

Arguing Semantics:

A Dialogue on Ineffability and its Coherence in Religion and Philosophy

Adam Ebel and Jesse Kovac

The Philosophy of Religion

Professor Knepper

15 May 2014

Introductions

Adam Ebel: So this role, the role of the defensive optimist, is a role I find myself in more often than I'd like to admit, I have proposed a farfetched idea, ineffability, and as a result, find my said idea underneath a critical eye of Jesse's more conservative estimations. I, myself, am a little less religious than average, and I do not find ineffability a terribly compelling concept, so I felt odd to be defending what many would interpret to be a religious position in playing devil's advocate.

SljchoH is Klingon for "one-to-become-clever" or "student."

Jesse Kovac: I began this course's investigation into religious ineffability with both an open mind and a sound expectation that I would end up being sympathetic to the concept of ineffability. As time progressed, I found myself inescapably closing in on a more skeptical point of view: that ineffability, at least as I had seen it invoked by religious traditions, was a wholly incoherent concept. Because of this, I am grateful that Adam has assumed the role that he has. An in-depth dialogue about the merits of the concept is exactly what I need to pull the various strands of this class's discourse together.

SljchoH: Define ineffability, Jesse.

JK: I would define ineffability in more absolute terms than perhaps other people would. I consider ineffability, or that which is ineffable, to be completely beyond language. You can't actually express it linguistically at all.

Here, I present an absolutist definition of "ineffability," because I consider the concept, by nature, to be an absolute one. I appeal to the Merriam-Webster definition, which is as follows: "Incapable of being expressed in words."¹ My approach can be traced to such a

¹ "Ineffable." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed May 13, 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ineffable>.

definition, as something is either capable or incapable of being something. There is little overlap with such concepts.

SIjchoH: I suppose I have a less absolute definition in which ineffability is simply something that is a part of the human experience that cannot be explained using the tool of language, whether it is an element or an entire object in and of itself is a more tangential point.

Unfortunately, we end up diving into this “tangential point” a little while later. I think it is a given that an absolute is incredibly difficult to defend, whereas a relativism is equally difficult to disprove. I will also take the Merriam-Webster definition, “incapable of being expressed in words”¹ to mean that the entirety of the said ineffable object cannot be expressed in words, although smaller parts of it may be explained using language.

JK: So you have a more relative view...

SIjchoH: Yes...

JK: So then I guess the question falls to me, whether or not you can experience ineffable things... And I guess that’s a question I don’t really have an answer to. We can try to find that as this goes on.

SIjchoH: Ok, so...do you think ineffable experiences can happen, with a guess, right now?

JK: I would say that ineffability doesn’t exist as a piece of reality, things in of themselves are not ineffable by nature. If ineffability is a thing, I think it is a result of us, our thought processes and linguistic capabilities. I don’t think there are things out there that our ineffable in and of themselves.

SIjchoH: But are our thought processes and thoughts not a part of reality? Are they not grounded in the physical being that is us?

JK: Yeah thoughts and thought processes are grounded within us, but I think thought and language is a way to make sense of the reality that is outside of our minds...

SIjchoH: ...Which is still a part of reality...

JK: ...Yes it's a part of reality, but it's still a representation of it.

SIjchoH: So if language cannot accurately represent the thoughts that we have, which are representative of the reality, right? We're going through a three step process here, then by the transitive property, if we cannot utter it, there are things language cannot cover in reality.

JK: Yeah there are things that language can't cover, but I would be inclined to say that if we can't describe it in any way then it simply doesn't exist in any external reality, because we describe everything we experience. If there isn't anything we can say about it, then I don't think it's really out there.

I think Jesse may contradict himself here. Are said "things" not a part of reality as established within the last few sentences?

SIjchoH: Well how do we prove any external reality?

JK: How do we prove any external reality?

SIjchoH: Yes.

JK: Now we have to define what proving is.

SIjchoH: Well I would say this goes back to a much deeper debate, that we have a fundamentally subjective universe. In which we cannot objectively point out any sort of matter that we have not, in some way, rendered in our minds.

JK: Well if we are talking about subjectivity then I think that objectivity could be found through... considering subjectivity as a lens, and that everyone sees the world through a different perspective, and if we find something we all happen to see the same way, we can consider that to

be proven. If something is beyond the lenses, we can consider that thing to be objectively true. That's the goal of science, you can design an experiment, and anyone around the world can repeat that experiment to get the same results. That's one of the underlying principles of the scientific method.

SIjchoH: So by compiling the majority of subjective experiences, because we're never going to get all of them, we can get objective reality. So enough subjectivity adds up to objectivity?

JK: That's not the point I'm making.

SIjchoH: ...Oh, but is it not?

JK: I think it's subtly different. No, my point is that there are certain experiences that aren't affected by the subjective lens.

SIjchoH: Name one.

JK: ...

(Mutual laughter, general frivol)

JK: Hold on, I've got one, I've got one. I'm going to through this pencil and it's going to follow a parabolic path to the ground. Watch it.

Jesse throws a pencil to the ground.

JK: Did it do that?

SIjchoH opens the door.

SIjchoH: Damion, did a pencil just fall to the ground just now?

Damion Miller: What the hell?

(Laughter)

SIjchoH closes the door

JK: Everyone with the capacity to observe that saw it the same way.

Strictly speaking, we didn't, Jesse saw it move away from him, I saw it come closer, and we were to further complicate the scenario, there are very minute differences in relativity between Jesses view and mine that would be amplified if we were moving.

Adam has brought up an excellent point here. We saw the same event, but we did not see it the same way. Such a concept is present in the Theory of Special Relativity, in which an event that occurs will do so to all observers, but each observer will see it happen differently, and in fact sometimes in a different order if there are multiple events given the right circumstances. Regardless, all the observers saw the same event, but the details of perspective would be different. It is subjective to a degree.

SIjchoH: But that's the point. One, you cannot prove that I am a subjective viewer, you cannot prove that I am not just a fabrication of your imagination. Which is really far into conspiracy...

JK: ...and not in line with your point.

SIjchoH: ...But what is in line with my point is that Damion, not having the capacity to see what happened, made that experience not a part of his subjective reality. Really, it was not a part of the majority of the subjective experience of human beings, and thus, according to your method of finding objective reality, not a part of the objective reality.

JK: See, but I don't think that's the case because whether or not their aware of it, it's still a part of their reality, they just don't know it...

SIjchoH: ...Then how do we know?

JK: How do we know that happened?

SIjchoH: Yeah.

JK: You and I know that happened, we just saw it, and you could repeat that experiment in front of those people, and it would become a part of their reality...

SIjchoH: But by your definition of reality, we can't, right? Because that was a subjective interpretation we just made. We received the sound and light, and you felt, and you saw from your senses but fundamentally we can't prove that that was a part of fundamental objective reality...

JK: To the very best of our ability we can.

SIjchoH: And what is the very best of our ability?

JK: That we observed it happen, and that we can record, recall...

SIjchoH: ...Which is to say that the very best of our ability is a subjective determination.

JK: If that were true where does that put us?

