

Silvia Jonas. *Ineffability and its Metaphysics: The Unspeakable in Art, Religion and Philosophy*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2016. 226 pp. \$99.00 (hbk).

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In this ambitious and lucidly argued book, Silvia Jonas proposes a general metaphysical explanation for non-trivial and philosophically interesting cases of ineffable experience or insight. Non-trivial cases of ineffability, she supposes, are those in which “there seems to be something meaningful and important lurking behind the linguistic barrier” (3). Apparently ineffable insights or experiences of this sort, Jonas suggests, are commonly reported in art, philosophy and religion. Thus, in aesthetic experiences people often report that artworks seem to convey a significance that in principle defies linguistic expression. Many philosophers following in the train of Plotinus or Hegel have likewise supposed that whatever is metaphysically ultimate must in principle be the sort of thing that is beyond the reach of word and concept. Finally, various religious traditions have held either that their ultimate object of religious reverence is itself ineffable or that there is a kind of mystical knowledge or experience of that object that is necessarily inexpressible. Even within this range of cases centering on phenomena that seem both important and unsayable, Jonas’s subject matter is narrower still. Her proposed explanation extends only to those non-trivial cases of ineffable aesthetic, philosophical or religious phenomena that are “philosophically interesting,” i.e., cases where the relevant ineffable insight or experience cannot be alternatively explained by a) some contingent lack of knowledge that might possibly be remedied (“nescience”), b) physical limitations on finite human knowers, or c) a category mistake or logical impossibility (4-6).

Jonas dismisses each of these three explanations as uninteresting either because it poses no philosophical mystery or else because it is explicable in terms extrinsic to the subject or object of ineffable insight or experience. To be philosophically interesting in her usage thus means that there be some mystery generated by cases of ineffability that stands in need of philosophical explanation, and further that the explanation in question is due to an intrinsic feature of the subject or object that generated the ineffable experience or insight. However, both criteria seem to me dubious indicators of whether a phenomenon merits philosophical attention or not. It is by no means obvious that only intrinsic, and not relational or extrinsic causes merit philosophical interest, and she nowhere offers an argument justifying that claim. With respect to her criterion of mysteriousness, ineffability due to nescience, human finitude or category mistake may nevertheless generate mysteries about what

sort of particular relation between knower and known gives rise to the experience, or about the nature and source of the value that the knower places upon ineffable experiences of that sort. Religious mystics, for example, have often attributed their ineffable experiences to human finitude in the face of an infinite object, and they often explain the religious value they place upon their ineffable experiences in terms of paradoxes or category mistakes that are explicitly endorsed as such (unknowable knowledge, luminous darkness, etc.). Do the phenomena reported by these mystics in fact merit the explanatory appeals to finitude and category mistake made by their subjects? What is the best way to analyze such appeals? Surely these are philosophically interesting questions, but Jonas rules them out as such a priori. Her support for the claim that cases of nescient, finite, and logical ineffability are philosophically trivial derives entirely from her use of trivial examples over more interesting candidates such as that of e.g., mystical experience. But it does not follow from the triviality of the examples she chooses to cite that the relevant class of phenomena is also trivial.

In carving out her subject matter, therefore, Jonas appears to conflate what falls within the scope of her interest with what is a legitimate candidate for serious philosophical attention *per se*. This does not detract from the significant contributions she makes for our understanding the phenomena that interests her. But her tendency to present the theoretical options she has chosen to consider as if those were the only viable theoretical options available to us is a recurring problem throughout the book, and in fact a structuring feature of it. In the remainder of the review I'll therefore offer both a sketch and a critical evaluation of the book's overarching rhetorical and logical structure before homing in on the constructive theory of ineffability Jonas commends in the final chapter. This will prevent me from engaging the many creative theoretical stances on ineffability that Jonas stakes out and attacks throughout much of the book. But my selectivity in this regard should not give the reader the impression that these chapters are not worth reading. On the contrary, I think that her formulations of the many views she rejects are worth the price of the book (and it is an expensive book).

