

Mystical Experience and the Apophatic Attitude

Sameer Yadav
Westmont College

Abstract: Apophaticism in mainstream analytic theology and philosophy of religion has come to denote a metaphysical and semantic thesis: that, due to divine transcendence, God is ineffable, inconceivable, or incomprehensible. But this conception fails to properly take account of the central claim of apophaticism as a special type of *mystical* theology. As such, the apophatic commitments to divine ineffability (however understood) are instrumental. More fundamental is the function of theological ignorance to uniquely inform the task of theology and transform the theologian in union with God. Taking Jonathan Jacobs' recent account as a test case, I argue that reconstructions of apophaticism need to be supplemented by an account of this informational and personally transformative value that apophatic mysticism places on its commitment to divine incomprehensibility. I supply the needed account of apophatic valuing in terms of wonder as the appropriate emotional attitude toward divine transcendence.

Introduction: Rationally Reconstructing the Apophatic Tradition

It is fair to say that analytic theologians on the whole have not taken kindly to apophaticism. As it has been interpreted in analytic theology, apophaticism is a metaphysical and semantic thesis according to which all concepts are inapplicable to God. Strictly speaking, therefore, we can say nothing true of God, because God is literally indescribable, ineffable, incomprehensible, inconceivable, and hence unanalyzable. This tends to make theologians and philosophers of religion with analytic sensibilities queasy. They have responded largely by refuting the very idea as self-referentially incoherent (e.g., doesn't the concept "ineffable" apply to God?) or, even if coherent, as incompatible with a belief in divine revelation (e.g., doesn't Jesus succeed in making God known to us?). In thus dismissing apophaticism, analytic theologians often misrepresent it as a distinctively modern idea of Kantian vintage.¹ Even when recognizing the antiquity of an apophatic commitment to divine ineffability, the commitment is often regarded as a regrettable influence of middle-platonic metaphysics upon early Christian figures, a wrong turn within the tradition

¹ See Plantinga (2000, 3-63).

that sacrifices the ultimacy of divine personhood,² and makes a genuinely Christian task of explicating a theology of revelation or divine accommodation impossible.³

Jonathan Jacobs is a notable exception to this hostility towards apophaticism on the part of analytic theologians.⁴ In a recent article, Jacobs (2015) highlights how central the doctrine of divine ineffability was on the part of those theologians responsible for the formulations of what is now regarded as orthodox Christian belief, and he attempts to give a defensible rational reconstruction of that doctrine. But while Jacobs thus positions himself against the grain of the mainstream in analytic theology, his conception of apophaticism shares an important assumption with its analytic detractors. Like them, Jacobs assumes that what is essential to apophaticism consists mainly or solely in its metaphysical and semantic commitment to divine ineffability. Thus in offering his own defense of those commitments he claims to have offered “a rational reconstruction of what is important to the tradition” (160) and he would further “consider the project to have failed if it did not capture what is central to the apophatic tradition” (160-161).

For present purposes, I wish to remain neutral about whether Jacobs’s account succeeds as a rational reconstruction of the metaphysics and semantics of divine ineffability. There are reasons to suspect that it does not, both on theological and philosophical grounds. Thus, for example, Samuel Lebens (2015, 264-265) has worried that it leaves truths of revelation inadequately grounded. But the central claim I wish to make does not depend on the coherence or correctness of Jacobs’s account, as much as its underlying assumption that, if coherent and correct, it would succeed in rationally reconstructing what is centrally important to the apophatic tradition. That assumption, I claim, is false. For while what is central to the apophatic tradition includes a metaphysical and semantic commitment to divine ineffability, it includes more than that. Apophaticism also centrally involves some construal of how divine ineffability ought to inform and transform the apophatic theologian. Holding that God is ineffable in the apophatic tradition is not simply a matter of coherently and correctly specifying the sense in which we can and cannot get God right in theology (which is all that Jacobs’s account purports to do). It is also supposed to be a normative practical guide to spiritually unite us with God by way of our successful and failed attempts to get God right. And on that front, Jacobs’s reconstruction offers us no help at all. Nevertheless, it is possible to show how we might go about supplying what is missing, and that will be my goal in this paper.

After summarizing Jacobs’s defense of ineffability in the first section, I’ll go on in a second section to elaborate on my criticism of its insufficiency as a rational reconstruction of the apophatic tradition and I’ll carve out one conception of mystical experience I find developed in that tradition. To have recognitional experiences of God as ineffable is a phenomenological way of supplying both the informative and transformative significance that Jacobs’s reconstruction lacks. In a

² See Adams (2014, 2-3).

³ See Yandell (2013, 367). See also Daniel Howard-Snyder (forthcoming, 2016), for an argument against “panmetaphoricist” analyses of divine incomprehensibility, according to which all true speech about God is metaphorical, and as such fails to express *literal* truths about God.

⁴ There are others. For example, see Samuel Lebens (2014) for an attempt to develop a “Plantinga-proof” analysis of apophaticism in terms of “illuminating falsehood.”

third section, I therefore show how it is possible to conceive of God's ineffability in Jacobs's sense as a matter of perceptual recognition for us, such that we can make sense of the idea of an apophatic mystical experience of God as ineffable. In the fourth and final section, I develop a phenomenology of apophatic mystical experience – an account of what it is like to perceptually recognize God as ineffable – in terms of the emotion of wonder. Wonder, I argue, can be an emotive way of perceptually recognizing divine ineffability that is capable of being both informative and spiritually transformative for the theologian, and as such it is the attitude characteristic of an apophatic theology. Filling out Jacobs's picture in this way, I claim, moves us further toward a rational reconstruction of what is central to Christian apophaticism. Of course, this newly supplemented reconstruction would fail if that which it supplements (i.e., Jacobs's account of divine ineffability) is in fact incoherent or incorrect. But having demoted the centrality of a metaphysics of divine ineffability to a secondary role in what follows, I can conclude with a few words about the compatibility of my account of the modes of mystical experience with alternative theories of divine ineffability.

I. Jacobs on Divine Ineffability

In order to appreciate my complaint about Jacobs's rational reconstruction of apophaticism, we first need Jacobs's metaphysical and semantic picture before us. As I understand him, Jacobs interprets the apophatic theologian's claim that God is ineffable to imply that it is possible to possess and express truths about God, in one sense of the word 'truth' while it is not possible to possess or express any truths about God in another sense of the word 'truth.' Appreciating Jacobs's analysis of ineffability therefore depends on distinguishing between the kind of truth that God makes available to us and the kind of truth that God does not and cannot make available to us.

All truths, he thinks, can be properly analyzed in terms of two elements: a truth-bearer and a truth-maker. Truth-bearers are essentially representations of metaphysical structure (whether one thinks of these in terms of, e.g., sentences or propositions), whereas truth-makers are those features of reality in virtue of which such representations are correct or incorrect. Truths thus consist in relations between truth-bearers and their truth-makers. For example, the proposition "Sameer is sleepy" represents me as being in a certain physiological state and if the proposition is true, it is made true by, or is true in virtue of, my being in that state.

Central to Jacobs's analysis is the claim that there is more than one way for a truth-bearer to be made true by reality. Some truth-bearers, he claims are fundamental while others are non-fundamental. Fundamental truth-bearers succeed (more or less) at carving reality at the joints, insofar as their representations of reality mirror its intrinsic metaphysical structure. Non-fundamental truth-bearers, on the other hand, impose an artificial or gerrymandered structure on reality, but are nevertheless made true by it. So while only fundamental truths succeed in exhibiting the objective layout of reality (making it "ontologically perspicuous"), the

objective layout of reality is capable of making both fundamental and non-fundamental truth-bearers true. Jacobs illustrates this with an example adapted from Sider⁵:



Figure 1

If you wanted to state a truth about Figure 1, you might deploy the following truth-bearer, represented by Figure 2: “This box is divided between two regions with an equal surface area, one black, one white.” Clearly, this proposition is made true by the figure. Now suppose that I belong to a different linguistic community than you, with a very different conceptual framework for carving up the world. When I see Fig. 1, my conceptual and linguistic conventions lead me to divide the figure via the diagonal line in Fig. 3, and to divide it color-wise not into “black and white” like you, but “blite and whack,” where “blite” on my conventions names (what you would call) being mostly white and partially black, and “whack” names (what you would call) being mostly black and partially white. On my conceptualization, therefore, it would be true to say “This box is divided between two regions with an equal surface area, one blite, one whack.” But as Fig. 3 illustrates, my proposition is equally well made true by the figure, given my conventions.



