

Theology for Equivocators¹

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Abstract: This essay concerns glut-theoretic theology. Glut-theoretic theists hold that God exists and that some statements about him are both true and false at once. Thus, glut-theoretic theology rejects the principle of semantic bivalence—that every statement is either true or false, never both—a pillar of classical propositional logic. Good theology, they argue, may require maintaining that a statement about God both is and is not the case. Though initially shocking, this view has ancient roots and new advocates in analytic theology. I offer two arguments here for a specific form of glut-theoretic theism: one novel, addressing paradoxes of classical metatheology; the other medieval, examining Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite’s glut-theoretic response to divine ineffability.

Keywords: Truth-Value Gluts, Nonclassical Logics, Liar Paradox, Divine Attributes, Religious Language, Medieval Philosophy of Religion

1. Orienting Remarks

This essay concerns glut-theoretic theology. Glut-theoretic theists hold that God exists and that some statements about him are both true and false at once. Thus, glut-theoretic theology rejects the principle of semantic bivalence—that every statement is either true or false, never both—a pillar of classical propositional logic. Good theology, they argue, may require maintaining that a statement about God both is and is not the case. Though initially shocking, this view has ancient roots and new

¹ For helpful comments and discussion on earlier versions of this essay and themes related to it, I express thanks to: Ron Avni, Jc Beall, Dan Bonevac, Sam Cantor, Henry Curtis, Josh Dever, Jim Hankinson, Rob Koons, Jon Litland, Joe Petraroli, Ross Preuss Greene, Justyn Smith, and my anonymous reviewers at *TheoLogica: An International Journal for Philosophy of Religion and Philosophical Theology*.

advocates in analytic theology.² I offer two arguments here for a specific form of glut-theoretic theism: one novel, addressing paradoxes of classical metatheology; the other medieval, examining Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite's glut-theoretic response to divine ineffability.

The form of glut-theoretic theism I aim to motivate is a gluttony version of classical theism, whose operative logical standard is the Logic of Paradox (LP). Before proceeding, I will explain what I mean by classical theism, how LP functions, and what it means for a discourse to operate under an alternative logical standard. Then we'll turn to the arguments

Classical theists hold that there is one God—the divinity of both the Abrahamic religions and “the philosophers.” God is a personal agent who is perfectly spiritual, free, simple, and essential (i.e., without accidental attributes); omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, omnipresent, omnitemporal; impeccable, impassable, incomprehensible, infallible; existing necessarily, transcendentally, and a se; and the creator, sustainer, and governor of all that exists (except himself).³ The arguments that follow each concern some of these attributes: the medieval paradox targets incomprehensibility, simplicity, aseity, and transcendence; the novel one, their collective selection.

Theists have traditionally assumed that theological discourse is (or should be) governed by classical propositional logic (CPL), but I propose evaluating it by the standards of the Logic of Paradox (LP) instead. To explain LP, we must first review CPL. As a model of rational discourse, CPL has two parts: syntax and semantics. Its syntax includes infinitely many atomic sentences ('p', 'q', 'r', etc.), two primitive connectives—negation ('~') and disjunction ('∨')—and three derived ones: conjunction ('∧'), conditional ('⊃'), and biconditional ('≡'). (Choosing negation and disjunction as primitives is conventional.) A sequence is well-formed if it satisfies three rules: (1) atomic sentences are well-formed; (2) if 'φ' is well-formed, so are '~φ', '(φ ∨ ψ)', '(φ ∧ ψ)', '(φ ⊃ ψ)', and '(φ ≡ ψ)'; and (3) nothing else counts as a statement. Together, these clauses inductively define all well-formed formulas of CPL.

The semantics of CPL assigns total functions from statements to truth-values, specifying the truth and falsity conditions of all complex expressions. These functions are typically defined by truth tables. CPL upholds semantic bivalence, maintaining exactly two mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive values—true and false. The semantics for negation and disjunction are as follows:

² See, e.g., Göcke (2016), Cotnoir (2017), Cotnoir (2019), Göcke (2021), Ahsan (2021), Ahsan (2022), and Bassford (2023).

³ Cf. Bittle (1953), Mawson (2019), and Fuqua and Koons (2023). Hereafter, I refer to this view simply as 'theism.'

$\sim$ CPL	
T	F
F	T

VCPL	T	F
T	T	T
F	T	F

So understood, conjunction is defined as $(\varphi \wedge \psi) = \sim(\sim\varphi \vee \sim\psi)$; conditionalization as $(\varphi \supset \psi) = (\sim\varphi \vee \psi)$; and biconditionalization as $(\varphi \equiv \psi) = ((\varphi \supset \psi) \wedge (\psi \supset \varphi))$. Truth-table rows then yield the valuations for complex statements. A semantics also specifies what follows from what by indicating which truth-values count as designated. A statement is a tautology if every admissible valuation assigns it a designated value; one statement implies another if every valuation assigning the first a designated value assigns the second one too. In CPL, the only designated value is truth, so φ implies ψ just in case, if φ is true, ψ is also true. Thus CPL validates familiar implication rules: explosion $(\varphi \wedge \sim\varphi) \models_{\text{CPL}} \psi$; disjunctive syllogism $\{(\varphi \vee \psi), \sim\varphi\} \models_{\text{CPL}} \psi$; modus ponens $\{(\varphi \supset \psi), \varphi\} \models_{\text{CPL}} \psi$; etc.

