

Why so negative about negative theology? The search for a Plantinga-proof apophaticism

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Abstract In his *warranted christian belief*, Alvin Plantinga launches a forceful attack on apophaticism, the view that God is in some sense or other beyond description. This paper explores his attack before searching for a Plantinga-proof formulation of apophaticism.

Keywords Alvin Plantinga · Apophaticism · Brains in vats · Language and its limits

What would it take to be Plantinga-proof?

In part one of his *warranted christian belief*, Alvin Plantinga (2000) launches a forceful attack on apophaticism—the view that we can’t meaningfully speak about God, at least not discursively. His arguments are compelling and his rhetoric is dazzling. It really is a master-class in argumentative philosophical prose. Nevertheless, in this paper, I argue that apophaticism is far from defeated.

Plantinga tries to face down what he takes to be the most serious modern contenders in the apophatic camp: (a reconstructed version of) Immanuel Kant, Gordon Kaufman and John Hick. In the final analysis, Plantinga presents apophaticism with a daunting set of obstacles to overcome. The obstacles, in summary, are these:

Incoherence

One who states that there exists a God about whom nothing can be said, as Kaufman and (a re-constructed) Kant seem to do, often end up making several claims about that

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which can't be said: that, for example, our concepts don't apply to it; that we cannot refer to or think about it. But, as Plantinga (2000, pg. 29) notes, echoing Ramsey, if you can't say anything about a thing, then you can't say anything about a thing, and you can't whistle it either.

John Hick seems to be sensitive to this worry. He doesn't say that you can't say *anything* about God, instead, he says the following:

- If there were an infinite, transcendent, and ultimate being, then the only properties it could have of which we have a grasp are formal properties and negative properties.

Hick's thesis invokes two distinctions, neither of which is easy to maintain. If you can't maintain these distinctions, the thesis will once again collapse into incoherence. The first is the distinction between positive and negative properties. Hick claims that none of the non-formal *positive* properties of which we have a grasp can be applied to God. But, what *is* a positive property? The intuitive notion is that every concept comes along with a negative compliment; for light there is darkness, or the lack of light; for wisdom there is non-wisdom, or the lack of wisdom, etc. But it will often be hard to say which of any given pair of properties is the positive and which the negative property. Hick wants to say that being infinite is a negative property, defined as not having limits. But, who's to say that he's right? Isn't it equally intuitive to say that *being infinite* is a positive property and that *having limits* is negative? The positive–negative distinction here is hazy. This threatens the coherence of Hick's whole thesis.

Furthermore, the classic conception of God's infinity has to do with his instantiating certain non-formal *positive* properties to an infinite degree. But, Hick's God doesn't instantiate *any* non-formal positive properties of which we have a grasp. Hick's God instantiates neither power nor wisdom, and thus neither infinite power nor infinite wisdom. So, in what sense is he infinite? Plantinga (2000, pg. 55) answers on Hick's behalf:

[Hick] might try saying that this being is ultimate and unlimited, all right, but only with respect to properties of which we have no grasp ... [T]he way in which it is infinite is that it has to the maximal degree some properties of which we have no grasp.

Plantinga's assessment of this position seems right: not obviously incoherent, but certainly bizarre!

The second distinction that is central to Hick's thesis is the distinction between formal and non-formal properties. Formal properties include those properties that everything necessarily has essentially. That category includes: *being self-identical*; *having properties*; *having essential properties*; *being either a horse or a non-horse*; *being such that $7 + 5 = 12$* ; and *existing*. But, as Plantinga points out, Hick thinks that the category of formal properties is wider than this. Formal properties, for Hick, have to include certain semantic and epistemic properties such as, *being referred to by human beings*, and *being thought of by John Hick*. Hick's idea isn't that we can't refer to God, or even that we can't say things about him; his idea is only that we can't attribute non-formal positive properties to him; so Hick has to smuggle in these semantic and epistemic properties under the category of the formal; otherwise he won't be allowed, by his own lights, to refer to, or think about God.

One question that Plantinga seems to push is this (pg. 52): is Hick’s category of ‘the formal’ non-arbitrary, or is it ad hoc? We’ve already seen him sneak semantic and epistemic properties into this category; he also includes the property of *being the cause of religious experience*. What makes that a *formal* property other than the fact that Hick wants God to have it and doesn’t want to violate his apophaticism?

So, in actual fact, we end up with the following apophatic theism that is barely coherent, bizarre and ad hoc:

- There is a being that has no non-formal positive properties of which we have a conception/grasp, except for certain semantic and epistemic properties and the property of *being involved in human experience* and any properties that that entails. And, this being is infinite and unlimited in virtue of instantiating to an infinite degree certain properties of which we have no grasp.

Plantinga’s first concern is that apophaticism is incoherent or, at best, barely coherent, bizarre and ad hoc.

