

Apophatic Language, the Aesthetic, and the *Sensus Divinitatis*

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Abstract: Across a variety of religious and philosophical traditions, it is common to think that it is possible that God defies all description. This presents a problem, however, as the claim that God defies all description itself appears to describe God. Drawing on multiple religious and philosophical traditions, this paper proposes an addition to the pragmatic stock of approaches to this problem. The proposal is that apophatic utterances are best interpreted—at least in the first instance—as *invitations* to engage the world aesthetically and creatively, as an act of faith. Their goal is principally to motivate us to act in ways that will allow us to *appreciate* the extraordinary or divine, rather than to, say, *believe* that some proposition regarding the extraordinary or divine is true (even if we might come to accept, and perhaps even believe, propositions as a result of our appreciative actions).

1. Introduction

It is common, across a variety of religious traditions, to think that it is possible that God defies all description.¹ A problem, however, arises in connection with this: the claim that God defies all description itself appears to describe God. For it plausibly attributes the following property to God: namely, the property of defying all description. In other words, it would seem that God ends up being described as

¹ As Samuel Lebens observes, experiences that inspire this kind of thought are sometimes held to occur in the midst of mystical rapture, but they are sometimes much less dramatic (as when, for instance, people claim to experience an “indescribable presence” accompanying them in their everyday lives). Furthermore, religious traditions often contain *both* cataphatic claims and apophatic claims. Hence, at least two problems arise in this connection. First, although apophatic claims seem to contradict cataphatic claims, people often feel compelled to make both sorts of claims—but how can God be beyond description if we claim that God is good and that God is the creator? Second, apophatic claims seem to be internally incoherent in addition—but how can God be beyond description if he satisfies the description “beyond description” (Lebens 2017, 90)? This paper focuses on the second of these questions; however, it is my hope that the account provided here could be easily applied so as to answer the first of them as well.

defying all description. Thus, the claim that God defies all description appears to contradict itself, in which case it would not even be possibly true.

Several semantically standard approaches to addressing this problem have been proposed, including the following.² On one, it is argued that apophatic claims, expressed by sentences like “God defies all description,” are not false because contradictions can be true (and such apophatic claims are part of the set of true contradictions).³ Call this the *paraconsistent approach*. On another, it is argued that the appearance of contradiction is illusory. This is because such apophatic claims are saved from contradiction because there are two distinct kinds or levels of truth, which allows them to be true₁ but not true₂ (or *vice versa*).⁴ Call this the *dual-truths approach*. These can be classified as either, say, *metaphysical* or *semantic approaches* in that each proposes to reinterpret how we evaluate some metaphysical or semantic property of the claims or utterances in question: specifically, their *truth*. The choice one makes in this regard will, perhaps just for starters, be determined by whether one takes truth to be a metaphysical or semantic property.

Yet another set of general approaches is different from the general approaches delineated directly above in that no defense of the truth of such apophatic claims is mounted. Rather, it is admitted that such apophatic claims are false, or at least could be. It is argued that this is not itself a problem for those who utter sentences that express them, however, as such utterances are not best interpreted as assertions. For instance, according to Samuel Lebens, utterances of sentences like “God defies all description” can rather be interpreted as *illuminations* of what cannot be discursively described, as well as epistemic *correctives* to overconfident, and perhaps even arrogant, theology. On his view, they show us that although we can theorize about God in a productive manner, we should do so with extreme humility (Lebens 2017, 105). Regardless of how we tend to classify each of these in-principle independent approaches, they can both be classified as *pragmatic approaches* in that each proposes to reinterpret how we evaluate some aspect of the *use* of the claims or utterances in question rather than their truth: specifically, whether they serve as good illuminations, or correctives.

There are a number of concerns that one might have with such pragmatic approaches. One is that the specific examples provided above do not, on their own, explain precisely how such apophatic claims or utterances might “be interpreted as illuminations of what cannot be discursively described,” or serve as “epistemic

² These approaches assume a standard rather than a non-standard semantics of sentences like “God defies all description” in that they treat the relevant indicative religious sentences as representing the world as being a certain way (i.e., such that God defies all description), and hence as true or false according to whether they do so successfully. Non-standard semantic alternatives include: reductionism, subjectivism, and expressivism. For a discussion of non-standard semantic alternatives see, for example, Scott (2010). Neither the paraconsistent approach nor the dual-truths approach assumes a non-standard semantics as such, though each proposes a novel way of evaluating the truth of the sentences in question. Pragmatic approaches also needn’t employ a non-standard semantics. While it may be possible to account for apophatic language by arguing for a non-standard semantics regarding apophatic language, such possible approaches are not the focus of discussion here.

³ Recent defenses of this approach, at least regarding apophatic language in Buddhist philosophy, include Priest and Garfield (2003).

⁴ Recent defenses of this approach include Jacobs (2015).

correctives to overconfident, and perhaps even arrogant, theology.” After all, these claims or utterances are admitted to be false, or at least possibly so, and thus (absent further detail) it is reasonable to hold that they are poorly suited to illuminate or correct anything (or at least anything real or true, or even taken to be real or true). Another way of phrasing this concern is in terms of a question: Why exactly should we think that these particular untrue or possibly untrue claims or utterances—claims such as *that God defies all description* or utterances of sentences like “God defies all description”—could correct or illuminate rather than mislead and obfuscate?

In response to this concern, this paper proposes an addition to the stock of pragmatic approaches outlined above. Rather than interpreting apophatic utterances as *illuminations* of what cannot be discursively described, or epistemic *correctives* to overconfident theology, the proposal is that apophatic utterances are best interpreted—at least in the first instance—as *invitations* to engage the world aesthetically and creatively, as an act of faith.⁵ Their goal is principally to motivate us to act in ways that will allow us to *appreciate* the extraordinary or divine, rather than to, say, *believe* that some proposition regarding the extraordinary or divine is true (even if, as discussed later, we might come to accept, and perhaps even believe, propositions as a result of our appreciative actions). The proposal is, hence, a form of *fictionalism* about apophatic language: according to it, the purpose of uttering sentences like “God defies all description” is not to assert the literal, semantic content of those sentences (in the case at hand, that God defies all description), but rather to do something else instead.⁶ The claim that the function of such apophatic language is principally to invite readers to engage God aesthetically and creatively rather than doxastically or epistemically is therefore consistent with the claim that the function of cataphatic language (such as utterances of “God is good”) is to directly assert true claims about God. It, however, fits with other kinds of accounts of cataphatic language, too, including—but of course not limited to—fictionalist ones. It therefore is consistent with giving a unified account of the nature and function of religious language, or not.