Like CPL, LP consists of two parts: syntax and semantics. It shares CPL's syntax, including the convention of taking negation and disjunction as primitive connectives. The difference lies in its semantics. Formally, LP is trivalent, recognizing three possible values a statement might possess: true, false, and both. This third value is not a foreign addition to CPL's scheme. While CPL's truth-values are {true, false}, LP evaluates sentences relative to the powerset of those values (excluding the null set), yielding {true}, {false}, and {true, false}. A statement assigned {true, false} (abbreviated B) is thereby both true and false—i.e., glutty. The truth tables for LP's connectives are as follows:

$\sim$ LP	
T	F
B	B
F	T

$\vee$ LP	T	B	F
T	T	T	T
B	T	B	B
F	T	B	F

Although LP and CPL appear to diverge in defining their connectives, the difference is only apparent. Assign truth the value 1, falsity the value 0, and both the value $\frac{1}{2}$, and negation and disjunction function identically in both systems: $v(\sim\varphi) = 1 - v(\varphi)$; and $v(\varphi \vee \psi) = \Delta(v(\varphi), v(\psi))$, where Δ selects the higher value of the disjuncts. Conjunction, conditionalization, and biconditionalization are defined as usual.⁴

⁴ Note, however, that LP can approximate modus ponens. If we generalize implication to allow one set of statements to imply another, then in LP $\{(\varphi \supset \psi), \varphi\}$ implies $\{\psi, (\varphi \wedge \sim\varphi)\}$ —meaning that

It is worth briefly noting one additional logical system: Strong Kleene (K3). K3 is just like LP except in two key respects. Like LP, it shares CPL's syntax, is trivalent, and defines its connectives analogously, substituting its own third value for LP's. The first difference lies in that third value. LP's truth-values form the powerset of CPL's values minus the null set, whereas K3's include the null set and exclude {true, false}. Thus, K3's values are {true}, {false}, and $\emptyset$, where $\emptyset$ (abbreviated N) represents being neither true nor false. The second difference concerns designated values. LP designates its third value; K3 does not. This distinction matters: in K3 there are no logical truths, and different inferences are valid than in LP. If LP suits glut-theoretic reasoning (some statements are both true and false), K3 suits gap-theoretic reasoning (some are neither). Gap-theory will reappear later, and we will assume its preferred logic is K3.⁵

Much more could be said about these logics, but this will suffice.⁶ What do I mean in saying that theists should let LP, rather than CPL, govern theological discourse? Minimally, to take a logic as governing a discourse is to do so normatively. Logic, whatever else it is, serves a normative role in rational practice. On one hand, it issues hypothetical commands: we must not reject one claim if we accept another that entails it. On the other, it issues categorical commands: e.g., we must not accept a statement of the form $(\varphi \wedge \sim\varphi)$. Most theists follow the latter rule, rejecting all such claims about God because CPL forbids them. I argue instead that theology should follow the hypothetical and categorical dictates of LP, where not all contradictions about God are ruled out. LP, being subclassical and paraconsistent, is weaker than CPL. Thus, the glut-theoretic theist, as I understand the position, favors weakening certain inferential norms of rational God-talk.

2. Metatheological Ambiguity

Now let's turn to the arguments supporting glut-theoretic theology. Both share the same basic structure: a paradox is presented, a glut-theoretic solution is offered as its best resolution, and, on this basis, glut-theoretic theology is shown to be acceptance-worthy. The first argument is partially inspired by Nagasawa's type-B

accepting the premises requires accepting ψ , $(\varphi \wedge \sim\varphi)$, or both. The resulting system, sometimes called LP+ (cf. Beall 2015), will not concern us further; I will continue speaking only of LP.

⁵ While my focus is theology governed by LP, note that LP and K3 combine to form First-Degree Entailment (FDE), which recognizes all four values—true, false, both, and neither—taking {true, false} as designated and $\emptyset$ as undesignated. For FDE-based theology, see Beall (2021) and Beall (2023).

⁶ For additional formal details, see Priest (1979), Beall and van Fraassen (2003, pt.3), Priest (2008, pt.1, chs.1, 7), and Sider (2010, ch.3).

theological paradoxes.⁷ To begin, let's briefly review Nagasawa's taxonomy of theological paradoxes. He divides paradoxes of God into three broad genera, here slightly generalized. A type-A paradox aims to show that theism is incoherent: citing just one theological doctrine, it uses logic and semantics to derive a contradiction. A type-B paradox aims to show that theism is internally inconsistent: citing more than one theological doctrine, along with logic, it derives a contradiction. And a type-C paradox aims to show that theism is externally inconsistent: citing at least one theological doctrine, one nontheological doctrine, together with logic, it derives a contradiction. Milne's infamous theological liar paradox is type A, citing only divine omniscience.⁸ The problem of evil is type C, citing several divine attributes and the existence of evil. The canonical type-B paradoxes involve apparently conflicting divine attributes. However, there is another variety of type-B paradox worth noting. Arguments that cite inconsistency among the divine attributes put pressure on theism's theological commitments, but an additional variety puts pressure on its metatheological commitments, as well. The dialectical significance of type-B paradoxes is that they offer defeasible but strong support for glut-theoretic theism, since glutty replies are often among the most plausible resolutions available.

The first kind of type-B paradox targets inconsistencies among the divine attributes. Theists describe God as possessing many omni-, im-/in-, and infinitary properties—being omniscient, impeccable, infinitely wise, and so on. Yet such a being appears logically impossible, since these descriptors are *prima facie* inconsistent by CPL standards.⁹ Omnipotence and omniscience are especially problematic: if God is omnipotent, he can do anything, including be mistaken; but if omniscient, he is epistemically impeccable and cannot be mistaken. Hence it is both possible and impossible for God to err—absurd. Likewise, if omnipotent, God can sin; if omnibenevolent, he cannot—again absurd. Recall also that God is eternal and simple. Could He cease to exist? Could he become complex? Further examples follow in the same vein.

