

STRATEGIC AND RELIGIOUS INEFFABILITY IN PLATO AND PLOTINUS¹

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Abstract: This contribution focuses on strategic ineffability in Plato. Strategic ineffability serves different purposes. In Plato, it is mainly used to express a religious feeling of dependence and to emphasize the remoteness of the divine. However, its meaning is not only religious. It is also part of a complex narrative device that often resorts to irony in order to de-emphasize the most arduous and controversial metaphysical speculations. Whereas *topoi* of affected modesty and unspeakability may only play an aesthetic role, strategic ineffability has to do with relevant communication: it is a way to share with (and induce in) other people feelings, goals and morally relevant beliefs, without entailing any accurate conceptual content. Knowledge is not the primary goal here. The paper argues that Plato, Plotinus and other ancient philosophers used the notion of divine ineffability strategically to share beliefs with their selected audiences and lead their disciples to spiritual change.

Keywords: Plato, Neoplatonism, ineffability, religious experience, communication

In my previous contribution, published in this same issue of *Dialogos*, I argued that Plato rejects divine ineffability epistemically (Montanari 2021). This means that, according to Plato, the divine is not or should not be conceived as it were

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beyond the capacity of human mind, say, conceptually inaccessible. Thus, men do have some access to supreme knowledge. The question to address now is the following: does this divine (= supreme) knowledge exclude all possible other kinds of ineffability? The answer is no. There are other types of ineffability in Plato, such as (a) unrepresentability, (b) unspeakability and (c) strategic ineffability and each of them may refer to divine matters. Let me remind something about the first two kinds, before I focus on strategic ineffability, which is the central topic of this paper.

Introduction: three types of ineffability in Plato

(a) The notion of unrepresentability implies some kind of radical epistemic closure, which prevents human mind to form concepts about certain things. Firstly, in Plato, it affects our understanding of the receptacle (the bottom level of reality), which is the condition of matter, and, to a variable degree matter itself.² On the contrary, as we know, metaphysical dualism requires supreme intelligible realities, the top of system, to be perfectly knowledgeable, though probably only in non-propositional terms (Montanari 2021). Secondly, there seems to be epistemic boundedness also for the way supreme knowledge is achieved. Important Platonic passages suggest that divine knowledge is achieved by way of a “noetic intuition”, say, a sort of illumination, which Plato apparently describes as unrepresentable, beyond human conceptualization and strongly influenced by divine forces (Montanari 2022).³ This means that while men may have access to

² This is why all that is related to matter (cosmos, bodies, human soul, etc.) is subject to some description and explanation only by way of metaphors, stories and reasonable beliefs, *μῦθοι*, whose content may be said true only *κατὰ τὸν εἰκότα*, as Timaeus says (29d, 30b, 48d, 72d-e). Consequently, there is a substantial correspondence between ontology and epistemology (higher and lower levels of being correspond respectively to higher and lower degrees of truth-belief), as some famous passages show, such as *Republic* (VI 509b-511e) and *Timaeus* (29b-d).

³ Gonzalez 1998 e 2003; Vegetti 2003 (159, 180) and 2007 (65-70). Noetic illumination is apparently implied in some crucial passages, e.g. *Rep.* VII 532a-c, *Simp.* 209e-212a, *Phaedr.* 248a, *Laws* XII 968d-e, *Ep.* VII 341c-d. Some of them have been often and, in my opinion, erroneously interpreted in mystical terms.

divine knowledge with respect to its content, the event that brings about this acquisition remains drastically inaccessible to them.

(b) Texts are also replete of statements about one's inability to translate into words and communicate to other people some important truth or state of mind. This is the kind of ineffability I call unspeakability.⁴ Many of these statements give the impression of being nothing but ornamental *topoi* and stylistic devices, such as declarations of affected modesty and *Unsagbarkeitstopoi* (Curtius 1983: 5.3). Undoubtedly, however, a number of them go beyond this formal aspect and have more substantial meaning. They may reflect the inability to translate into words some feelings and beliefs,⁵ but also, and perhaps more significantly, either the existence of objective ritual prescriptions or a subjective unavailability to reveal a doctrine to somebody, thus the existence of inhibitions that compel a master to maintain secrecy on his dogmata.

