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What we can and cannot say: an apophatic response to atheism *(This is an uncorrected pre-print copy, please do not cite this version)*

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Nearly all contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God attempt to show it is either logically impossible or highly improbable that there exists a person, P, such that P essentially possesses the maximal-person properties (i.e., omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence) simultaneously. Contemporary arguments for atheism, thus, assume there is a lot we can say about God. More specifically, they presuppose God's essence is identical to a bundle of essential properties that can be known. I shall refer to this conception of God as *theistic personalism*.¹ In this chapter, I argue that the most powerful, and economical, response to contemporary atheism is to adopt apophatic theism.² Historically, one can find proponents of apophatic theism in numerous philosophical and religious traditions—including some strands of Hinduism, Judaism, Neoplatonism, Christianity, and Islam.³ Some of its most ardent Christian exponents come from the Eastern Christian tradition in the writings of such luminaries as Pseudo-Dionysius, St Maximus the Confessor, and St John of Damascus.⁴ Eastern Christian apophatic theists believe there is a lot we *cannot* say about God, insisting that the divine nature is completely ineffable. This chapter draws upon apophatic theology, and its commitment to divine ineffability, to proffer an undercutting defeater for virtually every contemporary argument for the nonexistence of God. It also anticipates and responds to several significant objections.

I begin by canvassing various contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God and showing that virtually all of them are designed to undermine the truth of theistic personalism. After this I explore apophatic theism, carefully explaining its core thesis: the doctrine of divine ineffability. I then show how adopting apophatic theism provides one with a powerful response to contemporary atheism. I conclude by anticipating and responding to several serious objections; namely, I respond to the claim that divine ineffability entails a contradiction and is, thus, self-referentially incoherent, and to the charge that appealing to apophatic theism as a response to atheism commits the fallacy of special pleading and is

¹ The term 'theistic personalism' was introduced in Davies (2003) to distinguish between the standard conception of theism typically endorsed by analytic philosophers of religion and the classical conception expounded by ancient thinkers. For other philosophers who use the term see Hart (2013), Feser (2017), Pouivet (2018), and Grimi (2018). Stenmark (2015) uses an equivalent term, 'personal theism', to denote the God of theistic personalism. Likewise, Bishop and Perszyk (2017) use the equivalent term 'personal omniGod' and Schellenberg (2015) uses the equivalent term 'personal ultimism'.

² This chapter substantially expands upon the ideas developed in Brown (2017).

³ For more on ancient Hindu, Jewish, Neoplatonic, and Islamic conceptions of God see Moses Maimonides (1963, originally 1190), Dube (1984), Putnam (1997), Perl (2007), Ali (2016), Flood (2020).

⁴ This list is, by no means, exhaustive but merely includes the major figures that I focus on in this chapter.

intellectually dishonest. I also develop and tentatively respond to an argument for the nonexistence of the apophatic theist's God.

Contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God

Most contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God target theistic personalism and for good reason. Many prominent figures in analytic philosophy of religion are proponents of theistic personalism. For example, Richard Swinburne, in his influential book *The Existence of God*, defines God as follows:

I take the proposition 'God exists' (and the equivalent proposition 'There is a God') to be logically equivalent to 'there exists necessarily a person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who necessarily is eternal, perfectly free, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and the creator of all things'. I use 'God' as the name of the person picked out by this description (Swinburne, 2004 p.7).

Recall from the introduction that, at a bare minimum, proponents of theistic personalism are committed to the following thesis:

Theistic personalism *simpliciter* (TPS): there exists a person, P, such that, P essentially possesses the maximal-person properties (i.e., omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence) simultaneously.

In the passage above Swinburne includes some additional divine attributes in his description of God (e.g., God 'being eternal', 'being incorporeal', etc.) but TPS clearly lies at the heart of his conception of God. For Swinburne, 'God' is a proper name that denotes a person essentially composed of the maximal-person properties. Alvin Plantinga, another towering figure in contemporary analytic philosophy of religion, also espouses the same thing:

Now central to the great monotheistic religions—Christianity, Judaism, Islam—is the thought that there is such a person as God: a personal agent who has created the world and is all-powerful, all-knowing, and perfectly good. I take naturalism to be the thought that there is no such person as God, or anything like God. Naturalism is stronger than atheism: you can be an atheist without rising to the full heights (sinking to the lowest depths?) of naturalism; but you can't be a naturalist without being an atheist (Plantinga, 2011 p.ix).⁵

Again, setting aside the additional property 'being the creator of the world' included here, it is evident that TPS is the thesis that Plantinga takes to be central to all three of the great Abrahamic religious traditions.

To cite one final example, the prominent atheist philosopher of religion, John Schellenberg, also conceives of God in terms of theistic personalism. As Schellenberg explains:

My claim is that the idea of God ... the fairly specific and detailed idea of *an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-good and all-loving creator of the universe*, represents *one way* in which the *broader* idea of ultimism can be filled out, a way that utilises the concept of a person. Theism gives to ultimism a face, one might say (quite a familiar

⁵ Plantinga also famously defends this same conception of God in his seminal work *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000).

one). Another way of putting it is to say that theism is an elaborated or personal *version* of ultimism. You could also turn the point into an equation: theism = personal ultimism (Schellenberg, 2015 p.20).

It is crucial to note that philosophers like Swinburne, Plantinga, and Schellenberg, who conceive of God in terms of theistic personalism, use the term 'person' univocally. Hence, when they say that God is a 'person', they are using this term in exactly the same sense as we do when we say that a human being is a 'person'. Like human beings, God is taken to be a rational agent, with emotions and a will, who possesses knowledge, has intentions, etc. The primary difference between God, and a human person, thinks the theistic personalist, is a difference in *degree*. Human persons possess personal properties to a minimal degree; God, on the other hand, possesses personal properties to a maximal degree. For example, unlike human persons, who only possess a minimal amount of knowledge, God possesses the maximal amount of knowledge that is logically possible for a person to possess, i.e., God is omnipotent.