In Chapter 1, after narrowing her interest to those non-trivial cases of ineffable insight or experience and ruling out explanations of finitude, nescience and category mistake, Jonas proposes a taxonomy of possible explanations. Any instance of non-trivial ineffable phenomenon, she says, might be due either to 1) some object or property that gives rise to that phenomenon; or 2) the experiential or cognitive content of that phenomenon; or 3) the propositional structure in which that content is embedded; or 4) the subject's way of knowing that phenomenon. Of course, on most analyses of objects/properties, contents, propositions, and knowledge those concepts are overlapping and not mutually exclusive. For example, both knowledge and propositions have content, propositions can be objects of knowledge, etc. But they nevertheless can be mutually exclusive and logically distinct *explainers* of ineffability. It may be an object or property that *makes* a phenomenon ineffable as opposed to any way of knowing it, or any proposition about it or mental content involving it. Similarly, it may be that what makes a phenomenon ineffable is a particular sort of mental content, rather than the object or property being represented by that content, or the propositional structure in which that content is embedded or any way of

knowing it. Or it may be that ineffable experiences or insights are generated by certain kinds of propositional structure rather than the content it structures, or any objects/properties that figure into its content, or any unique way of knowing that propositional structure. Finally, it could be that ineffable experiences or insights arise not from any unique class of object/properties, kind of mental contents or propositional structure, but rather from a unique way of knowing certain objects/properties, contents, or propositions.

This is a tremendously useful framework of analysis for explainers of ineffability, and one that seems to me to succeed in naming both logically distinct and mutually exhaustive sources of explanation. The trouble comes primarily in the way that she makes use of the taxonomy to argue for her own preferred explanation, according to which (spoiler alert) ineffable experiences or insights arise not from objects/properties, contents, or propositions, but from a particular way of knowing. Jonas proposes to arrive at her favored view by elimination. Thus, after stipulating her use of key terms in Chapter 2, she proposes to identify and rule out every plausible theory of non-trivial ineffability grounded in object/properties (Chapter 3), propositions (Chapter 4), mental content (Chapter 5) and most theories grounded in knowledge (Chapter 6), thus funneling us to the particular knowledge-theory that she endorses as the only viable alternative left standing (Chapter 7). Moreover, each of these chapters individually employs the same sort of elimination strategy that is employed in the broader structure of the book. Thus, for example, her argument against ineffable objects/properties in Chapter 3 she says that if an object is what makes an experience or insight ineffable, then it is either in virtue of some property it has, or in virtue of lacking any properties. In the former case the property in question must be a haecceity (an individual essence), while in the latter case the object must be a bare particular. But, since neither haecceities nor bare particulars are viable metaphysical explainers, they cannot serve to ground ineffable experiences or insights (71). Therefore, we must reject object/property explanations of ineffability and look elsewhere, say to content-theories. Every chapter proceeds similarly, by surveying what Jonas regards as the most plausible theory choices under the relevant theory-type, systematically excluding each plausible theory of that type, and closing with a handy flow-chart showing the available options and most decisive objections confronting each one before moving on to the next theory-type until we work our way to knowledge-explanations and finally her self-knowledge explanation.

As I've already mentioned, I found Jonas's identifications and attacks of a host of candidate object, proposition, content and knowledge theories extremely valuable for getting various advocates of ineffability to think through the implications of their claims and detractors to take those claims more seriously. But despite the apparently rigorous structure of elimination, there always remains a wide swath of theories in the literature on ineffability that fall outside the narrow range of theories that Jonas constructs and rejects. In fact, many of her candidate theories do not engage the literatures on (especially) aesthetic or religious ineffability at all. Rather than citing any actual proponents of the views she rejects, she proceeds largely by constructing novel theories on behalf of advocates of the aesthetes, religious thinkers, and philosophers she cites, drawing upon conceptual resources from contemporary analytic metaphysics. Thus, for example, while citing Plotinus, Kant and Hegel on the

