

# Introduction to Negative Theology

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From a very particular angle of view, attempting to talk about ultimate reality is just plain silly. I do not refer to the perspective furnished by critiques of religion as a kind of fantasy discourse. Rather I refer to a religious and theological perspective affirming that ultimate reality, whatever else it may be, must be beyond human cognitive grasp.

This view is definitely not universally shared, and even when it is present its potential silencing impact on theological speech is often blunted or subverted in some way. American philosopher Charles Hartshorne is one of the few religious thinkers who straightforwardly acknowledged this problem of theological speech, and went on to resolve the problem by declaring that human beings have no cognitive limitations in speaking of God; theological discourse is therefore potentially completely rational. But this was only possible for Hartshorne because God—for him and for Alfred North Whitehead and for their orthodox followers in the corresponding two main process theology camps—is not ultimate reality. Speaking about God rationally when God is not infinite, not omnipotent, not omniscient, not simple, and not creator might indeed be possible—probably not more complicated than speaking of society or causation or value. But speaking of ultimate reality is just as problematic in the process framework as it is in any other cosmological vision of reality. With this Hartshornian response to the problem of theological rationality in mind, it is important to clarify at the outset that the subject here is ultimate reality, whether or not this is what people are willing to call God.

Many doctrines of revelation are supposed to solve the problem of theological rationality. By means of self-revelation, ultimate reality somehow gives itself to human cognitive grasp. On this view, so long as we confine ourselves to the parameters of revelation, we can speak confidently of ultimate reality. We see versions of this view

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in all of the Abrahamic faiths and perhaps in the most pronounced ways within some schools of Hindu philosophy, where revelation through the Vedas (*āgama*) is one of the *pramāṇa*, the epistemological relevant factors in discerning reliable knowledge. But even here the problem is not completely resolved. Most theologians have perceived that whatever is revealed through revelation cannot overcome the inherent incomprehensibility of ultimate reality, because this inherent incomprehensibility derives from a mismatch between the nature of ultimate reality and human cognitive powers, and no amount of revelation can remove this mismatch. Swiss theologian Karl Barth powerfully reminded contemporary Christian theology of this by declaring that God (keep in mind that Barth, unlike Hartshorne, viewed God as ultimate reality) is revealed as essentially unknowable, and utterly unscaled to human cognitive capacities. How could it be otherwise?

Despite these attempts to resolve the problem of the rationality of theological speech, therefore, the problem persists—and all the more sharply for having been refined in discussion with competing alternative views of theological rationality. Perhaps, then, the only honest and rational response is to give up God talk altogether. But this is a solution utterly indigestible to ordinary people, and would foreshadow the death or transformation of many forms of religion, within which ultimacy talk is vital. To the extent that theology is in part a second-order discourse aiming to make sense of the first-order discourse of religious communities, theology has to remain in the ultimacy-talk business as long as religions do. But it is thinkable that theology as a type of philosophical discourse unconstrained by any alliances with religious communities—this is “religious philosophy” in the usage of my *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion*—could declare itself unable to speak of ultimate reality, and thereafter confine itself to discussing more tractable topics such as religious anthropology and theological ethics. Here we see emerge the outlines of the sociality of responses to the problem of theological rationality. For confessional theologians allied with religious communities, the show must go on, it simply must. For religious philosophers identifying with the secular academy and not serving the institutional interests of religious communities, calling the curtain down upon ultimacy discourse, with subsequent curtailing of the theological task, is a serious possibility—and a path that some take.

Despite this vital difference in perceived professional obligations among theologians, the confessional theologians and religious philosophers have common cause. This is because there is among all theologians engaged in ultimacy talk a very serious consideration of the rationality problem and a host of intricate responses riding on the backs of long traditions that arc across religions and cultures. These responses are the subject matter of this section of the book. Not all of these responses support the continuation of theological ultimacy talk but most do. Not all allow that ultimacy talk is morally good or spiritually wise but most do. Not all endorse particular linguistic techniques but most do. Not all think that modeling ultimate reality is possible but most allow that ultimacy models remain viable albeit with varying degrees of systematicity. Of course, those opting for object silence literally disappear from the conversation so their voice is absent.

That leaves the approaches to ultimacy talk discussed in this section in a peculiar position. Each wants to warn of the deep, dark problem confronting theological speech about ultimacy, but each also wants to find a way to persist in such speech, though with varying levels of confidence in the endorsed techniques for subverting the problem. Each thinker discussed strikes this all-important balance in a unique way. Most deploy negative theology in one way or another, for the long-held reason that we are on surer ground when we deny literal assertions about God than when we try to make literal affirmations about God. A few acknowledge the vital role of dialectic in reasoning toward ultimate reality. Surprisingly, the more sophisticated techniques—balancing, juxtaposition, trajectorial, and technical-discourse techniques at the level of entire symbol systems—are not taken up in the essays of this section. But negative theology gets a good airing, and there is no question that this has been the dominant method for striking a balance between saying more than advisable and saying less than possible about ultimate reality.

