

2017

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Link to published article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65900-8_6

APA Citation

Palmquist, S. (2017). Is There a Logic of the Ineffable? Or, How Is it Possible to Talk About the Unsayable?. *Contemporary Debates in Negative Theology and Philosophy*, 71-80. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65900-8_6

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Is There A Logic of the Ineffable?

Or, How Is It Possible to Talk about the Unsayable?

Stephen Palmquist

Is there a *logic* that governs the unsayable? In this chapter, I will propose and defend a single, fixed, definite answer to this question. Additionally, I will argue that there can be no other answer than this so long as one chooses to view the many and varied attempts to talk about the ineffable as exercises that are both coherent and also in some way conveyers of meaning. As a point of entry into this debate, I will focus on William Franke's *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*¹ and the single claim I shall defend as *the* answer to the question posed in my title, is: "Yes, and no. *Or* yes-but-not-yes. *And/or* yes-no."

While it might seem to the uninitiated as if I am merely playing with words, I am quite serious in making three assertions. First, this answer is *definite* and *singular* (though it admittedly consists of at least three distinct parts). Second, it is the only *possible* answer one can state to the question as posed. And third, my answer to the question does not preclude the option of giving no answer whatsoever—i.e., of remaining silent. For, as clarified by the *subtitle*, the question makes no assumptions about whether or not one *must* talk about the ineffable in order to understand it. Wittgensteinean silence in the face of the ineffable may well be not only possible but perhaps even superior to writing

¹ William Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2014).

articles and books about the unsayable that claim to convey something meaningful about it. Be that as it may, my concern in this essay is to identify the basic principles that make it possible to *talk* (or write) meaningfully about what cannot be said.

What must be stated as clearly as possible, therefore, right at the outset of any inquiry such as this one, is that the subject-matter we are discussing is linguistic, due to the undeniable fact that we are *talking* about it, even though what we are talking *about* is *contra*-linguistic. That is, the subject matter of the unsayable is, by definition, the realm of human experience that defies explanation in human language; it is the set of experiences that, try as we might, we cannot adequately express in words. So the question I am posing here can be most concretely expressed as follows: when we nevertheless *talk about* that unsayable realm of human experience, does our form of discourse take on a set of characteristics that can be reduced to a logical form? Once again, my single definite answer to this question is: “Yes, and no. *Or* yes-but-not-yes. *And/or* yes-no.”

Funny though this answer may seem, I can seriously affirm that it is not intended as a joke—or at least, not primarily so. That we may find the single definite answer to our question to be somewhat humorous, however, does have implications for the entire project that Franke and so many others who attempt to write about that which cannot be said have undertaken. I will return to these implications at the end of this chapter.

If we take seriously the (admittedly humorous) fact that my question is about the logic of any attempt to say what cannot be said, then the easiest way to approach an assessment of my alleged answer—i.e., that the logic that governs any attempt to say what cannot be said is precisely “Yes, and no; *or* yes-but-not-yes; *and/or* yes-no”—will be to consider first the standard, time-honored answer to the related question: What is the

logic of any attempt to say what *can* be said? For that question, the most obvious place to turn is to Aristotelian logic.

One need not go further than the most basic Introduction to Logic textbook to learn that the most fundamental basis for human linguistic communication rests on the interrelationship between three basic logical laws, often called the law of *identity*, the law of *contradiction*, and the law of the *excluded middle*. (Following fairly standard philosophical practice, I shall refer to the second of these as the law of *noncontradiction*, for reasons that will soon become clear. For now, let it suffice to say that the proper name for this law should reflect what the law accomplishes: it shows us how *not* to contradict ourselves.) Reducing the three laws to their most basic logical form, we can express them as: “ $A=A$ ” (i.e., a thing is what it is); “ $\neg(A\wedge\neg A)$ ” (i.e., a thing and its negation cannot both pertain at the same time and in the same respect); and “ $A\vee\neg A$ ” (i.e., something either is or is not).²

In order to understand the claim I am making about the *logic* of any attempt to talk about the ineffable, I must make one crucial adjustment to the standard Aristotelian laws. Whereas Aristotle portrayed his three laws as *universal*, covering *all* coherent, meaningful uses of language whatsoever, I claim that his laws properly apply only to one of the two main ways that human beings have of using language—namely, to talk about what *can* be said (i.e., to use words *literally*, to refer to knowable phenomena). To signify

² Although this is the standard way of expressing the law of noncontradiction in the literature, I normally express it using the simpler (but technically less precise) formula, “ $A\neq\neg A$ ”. For my previous defense of synthetic logic, together with an explanation of why I prefer the simpler version of the formula, see Chapters 4 and 5 of my book, *The Tree of Philosophy: A course of introductory lectures for beginning students of philosophy*⁴ (Hong Kong: Philopsychy Press, 2000 [1992]).