SIjchoH: That puts us that reality is fundamentally subjective

JK: ...That may be the case. That could prove my point.

SIjchoH: Why would that prove your point?

JK: If our perception of reality is subjective, than that would explain why we would think ineffability exists, because we are filtering it through different subjective lenses.

SIjchoH: That might explain why we might think ineffability exists, but it doesn't disprove ineffability.

JK: No, but it does provide an alternative, that we just think it exists and it doesn't.

SIjchoH: But here's the thing, if we think it exists, does it come into existence, in our subjective experience? Since we do not have an objective experience to compare it past.

JK: To go back to the objective experience, just because we're not aware of something doesn't mean it doesn't happen. Of course you agree with that.

SIjchoH nods.

JK: So that would mean that there is an objective world out there. That I might not be aware of but it's happening. Just because the Rashomon effect is a psychological element to our existence doesn't mean that there isn't one, true way that events occur. We just don't know what they are and we can't figure it out. So there could be an objective reality it's just hard for us to filter it out and figure out exactly what it is.

SIjchoH: So if there could be an objective reality, but there is no way for us to determine what it is without going through a subjective lens, as far as our knowledge and ability, we live in a subjective reality.

JK: Each one of us, in a sense, would live in a subjective reality, within a larger objective reality...

SIjchoH: ...But we wouldn't be aware of the Objective reality.

JK: We're aware of it...

SIjchoH: ...How so?

JK: We know it's there...

SIjchoH: Through a subjective lens...

JK: Through a subjective lens. But my point is that this whole talk about lenses works off the point that there is a world out there that we're seeing through a lens. So sure our observation of it is subjective, but *it* is objective. And I think ineffability is introduced in discourse through the lens and through interpretation of what comes through the lens.

SIjchoH: And how does that make ineffability incoherent?

JK: That in and of itself doesn't, that just is a qualifier that makes it so it may not be real. There is a possibility that things aren't entirely ineffable. That's my qualifier. The reason it's

incoherent...we can start with the paradox of having a word for that which is beyond language. Right there.

SIjchoH: Now I would not say so. Is silence a paradox?

Silence is not a paradox, although one can, naturally, not have silence while saying the word, "silence," so in this literal application it could be. The point at hand, however, is that silence and ineffability are of distinct natures. "Silence" refers to an observable and describable phenomenon when there is no sound to be heard. Ineffability, on the other hand, refers to something that we, despite having a word for it, cannot describe linguistically at all, hence the reference in Jonathan Bellman's lecture title: *After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest*.² The ineffable is wholly inexpressible, and would therefore be best expressed by not expressing at all: silence. To return to Adam's question of silence, no it is not a paradox, because it can be experienced and described, unlike ineffability.

Silence can only be observable as a lack of something else, namely noise. Cannot ineffability be observable as a lack of language? If silence is observable as a lack of noise, then ineffability can be observed as lack appropriate language to describe it. In *After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest* Jonathan Bellman concludes that the music that is effable to a composer becomes ineffable within the listener as a result of their subjective interpretation of the music. "It is within the heart of the individual listener that the existential thirst for the ineffable is found, the nectar that slakes that thirst is, pace Mendelssohn, as unique as each individual"² I would argue that ineffability, in the sense that is invoked Jonathan Bellman, is entirely dependent on being experienced.

This last point of Adam's, that ineffability according to Bellman is entirely dependent

² Jonathan Bellman, *After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest*.

on human experience, is something that I agree with. However, where Adam likely means “experienced in reality” by this, I refer more to ineffability being dependent on language’s inability to capture reality, and thus is a part of the human experience but not of external reality.

(Silence)

JK: I like that point, let's explore it.

SIjchoH: So while the concept of ineffability has to be explained using effable means, it does not mean that it cannot be applied to things that are ineffable. Now we might make the extension that while ineffability might not be a paradox in of itself, we can change ineffability to be something other than a description in of itself. So ineffable can mean what is indescribable other than that it is indescribable.

JK: So, what you’re saying is that there is a possible way of looking at ineffability that if the word itself is coherent, then it is the only word usable to describe ineffable things.

SIjchoH: Yes.

JK: Ok, I can agree. I can’t counter any of your points about ineffability being a word that works. Because it does, in that respect. But every time ineffability is invoked, especially with religion, there’s always a caveat, there is always something further, something to describe the ineffable reality. And this is where the concept becomes incoherent, because it is never used, and put away. We never say, “That is ineffable,” and then we’re done. We say, “That is ineffable and the source of all things,” or something like that.

SIjchoH: Well I would not say, that within religious experiences, ineffability is incoherent. I might say that its application within the religious experience is incoherent, but moving on beyond that point, and I guess this comes to a difference in our definitions, that ineffability is not an absolute term. I could say that the thing in of itself may be ineffable, but it could apply itself

through a variety of means.

JK: I'm sorry, what sort of means could an ineffable thing apply itself?

SljchoH: I'm going to provide a non-religious example. So let us say we have a remarkable machine that is able to transcribe all of your thoughts and experiences into words, from your birth to your death. Now, someone reading that transcript, if we are going with the idea that ineffable experiences do not occur, would have experienced your life upon finishing it.

This device is a thought device, that is to say entirely infeasible with our current technology. But I would argue that we are coming closer to complete and immediate communication over our experiences as we enhance not just how data is communicated through a medium such as a computer, but how it is received in input. I do not think it is outlandish to think of a means of transcribing thought within the next century.

I find that a comment of Ben-Ami Scharfstein touches upon similar concepts as Adam's thought experiment. In his introduction to *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy of Religion*, he points out that, "We are the animals that use words and that complain rather often that they fail us. Thinking of the effect we should prefer but fail to make, we say, 'I can't put it into words.' We seem to imply that if we were able to use words well enough or if words were a more faithful medium, we could transmit our experience exactly and be appreciated for what we know ourselves to be."³ The implication which Scharfstein describes is akin to the question which Adam posed to me. Retrospectively, something I find interesting about this is that neither Adam nor I took on the perspective of Scharfstein's implication. Almost instinctively, we both reached the conclusion that even if our an experience was described to the best of language's ability that someone reading or hearing the description would not have, in fact, experienced it.

³ Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* (University of New York Press, 1993), xvii.

At the time of the dialogue, this was something of an obstacle to me, as I was attempting to make the point that ineffability arose from language, not from reality. By the end of the dialogue, my views had changed, and I would argue that the instinctive backlash to the idea that one could transmit experience completely through words is due to the nature of human experience making it likely impossible.

JK: I don't think they would have experienced it.

SIjchoH: How so?

JK: Any more than someone who reads a biography or an autobiography can experience it.

SIjchoH: The difference with the autobiography, is that it's incomplete, there are gaps, there is a mechanical restriction, that prevents them from applying every thought and belief that comes across their head. Now if we were to transcribe one's experience, word from word for all of ones thoughts and beliefs, would that not, assuming that the language is applied perfectly, that they would have experienced your life?

JK: I still would not maintain that they would have actually experienced it.

SIjchoH: Why not?

JK: Let's talk about love.

SIjchoH: Ok.