Categorising contemporary arguments for atheism

Interestingly, in the passage quoted above, Plantinga defines naturalism as the negation of the truth of TPS. He says, "I take naturalism to be the thought that there is no such person as God, or anything like God" (Plantinga, 2011 p.ix). As I have already established above, for Plantinga, the thesis that God exists is roughly equivalent to TPS. So, according to him, a naturalist just is an atheist regarding the God of theistic personalism. Quite in line with Plantinga's statement here, it has been (and continues to be) one of the major goals of atheistic philosophers of religion to show that theistic personalism is either logically impossible or highly improbable. Arguments purporting to show this abound and the literature surrounding them is vast. Helpfully, Yujin Nagasawa has divided all contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God into three major categories:

Type-A: Arguments which purport to show the incoherence of the divine attributes.

Type-B: Arguments which purport to show inconsistency between the divine attributes.

Type-C: Arguments which purport to show the inconsistency between the divine attributes and a contingent fact (Nagasawa, 2017 p.82-88).⁶

Let us begin by looking at an example of a 'Type-A' argument for the nonexistence of God. Type-A arguments target one of the maximal-person properties that are allegedly part of God's essence, and purport to show that the targeted property is internally incoherent. If it can be shown that one of the maximal-person properties supposedly possessed by God is incoherent then it can be shown that God does not exist.

One well-known Type-A argument for the nonexistence of God is the 'Paradox of the Stone'. This argument targets God's *omnipotence*. Patrick Grim summarises it thus:

⁶ One can also find numerous examples of Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments in Mackie (1982), Sobel (2003), Everitt (2003), Martin and Monnier (2003, 2006), and Oppy (2006). Note, however, that the authors of these works do not use the terms 'Type-A', 'Type-B', and 'Type-C' to categorise their arguments.

Could God create a stone too heavy for him to lift? If so, there is something God could not do – he could not lift such a stone. If not, there is again something God could not do – he could not create such a stone. In either case, there is something God could not do. It follows that there are things no God could do; neither he nor any other being (for we could substitute any other name for “God”) could be omnipotent (Grim, 2007 p.200).

Other Type-A arguments target *omniscience* or *omnibenevolence*; purporting to show that these concepts are also internally incoherent.⁷ If sound, Type-A arguments undermine theistic personalism by showing that the existence of a person possessing one of the essential *omni*-properties is metaphysically impossible.

Type-B arguments for the nonexistence of God also purport to show that the existence of the theistic personalist’s God is logically impossible. However, unlike Type-A arguments, they aim to reveal a conflict between two or more of the maximal properties that God possesses. If they can show that, for example, it is contradictory for there to exist a person who is both omniscient and omnipotent, then they can show that the theistic personalist’s God does not exist. David Blumenfeld makes such an argument, claiming that omniscience and omnipotence are not compossible. One can formulate his argument as follows:

The Argument from Impossibility

- 1.1. An omniscient being has a complete and full comprehension of every possible concept.
- 1.2. To fully comprehend some concepts, one must have had an experience of an instance or exemplification of them.
- 1.3. There are some concepts, an omnipotent being cannot experience an instance or exemplification of.
- 1.4. Therefore, there are some concepts that an omnipotent being does not fully comprehend.
- 1.5. Therefore, no omnipotent being can be omniscient (i.e., the existence of a being simultaneously possessing the essential properties of omniscience and omnipotence is metaphysically impossible).
- 1.6. Therefore, there is no omnipotent and omniscient being (Blumenfeld, 1978 p93-96).

The crucial premise in Blumenfeld’s argument is 1.3. In support of this premise, he cites several examples of concepts that an omnipotent person cannot experience. One example he proffers is *fear*. According to Blumenfeld, to experience fear one must *believe* she is in danger. An omnipotent person, however, cannot believe he is in danger. Therefore, an omnipotent person can never truly experience fear. As a result, an omnipotent person can never fully comprehend the concept of fear. If this argument is sound, then it follows that the God proposed by theistic personalist’s does not exist.

⁷ For examples of Type (A) arguments that target *omniscience* and *omnibenevolence* see Grim (2000) and Hoffman and Rosenkrantz (2002).

Type-C arguments attempt to show there is an inconsistency between the maximal-person properties and some contingent fact. One of the most powerful, and intensely debated, Type-C arguments is the ‘Evidential Argument from Evil’. The contingent fact this argument is concerned with is the fact of gratuitous evil. Examples of alleged gratuitous evils include things like the intense suffering of a fawn that dies a slow agonizing death after being injured in a forest fire, or the profound suffering of a little girl being repeatedly raped and eventually strangled to death. There are numerous similar facts—horrendous, ongoing, seemingly pointless evils—one could point to. According to proponents of the evidential argument, instances of gratuitous evil make the truth of TPS highly improbable. William Rowe originally formulated the argument as follows:

The Evidential Argument from Evil

- 2.1. There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- 2.2. An omniscient, wholly good [i.e., omnibenevolent] being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse.
- 2.3. There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being (Rowe, 1979 p.336).⁸

If Rowe’s argument is cogent, it is highly improbable that TPS is true. According to Rowe, this means it is more reasonable to adopt atheism than theism.

Another important Type-C argument is Schellenberg’s well-known argument from divine hiddenness. Like the arguments we have just outlined, the argument from divine hiddenness also seeks to provide a defeater for belief in the God of theistic personalism’s existence. As Schellenberg explains:

Properly conceived, within a philosophical context, the hiddenness argument will be viewed as a way of testing whether the most common elaboration of ultimism in the world today, the idea of a person-like God ... can rationally survive (Schellenberg, 2015 p.21).