The second kind of type-B paradox is partly inspired by Kvanvig's recent work on metatheological traditions.¹⁰ It probes more deeply into theism's conception of God, targeting the tradition's metatheology itself. Scripture says that Adam walked and spoke with God face-to-face; if so, he was in a better position to describe God than we are, who must do so at a distance. In general, every hypothesis about what God is like begins from at least one guiding principle—some intuition about what is

⁷ Nagasawa (2008); see also Cotnoir (2017) and Bassford (2023, ch.1).

⁸ See Milne (2007) for more on Milne's paradox.

⁹ Cf. Blumenfeld (1978).

¹⁰ Specifically, Kvanvig (2021a) and Kvanvig (2021b).

fundamental to God—from which a fuller description is then derived.¹¹ A metatheology is such a guiding principle. Theism's metatheology thus refers to the principle(s) from which its conception of God is generated and sustained. Kvanvig identifies three kinds of metatheology: perfect being, where God is the maximally perfect being; creator, where God is the supernatural first cause and designer; and worship-worthiness, where God is the being most deserving of worship and devotion. Contemporary theism incorporates elements of all three: a perfect being strand from Plato and the Abrahamic Platonists of late antiquity; a creator strand from Aristotle and the Abrahamic Aristotelians of the late Middle Ages; and a worship-worthiness strand from early Abrahamic religion. Yet these three metatheologies are *prima facie* inconsistent—giving rise to the second type-B paradox.

Here is a simplified account of theism's three metatheological traditions, presented in order of intellectual development.

- Early Abrahamicists conceived of God as a benevolent divine patriarch.¹² In this tradition, God is a god—an immortal, anthropic but superior being with interests and a distinctive psychology of his own. He is a father to humanity, where “father” carries deontic implications: humans owe God obedience, respect, and devotion; God owes humanity beneficence, support, and instruction. God is also a patriarch in ruling humanity (or a chosen people), functioning as a king within a theocratic order. Thus, early Abrahamicists spoke of God hypologically, praising Him through the superlative forms of paternal and royal virtues. From this metatheology flow attributes such as personhood, justice, love, providence, and might.
- Platonic Abrahamicists conceived of God as the Form of the Good. Plato posited a hierarchy of being—representations, objects, mathematical entities, Forms, and finally the Good, the highest ontic category (*Republic*, bk.6). Lower entities are less real, more material, dependent on higher ones, and exist in a state of becoming rather than being. Ethical and aesthetic predicates hold true only insofar as their subjects resemble the Good (*Symposium*). Identifying God with the Good, Platonist Abrahamicists portrayed Him as the immaterial, most fundamental, perfect being in virtue of which all goodness and beauty exist. From this tradition flow attributes such as immateriality, transcendence, aseity, unity, and simplicity.

¹¹ Cf. Peirce (2011).

¹² Cf. Stump (2016).

- Aristotelian Abrahamicists conceived of God as the First Cause of the cosmos. Aristotle argued for a first, total, organizing cause of all existence (Physics, bk.6). This First Cause is the designer, originator, and sustainer of everything: nothing could exist or persist without its causal influence. Within Aristotle's hylomorphic metaphysics, where all objects consist of matter (potentiality) and form (actuality), the First Cause must be purely formal (Metaphysics, bk.12). God is thus a being of pure actuality, existing necessarily and sustaining all that exists. From this metatheology flow attributes such as omnipresence, necessary existence, and omnipotence.

In this sense, it is said that God is the God of Abraham and the philosophers alike. To see how these metatheologies might be inconsistent, consider the distinctive attributes that flow from each approach. Should we think that God is transcendent? The Platonic tradition would have us think that he is. The Abrahamic tradition would have us think that he is not, but that he is rather never far from his followers and ready to engage in contingent acts of service on their behalf. And the Aristotelian tradition would have us think that he is omnipresent, and under no circumstances engaging in contingent acts of service for anyone in particular. Should we think that God is a person? Again, the Platonist tradition would suggest not; after all, in Plato's divided-line metaontology, numbers and Forms are not thought to be personal, and so we should not expect that the Good—that is, God—would be either. The Abrahamic tradition would certainly suggest that he is; as Leftow notes, worship is (intended to be) a communicative act, and so nothing is worship-worthy that is not personal, or at least person-like (e.g., an institution).¹³ And the Aristotelian tradition is again neutral on the subject, which explains why deists, like theists, have been inspired by causal and teleological arguments. Further instances can be generated. In some cases, the metatheologies complement one another such that one makes determinate what another leaves indeterminate; but in other cases, they collide. The divine-attribute type-B paradoxes, then, are merely a superficial effect—downstream consequences of deeper type-B paradoxes of traditional theological metatheology.

How should the theist resolve the type-B metatheological paradoxes? Two strategies are apparent. First, one might deny that any such inconsistencies exist. But this response faces extensional adequacy concerns, since all three metatheological traditions are well represented within the major Abrahamic religions—Judaism,

¹³ Leftow (2016).

