

INEFFABILITY

It [the Godhead] is free of all names and void of all forms. It is one and simple, as God is one and simple, and no man can in any wise behold it.—MEISTER ECKHART

Brahman has neither name nor form, transcends merit and demerit, is beyond time, space, and the objects of sense-experience. . . . Supreme, beyond the power of speech to express . . .—SHANKARA

In them [mystical states] the mysterium is experienced in its essential, positive, and specific character, as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought.—RUDOLPH OTTO

That Soul is not this, it is not that. It is unseizable, for it cannot be seized.—BRIHAD ARANYAKA UPANISHAD

No form belongs to Him, not even one for the Intellect. . . . What meaning can there be any longer in saying: "This and this property belongs to Him"?—PLOTINUS

Philologos: How can anyone seriously make statements like this? They seem to be self-defeating. For in making such a statement as "Brahman has neither name nor form . . . [and is] beyond the power of speech to express," isn't one doing (or purporting to do) the very thing which the statement declares to be impossible, namely, attach a name or ascribe a form to Brahman or "express" it in speech? Of course we cannot press this charge until we know the authors' exact intentions. Perhaps they are indulging in rhetorical exaggeration, as I would in saying, "Oh, Jane is impossible." If I said this, you wouldn't charge me with self-contradiction on the ground that I was on the one hand implying that "Jane" names an actually existing person and on the other hand asserting that it is impossible (logically or causally) that this person exists. You would take me to be saying,

hyperbolically, that Jane is very difficult to get along with, and/or expressing my irritation at her. (Cf. "That outcome is unthinkable," "I *always* say the line 'Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day' wrong.") Similarly, Shankara may be hyperbolically saying that it is difficult to find the right words to talk about Brahman, and/or expressing the frustration he meets in such attempts. Or perhaps the authors are using terms like "name," "form," "express," and "property" with unstated restrictions and qualifications such that their statements do not involve naming, expressing, attributing forms or properties, and so on, in their use of these terms. On neither of these interpretations would their statements be logically objectionable. But the oracular style of these writings makes it very difficult to know what interpretation to give them.

Mysticus: It is true that most religious writers are rather obscure, on this point as on others. But there is at least one exception—Professor W. T. Stace. In his recent book, *Time and Eternity*,¹ Stace puts forward the proposition that God is ineffable and takes considerable pains to explain exactly what he means, thereby, so it seems to me, giving a precise expression to what the people such as you cited were getting at. He makes it quite clear that he is not speaking hyperbolically, and he makes it quite explicit that the assertions are to be taken unqualifiedly, without any sort of restriction. And yet I cannot see that they are self-defeating in the way you suggest. Here are some of his statements of the thesis:

To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that He is without qualities. . . . And this implies that any statement of the form "God is x " is false.²

Thus to the intellect He is blank, void, nothing. You cannot attach any predicate to Him . . . because every predicate stands for a concept, so that to affirm a predicate of Him is to pretend that He is apprehensible by the conceptual intellect.³

It is not merely *our* minds which cannot understand God, nor is it

¹ Princeton, N. J., 1952. ² *Op. cit.*, p. 33. ³ *Op. cit.*, p. 42.

merely *our* concepts which cannot reach Him. No mind could understand His Mystery—so long as we mean by a mind a conceptual intellect—and no concepts could apprehend Him. And this is the same as saying that He is, in His very nature, unconceptualizable, that His Mystery and incomprehensibility are absolute attributes of Him.⁴

Philologos: These utterances sound uncompromising enough. But there is something very queer about some of them, for example, "He is, in His very nature, unconceptualizable." Is this as if I should say, in speaking of a very bright but intractable student, "He is, by his very intelligence, incapable of learning"? Note that I *couldn't* be denying, in a literal sense, that he can learn. For my statement presupposes that he has intelligence, and we wouldn't say of anything that it has intelligence unless we suppose that it could learn something. Any evidence that it was in a strict sense incapable of learning would equally be evidence that it had no intelligence. In actually using this sentence I would be employing hyperbole to express vividly the fact that the very intelligence which makes him capable of learning is so quick-triggered that it is *difficult* for him to submit to the prolonged discipline which is essential for thoroughly learning anything. So in the same spirit I might say of an acquaintance, "He is, in his very nature, unconceptualizable" (cf. "His nature is an absolute enigma to me"), thereby exaggeratedly saying that he is hard to understand and expressing my puzzlement at his dark and devious ways. But again I could not mean "unconceptualizable" in a strict sense here;⁵ for in ascribing to him a nature, I have already admitted that he is conceptual-