John Peter Kenney's "The Platonic Monotheism of Plotinus" is a philosophical curator's effort to intercept a monist misreading of Plotinus and to situate him where he properly belongs: Plotinus is a *monotheist*. That is, the Plotinian One is ineffable ground of being, a transcendent first principle grounding real ontological difference between the varied orders of reality. Of course, Plotinus's One is not an eternal creator being possessing all perfections, which is what most contemporary exponents of "armchair philosophy of religion" mean when they speak of monotheism. The One resists such finite predications. Though exceeding human cognitive grasp, the One can be discerned through the practice of philosophical dialectic and immediate contemplation. As Kenney puts it, "even to describe Plotinus as a form of monotheism requires some measure of hermeneutical humility." Kenney also sets up comparative contrasts to explain Plotinus and his abiding relevance. He contrasts post-Enlightenment armchair philosophy of religion with the older view of religious philosophy as spiritually potent way of life, which is how Plotinus thought of it. He contrasts Plotinus's ultimacy view with Greco-Roman paganism and Hindu sacrificial polytheism, construing Plotinus as himself a constructive synthesizer attempting to crystallize the organizing principle of monotheism implicitly present in popular pantheons. Kenney's framing of the Plotinian approach as an apophatic ontological strategy for articulating divine transcendence yields a meta-theoretic principle of iconoclasm for guiding the synthetic interpretation of the pluralism of ultimacy models. This iconoclastic principle corrodes every particular model of God in the name of an ineffable ground of being. Plotinus's monotheism, therefore, finally proves to be of limited use as a determinate model of God, at which level it is effectively self-deconstructing, and best suited to be a principle for provoking a fuller understanding of the questionable rational status of any and all models of ultimate reality.

Nancy J. Shaffer's "Pseudo-Dionysius and the Negation of Models of God" also draws on literature deeply influenced by Neoplatonists such as Plotinus and Proclus. Her opening gambit is to interpret the Christian doctrine of transcendence as demanding an apophatic approach to theology in which the only wholly true statements about God are negative propositions that declare what God is not. She then

describes the way that Pseudo-Dionysius pursues divine transcendence in three stages. First comes the *via positiva* (using non-literal language to make affirmations about God), where the problem is the inadequacy of all of the conceptions offered in the naming process. Second, and in reaction, the *via negativa* (using literal language to deny affirmations of God) corrects the excesses of the naming process and leaves us straining for a cognitive toehold as one after another of the names of God are deconstructed under the weight of divine transcendence. Third, and finally, in order to avoid the trivialization of transcendence that occurs when one of the first two stages is indulged to the poverty of the other, Pseudo-Dionysius affirms the supereminence of God, which involves a juxtaposition of naming and negation so as to join transcendence with mystery in a way proper to divinity. Shaffer's contribution lies in carefully parsing the logical stages of Pseudo-Dionysius's thought and using contrastive relationships with other Neoplatonists to indicate distinctive elements of his approach to transcendence.

Kenneth Seeskin's "Strolling with Maimonides down the Via Negativa" is an entertaining exposition of the *via negativa* in Maimonides, framed by the vibrant assertion that monotheism, properly understood, demands nothing less (or more!) than the *via negativa*. For Maimonides, the oneness of God must be strengthened by affirming the absolute uniqueness of God—uniqueness of such a kind that comparative contrasts break down completely, leaving us with only the ability to deny the adequacy of any finite predicates applied to God. God is unique in the sense that God is not a member of any class of created things and thus can never effectively be compared to anything else—this is nothing short of incommensurability in the strongest sense. In fact, Seeskin points out that even negation is suspect for Maimonides because it links God to the things negated in a shared semantic field. There is little we can do about this besides remaining wary of our inveterate tendency to anthropomorphize God and to be ready to lapse into silence in the face of the divine mystery. Of all the essays in this section, Seeskin most forcefully commends his subject's way of thinking about God to us; he believes that his account of Maimonides' theology can help contemporary readers.