In section two, I begin by explaining what it might mean to engage the world aesthetically and creatively as an act of faith by discussing one way in which Zhuangist philosophy can be interpreted as employing apophatic language and apparent contradictions to encourage readers to realize the philosophical and

⁵ “Are best interpreted” is left deliberately ambiguous so as to leave it open, to the extent that I can, as to whether fictionalism about apophatic language should be seen as a form of descriptive or hermeneutic fictionalism, or a prescriptive or revolutionary form: that is, whether it is best construed as a way of looking at current linguistic practice or suggesting a revision to linguistic practice. It is also worth noting here that these invitations, if taken up, might allow us to act in ways that serve as illuminations or correctives, which is why I say “in the first instance” here. This possibility is addressed later, in section four of this paper.

⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I use “semantic content” and “literal content” more or less interchangeably, for ease of explication. It is worth noting that some might take issue with this, for example, on the grounds that it may be possible for non-literal content to be semantic content, at least in certain cases (see Camp (2006) for a discussion of possible examples). As far as I can see, however, accommodating this worry would affect only the letter, but not the spirit, of the view advanced here, as it could easily be restated so as to alleviate this concern.

religious ideal of *wu-wei* (無為) by submitting to faith. In section three, I continue by clarifying how the specific description of aesthetic, creative acts of faith discussed in section two can be further fleshed out, such that it can help to better elucidate the nature and function of apophatic language more generally, including utterances of “God defies all description.” Finally, in section four, I conclude by elaborating one additional, related way in which the aspects of Zhuangist philosophy under discussion can enrich contemporary analytic theology and philosophy of religion: specifically, by allowing us to understand the *sensus divinitatis* as being less like the operation of *perceptual* faculties or processes and more like the operation of *creative* ones—that is, as involving more active and affective, creative, aesthetic modes of engagement with the extraordinary or divine than passive and cognitive, interpretive, epistemic ones.

2. The *Zhuangzi*, *Wu-Wei*, and Aesthetic, Creative Acts of Faith⁷

The *Zhuangzi* is one of two foundational Daoist texts (alongside the *Daodejing*, or *Laozi*), and among the most influential works in the history of world philosophy. The text is widely considered to have been composed (at least in large part) by a Chinese philosopher of the same name (莊子, or “Master Zhuang”) in the late fourth century BCE.⁸ Its interpreters are faced with puzzles similar to those that confront interpreters of philosophers such as Wittgenstein: while the works of both philosophers appear to contain strong *prima facie* arguments, interesting categorizations, and pregnant examples, they are often not written in an expository style, and include suggestions that may subject them to fatal self-referential paradoxes. Some interpreters attempt to reconstruct systematic philosophical positions based on their writings, often supplying an explanation for why they write as they do. Other interpreters, however, take seriously the possibility that the writers in question reject conventional philosophical exposition because they also reject conventional philosophical system building. In addition, the *Zhuangzi* contains a variety of contradictory remarks and apophatic language similar to, “God defies all description,” such as, “The Great Way is not named (夫大道不稱),” found in the *Qi wu lun* (齊物論), ch.2 of the text, “Discussion on Making All Things Equal”.⁹

⁷ This section draws heavily on Chung (forthcoming).

⁸ For the purposes of this paper, I will be using “the *Zhuangzi*” and “*Zhuangzi*” more or less interchangeably. For even if the *Zhuangzi* was not written by a single person picked out by the name “*Zhuangzi*,” (or “Zhuang Zhou” 莊周) it might still be interpreted as suggesting a view that could have been expressed by such a person. Cf. Mattice (2017).

⁹ Cf. Watson (2013). Note also that expressions like “the Way” typically translate *dao* 道 in these discussions. As Bryan Van Norden explains, “This crucial philosophical term has five related senses. ‘*Dao*’ can mean a path or road (as in the modern Chinese compound “*dàolù* 道路,” roadway). In both Chinese and English, there is a natural metaphorical extension from ‘way’ in the sense of a literal *path*

With respect to this statement in particular, a problem similar to that with which this paper began arises, as the claim that the Great Way is not named itself appears to name the Great Way, and therefore also appears to contradict itself.

Related to this, one of the things that the Zhuangzi is best known for is its use of skeptical arguments and paradoxical statements to call into question conventional ways of thinking and acting, with the apparent aim of encouraging readers to consider alternative approaches to thought and action. These alternative approaches are generally considered by interpreters to be characterized by features such as spontaneity, flexibility, creativity, and playfulness, rather than excessively rigid reliance on self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions. However, the philosophical and religious ideal of wu-wei (無為)—translatable into English as, for example, “no-trying,” “no-doing,” “non-action,” or “effortless action”—encompassing such features contains within itself a tension.¹⁰ This tension is rooted in the fact that the state of perfected action engendered by wu-wei is presented as a state that needs to be achieved: we are thought not to be presently exemplifying wu-wei, and hence, to do so, we must endeavor to transition from our current, dissatisfactory state of “effortful action” into an alternative, ideal state of “effortless action.” A problem thus arises: is it possible to try to not try (and succeed in not trying), and if so, how? Or, if not, might this tension be resolved, or otherwise handled, in some other way? This problem has been characterized as “the paradox of wu-wei” and is comparable to other interesting problems. These include what have been characterized as “the paradox of liberation” (which arises in connection with discussions of how to achieve nirvana in Buddhist philosophy) and “the paradox of virtue” (which arises in connection with discussions of how to achieve virtue in classical Greek, Confucian, and Daoist philosophy) (Cf. Slingerland 2003). Moreover, it, too, is similar to the problem with which this paper began, as it is not clear that it is possible to make sense of, much less successfully execute, action that is at the same time non-action. The Zhuangzi, therefore, presents us with multiple problems similar to that with which this paper began, concerning not just how to interpret apophatic language, but also how to act on the basis of it.