Like the evidential argument from evil, the argument from divine hiddenness attempts to show there is an inconsistency between God’s properties and some contingent fact. The hiddenness argument maintains the fact that there are nonresistent nonbelievers is incompatible with the existence of an omnibenevolent and omnipotent person. ‘Nonresistent nonbelievers’ are, according to Schellenberg, sincere knowledge seekers who are neither actively nor passively resisting belief in God yet lack a belief that God exists (Schellenberg, 2017 p.3). His argument runs as follows:

The Argument from Divine Hiddenness

⁸ For up-to-date treatments of the evidential argument from evil see Rowe (2001), Howard-Snyder (1996), and Oppy (2013).

- 3.1. If a perfectly loving God exists, then there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person.
- 3.2. If there exists a God who is always open to a personal relationship with any finite person, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- 3.3. If a perfectly loving God exists, then no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists (from 3.1 and 3.2).
- 3.4. Some finite persons are or have been nonresistantly in a state of nonbelief in relation to the proposition that God exists.
- 3.5. No perfectly loving God exists (from 3.3 and 3.4).
- 3.6. If no perfectly loving God exists, then God does not exist.
- 3.7. God does not exist (from 3.5 and 3.6) (Ibid., p.1).

Both premise 3.2. and 3.3. implicitly assume that God, understood as an all-loving (i.e., omnibenevolent) and omnipotent person, has both the desire and the power to ensure no finite person is ever nonresistantly in a state of non-belief. Given that there are, according to Schellenberg, nonresistent nonbelievers, the proposition that there exists a person who is simultaneously omnibenevolent and omnipotent is false. Accordingly, the most reasonable position to adopt is that TPS is false.

As should now be manifestly clear, all three kinds of argument—Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C—are designed to show that TPS is false. They all begin by defining God per theistic personalism and then purport to show it is either logically impossible for any person to possess the maximal-person properties simultaneously *or* that it is highly improbable that any person possessing the maximal-person properties exists.

A concise formulation of the contemporary argument for atheism

For the sake of clarity and concision, we can represent the general structure of the contemporary argument for atheism in the following way:

The Contemporary Argument for Atheism (CAA)

- 4.1. If God exists, he is a person who essentially possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously.
- 4.2. It is not the case that any person possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously.
- 4.3. Therefore, God does not exist.

Contemporary atheists typically assume premise 4.1 is true; partially because, as we have just seen, many prominent theistic philosophers of religion, such as Swinburne and Plantinga, endorse theistic personalism. Indeed, they seem to view theistic personalism as being

identical to the conception of God endorsed by all three great Abrahamic religions. So, it is understandable why many atheists assume 4.1 is true. The crucial premise of this argument is usually taken to be 4.2. In support of its truth, one or more Type-A, Type-B, or Type-C arguments may be proffered. Obviously, if CAA is sound, we ought to believe that God does not exist.

Now that I have provided a concise formulation of the contemporary argument for atheism, I am nearly ready to evaluate it and offer an apophatic response. Before doing so, however, I must first explain apophatic theism and provide an analysis of its conception of divine ineffability.

Apophatic Theism and the Doctrine of Divine Ineffability

In this section I consider several significant passages from notable Eastern Christian proponents of apophaticism; namely, from Pseudo-Dionysius, St Maximus the Confessor, and St John of Damascus. Their writings have had such a profound and lasting influence on Eastern theology, that I take their explication of divine ineffability to be representative of the broader Eastern Christian tradition. Along the way, I clarify some of the associated concepts one must understand if she is to have a good grasp of the Eastern doctrine of divine ineffability: these include the concepts of ‘negative properties’, ‘ontological infinity’, ‘beyond-beingness’, and ‘beyond-essence’. I conclude this section by proffering an argument for divine ineffability. The primary motivation for this being to show why one might find it reasonable to adopt divine ineffability in the first place.

Before I get started, a disclaimer is in order. One could easily write an entire chapter or even a book exclusively focusing on any one of the numerous concepts or arguments that I am about to discuss. Yet I have only dedicated a few pages to this endeavour. Readers with a background in metaphysics or epistemology may find this frustrating and wish that I had developed these ideas in more detail. To this I can only respond by offering my sincere apologies. The restrictions of space only allow me to provide a concise overview of these ideas for the sake of developing and supporting my main argument. Remember, the primary goal of this chapter is to proffer an apophatic response to contemporary atheism. With that goal in mind, I believe the coverage of the ideas I provide in this section serves this purpose well.

Eastern Christian proponents of apophatic theism

Let us begin by exploring the following passage from Pseudo-Dionysius:

Just as the senses can neither grasp nor perceive the things of the mind, just as representation and shape cannot take in the simple and the shapeless, just as corporal form cannot lay hold of the intangible and incorporeal, by the same standard of truth beings are surpassed by the infinity beyond being, intelligences by that oneness which is beyond intelligence. Indeed, the inscrutable One [i.e., God] is out of the reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of all unity, this supra-existent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name. It is and it is as no other being is. Cause [i.e., ground] of all existence, and therefore itself transcending existence, it alone could give an authoritative account of what it really is (Pseudo-Dionysius, 1987, originally, c.5th-6th century pp.49-50).

A *prima facie* reading may lead one to take Pseudo-Dionysius' account of divine ineffability to be self-referentially incoherent. For it seems as if the writer is saying that God is both unknowable and knowable. On the one hand the author appears to believe that God exists yet simultaneously claims that God is beyond existence. Likewise, the author claims that God is inexpressible and beyond the reach of every rational process yet also affirms many things about God, stating that he is the source of all unity, the ground of existence, and the Good. Indeed, the author seems to know quite a lot about the unknowable God, also claiming that God is incorporeal, intangible, inscrutable, and so on and so forth. The concern that the doctrine of divine ineffability is logically inconsistent is a serious one. I will provide a response to this concern in the third section of this chapter, where I deal with serious objections to apophatic theism.

Presently, I wish to highlight a few important metaphysical and epistemological notions in this passage that I will develop further below. First, note that according to Pseudo-Dionysius, God—the ground or ultimate explanation of existence—is conceived of as being shapeless or without form, as infinite and incorporeal, as beyond existence, and unlike any of the entities that make up the corporeal realm of beings that exemplify form or structure. Second, note that these metaphysical beliefs about God seem to have epistemological implications: for the author, they entail that God's nature or essence is completely unknowable; that structured or form exemplifying entities (i.e., intelligent beings like humans) simply cannot express what kind of entity God is. Yet, paradoxically, the author also clearly believes there are things we can say about God; such as that God is Good and the source of all unity, etc. I will examine these concepts more closely in a moment.

