

BOOK OF THE MONTH

NEW WORK ON INEFFABILITY

Silvia Jonas, *Ineffability and Its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion, and Philosophy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. \$99.00. pp. xi + 226. ISBN: 978-1-137-57954-6).

Silvia Jonas has written an important and lucid book about a ‘notoriously elusive’ topic ‘that has baffled philosophical minds for over two thousand years’ (p. 1). Yet the rise of new philosophical standards, focussed on analytical rigour, logical stringency, and scientific mindedness, has allowed the topic of ineffability, which, by definition, deals with what is beyond linguistic grasp, to become a ‘nonissue in contemporary philosophy’ (p. 1).

Jonas deploys impressive analytical rigour and clarity of expression, in rare combination, to address the central question: ‘What does ineffability consist in metaphysically?’ (p. 2). While questions concerning ineffability continue to arise in various (sometimes very technical) philosophical contexts, most notably, for readers of this journal, in philosophy of religion,¹ there has been ‘virtually no systematic, context-independent examination of the metaphysics ineffability itself’—until now. Furthermore, Jonas’s methodological aim is to combine “analytical” rigour with the “continental” ambition of providing a comprehensive explanation of ineffability’ (p. 2). Such an explanation is intended to make the concept of ineffability ‘tangible and ready for use’, ripe for reapplication across various philosophical contexts, the most puzzling (and therefore interesting) of which are taken to be aesthetic and religious contexts, as well as that of philosophy itself (pp. 1, 6–9).

An introductory chapter provides a succinct overview of the topic, and of Jonas’s motivations for addressing it. Here, Jonas distinguishes mundane, trivial cases of ineffability from ones that are more ‘rare’ and ‘meaningful’ (p. 3). As she explains, ‘Everyone experiences moments of speechlessness. Only sometimes, though, does such ineffability feel significant’ (p. 2). It is this important distinction that lies behind the book’s interest in the kind of ineffability in play in aesthetic, religious, and philosophical contexts, rather than the more trivial kind that results, for example, when a person is gagged (p. 5). Like the present author, Jonas is interested in the ineffable *in principle* (p. 4). Her introduction provides a helpful brief history of ineffability, which ranges from Laozi and Plotinus to Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Adorno, and ends with an outline of the structure of the book as a whole.

Chapter 2 thoroughly sets out the terminology and provides a definition of ineffability that rules out the trivial, philosophically uninteresting cases:

A nonlinguistic item *y* is ineffable if and only if it is metaphysically impossible that there be a linguistic item *x* whose content nontrivially entails the content of *y* and whose content is, in principle, communicable to other finite beings by users of a finite language (p. 49).

As one would expect from a book that aims to be responsible, as well as ambitious and pioneering, much of it is devoted to ruling out confused and unhelpful ways of thinking about ineffability. A mildly frustrating implication is that the substance of Jonas’s positive proposal regarding ineffability and its metaphysics is confined to her final two chapters. While chapters 3–6 carefully rule out objects, properties, propositions, and content as

¹ See, e.g., G. Bennett-Hunter, *Ineffability and Religious Experience* (Oxford: Routledge, 2014).

plausible candidates for the relevant kind of ineffability (including the aesthetic and religious varieties of each (pp. 117–128), chapters 6 and 7 address ineffable knowledge, a subset of which Jonas thinks the only promising candidate for explaining the metaphysics of ineffability *per se*: namely ‘Self-acquaintance’. Chapter 8 rounds off the volume with some very brief remarks on the possible application of the concept of ineffability, thus explained.

Jonas’s constructive proposal, that the metaphysics of ineffability should be explained in terms of Self-acquaintance, is spelled out in five claims, for each of which she provides careful and persuasive defence:

1. The reference point of indexical self-ascription of properties is a primitive entity, which I call the ‘Self’. (Existence Claim)
2. It is possible to stand in an acquaintance relation with (i.e., to gain phenomenal knowledge of) one’s Self. (Acquaintance Claim)
3. Self-acquaintance is phenomenal knowledge and, as such, ineffable. (Ineffability Claim)
4. The importance we attach to moments of Self-acquaintance is due to the object we get acquainted with. (Importance Claim)
5. The metaphysics of ineffability is to be explained in terms of Self-acquaintance. (Metaphysics Claim) (p. 167)

Jonas articulates the nature of Self-acquaintance as a combination of two different kinds of ineffable knowledge: indexical knowledge (which is involved in the ascription of such terms as ‘I’, ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘here’, ‘there’) and phenomenal knowledge (the kind of knowledge one gains, for example, by seeing red, which is irreducible to even a comprehensive knowledge of the facts about colour perception (pp. 158–60, 161–66, 175). By combining the central, yet hidden, role of the Self (provided by indexical knowledge) with the epistemic force of direct contact with aspects of the world (provided by phenomenal knowledge by acquaintance), Jonas is able to explain ‘everything that needs to be explained about experiences of ineffability in terms of what is already there, not in terms of some obscure entity’ (p. 175). For example, her defence of the Importance Claim helps to explain the significance that we typically attach to experiences of ineffability: ‘The Self is the ultimate reference point for every human being. This fact alone is enough to explain why moments where we get acquainted with it feel extraordinary, important, and meaningful’ (p. 174).