Dietmar Mieth's "Meister Eckhart's God" is a meditation on the mysterious inscrutability of the divine, this time in conversation with one of the most profound and challenging of the Christian apophatic theologians. Mieth draws attention to the way Eckhart managed the tension between God as revealed and the Godhead as unapproachable mystery. The "silent desert of the Godhead" in which all intentions and goals are thwarted places human beings in an extraordinary relationship-that-is-not-a-relationship with God. Mieth rightly points out in passing how strong the affinities are between this view and Zen Buddhism, noting that there is ongoing dialogue around this issue. One of the valuable aspects of Mieth's contribution lies in drawing out Eckhart's vision of the intricacy of the human pursuit of God given God's character as both self-revealed and wholly inaccessible. There is a sophisticated phenomenology of the spiritual journey present in Eckhart that goes well beyond its anticipations in Plotinus and Pseudo-Dionysius. Interestingly, Mieth clearly recognizes that there is a translation problem facing contemporary thinkers who would venture to speak of God in Eckhart's way. His attempt to re-express

Eckhart's ultimacy model in the language and sensibilities of the modern world is poetic and stirring. Here we see a form of kindness: Mieth is determined to commend Eckhart's model of God as spiritually vital for us today.

Aaron P. Smith's "Kierkegaard's Model of God and the Importance of Subjective Experience" tackles a thinker who never clearly offered any single model of God; rather Kierkegaard discusses a profusion of them in his various writings. Smith's goal, then, is to make sense of this fact, for which he finds Kierkegaard's idea of subjective experience to be vital. Smith argues that Kierkegaard is critical of the very task of model building in relation to God, viewing it as spiritually unhealthy intellectualization of the experience of God. Like Kierkegaard himself, it appears that Smith encourages using models of God as vehicles for subjective existential connection with God—and we should do this without worrying too much about their orthodoxy or philosophical credentials. Importantly, Smith criticizes Kierkegaard for not recognizing that his emphatic embrace of subjective experience naturally leads the true God-seeker—the one who follows subjective experience wherever it leads—well beyond the limits of Christianity. There is implicit here a way of construing the significance of the plurality of ultimacy models as an experiential challenge rather than as a cognitive, theoretical one.

Mario von der Ruhr's "Transcending the World: Wittgenstein, God and the Unsayable" is an historical tracing of Wittgenstein's developing ideas of God, from his early *Notebooks* and the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* to remarks made later in life and preserved in *Culture and Value*. Von der Ruhr's essay is the most historically minded effort in this section. What emerges is that Wittgenstein defended the idea of God not merely out of personal religious preference but because he could see no reason to regard God-talk as irrational that did not also apply to the practices of moral judgment. As for Wittgenstein's specific conceptions of God, von der Ruhr argues that there is not much to go on beyond Wittgenstein's affirmation that God is the sort of reality that cannot be put into words and yet makes itself manifest. Reading across Wittgenstein's output, therefore, God-talk emerges as our language for speaking of the meaning of life, truth, beauty, dependency, the preciousness of individuals, and moral rightness, while God is conceived in minimalist terms as the ground of all this being that necessarily eludes cognitive grasp and linguistic expression. One senses in von der Ruhr's argument an implicit, Wittgenstein-inspired disapproval of the more intellectually aggressive adventures of truth-aiming comparative inquiry and constructive synthesis: the effort to grasp the ungraspable in human language is futile and effectively cuts us off from the empirical reality that is actually available to us.

Wendy Farley's "Schleiermacher and the Negative Way: Implications for Inter-Religious Dialogue" is, among the contributions in this section, the most explicitly supportive of comparative inquiry. Indeed, here the curator's interest in a particular figure's God-model (in this case, Schleiermacher's) is subordinated to inquirer's truth-aiming intention, albeit in the modest form of dialogue rather than the more aggressive form of evaluation. Farley regards interreligious dialogue, and so (one presumes) dialogue among ultimacy models, as a strategy for radicalizing awareness of the cognitive breakdown associated with all attempts to model ultimate reality.

Why is this needed? Farley asserts that even apophatically inclined theologians and religious philosophers often succumb to subtle forms of attachment, privileging their symbolic ways of speaking of God, as if the full force of apophasis does not apply to them. Less apophatically minded theologians are even worse off. The upshot of full-bodied dialogue is a loosening of attachment to any particular mode of symbolic ultimacy talk and simultaneously a more consistent activation of the formal acknowledgement that apophasis is necessary in theological approaches to ultimate reality. Farley illustrates the importance of consistent apophaticism for the loosening of attachment to ultimacy models by placing Schleiermacher in dialogue with Buddhist philosophy. This essay exhibits the paradoxical status of comparative inquiry in face of ineffable mystery: we may aim for the truth with our efforts at theological and dialogical speech but we perpetually discover both the intractability of the task and the traces within ourselves of intransigent attachment to unduly crisp conceptual formulations of ultimate reality. Where this leaves the task of comparative inquiry, to which Farley herself is clearly committed, or the larger task of constructive synthesis, Farley declines to say, apart from quoting Nāgārjuna to the effect that through great study we finally surrender to the inevitability that we must relinquish all views.