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

⁵ A terminological note for the whole paper: I take Stace, and those who talk about this matter in the same way, to be using "concept" within the philosophical tradition in which we can be said to apply a concept to *x* whenever we predicate anything of *x* (or attach a predicate to *x*); and in which to say that we can apply concepts to *x* is equivalent to saying that *x* is conceptualizable, capable of being apprehended by concepts or by the conceptual intellect, etc. These equivalences are implicit in the second of the three above quotations from Stace and in the quotation below, p. 510. Therefore, although I hold no brief for this double-barreled lingo, I shall in the following use "apply a concept to *x*" as synonymous with "attach

izable, that is, that concepts can be applied to him. We speak of the nature of x only where we suppose ourselves able to say various things about x . We wouldn't talk about human nature unless we supposed we could apply certain concepts to men. Hence I can suppose only that Stace in saying, "He is, in His very nature, unconceptualizable" is hyperbolically expressing the *difficulty* of forming concepts which apply strictly to God. And so we are back to something like "Jane is impossible."⁶

Mysticus: No, I can't agree that Stace is just exaggerating. But I must admit that the statements you cite are not happy ones. However, I don't believe they are essential for the statement of his thesis. He doesn't have to speak of God's *nature*, or of something being an absolute attribute of God. He used those locutions in order to emphasize that God is unconceptualizable not just by the human mind but by any mind whatsoever. But he could have made the point by saying just that (as he also does) and thereby have avoided tripping himself up in this way.

P.: Let's see what is left after the purge. "To say that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, . . . that any statement of the form 'God is x ' is false." "Thus you cannot attach any predicate to Him." But if in saying, "God is ineffable" we are making a true statement, haven't we applied a concept to Him, viz., the concept of ineffability? Haven't we attached a predicate to Him, viz., "ineffable"? Haven't we made a true statement of the form "God is x "? Aren't we in the position of being able to make a true statement only by doing the very things which the statement declares impossible, thereby falsifying it? Is this like a man saying, "I can't speak English"? (Cf. the case of a town crier who cries that crying has been outlawed.)

M.: Surely you aren't serious. When I say, "God is ineffable," I am not attempting to apply a concept to Him or attach a

a predicate to x " (or "predicate something of x "). And, for stylistic purposes, I shall sometimes add as a further synonym "characterize x ." I am under no illusion that the boundaries of these three terms are precisely drawn in the tradition. In fact a good part of this paper hinges, in part, on exhibiting their vagueness. But I think that within the tradition they oscillate together for the most part.

⁶ The same sort of considerations apply to "His Mystery and incomprehensibility are absolute attributes of Him."

predicate to Him, and so if the statement is true it would not be correct to say I have succeeded in doing these things. I am denying that any concepts or predicates can be applied to Him. Of course, the grammatical form of "God is ineffable" is misleading. It looks like a positive statement, such as "Jones is ill" or "Susie is pretty," but actually it doesn't involve attaching any predicate to anything. Its logical form would be more clearly exhibited if it were formulated: "It is not the case that any predicate can be attached to God." This shows that "God is ineffable" is not really of the *logical* form "God is x ," although it looks as if it were. Similarly, saying "King Arthur is fictitious" does not constitute attaching a predicate to King Arthur, although it looks as if it did. Hence to say truly "God is ineffable" we are not required to do what we are declaring to be impossible.