Figure 2

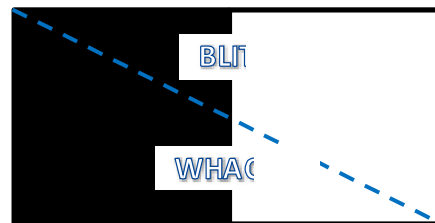


Figure 3

But while the figure itself can therefore make true both your proposition about its division into black and white regions and my proposition about its division into whack and blite regions, there also seems to be some sense in which I am missing something. While both propositions are true your system of representing seems better suited to the structure of the figure itself than mine. My color concepts seem to gerrymander – they impose an artificial structure on the figure -- whereas yours carves at the joints and seems more clearly to go “with the grain” of the

⁵ See Jacobs (2015, 161); Sider’s example is slightly different (2012, 1-2).

intrinsic structure of the figure. But notice that this does not mean that the blite/whack proposition is false or that it fails to objectively track with reality. On the contrary, the way things really are with the figure is what makes my proposition true. Similarly, if I had said that the surface areas of the blite and whack region were different or that the blite and whack regions were different shapes, the figure would have made these propositions false. Nevertheless, we are inclined to say, the black/white proposition is a (more) fundamental way of representing the figure, while the blite/whack proposition is a non-fundamental way of representing it.

Jacobs analyzes the claim that God is ineffable as the claim that there are no fundamental truths-bearers about how God is intrinsically, or if there are, all such truth-bearers are false (Jacobs, 165). Whether there aren't any fundamental truth-bearers about God's intrinsic properties for God to make true, or whether such truth-bearers are all necessarily false, it follows that there can be no fundamental truths about how God is intrinsically. Apophatic theologians thus hold that every possible truth-bearer about how God is intrinsically gerrymanders and that none succeeds in carving God at the joints. But Jacobs also emphasizes that while this commits us to denying that any proposition about God can make God's metaphysical structure ontologically perspicuous to us, it does not imply that God fails to make any propositions about Godself true. For God may still be regarded as the truth-maker for at least two other kinds of propositions about Godself. First, God can serve as truth-maker for those propositions that do not purport to say how God is intrinsically, but rather how God is related to the world. Second, God can even make true or false many of our claims about the divine nature (e.g., that God is triune, merciful, etc.), but only in a non-fundamental way (165). All such claims are like the blite/whack proposition; they fail to be joint-carving with respect to God.

We can thus summarize the view as follows. Take any truth-bearer T. If T is about God's intrinsic properties, then T is a non-fundamental way of representing God that might be made either true or false by some relevant features of God. But the apophatic theologian will either deny that T succeeds in representing God in a fundamental way at all, or else claim that it represents God falsely. Regarding this commitment to affirming a non-fundamental theological truth, Jacobs says, "represents the threefold ascent of apophatic theology. We begin by asserting a truth (cataphatic theology): P. For example we assert that God is three in hypostasis. We then move on to the first stage of denial: It is not the case that fundamentally, P...While God is three in hypostasis, it is not fundamentally the case that God is three in hypostasis. We then end with the denial of denial...But it's not the case that fundamentally God is not three in hypostasis" (166). That God is a truth-maker that transcends or remains "beyond" any fundamental way of representing him is, Jacobs claims, just what Pseudo-Dionysius has in mind by thinking of God as "hyper" essential (166-167).

As I mentioned at the outset, the two most often repeated complaints about the doctrine of divine ineffability are that it is self-referentially incoherent and that it engenders an unacceptable theological skepticism. Jacobs claims that his reconstruction of the doctrine is capable of meeting both objections. So consider the following proposition P: "God is intrinsically such that there could be no fundamental truth-bearers about him, or if there are such truth-bearers, they are

false.” Does P represent the way God is intrinsically in a fundamental or non-fundamental way? We can without any contradiction claim that “non-fundamentally, P” while denying that there is a truth value to the claim “fundamentally, P” or else we can deny the truth of that claim. Moreover, if correct, Jacobs’s analysis would not imply any debilitating skepticism about the truth of orthodox Christian doctrines or the enterprise of theology. We theologians remain capable of discovering and communicating truths about God. It is just that all such truths are necessarily gerrymandered.⁶

II. Apophaticism as Christian Mysticism

Suppose that all of this is correct. Could it, as Jacobs claims, be enough to constitute a good rational reconstruction of what is central to the apophatic tradition? No, for one fairly straightforward reason: a bare metaphysical commitment to the doctrine of divine ineffability – even a particularly strong version of it – is an insufficient specification of what is central to Christian apophaticism as such. What distinguishes apophatic theology from non-apophatic theology is not the form of its doctrine of ineffability per se – apophatic views on divine ineffability differ considerably for different figures and times. What marks out apophaticism instead is the particular sort of use to which a doctrine of divine ineffability is put, however its content is specified. Apophatic theology gives the doctrine of divine ineffability a particular kind of functional role within an overall conception of what theology is and what it is for. It is within a broadly “mystical” conception of theology that apophatic theologians have deployed a doctrine of divine ineffability, and Christian apophaticism is best understood as a kind of Christian mysticism.

Mystical theology envisions a particular end to which theology is ordered – union with God -- and ‘apophaticism’ is that embodiment of mystical theology which holds that a doctrine of divine ineffability figures centrally in ordering the theologian to that end. But if a doctrine of divine ineffability counts as “apophatic” only when it serves this purpose, then Jacobs’s defense of a doctrine of ineffability only counts as a rational reconstruction of apophaticism to the extent that it can be shown to figure centrally in an overall conception of theology that orders the theologian toward union with God. Jacobs offers no such account, and it follows that his doctrine of ineffability fails to count as a reconstruction of what is central to apophaticism. In this section, therefore, I’ll say a bit more about the sense in which I take apophaticism to be a kind of Christian mysticism. Then I’ll articulate two different kinds of apophatic mysticism that we might wish to rationally reconstruct using Jacobs’s analysis of divine ineffability – experientialist and anti-experientialist. Since I will be opting to deploy Jacobs’s analysis in a reconstruction of

⁶ Here Lebens (2014) argues that: “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 collapse into the revisionary pluralism of Hick?” (265).

experientialist apophaticism, I'll conclude the section by identifying two desiderata for an analysis of an apophatic mystical experience. Satisfying these two desiderata will be my aim in the final two sections of the paper.

The idea that there is such a thing as a broadly shared conception of 'mystical theology' that usefully summarizes a stable feature of Christian tradition is controversial. In the afterword to his influential *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, Andrew Louth (2007) registers a retrospective skepticism about the prospects for identifying a "diachronic mysticism, a mysticism that stretches throughout the ages, a mysticism that has a tradition" (211). Sarah Beckwith (1993) notes that although "mystical theology has had a history that goes back to Origen and the Pseudo-Dionysius, 'mysticism' as a word was only first used in 1736" (11) and that "writings on mysticism are not simply in the business of describing something already there" but that as a recent invention mysticism is "as much a...modern construction as it is a medieval phenomenon" (13). Christina van Dyke therefore rightly concludes that the question of how to define Christian mysticism has a "loaded history" (2014, 721). Any attempt at necessary and sufficient conditions in defining Christian 'mysticism,' much less Christian 'mystical theology' is therefore going to be contentious.

I won't attempt a definition of that kind. Instead, I will adopt van Dyke's "working definition" of mysticism, which she specifies according to its purported goal, which is "direct and immediate union of the human soul with the divine" (722). What helps us to identify Christian mystics, on this definition, is their aim of achieving a direct and immediate union with God, and what divides them is just how to properly understand what such a union consists in and how to attain it. Van Dyke's interests in offering this definition extend more narrowly to medieval mysticism in the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, whereas I wish to generalize it as a working definition of the Christian mystical tradition per se.

Such a diachronic generalization, I think, is in keeping with the way that many scholars of various periods in the tradition have characterized the "mysticism" of those periods. Thus, for example, despite Louth's skepticism about a diachronic canon he retains his characterization of early Christian mysticism as constituted by the "soul's search for immediacy with God" (2007, xii) via the transformation of the "Greek contemplative ideal" of ascent and return (xiii). McGinn's survey of figures and texts across a wide range of texts and figures likewise reinforces his heuristic conception of mysticism as involving a "direct consciousness of the presence of God" (1991, xvi). Louth is quite right, however, that there is no one way of understanding the directness or immediacy, or the presence of God, and there is something to his worry that McGinn's recourse to "consciousness" fails as an umbrella concept, since as Denys Turner (1998) has shown, at least some mystics seem to aim precisely at the erasure of the conscious self.