As Edward Slingerland explains, one way of addressing the paradox of wu-wei—and which, I think, promises to help to better elucidate the nature and function of apophatic language in the *Zhuangzi* and elsewhere—models wu-wei as a form of submission to faith. On this approach, Zhuangist sages have no technique or conscious goals that they desire to attain, but merely commit to the “Will of Heaven (*tian* 天),” just “as the swimmer in chapter 19 of the *Zhuangzi* throws himself into the raging water at the foot of Lü-liang falls, trusting that the natural flow of the

to ‘way’ in the sense of *a way to do something*. Closely related to this is ‘Way’ as *the linguistic account of a way of doing something*. From these senses, ‘Way’ came to refer to *the right way to live one’s life and organize society*. Eventually the term also came to mean *the ultimate metaphysical entity* that was responsible for the way the world is and the way that it ought to be . . . [However,] [a]lthough it can have any of these five senses, the primary meaning of *dao* (for most Eastern Zhou [i.e., pre-Qin] thinkers) is the right way to live and organize society” (Van Norden 2011, 11). The fifth sense of the term, however, is often considered to be in play in Daoist texts such as the *Zhuangzi*.

¹⁰ I will henceforth use “wu-wei” without italics, following similar conventions as Slingerland (2003).

river will bring him through intact”¹¹ (Slingerland 2003, 213). This, however, raises many questions, including the following. What, precisely, are both wu-wei and faith taken to involve, in this context? Moreover, how are they related to discussions of faith in so-called “Western” philosophy of religion?¹² I will answer each of these questions below, in turn.

To first better explain what wu-wei is and what it is like, before going on to explain how it can be modeled as a form of submission to faith, consider, for example, the way that one thinks and acts when one gives a really good academic talk. Giving a really good academic talk is not purely physiological, completely unconscious, or automatic. It involves deliberation and choice. There is, in other words, a sense in which giving a really good academic talk is both *effortful* and *not easy*. However, there is another, different (and yet equally interesting) sense in which giving a really good academic talk is both *effortless* and *easy*. For giving such a talk can be characterized as involving the same kind of unconscious ease with which, say, good singers sing a song: that is, when they, for instance, do so in an absorbed, focused fashion, and when they are not worried or nervous about whether anyone is judging them, but just want to sing well for its own sake. This is true even in cases where singing, or giving a talk, involves an array of conscious, deliberate, and even, in a sense, effortful activities as well—and even if it typically does so. Wu-wei, conceived as an ideal state, can thus be further characterized as involving a standing disposition (or set of dispositions) to act in a manner that exemplifies this sort of effortless ease *all the time*, even while engaged in conscious, deliberate, effortful activity. For the sense in which wu-wei action is effortless is that while exemplifying wu-wei, one’s actions are, in an important sense, unforced—even if they involve intense mental and physical effort.

On this understanding of what wu-wei involves, then, it encompasses not what is actually happening (or not) in the externally observable realm, but rather the state of mind of the agent. Nonetheless, for a person who exemplifies wu-wei, proper conduct follows as instantly and spontaneously as the nose responds to a bad smell. This is, again, not to say that actions issuing from wu-wei are automatic, completely unconscious, or purely physiological. Individuals who exemplify wu-wei may still make choices and even, at times, pause to weigh various options or consider situations ahead. Such choices and deliberations, however, are themselves also performed with a sort of effortless ease. Unlike instinctual or merely habitual

¹¹ A brief note on translating “天” or “tian” as “heaven”: according to Stephen Angle, “[a] quick summary of the career of *tian* runs something like the following. Early meanings include ‘the sky’ and the name of the Zhou people’s sky deity. During the classical era, many texts continue to imbue *tian* with what we can loosely call normative and religious significances, though compared to the early Zhou, *tian* in the classical period is often considerably abstracted or naturalized” (Angle 2018, 169). For more on translating “天” or “tian”, see, for example, Huff (2017) and Angle (2018). Also, although Slingerland uses the term “Zhuangzian”, I—along with many other commentators—have elected to use “Zhuangist” instead. Given that *Zhuangzi* is translatable as “Master Zhuang,” however, both strike me as acceptable.

¹² I say “so-called”, as the dichotomy between “non-Western” or “Eastern” and “Western” is fraught. A better alternative might distinguish European-influenced traditions from non-European-influenced traditions, though this may turn out to be in some ways problematic, too.

forms of thought and action, wu-wei calls for varying degrees of awareness on the part of agents and allows for a considerable amount of flexibility in response. (Slingerland 2003, 7-8) For these sorts of reasons, translating wu-wei as “no-forcing” or “no-overdoing” may be preferable to aforementioned possibilities (Cf. Slingerland 2000 and Seok 2019).

It is important to note in addition that although spontaneity in European-influenced philosophy is commonly understood as being associated with subjectivity, as Slingerland notes, the opposite can be said of the sort of spontaneity evinced in wu-wei. Rather, there is a sense in which the sort of spontaneity evinced in wu-wei represents the highest degree of objectivity, for while exemplifying wu-wei, one’s embodied mind conforms to something larger than the individual (for instance, the Will of Heaven or the order represented by the Way). This is why wu-wei, conceived as an ideal state, can be seen as a religious ideal: in realizing it, an individual in turn realizes his or her proper place in the cosmos (Slingerland 2003, 8).

Wu-wei—again, conceived as an ideal state—can thus be provisionally characterized as a standing disposition (or set of dispositions) to act in an unforced manner that is uniquely and appropriately responsive to any situation. It is thus more aptly characterized by features such as spontaneity, flexibility, creativity, and playfulness, rather than an excessively rigid reliance on self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions. It is about reflecting, responding, and adapting rather than projecting, disregarding, and imposing. Moreover, it is at once a philosophical and religious ideal, as it concerns not only how to live well, but also comprises a soteriological goal aimed at situating agents in a productive relationship with something (taken to be) far grander (and releasing them from a dissatisfactory situation).