For now, let us consider a key passage from St Maximus the Confessor:

For to have any idea of what God might be is impossible and completely beyond the reach of all creation, whether visible or invisible. Moreover, 'from those things that are around' the essence, we learn only that God exists, and when these things are contemplated properly and piously, God yields Himself up to those who gaze upon Him. But all the things that are 'around' the essence do not disclose what the essence itself is, but what it is not, such as not being created, not having a beginning, not being finite, not being corporeal, and any other such things that are around the essence, and indicate what it is not but not what it is ... Thus, the negative statements indicate not that the Divine is something, but rather what it is not, and these are in compliance with the affirmations around that something (which the Divine is not) (Maximus the Confessor, 2014, originally, c.630 pp.65-67).

According to St Maximus, it is epistemically impossible to come to know what kind of entity God is, i.e., to come to know God's essence. At best, he maintains, when we talk about God's nature all we can do is enumerate negative properties such as 'being infinite' or 'being incorporeal' or 'being uncreated', and so on and so forth. He is quick to point out, however, that negative properties do not tell us what kind of entity God is but, rather, simply tell us what kind of entity God is not. It is also important to point out that even though we cannot say anything about God's essence, St Maximus, like Pseudo-Dionysius, believes we can make positive affirmations about God.

St Maximus refers to the things that are "around the essence" of God. To a contemporary reader this may sound odd. What he is referring to, in this instance, are the properties that

flow forth from God's essence; properties that are grounded in God's activities or *energies*.⁹ St Maximus believes that we can make positive statements about the things that are around the essence but is very quick to emphasise that these statements do not tell us anything about what kind of entity God is. There is a lot more to be said about this but, for now, let us forestall any deeper discussion about these issues and consider the following passages from St John of Damascus.

After summarizing several ancient arguments for the existence of God, St John states:

Thus, it is clear that God exists, but what He is in essence and nature is unknown and beyond all understanding. That He is without a body is obvious, for how could a body contain that which is limitless, boundless, formless, impalpable, invisible, simple, and uncompounded? (John of Damascus, 1958, originally, c.743 p.170).

He then goes on to explain that we can enumerate many of God's negative properties but that these do not tell us what God is. He explains that:

One who would declare the essence of something must explain what it is, but not what it is not. However, as regards what God is, it is impossible to say what He is in His essence, so it is better to discuss Him by abstraction from all things whatever. For He does not belong to the number of beings, not because He does not exist, but because He transcends all beings and being itself. And, if knowledge respects beings, then that which transcends knowledge will certainly transcend essence, and, conversely, what transcends essence will transcend knowledge (Ibid., pp.171-172).

St John shares the same metaphysical and epistemological commitments as Pseudo-Dionysius and St Maximus. Like Dionysius, he maintains that God is not a body (i.e., a physical or material entity), that God is limitless, boundless, and formless. Like St Maximus, he believes it is epistemically impossible to come to know what kind of entity God is. Likewise, he believes that negative statements do not tell us anything about God's essence but, rather, simply tell us what God is not. Additionally, according to St John, God is not a member of the collection of existing things (i.e., of limited, form exemplifying things); rather, he transcends existence or is beyond being. The assumption seems to be that what we typically think of as existing things are things that exemplify a form or structure. Since God is formless, and not what we typically think of as a type or kind of thing, St John claims that God is beyond essence and, thus, that it is impossible to come to know what kind of entity he is.

There are several important points to emphasise here. First, is that their account of ineffability is not the thesis that one cannot say anything about God whatsoever. In other words, their account does not assert that we cannot apply any concepts to God. On the contrary, they believe we can know what I have been calling God's negative properties and that we can positively assert things about the things around God's essence; i.e., about God's activities. Second, is that none of these thinkers conceive of divine ineffability as being a metaphysical doctrine, but rather, as being an *epistemological* doctrine. To be sure, their account of ineffability is built upon several crucial metaphysical assumptions, such as the belief that God

⁹ As Tollefsen explains, "According to Maximus, we should distinguish between God as He is in Himself or in His own essence, and the activity out of the essence ... The activities may be contemplated around Him ... and Maximus distinguishes between what is around ... God and what concerns ... Him" (Tollefsen, 2008 pp.165-166).

is formless, and the notion that an entity's form determines its essence. However, their account of ineffability is an epistemological one. For them, divine ineffability merely entails it is epistemically impossible to come to know God's essence.

Making sense of Eastern Christian accounts of divine ineffability

Explications of divine ineffability, like the ones considered above, often confound contemporary readers. In this section I first attempt to clarify and expand upon the account of divine ineffability articulated by the authors above. After this, I develop an argument for divine ineffability that is inspired by the Eastern Christian thinkers I just canvassed. Keep in mind that all of this is ultimately in service to my main goal, which is to offer an apophatic response to atheism. Let us begin by considering negative properties.

Negative properties.

Upon reading passages like the ones above one might wonder: "If God's essence is unknowable, as the authors above claim, how is it that they can consistently attribute to Him properties such as 'being limitless' or 'being formless' or 'being uncompounded'?" It is crucial to understand that, for the apophatic theist, properties like limitlessness, formlessness, and unchangingness (and a host of similar properties), are what I call *negative properties*. The term 'negative properties' is, however, somewhat of a misnomer. It does not refer to properties that an entity actually or even potentially instantiates; rather, it refers to properties that an entity does *not* instantiate. To get your head around this consider the following example. When I assert the proposition <My daughter is *not* dyslexic>, I am not predicating of my daughter the attribute 'being *not*-dyslexic'. I am simply saying that my daughter does not instantiate the property 'being dyslexic'. Likewise, when it comes to the divine nature, negative properties are not taken by apophatic theists to be qualities that God instantiates; rather, they are taken to be qualities or characteristics that God does *not* instantiate. Importantly, negative properties do not positively state what kind of entity God is; rather, they merely tell us what kind of entity God is *not*.

