God and the Paradox of Ineffability

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Abstract

In Christian theology (and for that matter, a number of other theistic religions, such as Hinduism) it is standard to claim that God is ineffable. Moreover, arguments are given for this. For example, it may be claimed that God is so different from God's creatures, that human concepts (the only ones we have) cannot be applied. Clearly, however, if such arguments work, God obviously is effable. We thus have an apparent paradox to the effect that God both is and is not ineffable. There are some standard ways of trying to defuse the paradox. For example, it has been claimed that one cannot *assert* anything of God; all one can do is *deny* things. Or it has been claimed that one cannot say anything literally true of God, but only non-literal things—maybe things that are analogically true. However, such moves face well known problems. A much more unorthodox and radical approach—pursued, for example, by Nicholas of Cusa—is to accept the paradox at face value: God is truly a contradictory object: both effable and ineffable. In recent years, the techniques of paraconsistent logics have been used to show how to make sense of paradoxes of various kinds, such as the liar paradox and Russell's paradox, simply by accepting their contradictory conclusions. These techniques may also be deployed to make sense of this theological paradox in the same way. In this essay I will show how.

1   Introduction

In Christian theology it is standard to claim that God is ineffable. Moreover, arguments are given for this. For example, it may be claimed that God is so different from God's creatures, that human concepts (the only ones we have) cannot be applied. Clearly, however, if such arguments work, God obviously is effable. We thus have an apparent paradox to the effect that God both is and is not ineffable. There are some standard ways of trying to defuse the paradox. For example, it has been claimed that one cannot *assert* anything of God; all one can do is *deny* things. Or it has been claimed that one cannot say anything literally true of God, but only non-literal things—maybe of an analogical kind. However, such moves face well known problems.

A much more unorthodox and radical approach—pursued, for example, by Nicholas of Cusa—is to accept the paradox at face value: God is truly a contradictory object: both effable and ineffable. In recent years, the techniques of paraconsistent logics have been used to show how to make sense of paradoxes of various kinds, such as the liar paradox and Russell's paradoxe, simply by accepting their contradictory conclusions. These techniques may also be deployed to make sense of this theological paradox in the same way. In this essay we will see how.

In the first main part of the essay, we will have a look at some of the history of the matter. This does not pretend to be a comprehensive discussion. It could not be: one could write a book (indeed, many books) on it. I provide the discussion simply to indicate both the importance of the paradox to Christian theology and its thorny nature. After a brief segue, we then turn to how one may apply the techniques of paraconsistent logic to handle the matter.

2   God and Paradox

2.1   The Perfections

But first, let me put the whole discussion in the much more general context of the paradoxes which the Christian notion of God generates.

It is orthodox in Christian theology to attribute to God certain extreme properties, such as omnipotence, omniscience, moral perfection, and so on (the so called perfections). Like most limit properties, and as is well known,

these teeter on the brink of contradiction—or, if you believe in the existence of God, paradox.[1]

Take, for example, omnipotence. To be omnipotent is to be able to do anything. However:

- Since God is omnipotent, they[2] can create a stone so heavy that they cannot move it.

- So it is possible that there is a stone they cannot move.

- But since God is omnipotent it is impossible for there to be a stone they cannot move.

The standard solution to the paradox is that suggested by Aquinas. Since God can do anything, it is impossible that there is a stone that God cannot lift. So creating such a stone is an impossibility. And even God cannot do the impossible. So the first premise is false.

But matters are not so straightforward. Creating a stone that God cannot move may be impossible. But creating a stone that the creator cannot life is not an impossibility. Give me enough clay, and I can do it. But God cannot do it. So God is not omnipotent.

The *combination* of perfections also leads to apparent contradiction. God is morally perfect. Morally perfect entities do not do harmful things. So God does not do harmful things. No contradiction there. But God is usually taken to have the perfections necessarily. So it is necessary that God does not do harmful things. That is, God cannot do harmful things. So God is not omnipotent. And again, doing harmful things is not at all logically impossible. I need much less than lots of clay to do this myself.

Of course, arguments of this kind are well known, and it is not my intention of going into all the things that have been said about them here.[3] I point them out to show that the Christian concept of God is deeply entangled in paradox. The rest of this essay is about just one of these, though since it concerns the very possibility of talking about God at all, it is perhaps the most fundamental of the bunch.

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[1] For discussion and references, see Everett (2010).

[2] Every pronoun is wrong. The third person plural seems the least offensive.

[3] See, again, Everett (2010).