Christianity, and Islam.¹⁴ Alternatively, one might adopt a purist stance, holding that at least two of the three metatheologies are false. This remains the most common, though not necessarily the most plausible, strategy, for all three metatheologies are *prima facie* intuitive—especially to anyone working within the Western theological tradition. Taking a purist stance comes at the cost of losing plausible grounds for maintaining that God has all the attributes we usually suppose he does. A third strategy, which I now propose, is to accept that some statements about God are both true and false. I see two ways to motivate such a resolution, both inspired by discussion in Lewis.¹⁵

Consider Belnap's inconsistent computer.¹⁶ Belnap has us imagine that we are designing an artificial information processor—a computer or computer program, similar to ChatGPT—intended to make quick and accurate deductions from the information it is fed. We might, for example, pose it a question and expect it to draw from all available data to produce sound inferences in response. However, since the computer is likely to be fed data from multiple sources, some of its data may be inconsistent. The question then arises: Should we program the machine to obey the norms of CPL? Belnap suggests that we should not. We should want the computer to resist combining inconsistent data from separate sources, since doing so could detonate explosion, undermining its ability to answer accurately even where no inconsistency exists. Belnap therefore proposes programming the machine with an alternative logic—one capable of quarantining contradictions that arise in its total dataset. One way to do this is by indexing the information entered into different inferentially isolated domains. Instead of simply registering ' φ ' or ' $\sim\varphi$ ', the processor would record ' $\langle\varphi, \text{source}_1\rangle$ ' and ' $\langle\sim\varphi, \text{source}_2\rangle$ '. It would thus operate analogously to an intensional logic. In Kripkean modal logic, for instance, a statement true at one world and false at another is not thereby both true and false at any single world. Just so, in our computer, unrestricted conjunction introduction would fail. Belnap's proposal seems sensible. It would require the computer to run on a relativistic logic, of the sort Aristotle attributes to Protagoras and critiques in the *Metaphysics* (bk.Γ), or perhaps on a "logic of inconsistency" like that sketched by Rescher and Brandom.¹⁷ Now, the theist is in a similar position to Belnap's computer. Theism appears informed by inconsistent metatheologies. One suggestion, then, is that the theist might follow Belnap's computer in maintaining a theology with an operative inferential framework capable of sourcing its

¹⁴ Cf. Rubenstein (2004).

¹⁵ See Lewis (1982).

¹⁶ See Belnap (2019).

¹⁷ See Rescher and Brandom (1980).

commitments and isolating them where inconsistent. The classical theist could then say, in one breath, that God is infinitely wise; in the second, that he is not wise; but not thereby be compelled, in a third breath, to say that he both is and is not wise — since unrestricted conjunction introduction fails in theological discourse. This sort of argument does not support a theology governed by LP, but it nonetheless supports one similar to it.¹⁸

I will, however, register a worry about this first glutty (or glut-theoretic-adjacent) proposal for resolving the type-B metatheological paradoxes. It seems to recommend that the theist voluntarily enter into a state of self-deception. Self-deceivers display curious behaviors, appearing to both believe and disbelieve the same statement at once. For example, they may say and seem sincerely to believe that φ , yet behave as though they believe $\sim\varphi$. The paradox of self-deception, then, is to explain how it is possible for a person to both believe and disbelieve the same statement simultaneously — to be both deceiver and deceived with respect to one and the same proposition.¹⁹ A common response, which seems right, is that the person's total belief-set is divided between two doxastically insulated subsets.²⁰ In asserting φ , the person relies on one belief-set; in acting on $\sim\varphi$, they rely on the other. Notice that Belnap's inconsistent computer is in just such a state. But self-deception is a form of motivated irrationality, and inducing oneself into a state of motivated irrationality is no way to rationally resolve a paradox — otherwise a lobotomy would be the universal solution to every paradox, and it is not.

The second way to motivate a glutty resolution to the type-B paradoxes takes inspiration from ambiguous logics.²¹ It is well known that ordinary languages are rife with ambiguity: a single phrase can denote diverse objects, and a single statement can express diverse propositions. On some interpretations, the statement may express a truth; on others, a falsity. In "Scrooge walked along the bank on his way to the bank," for instance, the term bank is synonymically ambiguous. It can refer either to a river embankment or to a financial institution. If Scrooge has just walked along the river to the institution, the statement is true when the first bank denotes the embankment and the second the institution, but false if the order is reversed or if the term is taken univocally. Suppose we know we are entering a dialectical context in which such ambiguity is pervasive and disambiguation largely impossible. Ambiguous logics are designed precisely for such cases, granting us the

¹⁸ For recent work on Belnap's computer, see also Middelburg (forthcoming).

¹⁹ Cf. Saunders (1975).

²⁰ Cf. Gardner (2007, pt.1).

²¹ Such as those sketched by Jaśkowski (1969) and Pinter (1980).

ability to reason as soundly as possible in the presence of pervasive semantic indeterminacy. They operate as follows (starting from CPL).

First, ambiguous logics add an element to CPL's truth-values and reinterpret what each element means. A statement is no longer simply true or false but rather true-on-some-disambiguation or false-on-some-disambiguation (hereafter "-osd"). These categories are jointly exhaustive but not mutually exclusive, yielding three possible assignments: true-osd only, false-osd only, and both (as in the Scrooge example). Second, they revise CPL's designated values to include as designated all statements that are true-osd, whether exclusively or not. This is the important point, for if a statement is designated, then it is generally speaking assertable and believable, as well. The simplest calculus meeting these conditions is precisely LP. Hence, to accept an ambiguous logic is to accept a glut-theoretic logic—specifically, our system LP.

