure matches the structure of reality perfectly, whose structure mirrors

---

[5]Contra, for example, Sider. It also follows that on the way I'll use fundamentality it is not concepts that carve or fail to carve at the joints, but truth bearers (propositions, sentences, or what-have-you).

the structure of reality perfectly, is such that P and $\mathscr{F}(P)$. Call a proposition that is fundamentally the case a 'fundamental truth'. Some propositions can be true and fail to carve perfectly at the joints. Such a proposition, say, P, would be such that P and it is not the case that $\mathscr{F}(P)$. Call such a truth a 'non-fundamental truth'.

An example may help. Suppose, among the correct, objective, ontological inventory of our world, there are no tables. But there are, of course, atoms arranged in various ways, and some such arrangements are table-wise arrangements. Suppose, further, that in the context of an ordinary conversation, a person says "There are tables." Of course, since the correct ontology does not include tables, that sentence will not correctly represent the structure of the world. But that does not entail, on the view we're considering, that the sentence has expressed a falsehood. It does entail that if the sentence expresses a truth, it is a non-fundamental truth.

It will help to introduce some machinery to capture all that I will want and need to say. I will use four tools: perfect fundamentality, relative fundamentality, an in-virtue-of or because relation between propositions, and an in-virtue-of or because relation between a proposition and thing (or things). I've already introduced perfect fundamentality. Relative fundamentality is then the comparative of perfect fundamentality. When one proposition, P, is more fundamental than another, Q, I will write '$\mathscr{F}_>(P, Q)$'.

The in-virtue-of or because relation between propositions P and Q, which I will express as $\mathscr{B}_{prop}(P, Q)$, is meant to capture the general idea that P is true because Q is true. For my purposes, this is equivalent to P's being grounded in Q, Q's being the metaphysical truth conditions for P, or Q's being the requirements on reality for P. (For example: that there is a table is true because there are some atoms arranged table-wise.)

When one proposition, P, is true in virtue of a *thing* or bit of the world, a, I will say $\mathscr{B}_{thing}(P, a)$. For my purposes, this is equivalent to truth making, without any of the specific, substantive commitments that typically go along with truth making theory, such as truthmaker maximalism.

Perhaps we could do with fewer tools. For example, perhaps we could define relative fundamentality in terms of the propositional because relation and the entity because relation: $\mathscr{F}_>(P, Q)$ if and only if there's some a such that $\mathscr{B}_{thing}(P, a)$ and $\mathscr{B}_{thing}(Q, a)$ and $\mathscr{B}_{prop}(Q, P)$. That is, one proposition is more fundamental than another if and only if they share a truthmaker or entity ground and the later proposition is true in virtue of the former proposition. Perhaps we could say a few things about how the tools are plausibly related. For example, if P is true in virtue of Q, then Q is more fundamental than P. And if Q is more fundamental than P, then P

6

is not perfectly fundamental. But I will not here take a stand on such issues except where the consistency of the view I propose requires it.

Return to our example of tables. Suppose, again, that in the ontological furniture of the universe, there are no tables, but that there are some table-wise arrangements of atoms. Using our four tools, we could say things like this: That there are tables (=P) is true, but not fundamentally true: P and not $\mathscr{F}(\mathrm{P})$. That there are tables is true because it is true that there are table-wise arrangements of atoms(=Q): $\mathscr{B}_{prop}(\mathrm{P}, \mathrm{Q})$. The former proposition is less fundamental than the later: $\mathscr{F}_{>} (\mathrm{Q}, \mathrm{P})$. The arrangements of atoms (=the xs) are the entities because of which the proposition that there are tables is true: $\mathscr{B}_{thing}(\mathrm{P}, xx)$.

I claim that this way of thinking about how our representations map onto the world is consistent. I think it is more than that, of course—I think it's probably true. But for present purposes I need only claim that it is consistent. The view *does* involve substantive claims, and you may think that one or more of them is false. The view claims that some propositions are both true and non-fundamental, for example. (Perhaps, instead, you think that all truths are fundamental.) It claims that sense can be made of 'reality' or 'the structure of reality'. And so on. But I am not here claiming the the view is correct; I claim only that in asserting the view, one has not asserted something inconsistent or incoherent. And that seems obvious.