2.2 Enter Ineffability

The paradox in question concerns God's ineffability. That God is ineffable is a standard claim of Christian theology. What drives it is the simple pious thought that God the creator is so different from God's creatures, that no concepts such creatures can form, or words they have, can be applied to God. But as hardly needs to be said, Christians, and theologians who theorise Christianity, say a great deal about God. Here, then, is our paradox. God cannot be talked about, and yet they are. As Karl Barth puts it:[4]

> As ministers we ought to speak about God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability...

The contradiction is, of course, obvious, and has hardly passed the notice of Christian theologians. In response to the paradox, two main strategies, broadly speaking, have appeared to address it—though one may find strands of both in many theologians. These are often called *kataphatic* and *anophatic*. The kataphatic approach is to the effect that one can say things about God, though they may not mean what you think they do. They have to be understood as analogies, or in some other non-literal way. The anophatic approach is more hard-nosed. One cannot say anything positive about God. All one can do is say what God is not. This is the *via negativa*, the negative way.

There is a rich tradition of Christian theology in the history of all this; and this is not the place to tell it. However, in the first half of this essay, let us look at some of it, to give us a sense of the lie of the land.

3 Some History

3.1 Plotinus

Let us start with the Anophatic approach. The ineffability of God certainly has Biblical roots.[5] But philosophically it derives from Neoplatonism. Thus,

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[4]In *The Word of God and the Word of Man* (1922). Quoted in White (2010), p. 3. Note that Barth himself is, in fact, talking about God.

[5]*Exodus* 3: 13-14: Moses said to God, "Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' Then what shall I tell them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I am has sent me to you.'" *Psalms* 139: 6: You hem me in behind

Plotinus (204/5–270)[6] describes his ground of reality, the One, saying:[7]

> Knowing is a unitary thing, but defined: the first is One, but undefined: a defined One would not be the One-absolute: the absolute is prior to the definite.

> Thus The One is in truth beyond all statement: any affirmation is of a thing; but the all-transcending, resting above even the most august divine Mind, possesses alone of all true being, and is not a thing among things; we can give it no name because that would imply predication: we can but try to indicate, in our own feeble way, something concerning it: when in our perplexity we object, "Then it is without self-perception, without self-consciousness, ignorant of itself"; we must remember that we have been considering it only in its opposites.

In other words, the ground of beings cannot itself be a being: it cannot be a *this*, rather than a *that*. It cannot be characterised, that is, described. When we try to say something all we can do is (feebly) say what it is not. But note that Plotinus says a lot of very positive things about God in the process of explaining this. As far as I know, he does not address the contradiction, though there are certainly hints of dialetheism in the *Enneads*.[8]

3.2 Pseudo-Dionysius

The idea was taken up by the Christian Neo-Platonist known only by his pseudonym, Dionysius the Areopagite, now therefore usually referred to as 'Pseudo-Dionysius' (fl. late 5th, early 6th C).[9]

Pseudo-Dionysius does not deny that there are 'names' (characterisations) that creatures can apply to God, such as *over (hyper)-good, over-being*, but these are merely 'symbolic'. In the last instance, all names for God, including these, must be denied. All one can say is that God is none of these things. Thus, in Chapter 5 of his *The Mystical Theology*, we have:[10]

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and before, and you lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.

[6]On Plotinus, see Gerson (2018).

[7]*Ennead* V, 3: 12, 13. MacKenna (1991), p. 379 f.

[8]'The One is all things and no one of them'. *Ennead*, 2, 1. (MacKenna (1991), p. 361.) See also Gilson (1972), p. 43 ff.

[9]On Pseudo-Dionysius, see Corrigan and Harrington (2019).

[10]Rolt (1920).

Once more, ascending yet higher we maintain that It [GP: the Godhead] is not soul, or mind, or endowed with the faculty of imagination, conjecture, reason, or understanding; nor is It any act of reason or understanding; nor can It be described by the reason or perceived by the understanding, since It is not number, or order, or greatness, or littleness, or equality, or inequality, and since It is not immovable nor in motion, or at rest, and has no power, and is not power or light, and does not live, and is not life; nor is It personal essence, or eternity, or time; nor can It be grasped by the understanding since It is not knowledge or truth; nor is It kingship or wisdom; nor is It one, nor is It unity, nor is It Godhead or Goodness; nor is It a Spirit, as we understand the term, since It is not Sonship or Fatherhood; nor is It any other thing such as we or any other being can have knowledge of; nor does It belong to the category of non-existence or to that of existence; nor do existent beings know It as it actually is, nor does It know them as they actually are; nor can the reason attain to It to name It or to know It; nor is it darkness, nor is It light, or error, or truth; nor can any affirmation or negation apply to it; for while applying affirmations or negations to those orders of being that come next to It, we apply not unto It either affirmation or negation, inasmuch as It transcends all affirmation by being the perfect and unique Cause of all things, and transcends all negation by the pre-eminence of Its simple and absolute nature—free from every limitation and beyond them all.