Lack of any argument

Even if we could somehow achieve coherence here, gravitating towards a thesis like Hick’s, why should we feel obliged to believe it? Some people seem to urge an apophatic theism on the basis of its beauty. Plantinga is unimpressed (2000, pg. 21): appeal to the beauty of the theory ‘doesn’t constitute much of a reason for the rest of us—those of us more impressed by the incoherence of the picture than its beauty—to accept it.’ He (Plantinga 2000, pg. 33) finds the following argument put forward by Kaufman:

- (a) if God is not a finite reality, then absolutely nothing within our experience can be directly identified as that to which the term ‘God’ properly refers
- (b) if nothing within our experience can be directly identified as that to which the term ‘God’ properly refers, then the term ‘God’ doesn’t refer to anything, or at least it is problematic that it does

Plantinga promptly jumps upon both parts of this argument. (a) is simply or false, or, at the very least, completely lacking any compelling argument. Skeptics about religious experiences haven’t grounded their skepticism upon the notion that it would be impossible to experience something *infinite*; rather, their skepticism is based upon incredulity, or upon their conviction that the subjects of religious experience were somehow deluded. Why? Because there seems nothing conceptually askew with the possibility of experiencing something infinite – even if that experience wouldn’t capture the full extent of the infinite thing experienced. Indeed, if God is omnipotent, then surely he would have the resources to make himself available to human experience. Moreover, (b) is clearly false. If it were true, then how would scientists ever hope to refer to the Big Bang, for instance? ‘The Big Bang’ doesn’t refer to anything within our experience, but it still *refers*.

Plantinga simply can’t find a compelling argument in favour of apophaticism. John Hick’s less radical apophaticism seems only to have been motivated by his desire to escape from the arrogance of claiming one religion to be superior to others. Hick thinks

that non-formal positive language about God turns out to be false, but that classical religious language, though literally false, can be *mythologically true*. Hick (1989, pg. 348) defines mythological truth as follows: ‘A statement or set of statements about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X.’ Putting to one side the vexed question as to what constitutes an *appropriate dispositional attitude*, Hick seems to think that a virtue of his theory is that it allows many religions to be mythologically true, side by side.

To the extent to which Hick’s position is *motivated* by the foregoing considerations, his position stands to face two major obstacles. First: it is going to be very difficult for adherents to the classical religions to continue their religious practices upon the realization that their central doctrines are all literally false (even if mythologically true). Indeed, in what sense can somebody really be called a Christian, if, in the final analysis, he thinks that all of the central doctrines of Christianity are false? Secondly: Hick’s position is strangely self-defeating. For fear of self-aggrandizement, he shirks any claim to one religion’s being more veridical than another. But, as Plantinga (2000, pg. 62) points out, we end up doing something much worse, from the point of ‘intellectual imperialism and self-exaltation’, namely:

[W]e now declare that everyone is mistaken..., everyone except for ourselves and a few other enlightened souls. We and our graduate students know the truth; everyone else is sadly mistaken... We benevolently regard the rest of humanity as misguided; no doubt their hearts are in the right place; still, they are sadly mistaken about what they take to be most important and precious. I find it hard to see how this attitude is a manifestation of tolerance or intellectual humility: it looks more like patronizing condescension.

This reflection upon Hick’s self-defeating motivation for apophaticism leads us to the third challenge that Plantinga poses for apophaticism.

Arrogance

It’s one thing to think that you are right and that others are wrong. We all do that all the time. There seems to be no vice in that. But, to think that you understand better than your opponent what your opponent means when she says the things that are most central to her; that is when you trigger the vice of intellectual arrogance. To tell the Muslim that Mohammed wasn’t spoken to by God, or to tell the Christian that Jesus wasn’t the Messiah, or, to tell the Jew that Moses didn’t receive the Torah; that’s all in order, if that’s what you think. But, to tell the believer that she doesn’t really mean what she says when she says that Mohammed was spoken to by God, or that Jesus was the Messiah, or that Moses received the Torah, and that really she’s engaging, unwittingly in mythology rather than literal history... that seems wrong, not just as a matter of fact, but even as a matter of principle.

Reductive revisionism

The intellectual arrogance inherent in so much apophaticism comes from the claim that religious language doesn’t function how the parishioner-in-the-pews thinks it functions

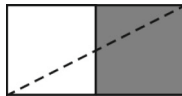
but really does something very different indeed. Kaufman’s brand of apophaticism goes further than Hick’s in this regard. He denies Hick’s claim that religious language evokes appropriate attitudes towards the Divine Being that we experience in our lives. For Kaufman, this already says far too much about God. Instead, religious language, though false, encodes certain symbolism that, in turn, will promote human flourishing. Plantinga’s (2000, pg. 42) verdict is devastating:

This [revisionism] is not a matter of pouring new wine into old wineskins: what we have here is nothing like the rich, powerful, fragrant wine of the great Christian truths; what we have is something wholly drab, trivial, and insipid. It is not even a matter of throwing out the baby with the bathwater; it is, instead, throwing out the baby and keeping the tepid bathwater, at best a bland, unappetizing potion that is neither hot nor cold and at worst a nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast.

The task of this paper is to see whether there might be a form of apophaticism left untouched by Plantinga’s critique: an apophaticism that is (1) coherent, (2) well-motivated, (3) un-patronizing and (4) non-reductive; any such apophaticism could claim to be Plantinga-proof.

Jonathan Jacobs’ apophaticism

Jonathan Jacobs (forthcoming) has recently sought to defend apophatic theology. He bases his defense of apophaticism on a distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental truths. This distinction, he illustrates using the following diagram:



Here are some true sentences about that rectangle:

1. Half of the rectangle is black, and half is white.
2. The area of the rectangle that is black is equal to the area of the rectangle that is white.