Thus Jonas explains the metaphysics of ineffability in terms of a particular kind of ineffable knowledge, Self-acquaintance, which she suggests ‘explains our paradigmatic cases of philosophically intriguing ineffability, as found in aesthetic, religious, and philosophical contexts’ (p. 158). In answer to the question posed at the beginning and end of her book, ‘Can art, religion, or philosophy afford ineffable insights—and if so, what are they?’, Jonas answers: ‘yes, art, religion, and philosophy can afford ineffable insights. These insights are moments in which we get acquainted with our Self’ (p. 181).

Jonas’s remarks on the possibilities for applying her new philosophical theory of ineffability are tantalizingly brief, yet they are signally suggestive—especially in connection with religion (pp. 183–4). While she concedes that it is clearly unable to accommodate every possible interpretation of a given ineffable religious experience, Jonas suggests that Self-acquaintance could serve as ‘a “minimal metaphysics” of religious ineffability’ on which both a theist and an atheist could agree. This is a suggestion that would be worth developing in further detail on account of its extremely exciting potential implications for the theory and practice of interreligious communication, particularly between the theist and the atheist—

whether religious (Taoist, say) or non-religious.² Readers of this book will be hoping for further work (which Jonas leaves to specialists in the relevant areas) carrying out a detailed application of her theory of ineffability and its metaphysics in aesthetics and philosophy of religion (p. 177).

For this reader, two closely related questions remain. Like most analytically trained philosophers, Jonas assumes the validity of the subject–object distinction. Of course, this distinction is essential; it clearly conditions all cognitive thought and literal language. But does she regard it to be *exhaustively* valid? John Dewey regarded the *distinction* between subject and object as useful but repudiated *dualistic* construals of the distinction or a supposed *dichotomy* between them, since he saw that this would end up rendering unintelligible the potential relationship between the distinguished items.³ In Self-acquaintance, in terms of which Jonas explains the metaphysics of ineffability, the ‘object’ of the acquaintance turns out to be none other than the ‘subject’, our primitive point of view upon the world, that for which there are any ‘objects’ for us at all. If this is so, it will be impossible fully to understand the Self in objective terms.⁴ So does Self-acquaintance represent a unique epistemic experience that shipwrecks the subject–object distinction and therefore demonstrates the untenability of dualistic conceptions?

Relatedly, towards the end of her book, Jonas tends to use the terms ‘experience of ineffability’ and ‘ineffable experience’ interchangeably. Is this tendency indicative of the shipwreck just mentioned? One contemporary philosopher has taken the vagueness and ambiguity in the phrase ‘what I experienced’, which could equally refer to the object of the experience as to the experience itself, as an indication that the distinction between subject and object is often ‘badly drawn’ in the experiential demesne.⁵ If, in Self-acquaintance, the ‘subject’ becomes the ‘object’ of an experience that shipwrecks the subject–object distinction, it would in that case seem quite natural to say that an ‘ineffable experience’ amounts to an ‘experience of ineffability’ and *vice versa*.

Ineffability and Its Metaphysics is a vital contribution to the recent revival of philosophical interest in ineffability. The book’s positive proposal will be of particular interest to philosophers of religion, especially those interested in the possibilities for constructive dialogue between theism and atheism.

² I argue for a similar view of the implications of religious experiences of ineffability from a Wittgensteinian perspective in my ‘Wittgensteinian Quasi-Fideism and Interreligious Communication’, forthcoming in G. Andrejč & D. Weiss (eds), *Wittgenstein and Interreligious Encounter* (Leiden: Brill, forthcoming).

³ J. Dewey, J. and A. F. Bentley, *Knowing and the Known*, at <https://www.aier.org/sites/default/files/Files/Documents/Standard/KnowingKnownFullText.pdf> [accessed 27th June, 2016], 187.

⁴ Cf. M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 105. Here, Merleau-Ponty is arguing against the objectification of the body, which is in some ways quite unlike Jonas’s ‘Self’; it is a less primitive entity, for example. But we should be reluctant to objectify the Self for the very same reason: “[i]n so far as it sees or touches the world, my body can...be neither seen nor touched. What prevents its ever being an object...is that it is that by which there are objects.”

⁵ David E. Cooper, ‘Ineffability and Religious Experience’, in A. de Nicolás and E. Moutsopoulos (eds), *God: Experience or Origin?* (New York: Paragon House, 1985), 189–99, on 197.

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