JK: So I imagine someone could describe it in every detail imaginable to someone else, you could have hundreds and of hundreds of pages about the feelings, all the emotional sensations, everything about it. Someone who would have read that, I would argue, would not have experienced love. And if they were to experience it, they would say the experience was vastly different from the reading.

SIjchoH: What makes the experience different from the words used to describe it? Something that is...?

JK: Well things can be experienced without being put into language.

SIjchoH: So what would those experiences be called?

(Laughter)

JK: I think you trapped me there. I think that was intentional. And that would mean that certain experiences would be beyond words.

It was totally intentional.

SIjchoH: So if there are experiences that are beyond words, is ineffability coherent?

JK: I would still maintain that it is not coherent as it is applied within religions.

This statement requires a certain amount of elaboration, as it is both bold and sweeping. My evidence comes primarily from Taoism and from Sikhism, in which ineffability, whenever invoked, always comes with a self-defeating catch. In the *Tao Te Ching*, the following is said of the Tao: “The *Tao* that can be spoken is not the constant Tao, The name that can be named is not the constant Name.” characterizing the Tao as ineffable. However, the tradition goes on to assign four characteristics to the Tao, which Louis Komjathy conveniently enumerated: “The source of everything, unnamable mystery, all-pervading sacred presence (qi), and the universe as transformative process (Nature).”⁴ A resolution to this contradiction of describing the ineffable by way of making “Tao” a placeholder for [] that merely points to the actual, ineffable reality. I consider this resolution to be unsuccessful, because an approximation needs to get close to that which it approximates, and attempting to approximate something truly ineffable with a word is akin to approximating infinity with a finite number. It cannot be done; they are of distinct

⁴ Louis Komjathy, lecture: “*Names are the Guest of Reality*”: *Apophysis, Mysticism, and Soteriology in Taoist Perspective*.

natures. Sikhism runs into a similar problem. In *Verses of the Sikh Gurus, The Name of My Beloved*, translated by Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, the following is said of the divine: “Words fail to describe.”⁵ Despite this, we also call it “primal, immaculate, immortal, immutable, constant through the ages.”⁶ In this way, the application of ineffability in these traditions is incoherent.

So could absolutely indescribable by any words other than indescribable provide a suitable workaround for these semantics, or...?

SIjchoH: So how is it applied in religion that makes it different from your example of love?

JK: For example, Taoism. The Tao is described as being ineffable, but has four characteristics. So if the Tao really is an effable experience, it would be beyond language and we could not say these things about it.

SIjchoH: So the Tao could not be in and of itself beyond language.

JK: Right, just like the example of love, if we're going to go back to it, it isn't ineffable because there could be pages and pages written about it. The experience might not be the same as writing about it, but love is not ineffable, because it can be written about, so that's my qualifier. There are things that you couldn't capture, and I suppose that's where your relativistic ineffability comes in. But absolutely ineffable? Not a chance.

SIjchoH: There are things that are partially ineffable, and ascribe parts that are effable to show that there are parts of this that we cannot describe from our own experience. For a religious believer who has entered into a PCE or something of the sort, would say that their experience has been partially beyond words.

⁵ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Verses of the Sikh Gurus: The Name of My Beloved* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 61.

⁶ Nikky-Guninder Kaur Singh, *Verses of the Sikh Gurus: The Name of My Beloved* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 58-59.

JK: Sure, but that still means that absolute ineffability still wouldn't apply.

SIjchoH: Absolute ineffability cannot even be perceived.

JK: Exactly, so why even bother with it? That's my point, and religious traditions often make claims of absolute ineffability. They invoke absolute ineffability, which we seem to be in agreement is incoherent.

SIjchoH: Absolute ineffability isn't incoherent, it just isn't perceivable.

JK: So what's the point in talking about it? If we can't talk about it, then that makes it incoherent.

SIjchoH: No, no, no, you were just saying that there is an observable universe outside of our perception...

JK: I never said we couldn't perceive it, we all see it through lenses I suppose.

SIjchoH: But we had come to agreement, things can happen outside of our observation that are still real.

JK: Yes.

SIjchoH: So could things happen beyond our ability to perceive them, or even our ability to conceive or express them, and still be real.

JK: Things can happen beyond an individual's ability to perceive them and be real, but I wouldn't say that things happen beyond our ability to conceive of or express. But as something that we can talk about and apply to religion there is no point, because it cannot be said. It is beyond our language, our ability to understand it, but as a topic that we can discuss, it's incoherent.

SIjchoH: It's not incoherent. It becomes impractical. And implausible, but it doesn't become incoherent.

JK: So it can be implausible but not incoherent.

SIjchoH: It can be impossible to discuss, but its logic still retains its status.

JK: How is logic invoked and defined?

SIjchoH: Logic is typically defined... at least in shorthand, by mathematics...

JK: Which is a language...

SIjchoH: Yes...

JK: So logic is expressed and defined in language. So if something can't be logically expressed or explored, it's logically incoherent.

SIjchoH: Yes, but ineffability can be explored, even though things that are ineffable cannot. So absolute ineffability can be explored with logic, although things that are absolutely ineffable, cannot.

JK: ...I don't think I argue with that statement.

SIjchoH: So then if we can model ineffability with mathematics, a language, then is it not a viable candidate for perception and discussion? Although the things it applies to cannot?

JK: If such a subtle distinction can be made, then we can only talk about ineffability and we can't talk about ineffable things. It's going to be a very short conversation.

On the contrary, we can create negatives of sorts, that models out all of the partially ineffable things, and sifts the effable from the ineffable, and discuss the holes that appear within the subsequent experience as a frame of reference for where ineffable elements patch up the holes, and why those holes need patching. Not entirely unlike dark matter.

SIjchoH: But we can talk about partially ineffable things.

JK: Yeah, that would be a part of the definition.

SIjchoH: Just like we can talk about the Hubble telescope's exploration of deep space, we have very little idea of exactly what's there, but from the little glimpses we're able to capture we can discuss those.

JK: But absolute ineffability cannot be discussed.

SIjchoH: Yes, although absolute ineffability cannot be discussed, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist.

JK: My point would be, that it becomes very incoherent in many traditions, because absolute ineffability is so often evoked. And then it becomes not absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: I would agree that invoking absolute ineffability defeats itself, when you describe the ineffable thing. But you can still say there are things that are absolutely ineffable in reality, so in the case of the Tao...

JK: ...But to say that there are things that are absolutely ineffable in reality is something you can't prove at all.

SIjchoH: Yes, you can't prove it, you can't disprove it...

JK: Then it is a statement not worth making.

I think it is a little presumptive and demeaning of language, ironically on the effability proponent's side, to say a statement is "not worth making." If such said statement can help a person reach spiritual fulfillment, or explain a gap within our conscious experience, is it not still worth making, if not just to discuss?

I am in no position to claim that such a statement is not worth making in a personal, internally spiritual context. However, in a logical, philosophical setting such as this, I am willing to claim that a statement which cannot be proven or disproven is not worth making because it is unlikely to move the discussion forward in any significant way.