We can adequately recognize the complexities and discontinuities of development within the mystical tradition while recognizing that some conception of "direct and immediate union" remains a consistent feature across a great diversity of texts and figures in that tradition. Insofar as it is a tradition of disputes, the arguments tend to be over how to properly characterize and achieve the kind of union at which the mystic aims. But differences about that can be understood

against the assumption that what is to be desired is some kind of unitive relation to God that is spiritually transformative or bears some soteriological significance for the mystic. If we wanted to further distinguish mystical theology from Christian mysticism more broadly, we could do so by singling out only those Christian mystics who take their pursuits or attainments of union with God (however understood) to be a necessary source of information in their inquiry into the doctrinal loci of theology. Thus, for example, van Dyke cites Julian of Norwich as a figure whose mysticism intersected with her intellectual project as a theologian interested to “engage issues central to medieval philosophical theology, such as the nature of the Trinity, God’s attributes, and the possibility of universal salvation (2014, 721).”

Against this background, Christian apophaticism is best understood as a species of Christian mysticism – a particular way of specifying the sort of union with God at which the mystic aims. Namely, it is that way of understanding union with God which necessarily depends on a recognition of divine ineffability, such that union with God is a union with God as (in some sense) ineffable. Christian apophatic theology, moreover, can be understood as one particular way of doing mystical theology. Namely, apophatic theology is that way of inquiring after doctrinal loci which necessarily depends on the theologian’s recognition of divine ineffability, wherein the theologian takes her own pursuits or attainments of union with God as ineffable to serve as a necessary source of information for her theological inquiry.⁷

On the characterization of apophaticism and apophatic theology just given, Jacobs’s reading of Pseudo-Dionysius’s method is a radically inadequate specification of his apophatic theology. Jacobs supposes that the apophatic significance of the Dionysian method consists in its propositional structure: a movement from theological affirmation (“God is F”) to a denial (“It is not fundamentally the case that God is F”) to a denial of the denial (“It is not fundamentally not the case that God is F”), together with a characterization of Dionysian “hyper” talk as God’s being “beyond” fundamental truth-bearing. In characterizing his apophaticism this way, Jacobs gives us at best a partial reconstruction of the Dionysian picture. As Tamsin Jones (2011) correctly observes, “[a]pophasis is understood incorrectly when it is thought to be a mere linguistic method of correcting proper speech about God; rather, apophasis involves the basic presupposition of how God and creation are essentially related and also the soteriological horizon of this relation” (45). While this analysis clarifies the ontological commitments implicit in Dionysian affirmation and denial, it fails to clarify either of the two features of apophaticism mentioned above: first, how it is that this pattern of affirmation and denial succeeds in uniting the theologian with God – its “soteriological dimension” – and second, how the union it brings about can inform and guide the task of theological inquiry per se. But having failed to specify these matters, Jacobs has failed to give us a rational reconstruction of an apophatic theology.

To supply what is lacking, we need some conception of what sort of transforming “union with God” apophaticism ought to be seeking, as well as a

⁷ For a persuasive reading of Christian mystical theology as determined by this mutual relation between the theologian’s spirituality and theological theorizing, see Mark McIntosh (1998).

conception of how the pursuit or attainment of union in the relevant sense can inform and guide the enterprise of theology. Apophatic theologians are not agreed about either of these matters, however, and they have therefore put a doctrine of divine ineffability to work in different ways in support of their various analyses of spiritual union with God and its normative significance for theological inquiry. Here again Van Dyke's analysis of a more narrow brand of medieval mysticism suggests a helpful wider taxonomy for the options available to the mystical theologian. She distinguishes between an "affective" and an "apophatic" mysticism (2014, 722-723).

Affective mysticism, Van Dyke says, held that union with God "can be experienced and expressed in emotional, physical and sensory terms" (722) whereas apophatic mysticism held that union with God is a "selfless and unknowing merging with the infinite" entailing an "annihilation of sensory experience" and hence, is "anti-experiential" (723). What I want to highlight from Van Dyke's description is the distinction between an experiential vs. anti-experiential understanding of union with God and the kind of self-transformation envisioned by it. While the medieval apophaticism of the particular period she considers may well be thought to consist in the anti-experiential apophaticism she describes, what makes it a kind of apophaticism on my account is just that it necessarily involves an appeal to divine ineffability or unknowability in its conception of the sort of union to which the mystic is ordered – namely, it is that kind of union with God as ineffable that is achieved by a self-abnegation and renunciation of all human faculties that purport to contain or "comprehend" God, whether via the intellect or the senses.

But the "unknowing" by way of which the apophatic mystic is directed to God as ineffable has also been understood in the wider mystical tradition in more "affective" or "experientialist" terms. Thus, for example, Louth characterizes the kind of union with God at which early apophatic mystics aimed as a kind of immediate awareness of God as unknowable, emphasizing a sense in which the Greek tradition of "contemplation" or *theoria* we find in, for example, Gregory of Nyssa and Pseudo-Dionysius involves a kind of perceptual relation between the mind and the immaterial and purely intelligible objects towards which it can be directed, such as God. This makes possible an immediate awareness of the presence of God as incomprehensible in these figures which Louth describes as a kind of "seeing without seeing," a form of recognizing that one is in the presence of God who is experienced as incomprehensible (Louth, xiv, 85, 160). Whereas an apophatic mystical experience of God was experienced by the early apophatic mystics such as Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius as having a sensory and affective phenomenology of "divine darkness," Louth notes that in the apophaticism of the period Van Dyke considers the "dramatic and affective character of the Night of the later mystics is missing (177)."

If apophatic theology is a kind of Christian mystical theology for which the informing and transforming role of divine ineffability may be construed either experientially (as in the earlier tradition) or anti-experientially (as in the later medieval tradition), then which sort of reconstruction of apophatic theology should we seek? I doubt that the prospects for a rational reconstruction of anti-experientialist apophaticism are very promising. I will not argue the case here, except to say that a "self-annihilating" picture of union with God confronts

theological worries about how to properly maintain the creature/Creator distinction, while also confronting philosophical worries about whether a coherent analysis of the requisite mental state constituting such a “union” with God is even possible. I shall therefore be plumbing for an incorporation of Jacobs’s analysis of divine ineffability into a rational reconstruction of an experientialist apophatic mysticism.

This suggests two desiderata for my rational reconstruction of experientialist apophatic theology. The first is that divine ineffability in Jacobs’s sense needs to somehow determine the shape of our experience of God, so that the theologian can possibly undergo something that counts as an “apophatic mystical experience.” We first need to see how the impossibility of expressing or possessing any fundamental truths about how God is intrinsically could be a matter of experience for us. Second, whatever such an experience amounts to, it has to have a phenomenology that explains how such experiences can be both informative and transformative for the theologian. We have to be able to see how apophatic mystical experiences count as experiences of union with God that have an irreducibly epistemic and spiritual significance for us. In the following two sections, therefore, I’ll propose a strategy for satisfying each of these desiderata in turn.

III. Experiencing the Ineffable

Recall that on Jacobs’s analysis of divine ineffability there are no fundamental truths about how God is intrinsically (either because there are no fundamental truth-bearers about how God is intrinsically, or because all such truth-bearers are false). Humans therefore lack any fundamental way of representing God as God is intrinsically – and this not as a function of mere creaturely limitation, but in virtue of the way things stand with God’s relation to all possible truth-bearers about him as their truth-maker. In order to have an apophatic mystical experience of God, God’s being ineffable in this sense has to somehow manifest itself in an experience of God. Is it possible to have an experience of God as a truth-maker for which there are no fundamental truth-bearers, an experience of God as necessarily making true only non-fundamental truth-bearers? Admittedly, it is difficult to see how a fact about God’s truth-making relation to every possible truth-bearer could possibly present itself to anyone in experience. Indeed, understood in some ways, the claim that such a fact can be revealed to anyone by way of an experience is clearly false. But I think there is at least one way to understand the claim so that it comes out true.

Let’s say that an “experience of God” is a direct presentation of God to an observer *S* who is suitably sensitive to such a presentation. In such cases, God is represented to *S* as having some feature *F*. For an experience of God to represent God to *S* as *F*, moreover, is for *S*’s relevant sensitivities to God to register God’s presentation to *S* as satisfying some particular conditions of correctness. So just as our visual sensitivities to physical objects might register the presence of a red ball in our visual field as red and round, so our spiritual sensitivities to God might register the presence of God to us as, for example, loving. In the case of the ball, its mode of

presentation to me is one that represents it as satisfying the correctness conditions of being red and round, whereas God appears to me as satisfying the correctness condition of being loving.