What prevents people from realizing wu-wei, and hence puts them in the situation that gives rise to the paradox of wu-wei? On one way of interpreting the *Zhuangzi*, the reification of distinctions, due to deeming discriminations, interferes with people’s ability to respond to the world flexibly and in a fitting manner (as such discriminations do, or at least may, not befit the way things are). Instead, people seek to assert themselves, and thereby enter into a variety of conflicts that make it difficult to act in an unforced manner. Therefore, to exemplify wu-wei, one must cease to make such discriminations and instead elect to use language (and thought) in a different way: one that is, as explained above, uniquely and appropriately responsive to any situation. This means using language (and thought) in a manner that is characterized by features such as spontaneity, flexibility, creativity, and playfulness, rather than an excessively rigid reliance on self-serving plans, characterizations of prior experiences, and fixed preconceptions. Doing this exemplifies what might be called *da zhi* (大知), “great knowledge,” whereas doing otherwise (at best) exemplifies *xiao zhi* (小知), “little understanding” (Slingerland 2003, 179).

We can now return to the paradox of wu-wei, described near the outset of this section, as well as the question of how wu-wei can be modeled as a form of submission to faith. While a variety of modern scholarly approaches to this problem

abound, of particular interest for the purposes of this paper is an approach, suggested by scholars such as Mori Mikisaburo, that Slingerland characterizes as emphasizing the role of “faith” (*shin rai* 信賴) in Zhuangzi’s thought. As noted above, on this approach, Zhuangist sages have no technique or conscious goals that they desire to attain, but merely commit to the “Will of Heaven” just “as the swimmer in chapter 19 of the *Zhuangzi* throws himself into the raging water at the foot of Lü-liang falls, trusting that the natural flow of the river will bring him through intact.” According to Slingerland, “faith” here should thus be understood more in the sense of, for instance, *fiducia* (confidence or trust) than *assensus* (mental assent to some proposition).¹³ After all, the idea is to cease to make deeming discriminations by, say, taking on a particular propositional attitude (including propositional faith). Hence, wu-wei can be interpreted as involving liberation from *shi* (是, “it is”) and *fei* (非, “it is not”) judgments that deem, and a disposition to trust in rather than assent to (Slingerland 2003, 213). In other words, “faith” in this context is closer to “faith in” rather than “faith that.” To this extent, it plausibly involves a kind of provisional or tentative acceptance rather than firm belief—a point to which I will return below.

On Slingerland’s view, while this understanding of wu-wei is of significance for early Chinese thought in general, Zhuangzi is unique in making the need for submission to faith the virtually exclusive focus of his religious vision. While Confucians and Laozi suggest taking leaps of faith that involve committing to fairly well-defined transformative programs of self-cultivation (meant to bear very specific personal, social, and political fruit), Zhuangzi offers his audience much less in this regard (Slingerland 2003, 214). It is, hence, very difficult to ascertain what Zhuangzi’s positive philosophical project is, especially since the text displays a variety of challenging tensions, alluded to earlier. For example, it indeed appears to make positive recommendations as to how to live. But it also tends to undermine them with arguments to the effect that genuine freedom and happiness are only to be found if one ceases to be concerned about oneself, and also by a broad array of highly general skeptical arguments.¹⁴ Furthermore, as discussed above, it contains much that is paradoxical and perplexing, including—though not limited to—apophatic language.

One way of addressing these tensions (in a manner connected to the discussion above) is to propose that, rather than aiming to persuade readers of some claim (or set of claims), Zhuangzi instead aims to enable readers to adopt some perspective (or set of perspectives) that might in turn encourage readers to engage the world not doxastically or epistemically, but rather aesthetically and creatively, as an act of faith. One possible such perspective is a *fictionalist* perspective. Suppose that it is indeed the case that the reification of distinctions, due to deeming discriminations, interferes with people’s ability to respond to the world flexibly and in a fitting manner (as such discriminations do, or may, not befit the

¹³ See, for example, Llewelyn (1964) and Bishop (2016) for discussions of different kinds or aspects of faith.

¹⁴ For more on the use of skeptical arguments in the *Zhuangzi*, as well as the tensions in the text that arise in this connection, see Chung 2018 as well as a variety of works referenced there, perhaps especially those collected in Kjellberg and Ivanhoe (1996).

way things are). As a result, people seek to assert themselves, and come into conflict with things in the world in ways that make it difficult to act in an unforced manner. Therefore, to exemplify *wu-wei*, one must cease to make such discriminations, and instead elect to use language (and thought) differently, in a manner that is—again, as explained above—uniquely and appropriately responsive to whatever situation is at hand. Interpreting Zhuangzi as aiming to convey a fictionalist perspective (rather than a claim) allows us to understand “discriminating-that-deems” as being reasoning that aims at *belief*, and “discriminating-that-does-not-deem” as reasoning that aims at *acceptance*.¹⁵ In this way, distinctions are not reified (and thus, to this extent, are rather “fictionalized”) and one’s ability to respond to the world flexibly and in a fitting manner is not thereby hampered, as it would be if they were. One is therefore less apt to come into conflict with things in the world, and to encounter difficulty adapting to novel situations. Because of this, one can act in a manner that is characterized in the ways outlined above, and the paradox of *wu-wei* is avoided. Perhaps one indeed cannot literally try to not try (and succeed in not trying). Perhaps the claim that there is action that is non-action contradicts itself. But what about “trying to not try” or “action that is non-action”? If, having adopted a fictionalist perspective, one ceases to make discriminations that deem, is not the paradox avoided? The paradox can plausibly only be asserted if one makes discriminations that deem.¹⁶ And if one is not literally trying to not try, but rather has stopped making such deeming discriminations, is this not exactly characteristic of *wu-wei* in that it is a genuine form of no-doing or non-action? (In the sense that one is “asserting,” without asserting, thereby maintaining an ability to respond flexibly?) The proposal, then, is that one need only shift one’s perspective on language, thought, and action to realize *wu-wei*. This, however, will require an act—or, perhaps better, many acts—of faith, as there will be, to put the point somewhat metaphorically, no solid ground on which to stand, or even a solid raft on which to float.¹⁷