P.: So the man who said, "I can't speak English," if charged with falsifying his own statement, might retort (in French) that he didn't mean that he couldn't say what he was saying. (And if the town crier were arrested, he might complain, "But surely the law doesn't forbid my crying *it*. It's the only way of publicizing it.") In both these cases the speaker trusts us to make the sort of qualification that would make his statement intelligible and proper. If we are tempted to interpret them in a paradoxical way, we draw back and say, "They couldn't have meant that" and look for some qualification that will remove the paradox. So Stace perhaps trusted to the circumstances to make it plain that he wouldn't count "ineffable" as a predicate because it is negative. But wouldn't it be better to make this explicit and restate the principle as: "No *positive* predicates can be applied to God"?

M.: This qualification is unnecessary. "Ineffability" is not a predicate, in the strict sense of the term. For to "predicate" ineffability of x is really to deny something of x .

P.: If a pupil who had been directed to give an example of a subject-predicate sentence were to present "Freedom is intangible" or even "God is ineffable," wouldn't he get credit for his answer? And isn't "the concept of impossibility" a proper phrase? So whatever the "strict" sense might be, the point is that Stace is deviating from common usage and, in the

interests of intelligibility, had best make his deviation explicit.

But now I want to bring out another feature of "God is ineffable" which puzzles me. Let me approach this by asking: "What is it of which ineffability is being predicated or, if you prefer, of which 'effability' is being denied?"

M.: God, of course.

P.: Ah. But what do you mean by "God"?

M.: Stace identifies God with mystical experience. But that seems to me unduly restrictive. I would rather say that God is that toward which we direct religious activities of any sort: worship, prayer, and so forth.

P.: But when you and Stace explain in this way the meaning you attach to "God," aren't you thereby attaching predicates to Him, or at least putting yourself in a position to do so? In other words, in using "God," aren't you presupposing that you can predicate of God whatever phrase you would give to explain your meaning?

M.: There does seem to be something odd here. Perhaps we are overlooking some peculiarity in the way a proper name like "God" is used. Now that I recall, Stace says:

As every logician knows, any name, any word in any language, except a proper name, stands for a concept or a universal. . . . Neither God nor Nirvana stand for concepts. Both are proper names. It is not a contradiction that Eckhart should use the name God and yet declare Him nameless. For though He has a proper name, there is for Him no name in the sense of a word standing for a concept.⁷

P.: This theory does not tally with the way you, and Stace, were just now explaining the meaning of "God." But never mind that. Let's look at this conception of proper names for a bit. And first I want to ask: "How do we determine whether a given person understands a given proper name?"⁸ Let's start with something a little simpler than "God." Suppose I say to you,

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁸ We do not ordinarily speak of "understanding a proper name." But we do speak of understanding sentences and using them meaningfully; and one of the conditions of understanding or using meaningfully a sentence in which a proper name occurs is knowing who the proper name is a name

"Jane is a spiteful wench." You nod, but for some reason I suspect you are bluffing. So I say, "I don't believe you know who I am talking about." What could you do to vindicate yourself?

M.: I might point out a girl in the room and say, "That is Jane." Or I might just go over and address her by name.

P.: Yes. But this obviously doesn't apply to our problem, since one can't, in a literal sense, point out God, or go over and address Him. And so for our purpose we had better stipulate that I make my statement when Jane is not present and that for some reason we can't go to where she is. Or take the case of a historical figure, for example, "Richard II of England," where pointing out is *logically* impossible. How would you prove your understanding in these cases?

M.: In the case of Jane, I might reply to your charge by saying something like "She's Fred's sister-in-law" or "She's the girl with the auburn hair Bob introduced me to last night." In the case of Richard II, I might say, "He was the king deposed by Bolingbroke," or, "He was ruler of England from 1377 to 1399."

P.: Good. But doesn't this show that a condition of your understanding me, when I use the proper name of something you cannot point out, is your capacity to provide some such identifying phrase? If you were unable to provide any such phrase, would we say you understood the name?

M.: I suppose not.