One way to understand the idea that experiences specify conditions of correctness that reality can satisfy by the way in which it registers to our sensitivities is to hold that experiences are a kind of truth-bearer. That is, as modes of presentation under which the structure of reality is represented in some way. So, experiences have a structure-mapping function that is similar to that of propositions. Accordingly, the layout of reality itself can serve as a truth-maker not only for propositions, but also for experiences. Thus, for example, when a red ball appears to me under a visual mode of presentation as round and red, my experience is made veridical by the ball. The ball thus plays the same sort of role as a truth-maker for the veridicality of the experience as it does for the truth of the proposition "That ball is red." So while the proposition about the ball and the experience of the ball are very different sorts of truth-bearers, both can be seen as ways of representing the ball that share the same truth-maker. Similarly, God can serve as the truth-maker for both the true proposition that God is loving and the veridical experience of God as loving.

As truth-bearers, moreover, experiences like propositions can also be either fundamental or non-fundamental in Jacobs's sense. An experience is fundamental when the conditions of correctness specified in an object's mode of presentation are ontologically perspicuous or joint-carving. Thus, for example, if among the correct, objective, ontological inventory of our world there are such things as extensive magnitudes of shape and size, then a veridical experience of the ball as round counts as a fundamentally veridical experience. But suppose, also, that on the correct ontological inventory of the world, the redness of the ball consists in certain dispositional microphysical properties of the ball to absorb and reflect light in a certain way, so as to present itself to suitably sensitive observers as red. In that case, my experience of the ball's redness does not represent the ball as having the relevant microphysical structure.

But this does not mean that my experience of the ball as red is illusory. On the contrary, it is precisely in virtue of the ball's possessing the relevant microphysical properties that it presents itself to me as red, and my experience of it as red succeeds in tracking its dispositional property. Such an experience is veridical, but not in a way that renders perspicuous the ontological structure of reality, but rather in a way that gerrymanders the structure of reality, and as such my color experiences are non-fundamentally veridical. Unlike the case of blite and whack, my experience of the ball as red is gerrymandered not according to facts about my linguistic conventions, but rather according to facts about my retinal biology. Insofar as colors are objective features of the world, therefore, we can regard them as making veridical our color experiences, even while failing to supply us with conditions of correctness that render their ontological structure perspicuous.⁸

⁸ The idea that color experiences are non-fundamental, I submit, is consistent with McDowell's understanding of what it means to call them "secondary properties (McDowell, 1985; 1998)."

On Jacobs's analysis of divine ineffability there are no fundamental truth-bearers for how God is intrinsically, and it follows from this that there can be no fundamental experiences of God, or that all experiences of God are necessarily non-fundamental in the correctness conditions imposed in God's modes of presentation to us. Insofar as the way in which our spiritual sensitivities register God as possessing features that satisfy particular conditions of correctness for, for example, God's being loving, wise, etc., our veridical experiences of God as such are necessarily non-fundamental veridical ways of representing God. This is a step in the right direction, insofar as it allows us to see how the kind of fundamentality involved in the doctrine of divine ineffability makes a difference for the sorts of experiences of God we can have. All experiences of the way God is intrinsically, we can say, are more like experiencing a ball's redness than its roundness, and as such veridically represent God while failing to be joint-carving. But an apophatic mystical experience would be a non-fundamental experience of God in which the experiencer recognizes or is aware of God as a truth-maker for which there are no fundamental truth-bearers, whether experiential or propositional.

In order to make sense of that kind of experience, we need some substantial additions to our picture. We have the idea that we can have non-fundamentally veridical experiences of God. What more do we need? First, we need for the mystic's non-fundamental experience of God to count as an experiential awareness or recognition of God. Second, the content of the apophatic mystical experience needs to be one in which God is recognized as non-fundamentally F, due to the impossibility of its being the case that fundamentally, God is F. We can meet this latter requirement by way of the notion of a theory-laden recognitional experience, but before explicating the notion of a theory-laden recognitional experience, it will be useful to say a brief word about the first issue, that of recognitional experiences per se.

It is consistent with the analysis of experiences of God given above that S veridically experiences God as F without S's recognizing that God is F. In many instances, we experience the various aspects of reality to which we are suitably sensitive without being aware that we are doing so. Thus, it is possible for me to visually register, for example, a bump in the rug without being aware, noticing, or recognizing that I have registered it (as evidenced, perhaps, by my instinctively stepping over it to avoid tripping, all the while ignorant of having done so). In that case, the rug appears to me under a visual mode of presentation as having a bump, even though my experience lacks an occurrent phenomenology such that it doesn't seem to me to have a bump. Presumably we may also have non-fundamental experiences of God as being thus-and-so without it seeming to us that God is thus-and-so. But this is not the sort of experience that apophatic mystics have in mind. Rather, theirs is a sort of experience in which it veridically seems to them that God is ineffable, and as such they are aware of, recognize, or identify God as ineffable. For S to have a recognitional experience of some object X as having some feature F is just for X to appear to S under a mode of presentation that has some occurrent phenomenology – a seeming – that satisfies the conditions of correctness involved in X's appearing to S as F. So when I have a recognitional experience of a ball as red and

round, it seems to me that its visual mode of presentation to me satisfies the relevant correctness conditions of redness and roundness.

All recognitional experiences of this sort depend on some sort of background knowledge in order for the subject to properly identify the features of an object represented in an experience. Thus, my ability to immediately and non-inferentially recognize a ball as red consists in its seeming to me to satisfy some conditions of correctness for something's being red and round, and it cannot seem to me that the conditions of correctness for something's being red and round are satisfied unless I know what it is for something to count as red and round. Knowing that, moreover, is a matter of my having been initiated into a framework of practical and conceptual norms that includes conditions of correctness whose satisfaction counts as recognizing something as red. In recognitional experiences, therefore, it is my conceptual repertoire that specifies the conditions of correctness that a sensory mode of presentation must satisfy in order for it to seem to me that X is F. This might be something like what John McDowell (2009a) describes as the difference between a bird expert and someone ignorant about birds, both of whom are visually presented with a cardinal under favorable conditions, so that the contents of their experiences – the features of the bird that appear to them under a visual mode of presentation – are identical. Yet the bird-expert's recognitional experience can involuntarily and non-inferentially draw upon her background knowledge such that the bird non-inferentially appears to her as a cardinal, while for the non-expert's recognitional experience, having fewer conceptual resources to draw on, the bird simply appears as a bird.

Similarly, my conceptual and practical repertoire might supply me with the necessary background knowledge to recognize certain experiences as direct presentations of God as loving, while lacking the requisite knowledge, it is nevertheless possible for me to have an experience of God as loving without recognizing God as loving or even recognizing the experience as an experience of God. In both the bird and the God example, however, recognitional experiences have conditions of correctness specified by my background knowledge (about birds and God, respectively), and those conditions are either satisfied or not by what actually presents itself in my experience – what features of the bird or of God actually show up in an occurrent phenomenology under the modes of presentation that those objects have afforded me given my relevant sensitivities. If God's being loving presents itself to me as God's being loving, then the experience is veridical.

But in addition to recognitional experiences of God, we may also have theory-laden recognitional experiences of God, and this is crucial for the possibility of an apophatic mystical experience of God as ineffable. As with recognitional experiences in general, theory-laden recognitional experiences draw on our background knowledge to specify the conditions of correctness for the modes of presentation under which an object presents itself to us. But in theory-laden experiences, the correctness conditions determined by one's background knowledge cannot be satisfied entirely by what is actually presented to the subject in the experience, but must also be satisfied by her background knowledge itself. Robert Brandom's example of the physicist's ability to observe mu-mesons is a canonical example

(2002, 363-364).⁹ Physicists, Brandom tells us, routinely report observing mu-mesons in a cloud chamber, although, strictly speaking, humans do not possess sensitivities suitable for detecting the features of mu-mesons as they do for detecting colored balls or birds. However, their background knowledge and training makes them capable of reliably, differentially, and non-inferentially reporting on the presence of mu-mesons in virtue of visual presentations of hooked vapor trails in a cloud chamber. On McDowell's analysis (2006, 118-119) physicists are only, strictly speaking, experiencing various effects of mu-mesons which reliably indicate the presence of mu-mesons.