2 Divine Ineffability

Let's turn, now, to divine ineffability. You might think, initially, that if God is ineffable, it's primarily something to do with us, our limitations, or the limitations of our language. But, at least according to one strand of thought, it is is not our limitations that ground God's ineffability. It's not that, given our present language, or given our finite mental capacities, we cannot correctly describe God. It is, rather, God and his transcendence that grounds his ineffability. As Putnam puts it, "It is not just that one feels . . . that one cannot express properly what one *means* by using the words our language provides to describe God; it is that one feels one cannot *mean* what one should mean" (1997, 410). This strong view of ineffability is not the only view one might take. But, as my goal here is to defend the consistency of the view, not its truth, I shall adopt it. It certainly doesn't make the defense any *easier*. (Moreover, for what it's worth, I think it's the mainstream view, as it were, of the apophatic or mystical tradition.)

Still, even on this strong view, it is not that God is in no way describable.

The apophatic theologian claims that God is ineffable, incomprehensible, and inconceivable, only *as He is in Himself*, as He is intrinsically. It is perfectly compatible with apophatic theology that various truths about how God is related to his creation are effable.

With those distinctions in mind, then, how can we use fundamentality to construe the claim that God is ineffable? Consider all the true propositions about how God is intrinsically; call the set of such propositions $\mathscr{P}$. I propose that to say that God is ineffable is to make the following claim:

> **Ineffability Thesis:** For any proposition $P \in \mathscr{P}$, $\text{not}(\mathscr{F}(P))$ and $\text{not}(\mathscr{F}(\text{not-}P))$

Every true proposition about how God is intrinsically is non-fundamental. There are no true, fundamental propositions about how God is intrinsically.[6]

How does that relate to the claim that God is ineffable? It will be helpful, in this regard, to introduce the idea of the metaphysics room from Sider. We enter the metaphysics room by stipulating that we intend the things we say to express only fundamental propositions. If there is a fundamental truth near enough to what we mean, then we intend to express that proposition. If there is a fundamental proposition near enough, but its negation is fundamentally true, then we asserted something, but what we asserted is false. If, on the other hand, no fundamental proposition, no perfectly joint carving proposition, is near enough to what we mean, then we have not asserted anything. By entering the metaphysics room, we agree to limit ourselves in what we can say. We shall assert fundamental propositions, and nothing else.

If the Ineffability Thesis is true, and we enter the theology room, we can do nothing but remain silent. We could say nothing whatsoever. If we wished to describe God in any way, as loving, merciful, long-suffering, we would have to leave the theology room. We would have to give up on our goal of expressing only fundamental truths. We could not even assert the central doctrines of the Christian faith. God is one in *ousia*, three in *hypostasis*. If the Ineffability Thesis were true, even these would fail to be fundamental truths about God.

---

[6]The idea of using a distinction between two ways of talking to give an account of ineffability is prefigured by Bergmann (1960), but as might be expected, Bergmann did not attempt to give an account of divine ineffability, but rather of the ineffability of what we would call the simple elements of one's fundamental ontology: "What is 'simple' is so simple indeed that, in speaking about it (directly), the best or the most one can do, put it any way you wish, is to name it, that is, attach a label to it..." (33).

Let the book of the world[7] be the story of the metaphysical structure of reality. It includes all and only the true, fundamental propositions. If we were to write the book of the world, no propositions about how God is intrinsically would appear in it. There is a genuine sense in which the book of the world would be incomplete, were the Ineffability Thesis true.

I claim, therefore, that the first constraint on a defense of ineffability is met: If the Ineffability Thesis were true, God would be substantively ineffable.

I claim also that the Ineffability Thesis is narrowly consistent. It's important to note in this connection that negation does not distribute over $\mathscr{F}$. From not($\mathscr{F}(P)$), it does not follow that $\mathscr{F}(\text{not}(P))$. And while the operator is factive—if $\mathscr{F}(P)$, then P—its negation is not, since its negation is not a fundamental truth: not($\mathscr{F}(P)$) is importantly different from $\mathscr{F}(\text{not}(P))$. Since negation does not distribute across the fundamentality operator, the thesis itself is not contradictory. Nor, it's worth noting, do you have to give up on excluded third (as a number of other defenses of apophatic theology have it). Every proposition is either truth or false.

But what about the second constraint on an account of ineffability. The second constraint requires that the central Christian doctrines be *true*. Is the Ineffability Thesis consistent with the truth of the Christian doctrines? Yes, so long as we allow the Christian doctrines to be non-fundamental propositions. Let P be some Christian doctrine. It is true. But, by the Ineffability Thesis, if it is about how God is intrinsically, then not($\mathscr{F}(P)$) and not($\mathscr{F}(\text{not-}P)$).