that Aristotle's three laws do not apply to all language whatsoever but only to the way of using language that keeps itself within these strict limits, I will refer to them as the laws of *analytic* logic. Anytime we use language in an attempt to *analyze* the constituent parts of what can be parsed, these three laws determine the formal requirements for how our language derives its meaning; indeed, they must be followed by anyone who wants their words to be taken as *literally* true and self-consistent.³

The twofold claim that is the basis of this essay—that the ineffable has a logic and that its logical form can be understood by regarding “Yes, and no; *or* yes-but-not-yes; *and/or* yes-no” as a definite answer to the question of its existence—similarly applies only to one realm of human discourse. I will refer to the logic of that realm as *synthetic* logic. With this in mind, let us now proceed to examine each of the component parts of my answer to the question at hand.

Is there a logic of the ineffable? The first part of my three-in-one answer is: “Yes, and no”. The “yes” component of this part of the answer will be justified if it turns out that the answer I am now in the process of explaining does correctly describe the logic of the ineffable. However, even if I succeed in offering a persuasive explanation, the answer will *also* be “no”, because, as will soon become apparent, if it is not already all-too-blatantly so, what this logic governs is not the ineffable *as such*, but any attempt to *talk coherently about* the ineffable. As Franke so powerfully adumbrates in his book, the

³ As we shall see, the qualifier “literally” is crucial here. My statement about the laws of analytic logic is by no means meant to exclude the possibility of paraconsistent logics, such as the fine work Graham Priest has done on dialetheism. (See, for example, G. Priest, R. Routley, and J. Norman (eds.), *Paraconsistent Logic: Essays on the Inconsistent* (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1989).) Quite to the contrary, my purpose in labeling Aristotelian logic as *analytic* is precisely to make room for an opposing type of logic that governs the inconsistent.

unsayable is by definition something that cannot be said, so when we talk about it, we are not, in fact, talking *about it* in any literal sense; rather, we are, at best, *evoking* a form of experience, an experience that is what it is even though, insofar as it is ineffable, it can never be put into words.

To avoid equivocation, it seems that we must regard this “yes, and no” part of our answer as referring either to the ineffable *itself* or to our attempts to *talk about* the ineffable. Or do we? Intentionally answering the question in an equivocal way (“yes *and* no”) has evoked an insight that is crucial to a proper understanding of the logic of the ineffable: the only way (or, at least, one very good way) to justify any attempt to talk about something that, in itself, cannot be talked about is to do so with the aim of *evoking a new insight*; and the resulting insight (if it is a genuine insight) must *participate* in the realm of the unsayable even though it is expressed in words. That is, the reference to language that is inherent in the “yes” component of the first answer is *required*, if the result of our investigation is to produce an actual *logic* of the ineffable (for if it is not about language, then it is not a logic!), yet the exclusion of language that is inherent in the “no” component of the first answer is *also* required, if the result of our investigation is to be about the *ineffable*, and not *merely* about a playful but meaningless form of words. To put this point more succinctly: this first part of our three-in-one answer entails that the logic of the ineffable must *intentionally equivocate*, and must do so for the purpose of *evoking an insight*.

Importantly, this first part of my threefold answer, the “yes, and no”, exhibits a form that is precisely the opposite of Aristotle’s second law of analytic logic. Whereas we must take great pains to ensure, when talking about the *sayable*, that when we say “A”

we do *not* mean “-A” (for to mean both would be to contradict ourselves), when we talk about the *unsayable*, we must take equal care to ensure that when we say “A” we *do* also mean “-A”. For if we *only* mean “A” when we say “A”, then we are talking literally about the *sayable*, not symbolically, about the *unsayable*! The first law of synthetic logic, therefore, must be understood as diametrically opposed to the Aristotelian law of (*non*)contradiction. This first law can quite determinately be called the law of *contradiction*: in synthetic logic, we must *affirm* “ $A \wedge \neg A$ ”, which we can do only if somehow “ $A = \neg A$ ” is true (cf. note 2). In my initial statement of the logic of the ineffable I expressed this, perhaps somewhat cryptically (but therefore, *all the more accurately*, as far as synthetic logic is concerned) as “yes, *and* no”.