Ian James Kidd's "Feyerabend and the Ineffability of Reality" is an unusual offering in that philosopher Paul Feyerabend is not often spoken of in relation to models of ultimate reality. Kidd demonstrates that Feyerabend had significant thoughts on the subject, however, and unfolds this significance by means of an analysis of the philosopher's later writings. Kidd argues that Feyerabend operates within two conceptual frames when speaking of ultimate reality. In one, the theme of ineffability sets the tone. In the other, fullness of being or "abundance" is the leading theme. In Kidd's analysis, these two conceptual frames are reconcilable and the reconciliation yields a fairly clear view of Feyerabend's distinctive model of ultimate reality. Ultimate reality, for Feyerabend, is subject to a host of modes of apprehension and lines of inquiry, due to the way that human cognitive powers can only work selectively with the cognitive and ontological abundance of ultimate reality. Apart from this perspectival cacophony, therefore, ultimate reality remains forever unknowable. Kidd draws attention to Feyerabend's political motive here: the affirmation of a plenitudinous ineffability preserves a field of pluralistic appreciation of diversity by blocking all attempts to control the entire territory of ultimacy models. Kidd appears to endorse Feyerabend's belief that this is a positive and humane vision of ultimate reality. Implicit here, but not drawn out by Kidd, is a principle of great value for the synthetic task of interpreting the daunting pluralism of ultimacy models. Could Feyerabend's conjunction of the ineffability and abundance of Being be a satisfactory explanation for that pluralism? It is fascinating here that the effect of Feyerabend's approach at the level of comparative inquiry is precisely nil: it is a thoroughly relativist approach that (as presented in this essay, at least) yields no traction for leveraging one view into a superior position relative to another. Yet the promise of this view for synthetic interpretation of the pluralism of models as a whole is exceptional.

Finally, Donald L. Wallenfäng's "Immediate Mediation: Jean-Luc Marion as Apophatic Source for Postmodern Modeling of God" is another compassionate

commendation to readers of a way of thinking about ultimate reality. Wallenfäng's manifest theological agenda is to speak the truth concerning ultimate reality for our postmodern context. His commendation of Marion's view of God is mostly gentle, taking the form of heart-felt testimony attached to a moving exposition of Marion's thought. Much as in Marion's own writings, however, Wallenfäng also performs a robust comparative evaluation of Marion's horizon-saturating disclosive hermeneutics of givenness against the larger tradition of Christian theology, which is rendered in broad-brush strokes as in thrall to metaphysical and conceptual idolatry. This is obviously a bold move, both in Marion and in Wallenfäng's endorsement of Marion, but we do know that very occasionally a thinker does in fact slice between bone and marrow in provocative tradition-wide generalizations, so we can acknowledge in principle that Marion may be onto something of great importance in just the way that Wallenfäng believes. In one respect, Marion's view of ultimate reality bears a close resemblance to Feyerabend's: in both cases there is a plenitude that gives itself for engagement and interpretation, and upon reception is always fragmented into cognitively manageable perspectives that nevertheless can express authentic forms of engagement. But Marion develops in great detail the phenomenology of saturated phenomena in a way that Feyerabend did not, predictably yielding an affirmation of Christian faith that Feyerabend thought was precisely what ought not be possible in face of plenitudinous mystery.

In closing this introduction, it is worth briefly considering the warnings about ultimacy models and the endorsement of techniques of indirection that we have in these essays in light of the problem of religious pluralism, and particularly the pluralism of ultimacy models. Every single contribution affirms the ineffability of ultimate reality in one or another way, with a corresponding sympathy for apophatic modes of theological discourse. Unsurprisingly, there emerges in the majority of essays recommendations on behalf of principles that could help to explain or at least to manage the pluralism of ultimacy models, and all of these principles are rooted in the fundamental assumption that ultimate reality, whatever else it may be, surpasses complete human cognitive grasp. I take this to be an important coalescence within contemporary religious philosophy: the apophatic way in theology offers more intelligible and convincing solutions to the problem of pluralism of ultimacy models than alternatives.

## Reference

- Wildman, Wesley J. 2010. *Religious philosophy as multidisciplinary comparative inquiry: Envisioning a future for the philosophy of religion*. Albany: SUNY Press.