In essence, this represents the threefold ascent of apophatic theology. We begin by asserting a truth (catophatic theology): P. For example, we assert that God is three in hypostasis. We then move on to the first stage of denial: It is not the case that fundamentally, P, or not($\mathscr{F}(P)$). While God is three in hypostasis, it is not fundamentally the case that God is three in hypostasis. We then end with the denial of denial: not($\mathscr{F}(\text{not-}P)$). But it's not the case that fundamentally God is not three in hypostasis.

Indeed, we can model Psuedo-Dionysius's 'hyper' talk in precisely this way. Dionysius describes God not as wise, and not as not wise, but as beyond-, super-, or hyper-wise, and similarly for any other predicate that we can truly predicate of God. In general, for God to be hyper-F, on the present model, is for it to be true that God is F, but not fundamentally true that God is F and not fundamentally true that God is not-F. He is not merely F; he is beyond F. The ineffability thesis is equivalent to the claim

---

[7]See Sider (2012)

that for any predicate, F, that is truly predicated of God intrinsically, God is hyper-F.

In this way, we can eff the ineffable: We can, using non-fundamental propositions, describe God correctly. We can say lots of true things about how God is intrinsically. He is wise, loving. He is three in hypostasis, one in ousia. Such propositions need not be metaphorical. They can be strictly, literally true.[8] And they can be importantly true. We can know them, and understand them. Some may be more fundamental than others, but God is ineffable because no matter what we say truly, we have failed to assert a perfectly fundamental truth. God is non-fundamentally effable, and fundamentally ineffable.

My defense of the consistency of divine ineffability is complete. The Ineffability Thesis is narrowly consistent, and is consistent with the truth of all the orthodox Christian doctrines: it is broadly consistent. And it is a substantive conception of ineffability.

Before turning briefly to some objections, it is worth pointing out an alternative to the Ineffability Thesis that is in its neighborhood. In giving an account of ineffability, I used only perfect fundamentality. But given that I've got relative fundamentality as a tool, it might make sense to formulate the Ineffability Thesis in terms of it.[9] But since relative fundamentality is comparative, to what would a comparative version of the Ineffability Thesis compare propositions about how God is intrinsically? Every true proposition about how God is intrinsically is less fundamental than . . ., what? One way to go would be this: To say that God is ineffable is to say that whatever we can say about him as he is intrinsically, we can do better, perspicuity-wise, in saying something about something else. Alternatively, no matter how we speak about God, we do worse with respect to carving nature at the joints than we could if we spoke about something else.

Let $\mathscr{P}$ be the set of all true propositions about how God is intrinsically, and $\mathscr{Q}$, the set of all true propositions about how anything other than God is intrinsically. Then we could say:

> **Relative Ineffability Thesis:** For any proposition P $\in \mathscr{P}$, there is some proposition Q $\in \mathscr{Q}$ such that $\mathscr{F}_>(\text{Q, P})$.

Plausibly, it would follow that no P $\in \mathscr{P}$ is perfectly fundamental.

---

[8]Contrast Kenny (2006), who in addition to counting (certain strands of) negative theology as a form of agnosticism, thought that it entailed that "we cannot speak of him literally, only in metaphor" (448).

[9]I'm grateful to [name removed for anonymous review] for the suggestion.

3 Objections and Replies

I turn now to replying to some objections.

3.1 Atheism?

Apophatic theology is often accused of being a version of atheism or agnosticism, since we cannot say truly that God exists. On the view I've proposed, it is not fundamentally true that God exists, but it does not follow that it is false that God exists, or that it is fundamentally true that God does not exist. Following the threefold ascent model proposed above: God exists, but not($\mathscr{F}$(God exists)), and not($\mathscr{F}$(God does not exist)).

It is the last claim, I think, that makes it clear that the view I've proposed is not atheism. For atheism is just the view that, if "God exists" is meaningful, then fundamentally, God does not exist. But, according to the Ineffability Thesis, that proposition is false! It's not the case that fundamentally, God does not exist.

More subtle is the accusation that we can't distinguish the Ineffability Thesis from a liberal atheist, who thinks that the proposition God exists is true, but not fundamentally true. Perhaps she thinks the only requirement on reality that the proposition God exists makes is that, say, there's a lot of love in the air. Since $\mathscr{F}$ is factive, our liberal atheist will also say that it's not fundamentally false that God exists. So the liberal atheist says that God exists, but that it's neither fundamentally true nor fundamentally false that God exists. That's what the apophatic theologian says. So what gives? Isn't the apophatic theologian an atheist after all?