At this point let me make an important clarification. Aristotle is very explicit in arguing that the basic laws of analytic logic assume that the components being related by each law must be regarded as being true *at the same time* and *in the same respect*. In other words, if we can *demonstrate* that an apparent contradiction is based on an equivocation, then we can account for the truth of the proposition without ever genuinely straying from the laws of analytic logic. In the foregoing example, there is no need to appeal to synthetic logic *if* we know in advance that the “yes” side of the first answer refers to a linguistic structure while the “no” side does not. A paradox is only paradoxical for as long as we are *unable* to translate what seems at first to be a case of synthetic logic into a case of analytic logic. That is, a paradox is *resolved* if the contradiction proves not to be a contradiction after all, but rather to be an unnoticed equivocation based on a conflation of perspectives; and a paradox becomes an out-and-out contradiction (and must therefore be declared to be false) if its initial status as “apparent” turns out to be

absolute. In other words, the first law of synthetic logic (the law of contradiction) issues a challenge: if you want to evoke an insight into the ineffable, then *appear to contradict yourself*.

But this first law comes with a dual warning: do not *actually* contradict yourself, or your attempt to evoke the ineffable may have disastrous consequences; and if the insight evoked by your paradoxical words can be translated into analytic logic *without remainder*, then (noble and well-meaning though your words may be) you have not *actually* evoked the ineffable but have merely played with words. Synthetic logic is a *logic of the ineffable* only insofar as it guides us to create linguistic formulations that are so rich in meaning that they will *never* be able to be translated into analytic logic *without remainder*. That is, a genuine use of synthetic logic is one that continues to evoke new and unforeseen insights, even if *some* of the insights it evokes may be translatable into analytic terms. As for the remainder, we can experience it only in silence.

The second part of my answer, “*or yes-but-not-yes*” is, as should now be readily apparent, the negation of Aristotle’s first law. Just as Aristotle’s law of identity ensures that if we are talking about what is sayable then we must *always* mean “A” when we say “A”, this second law of synthetic logic requires us *not* to mean “A” when we utter “A” in an attempt to convey a coherent and meaningful truth about the *unsayable*. I therefore call this second law of synthetic logic the law of *non-identity*, or $A \neq A$. The definite answer I posed at the outset of this talk expresses this law as “yes-but-not-yes”.

A key problem in unpacking the implications of this second law of synthetic logic is to determine whether it, together with the analytic law that corresponds to it, specifies an ontological principle (namely, that a thing is—or is not—what it is) or a merely

linguistic principle (namely, that a given word must refer—or must not refer—to the same thing wherever it appears in the sentence). The latter is surely the *minimum* that Aristotle’s law requires, though he also applied it ontologically, to argue that when we say that a thing has a feature (named “A”), we mean that the thing in question actually expresses the ontological reality (the A) to which that word refers. The corresponding law of synthetic logic, therefore, should entail that, when using words in an attempt to evoke an experience of the ineffable, we must *not* assume that a thing *is* the thing it appears to be, nor should we assume that a word we use to *refer* to a feature of that thing necessarily refers to that feature.

Franke’s instructive work on the unsayable contains examples of expressions that illustrate one or both of these two laws of synthetic logic on nearly every page, but one example of each will suffice for our purposes here. First, he points out that in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* Shakespeare’s Bottom “says over and over again...what cannot be said.”⁴ This claim can only be properly understood by a reader who recognizes that Franke is *intentionally equivocating*, in order to evoke insight in the reader. Likewise, he later states that “the One...cannot even be said unequivocally to be One.”⁵ Again, this claim can convey its intended meaning accurately and successfully only if we (the readers) take the words to mean that the author is intentionally identifying the unidentifiable. One who reads such statements solely with Aristotle’s laws of identity and non-contradiction in mind is bound to be befuddled and therefore *blocked* from experiencing any deep truth that may be revealed in these seemingly contradictory words.

⁴ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, pp.13-14.

⁵ Franke, *A Philosophy of the Unsayable*, p. 145.

By contrast, if we interpret the first quote as an expression of the law of contradiction (i.e., as referring to the fact that Bottom's words frequently refer to an A that is *also* not A, and serve the purpose of evoking an insight about the ineffable) and the second quote as an expression of the law of non-identity (i.e., that when we say "One" in our talk about the ineffable, we often refer to what at the same time "*is not One*"), then the path to insight is flung wide open. While narrow-minded adherents of strictly analytic logic might scoff at the meaninglessness of such explicitly paradoxical expressions, anyone with an openness to the meaningfulness of synthetic logic will treat such statements as challenges to *experience* the ineffable so that relevant insights may emerge.