SIjchoH: No, if that statement provides explanation for one's ineffable subjective experience. Then would that not be worthy of discussing. If not just to try to describe an ineffable experience.

JK: But absolute ineffability couldn't describe your experience, because you called it an experience, it can't be absolutely ineffable. So it's still something.

SIjchoH: But there could be elements of ineffability in their experience.

JK: Then its relative, but you can't point at that and say that is absolutely ineffable, because there is a "that," if nothing else it is a "that."

SIjchoH: Yes, there is nothing that you can *point to* and say that it is absolutely ineffable.

JK: Yes exactly, there is *nothing* that you can point to and say that it is absolutely ineffable. There is *nothing* that is absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: No, that gets back to our pen point right? Just because we don't have the capacity to point at it doesn't make it unreal.

JK: The concept of absolute ineffability... Damion didn't of see the pen drop right? But if he was here he could have seen it, so it wouldn't be absolutely ineffable, just partial to him. So absolute ineffability something you have not capacity to know about. So even if you were there to see it...

SIjchoH: It's not a question about there, it's a question of being capable at all.

JK: Right, so if you're incapable of experiencing it at all, then it might as well not exist.

SIjchoH: I wouldn't say so.

JK: If there is no way you will eventually get to the point where you can express it linguistically, no matter what you do, or where you are, or how you think, you cannot explain or describe it, whatever it is might as well not exist.

SIjchoH: So the portion of the universe that's out of sight, beyond the speed of light, it might as well not be there.

JK: That's not true.

SIjchoH: How so?

JK: If our current science stands, the light that is beyond our current observable horizon will eventually make its way to us and we will be able to describe it. It will be therefore not absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: But there are sections of the universe that are expanding faster than the speed of light that we will never be able to see.

JK: And if there are beings inhabiting those portions then theoretically they would be able to see it. And they were able to perceive and understand it, then it wouldn't be absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: It would be absolutely ineffable to our knowledge and capacity.

JK: So to one person's, one element's subjective reality...

SIjchoH: ...To all people, all subjective realities that we know.

JK: Here's the thing though, for something, it wouldn't be absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: How so?

JK: Because in theory someone could understand it. If we were there, because there's no law stating that we couldn't...

SIjchoH: ...I'm not saying...

Ken Kuniy: Could I point something out to that? Jesse?

JK: I suppose.

KK: I just want to point out a flaw in your argument.

JK: Oh, thank you.

KK: I just want to point out that you're saying that it's possible to see it if they're there. That's just another condition, what if humans had the capacity to understand what is absolutely ineffable? That's just another condition.

JK: We couldn't because that is our notion of absolute ineffability.

KK: But you're saying that it's still a part of our reality, because it follows the condition that if we were there, then we could see it.

JK: No, it's part of our reality if it's perceivable...

SIjchoH: ...But it isn't perceivable...

JK: For us, for now. But in theory it is perceivable.

SIjchoH: For us, which is the entirety of our subjective experience...

JK: See, in that respect, anything that we can't see with the naked eye that we can only see with telescopes, would be absolutely ineffable. But it's not, because we see it now.

KK: But here's the thing, Jesse, if our mind could reach the point where we could comprehend the ineffable, then that's just another condition.

JK: Then it couldn't be ineffable, it wouldn't have been absolutely ineffable because absolutes are absolutes.

KK: But what makes it absolutely ineffable is that we can't comprehend it.

JK: But that's my point. That's my point. Because if there is something out there we would eventually be able to understand it.

KK: I'm just pointing out your condition, of being here and observing something in our subjective reality is the same as the human element of attempting to comprehend the ineffable.

SIjchoH: Hold on, repeat your last statement.

JK: Hm?

SIjchoH: Repeat your last statement.

JK: So if there is a point that we could understand something, then it wouldn't be absolutely ineffable, because it is still understandable or expressible.

SIjchoH: So if there is not a point at which it will be understandable, then does that still make it unreal?

JK: Because then it wouldn't be real, yeah. As long as it will be never discoverable or understandable it might as well never be real.

SIjchoH: But what if we never discover faster than light travel? What if we never colonize the galaxy or greet those aliens that we can't perceive. Those aliens, to our whole subjective reality, would be ineffable.

JK: Yeah we wouldn't know about them, but they would still be there if they were there. Our knowledge of something doesn't dictate whether it's real. It just dictates whether or not we know about it.

SIjchoH: And?

JK: So your point is?

SIjchoH: So my point is that your point is that we can't perceive understand or know it, then it becomes...

JK: If it actually is impossible to express linguistically.

SIjchoH: Yes, and those aliens are impossible to express linguistically

JK: No they're not impossible, we just don't know anything about them at the moment...

SIjchoH: ...No, at any moment, because were going with the theory that FTL travel is impossible...okay I've got a better idea that's a little more convenient. Multiverse theory.

JK: Ok.

SIjchoH: No way to prove it.

JK: Yeah.

SIjchoH: Ok. Does this make it unreal, untrue, or moot?

JK: It might as well not be. Doesn't make it untrue, but for all intents and purposes it's not.

SIjchoH: How do you explain the extremely coincidental mathematical harmony that allows for more complex structures such as planets, stars, and even galaxies?

JK: Just because we currently do not understand something doesn't make it theoretically, eternally indescribable.

SIjchoH: Could anyone explain why that is, or if there are multiple universes?

JK: But the theory that we have to describe the concept of the multiverse is not ineffable.

SIjchoH: But the Multiverses themselves are. They could follow a totally different logic, they could be beyond math.

JK: They would be beyond experience, not just language. And I would say that ineffability is beyond language but not beyond experience

SIjchoH: So you're saying that ineffability is...

JK: My point is that anything that can be experienced can be explained in some way.

SIjchoH: So my point is that there is no way any of us can explain or understand any of the multiverses predicted by this theory. So they are absolutely ineffable.

JK: Not absolutely because you just talked about them.

SIjchoH: No, I just explained Multiverse *theory*, which predicts the existence of other universes that cannot be perceived, understood, or explained.

JK: So the notion of them isn't ineffable, but if those do exist, and there is no way for us to observe them, then they might as well be ineffable.

SIjchoH: So the notion of ineffable things is coherent.

JK: Just because we come up with a theory that says something else might be out there that we would never be able to know, that's not even a part of our reality, that's the point of multiverse theory is that we're can only talk about the reality that we're in. I think bringing in the multiverse and other realities muddies the waters of this whole thing.

SIjchoH: Muddies the waters? Muddies the waters?! I will muddy the waters all I want as long as it lets me prove absolute ineffability are waters that are absolutely muddy!

JK: (laughs) But that doesn't really prove anything. It's a theory that we have no way of knowing whether it is true or not.

SIjchoH: Yes, but it does have application within this universe, because it does explain the physical harmony that allows such an amazing series of structures that we see within the Universe.

JK: I don't think that has actual practical application to the existence of ineffability.

SIjchoH: But it is a thing that has the notion of absolutely ineffable things, that explains a concrete and effable part of our universe, and why it functions that way.

JK: How does it explain it?