No. For the apophatic theologian can use the entity because relation to distinguish herself from the liberal atheist. The apophatic theologian can say that for any true proposition about God, it is true because of God. For any true proposition about how God is intrinsically, P, $\mathscr{F}_{thing}$(P, God).[10] But the liberal atheist will not agree to that.

(In this way, we could say that the apophatic theologian thinks the book of the world is incomplete, unless we could include in it non-propositional entities, or non-propositional representations of them.[11])

---

[10]Note that this is not to say that such propositions are true because *the proposition* that God exists is true. The apophatic theologian may think that, but if she does, she thinks it's not the end of the story. For even the proposition that God exists is not fundamental.

[11]Thanks to [name removed for anonymous review] for discussion on this point.

3.2 Theological anti-realism?

If the Christian doctrines are non-fundamental truths, then on the conception of theological realism offered by Rea (2007), is the view here offered a version of theological anti-realism? According to Rea, you are a realist about a claim such as "a is F" if and only if you think there is an x such that $x = a$, and you think there are Fs.

Given that we're operating in a framework that allows a sentence to be true but non-fundamental, I think this definition will need to be nuanced. For our apophatic theologian accepts the fundamental/non-fundamental distinction. She allows, for example, that the proposition tables exist is true but not fundamental. Will she be a realist or anti-realist about tables? Realist: She thinks there are tables. Anti-realist: She thinks that, fundamentally, there are no tables.

Call someone a 'liberal' realist about the x's if she thinks the sentence "There are x's" expresses a non-fundamental truth, and a 'fundamentalist' realist if she thinks it expresses a fundamental truth.

You might wonder why I want to call a liberal realist a 'realist' at all, a 'realist' of any sort. I think it is worth re-emphasizing at this point what you are and are not saying by saying that a proposition is non-fundamental. You are not saying that it is false. You are not saying it is unimportant. You are not saying that it is mind-dependent. You are not saying that it is metaphorical. It might be literally, objectively, mind-independently, importantly true. You are, however, saying that it does not carve nature perfectly at its joints, that it is in some way gerrymandered, ontologically imperspicuous. So I think it's appropriate to call the liberal realist a 'realist' of *some* stripe, and liberal seems a good adjective to me.

Our apophatic theologian is a a liberal realist about divine discourse about how God is intrinsically.

But I do think there is some sense in which our apophatic theologian is an anti-realist about theological discourse. It's worth noting, in this regard, that Kit Fine originally introduced the "in reality . . ." move in order to capture the debate between realists and anti-realists about various phenomena. On this way of thinking about things, a metaphysical reductionist about the Fs is someone who thinks that propositions using 'F' are non-fundamental, not true in reality. So someone who thinks that mental states are reducible to micro-physical states thinks that there are mental states, but not in reality. In reality, there are micro-physical states. She is an 'anti-realist' about mental states just in that precise sense. Someone who thinks that casual relations reduce to regularities thinks that some things

12

cause some other things, but not in reality. In reality, there are various regularities. She is an 'anti-realist' about causation just in that precise sense. And someone who thinks that modality is reducible to claims about concrete possible worlds thinks that some things are possible, but not in reality. In reality, things happen in disconnected concrete possible worlds. She is an 'anti-realist' about modality just in that precise sense.

In each case, the reductionist thinks that propositions expressed using the reduced concept are often enough true (and literal), mind independently true, perhaps very important, and so on. But in the precise sense of thinking that such truths are non-fundamental, she is an 'anti-realist' about them. And in just that precise sense, our apophatic theologian is an anti-realist about intrinsic predications of God. Shorn of the objectionable bits, 'anti-realism' is not an objectionable feature of the view—or, at any rate, it's an objectionable feature of the view only in the sense that any reductive theory of anything is objectionably 'anti-realist'.

3.3   Incoherent?

According to the last objection, the view I've proposed is incoherent. In particular, the objection goes, it is incoherent to suppose that there could be truths that could be disconnected so radically from the fundamental structure of reality. This objection comes in two flavors: First, the stronger form claims that, while we might allow that there are some non-fundamental truths, they can't be pried apart from the fundamental ones too far. Second, the weaker form of the objection argues that, while non-fundamental truths can indeed be pried apart from the fundamental truths fairly far, they need to be grounded in some fundamental truths or other.