In other words, all one can do is deny anything said of the Godhead—even the cardinal points of Christian theology.[11]

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[11]Those who know their Buddhism cannot but be struck by the similarity with a passage from the celebrated Māhāyana *Heart Sūtra*. In Māhāyana there is a crucial distinction between conventional truth and ultimate truth (emptiness). The passage in the *sūtra* comprises a denial of the ultimate truth of all things, including the cardinal points of Buddhist teaching. It reads as follows (Garfield (2016)):

In the same sense, Śāriputra, all phenomena are empty. They have no defining characteristics. They are unarisen; they are unceasing. They are neither diminishing nor increasing. Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is no form, no feeling, no perception, no dispositions, no consciousness; no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no visible object, no sound, no smell, no taste, no tactile sensation, no mental object; there is neither igno-

The passage also gives a reason for this in the last couple of sentences. It transcends language because it is perfect, simple, and beyond limitation. The thought is that to describe the Godhead in any way with human concepts—what others do we have?—is to limit it; and the Godhead transcends any such limitation. Never mind the cogency of this argument, note that the reason given characterises the Godhead in positive terms. And in doing so, it does exactly what it claims cannot be done.[12]

Moreover, the attempt to solve the problem with the *via negativa* is problematic in its own right. The Godhead cannot be characterised by human concepts. But negation itself is a human concept. So one cannot even describe the Godhead using negation, as Pseudo-Dionysius notes in the penultimate sentence. As hardly needs pointing out, however, he has just spent a whole long paragraph doing just that.

In truth, there is a serious problem about a relentless *via negativa*. This may be illustrated by the following conversation between a Christian, C, and a non-Christian (NC):

C: I hold there to be an entity worthy of worship.

NC: Is it a spiritual entity?

C: No.

NC: Well, is it an intellect of some kind?

C: No.

NC: Hm... So is it a creator of some kind?

C: No.

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rance nor the end of ignorance; neither aging and death nor the end of aging and death. In the same sense, there is no suffering, no origin of suffering, no cessation and no path; no wisdom, and neither attainment nor lack of attainment.

[12]Actually, the whole distinction between positive and negative is highly problematic. It is not marked by using negation or a negative prefix, and it is not clear that there is a sensible distinction here. Thus, *transparent* and *opaque* are opposites (as least when applied to physical objects), but each can be defined as the negation of the other. Moreover, 'transparent' can be defined as *letting light through* or *not blocking the passage of light*. 'Opaque' can be defined as *stopping the passage of light* and *not allowing light through*. Which of the pair is positive, and which negative? Closer to home, the pair 'finite' and 'infinite' are similar. 'Infinite' can mean *not finite* or it can mean *greater than any finite quantity*. 'Finite' can mean *not infinite* or *smaller than any infinite quantity.*

*N*C: Well, tell me *something* at least.

C: I'm afraid I can't. It is beyond all characterisation...

NC (*interrupting*): Then how can I know know what you're talking about?

C (*continuing*): Indeed, it's not even true to say that it's worthy of worship.

*N*C: ???

It's exactly this bind which motivates a Kataphatic approach. So let's turn to this.

3.3   Anselm

As an example of this approach, let us consider Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109).[13]

In Chapter 2 of his *Proslogion* Anselm gives his celebrated version of the Ontological Argument for the existence of God, based on the definition of God as a being greater than which cannot be thought. However, in the lesser known Chapter 15, he explains that God is a being *greater* than can be thought:[14]

> Therefore, Lord, not only are You that than which a greater cannot be thought, but You are also something greater than can be thought. For since it is possible to think that there is such a one, then, if You are not this same being something greater than You could be thought—which cannot be.

The reason is essentially that if God were not a being greater than which could be thought, one could think a different being that was. This would be greater than God which, by definition, is impossible.

Let us not go into the cogency of this reasoning here.[15] The important point to note is that Anselm is saying that God is greater than can be thought; and that means conceived; and that means described. For if God could be described, they could be conceived in those terms, so they could be thought. Yet clearly Anselm himself is describing God, in writing these very passages.

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[13]On Anselm, see Williams (2020).

[14]Davis and Evans (1998), p. 96.

[15]On which, see Priest (1995), 4.1-4.3.