The activity in the cloud chamber can thus appear to the trained physicist under a mode of presentation the occurrent phenomenology of which is as the activity of a mu-meson. In the case of this experience, the standards of correctness specified in the mu-meson's mode of presentation to the subject cannot be fully satisfied by what actually presents itself to her in the cloud chamber – the visual presentation of a hooked vapor trail. To recognize a mu-meson as such by way of identifying some features visibly presented to me in a cloud chamber as the activity of a mu-meson is in this way quite different than the recognition of a cardinal as such by way of identifying some features of a bird visibly presented to me as the features of a cardinal. Whereas correctly recognizing a bird as a cardinal requires that the features of the bird that are visually present to me are in fact sufficient evidence for the correct identification of the bird as a cardinal, correctly recognizing a reaction in a cloud chamber as a mu-meson requires evidence beyond what is actually presented to me in the experience. The evidentiary base for my non-inferential and experiential recognition of the vapor trail as a mu-meson includes a theory about the behavior of mu-mesons in a cloud-chamber, and the correctness of my experience thus depends in part on the correctness of that theory. Granted the truth of the relevant theory, the physicist's recognitional experience of some characteristic activity in a cloud chamber may count as a veridical recognitional experience of mu-mesons.

The recognitional experience is theory-laden because if the theory is correct, then the physicist enjoys what Alston (1991, 21-22) calls an "indirect perceptual recognition" of mu-mesons by way of a direct perceptual recognition of the visible activity of mu-mesons in a cloud chamber. Similarly, the apophatic mystic can hold as a theoretical commitment that God is ineffable in Jacobs's sense – that there are no fundamental truth-bearers that represent the way God is intrinsically. Given the truth of that theory, moreover, it becomes possible for certain experiences of God to draw upon that background belief as part of the conditions of correctness for a mode of divine self-presentation. If, therefore, the mystic antecedently holds that God is ineffable and consequently that there can therefore be no fundamental experiences of God, then it is possible for God to become present to her under a

⁹ Unlike McDowell, however, Brandom (via his reading of Sellars) thinks that *all* experiential awareness consists in theory-laden forms of recognition, such that to "be observable is just to be noninferentially reportable" (2002, 363). Here I have sided with McDowell in thinking that knowledge-dependent experiences of perceptual recognition like that of the cardinal are "more basic than theory-laden experience (McDowell, 2006, 119)."

mode of presentation the occurrent phenomenology of which includes her belief in divine ineffability as part of the conditions of correctness for the experience.

In the case of the physicist, she can have an experience in which, given the truth of her theory, it non-inferentially seems to her that she is being directly presented with the activity of a mu-meson, or indirectly presented with a mu-meson. Similarly, the apophatic mystic can have an experience in which, given the truth of her theory of divine ineffability, it seems to her that she is being directly but non-fundamentally presented with the activity of an ineffable God, or indirectly presented with an ineffable God. In both cases, the theory-laden recognitional experiences in question involve a kind of “presence-in-absence” in which some theory about what cannot show up to us in experience (God as a truth-maker for which there are no fundamental truth-bearers) forms a background belief that serves as a criterion for correctly recognizing what can and does show up in experience (God under various non-fundamental modes of presentation).

In the movement from affirmation to denial in an experientialist apophatic mysticism, therefore, the affirmation can be seen as an observation report about a recognitional experience of God as, for example, good, just, loving, etc. But the mystic also recognizes the inadequacy of such recognitional experiences to carve God at the joints, and hence they deny that this particular experience of God is a fundamental way of representing how God is intrinsically, and she can therefore come to have a recognitional experience of divine justice, goodness, love, etc. as non-fundamental. An apophatic mystical experience, however, presumes both the positive experience of divine attributes and the recognition of such experiences as non-fundamental, and further involves a theory-laden recognitional experience of divine attributes as necessarily non-fundamental, and hence as indicators of the presence of a God who could not possibly appear to one in a joint-carving way.

To enjoy a veridical apophatic mystical experience of God as ineffably loving, good, wise, etc. requires the mystic to make an “ascent” in her experience of God’s presence to her suitable sensitivities. That ascent consists in a shifting recognition of the features of God that are present to the mystic, to a recognition of those features as indirect indicators of God’s necessary absence to her. It is just this sort of ascent that we find in both Gregory and Pseudo-Dionysius, inflected in different ways and taken in different ways to inform their linguistic claims about affirmation and denial in theology. But those linguistic claims, arguably, are derivative of their analyses of the perceptual relation to God given by an apophatic mystical experience.¹⁰

¹⁰ For an argument that Gregory ought to be read this way, see Yadav (2015, chs. 8-9). One key passage that can be accommodated especially well on this reconstruction is Gregory’s description of the “luminous darkness” (1978, 95), which we might understand as a single recognitional experience that includes both a non-fundamental experience of God as X (hence luminous) but one which also indicates God’s unavailability to any fundamental truth-bearers (hence darkness). Another is his illustration of our ongoing experiential encounter with divine presence and absence as that of experiencing a fountain whose streams of goodness and beauty flow to us from an interminably mysterious source (2012, 339).

Similarly, in *The Mystical Theology*, Pseudo-Dionysius regards theological contemplation as a way in which God’s “unimaginable presence is shown” by passing from the light of God’s self-revelation to the “ray of the divine shadow” – the “brilliant darkness of a hidden silence” (1987, 135-137). Jones (2011) summarizes well an experientialist reading of Dionysian contemplation as one in

IV. Wonder and the Apophatic Attitude

Thus far I've suggested that, while giving us a serviceable model of divine ineffability, Jacobs fails to give us a rational reconstruction of an apophatic theology in which such a model figures. As a kind of mystical theology, apophatic theologians utilize a doctrine of divine ineffability in their understanding of the kind of self-transforming union with God at which theology aims and from which theology is informed and guided. Such a transforming and informing union with God as ineffable, moreover, has been understood by apophatic theologians both in experientialist and anti-experientialist terms. Having opted to deploy Jacobs's model of ineffability to reconstruct an experientialist apophatic theology, it became necessary to see how God's ineffability in Jacobs's sense could be a matter of experience. The fact that there are no fundamental truth-bearers about how God is intrinsically can be a constituent in an experience of God, I've suggested, insofar as we can have non-fundamental experiences of God as F (loving, wise, etc.) that we recognize as indicators of the necessary unavailability of any fundamental truth-bearers that could represent how God is intrinsically. This is the knowing by unknowing of God's presence-in-absence and God's transcendence-in-immanence about which apophatic mystics speak, the luminous darkness or ray of the divine shadow to which their linguistic patterns of affirmation and denial bear witness.

What remains is to explain just how an experience of this sort can be both transformative for the theologian and informative for theology per se. On an apophaticism of the experientialist sort, whatever it is like to have an apophatic mystical experience is supposed to be capable of eliciting a spiritual change in the theologian that counts as a kind union with God. Moreover, this spiritual transformation must carry not only a soteriological significance for the theologian, but also an epistemological significance for theology. That is, a self-transforming union with God as ineffable must also uniquely inform and guide theological inquiry as an enterprise aimed at discovering truths about God. So what is the phenomenology of an apophatic mystical experience, and how can we construe it as fulfilling both the soteriological (transforming) and the epistemological (informing) roles?

The phenomenology of an apophatic mystical experience, I suggest, is a phenomenology of wonder or awe, construed as the appropriate attitude to take toward the mystery of God given in that experience. The "apophatic attitude" is thus the attitude of wonder appropriate to one's theory-laden recognitional experience of the necessary concealment of God from any joint-carving way of representing how God is intrinsically. It is the apophatic mystic's wonder at God as the ineffable ground of her gerrymandered or non-fundamental experience of God which is capable of simultaneously transforming her qua Christian and informing her qua

which "one must go *through* the visible and material, using it as God's gracious self-manifestation, partial yet true" (68), although on my reconstruction we should say that God's self-manifestations are non-fundamental/gerrymandered, yet true.

theologian. After a few remarks about wonder as the appropriate attitude toward mystery, I'll turn to consider its soteriological and epistemological significance.