The last thing I said is particularly important to keep in mind. When a subject, S, comes to know that an entity, x, does not instantiate some property, P, S has, indeed, come to know something about x (namely, S has come to know that x does *not* instantiate P). S has not, however, come to know anything about x's essence. To come to know x's essence, S must come to know something positive regarding what kind of entity x is. As St John of Damascus affirms in the passage above, "one who would declare the essence of something must explain what it is, but not what it is not" (Ibid., p.172). Suppose you asked me the following question, "What is a triangle?" and I responded by stating, "A triangle is not a square; it does not have four sides". I suspect you would be annoyed by my answer because, while it is true that triangles are not squares and do not have four sides, this statement does not tell you what kind of entity a triangle is—which is, precisely, the information you were seeking when you asked the question!

The crux of the matter is, for an apophatic theist, when S comes to know God's negative properties, she is not coming to know anything about God's essence but, rather, merely learning what kind of entity God is not. Furthermore, when an apophatic theist attributes to God negative properties, she is not really claiming that God possesses such properties. For example, when an apophatic theist says that God is *formless*, she is not asserting that God

instantiates the property ‘being without form’. Rather, she is asserting that God does not exemplify a form or a structure.

One worry about negative properties is that it seems as if apophatic theists are arbitrarily stipulating that certain of God’s properties are negative. Fortunately, this is not the case. Apophatic theists adhere to the following basic rule: *any property univocally predicated of structured or form exemplifying things can be negated of God*. So, for example, if a structured entity bears the property ‘being subject to change’, then one can say that God does not bear the property ‘being subject to change’ (i.e., one can say that God is unchanging). If a structured entity instantiates the property ‘being temporal’ then one can say of God that he does not instantiate the property ‘being temporal’ (i.e., one can say that God is atemporal), and so on and so forth. Importantly, this process—in which one systematically denies that God instantiates any property predicated of structured entities—only applies to *univocal* properties. For example, when one says that, say, rocks, plants, humans, and ecosystems, all bear the property ‘being subject to change’ and an apophatic theologian says, “God does not bear the property ‘being subject to change’”, she means that God is not subject to change in the *same* sense that structured entities like the ones just listed are subject to change. Saying this does not entail it is impossible to apply any positive concepts to God (recall that apophatic theists maintain we can apply positive *analogical* concepts to God’s activities or energies).

For now, that is all I will say about negative properties. Let us shift our attention to exploring several negative properties that are of great importance for properly understanding divine ineffability: that is, being *ontologically infinite, beyond-being, and beyond-essence*.

Ontologically infinity, beyond-beingness, and beyond-essentiality

When contemporary readers encounter statements from apophatic theists saying things like God is ‘limitless’ and ‘infinite’, they might mistakenly take this to mean that God is: (a) eternal, i.e., that God exists for an infinite duration of time, or (b) that God fills all of space, i.e., that God infinitely extends in all directions. Both interpretations, however, are incorrect in so far as the doctrine of ineffability is concerned. What I believe apophatic theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius, St Maximus and St John of Damascus have in mind when they refer to God as being infinite is what I call ‘ontological infinity’.¹⁰ We can define this term as follows:

Ontological Infinity: an entity, *x*, is ontologically infinite *iff* *x* does not exemplify a form or structure.

Likewise, we can define the antithetical concept of ontological finiteness as follows:

Ontological Finiteness: an entity, *x*, is ontologically finite *iff* *x* exemplifies a form or structure.

Universes, galaxies, solar systems, planets, ecosystems, rocks, plants, animals, atoms, and so on and so forth exemplify form or structure. According to the ancient authors we are considering in this chapter, an entity’s form or structure is what grounds its essence or nature

¹⁰ For a recent discussion about the distinction between physical or mathematical infinity versus metaphysical or ontological infinity see (Hart, 2017 p.91).

and this, in turn, necessarily limits it. If I possess the form or structure of a human being, I do *not* possess the form or structure of a spitting cobra, or an alligator, or a flower, or whatever. The structure I exemplify, thus, determines what kind of being that I am as well as what kind of being I am not. It also grounds the range of natural powers I possess; that is, it determines and, thus, limits the range of activities I can potentially engage in. It is in virtue of the fact that I possess the form of a human being that I can potentially engage in activities such as ‘composing and playing music’, ‘devising experiments in a lab’, or ‘grabbing things using my opposable thumb’. Likewise, it is in virtue of the fact that I possess the form of a human being that, without the help of technology or genetic enhancements, I cannot, for example, ‘leap over tall buildings in a single bound’, ‘spew poisonous venom from my glands’, or ‘shape-shift into any object that I fancy’. To say that an entity, *x*, has a form or structure, and thus an essence, implies that *x* is limited or *finite* (in an ontological sense). In contrast, to say that an entity, *x*, is ontologically infinite is to say that *x* does not possess a form or structure, and, thus, is *not* limited or ontologically finite.

This has important implications regarding the apophatic theist’s use of the term ‘essence’ as it is applied to God. If we treat ‘essence’ as a univocal term, then the only thing we can say about God is that God does *not* have an essence; precisely because God is ontologically infinite and, thus, does not exemplify a form or structure. Therefore, apophatic theists, like the ones I explored above, will sometimes say that God is ‘beyond-essence’ or ‘beyond-being’. Since God does not exemplify a form or structure, he does not exist in the same sense that the total collection of ontologically finite entities exists; he also does not possess an essence in the *same* sense that the total collection of ontologically finite entities might be said to possess an essence. As an ontologically infinite entity, God transcends essence and existence (if we take ‘essence’ and ‘existence’ to mean the same thing that we typically do when we apply them to ontologically finite entities).