Moreover, such acts will be *aesthetic*, *creative*, and *non-propositional* (rather than *epistemic* or *doxastic*, and *propositional*) acts of faith in that they are

¹⁵ Many fictionalist accounts proposed in contemporary analytic philosophy rely heavily on a distinction between acceptance and belief, in addition to analogies with fictional discourse, along these lines. Compare James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which famously opens with the line “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed,” with Caesar’s *Gaulic War*, which begins with “Gaul as a whole consists of three separate parts....” While Caesar wants the reader to believe the literal truth of his description of Gaul, Joyce certainly does not intend the reader to *believe* that anyone named “Buck Mulligan” actually did precisely what he describes. Rather, the reader is meant to *accept* the aforementioned sentence in some other way, and for some other purpose (Chung 2018, 3).

¹⁶ Assertion, after all, plausibly requires an appropriate commitment to some asserted proposition—and hence, to a discrimination that deems—rather than simply an utterance of a declarative sentence, however forceful. This is evidenced by the fact that, say, an actor on a stage is typically not thought to have asserted anything, or to have made any discrimination that deems, as their assertions and distinctions are (in some meaningful sense) fictional rather than real.

¹⁷ My use of this metaphor here owes something to Sosa (1980), as well as David Loy’s remark on Zhuangzi’s use of language that “it is easy to keep from talking; the hard thing is to talk without needing to touch a ground” (Loy 1996, 61).

productive, spontaneous (and hence, as will be discussed in greater detail in section three, creative) acts which principally aim not to help people to form true beliefs or *faith that* propositions are true, but rather, instead, to create and appreciate, and have *faith in*, (perhaps just for starters) relationships with themselves, others, and other things in, and aspects of the world, including—and perhaps especially—the extraordinary or divine. After all, given sensible claims about the *Zhuangzi's* attitudes toward reified distinctions, it is reasonable to interpret him as being unconcerned with using language to apprehend truths about the world. Rather, he is arguably better interpreted as being concerned with using language to demonstrate or illustrate perspectives, which can then be manifested in a multitude of ways in action, depending on the circumstances.¹⁸

This is not only consistent with the *Zhuangzi's* apparent approval of characters who are able to adapt to situations, and of flexibility or versatility in general, but also jibes with the thought that, for *Zhuangzi*, using language is one way to live well, even if one's utterances can never express truths. Furthermore, that the *Zhuangzi* aims to demonstrate or illustrate (rather than articulate) a(n aesthetic, creative) fictionalist perspective, rather than a thesis, not only accords well with many of the skeptical arguments that we find suggested in the text, but also explains why he writes in a way that's largely literary rather than expository, playful rather than serious, and open-ended rather than committal. It also allows us to understand him as having a positive philosophical and religious project that can avoid charges of self-referential absurdity, as a fictionalist *perspective—dispositional* rather than *propositional* as it is—cannot strictly speaking contradict itself.

It should be emphasized, however, that one needn't adopt as wide-ranging a fictionalist perspective on language as *Zhuangzi* might to find such a perspective—or even a fictionalist claim—useful for elucidating the nature and function of apophatic language more generally. In the next section, I clarify how this might be done.

3. Apophatic Language and Aesthetic, Creative Acts of Faith

¹⁸ Perspectives, after all, might be best characterized as involving dispositions that at least partially comprise psychological 'points of view' rather than claims. Consider Elisabeth Camp's particularly detailed characterization of a perspective: "a perspective is an open-ended disposition to notice, explain, and respond to situations in the world—an ability to "go on the same way" in assimilating and responding to whatever information and experiences one encounters. As such, perspectives differ from propositional attitudes, and trying on a perspective differs from imagining a content, in at least two related ways. First, a perspective determines no truth-conditions of its own: although some perspectives can be crystallized in frames or slogans like 'Look out for number one' or 'Turn the other cheek', these function as interpretive imperatives to be applied to whatever situations come along, rather than imposing cuts in possibility space themselves. Second, having a perspective is a matter of cognitive action rather than cognitive content: it involves actually noticing, explaining, and responding to situations in a certain way, and not just representing situations as 'to be interpreted' in that way. In slogan form, perspectives are tools for thought, not thoughts in themselves" (Camp 2017, 78-79).

Let us take stock. On the above description of Zhuangzi's positive philosophical project, Zhuangzi employs apophatic language and apparent contradictions, such as those that arise in connection with the paradox of *wu-wei*, to enable readers to realize the philosophical and religious ideal of *wu-wei* (無為). This is because he can be interpreted as using apophatic language and apparent contradictions to encourage readers to cease to make deeming discriminations by, say, taking on a particular propositional attitude (including propositional faith). Rather, he aims to inspire readers to engage the world not doxastically or epistemically, but aesthetically and creatively, as an act of (non-propositional) faith. Such acts will be aesthetic, creative, and non-propositional (rather than epistemic or doxastic, and propositional) acts of faith in that they are productive, spontaneous (and hence, as will be explored in this section, creative) acts which aim not to help people to form true beliefs or faith that propositions are true, but rather instead to create and appreciate, and have faith in, (perhaps just for starters) relationships with themselves, others, and other things in and aspects of the world, including—and perhaps especially—the extraordinary or divine. This will in turn allow for the paradox of *wu-wei* to be avoided as this fictionalist shift in perspective will allow one to stop from making deeming discriminations, thereby maintaining an ability to respond flexibly that will itself involve an act—or perhaps better, many acts—of faith.