P.: And isn't the same true of "God"? Suppose I say to you, "God is a very present help in time of trouble." You nod piously, but for some reason I suspect a failure of communication; perhaps I have reason to think you use the word differently. And so I ask, "What do you mean by 'God'?" You might reply, "The first cause," or "The necessary being," or "The supreme mind

of (with certain qualifications which are noted below, p. 514). Hence, in the absence of any other compendious expression, I shall speak of "understanding a proper name, '*N*,'" as synonymous with "knowing who (or what) '*N*' is the name of" or "knowing who (or what) *N* is." This extension of the use of "understanding" will not cause confusion unless it is allowed to obscure the important differences involved.

holding moral relations with mankind," or "He Who revealed Himself to the prophets," or "The father of Jesus Christ," or "The judge of our sins." If you were unable to give *any* such answer, wouldn't I be justified in concluding that you didn't understand the word "God" in any way? This means that a condition of your understanding any statement containing "God" is your capacity to supply some such identifying phrase, and any such phrase would constitute a predicate which could be attached to God. Hence "God is ineffable" asserts that an essential condition of its meaningfulness does not hold.

M.: Hold on. I might agree with your premise that I couldn't be said to understand a sentence containing "God" unless I could supply an identifying phrase. But your conclusion doesn't follow. Suppose in order to identify Jane I use the phrase "the girl whose picture was on the back page of last night's paper," or in order to identify Richard II, I use the phrase "the protagonist of Shakespeare's play of that name." Would these responses be sufficient to convince you that I had understood your statements containing those proper names?

P.: I suppose so.

M.: But to say that a picture of Jane was on the back page of last night's paper is not to predicate anything of Jane or characterize her in any way. You might well complain that I had not told you what she is like and that you still can't form a concept of her. And still less have I predicated anything of Richard II when I have said that Shakespeare wrote a play about him.

P.: Maybe not. But you have said something about them.

M.: True. But to say that x is ineffable is obviously not to say that we can't say anything about x in any sense of "say something about." It is to say that we can't say anything which would involve attaching a predicate to x or characterizing it.

P.: You have overlooked one point, I fear. Even if you can't use those identifying phrases to characterize x , the information contained in these phrases gives you clues as to how to go about characterizing x . You can look at the back page of last night's paper, and on the basis of what you see, you can tell me all sorts of things about Jane. You can read Shakespeare's play

and/or study his sources and thereby discover many characteristics of Richard II. Hence it isn't true that you could provide identifying phrases of this sort and yet *not be able* to characterize that which the phrase identifies.

M.: Perhaps. But what about "God"? That's the case we're really interested in. Couldn't I demonstrate my understanding of "God" by saying something like "the object of religious experience," or "the object of worship"? And surely saying that doesn't lead to any characterization of God. In the other cases there was perhaps a minimal characterization lurking in the very *mode* of identification. For in identifying x as the protagonist of a drama, I am presupposing that x is a human being; and to identify x as that a picture of which . . . is to presuppose that x is a visible thing. But to identify x as the object of religious experience or worship is not to imply anything about what sort of entity it is. It does not involve any limitation on what can and cannot be said about it. It is like saying of something that it is an object of thought. That tells us nothing. *Anything* can be thought about.

P.: But doesn't your identifying phrase tell us where to look for more information, just as in the other cases? If you actually use "object of religious experience" as a criterion for identifying God (and aren't just mechanically repeating the phrase), you can find other things to say of God by reflecting on your own religious experience and/or reading what other people have said on the basis of theirs. Thus, depending on what you are willing to call "religious experience," you could discover that God is infinite bliss, a consuming fire, the ground of all being, the spirit of love, and so on. Or if your criterion is "object of worship," you could examine what you take to be cases of worship and discover what is said of God there, for example, that He is our father, King of Kings, creator of heaven and earth, judge of all men, and so forth.

M.: Ah, but the language we use to describe what we meet in religious experience or to address the object of our worship is metaphorical language. We don't mean that God is literally a fire, a father, a King, and so forth. Hence in saying these things we aren't really predicating anything of God.

P.: The standards for *real* predication seem to be steadily stiffening. Do you really wish to say that when the poet says:

There is a garden in her face
Where roses and white lilies grow,

he is not predicating anything of his lady fair?

M.: Not in the strict sense.

P.: What would you take to be a case of predication in the strict sense?

M.: "This cup is blue."

P.: "God is a consuming fire" is certainly different from that. But until you have said just how it is different, that is, until you have given some criteria for recognizing *real* predication, your general thesis that no predicate can be applied to God doesn't come to much.