Terms as ἄρρητον and οὐ ῥητέον, for instance, usually apply to what cannot be said. This may refer to some conceptual sophistry, like speaking of the not-being as it were something (*Soph.* 238c), but normally it has to do with interdictions or inhibitions. One may be forced to keep silence either by virtue of some formal rule or oath (as it happens in secret rituals) or because convenience imposes a certain behavior.⁶ This is the case of the ritual prescription of silence (εὐφροσύνη). During religious ceremonies, words are only conditionally allowed: in the right moment, in proper and mostly ritualized forms. Loquacity is

⁴ Socrates and other leading characters in Plato state very often their inadequacy, inability or reluctance to talk about certain questions. Quoting all the relevant passages would be pointless. Furthermore, it would not be exhaustive, because it would be necessary to mention also a huge number of metaphors and similes continuously mobilized by Plato to stress the difficulty and incertitude inherent in human arguments. This vivid imagery is mostly related to sea and maritime danger, ritual initiations, difficult crossings and ascents, athletic competitions, hunting and fighting. Knowledge is imagined by Plato in terms of pain, hardship and risk.

⁵ One interesting case is in *Phaedo*, namely, the silences of Socrates (84c, 95e) and the last doubts of Simmias, validated by Socrates himself (107a-b). See my discussion of these strange passages in Montanari 2022.

⁶ The term ἀπόρρητον, usually substantivized at plural, also denotes the same ceremony (mysteries), as in *Phaed.* 62b (ἐν ἀπορρήτοις), *Rep.* II 378a (δι' ἀπορρήτων), but *Theaet.* 152c (ἐν ἀπορρήτω). In one occasion, it denotes irrational numbers (*Rep.* VIII 346c).

traditionally avoided (οὐκοῦν τόν γε θεὸν οὐ ῥητέον ἔχειν ἦθος τοιοῦτον etc.).⁷ The terms, lastly, may be used by a master who is reluctant to speak about important matters in the wrong context and with wrong people.⁸ What happens to Plato with Dionysius is nothing but a dramatic case of this kind. So, with few exceptions, ἄρρητον is not what one cannot say due to some severe epistemic or linguistic limitation, but simply because considerations of prudence, rules and traditions impose silence (there is also an important figurative, strategic use of the terms, which I will consider later).

Let me observe that where Plato's narrative switches to a mythical mode, he is often saying that something cannot be told directly and through normal arguments, but only through a surrogate image (εἰκῶν), say, in the modality of *representations* (stories, metaphors, allegories) vs. that of speculative, conceptual exposition. Useless to say, this is one of the most common patterns in Platonic narrative where supreme matters are at stake. The switch occurs, for instance, when Socrates illustrates the Form of the Good (*Rep.* VI 506d-e), when the Athenian explains the movement of the intelligence (*Laws* X 897d-e), or when Socrates deals with the aspect (ιδέα) of the soul (*Phaedr.* 246a). Now, a shift to the mythical mode may be a case of either unspeakability, when it reflects some kind of subjective reluctance (whatever the reason may be: wrong circumstance, wrong people, inadequacy of the master, intrinsic difficulty of the topic, etc.), or unrepresentability, when stories and metaphors are unavoidable due to the subject matter (for instance, receptacle, material realities and human soul).

(c) The present contribution focuses on *strategic* ineffability, by considering in particular its relation with religious experience. A certain attribution is strategic when, by referring it to an object, I do not mean literally what I am saying, but I am using my words for some different purpose. I may say, for instance,

⁷ On ritual εὐφροσύνη, see *Laws* VII 799a-802d. On the convenient way to talk about gods, see, at least, *Rep.* II 377d-391e, *Laws* X 899c-907b.

⁸ As example of reluctance and unavailability, see for instance *Rep.* VI 506d-e, *Tim.* 48c-d, *Laws* XII 968d-e, *Ep.* VII 330c-331b, 340e-341e, 344d-345b. Of course, a number of these passage has been referred to unwritten doctrines.

that “Paul is invisible”, though with my words I do not mean to describe any actual feature of Paul, not even by metaphor (on the contrary, I may observe and believe that Paul is actually there, very well visible and sitting in front of me, etc.), but I say so because I want to provoke some reaction in Paul or in someone else: for instance, I want to make Lisa laugh at my jokes about Paul, or I want Paul to feel embarrassed in front of Lisa because of my jokes, or I want to feel myself better than Paul and admired by Lisa, or all these things at the same time. So, when we refer to something strategically, we are not making an epistemic, denotative or informative use of language, rather we are using words for some other purpose we may have in mind, mainly, to produce a reaction in somebody else.