SIjchoH: The alternative theory is Fine Tuner theory, both of these make the point that if the mathematical values fundamental to the universe, you know; gravitational constant, speed of light, if they were just a little bit different, galaxies planets, none of these would have formed. Everything is just so mathematically perfect to form life.

Fine Tuner theory is actually invoked by religious proponents far more often than Multiverse, which is seen as a secular alternative to the problem. Fine Tuner theory asserts that there is a conscious effort behind the universes design looking to promote complex structures

such as life. God, in other words. Fortunately for me both Fine Tuner theory and Multiverse theory notion to absolute ineffability and help solve a substantial dilemma of the human experience.

JK: The Multiverse theory explains this because...

SIjchoH: Because by the theory of eventuality, this would eventually happen.

JK: Ok, so that out of all of the universes out there, there would have to be at least one. It still doesn't explain why out of all the universes out there ours is that one...

SIjchoH: Yes it does. There is no other universe, that we could, or any other being could, perceive.

JK: As far as I understand the Multiverse is theorizing an infinite number of universe. So there could be a variety of universes in which galaxies could have formed...

SIjchoH: Yes, only one of which we can understand and perceive. But the only ones that have observers that can say, "galaxies are here" or "galaxies are not here" are the ones that have galaxies in them.

JK: And this relates back to ineffability because....

SIjchoH: Because the Multiverse is ineffable, but the notion of it does explain a concrete detail within our own universe, is thus worth talking about.

JK: The idea obviously isn't ineffable because we're talking about it.

SIjchoH: Yes the idea, the notion, is completely effable, but its indication of ineffable things, is talking about ineffable things.

JK: But it makes it a moot point because there isn't a way to understand or prove it.

SIjchoH: That doesn't make it a moot point.

JK: It's a moot point.

SIjchoH: How so?

JK: As far as discussing it in our universe in a way that we can appreciate and understand it's a moot point. Your point is that these alternate universes can't be understood or explained, so they're absolutely ineffable. My point is that if these multiverses are so disconnected from our own there is no way they could verify any of the terms that we're using.

SIjchoH: They can't prove it, but they can explain it

JK: So you haven't proven absolutely ineffability.

SIjchoH: But I have proven that the notion of absolutely ineffable things...

JK: ... I agree with you that the notion of it works.

SIjchoH: So the notion absolutely ineffable things can explain effable things within our universe...

JK: ...Whoa, that's where we disagree.

SIjchoH: Ok, then go.

JK: I don't think you have successfully proven that. You've just provided a theory, that there are other universes and this one happens to be the way it is just because the way we fit into it. That doesn't prove the point we're talking about.

SIjchoH: But your point is that it's moot because there is no way that we can understand or perceive it. But we can understand and perceive the mathematical harmony within our universe...

JK: Yeah but that is not directly connected...

SIjchoH: It might not be directly connected but it could be explained...

JK: It *could* be

(Simultaneously) SIjchoH: It could *be*

As we reach the height of the argument we ironically invoke the same phrase with different emphasis. I think we are, despite the bickering below, coming to a mutual agreement.

JK: It could be, right? But we have absolutely no way to ever know about it, so it doesn't have any bearing on our conversation.

SIjchoH: It does have bearing on our conversation.

JK: The existence of an alternate universe doesn't have any bearing on our conversation.

SIjchoH: But I think that the existence of other universes has bearing over why our universe is the way it is.

JK: Similar to the notion of absolute ineffability, it comes across to me as a logical cheat.

SIjchoH: A logical fallacy? How is it a cheat?

JK: If you're trying to prove the existence of God to someone who doesn't believe in Him...

SIjchoH: Let me make a distinction. Absolute ineffability I do not believe can be proven. That does not mean that it cannot exist. And it also does not mean that it is incoherent.

JK: I think that if anything can be experience or known it can be expressed linguistically, maybe not adequately, but it can be expressed.

SIjchoH: How not adequately?

JK: You've been talking about relativistic ineffability.

SIjchoH: So there are elements within things that are ineffable.

JK: Relatively so, but it's not absolute.

SIjchoH: But those elements within those partially ineffable things must then in and of themselves be absolutely ineffable.

JK: No, I don't agree with that.

SIjchoH: So we have the experience that is partially ineffable. They are subsidiaries within it that are ineffable. Now, if you were to pick out all the effable things and take what is left, what is that?

JK: You tell me.

SIjchoH: It is absolutely ineffable. Because we have removed all that is effable about it.

JK: So you're saying that if there's such a thing as relative ineffability, then there are little bits of absolute ineffability that make it up.

SIjchoH: Yes.

JK: Give me an example of a relatively ineffable thing.

SIjchoH: We just talked about human experience, human life, yes? And how you can't describe all of it, and have it be the experience that one has had. So now that you have that, right, you can strip it out, all of it that has been experienced with the thousand page book that we were just talking about, what is left is what makes it impossible to experience that. And what is left is...

JK: Completely impossible to talk about?

SIjchoH: Yes, but completely possible to experience. So, then, absolute ineffability, in the sense of a portion of partially ineffable things, can exist.

JK: As if experiences were made up of building blocks of some sort.

SIjchoH: Is that not the basis of language?

JK: Is it?

SIjchoH: You build and construct concepts together in order to define experiences. Is there a language that does not follow this paradigm? There is not. Mathematics does it. By the very definition of language it has to be built and destroyed and built in order to form new and

different experiences. So that which it lack support for must be something that is not in language in any way shape or form.

JK: I'm honestly not even sure if I'm following everything you're saying.

SIjchoH: We have built an experience up from the grassroots of human experience and we're going to go to the very basics of heuristics and happiness and everything else and going to the most fundamentally describable things that we can, and build up into ever more complicated and intricate relationships until we have described the entirety of an experience from neurology to the physics...

JK: "That which is left."

SIjchoH: "That which is left?"

JK: "That which is left." Say it again.

SIjchoH: I get what you're saying is that because...

JK: "That which is left" is not absolutely ineffable! Because it is "that which is left."

SIjchoH: But, right, I am saying "that which is left" simply because my language forces me to do so. Could you just say...?

To my mind, it does not matter whether Adam is forced by language to address his concept as "that which is left" or not. The point is that language has an expression for it, and what is being referred to can't be absolutely ineffable. A similar statement is made in the *Tao Te Ching*: "Not knowing its name, I style it the 'Way.' If forced to give it a name, I would call it 'great.'" Despite the speaker here desiring to keep [] ineffable, language can address it in at least two ways.

Looking past the semantics, I think the expression that “which is left” is like a photo negative. Just as before I said that ineffability could be observed as the lack of linguistic explanation, absolute ineffability can be observed as partial ineffability-effable elements.

JK: So ineffability is a product of language, and not actually an element of reality.

SIjchoH: Ineffability is a product of the shortcomings of language.

JK: We agree. Absolute ineffability is not actually a thing, it is a product of language’s inability to describe experience.

SIjchoH: If language is incapable of describing the entirety of a thing...

Nate Little: Wouldn’t you also be able to argue that even though your language has those shortcomings that you wouldn’t be able to describe, wouldn’t you be able to find something in a separate language that describes that thing?