In addition to being independently plausible, the above fits well with common ways of understanding the purpose and value of artistic and aesthetic experience and activity in Chinese philosophy and religion. For example, according to Sarah Mattice, one of the distinct concerns of Chinese aesthetics is the ideal of aesthetic experience as a creative activity of integration with others and the world, and Chinese artists have long held that there is a strong reciprocal relationship between moral development and artistic practice. Engaging in (and with) the arts was, and in many cases still is, not understood as mere ornamentation or recreation, but as an important aspect of self and spiritual cultivation, along with the cultivation of better relationships with others and the world and—correspondingly—better communities and relationships with the extraordinary or divine. This is true across diverse philosophical and religious traditions within China: each saw their particular aesthetic practice as both a means to and a demonstration of personal development and integration with the Way. Indeed, according to philosophers such as Li Zehou, for the Chinese, “an aesthetic consciousness is the highest consciousness to be attained in human life” (Li and Liu 1984, 33; in Mattice 2017, 252). An aesthetic sensibility and sensitivity, and living aesthetically, are understood as the height of human experience and achievement (Mattice 2017, 251-252).

Specifically, in the case of the *Zhuangzi*, the ideal of aesthetic experience involves a creative activity of integration which leaps beyond the mundane and worldly so as to integrate the agent with the extraordinary or divine and—at least in a sense—“otherworldly”, thereby resulting in a certain kind of self-transformation. Transformation, as the text tends to portray it, is not a matter of simple passivity. The Way and processes of transformation are not just manifested in us. Rather, we

as human beings are in a special position of not only going along with these transformations in a non-impositional manner, but embracing them in addition, and in so doing finding ourselves to be creative agents of transformation (Mattice 2017, 259).

It is important to stress at this juncture that creativity is not conceived as involving *novelty*, but rather *spontaneity* (in the sense discussed in section two) and *productivity*. It is active not in that it involves agents in *imposing* their will upon the world (i.e., as explored above, “action”), but rather in *working with* what we might call “the will of the world,” of which they are parts (i.e., as explored above, “non-action,” or wu-wei). Creativity does not pit agents against the world, nor does it pit the world against agents. Rather, it is conceived as involving recognition of the interdependence and impermanence of all the myriad things, and willingness to be sensitive and responsive to that interdependence and impermanence. This Zhuangist conception of creativity also fits well with contemporary research suggesting that people from Chinese cultures and people from European cultures have tended to hold similar, yet not identical conceptions of creativity. In general, according to Weihua Niu and Robert Sternberg, even modern Chinese people are more likely to view creativity as having social and moral values, and as making a connection between the new and the old. Their European counterparts instead focus more on some special individual characteristics in understanding the concept of creativity (Niu and Sternberg, 2002). Particularly interesting for the purposes of this conversation, however, is that while both “Western” and “Eastern” (to use Niu and Sternberg’s terminology) conceptions of individual creativity come from a theistic or cosmic tradition of either divinely inspired or natural creativity, a defining feature of the Western concept of creativity—novelty—is not generally embraced by ancient Chinese conceptions of creativity (Niu and Sternberg, 2006).

The story of Wheelwright Pian well-exemplifies this overall perspective on creativity, which we find in the *Tian dao* (天道), ch. 13 of the text, “Heaven’s Way” or “The Way of Heaven”. Burton Watson translates the story thus:

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Pian, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, “This book Your Grace is reading - may I venture to ask whose words are in it?”

“The words of the sages,” said the duke.

“Are the sages still alive?”

“Dead long ago,” said the duke.

“In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!”

“Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?” said Duke Huan. “If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!”

Wheelwright Pian said, “I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard - you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old.” (Watson 2013)

On Mattice's reading, one thought conveyed by this story is that, although he is a “lowly” artisan, Wheelwright Pian has something important to teach the Duke. He has been creating wheels by hand for many years, and he has in that time developed an ability that allows him to act and execute his craft spontaneously and productively in a manner that cannot be captured through an algorithmic set of instructions. He must respond to precise particularities in the wood, his tools, and in his body to create what he wants to create—something that he does not accomplish by imposing a set plan. This is why he cannot (fully) teach his craft to his son, and his son cannot (fully) learn it from him. Creativity is a living vitality that one has to engage in personally. The sages' advice for living well is just “dregs” if it is taken as instructions that one can simply read and then complete; living well involves much more than this, namely an integration between contrasting types such as the learned and the spontaneous and the slow and the fast (Mattice 2017, 259-260).

There is an irony in this, in that the *Zhuangzi* itself (composed of words as it is) is also “chaff and dregs”—unless, perhaps, one engages it creatively, as an act of faith. It (alone) cannot teach one to appreciate the extraordinary or divine, and one cannot learn how to appreciate the extraordinary or divine from it (alone). At best, it can help guide one to engage the world aesthetically and creatively, as an act of faith (or many acts of faith) of one's own, to transform not wood, but rather relationships with themselves, others, and other things in and aspects of the world, including—and perhaps especially—the extraordinary or divine.

Conceiving of (certain instances of) transformation as involving creativity (such as, in the present discussion, wood or ourselves), as Mattice notes, requires that something is in place to be transformed. On this conception of creativity, it does not involve creating something from nothing, but rather transforming what is already present (wood, ourselves) into something different, which is integrated with what came before (cf. Mattice 2017, 260). Setting up the conditions for this sort of expression of creativity arguably requires *wu-wei* to fit with particulars of situations.

We are now well-positioned to explore how the specific description of aesthetic, creative acts of faith discussed above can help to better elucidate the

nature and function of apophatic language more generally, including utterances of “God defies all description.” The central idea is that the function of apophatic language like “God defies all description” is not to enable, encourage, or inspire readers to realize wu-wei specifically—or to take on any other aspect of the *Zhuangzi*’s proposed project—but rather to take on a different kind of related ideal (or set of ideals). As regards what this related ideal (or set of ideals) involves, there are many possible candidates. One very broadly applicable possibility is that apophatic language is often employed to shift people’s focus away from taking on particular propositional attitudes (including propositional faith), so that they may rather be inspired to (as is the case on the interpretation of the *Zhuangzi* suggested above) engage the world not doxastically or epistemically, but rather aesthetically and creatively, as an act of (non-propositional) faith. Furthermore, such acts will also be aesthetic, creative, and non-propositional (rather than epistemic or doxastic, and propositional) acts of faith in that they are (drawing from the Chinese conception of creativity discussed above) productive, spontaneous, and hence creative acts which aim not to help people to form true beliefs or faith that propositions are true, but rather instead to create and appreciate, and have faith in, (perhaps just for starters) relationships with themselves, others, and other things in and aspects of the world including—and perhaps especially—the extraordinary or divine.