Consider the stronger objection, first. Note that the objection is not to the view's consistency, but it's coherence. While I am not here defending the plausibility of the Ineffability Thesis, only its consistency, there is a fine line between wildly implausible and incoherent. Why think the Ineffability Thesis is wildly implausible? According to the first version of the incoherence objection, the idea that you could have non-fundamental truths that radically diverge from the fundamental ones in the way proposed is so implausible that it's difficult to make sense of. What does it mean for the non-fundamental truths to "radically diverge" from the fundamental ones?

Consider, for example, double negation. Suppose the proposition, P, is true. It's also true that not(not(p)). Does it follow that there is, in the fundamental furniture of the world, a double negation state of affairs? Does it follow that, $\mathscr{F}(\text{not}(\text{not}(P)))$? No, or so it is plausible to suppose. The

only thing that the truth of not(not(P)) requires of reality is that P.

Our first objector might grant *that* sort of limited non-fundamental truth, but she is skeptical of such moves, in general. There might, in some rare cases such as double negation, be non-fundamental truths, but in general a truth's requirements on reality are strongly connected to its own structure. This sort of attitude is similar to someone who is skeptical of metaphysical reductions, in general. Yes, some limited reductions might succeed, but once the reductive base gets too disconnected from that which is reduced, the reduction fails. Similarly, the thought is, non-fundamental truths require of reality the truth of some fundamental truth not too much unlike the non-fundamental one. Go too far, and you've turned the non-fundamental truth into a falsehood. Yet another way to put this objection: It's easy, when offering a theory of reality, to flip the switch to an error theory about ordinary statements. If your theory of reality diverges too much from the structure of the ordinary claims, then the ordinary claims are just false, not non-fundamental and true.

And, the objection continues, the theory I've offered allows the truths of orthodox Christianity to diverge too radically from reality in order to count as non-fundamental and true. It's incoherent that such truths could count as non-fundamental and true, because there's nothing even plausibly connected to them among the fundamental truths.

In reply, let's first note that I need only make the theory plausible enough to undercut the charge of incoherence. To do so, I will consider a series of cases where the non-fundamental truths diverge further and further away from the fundamental ones, and propose that at no point in the series have the non-fundamental truths diverged so far as to make the theory incoherent. The first case in the series is double negation. It's not wildly implausible to suppose that not(not(P)) could be a non-fundamental truth, if P were a fundamental truth. Consider now the more general claim that all fundamental truths are logical atoms or their negations. The only requirement that the proposition *it's not the case that if P, then both Q and R* makes on reality is either not-P, Q, or R. That seems an obviously coherent view.

Let's take a step further in the series, and consider some metaphysical reductions: Consider the view that books are just collections of pieces of paper. Here's a case where we have a concept used in the expression of the non-fundamental truth, namely, 'book', that's not used in any fundamental truths. The requirement on reality, if that reductive view of books is correct, for there to be a book on my desk, is that there are pages glued together with a cover on my desk. Again, I see nothing incoherent in the view that truths about books are non-fundamental in that way.

Consider, next, the reductive theory of causation, according to which propositions of the form *a* caused *b* are non-fundamental. Their requirements on reality are that certain regularities hold about the *a*'s and *b*'s. I see no reason, again, to suppose that it's at this point in the series of claims that we've moved into incoherence. To be sure, there are philosophical objections to reductive theories of causation. But those objections are not that the view is incoherent—just false.

Now move to Lewis's reductive theory of modality, according to which propositions of the form possibly(P) are non-fundamental, and their requirement on reality is that there is some concrete reality in which P. Here objections are often raised that the reduction fails precisely because the reductive account doesn't capture the phenomena in question. This, I take it, is how to best interpret the "changing the subject" objection. The theory of reality, about Humphrey's counterparts and concrete worlds, spatiotemporally disconnected from ours, is so far removed from the original claim, that Humphrey might have won, that the theory offered is not even a theory of the phenomena in question. We've changed the subject.

Even here, I submit, it's not *incoherent* to suppose that, if Lewis's theory of the structure of reality is correct, it's not false that Humphrey might have won. That theory might be false, but it doesn't seem incoherent.

I end our series of views with a sort of reductive theory closer to our present purposes: the traditional doctrine of divine simplicity. Brower (2008) has given a model of divine simplicity according to which God is the truthmaker for all predications of God. I think a plausible restatement of that view using the ideas I've introduced here, is that claims about how God is intrinsically are non-fundamental (even if some are more fundamental than others), and their requirement on reality is just God. So those who are inclined to think Brower's truthmaker account of divine simplicity is consistent should be willing to concede that the non-fundamental truths can diverge quite a bit from the fundamental ones.