Following Deonna and Teroni (2012) I shall take emotions to be evaluative attitudes that we take toward specific objects or contents. Thus, for example, my fear of the charging dog is best understood as a type of attitudinal stance I take up toward the dog as a way of evaluating its dangerousness with respect to me. In such a case, whether or not the dog in fact confronts me as a danger forms part of the correctness conditions for my fear. As a way of articulating the structure of emotion, they say that the object of my fear is the dog, whereas the formal object of my fear – the type of evaluative property being represented in my emotional attitude toward the dog – is danger (77). Emotions are thus evaluative ways of being directed on particular objects as (potential or actual) bearers of evaluative properties (78). The object or content of emotions – their cognitive base – is given to us by way of the many different sorts of mental acts of which we are capable: memory, testimony, perception, etc. An emotional response toward any object or content so given to us, is one that exhibits felt bodily stances that are appropriate to the evaluative property that the object or content is represented as having. So my fearing the dog consists in my seeing the dog as dangerous in such a way as to elicit the felt bodily responses appropriate to that evaluation (an action-readiness for fighting or fleeing, quickened pulse, etc.). My emotion can be considered correct if and only if the dog is in fact dangerous; if the dangerousness of the dog merited my felt attitude of fear toward it (81).¹¹

Wonder, on this sort of analysis, is that felt attitude toward an object or content as mysterious. Mysterious objects or contents, in other words, merit our wonder in the same sort of way that dangerous objects merit our fear. Just as in the case of fear, whether or not an object merits our wonder depends on whether it is in fact mysterious to us in the relevant sort of way. But unlike fear, wonder is a distinctively cognitive emotion (Fuller, 2006, 1-15). Whereas fear involves a practical stance toward objects manifest in our bodily preparedness for responses like fleeing, wonder involves a more cognitive stance toward the intelligibility of objects and includes the felt responses associated with inquiring into those objects – responses such as confusion, cognitive dissonance, surprise, amazement, and astonishment (33-41). Moreover, whereas fear can therefore provide us with reasons to form practical evaluative judgments and beliefs about the dangers in our environment, wonder can provide us with reasons to form evaluative judgments about the nature of our intellectual engagement with objects that we represent as mysterious (whether via experience, imagination, memory, or whatever).

It won't be possible here to offer a sufficiently descriptive phenomenology of wonder or a full treatment of the distinguishing features that mark out the kind of "mystery" that is its formal object. But there are two characteristic features of wonderment at mystery that are commonly reported in the literature. The first is a contrast between wonder and curiosity as emotions of epistemic interest and the

¹¹ Insofar as emotional correctness is a matter of success in satisfying the rational demands imposed on us by the objects or contents represented in their cognitive base, we can think of emotion as in a generic sense aimed at truth. For a recent argument to this effect, see De Sousa (2011).

distinct kinds of mystery at which each aims. Curiosity names an attitude of puzzlement about some object or content represented as standing in need of an explanation. Curiosity in this sense is a form of interest paradigmatic of the kinds of explanation sought by the “sciences” in the broad sense of those regional disciplines aimed at true explanatory descriptions of the realities they concern.¹² Upon acquiring the relevant information, the mystery or puzzle that elicited the curiosity vanishes, and curiosity is no longer an appropriate response (Fuller, 125). Curiosity is thus a distinctively calculative kind of interest in any object regarded as mysterious (Rubenstein, 17). Wonder, by contrast, is an emotion of interest elicited by mysteries that cannot be dissipated by more information (Wettstein, 36). Thus, for example, an obstetrician might appropriately wonder at the mystery of her child’s birth. Objects whose mysteriousness merit wonder may give way to curiosity, but insofar as their mysteriousness elicits wonder they invite a kind of astonishment or amazement that might naturally be expressed by interrogatives like “how is this possible?” or “what does this mean?” In such cases, these may be questions for which one genuinely desires answers, but with the expectation that whatever the answers, the felt attitudes of amazement, astonishment, etc. would remain appropriate.

A second characteristic feature of wondering at mystery is its drive toward ultimacy, both in the sense of a felt interest in the fundamental structure of reality that makes the object possible and in the sense of a felt inability to lay hold of a finally determinate or settled understanding of the object. The amazement at whatever one regards as mysterious has to do with a sense of its overwhelming or indeterminable significance. This is what Rubenstein identifies as the “groundless ground” of wonder as an amazement precisely at one’s inability to “get to the bottom” of the mystery represented by the object (7). Wettstein’s image is similarly that of being “lost, in over our heads” in a kind of “inability to come to terms with the thing,” and in a way that is “irremediable,” but for which the wondering person does not (and should not) seek a remedy (37). There is a natural slide from “how is this possible?” and “what does this mean?” to “what’s it all about?” (29); there is some common link between one’s wonderment at whatever object merits wonder and a more general wonderment at “existence” or “the universe (Rubenstein, 37-38).”

Wonder can thus be roughly characterized as an attitude of epistemic interest in an object for which the felt stances of surprise, amazement, or astonishment are appropriate. Moreover, the mysteriousness of the object that merits these stances resists dissipation by information, due to one’s construal of the object as manifesting a deeper or more ultimate significance that cannot be grasped.¹³ Apophatic mystical experiences represent God to the mystic as necessarily mysterious in just this way. God appears to the mystic under some gerrymandered mode of presentation which is recognized by the mystic as an

¹² See Silva (2006).

¹³ Abraham Heschel’s notion of “radical amazement” captures very well both of these features of the felt stances of epistemic interest in an object characteristic of the attitude of wonder. See Heschel (1997, 40-54).

indicator of God's ineffability – a sign of the divine truth-maker's unavailability to any possible truth-bearer which isn't likewise gerrymandered. For the mystic, this is a kind of mysteriousness for which curiosity is inappropriate – we cannot possess any fundamentally true explanatory theory about the way God is intrinsically. As a truth-maker, God is an intrinsically “groundless ground” for our theological theorizing in the sense that God grounds our ways of representing God in a necessarily non-joint-carving way, and apophatic mystics are irremediably astonished by experiencing this fact anew in every recognition of divine disclosure.

Suppose that the correctness conditions for such experiences are satisfied and that they are therefore veridical – that is, that there are no fundamental truth-bearers about how God is intrinsically and that the mystic's gerrymandered modes of presentation are made veridical by God's appearances to her. It follows that apophatic mystical experiences merit wonder as its appropriate emotional response to God. So in what ways might this particular type of wonder be transformative of the self and informative about God?

In *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation, and the Absurd*, Matthew Bagger (2007) draws attention to “religious cognitive practices” that “alter the individual's volitional complex – his or her beliefs, emotions, attitudes, perspectives and desires” – in accord with a religious end, so as to effect his or her “self-transformation (7).” Religious uses of paradoxical truths, Bagger claims, can be regarded as religious cognitive practices. He distinguishes between two distinct uses of paradox – ascetic and mystical – each of which is aimed at a distinct kind of self-transformation. Cognitive ascetics such as Kierkegaard deploy paradoxical articulations of Christian faith as a kind of “crucifixion of the understanding” (27) – a mortification of rational comprehension as a strategy of de-centering the self. Ascetics regard the “prodigious contradictions” of Christianity as requirements of a faith that “sees best in the dark (29),” suggesting an inversely proportional relation between a comprehension of God and an apprehension of God. The cognitive threat of apparently contradictory truths is regarded as irresolvable, and the ascetic is transformed by the self-denial of her epistemic interests. Cognitive asceticism is thus a kind of voluntary cognitive suffering – yielding to a mental self-annihilation or the martyrdom of thought when confronted with the “madness” of the Christian God as a confrontation with an indissoluble paradox.

Arguably there is a kind of wonder involved in the thought of God as manifest to us only by an ineliminably paradoxical way of thinking about God. But on the view we are considering, “ascetic wonder” is not the appropriate attitude toward the mystery of God's ineffability. For on Jacobs's model of ineffability, God is considered to be mysterious in a way that is only apparently contradictory. While apophatic theologians take the paradoxical language involved in reporting and pursuing experiences of God's transcendence in immanence to be an important way of conveying the self-transforming use of those experiences (a “knowing by unknowing,” etc.), there is nothing finally contradictory or incoherent about this way of speaking. An unknowing knowledge is just a kind of knowing (i.e. a non-fundamental perceptual knowledge of God as intrinsically F) that indicates or manifests that which cannot possibly be known (i.e. a fundamental comprehension of God as intrinsically F). Moreover, whereas the object or content of an ascetic

cognitive practice is logical insofar as it is an attitude of acceptance toward a contradiction or an irresolvable paradox, the object or content of an apophatic mystical experience is not propositional but personal. It is an attitude toward God.¹⁴ The wonder of the apophatic mystic is therefore that kind of wonder which is appropriate to an experience of an intrinsically mysterious God experienced as mysterious – a felt amazement or astonishment in one's theory-laden non-fundamental experience of a divine truth-maker as an indirect manifestation of its fundamental unavailability to fundamental truths about how it is intrinsically.