But, we could imagine a different linguistic community, with a different conceptual scheme, who carve reality up in different ways. Instead of thinking of the significant colour division here in terms of two divided halves, top to bottom, ‘they conceptualize it as divided color-wise in half by a dotted line from the lower left corner to the upper right corner... They have a concept for the color of the top left triangle, ‘whack’, and a concept for the color of the lower right triangle, ‘blite’. And thus, using their concepts, the following two sentences are true:

3. Half of the rectangle is whack, and half is blite.
4. The area of the rectangle that is whack is equal to the area of the rectangle that is blite.

Even though we can’t deny the truth of 3 and 4, the colour concepts they employ seem ‘gerrymandered. They don’t, as Plato put it, carve nature at the joints’. Following Ted

Sider (2012) and Kit Fine (2009), Jacobs wants to argue that sentences 1 and 2 express *fundamental truths* (or, at least, relatively fundamental) whereas sentences 3 and 4 express *non-fundamental truths*. This isn't to belittle sentences 3 and 4. By saying that a sentence/proposition is non-fundamental:

You are not saying that it is unimportant. You are not saying that it is mind-dependent. You are not saying that it is metaphorical. It might be literally, objectively, mind-independently, importantly true. You are, however, saying that it does not carve nature perfectly at its joints, that it is in some way gerrymandered, ontologically imperspicuous.

Jacobs is committed to the following three assertions:

1. Apophaticism makes no claim concerning truths about God's relationship to the world.
2. Apophaticism only makes a claim concerning propositions about God's intrinsic properties.
3. For any proposition, P , about God's intrinsic properties, apophaticism will claim that P is not fundamentally true, and that P is not fundamentally false.

That God is wise, for example, is neither a fundamental truth, nor a fundamental falsehood (hence Jacobs' apophaticism). But, it can still be (literally, objectively, mind-independently, and importantly) true; as a non-fundamental truth. Is Jacobs' apophaticism Platinga-proof?

First: is it coherent? On Jacobs' account, we still end up claiming that God is fundamentally ineffable, which is, in turn, to say something about what he fundamentally is, which is to contradict oneself. As I understand Jacobs, he tries to escape this problem by saying that it isn't *fundamentally* true that God is fundamentally ineffable. It is only *non-fundamentally* true that God is fundamentally ineffable. This move successfully saves Jacob's view from absurdity. The view is not, at least not obviously, incoherent.¹

Is it reductive, revisionary and arrogant? Jacobs hopes that his apophaticism can preserve the 'truths' of Orthodox Christianity. Although the doctrines of Orthodox

¹ Mike Rea (in correspondence) has suggested that there may be a contradiction lurking in the background of Jacobs' view. Though Jacobs accepts classical logic and therefore the principle of bivalence, it seems that he is committed to the denial of bivalence at the level of fundamental truths. Jacobs thinks that it's not fundamentally true that God is wise, and that it's not fundamentally true that God isn't wise. Fundamental-bivalence would be the view that, for any p , p is fundamentally true or not- p is fundamentally true. Jacobs' views about God violate fundamental-bivalence, which may allow us to derive contradictions. His denial of fundamental-bivalence would seem to lead him to a denial of fundamental-excluded-middle, that for any p , (fundamentally $p \vee$ fundamentally not- p). The denial of fundamental-excluded-middle seems to license the following sort of argument:

1. $\neg(\text{fund}(p) \vee \text{fund}(\neg p))$ (the denial of fundamental-excluded-middle)
2. Therefore: $(\text{fund}(p) \rightarrow \neg(\text{fund}(\neg p)))$
3. Therefore: $\neg(\text{fund}(p) \ \& \ \neg\neg(\text{fund}(\neg p)))$
4. Therefore: $(\text{fund}(p) \ \& \ \text{fund}(\neg p))$

4 is, of course, a contradiction. Perhaps Jacobs could save himself from this result if he qualifies his denial of fundamental-bivalence and fundamental-excluded-middle. Perhaps he thinks that these principles are not *fundamentally* false, but that they're not fundamentally true either, whether this will save him from further embarrassments down the line, I'm not sure. This line of inquiry deserves a more thorough investigation than I can provide in this paper.

Christianity cannot be *fundamentally* true, they can still be *true*. And thus, Jacobs hopes he can escape the charge of revisionism or intellectual arrogance (telling people that their religious claims don't mean what they think they mean). But, it's not clear that he really succeeds in his attempt to save the doctrines of Orthodox Christianity. We want to say that our non-fundamental truths are grounded in fundamental ones. For example, if sentences 3 and 4, about the rectangle, are true, they will only be true because of some *fundamental* facts about the rectangle. It is the fundamental reality of the white–black colour-distribution that make those *non-fundamental* claims about whack and blite true. But, if there are no fundamental truths about God, what is it about the world, as it fundamentally is, that makes Jacobs' Orthodox Christian doctrines non-fundamentally true?

Jacobs is aware of this question. His preferred response seems to be this: a non-fundamental truth doesn't have to be grounded in a fundamental-truth, but merely in an *object*. God, rather than fundamental truths *about* God, but *God Himself*, is what grounds the non-fundamental truths of Orthodox Christianity. And thus Jacobs concludes that it is 'perfectly consistent' with his formulation of apophaticism 'to claim that the orthodox Christian doctrines are grounded in *God*'. But, even if I accept that an object, rather than a proposition or a fact, might be the grounds for something's non-fundamental truth, it is far from clear that, according to Jacobs, *God* can be the fundamental grounding for any truth. Why? Because, according to Jacobs, the claim that God exists is not fundamentally true. Admittedly, for Jacobs, the claim that God exists is not fundamentally false either. But, it's remarkably hard to see how an object whose existence is not a fundamental matter can be the fundamental grounds to non-fundamental truths about that object!