When apophatic theists do speak of God as having an essence or as existing or as being an object or as being a specific kind of entity, they are using these terms *analogically*. To highlight this fact, apophatic theists sometimes use terms like ‘supra-essence’ to signal to the reader that they are not using ‘essence’ in the same sense as one typically does when she applies this term to ontologically finite entities.

At this stage, it is worth reiterating an important difference between apophatic theism and the theistic personalist conception of God that is the target of contemporary arguments for atheism. Recall that a theistic personalist takes the concepts we apply to God, like ‘being personal’ or ‘being knowledgeable’ to be univocal. According to this view, the essential difference between God and human beings is one of degree and not one of kind. God is a person in the same sense that you and I are persons; only, unlike you and I, he possesses personal qualities like ‘being knowledgeable’ to a maximal degree. In stark contrast to this, an apophatic theist claims that God is ontologically infinite. To claim that something is ontologically infinite is, also, to claim that it is *qualitatively* different from ontologically finite things. In other words, it entails that God is ontologically distinct, i.e., that “he” is qualitatively different from anything else in the world.

Having explained the concept of negative properties, and discussed the notion that God is ontologically infinite, beyond-being, beyond-essence, and thus, ontologically distinct, I am now in the position to explicate an argument for divine ineffability. My goal is to explain

why one ought to believe God's essence (or supra-essence) is unknowable given that God is ontologically infinite.

An argument for divine ineffability

An argument for divine ineffability can be formulated as follows:

Argument for Divine Ineffability (ADI)

- 5.1. God is ontologically infinite.
- 5.2. If God is ontologically infinite, it is epistemically impossible to know God's essence.
- 5.3. Therefore, it is epistemically impossible to know God's essence (i.e., God is ineffable).

Let us first focus on premise 5.1. As I have explained, Eastern Christian apophatic theists like Pseudo-Dionysius, St Maximus, and St John of Damascus, take God to be ontologically infinite. Let us consider, more broadly, whether traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists (as a whole) should adopt this view. I argue that they should for the following reasons.

The world is full of ontologically finite entities, i.e., objects, stuff, or complex systems that exemplify form or structure. Electromagnetic fields, elemental particles, atoms, and molecules possess a definite structure. Medium sized objects like rocks, plants, and animals possess a definite form or structure. Ecosystems and weather systems possess a definite structure. Planets, solar systems, galaxies, and universes exemplify a definite form or structure. We could go on enumerating examples like these *ad nauseum*. The point is, we encounter numerous ontologically finite entities in the world. One may, then, legitimately ask: '*Why or in virtue of what does the total collection of ontologically finite entities (from henceforth, TCOF) exist?*'.

In response to this question, a traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic theist *ought* to argue that God explains why or in virtue of what TCOF exists. To be clear, this is not the same thing as claiming that God is the 'cause' of TCOF's existence—assuming we are using the term 'cause' in the exact same sense as a contemporary anglophone philosopher might use the term.¹¹ Rather, it is to say that God provides a metaphysical explanation regarding why TCOF exists. Another way of stating this is to say that TCOF depends on God for its existence, at every moment of its existence. If one accepts that God explains the existence of TCOF then it follows, necessarily, that God is not a member of TCOF and is, therefore, ontologically infinite (i.e., does not exemplify a form or structure). To claim otherwise would violate the asymmetrical nature of explanations. It is absurd to believe that TCOF depends upon God for its existence—and is, thus, ontologically posterior to God—and that God is simultaneously a member of TCOF and, thus, ontologically posterior to himself.

In the previous paragraph I claimed traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists *ought* to believe that God explains the existence of TCOF. The reason I said this is because,

¹¹ For an interesting discussion and criticism of univocally applying the term 'cause' to God in contemporary arguments for God's existence see Smith (1996).

traditionally, they are firmly committed to the doctrine of divine *aseity*. Should we assume that God is, in fact, a member of TCOF—i.e., that God is finite, possessing a form or structure—then whatever entity tracks with the explanation for the existence of TCOF would stand over and above God or be ontologically prior to God. This conclusion is, however, unacceptable from a traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic perspective. According to this tradition, absolutely *nothing* stands over and above God or is on the same ontological level as God. So, there are strong theological motivations for a Judeo-Christian-Islamic theist to believe that God explains why or in virtue of what TCOF exists.

I want to pause here to respond to a possible objection. I have not offered any philosophical arguments in support of the claim that the existence of TCOF either has an explanation or stands in need of an explanation. Some readers might be concerned by this. To properly meet this objection, I would need to defend some version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason (PSR) or, as I have done elsewhere, show that it is never reasonable to believe that an unexplained fact—like the fact that TCOF exists—is ontologically brute (Brown, 2021). Doing this, however, would distract me from the primary goal of this chapter, which is developing an apophatic response to contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God. Luckily, I do not need to develop such an argument to accomplish this goal. Presently, I am neither trying to convince atheists that God exists, nor trying to convince them that God corresponds with the explanation for TCOF's existence. So, it is not necessary to develop any arguments for believing that the existence of TCOF has an explanation. In this section, I am simply trying to show *how* one might arrive at the conclusion that God is ontologically infinite in order to lend credence to premise 5.1.

Given the argument I just sketched, Eastern Christian apophatic theists and, indeed, all traditional Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists, appear to have a good reason for believing that God is ontologically infinite, i.e., that premise 5.1 is true. Now let us consider premise 5.2 which states that <If God is ontologically infinite, it is epistemically impossible to know God's essence>. As I explained in the previous sections, according to St Maximus and St John, the *essence* of an entity—*what* kind of thing it is—is determined by its form or structure. Thus, according to this view, an ontologically finite entity's existence depends upon it exemplifying a particular form or structure. The epistemological consequence of this is that coming to know an entity's essence involves coming to know something about its form or structure. If, therefore, an entity does not exemplify any form or structure, it is impossible, in principle, for us to come to know its essence. Since God is ontologically infinite—i.e., does not exemplify a form or structure—then it follows that it is epistemically impossible to know what kind of entity he is. In other words, premise 5.2 is true. God is ineffable.