As emphasized above, however, one needn’t adopt as wide-ranging a fictionalist perspective on language as the *Zhuangzi* might find such a perspective useful for elucidating the nature and function of apophatic language more generally. One might even find it useful to rather adopt a fairly narrow fictionalist thesis about apophatic language instead, as proposed in the introduction. Recall that it was stated there that apophatic utterances are best interpreted—at least in the first instance—as invitations to engage the world aesthetically and creatively, as an act of faith. As such, their goal is principally to motivate us to act in ways that will allow us to appreciate the extraordinary or divine, rather than to, say, believe that some proposition regarding the extraordinary or divine is true (even if, as will be discussed in section four below, we might come to accept, and perhaps even believe, some propositions as a result of our appreciative actions). The proposal is hence a form of fictionalism about apophatic language: according to it, the purpose of uttering sentences like, “God defies all description,” is not to assert the literal, semantic content of those sentences (in the case at hand, that God defies all description), but rather to do something else instead.

It is also worth noting that this proposal about the nature and function of apophatic language fits well with the fact that many current and long-standing views about religious language and practice may be interpreted as fictionalist (or closely related), even though they are not explicitly presented as such. Indeed, as Finlay Malcolm and Michael Scott note, just one possible early example is, unsurprisingly, *apophaticism*, which they characterize as a position that was prominent from mid-antiquity to the late medieval period, and whose central figures include Dionysius, Maimonides, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. According to them, a central idea of apophaticism is that we are unable to mentally or linguistically represent God’s nature. As such, what we say in our attempts to

describe God's nature is untrue. However, apophatic authors show no sign of preferring the elimination of religious discourse or withdrawal from religious practice. In part, this seems to be because, even though what we say about God is thought by them to be untrue and therefore should not be believed, the activity of attempting to represent God, and the recognition of its failure, may promote a closer relationship with God. The benefits of continued engagement outweigh the drawback that talk of God does not yield truths (Malcolm and Scott 2018, 6). Insofar as apophaticism is a form of religious fictionalism, it is, of course, restricted to our engagement with God-talk. Note that one might restrict the domain further, however, so as to include only our engagement with *apophatic* God-talk even more narrowly, such that—as mentioned above—the account of fictionalism about apophatic language proposed here fits with cataphaticism as well as apophaticism. One needn't be a fictionalist about all God-talk to be a fictionalist about apophatic God-talk, though this is certainly a possible option.

4. The *Sensus Divinitatis* as Aesthetic, Creative Faculty

Here I will conclude by elaborating one additional, related way in which the aspects of Zhuangist philosophy under discussion can enrich contemporary analytic theology and philosophy of religion: specifically, by allowing us to understand the *sensus divinitatis* as being less like the operation of *perceptual* faculties or processes and more like the operation of *creative* ones—that is, as involving more active and affective, creative, aesthetic modes of engagement with the extraordinary or divine than passive and cognitive, interpretive, epistemic ones.

The most influential discussion of the *sensus divinitatis* in contemporary analytic philosophy can be found in Alvin Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*. Here, Plantinga is concerned with addressing something that he characterizes as the F&M (Freud and Marx) complaint, which (given Plantinga's account) can be paraphrased thus. Christian and other theistic beliefs are irrational either because they originate in i) cognitive malfunction (a view that he attributes to Marx), or ii) cognitive proper function that is aimed at something other than the truth, such as comfort or the ability to soldier on in an appalling world in which we find ourselves (a view that he attributes to Freud). Hence, since theistic beliefs do not originate in the proper function of cognitive faculties (or mechanisms, or, presumably, processes) that are aimed at producing true beliefs, theistic beliefs lack warrant (Plantinga 2000, 167-168).

To respond to the F&M complaint, Plantinga proposes what he characterizes as the A/C (Aquinas/Calvin) model. On this model, there is a kind of natural knowledge of God. Drawing on Calvin in particular, Plantinga claims that the basic idea is that there is a kind of faculty or mechanism—what Calvin calls the “*sensus divinitatis*” or sense of divinity—which in a wide variety of circumstances produces in us beliefs (and indeed, knowledge) about God.¹⁹ These circumstances form the occasion in which such beliefs arise in that we do not consciously choose to have the

¹⁹ Here too I will henceforth to use the term “*sensus divinitatis*” without italics.

beliefs in question; rather, we find ourselves with them, just as we find ourselves with perceptual and memory beliefs. This suggests that the capacity for knowledge of (and about) God is innate, even if the knowledge in question is itself acquired over time. Therefore, Plantinga characterizes the *sensus divinitatis* as a disposition (or set of dispositions) to form theistic beliefs in various circumstances, in response to the sorts of conditions or stimuli that trigger the working of this sense of divinity (Plantinga 2000, 170-174).

Interestingly, however, the examples with which Plantinga (and on his interpretation, Calvin) motivates this view of the *sensus divinitatis* are decidedly aesthetic. According to him:

Calvin's idea is that the workings of the *sensus divinitatis* is triggered or occasioned by a wide variety of circumstances, including in particular some of the glories of nature: the marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky; the timeless crash and roar of the surf that resonates deep within us; the majestic grandeur of the mountains...; the ancient, brooding presence of the Australian outback; the thunder of a great waterfall. But it isn't only grandeur and majesty that counts; he would say the same for the subtle play of sunlight on a field in spring, or the dainty, articulate beauty of a tiny flower, or aspen leaves shimmering and dancing in the breeze. (Plantinga 2000, 174)

However, what is particularly important about these experiences, for Plantinga, is their epistemic rather than aesthetic import. He continues:

On a beautiful spring morning (the birds singing, heaven and earth alight and alive with glory, the air fresh and cool, the treetops gleaming in the sun), a spontaneous hymn of thanks to the Lord—thanks for your circumstances and your very existence—may arise in your soul. ... Here the *sensus divinitatis* resembles other belief-producing faculties or mechanisms. If we wish to think in terms of the overworked functional analogy, we can think of the *sensus divinitatis*, too, as an input-output device: it takes the circumstances mentioned above as input and issues as output theistic beliefs, beliefs about God. (Plantinga 2000, 174-175)

Crucial to Plantinga's account is that it is not that one, say, beholds the night sky, notes that it is grand, and concludes that there must be such a person as God. In his view, an argument like that would be weak. Rather, it is that, upon the perception of the night sky or the mountain vista or the tiny flower, theistic beliefs spontaneously arise within us. They are occasioned (i.e., it would seem, in part caused) by the circumstances themselves rather than inferences made on the basis of, or conclusions from, them. In this regard, the *sensus divinitatis* resembles perception, memory, and *a priori* belief (Plantinga 2000, 175).