Strategic ineffability is different both from epistemic ineffability (unrepresentability) and subjective inhibitions (unspeakability). For instance, by referring to divine ineffability epistemically, I am supposed to really mean what I say (that God is inaccessible to men), whereas by using the notion strategically I remain relatively indifferent to what my words actually mean and only aim at the effect they produce in a certain context (let us all praise God, etc.). This use is also different from the case of inhibition and reluctance, because my unavailability to talk in a certain situation is not necessarily interested in producing some effect on somebody else (Socrates does not reject Theages to hurt his feelings), while the effect is always essential to strategic communication. Or perhaps, though being reluctant, I may well have the intention to induce someone to feel something (intimate persuasion, for instance, or moral elevation), but I am not at all indifferent to the epistemic and informative value of my communication, which on the contrary remains primary (this usually happens when Plato tells myths to his friends).

Religious ineffability is mainly defined through the notions of *limited transcategoriality* and *religious dependence*. In the next pages, I will explain these ideas and how they relate with strategic ineffability. Then, I will show how this notion may be referred to Plotinus and Plato by providing some relevant textual examples.

Dependence, irony, ambiguity

In this chapter, I argue, firstly, that a religious mind naturally discards divine ineffability, but also need to reaffirm it in terms of a feeling of dependence. Secondly, I provide a general definition of dependence in psychological terms, but I also contend that, in some philosophical narratives (Plato's, for instance), dependence can be better understood as a text that produces ironical effects. Lastly, I show that dependence, as a text, is inherently elusive and ambiguous. For instance, it implies self-lessening as much as self-assertion and generally resorts to figurative language.

As I have argued elsewhere, both the conscious experience and the narrative of a religious mind implies the belief in the existence of some supernatural power as well as the idea of some sort of effective, possibly reciprocal, communication between that power and men (Montanari 2021).⁹ I will refer to this rather formal belief as the *minimal condition* for religious experience and religious narrative. I argue that, if this condition is plausible, it is also reasonable to expect that religious belief is incompatible with divine ineffability.

Divine ineffability means that human mind is incapable of understanding and experiencing divinity. There is some cognitive closure that prevent our mind to know it, in whatever sense the word "know" may be assumed (propositional, direct experience, technical competence, etc.). Now, if we accept divine ineffability, the above-mentioned minimal condition disappears, with all the hideous effects that this may imply for the believer: no consolations in hardships, no chance for happiness, no punishment for wrongdoers, no prize for the good man, no meaning for destiny and fortune, no purpose in praying (etc.). To say it in a nutshell, if divine ineffability and epistemic boundedness are radically assumed by a religious mind, then this mind would be no longer

⁹ My thoughts on this topic have been largely influenced by recent cognitivist approaches to religious experience. I also emphasize other aspects that usually this literature does not take too much into account, like dependence, redemption-beliefs, threat-defense representations and mystical bias.

religious, because it could not believe anymore in some meaningful relationship with the divinity.¹⁰

As John Hick pointed out concerning Pseudo-Dionysius, religious experience is incompatible with the “total transcategoriality” of God (Hick 2000). This means that, in all religions, the practice of worship requires the divine to be an entity one may enter in contact with. This is why I also refer to the minimal condition as *limited transcategoriality*, namely, the idea that divinity can be conceived of as ineffable by a religious mind only if “ineffable” does not entail absolute unknowability, but is assumed in some weaker or loose sense.¹¹ If this is the case, when we refer to the divine as ineffable we are not making an epistemic use of the notion (we do not use it to describe or understand something about divinity), but we are employing it for some different purpose, which I call, broadly speaking, strategic. Religious ineffability belongs to this strategic use.

However, this is only part of the story. Religion is not the realm of pure logic and abstract reasoning, but a matter of feelings and rather practical concerns. Identity and no-contradiction are not required to play an essential role in such domain. In this realm, divine ineffability may be rejected, but also somehow reaffirmed, and this is not supposed to cause any particular scandal, because in both cases we are not dealing with knowledge, but, as I have just said, feelings and practical concerns.¹² So, what kind of ineffability are we dealing with, now?

In a religious mind, even more so in mysticism, feelings and representations are often at stake that entail a radical sense of

¹⁰ This is why ancient agnosticism and epicureanism were generally perceived as atheistic threats. They did not say that God does not exist (Epicurus believed in their existence), but implied the impossibility of our relationship with God. Plato is very explicit about this specific sense of atheism (*Laws*X 899d-905d).