I think what this series of views shows is that it is *coherent* to allow the non-fundamental truths to diverge quite radically from one's theory of reality. Hence, I submit, the first version of this objection fails. Notice, however, that on the view I've proposed the non-fundamental truths about God are not grounded in any other *truths*. The second version of the incoherence objection allows that the non-fundamental truths can diverge from the fundamental ones, but not that they can be wholly groundless. Every non-fundamental truth, this objection goes, requires of reality that some fundamental truth is true. But, if the Ineffability Thesis is correct, all truths about how God is intrinsically are wholly groundless: they make

no requirement on reality that some other proposition be fundamental and true.

In response to this objection, first note again the context of the objection. I do not claim here to be defending the truth of the Ineffability Thesis, only its consistency and coherence. So to be a successful objection in this context, the objection must be that it's incoherent to suppose that there are groundless truths. To that objection, I concede that, on the view here proposed, the doctrines of the Christian faith are groundless in that specific sense, but deny that such groundlessness is incoherent. Note that the groundlessness in question is of a specific kind: a proposition is groundless if it is not grounded in other *propositions*. It is perfectly consistent with the Ineffability Thesis to claim that the orthodox Christian doctrines are grounded in *God*. What would be inconsistent is to claim that they are grounded in fundamental propositions about how God is intrinsically, since there aren't any, according to the Ineffability Thesis. Indeed, I think one way to translate the doctrine of divine simplicity in the current context is precisely that: the truths about how God is intrinsically are grounded in God, not in truths about the intrinsic structure of God.

But notice what this objection presupposes. It presupposes that no view is coherent unless it includes the thesis that reality can be fully and completely described in a perfectly joint carving way. Is it really incoherent to deny that? I can't see why. As Alex Skiles pointed out to me, it seems entirely possible that, for any way of carving reality, there is some different way that carves reality closer but not perfectly. We could continue to improve our conceptual scheme (or replace it for a new, better one), but never hit upon a perfectly joint carving one. But, more generally, it's not clear to me why coherence demands that all of reality can be represented propositionally, much less with fundamental propositions.

I conclude that the last, incoherence objection fails. The Ineffability Thesis might be false, it might even be implausible, but it's not incoherent.

4   Conclusion

Claims of apophatic or mystical theology are deeply entrenched in the Christian tradition. They are mostly ignored in the contemporary landscape, save for some work by philosophers with a continental perspective. It seems to me they are ignored by analytic philosophers of religion out of embarrassment. (At any rate, that's certainly a self-diagnosis.) They can't possibly be right, the thought is. They're so not right as to be almost laughable.

But, I've argued, they are not laughable. They are consistent and coherent. They are, I think, substantive claims about how we can and can't represent God. And the claims have significant implications for how we conceive of philosophical theology. On the view I've defended as consistent and coherent, we should not put to ourselves the task of describing how God is fundamentally. For that task cannot be completed. It cannot be begun. For, if the Ineffability Thesis is correct, and I've argued that it *might* be, we cannot speak in fundamental ways about God. And whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must remain silent.[12]

References

Alston, W. (1956). Ineffability. *The Philosophical Review*, 65(4).

Alston, W. (2005). Two cheers for mystery. In A. Dole & A. Chignell (Eds.), *God and the Ethics of Belief: New Essays in Philosophy of Religion* (pp. 99–114). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Ayers, L. (2004). *Nicaea and Its Legacy : An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Bergmann, G. (1960). Ineffability, ontology, and method. *The Philosophical Review*, 69(1), 18–40.

Brower, J. E. (2008). Making sense of divine simplicity. *Faith and Philosophy*, 25(1), 3–30.

Cameron, R. P. (2008). Truthmakers and ontological commitment: or how to deal with complex objects and mathematical ontology without getting into trouble. *Philosophical Studies*, 140(1), 1–18.

Fine, K. (2009). The question of ontology. In D. Chalmers, D. Manley, & R. Wasserman (Eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundation of Ontology* chapter 5, (pp. 157–177). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kenny, A. (2006). Worshipping an unknown god. *Ratio*, 19(4), 441–453.

Putnam, H. (1997). On negative theology. *Faith and Philosophy*, 14(4).

Rea, M. C. (2007). Realism in theology and metaphysics. In C. Cunningham & P. Candler (Eds.), *Belief and Metaphysics*. SCM Press.

Sider, T. (2012). *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.