SIjchoH: The concept of ineffability applies to all languages that we currently have, including mathematics, Punjabi, English, whatever. But, coming back to the original point, just having shortcomings does not make it necessarily, I’m trying to think about your point, you’re saying because it’s a product of language it can’t be ineffable?

JK: I’m saying because ineffability only exists because of language’s shortcomings that that which exists isn’t ineffable.

SIjchoH: I disagree. I would say that ineffability exists previous to language and we perceive it through the shortcomings of language.

JK: There’s our difference. I think it’s a product of the shortcomings of language to explain reality, but I don’t think it makes any element of reality absolutely ineffable. It’s just where our language isn’t good enough to explain it.

SIjchoH: Is that not ineffability?

JK: We came up with the term ineffability. Most words refer to things we can experience.

“Absolute ineffability” doesn’t refer to anything we can actually experience.

SIjchoH: In these religious contexts, it does!

JK: Give me an example.

SIjchoH: So whether we go from the Taoist to the Buddhist to anything else, I guess the Tao was the one you were criticizing, they believe that through talking to each other and through describing through subjective ineffable means an experience they had that they feel like they could not capture. Now, they did it enough, and found enough common shortcomings in their experience that they feel like there is a common ineffable thing. Not entirely unlike dark matter. We have found shortcomings within our model of the universe that has left it open to a flaw. We have made dark matter as something that cannot be even seen in any way shape or form. So, does that mean dark matter does not exist?

JK: We don’t know that it exists. We have no tangible evidence of its existence. At the moment it is a concept created to explain things we don’t understand, a result of observations but not of predictions or evidence.

SIjchoH: So if at all moments we never understand it, does dark matter become a thing?

JK: If at all moments we don’t understand it, does it become a thing? We can only be aware of its being a thing once we can prove it.

SIjchoH: If it is impossible for us to be aware of it being a thing...

JK: Which it can’t be if it is what we think it is, because we have theorized its existence by the interactions of the universe. If dark matter does influence the universe in the way we think it does, we’ll be able to find evidence for it.

SIjchoH: So if it cannot be perceived or anything, but it allows what we experience through our subjective lens of reality to work, because there are missing blocks, then is it a valid concept?

JK: I don't think dark matter is so much a shortcoming of language as a shortcoming of understanding. It think there is a difference.

SIjchoH: No, I would not say so. We use language to construct our understandings of the universe. And I think anything that is ineffable has a fundamental property of not being capable of complete understanding by the human mind. That is not to say that the human mind does not perceive its presence in having things that it inherently understands that lack support, but simply because the things that we do understand...

[There is a break in the dialogue as the conversation loses direction. The participants regroup and restart.]

SIjchoH: So, partial ineffability is a coherent concept.

JK: Yes, I would agree with you, partial ineffability is a coherent concept, with the caveat that it arises from language, not from actual reality.

SIjchoH: My belief is that it arises naturally from reality, as language's inability to describe it.

JK: I would say that it arises naturally from language's inability to describe reality. It's a very subtle difference but for me it's important.

SIjchoH: Yes, it's substantial. So, what does that entail for religions, as you were mentioning before?

JK: I mean, that's the real point of this dialogue. That's what we're trying to get at.

SIjchoH: Many religions use absolute ineffability, which we decided was neither provable nor disprovable.

JK: What does that mean for these religions, if they use concepts that aren't coherent as they use them?

SIjchoH: A lot of religions used concepts that are already incoherent to what we know, such as men being in the sky, vaults holding up water, much of literal religious tradition simply is not compatible with modern views. That does not make the social and moral values that they pronounce obsolete, but rather makes the language more figurative rather than absolutely concrete.

JK: So, to clarify, are you, and this is going to be a strong word and you're probably going to dispute it, and I welcome that, but are you almost demanding that modern day religions, to some extent, abandon their more implausible and illogical sort of creation stories and notions about the universe?

SIjchoH: I'm not demanding that they do that, I'm saying that those concepts—

JK: --For them to be coherent?

SIjchoH: Yes, renders them incoherent. I'm not demanding them anything. I'm simply pointing out that they are incoherent as it is.

JK: So you're saying that if they are going to be fully coherent, they would have to treat them as symbols.

SIjchoH: Yes.

JK: Okay, fair enough. Now, I've got a question, and you really touched on this already, but need logic be applied to religion, do they actually have to make coherent reasonable sense, or can religion by its nature transcend that?

SIjchoH: Religion by its nature can transcend coherence and logic to a degree, but for it to pertain to the universe that we know and wish to apply it to in order to understand moral dilemmas and as such must have some logical bearing, otherwise it remains, as you said, moot.

JK: So, things like the notion of everything emanating from the Tao, or perhaps Christian creation stories from Genesis, things like that, so you're saying that those need to be separated from the moral teachings or aren't necessary to it, because I would, if that is your point, I would ask the question of you whether or not you are making the same mistake that western philosophers did when they maintained that there was a religious Taoism and a philosophical Taoism, trying to separate things that aren't actually separable?

SIjchoH: I would say that if you're going to interpret religions on a fundamental level one must admit that they have a degree of incoherence with what we know about today. And they have a degree of illogical statements within them.

JK: Now this is a bold and sweeping claim and I think we should clarify a few points about what you or I would find incoherent with modern day knowledge.

SIjchoH: So, much of fundamentalist views of religious texts, I would say is a product of the period in which they are written, and have a lot of mystical and unfeasible explanations about things that we now know for certain today.

JK: For example?

SIjchoH: For example Christian creation myth. Now, while I guess it is a religious fundamentalist argument that two people did indeed come down from a garden, it's just not feasible genetically speaking with what we know about biology for that to have happened.

JK: And of course you have the age-old argument under that all things are possible for God, or the ultimate reality, or whatever it is that we're talking about that can transcend logic and bend the rules. And, your response to that?

SIjchoH: If it can transcend logic and bend the rules then it isn't really a reliable source of moral guidance to a universe that follows those rules and follows logical coherence.

JK: So moral laws are in some way related to physical laws?

SIjchoH: In a sense. We live in a physical universe governed by physical logic and physics and mathematics and everything else. The material world is governed on such things. Can we agree on this?

JK: I would agree with you, for certain.

SIjchoH: Now, that material world, in order to have applications of morality, which is usually what someone turns to religion to do, the religion has to have some pertinence to what is happening within this logical world. It itself must have a degree of logic within it.

JK: Because we need morality to exist in that world? Whatever structure it comes from...

SIjchoH: Must have some logical port in which it dumps into our universe's logic.

By now, Adam has time and again referred to the moral significance of religious traditions. I take some issue with this narrow focus, and feel that a certain amount of clarification is required. Religions have significance beyond the imposition of morality. Indeed, there some that deal very marginally with morality, if at all. I think specifically of some West African religious traditions. Such traditions are far less contemplative than more textually-based ones (or more Western traditions, such as the heavily moral Christian and Jewish traditions), and could be considered more practically-minded. Their rituals deal with healing, righting social wrongs, and the problems of everyday life.