Anselm is well aware of the issue here. In the slightly earlier *Monologian*, he addresses the matter. In Chapter 65, entitled 'How we came to true conclusions about something ineffable', he says:[16]

> We do often speak of lots of things without expressing them properly, i.e. in the way proper to the way they are. What we do, when we cannot, or will not, utter something properly, is to signify it by means of something else—a riddle for example. And often we do not see something properly (i.e. as it is), but we see it by means of some likeness or image—when, for example, we make out someone's face in a mirror. Thus we say and do not say, see and do not see, one and the same thing. For it is through something else that we say it, and we see it. But through what is proper to it, we do not.

> This line of reasoning, therefore, allows our conclusions about the supreme nature to be true and the supreme nature itself to remain ineffable. We understand them to be indicating the supreme nature by means of something else (*per aliud*), rather than expressing it by means of what is proper to its essence. The names, then, that are apparently predicable of the supreme nature, merely gesture towards it rather than pinpoint it. They signify via some sort of similarity, not through what is proper.

In other words, our language does not apply literally to God. Rather, what we say is *similar* to what is true of God.

This is not a comfortable position. When Anselm defines God as a being no greater than which can be thought, he is not saying that God is similar to this. He means it quite literally. (The Ontological argument is not intended as a riddle.) Indeed, when he says that one can say only things of God that are similar, this is meant literally. He is not saying that we can talk of God only in a way that is similar to being similar.

3.4 Aquinas

Let us move on to another important figure in the Kataphantic tradition, Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).[17] Thomas holds that one cannot apply concepts applicable to human things to God literally. One can, however, apply

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[16]Davis and Evans (1998), p. 71.
[17]On Thomas, see O'Callaghan (2014).

them analogically, as when we say that the music is sad. (Strictly, it is only people who can be sad, but the music may naturally be described as sad because it makes us feel sad.) Thomas' view of how one should understand such analogical predication was a complex and evolving one. Moreover, it depends on a problematic notion of causation.[18]

However, setting these things aside, his view has the familiar problems. He explains why things that are said literally of a creature cannot be said of God as follows:[19]

> ... it is impossible for anything to be predicated univocally of God and a creature: this is made plain as follows. Every effect of an univocal agent is adequate to the agent's power: and no creature, being finite, can be adequate to the power of the first agent which is infinite. Wherefore it is impossible for a creature to receive a likeness to God univocally. Again it is clear that although the form in the agent and the form in the effect have a common ratio, the fact that they have different modes of existence precludes their univocal predication: thus though the material house is of the same type as the house in the mind of the builder, since the one is the type of the other; nevertheless house cannot be univocally predicated of both, because the form of the material house has its being in matter, whereas in the builder's mind it has immaterial being. Hence granted the impossibility that goodness in God and in the creature be of the same kind, nevertheless good would not be predicated of God univocally: since that which in God is immaterial and simple, is in the creature material and manifold.

In the last sentence, in arguing that concepts that apply literally to one of God's creature cannot apply literally to God, he predicates *that which is in God* of both God and creatures, saying that *it* means different things in the two cases. Indeed, even the conclusion of his argument has the same problem. This states that it is impossible to predicate something of God and one of their creatures univocally. This applies the (very human) concept of predication to God. Moreover, it is applied to God's creatures in the same

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[18]See White (2010), esp. ch. 4.

[19]*Quaestiones Disputatae de Potentia Dei.* English Dominican Fathers (1952). Q 7, Art 7.

sentence. And if this did not mean the same thing in both cases, the intended contrast would misfire. The claim, then is self-refuting.

Moreover, when Thomas tries to get himself out of the problem of talking about God, by saying that one can say something analogous, he digs himself deeper into the hole. He says (*ibid*):

> We must accordingly take a different view and hold that nothing is predicated univocally of God and the creature: but that those things which are attributed to them in common are predicated not equivocally but analogically... [In this] a thing is predicated of two by reason of a relationship between these two: thus being is predicated of substance and quantity.

In the claim that 'nothing is predicated univocally of God and the creature' the same thing is predicated of God and creature—namely predication. The same problem appears a few sentences later, as does a binary-predicate analogue of the same problem. Thomas talks about a relation between God and creature. But it is one and the same relation that holds between God and creature.