Even though ambiguous logics were designed to address synonymic ambiguity, they need not be used exclusively for that purpose. Other kinds of ambiguity can be treated similarly. A statement may be true at one time and false at another, motivating a temporally ambiguous logic. It may be true at one possible world and false at another, motivating a modally ambiguous logic. And it may be true according to one person and false according to another, motivating a perspectively ambiguous logic. Classical theological discourse is likewise full of ambiguity—neither synonymic, temporal, nor modal, but rather doctrinal. It is true according to some metatheologies that God is personal, but false according to others. From one divine attribute it follows that God can sin; from another, that he cannot. Resolving these disputes seems impossible or indefinitely deferred. The proposal, then, is that the theist adopt an LP-style three-valued ambiguous logic, assigning both true and false to ascriptions of troublesome divine attributes, to the classical metatheologies themselves, and to any other theological propositions suspended in doctrinal ambiguity. These statements would then be contradictory but designated, and so the theist could continue asserting and believing them in good faith. This seems to me the best resolution to the paradoxes; hence, we have our first argument for glut-theoretic theism.

3. Effing the Ineffable

The second argument for glut-theoretic theology is inspired by a family of paradoxes concerning theological discourse, collectively known as the problem of God-talk.²²

²² Cf. Macquarrie (1967) and Vainio (2020).

The problem is to explain how, in human language, we can speak intelligibly and truly about the divine. Why think theological discourse poses any special difficulty? First, because theists assume that such discourse is possible. Theology is, after all, counted among the sciences—by which I mean rational, systematic bodies of expressed knowledge, or enterprises aimed at producing such. Second, because the nature of God, as received through tradition, seems precisely to preclude the possibility of intelligible, systematic speech about him. From our earlier description of God, many variations of the problem arise, requiring only minimal assumptions about the limits of human language. In general, problems of God-talk share this form:

- (1) God is X.
- (2) Human language cannot speak about something that is X.
- (3) Therefore, human language cannot speak about God.

For instance, God is said to be transcendent—completely unlike his creatures—yet human language can describe only creatures. He is perfectly simple, lacking properties and parts—yet language can describe only by predicating properties or parts. He is incomprehensible, beyond finite conception—yet language can describe only what is at least partly conceived. Thus we reach the conclusion that God is ineffable, and consequently that we cannot intelligibly speak of him. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (1987) captures the problem succinctly:

Many scripture writers will tell you that the divinity is not only invisible and incomprehensible, but also “unsearchable and inscrutable,” since there is not a trace for anyone who would reach through into the hidden depths of this infinity.²³

Just as the senses can neither grasp nor perceive the things of the mind, just as representation and shape cannot take hold in the simple and shapeless, just as corporal form cannot lay hold of the intangible and incorporeal, by the same standard of truth beings are surpassed by the infinity beyond being, intelligences by that one which is beyond intelligence. Indeed the inscrutable One is out of reach of every rational process. Nor can any words come up to the inexpressible Good, this One, this Source of unity, this supraexistent Being. Mind beyond mind, word beyond speech, it is gathered up by no discourse, by no intuition, by no name.²⁴

How then can we speak of the divine names? How can we do this if the Transcendent surpasses all discourse and all knowledge, if it abides beyond the reach of the mind and being, if it encompasses and circumscribes, embraces and anticipates all things

²³ Divine Names (hereafter ‘DN’), ch.1, sect.2.

²⁴ DN, ch.1, sect.1.

while itself eluding their grasp and escaping from any perception, imagination, opinion, name, discourse, apprehension, or understanding? How can we enter upon this undertaking if the Godhead is superior to being and is unspeakable and unnameable?²⁵

A response to the problem of God-talk is satisfying, minimally, to the extent that it meets three conditions. First, it must resolve the problem—that is, make it possible for some theological discourse to be both intelligible and true. Call such a response theologically optimistic; one that fails, theologically pessimistic. Second, it should not only make true theological speech possible but also sustain the possibility of a science of God. We wish not merely to say true things about God but to engage in discursive, rational inquiry that deepens our understanding of his nature. Third, a satisfactory response should be nondisruptive, allowing theology to continue largely as practiced, with minimal modification. Call such a response conservative; its opposite, nonconservative. Keeping these desiderata in mind, we ask: how should the contemporary theist respond? Since theism directly supports all relevant instances of premise (1) of our earlier schema (i.e., transcendent, simple, incomprehensible, etc.), theists have typically denied premise (2). Let's review two well-known, though ultimately unsatisfying, responses before turning to a more adequate glut-theoretic one.²⁶

One traditional response to the problem of God-talk is to go analogical about theological discourse. This strategy has three parts. First, it distinguishes between literal and nonliteral modes of discourse. Metaphors exemplify the latter: we explicitly say that a subject is a certain way while implicitly meaning only that it is similar to that way.²⁷ Second, it concedes that literal discourse about God is impossible but insists that nonliteral discourse remains possible. Third, it maintains that theological discourse is, and has always been, implicitly nonliteral. Thus, when we say "God is good," we do not literally ascribe goodness to God but speak through a disguised analogy, meaning something like "God is similar to something good" or "to goodness itself." This approach is ingenious, yet problematic. It fails to make true theological discourse possible, for it neglects the variation of the problem in which God is completely dissimilar to all creatures. If so, there is no suitable analog

²⁵ DN, ch.1, sect.5.

²⁶ For additional historical context, see Maimonides (1956, pt.1, chs.50–61) and Aquinas (1952, ST I, q.13). Note that I avoid referring to the following positions with the perhaps more familiar terms, 'via eminentiae' and 'via negativa', in order to keep the conversation focused and block unnecessary connotations.