M.: Surely such criteria could be given. But there is something else we have overlooked. There are cases where we would say that someone understands a sentence even though he doesn't know who is named by a proper name occurring in the sentence. Suppose you are rambling on about your acquaintances and you say, "John Krasnick is a queer duck." Perhaps we are interrupted then, and I don't have a chance to ask you who John Krasnick is. Or perhaps I am just not interested in following up this facet of the conversation. It would be strange, wouldn't it, to say that I didn't understand what you had said?

P.: Yes, it would. But note why. If I were called away just after uttering this sentence, and someone asked you, "Who is John Krasnick?" you would reply, "Oh, I don't know, one of P.'s acquaintances," or perhaps, "Someone P. was just talking about; that's all I know about him." You would have to supply at least this much of an identification if you are to be said to understand my remark.

M.: But if the ability to supply an identifying phrase like "the x named ' N ,'" or "the x A calls ' N '" is sufficient for understanding a sentence containing a proper name, then I can certainly understand such a sentence without being able to characterize the nominatum. Surely not even you would hold that saying, " X is named by ' N '" constitutes a characterization of x .

P.: No, I wouldn't. But note what is going on here. Insofar as the only identifying phrase you gave for *N* is "the *x* called '*N*,'" we are hesitant about saying that you understand, or fully understand, what is being said. If, when I said, "John Krasnick is a queer duck," you had nodded, assented, let it pass, or given other indications that you had understood me, and then it turned out later that the only identifying criterion you could give is "the man P. called 'John Krasnick,'" I could accuse you of practicing deception. I might say, "Why didn't you tell me you didn't know who I was talking about?" In other words, when we give the usual indications of having understood a sentence containing a proper name, we are purporting to be able to say more about the nominatum than this.

This is also brought out by the fact that if, after the interruption, someone were to ask you, "Who was P. talking about?" it would be misleading for you to reply, "John Krasnick." For in *using* the proper name, you would be representing yourself as knowing more about him than that I called him "John Krasnick." If that is all you know, the natural thing for you to say would be, "Oh, somebody named 'John Krasnick'." Thus we put this case into a special category.

And this means that the philosopher who *says*, "God is ineffable" could not be interpreted as understanding "God" in this very weak sense. If I were to *say*, "John Krasnick is queer," and couldn't tell you anything about him (except for queerness), apart from the fact that his name is "John Krasnick," you could justifiably accuse me of shamming. You might retort, "You weren't really saying anything." And there is a good reason for this usage. There would be no point in my saying anything about John Krasnick or God or anyone else unless I had some way of identifying them in addition to their being so named. Why should I bother to say of God that He is ineffable rather than effable, why should I care whether He is omnipotent or limited, loving or cruel, conscious or unconscious, if I know Him only as what people call "God"? It is not only that in this case I would have no *basis* for saying one thing rather than the other. More fundamentally, I could have no interest in doing so. People are interested in saying things, and raising questions,

about God because they identify Him as the source of their being, the promulgator of their moral laws, the judge of their sins, the architect of their salvation, the object of their worship, or (with Stace) mystical experience. It is because they identify God in such ways that they consider it important to ask and answer questions about Him.

M.: Perhaps you are right. But there is something else which has been worrying me. People differ enormously in verbal ability. Is it not possible for a man to understand a proper name and yet not be able to put this understanding, at least with any adequacy, in a formula?

P.: Perhaps. *Formulation* of an identifying phrase is not the only device for explaining one's understanding of a proper name, though it is the simplest. If the speaker lacks verbal facility, we might try to smoke out his criterion in some other way. We might, for example, present him with various passages from religious literature and note which ones he recognizes as describing God. Or we might describe (or present) various forms of worship and note which he considers appropriate. With sufficient pains we could, in this way, piece out a criterion which he would on reflection recognize as the one he actually uses. And if the most thorough attempts of this sort were persistently frustrated, wouldn't we again be justified in concluding that he wasn't using the word meaningfully?

Another thing. This point doesn't depend on any special features of *intersubjective* communication. I might be doubtful as to whether I really understood a certain name. If so, I would have to use the same devices to assure myself that I did (or didn't).