3.5   Cusanus

Let us finish this somewhat whistle-stop tour of history with a final Christian theologian who has a very distinctive position on the matter. This is Nicholas of Cusa (1401–1464).[20] The important text for our purposes is his *On Learned Ignorance.*[21]   Nicholas is in the Neoplatonic tradition, as is clear from his summary towards the end of the text (ch. 26, p. 45):

> Sacred ignorance has taught us that God is ineffable. He is so because He is infinitely greater than all nameable things. And by virtue of the fact that [this] is most true, we speak of God more truly through removal and negation—as [teaches] the greatest Dionysius, who did not believe that God is either Truth or Understanding or Light or anything which can be spoken of... Hence, in accordance with this negative theology, according to which [God] is only infinite, He is neither Father nor Son nor

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[20]On Cusanus, see Miller (2017).
[21]Hopkins (1985). Chapter and page references in what follows are to this.

Holy Spirit. Now, the Infinite qua Infinite is neither Begetting, Begotten, nor Proceeding.

Why is God ineffable? Nicholas cites the usual reason. God is infinite. Human categories ('names') apply the things of our familiar world, and God is infinitely greater than any of these.

He puts a very distinctive spin on this matter, however. Following Anselm, he defines God as that than which there can be no greater, and so is the Maximum (ch. 2, p. 6):

> Now, I give the name "Maximum" to that than which there cannot be anything greater. But fullness befits what is one. Thus, oneness—which is also being—coincides with Maximality. But if such oneness is altogether free from all relation and contraction, obviously nothing is opposed to it, since it is Absolute Maximality. Thus, the Maximum is the Absolute One which is all things. And all things are in the Maximum (for it is the Maximum)...

Since there can be nothing greater than the Maximum, it must contain all things within it. Moreover, since it does so, there are within it no oppositions of the kind required to apply a characterisation (ch. 24, p. 40):

> Since the Maximum is the unqualifiedly Maximum, to which nothing is opposed, it is evident that no name can properly befit it. For all names are bestowed on the basis of a oneness of conception [ratio] through which one thing is distinguished from another. But where all things are one, there can be no proper name. Hence, Hermes Trismegistus rightly says: "Since God is the totality of things, no name is proper to Him; for either He would have to be called by every name or else all things would have to be called by His name"; for in His simplicity He enfolds the totality of things.

Again, leaving the cogency of this reasoning aside, it is clear that Cusanus faces the paradox of ineffability. For in his very explanation of why God is ineffable, he clearly attributes many (positive) properties to him. How is this to be accommodated?

To handle matters, Nicolaus makes a remarkable move (ch. 4, p. 9; italics original):

Therefore, opposing features belong only to those things which can be comparatively greater and lesser; they befit these things in different ways; [but they do] not at all [befit] the absolutely Maximum, since it is beyond all opposition. Therefore, because the absolutely Maximum is absolutely and actually all things which *can* be..., it is beyond both all affirmation and all negation. And it is not, as well as is, all that which is conceived to be; and it is, as well as is not, all that which is conceived not to be. But it is a given thing in such way that it is all things; and it is all things in such way that it is no thing...

Again endorsing the ineffability of God—whilst characterising God in various ways—he says that God is and is not all things which are conceived to be or not to be. In other words, God is all things, so you can describe God in all ways. But it is none of these things, so you can say none of these things about God. So, in particular, God is both effable and ineffable.

The move is remarkable because, of course, it simply accepts the contradiction involved, violating the Principle of Non-Contradiction, a move that few Christian theologians, under the influence of Aristotle, have been prepared to make. This is no naive move, however. Nicholas is well aware of what he is doing. His rejection of the view is quite explicit. Indeed, as one commentator puts it, he criticised 'the Aristotelians for insisting on the principle of noncontradiction and stubbornly refusing to admit the compatibility of contradictions in reality'.[22]

4   Segue into Paraconsistency

We have now enough historical background to give us a sense of what is at issue here. As we have seen, all parties hold God to be ineffable. They not only hold this view; they give reasons as to why it is true, reasons which characterise God positively and are intended literally. (One cannot *reason* otherwise!) Moreover, attempts to explain how this is to be done, produce more of the same, just making matters worse. We seem to be stuck with contradiction. Nicholas makes the bold move of simply accepting the contradiction. Indeed, he does so in an extreme fashion, saying that all things—and

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[22]Maurer (1967).

so all contradictions—are true of god. As should not need to be said, one does not have go this far to accommodate just this one contradiction.

Nicholas' move is unlikely to recommend itself to philosophers and theologians in thrall to the Principle of Non-Contradiction—who are, in Wittgenstein's worlds, in superstitious fear and awe in the face of contradiction.[23] Once over such fear, there is nothing to prevent one accepting such a contradiction, at least in principle. However, simply to accept it, and leave it at that, is lame. What one needs is a theoretical articulation of what is going on, and some kind of guarantee that the contradiction involved does not go on holiday, taking contradictions to places where one really does not want them (for example implying that Jesus Christ was a frog and not a frog). It is here that the techniques of modern paraconsistent logic are of use. In the rest of this essay, I will show how. Whether such techniques could be applied to the other theological paradoxes we noted in Section 1, is another matter. Each would have to be considered in its own right; and this is not the place to do so.