To put my concern another way: there is something odd about grounding a large number of non-fundamental truths upon a very thin fundamental basis. If nothing can be said about God, fundamentally, then how does that God ground the truth of the claims of Orthodox Christianity rather than the claims of Orthodox Islam? Do we not collapse into the revisionary pluralism of Hick?

And thus, even before we ask whether Jacobs' apophaticism can be motivated by an argument in its favour, it's far from clear that the result will be Plantinga-proof. What arguments could possibly ground the non-fundamental truths of any religion, over the truth-claims of another religion, against this apophatic background (a background that doesn't give you enough fundamental theological truths to build any non-fundamental claims upon)? For this reason, I hope to propose another formulation of apophaticism.

Illuminating falsehood

In order to develop a Plantinga-proof apophaticism, we're going to need to understand the notion of *illuminating falsehood*. One good way of illustrating what I mean by 'illuminating falsehood' is to rehearse Hilary Putnam's famous Brain in a vat argument (1982, chapter 1). The argument, given its somewhat ambiguous statement, has been subject to various interpretations and reconstructions. In what follows, I invoke Anthony Brueckner's (1986) reconstruction of the argument.

Putnam's argument relies upon a causal theory of reference, according to which a person can only refer to entities to which he, and his act of reference, stand in certain causal relations (don't worry if you don't like Putnam's theory of reference. Eventually we'll be able to get our apophaticism going without committing to his theory of reference—we just need it now, for the sake of argument). Let's imagine that you are a brain in a vat (henceforth, a BIV). Let's imagine that, because you're a BIV, you have never witnessed a real tree, but only computer generated simulations of trees. Let's also imagine that you have never been taught English by anybody who has any causal contact with trees outside of the vat. Let's instead imagine that you, or your community of unknowingly envatted brains, have coincidentally developed a language that is internally indistinguishable from English.

Given all of these assumptions, when you use the word 'tree' it won't be possible that you're actually referring to a tree. Putnam offers three possible alternative referents for the BIV's tokens of 'tree': (i) the tree-in-the-image (which Brueckner (1986, pg. 150) takes to be *'the succession of sense impressions had by the BIV'*); or (ii) the electrical impulses that cause the brain in the vat to have the sense impressions that are had when un-envatted brains see a tree; or (iii) the features of the computer program responsible for generating those impulses. Opting for option (i), though any of them would do, Brueckner reconstructs Putnam's argument as follows:

- (a) Either I am a BIV (speaking vat-English) or I am a non-BIV (speaking English)
- (b) If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I have sense impressions as of being a BIV (given option (i))
- (c) Even if I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), I certainly don't have sense impressions *as of being* a BIV
- (d) If I am a BIV (speaking vat-English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (b) and (c))
- (e) If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV
- (f) If I am a non-BIV (speaking English), then my utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (e))
- (g) My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false (given (a), (d) and (f))

On the back of this argument, we can conclude that, necessarily, utterances of 'I am a BIV' are false. The argument is clearly valid (Brueckner 1986 is even able to show that it is valid when you translate the whole argument into vat-English). What's more, the following sentence turns out to be true whether it is said in English or in vat-English:

(T) My utterances of 'I am a BIV' are true iff I am a BIV

Brueckner (1986, pg. 156) explains why sentence (T) is true whether spoken in vat-English or English:

(T) is true so long as the metalanguage used in stating (T) is the same as (or contains) the language of the mentioned sentence. And this relation does hold for the relevant meta- and object languages: if (T) is uttered by a BIV, then vat-English will be both the meta- and the object language, and if (T) is uttered by a non-BIV, English will be both the meta- and the object language.

Given the truth of both (g) and (T), you seem able to move from a mere semantic claim about the self-defeating nature of the sentence ‘I am a BIV’ to the epistemic claim that you *know* that you are not a BIV: since you know that your utterances of ‘I am a BIV’ are false, and, since you know that your utterances of (T) are true such that your utterances of ‘I am a BIV’ have disquotational truth-conditions, you also know that you are not a BIV.

Opponents of this argument are going to think that they have been the victim of some sort of philosophical sleight of hand. Indeed, Brueckner (1986, pg. 164) contends that Putnam’s argument amounts to nothing more than a ‘trick’. On the back of Putnam’s argument, I do know that the proposition I happen to be asserting with my tokens of ‘I am a BIV’ is a false proposition, but I don’t know which proposition it is that I’m asserting, since I don’t know if I’m speaking English or vat-English! I don’t know if I am falsely asserting the proposition expressed by English tokens of the sentence, or if I’m falsely asserting the proposition expressed by vat-English tokens of the sentence. And, of course, there’s a big difference!

