

Apophaticism is Coherent*

Simon Hewitt

September 21, 2018

Very early first draft. Please do not cite without permission.

In *The Hitchiker's Guide to the Galaxy* we are introduced to the computer Deep Thought. Unparalleled in its power, the machine is the cause of upset to the philosophers Majikthise and Vroomfondel: 'I mean, whats the use of our sitting up half the night arguing that there may or may not be a God if this machine only goes and gives you his bleeding phone number the next morning?' [1, 149] By contrast with this predicament, present-day philosophers can themselves give the impression of believing that they themselves know God's phone number. Thumb through many of the contemporary classics in the philosophy of religion and you will find a lot of things being claimed about God.¹ God is a person, a (propositional) knower, a moral agent, stands in various relationships to modal, mathematical, and moral reality, and much else beside.²

An thing about philosophy of religion being upbeat about its capacity to make significant and true claims about God is that there are important and mainstream voices within religion itself which deny this capacity. Apophaticism is the position that there is a sense in which God is indescribable. Central thinkers in Abrahamic religious traditions sign up to a version of apophaticism, including Maimonides, pseudo-Dionysius, Ephraim the Syrian, and Aquinas.

*Thanks to Sam Lebens and Tasia Scrutton for discussion of material relevant to this paper.

¹Many atheist or agnostic philosophers are similarly committed to multiple claims about what God would be like were God to exist (however exactly the atheist who believes God's existence to be impossible would make sense of what they take to be a counterpossible); see e.g. [5].

²The most accessible example remains [11]. See also [9] for an explicitly anti-apophatic approach.

In spite of its pervasiveness in living religion,³ apophaticism has not proved popular amongst philosophers of religion. Many of these will simply assume claims the apophatic rejection of which has been historically widespread. One reason for this neglect is that apophaticism is widely assumed to be incoherent. The purpose of this note is to show how the apophatic theologian can respond to an influential argument of Plantinga's for the incoherence of apophaticism. It will turn out that varieties of apophaticism can find coherent expression and are not self-refuting.

1

Plantinga deploys a disarmingly simple argument against those who hold that our concepts do not apply to God:

Either those who attempt to make this claim succeed in making an assertion or they do not. If they don't succeed we have nothing to consider; if they do, however, they appear to be predicating a property of a being they have referred to, in which case at least some of our concepts do apply to it, contrary to the claim they make. So if they succeed in making a claim, they make a false claim. [10, 6]

This line of attack leaves one feeling that it doesn't get to the heart of what the apophatic theologian wants to say. I want to shore up this feeling in what follows. None the less, Plantinga has convinced friends of apophaticism, as well as enemies, that the doctrine is *prima facie* contradictory. For instance, Lebens accepts Plantinga's conclusion and goes on to explore ways of maintaining apophaticism in spite of this [4, 9-42].

I am more ambitious. I think that Plantinga has set up a version of a self-applicability paradox for the apophatic theologian, and that standard responses to such paradoxes are available to her, leaving her with a coherent, recognisably apophatic theology, which is not self-refuting.⁴ Let an apophaticism be any claim of the form that, for some interesting class of predicates \mathcal{P} ,

A-P: No predicate from \mathcal{P} applies (univocally) to God.

³Note that this pervasiveness may not always find verbal expression: if philosophy of religion is to be philosophy of religion, we should ask: are apophatic claims implicit in the ways people pray? In the forms liturgy takes? In what religious adherents will, or won't, say? In the nature of religious art?

⁴The parallel with self-reference is drawn explicitly by Ryan Mullins in the course of a Plantinga-style attack on apophaticism at [8, 6].

A-P leaves it open whether for some members of P they apply analogically to God, or for every member F of \mathcal{P} , God is not F (in which case \mathcal{P} had better not be closed under negation, on pain of contradiction), or whether instead F -ness is simply not predicable of God, such that an attempt at doing so would constitute a category mistake.⁵ Either way, there are plenty of interesting claims of the form **A-P** which are not contradictory.⁶ Let \mathcal{P} be the class of predicates for intrinsic qualities of persons, or of material objects: in both cases an intelligible and consistent apophaticism is forthcoming.⁷ In combination, these apophaticisms have considerable overlap with Aquinas' refusal, captured in his account of divine simplicity, to predicate creaturely attributes of the creator [2]. Already then we have an apophaticism of impressive pedigree within a religious tradition which does not undermine itself in the fashion Plantinga suggests.

The problem comes when the class \mathcal{P} is enlarged to include a predicate which expresses the condition of satisfying this open sentence:

Indes: No predicate from \mathcal{P} applies (univocally) to x .

Substituting 'God' for x in **Indes**, we see that the addition of this predicate to P yields instance of **A-P** which is true only if it is false, and which is therefore false. The instance is self-refuting. The problem is, of course, a familiar case of self-applicability. The class P contains a predicate that encodes information about the non-applicability of predicates from P . A common recourse in the face of problems around the self-application of some condition (in this case we're concerned with the condition of being such that no predicate from P applies, which is itself expressed by a predicate from P and within its own remit) is to excise the offending condition from our theory. In various contexts – set-theories, the theory of properties, and so on – appeals to predicativity, or to the Vicious Circle Principle serve to perform the excision.