Before we turn to that, though, let me just note that the phenomenon we are dealing with is not restricted to Christian theology, but can be found in others. Thus, in Hinduism, both God (*Brahaman*) and the self (*ātman*) are explained to be ineffable.[24] And in religions where there is no god, other things may be said to be ineffable. Thus, as I already noted, in Mahāyāna Buddhism, ultimate reality (*paramārtha satya*) is explained to be ineffable.[25]

Moreover, in a number of non-religious philosophies, there is held to be some kind of reality "behind" our phenomenological world, which is ineffable. Thus in Daoism, *dao* is ineffable; and for Heidegger, being is ineffable.[26] And in many other philosophies, there are ineffable aspects of reality: noumena for Kant; form for Wittgenstein (in the *Tractatus*); nothingness in gluon theory.[27]

Of course all these paradoxes are hostage to certain theories concerning the existence and nature of something or other (*dao*, form, being, etc). The paradox of an ineffable deity is no different in this way. This is not the place to go into any of this. I point these things out to make it clear that

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[23]Wittgenstein (1956), p. 53, Remark 17.

[24]See Priest (2018), 2.3.

[25]See Priest (2014), 13.9, and Priest (2018), 5.2.

[26]See, respectively, Deguchi, Garfield, Priest, and Sharf (2021), ch. 2, and Priest (1995), 2nd edn, ch. 15.

[27]See respectively, Priest (1995), ch. 5, Priest (1995), ch. 12, and Priest (2014), 13.11.

the phenomenon we are concerned with here of the effable ineffable is not restricted to Christian theism.

5 Modeling the Effable Ineffable

5.1 A Number-Theoretic Construction

So let us turn to technical matters.

In the Christian theologies we have been looking at, God is an ineffable object. That does not mean that one cannot refer to them. (One can do so with the word 'God'.) It means that one cannot say anything about the object referred to, that is, attribute some kind of property to them.[28] Now, all objects have properties. (If an object had no properties, it would have the property of having no properties.) Let us refer to an object's having a property as a state of affairs—though exactly what a state of affairs is, we need take no stand on here. States of affairs may themselves be effable and ineffable. A state of affairs is effable if there is some statement which describes it; it is ineffable otherwise. And clearly, an object is ineffable iff all the states of affairs of which it is a constituent are ineffable. (If an object is effable, one can say something about it, and so express some state of affairs concerning it. Conversely, if it is ineffable one cannot express any state of affairs concerning it, or one would have said something about it.)

So, in understanding effability/ineffability, we may simply concern ourselves with states of affairs. In particular, we need to have a binary predicate, $E(x, y)$, meaning *x is a statement expressing state of affairs y*. That y is an effable state of affairs can then be expressed by $\exists x E(x, y)$. That y is ineffable is expressed by the negation of this. We also need a way of referring to statements and the states of affairs they express. If A is any sentence, we will let $\langle A \rangle$ be its name, and $[A]$ be the name of the state of affairs it refers to. Clearly, we have, for any sentence, A, $E(\langle A \rangle, [A])$. Hence, $[A]$ is effable, $\exists x E(x, [A])$.

There are doubtlessly many ways of building these things into a formal theory. A simple way is to use the well understood machinery of arithmetic and its coding powers. Let me explain how.[29] For the moment, assume that

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[28]I do not use the word 'property' in any heavy-duty metaphysical sense here and in what follows. The word just means whatever it is that is expressed by predication.

[29]Full details of the construction can be found in Priest (202+).

we are working in the standard (classical) model of arithmetic, $\mathcal{N}$. If n is a number, let **n** be its numeral.

We assume any standard gödelisation of the language. Let $\#A$ be the code of A; and if n is the code of A, let $\langle A \rangle$ be **n**. The set of code numbers is a decidable set, and so is defined by an arithmetic predicate $G(x)$. We may take the numbers which are *not* gödel numbers to be states of affairs—ar at least, their code numbers under some appropriate coding. Think, intuitively of the *even* ones as effable, and the *odd* ones as ineffable. We map (codes of) formulas onto the even states of affairs by some recursive function, f. Intuitively, $f(x)$ is the state of affairs expressed by x. Let f be defined by the binary arithmetic predicate $F(x, y)$. We may take $[A]$ to be the numeral of $f(\#A)$. Finally, $E(x, y)$ may be defined in the obvious way: x is the gödel number of a sentence, and y is the state of affairs that x expresses. Let us write this, slightly oddly, as follows:

- $\exists z(G(z) \wedge z = x \wedge F(z, y))$

Note that the identity conjunct is doing no real work at the moment. $E(x, y)$ could be defined by the logically equivalent $G(x) \wedge F(x, y)$. However, that conjunct will play an essential role in a moment.