¹¹ One may ask: “what about Pascal’s hidden God?” My reply to the question is that every representation of a hidden divinity implies at least a non-propositional knowledge of the numen, some sort of knowledge by acquaintance, direct experience or intuition. In Pascal, the knowledge of God seems to be related with his notion of “connaissances du coeur”. See Nemoianu 2011 and 2015.

¹² As Peter Appleby said, “the real heart of the issue concerning ineffability is to be found in confusions about the workings of language and [...] in closely related misconceptions regarding human understanding” (1980: 154).

inadequacy and separateness: a man may feel he is nothing compared with the overwhelming and inaccessible power of divinity. When he says that God is ineffable, unthinkable, totally beyond human power and intelligence, he actually means that the numen is too high, mysterious, tremendous, magnificent and glorious to be attained by a poor, fragile and finite creature. Schleiermacher and R. Otto called this state of mind *Abhängigkeitsgefühl*, feeling of dependence, also feeling of absolute dependence (from now on, simply dependence).¹³ Dependence is not epistemic, rather it is practical and entails emotions.

Dependence plays a central role in many religious experiences and narratives, not only in mystical ones. In what does this role consist? Many answers are possible. Dependence may express terror, wonder-bewilderment, ironic understatement, self-lessening, contempt, love for the divinity, praise for its power and glory, and many other dispositions. It is not possible to state exactly what is the kind of feeling involved. The repertoire is virtually unlimited and context-sensitive. My idea is that dependence should be treated as a text.¹⁴ After all, all we may know about subjective feelings are texts, public representations, which are supposed to be their expressions. In our case, I believe that we should think of dependence as a narrative device, and not merely an ornamental one, but one that, once merged with philosophical arguments, produces an effect of ironical inflection or interruption.

Irony, in this case, means a text whose function is to mitigate philosophical arguments and put rational speculation at some distance, by sorting various effects, such as playfulness, self-criticism, understatement, anti-intellectualism, etc. What is kept

¹³ Otto 1963. More recently the category has been reinterpreted by Burkert (1996). The notion comes from the main theological work of Friedrich Schleiermacher (*The Christian Faith*, 1830, second edition, Proposition n. 4). This aspect of religious experience must not be universal. According to Pascal Boyer, it is a relatively recent feature in the history of religion (personal communication). This is consistent with the notion of “moralizing religions” (Boyer, Baumard 2013).

¹⁴ I am using the word “text” in the broadest possible sense, namely, in the way semiotics generally does. See Marrone 2018: “Tutto (...) può essere un testo: qualunque materia del mondo – fisico e biologico, (...) sociale, culturale e storico – può risultare per qualcuno, se opportunamente organizzata, un’espressione significativa che veicola determinati contenuti” (46-7).

aloof, specifically, is the inflation of the epistemic subject, his importance, the excess of confidence in his ability to reach some divine truth.¹⁵ Plato is a master in this kind of irony, which gives a playful tone (παιδιή) even to the most serious topics (σπουδή).¹⁶

In Plato, irony lessens, bends and even blocks the logical drive to absolute knowledge, which is a strong habit in our philosophical traditions. By using modern terminologies, one may say that this kind of irony refrains the philosopher from the temptation of “mirror-imagery” (Rorty 2018) or transcendental illusion (Kant 1977: Transcendental dialectics), particularly, from asserting too strong versions of foundationalism – typically, idealistic assumptions. Plato is an ironist no less than a metaphysician and he resorts to dependence ironically.¹⁷

Dependence introduces in his metaphysical discourses a kind of irony that is closely related with ordinary religious devotion. It can be summed up in a commonsensical sentence: *men are but limited and feeble creatures*. The aim, however, is not so much to state our epistemic boundedness per se, as if it were a matter of fact, but to express a certain way of feeling (*Stimmung*), namely, to produce a sense of religious awe: *men are but toys in the hands of the gods*, to put it in Plato’s own terms. Here, ineffability implies human belittlement. Even in this case, however, some sort of “attunement” to divine reality is required. Ineffability cannot really mean that God is unreachable, because total inaccessibility, as I said, would undermine religiosity. Divinity must be simultaneously stated as both reachable by men

¹⁵ This kind of irony is different both from “Socratic” (dissimulation) and the so-called “Romantic” irony (F. Schlegel). It shares perhaps with the latter the aspects of disruption and self-reflexivity, but is quite the opposite of the belief in the infinite power of subjectivity that Hegel criticized in Romantic irony. On Schlegel’s reading of Socratic irony, see Handwerk 2008.