But let's forget all these difficulties for the moment and suppose that one can say, "God is ineffable" without thereby defeating one's purpose. We are still faced with the question why anyone should accept the statement. Isn't it amply refuted by the facts? Religious literature is crammed full of sentences attaching predicates to God, and there are many men who devote their lives to making such predications.

M.: Oh, no doubt there are many sentences which have a

declarative grammatical form and contain "God" as subject. But if you examine them they will all turn out to be either negative or metaphorical. None of them express *conceptions* of God, and so none constitute predication in the strict sense of the term.

P.: Perhaps. But what positive reasons can be adduced for the position?

M.: Mystics, who are in the best position to know, have repeatedly declared God to be ineffable. Just consider, for example, the statements you cited at the beginning of our discussion.

P.: It is true that many mystics have said things which could be interpreted in this way. But if it is a question of authority, many deeply religious men who are not mystics have expressed themselves to the contrary. Of course you could rule out their testimony by defining "God" as what one encounters in mystical experience, or even (with Stace) simply as mystical experience.

M.: I would hesitate to do that. But if we approach God through mystical experience, without ruling out the possibility of other approaches, we can use a different line of argument. We can see that mystical experience has certain features which prevent it, or anything discovered in it, from being conceptualized. For example:

It is of the very nature of the intellect to involve the subject-object opposition. But in the mystic experience this opposition is transcended. Therefore the intellect is incapable of understanding it. Therefore it is incomprehensible, ineffable.⁹

But the oneness of God is indivisible and relationless. Now this relationless indivisible unity is precisely the character of the mystic intuition as described by all mystics. . . . To say this is only to say that the mystic experience is beyond the capacity of the intellect to handle, since it is the very nature of the intellect to operate by means of separation, discrimination, and analysis.¹⁰

P.: Leaving aside questions as to the adequacy of the analysis of "intellect" employed here, there is something very strange about these arguments. The conclusion is "Mystical experience

⁹ *Op. cit.*, p. 40. ¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, pp. 40-41.

is unconceptualizable," and in order to prove it we adduce various characteristics of mystical experience. That is, we have made our success in conceptualizing mystical experience in a certain way a condition for proving that it can't be conceptualized. But how could a successful completion of a task ever enable us to prove that the task is impossible? Wouldn't it rather prove the opposite? Isn't this like giving an inductive argument for the invalidity of induction? Or presenting a documentary film to show that photography is impossible?

M.: You keep making the same mistakes. To say that God is an indivisible unity is not to apply any concept to Him. It is simply to *deny* that there is any distinction of parts in Him.

P.: I begin now to see the situation more clearly. Several times I have pointed out that in saying or defending "God is ineffable," you were saying, or implying your ability to say, something about God. And each time you deny that what is being said involves attaching any predicate to God, applying any concept to Him, or characterizing Him, either because it is negative, or because it is metaphorical, or because it is an extrinsic denomination, and so forth. It begins to appear that you are prepared to deny of anything you are committed to saying of God that it is a predicate and so on. But if this is your tack, then in uttering "God is ineffable," you are just exhibiting a certain feature of your use of "ineffable" (and "predicate," "concept," and so on), rather than saying anything about God. You are expressing your determination not to count as a predicate and so on anything which is said of God. You are like a man who says, "Only empirically testable sentences are meaningful" (cf. "Only scientific method gives us knowledge") and then, whenever presented with a sentence which can't be empirically tested, denies that it is meaningful, without giving any reason for all these denials except the lack of empirical testability. After a while we will begin to suspect that he is just showing us how he uses "meaningful," rather than ascribing some property to all the members of a class which has been defined in some independent way.

M.: But I am just using "predicate," "concept," and so on, in their ordinary senses. The only statements which you showed

I was committed to making would not ordinarily be thought to involve applying concepts or predicates to God. Similarly *if* the positivist just accepts or rejects examples of meaningful statements according to our ordinary discriminations, he is saying something about the class of statements which would ordinarily be called meaningful.