This way of understanding the nature of the *sensus divinitatis*, however, overlooks its fundamentally appreciative, aesthetic dimension in favor of its secondarily doxastic, epistemic dimension. As Plantinga himself claims, the *sensus divinitatis* is triggered or occasioned by aesthetic experiences, such as the

apprehension of the beautiful (e.g., “the marvelous, impressive beauty of the night sky) or the sublime (e.g., “the majestic grandeur of the mountains”). Therefore, if one thinks it fruitful to, as Plantinga does, characterize the *sensus divinitatis* as an input-output device, one could add detail such that the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* can be construed a bit differently, such that it takes *apprehensions* of aesthetic features such as beauty or sublimity—some of which are divine perhaps in addition to natural—as input and issues as output *appreciations* of those features, which in turn may (again, following Plantinga’s use of the relevant terms) occasion *beliefs* about the divine.

What are some implications of modeling the *sensus divinitatis* in this way? I will discuss four. The first is that the *sensus divinitatis* is more akin to what some have called an “aesthetic sense” (cf. Davies 2013) than it is sense perception. It concerns—as the aesthetic is traditionally thought to—experience and judgment of, say, the beautiful and the sublime. This does not, however, entail that aesthetic modes of engagement are purely passive and contemplative, just as the *Zhuangzi* might have it. As Stephen Davies points out, though they may be such occasionally, this is neither required nor the default: rather, aesthetic modes of engagement often function similarly to the way that emotional modes of engagement do, by “lighting up the world” or “pushing or pulling us in some direction or another” (Davies 2013, 75). The awesome grandeur of towering peaks, for example, once apprehended should produce respectful admiration—a kind of appreciation—that cautions us if we choose to climb. Likewise, we might observe that this respectful admiration might also enable, encourage, or inspire us to act in creative ways that in turn enable us to further appreciate not only the peaks’ grandeur (say, by exploring it, painting it, contemplating it via poetry, and so on), but also the divine with which it is associated, and produce still further beliefs (including beliefs about the divine).

Related to this, the second is that the *sensus divinitatis* (again, just as the *Zhuangzi* might have it) involves more active and affective, creative, aesthetic modes of engagement with the extraordinary or divine than passive and cognitive, interpretive, epistemic ones. It suggests that the extraordinary or divine is—in the first instance—sensed aesthetically, rather than doxastically or epistemically as the object of particular propositional beliefs. Moreover, this sensing requires creativity the sense delineated above: sensing the extraordinary or divine in *acting* and *appreciating* productively and spontaneously, rather than in *believing*. Indeed, this may partially account for differences (as well as similarities) between different cultures’ and subcultures’ religious beliefs. If the *sensus divinitatis* takes apprehensions of aesthetic features such as beauty and sublimity as input and issues as output appreciations of those features prior to occasioning beliefs about the extraordinary or divine, given how much interpretation or processing (spontaneous and non-inferential as it may be) is involved in this belief-forming process, it is no surprise that particular religious beliefs are as varied as they are.

Building on all this, the third is that the greater skill we have as aesthetic appreciators, the better positioned we are—at least to that extent—to appreciate

the extraordinary or divine.²⁰ This is suggested by many of the *Zhuangzi's* most memorable characters, including Wheelwright Pian, who use their appreciative and creative abilities to live in accordance with the Way. It is also suggested by a great many other philosophers and theologians in the history of philosophy and theology who have been labeled as “mystics,” and who often stress the importance of aesthetic experiences of the divine.

Finally, the fourth is that it can explain why apophatic language can serve as illuminations of what cannot be discursively described as well as epistemic correctives to overconfident, and perhaps even arrogant, theology. For if apophatic utterances are best interpreted as *invitations* to engage the world aesthetically and creatively as an act of faith, such that their goal is principally to motivate us to act in ways that will allow us to *appreciate* the extraordinary or divine, rather than to, say, *believe* that some proposition regarding the extraordinary or divine is true (as they are in the *Zhuangzi*), then apophatic utterances can enable, encourage, and inspire us to: i) aesthetically sense and appreciate extraordinary or divine properties that cannot be discursively described (such as extraordinary or divine beauty or grandeur), and hence to that extent, illuminate them (as apophatic language draws our attention to these important aesthetic properties); and ii) correct tendencies to overconfident and even arrogant theology that would focus our attention not on important and yet not-discursively-describable extraordinary or divine aesthetic properties, but on other properties instead (that is, those which *can* be discursively described), thus leaving many properties (namely, those which *cannot* be discursively described, but rather aesthetically and creatively apprehended) undiscovered and unappreciated, and therefore unknown to us, propositionally or otherwise.

We can hence see that the foregoing suggests that not only can contemporary analytic theology and philosophy of religion be fruitfully diversified such that they can draw together elements of varied philosophical and religious traditions from around the world to propose novel approaches to commonly explored questions, but also that they can benefit from incorporating discussions of the aesthetic—underexplored in these domains—alongside discussions of the metaphysical, epistemic, and ethical.²¹

²⁰ This is not, of course, to rule out the possibility that other things, perhaps even including propositional faith and belief, are needed, too; however, these may come from a different source (e.g., the exercise of reason, the interpretation of scripture, etc.).

²¹ Many thanks to Asaf Angermann for reading an earlier version of this paper, and for his many insightful comments—all of which were greatly appreciated, though (alas) not all of which I was able to adequately incorporate into the final version of this paper.

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