²⁷ Cf. Black (1955).

available, and all analogies—implicit or explicit—are simply false. Hence, the analogical approach does not offer a satisfying solution.

Another traditional response to the problem of God-talk is to go negative about theological discourse. This strategy has two parts. First, it distinguishes between positive and negative discourse. Positive discourse affirms that a subject is some way; negative discourse denies that it is that way or attributes a negative property (e.g., “nongood”). Second, it seeks to save negative discourse from the paradox. The problem of God-talk, on this view, only shows that we cannot speak truly about what God is positively like. Yet it remains possible to speak truly about what he is not. Thus, while we cannot truly say “God is good,” we can truly say “It is not the case that God is good.” This approach, like the analogical one, is ingenious but unsatisfying. It fails our second and third desiderata. If the only true statements about God are negations, theological science becomes impossible, since its aim is to know God and his nature—something achievable only through positive reasoning. Moreover, unlike the analogical approach, it cannot plausibly be claimed that theologians have always spoken in disguised negations. Adopting this approach would require banning all positive theological statements—a radical, nonconservative revision of the classical theist’s discourse. Hence, the negative approach also fails as a satisfying solution.

And so, yet another traditional—though much less popularly endorsed—response to the problem of God-talk is to go semantically deviant about theological discourse. Pseudo-Dionysius offers a plausible, glut-theoretic solution of this kind. His approach is more complex than the previous ones and, in some respects, seeks to preserve insights from both. He begins by distinguishing between literal and nonliteral modes of discourse, on the one hand, and positive and negative modes, on the other. Like the negative theologians, he agrees that the problem of God-talk poses no issue for literal, negative theological discourse: since God transcends everything creaturely, and creatures are sometimes good, it is literally true that God is not good. Yet Dionysius also recognizes the importance of positive theological discourse and therefore seeks to accommodate it within his account. On this point, he maintains that certain positive, nonliteral statements about God are true as well. Dionysius:

[A]s I have often said elsewhere, we have a habit of seizing upon what is actually beyond us, clinging to the familiar categories of our sense perceptions, and then we measure the divine by our human standards and, of course, are led astray by the apparent meaning we give to divine and unspeakable reason. What we should really consider is this. The human mind has a capacity to think, through which it looks on

conceptual things, and a unity which transcends the nature of the mind, through which it is joined to things beyond itself. And this transcending characteristic must be given to the words we use about God. They must not be given the human sense... Therefore let us supremely praise this foolish "Wisdom," which has neither reason nor intelligence and let us describe it as the Cause of all intelligence and reason, of all wisdom and understanding.²⁸

Even if we cannot say what God is like, Dionysius writes that we can still speak truly about the effects of his actions on us and the rest of creation. Thus, while "God is good" may not be literally true, it is literally true that "God's creation is good." Dionysius then makes a remarkable suggestion: God performs semantic miracles. Theologians may think they speak literally when saying "God is good," but Dionysius insists they do not. Whenever a theologian utters a positive statement about God, God directly intervenes, altering its meaning so that the statement implicitly expresses only a truth about God's effects on creation. Dionysius:

[I]f we may trust the superlative wisdom and truth of scripture, the things of God are revealed to each mind in proportion to its capacities; and the divine goodness is such that, out of concern for our salvation, it deals out the immeasurable and infinite in limited measures.²⁹

We learn of... mysteries from the divine scriptures and you will find that what the scripture writers have to say regarding divine names refers, in revealing phrases, to the beneficent processions of God.³⁰

In this way, Dionysius seeks to save both positive and negative theological discourse from the paradox. Yet having secured literal, negative discourse and positive, nonliteral discourse, he faces a difficulty. If God alters the meaning of our positive statements so that they come out true, should not their negations thereby be false? Under CPL and semantic bivalence, this would follow—but Dionysius denies it. He holds that God changes only the meanings of positive statements, not negative ones. Thus, "God is good" and "God is not good" are not univocal. Does this mean a theologian may rightly say, in the same breath, "It both is and is not the case that God is good"? The final part of Dionysius's response is to allow precisely this. Dionysius:

²⁸ DN, ch.7, sect.1.

²⁹ DN, ch.1, sects. 1–2, 4.

³⁰ DN, ch.1, sect.4.

What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.³¹

He then illustrates how this method works:

Greatness and smallness,... rest and motion—these all are titles applied to the Cause of everything. They are divinely named images.... God is called great because of that characteristic greatness of his which gives of itself to everything great, is poured out on all greatness and indeed reaches far beyond it... “Smallness” or subtlety is predicated of God’s nature because he is outside of the bulky and the distant, because he penetrates without hindrance through everything... What, then, are we to say regarding the divine attributes “resting” and “sitting”? Just this much, namely, that God remains what he is in himself, that he is established alone in his immovable sameness and definitive grounding, that his actions are forever in the same mold and with the same objective and from the same unchanging center, that his stability begins totally from within himself... And yet what do the theologians mean when they assert that the unstirring God moves and goes out into everything? This is surely something which has to be understood in a way befitting God, and out of our reverence for him we must assume that this motion of his does not in any way signify a change of place... What is signified, rather, is that God brings everything into being, that he sustains them, that he exercises all manner of providence over them, that he is present to all of them, that he embraces them... [I]n some mode conforming to what befits both God and reason, one has to predicate movement of the immutable God.³²

Consequently, Dionysius endorses an ambiguous logic within theology—precisely the kind described in the previous section. Since ambiguous logics operate according to a glut-theoretic semantics like LP, Dionysius thus offers an equivocal, glut-theoretic response to the problem of God-talk.