P.: I'm not at all sure that you are using "predicate" and so on in just the way we ordinarily do, if, indeed, there is any one such way. At least you haven't made that out. Of course, it is only if you are taking "having 'God' as subject" as your sole and sufficient criterion for saying that a sentence doesn't involve predication and so on that you can be accused of uttering a tautology in the strict sense. Insofar as you have other criteria, you are not uttering a tautology. But if you don't state your criteria, and if, whenever you are forced to admit that certain statements containing "God" as subject can be made, you rule these out as examples of "predication" and so on, either without any justification or on the basis of a principle which looks tailor-made for the occasion, we can be excused for suspecting that your utterance approximates to a tautology. Of course alternatively I might suppose that you have no criterion. But then your utterance becomes so indefinite as to assert almost nothing.

If you want to prevent your thesis from oscillating in this limbo between tautology and maximum indefiniteness, you had better include a specification of the senses in which you wish to deny that concepts and predicates can be applied to God. With such a specification the thesis might well be significant and worthy of serious consideration. For example, you might restate the position: "God cannot be positively characterized in literal terms." This assertion need not lead to such frustrations as we have been considering. For the speaker could use a nonliteral phrase to identify God; and although the statement itself is presumably literal, it is not positive. And, given a sufficiently precise explication of "literal," this is a thesis well worth consideration. Or you might wish to say, "We can speak only of extrinsic features of God, not of His intrinsic nature," or "God can never be characterized with the precision we can attain in science," or "We can speak of God only in a highly abstract

way." None of these utterances need be self-defeating; for (1) in each case the sentence itself does not fall within the class of those declared impossible, and (2) a speaker or hearer can use a criterion for identifying God which does not involve attributing to Him a predicate of the sort which is ruled out. If you are interested in unambiguously communicating a definite thesis and avoiding tripping yourself up in the process, you would be well advised to make such specifications.

M.: Yes, I see that would be better. But how does it happen that so many philosophers make ineffability statements without qualification?

P.: Perhaps something like this is involved. There are many "un . . . able" words which can be applied with all sorts of qualifications, diminishing to an unqualified application. Thus I can say that our baseball team is unbeatable in our league; or unbeatable by any other college; or unbeatable by any other amateur team; or well-nigh unbeatable (by any team); practically unbeatable; or, simply, unbeatable; or even, to make it still stronger, absolutely unbeatable. The final term in this series, "unbeatable" (or "absolutely unbeatable") is logically just as respectable as any of the others. Though it may be wildly improbable that our baseball team is unbeatable (without qualification), there is no logical self-stultification involved in saying so. (Cf. "unattainable," "unbreakable," "uncontrollable.") With such cases in mind it is easy to feel logically comfortable about saying of God without qualification that He is unconceptualizable or ineffable. But we still might feel more squeamish about this latter case were it not for the fact that there are contexts where we can employ even these terms (or terms very close to them) without qualification. For example: (a) "A fall in the stock market is inconceivable"; (b) "John is unspeakable." Of course as (a) is actually used, it doesn't imply that we can't apply a concept to the falling of the stock market. It simply means that we have every reason to suppose it won't happen. But the verbal similarity between this and "God is unconceptualizable" (where this is intended to imply that we cannot form a concept of God) helps us to suppose that the latter is as legitimate as the former. Similarly (b) is simply a way of saying that John is despicable.

But the fact that it has a use helps us to suppose that the verbally similar utterance "God is ineffable" (taken to imply that God cannot be spoken of) also can be given a use. But fully to untangle the muddle in "God is ineffable," we should have to make explicit all the similarities and differences in the ways sentences of this sort function.

If we want to avoid such muddles, we must make explicit the sorts of conception, predication, characterization, and so forth we are asserting to be impossible with respect to God in contrast to the sorts we are admitting as possible. To label something ineffable in an unqualified way is to shirk the job of making explicit the ways in which it *can* be talked about; just as to unqualifiedly label an expression (which is actually used) meaningless is to shirk the job of making explicit the sort of meaning it *does* have in these uses. There may be something in the world which can't be talked about in any way, but if so we can only signalize the fact by leaving it unrecorded.

WILLIAM P. ALSTON

University of Michigan