Thomas Nagel’s way of putting the concern with Putnam’s argument is as follows (1986, pg. 73):

If I accept the argument, I must conclude that a brain in a vat can’t think truly that it is a brain in a vat, even though others can think this about it. What follows? Only that I cannot express my skepticism by saying “Perhaps I am a brain in a vat.” Instead I must say “Perhaps I can’t even think the truth about what I am, because I lack the necessary concepts and my circumstances make it impossible for me to acquire them!” If this doesn’t qualify as skepticism, I don’t know what does.

Imagine that we are scientists looking at the output of BIVs. Imagine that the brains hadn’t learnt English from us, and that we have exerted no causal influence over them. We merely observe. Finally, let’s assume that we scientists hold of a causal theory of reference much like Putnam’s. One day, we observe that one of the brains has uttered the sentence, ‘I am a Brain in vat.’ On the assumption of our theory of reference, we know that the brain must be speaking vat-English. Thus, we know that she’s said something false. But we also know that, in the final analysis, this falsehood has a different cause from the falsehood that arose when she said that ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$.’ The latter falsehood arose because she was really bad at arithmetic, but the former falsehood seems to arise only because the BIV didn’t have the linguistic capability of expressing what she really meant. We might even say, about that BIV, in such a situation, that despite saying something false, she had come about as close as she could to articulating the truth about her situation. In that sense, we might say that her falsehood was *illuminating*. Her utterance of ‘ $2 + 2 = 5$ ’ showed her up as a bad arithmetician. Her utterance of ‘I am a BIV’ was somehow profound. To echo Nagel, it was an attempt (perhaps the best possible attempt) to think the truth about what she is, despite lacking the necessary concepts.

In short, the soundness of Putnam’s argument (on the assumption of his theory of reference) coupled with the rightness of Nagel’s response, helps us to discover a startling new notion: the notion of illuminating falsehood (or, on other constructions of Putnam’s argument, illuminating *nonsense*). Wittgenstein wrote about illuminat-

ing/elucidating nonsense in his *Tractatus* (1922, proposition 6.54) and to this day, controversies abound as to what he meant.² But, what I mean by ‘illuminating falsehood’ (or, on other constructions of Putnam’s argument, ‘illuminating nonsense’), should be quite clear. It’s a difficult notion to spell out, but it is the property had by that BIV’s false token of ‘I am a BIV’, if we assume Putnam’s theory of reference. What’s more, even if you thoroughly reject Putnam’s theory of reference, and thus think his argument to be *unsound*, the discovery of the property of illuminating falsehood, which we discovered before discharging the assumption of Putnam’s argument, is still a real discovery. We have discovered a new property— *being an illuminating falsehood*.

With this notion in hand, the path seems clear to a coherent apophatic theism. We might claim that you can’t say anything about God in his transcendence. You can only say things about God as he appears to us in the course of human history. Of course, this seems incoherent. If you can’t say anything about God in his transcendence, then you shouldn’t even be able to say that you can’t say anything about God in his transcendence. But this is no longer a worry. We accept that it is false to say that you can’t say anything about God in his transcendence but that that falsehood, unlike other falsehoods, is illuminating.

Is such an apophatic theism Plantinga-proof? I’m not completely convinced, but I think it has a good chance. Let’s run through the tests in turn.

Is it coherent?

I have argued that it is. It relies upon a notion that is exceedingly difficult to define formally: the notion of an illuminating falsehood. But, without any formal definition, we have a clear example — the BIVs utterance of ‘I am a BIV’, under the dischargeable assumption of Putnam’s theory of reference. If we grasp the notion of illuminating falsehood, whether we retain Putnam’s theory of reference or not, we can make sense of the following claims, and their conjunction:

- I think that many utterances that my cataphatic co-religionists make about God are true (unless they try to talk about God in his transcendence).
- I think that any utterance of ‘We cannot say anything about God in his transcendence’ is false, but, while I do not believe the content it literally expresses, I do believe that the utterance is *illuminating*.

Is it motivated?

I think this is going to be the hardest Plantinga-test to pass. But I have two and a half arguments that all hold independent force.

Argument 1: Let’s once again imagine that we hold of a causal theory of reference, and that we hold either of the two following propositions:

² In Lebens (forthcoming), I present my formulation of apophaticism as an outgrowth of Wittgenstein’s distinction between saying and showing.

(P1) The world and its history are a story that God is telling

(P2) The world and its history are a dream that God is dreaming

Why might you assume (P1) or (P2)? You might think it follows from the classical theistic doctrine of Divine sustenance. This doctrine could be framed in either a weak or a strong formulation. A weak form of the doctrine of Divine sustenance could be modeled on the analogy of a person providing food for a helpless youngster. The child exists independently of she who feeds him, but without the feeder's intermittent attention, the child would surely die. A strong form of the doctrine of Divine sustenance could be modeled on the analogy of a person conjuring up a mental image of a red flower.³ That flower continues to exist all the while that the thinker continues to pay attention to it. It ceases to be, it would seem, as soon as the thinker stops concentrating. According to the strong doctrine of Divine sustenance, the world is ontologically dependent upon God in just the way that a mental image, or a dream, is dependent upon the thinker/dreamer.