¹⁶ On playfulness-seriousness, see for instance *Laws* VII 816d-e, *Ep.* VI 323c-d, and Guthrie 1975: 56-66.

¹⁷ The two concepts, irony and metaphysics, have been sometimes opposed (Rorty 1989). Plato shows that this opposition is all but necessary. Metaphysics does not mean dogmatism. Such assimilation is at least contingent, but probably merely ideological.

(proximity) and beyond human scope (remoteness). Both aspects are necessary from a religious standpoint.¹⁸

Dependence may also start from an emotional response, a moral flash that suddenly pops out of our mind, like when we hear a music we like very much and say “I couldn’t tell what I feel”. This unspeakability, however, becomes strategic when it changes into a matter of deeper existential concern, like witnessing, a way to show up and express one’s general view about the world and life.

A good example of deep existential concern is David Cooper’s argument for ineffability, which he calls “doctrine of mystery” (Cooper 2009). According to him, we need the thought that “there is a way the world anyway and independently is, but this way is not discursable” (namely, that there is an ultimate reality but this reality is ineffable), because otherwise we would live in a world of absolute relativism, where nothing is more or less worth than anything else, which is a belief we cannot live with.¹⁹ Now, the “need” of this argument has nothing to do with logic (if it did, it would be self-contradictory) and certainly does not provide us with any knowledge of the ultimate reality (which has been stated as beyond conceptualization). It is nonetheless an effective way to show a personal, existential and pragmatic concern, which might be legitimately shared by many people. One catches immediately what is relevant here and what Cooper has in mind.

At this point, religious ineffability turns into a fact of communication, as a way to catch the addressee’s attention on a value-position, a belief or a state of mind, briefly, something relevant that we want to express to our audience. This is why strategic ineffability mostly assumes a figurative character and usually entails hyperboles, metaphors, praises, exhortations and poetic evocations. Despite their ambiguity, these means are often the most effective in catching people’s attention.²⁰ It may also become more sophisticated and eventually dissolve into a stylistic

¹⁸ Many great theologians, from Thomas of Aquinas to Paul Tillich, recognized the coexistence of this opposite aspects in religious experience (Pyysiäinen 2009: 130-1).

¹⁹ The argument is quoted in Bennett-Hunter 2015: 8.

²⁰ Metaphors and analogies can also have a limited heuristic function. Their use in Plato, for example, is certainly not only strategic. One of the best discussions of this aspect is provided by Pender 2003.

fact, a rhetorical device, a matter of taste (*topoi* of unspeakability). However, it is neither knowledge nor the formal, abstract kind of reasoning that we usually identify with philosophical arguments.

This elusive, not strictly conceptual use of the term “ineffable” is confirmed even by a cursory reference to the Greek and Latin lexicon. While ἀπόρρητον mostly denotes mysteries, what is secret and not allowed, terms like ἄρρητον (οὐ ῥητέον, etc.) and *ineffabilis*, are mostly used either to mean what cannot be said (due to formal constraints, inhibition, reluctance) or to refer figuratively to what produces wonder, what is *mirabilis*, *ultra verba*.²¹ The terms are mainly used strategically, to evoke the mystery, the glory, the power of the numen, as well as numinous or exceptional mundane events, *usually without bearing major conceptual implication*.²² Even Augustine, who is perhaps the first Latin author where the notion of ineffability assumes a philosophical dignity, still largely employs it in a sense that is not strictly conceptual sense.²³

If what I have said is plausible, the exact meaning of religious ineffability cannot and need not to be fully determined. Its use remains necessarily ambiguous, determined by the pragmatic context and by more ordinary rules of inference (common sense, folk psychology).²⁴ This indeterminacy typically appears in praise and blame, or, more specifically, in hyperboles addressed to divinity and in self-lessening. Which content do they mean to convey? Wonder, dependence, self-assertion? Self-assertion is a possibility too. After all, as Burkert pointed out, a poet, a prophet or a priest who praise God and magnify his power

²¹ The word is not frequent in its literal, technical sense, say, what cannot be uttered, what is not pronounceable (in this sense, e.g. Pliny the elder, Nat. Hist. V, 1). See Colombo 1987.