Bagger's description of the "mystical" use of paradox better captures the transformative power of wonder at the mystery of God in this sense, what I've characterized as "the apophatic attitude." Such a wonder constitutes a self-transformation arising from the veneration of the object that gives rise to the (in our case, apparent) paradox, rather than the veneration of the formal features of the paradox itself. The mystic, Bagger says purports to attain a "superknowledge" of God's ineffable transcendence "on the far side of the paradox (9)," ¹⁵ and the awe or wonder elicited by this recognition of God as ineffably transcendent effects a type of self-transformation that is evidenced cognitively by enabling "identification with a wider perspective" (10) and volitionally by enabling "charity (11)."

Drawing on the work of Mary Douglas on the sociology of uses of logic, Bagger claims that the awed or wondering attitude toward God elicited by mystical unknowing is cognitively transformative because the recognition that the most important or ultimate reality to which our lives are ordered remains in some sense external to the reach of our cognitive boundary instills in us a kind of "availability bias (46)." The fact that a fundamental knowledge of God is objectively unavailable can instill in us a subjective recognition of our cognitive limits that comes to see "controlled crossings" of our bounded systems of representation as potentially cognitively enriching. The mystic's wonder at God as the mysterious truth-maker of only non-fundamental truths and perceptions about how God is intrinsically thus biases her toward a kind of de-centering of her own system of representing God. This kind of availability-bias, moreover, makes her open to the possibility of ways of representing God that gerrymander differently than her own experiences and background beliefs. Bagger therefore takes the mystic's claims about the knowledge of God as a mystery to "metaphysically ground one's social vision" as a way of informing one's perspective about the "dangers or rewards of boundary crossing (46)." The openness to wider perspectives effected by one's reverence for God's

¹⁴ Bagger's explication of the ascetic kind of negativity we find in Kierkegaard and Nicholas of Cusa approximates the idea of an "anti-experientialist" mysticism as described by Van Dyke, insofar as the "union" it envisions does not merely require a de-centering of self, but precisely *consists in* the abnegation of self and a "final break with immanence (Bagger, 27)." Whereas the kind of cognitive terror involved may be an important affective means for achieving a self-annihilating union with God, that union itself does not consist in any intellectual or sensory experience of God, but rather in an absolute negation of both.

¹⁵ The way of unknowing in my sense counts as a "superknowledge" or a "suprarational knowledge" in Bagger's sense: by way of a special kind of non-fundamental experience of God (a theory-laden one), we manage to know a truth-maker that transcends all possible fundamental truth-bearing, whether propositional or experiential.

unknowability thus informs a more charitable stance toward the incorporation of outsiders.

The idea is that the mystic's cognitive boundaries have been determined by assigning to the divine nature the role of an ultimate cosmological, moral, and aesthetic explainer of reality, and that the mystic will be disposed to favor social boundaries that reflect her theological explanations. If, therefore, she regards her ultimate explainer as necessarily escaping her cognitive boundaries for fundamentally representing God as a metaphysically ultimate reality, she will correspondingly be disposed toward recognizing the limits of her social boundaries as a gerrymandered vision of the way that metaphysically penultimate realities reflect God's intrinsic nature. There is much more that remains to be said about this sort of cognitive and volitional transformation of the self effected by an apophatic attitude, and many scholars have explored various aspects of religious wonder as capable of widening one's moral and metaphysical imagination, creating openness to belief revision, and facilitating more hospitable attitudes toward social boundary management in relation to marginalized outsiders.¹⁶

Granted that wonder directed at divine mystery can effect such self-transformation, in what sense can we regard such transformation as the "union with God" that the apophatic theologian seeks? Christian social arrangements, as envisioned by the mystic, are aimed at initiating members into the way of salvation, which is typically understood as a kind of "divinization." To be "divinized" is just to resemble the way God is intrinsically as much as is possible within the limits of one's created nature – this is what the apophatic mystic means by "union with God."¹⁷ Insofar as mystical theology aims at divinization, therefore, it requires the mystic to "be like God" in God's accommodation of the ineffable divine mystery to us by way of a non-fundamental self-revelation. To be transformed by a recognition of the wondrous mystery of a fundamentally unavailable God who has in charity non-fundamentally disclosed Godself to us likewise effects in us a Godlike charity toward others.

On my reconstruction, apophaticism holds that recognitional experiences of God as ineffable are not only soteriologically significant, but also epistemologically significant. The transforming union with God brought about by apophatic mysticism as a cognitive practice must be a uniquely truth-conducive way of finding out about God. While many scholars have acknowledged the transformative function of the religious attitude of wonder and awe, they are often less optimistic about the epistemic value of such emotions. In disposing us toward an expansiveness of mind by pointing us toward "something more" that grounds the domain of what is intelligible to us, Fuller (2006) acknowledges that wonder nurtures habits of mind that contribute essentially to our greatest cognitive achievements, and can further

¹⁶ See, for example, Fuller (110-158); Rubenstein (19-24); Wettstein (26-55).

¹⁷ See Bagger (48). Bagger cites the examples of Pseudo-Dionysius and Nicholas of Cusa as expressing mystical uses of the paradox of theological "superknowledge" that mirror the inclusive and assimilative concerns represented in their ecclesiastical interests to "initiate outsiders into the mysteries [of the sacraments] and divinize them" (48). But we might also point toward forms of inclusion or the widening of theological perspective represented by the "affective" mystics discussed by Van Dyke as opposing the ecclesiastical structure.

“open up certain kinds of realities that are not available to other kinds of rationality (155).” Nevertheless, he also claims that wonder is “rife with magical qualities” that while contributing favorably to human evolutionary adaptation remains “problematic from a philosophical perspective (155).”

Fuller concludes that the ontological commitments of wonder are unreliable, and that since experiences of wonder can “lead to sheer credulity” and “preoccupation with nonexistent fantasies,” “abiding in wonder alone is never an appropriate philosophical response to life (156).” Rubenstein (2008) disagrees, but not because she takes the ontological commitments of wonder to be reliable, but because she thinks that wonder is an inherently anti-metaphysical attitude. She follows Heidegger in refusing in principle all conceptual determinacy about how things are and construing all attempts at such determinacy as attempts to eliminate mystery and thus kill wonder by way of technological mastery (16-17). Wettstein (2012) argues instead that all religious wonder leads us neither to an unreliably determinate ontological commitment nor a reliably indeterminate ontological commitment. Wonder is not a way of reflecting on the metaphysical foundations of religious belief, and hence it is not ontologically committing at all; its point is not metaphysical but practical, to facilitate a religious way of life (7-8).

While there are theologians who reconstruct the apophatic rejection of a “joint-carving” theology in a way that aligns with elements of these positions,¹⁸ the reconstruction of the apophatic attitude that I’ve offered here clearly rejects their anti-metaphysical prejudice against wonder. On my picture, we can understand apophatic wonder as dependent upon objective features of the world given to us as the cognitive base of our emotion. The relevant features of the object itself are what determine the correctness conditions of the emotion – its appropriateness or inappropriateness. So whether the divine mystery that indirectly presents itself to us in our theory-laden recognitional experiences of divine ineffability merits our wonder or not depends on whether these apophatic mystical experiences of God are veridical or not. If such experiences are veridical, then the apophatic attitude can be a veridical and ontologically committed mode of recognizing a determinate metaphysical truth about God, and one that can ground the transformative practices it elicits.

Apophatic theology does not merely hold that the apophatic attitude can facilitate a kind of unknowing knowledge of God (i.e., recognition of the necessarily non-fundamental character of theological knowledge). It holds that, properly construed, Christian theology is itself a way of unknowing such that Christians do not practice theology merely for the sake of acquiring knowledge about God per se. Rather Christians seek to acquire knowledge about God for the sake of acquiring a divinizing knowledge of God, and it follows that the knowledge about God that they most value is a knowledge about God that coincides with a knowledge about oneself.

¹⁸ See, for example, Merold Westphal’s critique of “onto-theology” (2001, 1-28). His critique contains elements of each of the views expressed by Fuller, Rubenstein, and Wettstein. He claims that a “calculative-representational” approach to theology can lead us to make false claims about God, kill the wonder required for faithful religious practice, and misses the point of such practice, which is not at bottom aimed at holding any particular metaphysical views.

Alston (1991) aptly describes this conception of the aim of theological knowledge in his summary of Albert Farges's view that "it is by virtue of the mystic's consciousness of the action of God in his soul that the mystic is able to perceive God himself (62n54)."¹⁹ If mysticism aims at union with God as ineffable, apophatic mystical theology aims at a knowledge of one's union with God as ineffable.