Hebrew scripture, in different places, seemingly gives voice to both formulations of the doctrine. Thus, when the psalmist says, 'Everybody's eyes wait for you, and you give them their food in its time. You open your hand, and satiate the desire of every living thing' (145:15–16), he seems only to give expression to the weak doctrine of Divine Sustenance. The world depends for its existence, not upon God's continuous activity, but upon his *intermittent* activity. Every living thing exists independently of God, but without him opening his hand from time to time, they'd starve, and die, like the helpless baby left unfed. But, in psalm 104, which begins with a similar expression of the weak doctrine, we also read the following words (104:29–30):

You hide your face, and they vanish; you take away their breath, and they die, and return to their dust. You send forth your spirit, they are created: and you renew the face of the earth.⁴

In this instance it looks as if God is very active in maintaining the continued existence of creation; as if there is the sort of continuous ontological dependence, and the sort of Divine *activity* that is analogous to the thinker's continued thinking about the red flower. If God hides his face, even momentarily, we vanish, like a mental image that disappears as soon as the thinker stops thinking. Furthermore, God has actively to

³ I'm grateful to Amy Seymour for providing me with this analogy for *strong sustenance*.

⁴ This translation is my own, but it follows the JPS translation (Margolis 1917), somewhat controversially, in translating **יִבְהִלּוּ** as *vanish*, whereas every other full translation I have seen, including later JPS editions, translate it along the lines of 'they are troubled'. In defense of my favoured translation, Bresslau (1913), Gesenius (Gesenius 1836, using our psalm as his example) and Clines (1993) all include, as one of the meanings of the root, **בהל**, something along the lines of 'suddenly to perish'. Furthermore, regarding this phrase in the psalm, Dahood (1970) reads it, as 'they would expire' arguing that the root here isn't **בהל** but is actually **נבל**. Notwithstanding the defense of my translation, even if you revert to the more standard translation, it is clear that these verses from Psalm 104 express something like the strong doctrine of Divine sustenance, leading Eichrodt (1961 v.ii, pg.154) to say, 'It is hardly going too far to describe this Old Testament view of the maintenance of the word as *creation continua*.' For more on the controversies surrounding the Hebrew root, **בהל**, cf. Vanderkam (1977), who could be seen to be sympathetic to my translation, since he would be well-disposed to include 'to cease' under the meanings of the root in question, (pg. 250).

involve himself in the sustenance of the world: ‘he renews,’ as in, he continually generates or regenerates, ‘the face of the earth.’ This phrase is echoed in Jewish liturgy, which says in the morning benedictions before the recitation of the *Shema*: ‘He is awesome in praise, master of wonders, who, in his goodness, renews every day, continuously, the work of creation.’ God’s sustenance isn’t just a matter of his periodically stepping in to feed the ontologically independent creation with the timely opening of a hand. God’s sustenance is a continuous necessity. This sounds more like the strong doctrine.

So, the strong doctrine of Divine sustenance might be appealing to somebody steeped in the Bible and in liturgy, and it certainly isn’t a big jump from accepting the strong doctrine of Divine Sustenance to thinking of God’s relationship to the world in terms of a dreamer to a lucid dream, or a thinker to a mental-image, or a story-teller to the world of the story which he is telling.

Furthermore, reflection on the creation narrative in the book of Genesis lends further credence to (P1) or (P2). In that narrative, God just has to say ‘let there be x ’ and then, automatically, there is x . How does God pull that off? The traditional answer is: via omnipotence. But that isn’t a particularly thorough explanation. One still might want to know something of the *mechanics* of the feat, and the classical answer leaves that somewhat mysterious. But, if God is something like a lucid dreamer, or the author of the story that is our world, then of course he just has to say, ‘let there be x ’, and then there will be. For what does it mean for Hamlet to be a prince of Denmark over and above Shakespeare’s having stipulated in some sense or other, ‘let him be a prince of Denmark’?

Once you have assumed either (P1) or (P2), in the light of such reflections, and, if you *do* hold a causal theory of reference, then you’ll be well on your way to just the sort of apophaticism that I’m trying to defend as Plantinga-proof. Firstly, you will be compelled to view the following argument as sound, on the basis of your theory of reference (deleting terms as appropriate, to tailor the argument to (P1) or to (P2)):

- (a)’ Either I am a character in God’s dream/story (speaking *in-the-dream-English/in-the-story-English*) or I am not a character in God’s dream/story (speaking English)
- (b)’ If I am a character in God’s dream/story (speaking *in-the-dream-English/in-the-story-English*), then my utterances of ‘I am a character in God’s dream/story’ are true iff according to the dream/story that God dreams/tells, I am a character in his dream/story
- (c)’ Even if I am a character in God’s dream/story, I do at least know that I am not a character in his dream/story according to his dream/story
- (d)’ If I am a character in God’s dream/story, then my utterances of ‘I am a character in God’s dream/story’ are false (given (b) and (c))
- (e)’ If I am not a character in God’s dream/story, my utterances of ‘I am a character in God’s dream/story’ are true iff I am a character in God’s dream/story
- (f)’ If I am not a character in God’s dream/story, my utterances of ‘I am a character in God’s dream/story’ are false
- (g)’ My utterances of ‘I am a character in God’s dream/story’ are false (given (a), (d) and (f))

Furthermore, I know that (T)’ would be true whether or not I am character in God’s dream/story:

(T)' My utterances of 'I am a character in God's dream/story' are true iff I am a character in God's dream/story

Knowledge of (g)' and (T)' should be enough to demonstrate that our assumption of (P1) or (P2) is wrong! And yet, since we have provided good independent reason to assume (P1) or (P2), we might feel as if we've been the victim of a trick, in the form of this Putnam-like argument. We might want to launch a Nagel-like response: All this talk of our being figments of God's imagination, or characters in his story, may turn out to be false; but, that falsehood was the best, perhaps, that we could do to gesticulate towards the propositions that we were unable to express — the propositions that our words might well have expressed had we been able to speak the language of God.