notion of ineffable objects/properties, Jonas does not attempt to retrieve their own conceptual frameworks for that notion or engage any contemporary philosophers who do. Instead she proposes her own rehabilitation of the notion of an ineffable property of “absoluteness” in terms of the haecceity in virtue of which the Absolute is absolute, i.e., the non-qualitative property of “thisness” that purports to mark out the Absolute from everything else (60). With the “haecceity of the Absolute” now standing in for the property in virtue of which it purports to be ineffable, she can then turn her criticisms of the very idea of haecceities against the theory she has constructed on behalf of Plotinus, Kant and Hegel. But on this reconstruction, it is not anything’s being the Absolute or even being the haecceity *of the Absolute* that explains its ineffability, but rather its having a haecceity per se, since for any object if it has a non-qualitative individuating property then that property will be ineffable, whether we are talking about the Absolute or my grandmother. Arguably this weak connection between an ineffable property and the importance of the object that bears it makes a haecceity-theory more philosophically uninteresting than any of the three theory-types that Jonas had earlier dismissed. In any case, it surely is not an acceptable gloss on the Hegelian or Plotinian theories, whose notions of ineffability are generated not by any commitment to the existence of haecceities in general but rather by their particular commitment to the Absolute or the One (respectively).

My point, however, has less to do with Hegel or Plotinus and more to do with the logical or rhetorical function of Jonas’s argument strategy. By ruling out ineffable objects or properties grounded narrowly in metaphysical commitments to haecceities or bare particulars, she seems to take herself to have furnished us reasons to reject the very idea of an ineffable object/property altogether. Subsequent chapters make similar claims regarding proposition-theories, content-theories and knowledge-theories. But it stretches all credulity to claim to have “consecutively ruled out possible candidates for an explanation of ineffability” (174) simply by ruling out the particular set of theories she constructs and then rejects. At best, she will only have ruled out a handful of theories across the four possible theory-types in her taxonomy. To support the stronger claim, she would need to provide reasons to think that her selected theories can or should stand in for all possible theories of the relevant type. Thus, for example, she would need to show that all possible theories of ineffable properties ontologically commit us to haecceities. But claims of that sort seem patently unsupportable. To defend a deductive argument for her conclusion, Jonas would have to show that her finite set of theories of non-trivial ineffability logically entail all possible theories of non-trivial ineffability. We might therefore interpret her proposed argument structure more charitably not as deductive but rather as a kind of inference to the best explanation, with the theories she eliminates representing their respective theory-types not by entailing or implying them, but more loosely by being more likely to be true than alternatives theories of the relevant types. Her conclusion would therefore also be a probabilistic one, that of all the theories that have the best chance of being correct, her preferred theory is likely to be the only possible alternative to those that she has decisively refuted. But why should we believe that her candidate theories are more likely to be true than all of their *possible* rivals, when Jonas does not even engage much of the literature on their *actual* rivals? We’re not told. And how can we know that she has eliminated a

sufficient number of possible or plausible theoretical options to significantly raise the probability of her preferred view? Here again a crucial premise is both extremely doubtful and yet it isn't so much as addressed. Her argumentative funnel is still too leaky on all sides to move us toward her view.

Perhaps, however, we can read the book not as carving a path to the site where she will stake her claim, but rather as surveying some new theoretical territory. While much more modest, this is also a much more fruitful way to appreciate Jonas's arguments, I think. But it is one that is at cross purposes with her explicitly stated strategy of theory-elimination and its concern to construct and endorse a single normative theory and this produces an ineliminable sense of incoherence. The endorsement of a preferred theory leads us to expect an overall structure arguing in favor of that theory but, as we've seen, the eliminative strategy for guiding us to that theory is radically incomplete. On the other hand, a creative exploration of novel theories of ineffability leads us to expect openness to these alternatives, but instead we are given novel constructions of theories presented only for the sake of rejecting them, alongside a preferred theory which derives little or no direct evidentiary support from the incorrectness of the theories she's rejected. Read either way, then, the book as a whole appears to have a coherence problem that makes it difficult to engage its many arguments in a standard review. For while each chapter contains many creative and insightful arguments that merit serious engagement, I find myself not only without adequate space to discuss them all, but also without any plausible criteria for selecting which ones are most central to the overall argument of the book. This seems to me a strong sign that it would have been better suited to publication in the form of individual articles.