All theological knowledge on this conception is therefore either properly theological, being about God's non-fundamental self-presentations in mystical experience, or else merely instrumental for a properly theological knowledge of God. Apophaticism in theology is not only a claim about the nature of divine knowability but also about what is worth knowing about God or what sort of knowledge of God matters. Accordingly, the apophatic attitude is thus not merely truth-conducive for a regional concern within theology, that is, the divinizing knowledge of divine mystery alongside other ways of knowing God. Instead the apophatic attitude is epistemologically relevant for ordering all non-divinizing knowledge of God toward a properly theological knowledge of God, and in that way it is essential to the task of theological inquiry as a whole. Once we recognize this, we can see how the apophatic attitude plays an essential epistemological role for theology. Brun and Kuenzle (2008) name five epistemic functions of the emotions in general, each of which corresponds to an epistemic function that the apophatic attitude can have for theology: "motivational force, salience and relevance, access to facts and beliefs, non-propositional contributions to knowledge and understanding, and epistemic efficiency (1)." A detailed elaboration won't be possible here, but I'll conclude by briefly highlighting the epistemic significance of the apophatic attitude for theological relevance/salience.

Apophatic wonder can reveal "patterns of salience among objects of attention, lines of inquiry, and inferential strategies (Brun and Kuenzle, 17)." Wonder at God as a mysterious truth-maker of our veridical non-fundamental experiences of God can act as a "spotlight" that enables us to single out and focus on certain aspects of those experiences. The child's cry that appropriately elicits her parent's pity, for example, can enable that parent to "hear signs of some specific kind of distress, say pain, drawing their attention to possible causes and ways of bringing relief (17)." Similarly, the particular mode of attentiveness to God as a fundamentally mysterious truth-maker for particular modes of divine self-presentation may signal the unique theological relevance of some features of that self-presentation to which we would otherwise be inattentive. Gregory of Nyssa (1993) accordingly describes the mode of attentiveness toward God's knowable and perceptible qualities that the apophatic attitude inculcates as one that "slipping in all directions from what it cannot grasp, it becomes giddy and perplexed and turns back to what is akin to it, content to know only enough about the transcendent to be sure that it is something other than what can be known. That is why, when speech reaches what is beyond speech, then is a moment for keeping silent, and to keep the wonder of that ineffable power unexpressed in the secrecy of inward knowledge (

¹⁹ See also Farges (1926, 275-278).

126).” By attending to what is known by way of the wonder of unknowing, Nyssen says, mystics “immediately enjoin silence by the things they say (126).²⁰”

Conclusion

Despite failing to offer a rational reconstruction of Christian apophatic theology, Jonathan Jacobs’s model of divine ineffability provides one possible way of construing the kind of divine ineffability on which the apophatic theologian is directed as a source of inquiry and spiritual transformation. I’ve chosen Jacobs’s account to illustrate how we might reconstruct the central use to which a doctrine of divine ineffability can be put to both transform the theologian in union with God and inform the nature of the theological task. Jacobs’s story makes a good test case for this purpose because it is so radical in its construal of God’s fundamental unavailability to us that we can lose sight of how such an unavailability can be ordered to our edification. Showing how that could be so can thus serve to reorient our attempt to get God’s ineffability right by bringing that task back into line with the spiritual aim that the apophatic mystic claims that it serves.

But suppose that Jacobs’s way of reconstructing the metaphysics and semantics of divine ineffability is in fact false or incoherent. What follows for the prospects of an apophatic theology? Only that it must go looking for another, alternative way to properly theorize the object of its theory-laden recognitional experiences of God as ineffable, and thus another way of specifying what it is about God that elicits our wonder. In the apophatic tradition this informing and transforming role for divine ineffability has been explicated both in experientialist and anti-experientialist ways. One way of rationally reconstructing an experientialist apophatic theology, I have suggested, is by analyzing apophatic mystical experiences in terms of theory-laden recognitional experiences of God’s non-fundamental modes of presentation as indicators of divine ineffability. Crucial for the informing and transforming role played by such experiences, moreover, is their affective phenomenology of wonder. Apophatic theology, therefore, is that knowledge of God’s activity in the soul that orders us to union with God as ineffable by way of our wonder at experiences of the divine mystery.

Bibliography

Alston, William P. 1991. *Perceiving God*. Cornell University Press.

Bagger, Matthew. 2007. *The Uses of Paradox: Religion, Self-Transformation and the Absurd*. Columbia University Press.

²⁰ Whereas Jacobs’ depiction of mystical silence is a necessity governed by the “theology room,” Nyssen speaks of a normative silence governed by what happens *outside* the theology room.

- Beckwith, Sarah. 1993. *Christ's Body: Identity, Culture and Society in Late Medieval Writings*. Routledge.
- Brandom, Robert. 2002. "The Centrality of Sellars' Two-Ply Account of Observation to the Arguments of 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind.'" In *Tales of the Mighty Dead: Historical Essays in the Metaphysics of Intentionality*. 348-368. Harvard University Press.
- De Gaynesford, Maximilian. 2004. *John McDowell*. Polity Press.
- De Sousa, Ronald. 2011. *Emotional Truth*. Oxford University Press.
- Deonna, Julien A. and Fabrice Teroni. 2012. "Perceptual Theories of the Emotions." In *The Emotions: A Philosophical Introduction*, 66-75. Routledge.
- Farges, Albert. 1926. *Mystical Phenomena Compared with their Human and Diabolical Counterparts*. Kessinger.
- Fuller, Robert C. 2006. *Wonder: From Emotion to Spirituality*. University of North Carolina Press.
- Gregory of Nyssa. 1993. "Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes," translated by Stuart George Hall and Rachel Moriarty, 31-144. In *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on Ecclesiastes: An English Version with Supporting Studies*. Walter de Gruyter.
- _____. 2012. *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, translated by Richard A. Norris, Jr. Society of Biblical Literature.
- _____. 1978. *The Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson. New York: Paulist Press.
- Heschel, Abraham J. 1997. *Between God and Man: An Interpretation of Judaism*. Simon and Schuster.
- Howard-Snyder, Daniel. Forthcoming, 2016. "Panmetaphoricism." *Religious Studies*. 1-24.
- Jacobs, Jonathan D. 2015. "The Ineffable, Inconceivable, Incomprehensible God: Fundamentality and Apophatic Theology." In *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, volume 6, edited by Jonathan Kvanvig, 158-176. Oxford University Press.
- Jones, Tamsin. 2011. *Apparent Darkness: A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*. Indiana University Press.

- Lebens, Samuel. 2014. "Why So Negative about Negative Theology?" *International Journal for the Philosophy of Religion* 76:259-275.
- Louth, Andrew. 2007. *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*. Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, John Henry. 2009a. "Avoiding the Myth of the Given." In *Having the World in View*, 256-274. Harvard University Press.
- _____. 2009b. "Why is Sellars's essay called 'Empiricism and the philosophy of mind'?" In *Empiricism, Perceptual Knowledge, Normativity and Realism: Essays on Wilfrid Sellars*, edited by Willem A. deVries, 9-32. Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1998. "Aesthetic Value, Objectivity and the Fabric of the World." In *Mind Value and Reality*, 112-130. Harvard University Press.
- _____. 1985. "Values and Secondary Qualities." In *Objectivity and Morality*, edited by Ted Honderich, 110-129. Routledge.
- McGinn, Bernard. 1991. *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*. Crossroad.
- McIntosh, Mark. 1998. *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Plantinga, Alvin. 2000. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press.
- Pseudo-Dionysius. 1987. "The Mystical Theology." In *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, translated by Colm Luibheid, 133-142. Paulist Press.
- Rubenstein, Mary-Jane. 2008. *Strange Wonder: The Closure of Metaphysics and the Opening of Awe*. Columbia University Press.
- Sider, Theodore. 2011. *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Silva, Paul. 2006. *Exploring the Psychology of Interest*. Oxford University Press.
- Turner, Denys. 1998. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. Cambridge.
- van Dyke, Christina. 2014. "Mysticism." In *Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, edited by Robert Pasnau and Christina van Dyke. 720-734. Cambridge University Press.

Westphal, Merold. 2001. *Overcoming Onto-Theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith*. Fordham University Press.

Wettstein, Howard. 2012. *The Significance of Religious Experience*. Oxford University Press.

Yadav, Sameer. 2015. *The Problem of Perception and the Experience of God*. Fortress Press.

Yandell, Keith. 2013. "Religious Language." In *The Routledge Companion to Theism*, edited by Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison and Stewart Goetz, 355-368. Routledge.