Although far less popular than the analogical or negative approaches to the problem, Dionysius’s equivocal, glut-theoretic approach is more plausible. Returning to our desiderata, his solution surpasses the analogical one because his nonliteral interpretation of positive theological discourse actually makes such

³¹ Mystical Theology, ch.1.

³² DN, ch.9, sects.1–3, 8–9.

statements true. It surpasses the negative one because it allows for a genuine theological science without banning positive statements. Moreover, since Dionysius's equivocal model employs LP-style semantics, it suggests that the norms governing theological discourse might even be relaxed without loss of truth. Among the three responses considered, his glut-theoretic solution is thus the most satisfying: theologically optimistic, supportive of scientific theology, and decidedly conservative regarding actual theological practice. If his solution is best, we thereby gain our second argument for glut-theoretic theism.

Two objections to the Dionysian solution to the problem of God-talk should be addressed before concluding. First, one might note that there remains another possible response to the paradox. Dionysius's account is semantically deviant, rejecting semantic bivalence by allowing that a conjunction of a statement and its negation may be true. Yet there is another way to deny bivalence—one that may seem an even more effective strategy. Instead of going glutty about God-talk, one might go gappy. This gap-theoretic approach, another traditional response, is endorsed by Meister Eckhart and, on some occasions, Nicholas of Cusa. Eckhart, in fact, offers a critique of both positive and negative theological discourse which, if successful, would show that a gap-theoretic response to the problem is better motivated than a glut-theoretic one. Eckhart writes:

Oneness is purer than goodness and truth. Although goodness and truth add nothing, they do nevertheless add something in the mind: when they are thought, something is added. But oneness adds nothing, where God exists in himself... A master says: oneness is a negation of negation. If I say that God is good, then I am adding something to him. Oneness on the other hand is a negation of negation, a denial of denial. What does 'one' mean? One is that to which nothing has been added. The soul takes the Godhead where it is purified in itself, where nothing has been added to it, where nothing has been thought. One is the negation of negation. All creatures contain a negation within themselves: one creature denies another. One particular angel denies that he is another. But with God there is a negation of negation: he is one and negates all else, since there is nothing outside God. All creatures are in God and are his own Godhead, which signifies the fulness of which I spoke... By denying something of God—if I were to deny goodness of God for instance (though I can in truth deny nothing of God)—by denying something of God, I grasp something which he is not. It is precisely this which must be got rid of. God is one; he is the negation of negation.³³

And Nicholas would seem to agree, writing:

³³ Meister Eckhart (1994, German Sermons, sect.17).

Pagan: "Can God be named?"

Christian: "That whose magnitude cannot be conceived remains ineffable."

P: "But is God ineffable?"

C: "God is not ineffable but beyond everything that is effable..."

P: "Therefore, God is both effable and ineffable."

C: "Not this either... God is neither named nor not named, nor is God both named and not named, but because of the excellence of God's infinity all that can be said disjunctively and unitively, whether by means of agreement or contradiction, does not correspond to God..."

P: "Are you saying something true or something false?"

C: "Neither this one nor the other, nor both."³⁴

The objection, then, is that in confronting the problem of God-talk, it is better to conclude that theological discourse is neither true nor false than that it is both true and false. A gap-theorist would thus favor a model of theological discourse governed by K3 rather than LP.

In response, I'll say that Eckhart's reasoning is unsound. Consider his premise that "by denying something of God, I grasp something which He is not." This claim admits two interpretations, both mistaken. First, Eckhart might mean that denying God a positive property still implies that He possesses some other positive property—for example, that denying His goodness implies that he is evil or neutral. But this is false. A negation can imply an informative positive statement only where sufficient background information exists. The problem of God-talk, however, denies that any literal, positive statement about God is true—a point Eckhart himself concedes. If so, there is no such background context from which a true negation could imply a positive property of God. Alternatively, Eckhart might mean that denying God a positive property ("goodness") implies that he has a negative property ("nongoodness"). This too is false. Positive predicates plausibly refer to genuine properties in reality; negative ones do not. To say "Socrates is not white" affirms only the absence of whiteness, not the presence of some contrary. Likewise, denying that God is good does not attribute any property to him; it simply affirms the absence of goodness.

What's more, gap-theoretic responses to the paradox are not superior to glut-theoretic ones. Recall our desiderata on satisfying responses to the problem. Gap-theoretic responses are thoroughly theologically pessimistic. The gappy response makes room for no true theological discourse at all. In fact, it is better understood as a way of accepting that the paradox is sound and then explaining why it is

³⁴ Nicholas of Cusa (1997, *Dialogue on the Hidden God*).

insoluble—because every statement about God is neither true nor false. Gap-theoretic responses therefore do not make room for theological science. If no statement about God is true, then certainly there is no sound way to employ theological statements within sound processes of reasoning. And finally, the gap-theoretic responses would not simply propose a ban on all negative theological statements, as the negative response would do, but would impose an even stronger ban. It would imply that we should simply cease talking about God altogether. Eckhart famously endorses just such a position of radical theological quietism, writing:

God is nothing created, neither devotion nor delight nor whatever you may care for. Scripture says: 'the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not' [John 1:10]. If you think that by adding a thousand worlds to God you would somehow increase him, then you do not know God and do not have the least idea of what he is, and you are a fool.³⁵