What role, then, is played by the third part of my answer, "*And/or yes-no*"? This statement negates Aristotle's law of the excluded middle, affirming instead that when we talk about the ineffable, we are *compelled* to assume what I call the law of the *included* middle. This law ensures that, between any two opposite terms, a space always exists for a middle term that *is* neither A nor -A on its own; it may be either *both* at once (as the law of contradiction already permits) or *neither* (as implied by the law of non-identity). That is, we are no longer required to affirm "A∨-A", as the law of the excluded middle would suggest, because we are now somehow affirming *both* sides of the equation in one unified whole. This, of course, amounts to saying that the thing we are talking about is an utter mystery according to our normal linguistic and conceptual frameworks. And that is precisely what is affirmed, over and over, by all those who use words *meaningfully* to talk about the unsayable. This, I take it, is the gist of Franke's critique of Hegel: even though his dialectical logic bore a striking resemblance to the first two laws of synthetic logic, Hegel refused to admit that the Absolute of which he spoke is not the ultimately

Rational (and thus knowable), but is ultimately mysterious. Indeed, *if* we can affirm it at all (using words), Hegel's Absolute Spirit would have to be regarded as the ultimate linguistic experience of Mystery.

Incidentally, the conjunctions used in my initial answer are also quite specific. When talking about the sayable, we must always take care to abide by *all three* of Aristotle's laws of analytic logic. Those who talk about the unsayable, by contrast, may select just one of two main paths, typically called the "way of affirmation" and the "way of negation"—though writers who choose one of these paths almost always *also* choose the other at some point, taking the two quite distinct approaches to be complementary. The first employs analogical thinking to *affirm* that some A is equal to something that is quite distinct from and perhaps even opposite to A; that is, the way of affirmation entails describing the ineffable by means of linguistic constructions that are ultimately grounded on the law of contradiction ("A and not-A are both the case") in order to impose symbolic meanings onto things or experiences that would otherwise be quite ordinary and literally describable. For example, God may be called a "father" even though saying this does *not* mean that God literally *is* a father. The way of negation, by contrast, employs more literal, quasi-analytical thinking to deny that any A is actually A—a clear application of the law of non-identity. Thus, God's existence, when understood according to the way of negation, *is not* a form of existence that requires us to affirm that God (literally) "exists". Recognizing the reciprocity between the two laws of synthetic logic helps us to understand why, in the apophatic tradition, the ways of affirmation and negation are nearly always seen as *complementary*, even though they use words in quite different and seemingly incompatible ways.

Technically, these time-honored “ways” are logically distinct (hence my use of “or” between the first and second parts of my threefold answer); one who wishes to talk about the unsayable must choose one or the other at any given time. Yet, paradoxically, what one ends up saying in each case can also be portrayed as *the same*—namely, as a “yes-no” paradox that is both affirmation and negation at the same time. This, of course, cannot be the case according to the analytic logic that applies to what can be said. Yet, when we are talking synthetically and symbolically about what cannot be said, it most literally *is* the case. That is, even though the ways of affirmation and negation must be kept quite distinct from each other when talking about the unsayable, they both equally depend on *inclusive* thinking. As such, the mystery of inclusion can work together with both affirmation and negation, *or* with just one of the two, in order to generate meaningful talk about the ineffable. Indeed, writers often do this when they appeal to mystery in a statement that (other than the appeal) employs analytic logic to make a statement about the unsayable. Thus, for example, Kant repeatedly states that the thing in itself is *unknowable* (cf. the way of negation), yet elsewhere feels free to affirm that the form of causality that is appropriate to it is *not* spatio-temporal but an analogical causality of *freedom* (cf. the way of affirmation).

Let me summarize my central claim as clearly as possible. Ironic though it may seem, a clear grasp of the logical basis for our use of words is *just as important* when talking about the *unsayable* as it is when talking about the *sayable*. Once we realize that the former is merely the negation of the latter—that the fixed laws of synthetic logic can be readily defined, simply by stating the opposites of the laws of analytic logic—the clarity and forcefulness of our talk about the unsayable can be enhanced.

In conclusion, I suggest that the universality of *humor* among language users is arguably the best evidence that talk about the unsayable has a logic. For, as I have argued elsewhere, the logic of humor is also grounded on the same laws of synthetic logic that govern our talk about the unsayable.⁶ This, I maintain, is why anyone who is open to the transcendent is bound to find talk about the unsayable as incredibly *funny*, yet without in the least disrespecting its profound meaningfulness in the process.

⁶ “透視悖論--說謊者的幽默指南” (Chinese translation of “Paradox in Perspective: A Liar’s Guide to Humor”), in 拒絕再 Hea—真理與意義的追尋 (*No More Hanging Around—The Quest for Truth and Meaning*) (Hong Kong: 次文化 [Subculture Limited], 2013), pp.37-44.