An Apophatic Response to Atheism

Now that I have explored apophatic theism, and its commitment to divine ineffability, I am finally ready to put forth a response to atheism. Recall that one can formulate the contemporary argument for atheism as follows:

The Contemporary Argument for Atheism (CAA)

- 4.1. If God exists, he is a person who essentially possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously.

4.2. It is not the case that any person possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously.

4.3. Therefore, God does not exist.

As I explained in section one, most contemporary analytic philosophers of religion presuppose that premise 4.1 is true. They believe that if God exists, he is a person (in the same sense that you and I are persons) who essentially possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously. Thus, most anglophone philosophers who are amenable to theism have focused their efforts on trying to show that premise 4.2 is false. Which is to say, they have attempted to refute each individual Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C argument that one might proffer in support of premise 4.2. An apophatic theist, however, can set aside discussions about the truth or falsity of premise 4.2 and simply target premise 4.1; which is, indeed, what I am about to do.

As I have gone through great pains to establish in this chapter, apophatic theists have good reasons for believing that God is ontologically infinite, beyond-being, and beyond-essence. This entails that God does not exemplify a form or structure and, thus, *contra* theistic personalism, that God is not identical to a bundle of essential properties. I further argued that the fact that God is ontologically infinite entails that it is epistemically impossible to know God's essence, i.e., to know what kind of entity God is. So, again, *contra* theistic personalism, it is not possible to know God's essence. Given all of this, it follows that premise 4.1 is false: it is not the case that if God exists, he is a person who essentially possesses the maximal-person properties simultaneously. Or, at the very least, it follows that one could never know that a proposition like 4.1 is true.

Bear in mind that I am not merely arguing that 4.1 is false because it identified the wrong set of maximal-person properties. Rather, given apophatic theism and its commitment to divine ineffability, 4.1. is false because God is *not* a bundle of essential properties; hence, there is simply no reformulated version of 4.1, containing a different combination of essential properties, that is true. Even if one insisted that God is some bundle of essential properties, given divine ineffability, she could not, in principle, know what these properties are and, thus, could not know that 4.1 (or any similar proposition) is true.

If premise 4.1 is false, then the contemporary argument for atheism is unsound. In which case, we are not justified in believing the conclusion of CAA. Actually, if premise 4.1 is false, this counts as an undercutting defeater for any belief in the nonexistence of God that is justified on the basis of Type-A, Type-B, or Type-C arguments. For, *all* these arguments are aimed at showing that the God of theistic personalism does not exist. Put differently, the soundness of virtually all contemporary arguments for atheism depends upon premise 4.1 being true. Ergo, if premise 4.1. is false, it follows that all Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments are unsound. Even if one is not prepared to conclude, on the basis of ineffability, that 4.1 is false but, rather, wishes to remain agnostic regarding the truth value of 4.1, she is no longer justified believing the conclusion of CAA. To be justified in believing that God does not exist, on the basis of CAA, she would have to abandon her agnosticism and come to believe that 4.1. is true. But, given divine ineffability, it is epistemically impossible to come to know God's essence and, hence, the agnostic could never be rationally justified or warranted in believing that 4.1 is true.

Responding to Objections

In this section I respond to three serious objections facing the apophatic response to atheism. The first being that it commits the fallacy of special pleading and is intellectually lazy. The one proffering this objection may believe that the theist who adopts apophaticism as a response to atheism is merely shifting goal posts to avoid the formidable challenge that Type-A, Type-B, and Type-C arguments pose for theism. This objection, however, implicitly (and mistakenly) assumes that apophatic theism was developed because of the challenge of such arguments. In other words, it seems as if the one proffering this objection is implying that, in the face of overwhelming evidence for the nonexistence of God, proponents of apophatic theism are claiming that God's essence is unknowable merely to avoid dealing with the challenge of Type-A, Type-B and Type-C arguments. However, as we saw in section two, apophatic theism is an ancient conception of God that predates contemporary atheism by at least a thousand years. It is, thus, historically inaccurate to suppose that apophatic theism is merely a position that has developed in response to the threat of contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God. Furthermore, as I have demonstrated in this chapter, there are well founded metaphysical and epistemological reasons one might have for believing in divine ineffability that have nothing to do with contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God. Hence, the apophatic response to atheism does not commit the fallacy of special pleading, nor is it merely intellectual laziness.

The second objection I wish to address is even more serious. It claims that the doctrine of ineffability is both logically incoherent and utterly incompatible with Judeo-Christian-Islamic theism. Plantinga famously proffers this type of critique of ineffability in his important work *Warranted Christian Belief*:

It seems many theologians and others believe that there is real difficulty with the idea that our concepts could apply to God—that is, could apply to a being with the properties of being infinite, transcendent, and ultimate. The idea is that if there is such a being, we couldn't speak about it, couldn't think and talk about it, *couldn't ascribe properties to it*. If that is true, however, then, strictly speaking, Christian belief, at least as the Christian understands it, is impossible. For Christians believe that there is an infinite, transcendent, ultimate being about whom they hold beliefs; but *if our concepts cannot apply to a being of that sort, then there cannot be beliefs about a being of that sort* (Emphasis mine Ibid., 2000 p.4).

Note that Plantinga mistakenly conceives of ineffability as the metaphysical thesis that God has no properties and, thus, that there are no concepts that apply to God. According to Plantinga, if God is ineffable, one cannot hold any beliefs about him. In other words, he believes that ineffability entails we can't say anything about God. Obviously, this notion is deeply problematic for Judeo-Christian-Islamic theists because their traditions explicitly affirm that one can hold many true beliefs about God. More recently, ineffability has been similarly criticised by R. T. Mullins who writes:

Ineffability is an ill-judged metaphysical compliment given to God. It is a misplaced piety that attempts to express the transcendence of God by noting the limits of human language and reason, but ultimately lands in nonsense because it teaches that “God is unknown and knowable” (Mullins, 2016 p.6).