Given our understanding of the machinery, E intuitively defines the expressibility relation; and $E \langle A \rangle [A]$ is a simply consequence of the construction. Hence, $\exists x \exists y E(x, y)$: some states of affairs are effable. But if s is any odd state of affairs then, by construction, $\neg \exists x E(x, \mathbf{s})$, so $\exists y \neg \exists y E(x, y)$: some states of affairs are ineffable, too.

5.2   Enter Inconsistency

Now, $\mathcal{N}$ is a classical model, and *a fortiori* a model of the paraconsistent logic LP. LP models are exactly the same as classical models, except that truth an falsity may overlap. Thus, truth and falsity conditions must be given in pairs. For example:

- $\neg A$ is true iff A is false

- $\neg A$ is false iff A is true

- $A \wedge B$ is true iff A is true and B is true

- $A \wedge B$ is false iff A is false or B is false

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The LP models where truth and falsity are disjoint are exactly the classical models.[30]

Now, let $\mathcal{C}$ be some subset of the gödel codes. Let $\mathcal{N}'$ be the LP model which is exactly the same as $\mathcal{N}$, except that for each $c \in \mathcal{C}$, the pair $\langle c, c \rangle$ is added to the anti-extension of the identity predicate—that is, the set of pairs that make $x = y$ false. It is well known that everything true in $\mathcal{N}$ is true in $\mathcal{N}'$. In particular, if $c \in \mathcal{C}$, $\mathbf{c} = \mathbf{c}$. But $\mathcal{N}'$ makes more things true. I particular, if $c \in \mathcal{C}$, $\mathbf{c} \neq \mathbf{c}$ too.

Now, let S be be any sentence such that $\#S = s \in \mathcal{C}$. Then $\exists x E(x, [S])$. The state of affairs expressed by S is effable. But now consider $\exists x E(x, [S])$, that is, $\exists x \exists z (G(z) \wedge z = x \wedge F(z, [S]))$. If $n \neq s$ then $\neg \mathbf{n} = \mathbf{s}$ is true in the model. But if $n = s$ then $\neg \mathbf{n} = \mathbf{s}$ as well. Hence $\forall x \neg x = \mathbf{s}$. So $\exists x \exists z (G(z) \wedge z = x \wedge F(z, [S]))$ is false, since the middle conjunct is always false. Its negation is therefore true. That is, $[S]$ is ineffable. So, S expresses a state of affairs that is both ineffable and effable.[31] In fact, $\mathcal{C}$ contains (the codes of) all (and only) the statements that express effable ineffable states of affairs. It would quite natural to impose further constraints on $\mathcal{C}$. Thus, for example, presumably $[A]$ is ineffable iff $[\neg A]$ is. So it would be natural to require that $\#A \in \mathcal{C}$ iff $\#\neg A \in \mathcal{C}$. But we need not pursue this matter here.

Note, however, that the only inconsistent objects are the numbers in $\mathcal{C}$, so the contradictions are limited to those numbers which in this set. In other words, the contradictions are limited, and under tight control.

5.3   Applying This to God

So far, our construction has been quite generic. It could apply to the effable ineffable, whatever the effable ineffable states of affairs are. How do we bring the construction to bear specifically on statements about God?

To do this, we need to make reference to an appropriate language, of course. Let this be an interpreted language, $\mathcal{L}$. Let us keep matters simple. Atomic sentence of $\mathcal{L}$ are of the form Pa, where a is one of a bunch of names, and P is one of a bunch of monadic predicates. One of the names is g, 'God'. More complex sentences are built from these using conjunction, disjunction, and negation.

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[30]On LP, see Priest (2008), chs. 7, 21.

[31]A construction of the above kind was first used to explain how something could be both provable and not provable in a system of arithmetic. See Priest (2006), 17.8.

Now, when coding is applied to the language of arithmetic, it is normally the language of arithmetic that is being coded. But there is no reason, either in the nature of coding or the above construction, which requires this to be so. In particular, we may take it that the codes are codes of sentences in $\mathcal{L}$.