Given the soundness (on the assumption of a causal theory of reference) of the Putnam-like argument against (P1) or (P2), and the right-headedness of the Nagel-like response, we might think that utterances of (P1) or (P2) are doomed to falsehood, and *still* think, in the light of their initial motivation, that they are *illuminating*. In fact, it may turn out that we can't talk about God in his transcendence. We can only talk about God as he appears in his own dream/story. When we talk about God in his transcendence, even when we say that we can't talk about him in his transcendence, we end up uttering falsehoods. But, since we had good reason to assume (P1) or (P2) in the first place, we may believe that all of these falsehoods are illuminating.

And thus, on the assumption of a causal theory of reference, and (P1) or (P2), we have our first argument for just the sort of apophatic theism that we're trying to defend against Plantinga. On this apophatic theism, we *can* speak about God. We can say that we have experienced him. We can say that he freed the Children of Israel from Egyptian bondage and split the Red Sea. We can meaningfully apply any type of concept to him. But, we can only do this in *English-in-the-dream/English-in-the-story*. Everything we say about God in his transcendence, however, will be false – even the claim that everything we say about him in his transcendence will be false. But, some of those falsehoods (not all of them) will be illuminating. When the BIV says, 'My vat is blue', when in fact she is a BIV in a red vat, her falsehood isn't *even* illuminating (or at least, the content about the colour of her vat isn't illuminating). But, on a causal picture of reference, when she says 'I am a BIV', her falsehood *is* illuminating. Likewise, not all of our talk about God in his transcendence, on this theory of reference, will be illuminating, but some of it will be.

Argument 2: The second argument for our new variety of apophaticism doesn't rely on anything like a causal theory of reference, or upon any theological assumption in the family of (P1) and (P2). The apophatic theism I have been developing has the virtue of explaining a pervasive feature of the religious life. On the one hand, people who belong to a religious tradition claim to believe in the truth of a whole set of assertions about God. On the other hand, a large number of those same people, who have had religious experiences of a transcendent God, describe that experience in terms of a God that defies description.⁵ Well, if he defies description, why do you still

⁵ Gabriel Citron (in as yet unpublished work) has accumulated beautiful examples of this phenomenon from both the Christian and Jewish traditions. For example, Angela of Foligno (1993, pg. 191–2) talks of her personal religious experiences that left her claiming to know 'with the utmost certainty that the more one feels God, the less is one able to say anything about him' because of 'his infinite goodness being so far

believe all of the classical religious assertions about him? Our variety of apophaticism gives us a plausible and coherent account of what's going on. Any utterance, about God, of 'he defies description', is false, but *illuminating*, and, if your religion is the true religion, then the positive assertions you still want to make about him, on the basis of that religion, are *true*. This is what leads you to claim both that God cannot be described *and* that certain descriptions hold of him. You don't mean that all of your claims are true. That would be inconsistent. Some of them are illuminating falsehoods.

Argument 2 1/2: We can now make some sense of the medieval traditions that John Hick was appealing to with his claim that only negative properties apply to God. Perhaps the true claim in that vicinity is that some false sentences about God are *illuminating*, and some are not, and that a certain family of sentences with negative predicates, for one reason or another, have the most illuminating power. Gersonides couldn't understand why, according to Maimonides, it is good to say that God isn't ignorant, but, it is bad to say that God isn't wise. If Maimonides was really serious about his apophaticism, Gersonides contended, he should have accepted that both of those negative claims were true: God is neither ignorant *nor* wise.⁶ Well, not necessarily. Perhaps both are false, but perhaps only one is *illuminating*. To arbitrate *that* discussion, we'd need a test for a sentence's illuminating powers. That, I'm afraid, is beyond me. Nevertheless, members of a religious tradition may have reason not to want to delete (or ridicule) whole swathes of that tradition if they can at all help it. The Muslim, Jewish and Christian traditions contain strong apophatic strands: Ibn Sina, Maimonides and Aquinas stand out as thinkers sympathetic (in varying degrees) to the claims of apophaticism. Plantinga has to reject the whole tradition out of hand. To make one's own religious tradition less ridiculous is certainly a bonus. A coherent apophaticism of the sort I have been developing achieves just that.

Is it arrogant?

Hick and Kaufman's 'arrogance' stems from the claim that most religious people don't understand what their religious language even means.

But, the Plantinga-proof apophaticism that I've been trying to develop does nothing of the sort. Utterances of 'God is good', 'God is powerful', 'God took the Children of Israel out of Egypt' mean just what their utterers intend by them. But, as we've said, anyone claiming to have experienced God in his *transcendence* feels compelled to add to their descriptions of God the paradoxical claim that he is beyond description. The Plantinga-proof apophaticism that I've been developing merely makes sense of that compulsion felt by many religious people: the paradoxical description is *false*, but *illuminating*.