He goes on to argue that,

In my opinion no Christian theologian actually believes in the doctrine of ineffability. It is something that Christian theologians may pay lip service to, but it is not something one can actually believe. There are two reasons for thinking this to be true. The first is due in part to the fact that the doctrine is self-referentially incoherent. It cannot even be stated in a meaningful way. To say that God is unknowable is to know something about God ... The second reason to think that no Christian theologian actually believes in the doctrine of ineffability is derived from the simple fact that every major Christian theologian has completely ignored it in practice. Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa, John of Damascus, and Pseudo-Dionysius are great examples of people who pay lip service to ineffability, and then go on to write large treatises on the divine nature. If they really thought that God is ineffable they would not continue to speak about what God is like at such great lengths (Ibid., p.7).

Hopefully, it is apparent to the reader that these critiques of ineffability are attacking a straw man. As we have seen, *contra* Plantinga, divine ineffability is *not* the thesis that God has no properties and, thus, that there are no concepts that apply to God. Rather, divine ineffability is the thesis that it is epistemically impossible to come to know what kind of entity God is, i.e., to know God's essence. Likewise, *contra* Mullins, divine ineffability does not assert that God is both completely unknowable and knowable. Rather, it merely asserts that God's essence is unknowable and that, at best, when it comes to discussing God's nature, we can only predicate negative properties of God. Yet, it also asserts that there is a lot we can say about God. Specifically, the Eastern Christian thinkers we explored in this chapter believe it is possible to come to know about the things around God's essence, i.e., about the properties that are grounded in God's activities. According to these thinkers, and the broader Eastern Christian tradition they represent, we *can* positively affirm many things about God in virtue of the fact that God engages in activities like creating and sustaining TCOF (to cite but one example). Indeed, it is in virtue of the fact that God engages in this activity that we can say God bears the property 'being the Creator' even though we do not know what kind of entity he is.

So, unlike the straw man version of ineffability that is often attacked by contemporary thinkers, the Eastern Christian conception of divine ineffability I have defended in this chapter is not, obviously, self-referentially incoherent. Happily, it is also perfectly amenable to Judeo-Christian-Islamic theism, which is to say, it is consistent with the idea that there are many positive things we can say about God. As long as we remember that: (1) the truthmakers for positive statements about God are facts involving God's activities and, (2) we can only apply *analogical* concepts to God's activities.

The final objection I will address goes as follows. While CAA may be unsound, one can still put forth an argument for the nonexistence of the apophatic theist's God. As I have just explained, although an Eastern Christian proponent of apophatic theism believes God is ineffable, she also believes many positive things about God such as that he is the creator and sustainer of TCOF (to use the same example above). Obviously, apophatic theists do not conceive of 'being the creator and sustainer of TCOF' in the same way that a theistic personalist might. As we saw in the previous sections, an apophatic theist does not take positive properties to be part of God's essence but, rather, as being grounded in his energies. Likewise, an apophatic theist does not apply concepts like 'being the creator and sustainer of TCOF' to God univocally but, rather, *analogically*. However, even if one conceded with the apophatic theist on all these points, she could still formulate an argument like the following:

Another Argument for Atheism

6.1. If God exists, he is the creator and sustainer of TCOF.

6.2. No being is the creator and sustainer of TCOF.

6.3. Therefore, God does not exist.

An atheist may defend 6.2 by arguing that TCOF does not require an explanation for its existence because it necessarily exists or something along these lines. To fully respond to this objection would require, at least, another chapter (if not an entire monograph). For it would require that I defend one of the classical arguments for God's existence. Unfortunately, space does not permit me to develop such an argument here. Happily, my goal in this chapter was merely to develop an apophatic response to contemporary atheism and *not* to develop an argument for God's existence.¹² Hence, I will have to forgo a robust response to this final objection at this time.

Conclusion

Contemporary arguments for atheism assume there is a lot we can say about God. More specifically, they presuppose God's essence is identical to a bundle of essential properties that can be known. I refer to this conception of God as *theistic personalism*. In this chapter, I argued that the most powerful, and economical, response to contemporary atheism is to adopt apophatic theism with its commitment to divine ineffability. I closely examined contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God and showed that virtually all of them are aimed at undermining belief in the God of theistic personalism. I then explored the apophatic thinking of three significant Eastern Christian thinkers: Pseudo-Dionysius, St Maximus the Confessor, and St John of Damascus. I demonstrated that Eastern Christian apophatic theists believe there is a lot we *cannot* say about God, insisting that the divine nature is completely ineffable. After clarifying this oft misunderstood view, and developing an argument for divine ineffability, I set my sights on responding to contemporary atheism. Building upon my argument for divine ineffability, I showed that the first premise of the contemporary argument for atheism (premise 4.1.) is false; namely, I showed that it is not the case that if God exists, he is a person essentially possessing the maximal-person properties simultaneously. I then explained that if premise 4.1. is false, this counts as an undercutting defeater for any belief in the nonexistence of God that is justified on the basis of Type-A, Type-B, or Type-C arguments. For, *all* these arguments depend upon the truth of premise 4.1 to succeed. I concluded by anticipating and responding to several significant objections. By no means have I definitively refuted atheism or firmly established the existence of God. I do, however, believe I have achieved a much more modest goal; namely, I have provided good

¹² For those interested in classical arguments for theism, there are a great many examples in the ancient literature. For some examples see the works of Philo of Alexandria (1993 originally, 20-50BC p.537), Maximus the Confessor (2014, originally, 628-30 pp. 3-5), and John of Damascus (1958, originally, 743 pp.168-70). Additionally, Lloyd Gerson, (1993) and (1994), has done an unparalleled job reconstructing Neoplatonic arguments for theism, such as one finds in the likes of Plotinus. The Eastern Christian thinkers I discussed in this chapter were heavily influenced by Middle Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

reasons for believing that virtually all contemporary arguments for the nonexistence of God are unsound.

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