Let is write the set of gödel codes as $\mathcal{G}$. $\mathcal{C} \subseteq \mathcal{G}$ is the set of identity-inconsistent codes; that is the codes of effable ineffable sentences. Let the set of truths be $\mathcal{T}$, and the set of falsities be $\mathcal{F}$ (though these may overlap). In what follows, it may help to refer to the following diagram. The truths are in the vertical rectangle. The falsities are in the horizontal rectangle. So where these overlap, the sentences are true and false.
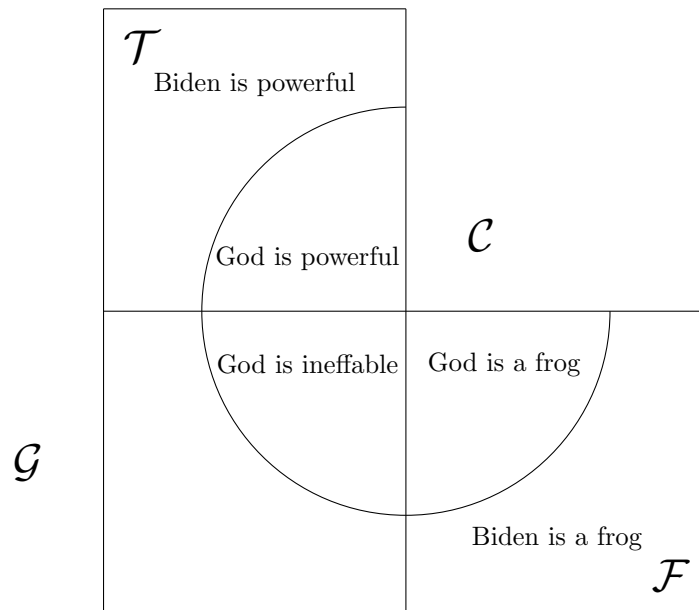
Let us consider some sentences of the form Pa. Take the sentence 'Biden is powerful'. This is true. On the other hand, 'Biden is a frog' is false. Neither is both true and false, and neither is in $\mathcal{C}$, since they are both straightforwardly effable.

Now consider the statement 'God is powerful'. This is, presumably, true, and not false; but it describes an effable ineffable state of affairs, so it is $\mathcal{C}$. What of 'God is a frog'? 'God is not a frog' is, presumably, true. But since it characterises God in a certain way, it is ineffable. Assuming that $\#A \in \mathcal{C}$

iff $\#\neg A \in \mathcal{C}$, then 'God is a frog' is also ineffable. Hence, 'God is a frog', is false and ineffable.

However, consider the sentence 'God is ineffable'. This is true, and since we have just expressed it, it false. So the statement is in both true and false. But since it is effable and ineffable, it must be in $\mathcal{C}$ as well.

Thus, in the model, God is both effable and ineffable. However, note that we do not have to follow Cusanus and hold that all contradictions are true of God. 'God is powerful and God is not powerful' is simply false, as is 'God is a frog and not a frog'.

6 Conclusion: Taking Stock

What we have seen in this essay is that, amongst the paradoxes delivered by the Christian conception of God, there is a fundamental one concerned with the very possibility of talking about God. We briefly looked at some of the theological history of the issue. As we saw, if one adheres to the Principle of Non-Contradiction, these are all—at the very least—problematic. The Principle has been highly orthodox amongst Christian theologians (and Western philosophers quite generally).

As we also saw, however, there was one who was prepared to reject it, and so accommodate the paradox, simply by accepting the conclusion that God is both effable and ineffable—Nicholas of Cusa. Of course, Nicholas did not have the techniques of modern logic at his disposal. What was shown in the second half of the essay is that the techniques of modern paraconsistent logic can be deployed to establish that endorsing the contradiction without contradiction running rife, is tractable and coherent—though one certainly does not have to go as far as Nicholas and hold that all contradictions are true of God.

To accept such a solution to the paradox, one has to be a dialetheist, of course. Many will find that a tough bridge to cross. However, the Principle of Non-Contradiction never had the rational ground that most Western philosophers have taken for granted.[32] Indeed, what drives the paradox of ineffability is exactly the thought that God is *so* different from mundane things that one cannot expect the usual rules of the game to apply to them. So even if one is not a dialetheist about mundane matters, one might well

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[32]See, e.g., Priest (1998a) and (1998b).

hold that some contradictions are true of God.[33] At any rate, once over the bridge of dialetheism, a dialetheic position on the matter seems to leave its competitors trailing far behind.

Of course, I am sure that there is much more to be said about all the matters we have covered in this essay. At this point, I am happy to leave such discussion to those who are Christians.

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