If we set the elimination strategy to one side, however, and focus instead on the general interest in articulating a theory of non-trivial ineffability, then it makes most sense to take up the theory Jonas endorses, which comes in the last chapter. Non-trivial ineffability, she claims, is a species of ineffable knowledge, and more particularly, a kind of self-knowledge. Jonas's theory consists in five claims. First, that there exists such a thing as a Self as a primitive reference point for self-indexical ascriptions of properties. Suppose you fear intimacy, and we both know it. The difference between *your* knowing it and my knowing it is that your knowledge has a first-personal referent as the bearer of the property ascribed, that of fearing intimacy. Second, it is possible to have a phenomenal knowledge of acquaintance with one's Self. In other words, there is something it is qualitatively like for one's Self to become an object of one's conscious awareness or experience, even if the relevant experience is non-sensory in character. You can fear intimacy without knowing that you do, but once you do come to know it, what you come to know is something about a first-personal referent. Third, all phenomenal knowledge, including the phenomenal knowledge of one's acquaintance with one's Self, is ineffable, incapable of being communicated to another by any linguistic expression. I may know what it is like to fear intimacy, but I cannot know what it is like to be the referent of *your* first-personal knowledge of fearing it, and no linguistic expression on your part could possibly impart that knowledge to me. Fourth, first-personal phenomenal knowledge seems to its knower to be particularly important because its referent — one's Self — is paradigmatically important to its possessor. Fifth, the metaphysics of ineffability for

the candidate phenomena of religious, philosophical and aesthetic experience or insight can all be explained in terms of Self-acquaintance (167).

Jonas attempts to offer some support for each of these five claims, but it is the last that does most of the work for her account. Let's therefore grant for the sake of argument that the first four claims are correct. Still, why suppose that all apparently ineffable aesthetic, religious or philosophical experiences or insights can be explained in terms of the phenomenal knowledge of the Self? Literally the only reason she cites is one that we've already cast doubt upon above, namely that there are (plausibly, probably) no other viable alternatives to the theories she's already eliminated (174-5). We've seen that this claim is almost certainly false or at any rate Jonas offers no reason to suppose it is true. Still, even if it were true it would at best supply us with an entirely extrinsic reason for considering the merits of her Self-acquaintance theory. It would no more establish the merits of that theory than finding the last person on Earth would establish his or her merits as a potential life partner. One might still reasonably remain single. If we are to endorse her theory, then, we will have to do it on the intrinsic merits of the theory itself. What makes it a good explainer for philosophical, religious and aesthetic phenomena of ineffability? Unfortunately, judged in this light, several difficulties are apparent. I'll mention two.