Benjamin Caleb Ray makes mention of the “*performative* force of ritual language--how ritual words make things happen in people’s lives,”⁷ speaking to the more earthly applications of such traditions. The *ihamba* healing ceremonies are another example of a religious purpose removed from more transcendent notions of reality: “During the *ihamba* ceremony, relatives and friends of the patient are required to voice aloud their personal grudges and feelings of anger toward each other and the suffering patient, and the patient too must express her anger and resentments.”⁸ These purposes and others--including combatting the magic of ill-intentioned sorcerers and dealing with the loss of cattle--remind us that some religious traditions, and West African ones in particular, deal with things other than morality.

I think Jesse is using a very western definition of morality. Indeed, West African religions on their onset, deal with immediate practical issues to the community, rather than the ultimate moral goals of an individual. I would argue, given the different cultural paradigms that govern African religion, management of the community, invoking of fertility, or settling disputes with one's neighbor, is a profound moral accomplishment. I believe the Masai tribe of southern Kenya donated 14 cows, held to be sacred, to the US embassy in the aftermath of 9/11. In the absence of most modernities, such an act, regardless of how earthly it may seem to us, was a profound expression of blessed charity and respect. Whether a religious tradition has practical application doesn't reduce its moral significance or implications.

JK: Your answer in short is, no, religions are not exempt from logic. They need to somehow be grounded in the real world.

SIjchoH: I would say that religious concepts are not exempt from logic. Religions as a whole, you could argue that portions of them that are illogical can be forgiven as the nature of their

⁷ Benjamin Caleb Ray and Kimberley C. Patton, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 102.

⁸ Ray, 107

transcendent nature, but there needs to be some logical basis for their application within our world.

JK: Okay. So, ineffability factors into this. The question we started with was whether or not religions use incoherent notions such as absolute ineffability, which I think we agreed was...

SIjchoH: We agreed that its coherence could not be proven or disproven.

JK: So that works either way. We're talking about religions whose notion of an ultimate reality, or a God, or a Tao, or whatever they choose to call it, if that relies on or in some way incorporates a concept that is arguably incoherent, what does that mean for them?

SIjchoH: So if a religion invokes an incoherent concept...

JK: Let's assume for a moment that it's incoherent. I think we should go down this path for a little bit and operate on the assumption that absolute ineffability is incoherent.

SIjchoH: I would argue that a fundamentalist interpretation of the religious text would argue that God transcends human logic and so he is exempt. For religions that I can respect as a moral guidance that their use of absolutes was sort of a popular and social influence on the writers of these, the transcribers of these moral traditions and religious beliefs. And that really got in these contexts if we are going to take it with a more lenient, symbolic degree as impartial ineffability.

JK: So you're saying that because of their use of incoherent concepts it has to be some way symbolic or the whole thing becomes incoherent?

SIjchoH: I wouldn't say the whole thing is incoherent, but its application to our universe becomes incoherent.

JK: (Laughs) that is a very subtle distinction.

SIjchoH: It's a subtle but important distinction.

JK: What is it useful for, coherent for, if it doesn't apply to our universe?

SIjchoH: I think for a religious person who believed in that sort of thing, I think Kierkegaard would be such, is that even though we couldn't have coherent argument or coherent way of reaching God, such a God could affect our lives as a power within our irrational selves.

I don't think Kierkegaard would care to fix this conundrum. On the contrary, he would employ it as evidence of the absurdity of the universe, and the futility of applying logic to it. "Life is not a problem to be solved."

SIjchoH: Here's my stance: religions that maintain partial ineffability can be seen as a symbolic representation of what is partially ineffable and how it applies to our logical and effable universe, and absolute ineffability can remain as such within those religions because those religious adherents believe it as transcendent to human logic and thus acts through one's own irrational self.

JK: Since we brought the absolute ineffability into it, I would ask how they're even aware of the absolutely ineffable.

SIjchoH: Because of their innate irrational selves, as Kierkegaard would put it.

JK: So, reasonably...

SIjchoH: There is no reason to it. According to them, there is a natural paradox that this thing is unreachable but one can reach it by admitting such and diving into such an irrational paradox.

JK: Okay, so I suppose my question to you, then, is whether or not you should, in a certain respect, ask of these traditions to turn many of their beliefs, especially those about the origin of all things and things having to do with these ineffable realities, into symbolism in order to be coherent for you, for logic. Because many of these traditions, as far as I understand them, mean those things literally, or they did when they were written. It was literally meant that all things emanate from the Tao then into the multitude of beings. And Genesis was meant to be a literal

account of creation. So, my question is, in fact my criticism is that it is perhaps disrespectful and inappropriate to say that we should take those as symbolic and only use their moral or applicable sections of their beliefs. That it is somehow inappropriate for us to do. And I ask how you feel about that.

SIjchoH: I would say that one can rarely ask a religion as a concept, to do anything. One can ask its adherents perhaps to change it, likely to little success, I think what is ultimately going to have to be the shift, and this ties back to our understandings of subjective interpretations of reality, is that we have our paradigms by which we understand the universe and many of these adherents have their paradigms, which are very different, and allow the religion to exist logically, we will either have to wait for them to change through progression, like how western philosophy has shifted through our experience with the material world, and general consensus. We either wait for them to do that, and if they do not, then we must accept, to a degree, the lack of both our and their capacity to understand each other's logic through our subjective lenses.

JK: I guess we're questioning if there's an inherent elitism in our attempt to sort of apply our reason and logic and philosophy to these religions. And I think that I would actually say that there may not be, that there doesn't have to be. This is my initial reactions to these questions of whether or not we should. Sure, we are more than welcome to try and understand them, and here's why. I don't think...since we're going back to the subjective reality thing we started out with, us trying to understand these very different traditions from our own, through our own lenses, I don't think is the same thing as trying to impose in a sort of colonialist sense our notions on them. I think there's a difference. Admittedly it may not be the most successful way of understanding them, but I think there's a difference between trying to interpret their concepts through our own concepts, in this case our own philosophical concepts of logic. I don't think it's

necessarily us imposing our standards of thought onto them by trying to understand their thought in terms of ours.

SIjchoH: I would say, when you say it's not the most successfully way, I am wondering what the most successful way is and I have a proposal for that. When we are interpreting it through our subjective lens, they do not make logical sense until we impose concepts of symbolism upon them. Indeed, this imposition, if we were enforcing it onto their own population, I think would be morally wrong and elitist. However, I think it is a natural and sort of limitation of us to understand it. But if we do use that in order to construct logic, that way we can understand the moral values of their religion, which I think they have full right to claim, and if they use that for our religions, then they may use their logic and apply and impose it on our religions to make moral conclusions from that. And I think by imposing our own structures upon such other religions in a theoretical capacity, allows us to understand them to the greatest degree that we ever will.

I think there is the opportunity for moral constructivism here. I think by exploring other cultural models of morality, we are better able to identify flaws within our own model, and perhaps integrate foreign concepts into our own sense of morality.

JK: The underlying theme here, and this is something I might be partial to, is that the only way to really understand a tradition is to be a part of it and to believe in it. Would you agree with that?