Now pay attention to this. God is nameless, for no one can either speak of him or know him. Therefore a pagan master says that what we can know or say of the First Cause reflects ourselves more than it does the First Cause, for this transcends all speech and all understanding. Accordingly, if I say that 'God is good,' this is not true. I am good, but God is not good! In fact, I would rather say that I am better than God, for what is good can become better and what can become better can become the best! Now God is not good, so he cannot become the best. These three are far from God: 'good,' 'better,' 'best,' for he is wholly transcendent. If I say again that 'God is wise,' this too is not true. I am wiser than he is! Or if I say that 'God exists,' this is also not true. He is being beyond being: he is nothingness beyond being. Therefore St. Augustine says: 'The finest thing that we can say of God is to be silent concerning him from the wisdom of inner riches.' Be silent therefore, and do not chatter about God, for by chattering about him, you tell lies and commit a sin. If you wish to be perfect and without sin, then do no prattle about God. Also you should not wish to understand anything about God, for God is beyond all understanding. A master says: If I had a God that I could understand, then I would not regard him as God. If you understand anything about him, then he is not in it, and by understanding something of him, you fall into ignorance, and by falling into ignorance, you become like an animal since the animal part in creatures is that which is unknowing. If you do not wish to become like an animal therefore, do not pretend that you understand anything of the ineffable God.³⁶

³⁵ German Sermons, sect.9.

³⁶ German Sermons, sect.28.

On another occasion, Eckhart attempts to soften his position. He writes that theological discourse is permissible, but only for the theologically inexperienced; and in such contexts, we should adopt a kind of fictionalist attitude toward what is said.³⁷ Eckhart:

I say that if someone perceives something in God and gives it a name, that is not God. God is above names and nature... There is no name we can devise for God. But some names are permitted to us, with which the saints have addressed him and which God has so consecrated in their hearts and bathed in divine light. And here we should learn first of all how we should approach God. We should say: 'Lord, with the same names which you have consecrated in the hearts of your saints and bathed in your light, we approach you and praise you'... [W]e should learn that there is no name we can give God so that it might seem that we have praised and honored him enough, since God is 'above names' and is ineffable.³⁸

Taking a fictionalist attitude would at least allow practitioners of theological discourse to continue speaking as they do, marking an improvement for gap-theory with respect to the third desideratum. But it offers no help regarding the second desideratum, for no science can proceed from statements true only by fiction or convention. Consequently, gap-theoretic responses to the problem of God-talk remain unsatisfying—and certainly not superior to glut-theoretic ones.

A second potential objection to the Dionysian solution to the problem of God-talk comes from Lewis. The Dionysian view proposes a model of theological discourse governed by an ambiguous logic, allowing both "God is good" and "God is not good" to be true on different disambiguations—and hence their conjunction to be true on some disambiguation as well. But Lewis objects: "Logic for ambiguity—who needs it? I reply: pessimists."³⁹ His reasoning is that it is a rational ideal to disambiguate all statements before reasoning with them. Since ambiguous logics are designed precisely for cases where disambiguation is impossible or impractical, endorsing one betrays pessimism about our ability to meet that ideal. Thus, the objection runs, a glut-theoretic, equivocal theology abandons the goal of univocal theological discourse too quickly and thereby fails an important rational standard.

It seems that Dionysius would disagree with Lewis that disambiguation is always a rational goal. Dionysius proposes that, for the sake of worship, we are meant to equivocate in our statements about God. He introduces ambiguous logic not to

³⁷ Cf. Vaihinger (1935).

³⁸ German Sermons, sect.5.

³⁹ Lewis (1982, p.439).

salvage some truth from a discourse otherwise prone to error, but to secure some truth where none would otherwise be possible. And while Eckhart advances his account of God-talk in a spirit of pessimism, Dionysius remains optimistic about theological science. The problem of God-talk may suggest that theoretical theology is impossible, but Dionysius holds that, with a little ambiguity—and the grace of God—we might still eff the ineffable.

Dummett invites us to imagine someone who has learned all the rules of chess and rehearsed countless in-game scenarios but has never been told that chess is a game or that its purpose is to win.⁴⁰ Such a person could not judge the merits of chess. Likewise, to know whether a discursive practice is rational or irrational, worthy of acceptance or rejection, one must know its point—what its practitioners aim to do by speaking as they do. Dionysius freely affirms contradictions about God and urges us to do the same. His account is plausible, I suggest, because of the purpose he assigns to such speech. Contradictory statements can express agnosticism or skepticism, serving as conversation-stoppers; they can amuse or provoke, as in oxymoron or absurdist art; or they can, as in Zen Buddhism, disrupt intellection to cultivate mindfulness, like the koan “the sound of one hand clapping.”⁴¹ But Dionysius recommends speaking this way for a different reason: to praise God. Before affirming his many contradictions, he writes:

[T]he purpose of what I have to say is not to reveal that being in its transcendence, for this is something beyond words, something unknown and wholly unrevealed, something above unity itself. What I wish to do is to sing a hymn of praise for the being-making procession of the absolute divine Source of being into the total domain of being.⁴²

Theology is a pragmatically peculiar discipline. When a physicist studies subatomic particles, they are not praising them. But as Al-Ghazali observes, when the theologian studies the nature of God, they engage in a meditative form of worship.⁴³ Thus, modifying the rules governing theology’s theoretical aims to better serve its devotional purpose seems, at least, reasonable—if not also worthy of acceptance.

⁴⁰ Dummett (1978: 2ff).

⁴¹ For a classic absurdist story involving contradictory statements, see Priest (1997). For more on the function of contradictions within the Buddhist tradition, see Tillemans (1999, p.190ff) and Ueda (2022).

⁴² DN, ch.5, sect.1.

⁴³ Al-Ghazali (2016, pp.103–104).

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