Jonas's proposed explanation does not succeed in explaining the paradigmatic sorts of cases she cites. She began the book by marking out experiences or insights of non-trivial ineffability as phenomena in which something particularly important seems to lurk behind the linguistic barrier. The importance in question, moreover, is the importance of a particular sort of insight or experience, in the relevant cases a religious, philosophical, or aesthetic insight or experience. But compare the case of my first-personal phenomenal knowledge of myself as, say, enjoying communion with God, with that of, say, realizing I've had too much coffee. It has seemed to me that I've had ineffable experiences or insights of communion with God, even while it has not seemed to me that my realization of having had too much coffee furnished me with an ineffable insight or experience. But both cases necessarily involve phenomenal self-knowledge, which suggests that self-knowledge of that sort is an insufficient explainer of the paradigmatic case of religious ineffability, even if it is a necessary feature of any good explanation. We may grant that both cases involve the experience of a Self that I value or regard as important, but we are not at all helped to see why I regard the ineffability of the religious case as important and not the other case. Recall that Jonas proposes to explain phenomena in which "there *seems to be* something meaningful and important lurking behind the linguistic barrier" (3). But the coffee case, and scores of other Self-involving cases, involve no such seeming. Jonas seems to recognize that the notion of self-knowledge might offer a "common metaphysical ground" rather than as a unique explainer for "every individual ineffable experience" (184). Still, this not only falls short of her initial promise of an explanation for non-trivial ineffability, but it also fails to capture any common ground for its paradigmatic types as opposed to any other brand of first-personal phenomenal knowledge.

Suppose, however, that we grant that self-knowledge could somehow account for the appearance or seeming of important or meaningful ineffable insights or experiences. Jonas's theory would force us to say that in paradigmatic cases of non-trivial ineffability, the subjects of ineffable experiences or insights are almost always

mistaken about the source of their insights or experiences. Religious ineffability is not due, as one supposes, to one's experience of or insight about e.g., God, but is due instead to one's experience or insight about oneself. The ineffability of the religious experience derives entirely from the phenomenal self-knowledge it involves, and not uniquely from anything about its purported religious object (if one exists), or its religious content. So too for aesthetic and philosophical ineffability. "My insight isn't, or isn't merely about *myself*," the relevant subjects will insist, "but about God/this artwork/the Absolute!" But if the subjects of the relevant phenomena tend to ascribe their ineffable experiences or insights to an intentional object (whether real or illusory), then why endorse a theory that requires us to impugn that ascription? Jonas's proposed answers to this question strike me as unconvincing. First, she claims that mistaken ascriptions arise from the uncommonness of such experiences (176). But, particularly in aesthetic and religious cases, those who report common ineffable experiences tend to exhibit a stronger rather than weaker tendency to ascribe their experience to the relevant aesthetic or religious objects or content. Second, she supposes that our language for marking out the relevant referent of such experiences — the Self — belongs to the technical vocabulary of philosophy, making it unavailable to subjects of ineffable insight (*ibid.*). But this is unpersuasive insofar as there is a perfectly common notion of the self at play in ordinary first-personal experience. Moreover, Jonas's explanation leads us to expect the use of more common circumlocutions about the self to pick out the source of non-trivial ineffability; it does not lead us to expect what we find, which is a tendency to ascribe such experiences to intentional objects of a particularly, e.g., religious or aesthetic sort.

Perhaps, she suggests, it is the case that particular social and conceptual infrastructures predispose one toward self-acquaintance of a sort that is conducive to ineffable experiences or insights of self-knowledge, and subjects of ineffable phenomena thus wrongly associate their experiences or insights with these triggering contexts (177). While initially plausible, this still strikes me as a tenuous explanation. I don't like drinking milk outside of my house. I have a weird pathology about expiration dates or people drinking out of the bottle/carton. So I am predisposed only to wanting to drink milk at home. Still, I don't therefore exhibit any tendency to confuse the intentional object of my desire for milk for a desire to be at home. The confusion of an experience of or insight about myself with an experience of or insight about God, an artwork, or the Absolute is arguably of an even greater magnitude. So why should we think mere association of triggering circumstances are enough to trick us into radically misidentifying what our own experiences or insights really seem to us to be about?

Despite these worries about the overall argumentative strategy and positive proposal of the book, it remains a significant achievement in its canvassing of the logical space for a theory of ineffability and in its elaboration of theories that occupy hitherto uncharted corners of that logical space. It is required reading for anyone interested in exploring the nature and significance of ineffability, and particularly for those whose cast of mind skews toward analytic philosophy, where there remains comparatively little work on the subject.