SIjchoH: Yes, I would.

At this point, I must make an alternate assessment about what the coherence of absolute ineffability means for the religious traditions that invoke it. As we have just established that anyone who is not a part of a religious tradition lacks the ability to fully comprehend it because they have not experienced it. my assessment is this: it is inappropriate for us, as philosophers and

outsiders to the tradition, to venture to label a religion (or, as Adam put it, its applications to our universe) incoherent, as we lack adequate understanding to make such a claim. Of course, we have every right to point out for ourselves that which does not work logically for us, such as absolute ineffability, but to make a sweeping statement about the objective incoherence of a religion is outside the scope of our inquiry. There is always the consideration that though aspects of such traditions do not make sense to an outsider they make perfect sense to a participator. Some of these participators, I would note, are considered some of the most influential thinkers of human history. Here I point to Christian mysticism as a personal example, where (quoted by Steven Fanning) Pseudo Dionysius says, “God... was beyond all description, having ‘neither shape nor form, quality, quantity, or weight’ and can ‘neither be seen nor be touched. It is neither perceived nor is it perceptible... God transcends all human language and concepts.”⁹ I am not a Christian mystic, and to me such a statement does not work in a tradition with such effable encounters with God as take place in both the Old and New Testament of Scripture. And yet, it has worked. It is perfectly coherent to the mystics and has been for some time. This is, perhaps, an example of an outsider’s inability to fully understand a tradition as well as its participators can, which suggests that we should be hesitant so make sweeping claims of incoherence.

JK: Perhaps this speaks to ineffability in experience more generally. This reminds me of your question, that if you could transcribe people’s thoughts could you experience what they experience by understanding it in language. And we can understand these religions in language, but it seems to me that both of us agree that you couldn’t really truly understand these religions the way they do, unless you were a part of it. There is a certain experiential ineffability to be found here. And, admittedly I am wondering if it is really the fault of language or not. I really

⁹ Steven Fanning, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 36.

am beginning to think, it might be a part of reality, because I can't possibly fathom a linguistic means to impart the fervor with which a Taoist would truly believe in the emanative properties of the Tao, or the way a Sikh would feel connected to all the other religious traditions because there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, they're all ultimately referring to the same Reality. And perhaps it's not a shortcoming of language. Maybe there is something to ineffability in reality.

Further, I would cite the field research of those such as Joseph Hellweg, whose experience as a member of the dozos apparently granted him deeper understanding of their beliefs. His initiation ritual comes to mind as a specific example: "I suddenly understood why dozos spoke of Manimory as a living being. The spirit they posited before me could make or break my immediate future--and theirs. Manimory confronted the living as an invisible presence who would in part determine--whether I 'believed' in him or not--the next several years of my life..."¹⁰ Having experienced a situation in which the beliefs of the dozo affected his reality, Hellweg took a step closer to achieving the sort of understanding which Adam and I spoke of, which it seems cannot be conveyed solely by language.

SIjchoH: So, I think that's a fantastic conclusion, honestly.

JK: Yeah, I think we may have actually come to agree on this.

SIjchoH: Wonderful.

JK: There's still the notion that absolute ineffability cannot be proven one way or another, whether or not it exists. I think I agree with you, ineffability may not be just linguistic. It may be a product of the human experience. Of experience itself and the nature of a partially subjective reality.

¹⁰ Joseph Hellweg, *Hunting the Ethical State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 66.

SIjchoH: And I'll agree with you that a part of the human experience is structured by language, and so to that degree there's always going to be trappings of ineffability wherever we attempt to venture.

Adam's statement here reminds me of one of Scharfstein's conclusions about ineffability: "Everything conceivable can at least be hinted at in words; but the inevitable residue of what we want to and cannot accomplish with them is the degree of ineffability that we can never escape, and perhaps do not want to escape."¹¹ I consider this an apt summary of what Adam and I decided upon throughout this dialogue, because it undermines the viability of absolute ineffability but acknowledges the existence of partial ineffability within language and experience.

JK: And that's why you would sympathize with the notion that absolute ineffability isn't necessarily in reality because wherever we go we explain, we talk about it.

SIjchoH: Yes.

JK: I like it.

SIjchoH: So, that's a wrap.

This dialogue ends on a successful note: Adam and I came to an agreement about the nature of ineffability, in both its relative and absolute forms, and along the way explored the nature of reality, science, and religion. What we concluded about absolute ineffability--that it may not exist in reality, or, in my case, does not exist in reality--can be applied to my earlier arguments about ineffability arising from language and connected to Jonathan Bellman's thoughts on a similar matter. If absolute ineffability has dubious existence in reality, then its origins must be human. As Bellman put it during the question and answer session after his

¹¹Ben-Ami Scharfstein, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* (University of New York Press, 1993), 186.

lecture (note that this is an approximation from memory, not a direct quote, but is supported by some of the themes of his lecture). “From a non-mystical point of view, ineffability is just a very human concept. It is a word for ‘something we don’t have a word for.’”¹² After attending Bellman’s lecture, I came to a conclusion about ineffability in general, which I now apply specifically to absolute ineffability: absolute ineffability is a cognitive and linguistic overextension which betrays our innate human propensity to seek to understand and to express our understanding even beyond reasonable limits.

Humans have displayed, throughout history, a desire to know, and this desire has fueled the progression of our societies. So while absolute ineffability is an incoherent concept, its existence in our vocabulary is wholly understandable. Humans in general recognized the inability of language to convey an experience so wholly that another person could have, essentially, experienced it as well. We call this ineffability, or in mine and Adam’s terms, partial or relative ineffability. Then we--that is, humanity--reached too far, inventing a concept for that which we could never experience, perceive, prove, or disprove: what I would call absolute ineffability. For me, humanity’s doing this simply serves to emphasize its desire to know.

We concluded on the topic that we began on. The idea of the world around us being so impacted by so profoundly by our subjective lens, that our blind spots can cover such essential pieces of the human experience. Both propositions, that ineffability is a natural phenomenon that we can never capture within our universe, or that we as human beings impose on ourselves in our endeavor to know and understand are staggering. Regardless, our discussion indicates a font of value beyond the realm of language that will ever be able to conclude. Despite our lack of conclusions, I was glad to have this enlightening discussion.

¹² Jonathan Bellman, *After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest*.

Bibliography

Bellman, Jonathan, *After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest*.

Fanning, Steven, *Mystics of the Christian Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 36.

Hellweg, Joseph, *Hunting the Ethical State* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 66.

"Ineffable." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed May 13, 2014. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ineffable>.

Komjathy, Louis, lecture: "*Names are the Guest of Reality*": *Apophysis, Mysticism, and Soteriology in Taoist Perspective*.

Ray, Benjamin Caleb and Kimberley C. Patton, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) 102-107.

Scharfstein, Ben-Ami, *Ineffability: The Failure of Words in Philosophy and Religion* (University of New York Press, 1993), xvii, 186.

Singh, Nikky-Guninder Kaur, *Verses of the Sikh Gurus: The Name of My Beloved* (San Francisco: Harper, 1995), 58-61.