Footnote 5 continued

beyond anything you could possibly say or think.' Citron also points to the Chassidic master, the *Kedushat Levi* (*Levi* 1875/6, p. 127), who seems to think that the more you experience God, rather than think about him, the more you come to realise that none of your predicates can apply to him, such that you end up calling him, paradoxically, the 'great nothing' given that there is *no thing* such that that *thing* can be predicated of God!

⁶ cf. Feldman's synopsis in Gersonides (1987), pg. 79, and Gersonides' own argument there on pp. 111–2.

If the claim to make sense of something often felt but little understood is patronizing, elitist, or arrogant, then this, along with a great portion of all decent attempts at philosophy, turns out to be patronizing, elitist, and arrogant. If not, then this apophaticism seems to pass the test. There is no intellectual imperialism here!

Is it reductive?

This breed of apophaticism is able to claim that the majority of what your cataphatic co-religionists say about God is literally true, and means just what they think it means. And thus, this breed of apophaticism isn't reductive. Of course, one might think this answer to be disingenuous, especially if we're taking argument 1 as our motivation for apophaticism. According to that argument, I haven't really saved the meaning of normal religious language. I have, rather, told you that your sentences are only true in some inferior language, such as *English-in-God's-dream*. This charge is unfair for two reasons.

1. According to the apophatic theism I have been developing, even on argument 1, the classical truths of theology really are *true* in the only languages any of us have ever spoken, and, the claim that there exists some more fundamental language such as *English-outside-of-the-dream* isn't true. It's simply an illuminating falsehood.
2. Even if we take the two-tiered nature of reality seriously (the world in the dream being one tier and the world outside of the dream being another tier), the predicates you want to apply to God—'is good', 'is powerful'—mean just the same thing when uttered by agents on the lower tier as they do when uttered by agents on the higher tier.

To see that my second point is true, let's investigate the meaning of the following sentence:

- In my story, James has five legs.

The meaning of any complex sentence has to be arrived at in stages. Dummett (1981, pg. 10) notes that it 'is necessary to jettison the original natural idea that the linear ordering of symbols is a true guide to the process of formation of complex expressions.' The brackets in the expression, ' $(2+3) \times 6$ ', serve to illustrate that, in relation to the operator ' \times ', 'the whole expression ' $2+3$ ' is to be treated as unitary.' The first stage in the construction of our expression joins ' 2 ' to ' 3 ' by ' $+$ ' to form ' $2+3$ '. The second stage joins the expression formed in the first stage to ' 6 ' by the operator ' \times '. Complex expressions have an 'order of construction', or a constructional history. ' $2 + (3 \times 6)$ ' has a different constructional history, and thus a different meaning to ' $(2+3) \times 6$ '. Our sentence about James having five legs in my story is not an exception. It is, as we shall see, complex. It has a constructional history.

The phrase 'In my story ...' is a sentential operator. It operates upon fully-formed sentences. The semantic function of the predicate ' x has five legs' is to make atomic sentences true when the value of x has five legs. The semantic function of that predicate doesn't change when it appears under the scope of the *in-my-story* operator. It continues to make its atomic sentence true when the value of x has five legs. The operator then comes along, after the formation of that atomic sentence, at the next stage of the

constructional history of the complex sentence, and shifts the truth-conditions to the world of the story. First, we construct the meaning of ‘James has five legs’, and only then can we apply the operator, to arrive at the meaning expressed by our sentence. In some important sense then, predicates within the scope of such operators mean just the same thing as they do outside of the scope of such operators. They have finished making their semantic contribution before the operators came on to the scene. If we thought otherwise, it would be very hard to follow conversations about dreams and stories.

Conclusion

If the notion of illuminating falsehood makes sense, then so does the claim that talking about God in his transcendence is illuminating falsehood. And, there are good reasons, with or without Putnam’s theory of reference, to make such a claim. All in all, it seems to me that there is at least a decent case to be made for the conclusion that such an apophaticism is coherent, motivated, un-patronizing and non-reductive. And thus, Plantinga may have been too hasty in his dismissal of apophaticism.

It would be open to Plantinga, or a supporter of his, to claim, in response to all of this, that I’ve created a completely neutered form of apophaticism. To accept that it is true doesn’t entail any revision of the majority of our religious language and thus it simply wasn’t the sort of thing that Plantinga felt he had to combat. To call it Plantinga-proof and celebrate that fact seems absurd since it wasn’t the sort of view that Plantinga was trying to disprove. But this is unfair. Failing to find a Plantinga-proof apophaticism that isn’t ‘neutered’ like mine, he seemingly goes on to assume that the nature of religious language presents no mystery whatsoever.

Indeed, there is a tendency among contemporary analytic philosophers of religion to treat religious language as being no different to any other type of language (cf. [Scott 2010](#)). The semantics of ‘God is transcendent’ are as straightforward as the semantics of ‘Trees are green’. But, this attitude flies in the face of a great deal of embodied religious experience attesting to the great mystery involved in religious language and in the religious life. Plantinga, like most (if not all) contemporary analytic philosophers of religion, is humble enough to concede that there is much about God that we cannot understand, but, if, in our philosophy of religious language, we don’t take seriously notions like *illuminating falsehood*—a notion that plausibly lies at the heart of any Plantinga-proof apophaticism—then there will always be those who think that analytic philosophy of religion is reductive and revisionist; perhaps even an ‘unappetizing potion that is neither hot nor cold and at worst a nauseating brew, fit for neither man nor beast.’

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