A similar move can be made by the apophatic theologian. Say that a predicate F is *reflectively semantic* just in case $\lceil Ft \rceil$, with t a grammatical singular term⁸ says of the purported referent of t either that it satisfies (singularly or together with other entities) some predicate, or fails to satisfy some predicate, or

⁵Of course, there's then the further question how to deal with category mistakes. See [6].

⁶As regards consistency, it is an easy exercise to convince oneself of the existence of a model.

⁷For this apophaticism to be consistent with theism it's required that *existence* is either: (a) not an intrinsic quality of persons/ material objects (along standard Kantian–Fregean lines), or (b) not predicated univocally of both God and non-divine entities (perhaps following the lines of [7].)

⁸I specify *grammatical* singularity because, for reasons that will need exploring elsewhere, I do not think that 'God' is a genuine singular term.

else that it is the referent (singularly or together with other entities) of some expression. Now, I claim, the following constraint on the statement of apophaticism using **A-P** both avoids Plantinga's objection and coheres well with what apophatic theologians typically have in mind when they say that God is indescribable (and similar things):

New-Ap: No predicate in \mathcal{P} is reflectively semantic.

According to **New-Ap**, 'is indescribable' is not one of the predicates whose application to God is denied by the apophatic theologian. She therefore does not contradict herself in saying that God is indescribable if indescribability is cashed out in terms of the non-applicability of predicates from some \mathcal{P} . But why should this be the sense of indescribability which the apophatic theologian has in mind?

2

Plantinga's argument against apophaticism feels like it is cheating, that it is frustratingly over-general in its understanding of the apophatic theologian's use of the word 'indescribable' in a manner that makes the refutation of her position a trivial affair. It is *prima facie* unlikely that no proponent of apophaticism, numbered amongst whom are several great thinkers, noticed the self-undermining nature of their doctrine if its content were as Plantinga claims. Intellectual charity, the demands of which extend into the past as well as to one's present-day colleagues, suggests that we ought to attribute a coherent position to the proponent of apophaticism if this is possible. This consideration alone gives us compelling reason to impute to the apophatic theologian the position contained in the combination of (some instance of) **A-P** and **New-Ap**, rather than Plantinga's interpretation of her beliefs.

Yet there are further reasons for thinking that **A-P** and **New-Ap** capture the sense in which apophatic theologians take God to be indescribable. Apophaticism is after all supposed to be a claim about God, rather than about theological language. The apophatic theologian takes what God is supposed to be (the creator, the ground of all being . . .) to place severe limits on the extent to which God can be captured by our conceptual equipment, and so to rule out numerous things from being sayable of God. A standard line of thought here will note that our conceptual apparatus is equipped for the investigation of creaturely, rather than creating reality, and will perhaps appeal to something like the doctrine of divine simplicity to urge the importance of the distinction between the two. Thus plausible candidates for \mathcal{P} include distinctively creaturely or material predicates. In any case,

the apophatic theologian is concerned to limit what we can say about God *in herself*. Reflexively semantic predicates, however, only talk about God in a derivative sense. They provide us with a way of encoding a semantic claim about satisfiability, one which in a formal semantic theory would be most naturally articulated in the metalanguage, as a material mode predication. They are, in other words, a mechanism for semantic descent. It may or may not be the case that a given reflexively semantic predicate does (or doesn't) apply to God in virtue of how things are intrinsically with God⁹. But there remains a clear sense in which no statement made using only a reflexively semantic predicate is about God. Moreover we are going to need to avail ourselves of reflexively semantic predicates to say what the apophatic theologian wants to say, that there are certain things which cannot be said of God.

*

References

- [1] Douglas Adams. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. Pan, London, 2016.
- [2] David Burrell. Distinguishing God from the world. In Brian Davies, editor, *Language, Meaning, and God : Essays in honour of Herbert McCabe with a new introduction*, pages 75–91. 2010.
- [3] Brian Davies. A modern defence of divine simplicity. In Brian Davies, editor, *Philosophy of Religion*, pages 549–564. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000. Originally published as 'Classical Theism and the Doctrine of Divine Simplicity' in 'Language Meaning and God' edited by Brian Davies (Geoffrey Chapman, 1987).
- [4] Samuel Lebens. *The Principles of Judaism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, Forthcoming.
- [5] J.L. Mackie. *The Miracle of Theism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1982.
- [6] Ofra Magidor. *Category Mistakes*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2013.
- [7] Kris McDaniel. *The Fragmentation of Being*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2017.

⁹According to classical theism, there is no more to how things are with God than the existence of the divine nature, in virtue of divine simplicity [3].

- [8] Ryan T. Mullins. *The End of the Timeless God*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.
- [9] Alvin Plantinga. *Does God Have a Nature?* Marquette University Press, Milwaukee, 1980.
- [10] Alvin Plantinga. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.
- [11] Richard Swinburne. *The Coherence of Theism*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2nd edition, 2016.

*