²² Also ἄρρητον may be related to the prohibition to reveal a secret ritual. This meaning could be stretched to include self-inhibitory injunctions, e.g. not to reveal a certain fact, doctrine, etc.

²³ In his first philosophical writings, as *De libero arbitrio*, the term is simply used as a synonymous of *mirabilis*. The importance of the concept increases in the theological writings. This is clear, for instance, in *De doctrina christiana*, I, 6.

²⁴ ‘Natural inferences’ means here intuitions. Formal logic aside, I tend to share the point of view of those who do not contrast reason with intuition. For a remarkable naturalistic, empirical approach to reason, see Mercier, Sperber 2017.

against human nothingness should somehow believe that their own voice will raise at the same heights of the numen.

Likewise, the most severe contempt for our human condition may well be coupled with an exuberant noetic excess. Indeed, dependence coexists with both self-contempt and noetic excess: the man who diminished himself before God is doing so because he believes *he knows* how much God is great, *he is aware of* how much man is worth of being blamed, etc. Human belittlement hides a certain dose of self-exaltation. A good example is provided by a passage in Plato's *Laws* (803c-804b):

I say that what is serious deserves serious attention, while what is not serious does not, that by nature God is worth of any effort, while man, as we said before, has been made as a toy by the God and this is really the best that could happen to him [...] puppets as they are [men], mostly, and participating in truth only in small part. — Stranger, you really belittle human race. — Do not wonder, Megillus, but forgive me, since I said what I said by looking at the God and feeling accordingly.

803. (c) ΑΘ. [...] Φημί χρῆναι τὸ μὲν σπουδαῖον σπουδάζειν, τὸ δὲ μὴ σπουδαῖον μὴ, φύσει δὲ εἶναι θεὸν μὲν πάσης μακαρίου σπουδῆς ἄξιον, ἄνθρωπον δέ, ὅπερ εἶπομεν ἔμπροσθεν, θεοῦ τι παίγνιον εἶναι μεμηχανημένον, καὶ ὄντως τοῦτο αὐτοῦ τὸ βέλτιστον γεγονέναι. [...]

804. (b) [...] θαύματα ὄντες τὸ πολὺ, σμικρὰ δὲ ἀληθείας ἄττα μετέχοντες.

ΜΕ. Παντάπασι τὸ τῶν ἀνθρώπων γένος ἡμῖν, ὃ ξένε, διαφραυλίζεις.

ΑΘ. Μὴ θαυμάσης, ὃ Μέγιλλε, ἀλλὰ σύγγνωθί μοι· **πρὸς γὰρ τὸν θεὸν ἀπιδὼν καὶ παθὼν εἶπον ὅπερ εἶρηκα νῦν.**

This is a typical example of ironic use of dependence. Self-lessening is manifest in the first part of the passage, while self-assertion and noetic excess appear in the last sentence (*πρὸς γὰρ τὸν θεὸν ἀπιδὼν καὶ παθὼν εἶπον*), which exalts the subject who

is actually engaged in divine contemplation. Who could say exactly what is relevant here? Is it the praise for a powerful divinity? Or the brutal lessening of human condition? Or the assertion of one's own ability to contemplate supreme truths? Or the opposition between playfulness and seriousness, which is so crucial in defining Platonic irony? Who knows. Perhaps, all of them at the same time.

Ineffability is here strategic, conceptually weak. There is no point in giving this passage any speculative value. What the Athenian means is simply: "we are nothing, God is everything!", "do not foolish yourself into thinking you are something special!". Dependence implies belittlement and ineffability means here something loosely connected with such ambiguous feeling. Can we shape a clear concept out of this? No, we can't. Passages like this, however, may result very effective to evoke a certain state of mind and are likely to appease pious persons. They cannot be taken literally as if they were philosophical arguments, though they do have intellectual implications.

They also provide a polite expression of understatement, by tempering the most daring metaphysical bets with irony. As I said, this is a crucial stylistic feature of Platonic *récit*. Plato is a sophisticated realistic writer no less than a philosopher and a religious thinker. He uses all the time a style made of allusive gestures, pious devotion, poetic ambiguity, ordinary conversation, humorous diversion (etc.), which then combine with dense logical arguments (*gravitas*) to produce a characteristic sense of playfulness (*levitas*).

Before continuing, let me summarize the main content of this chapter. Firstly, the kind of ineffability entertained by religious experience and narratives cannot be epistemically meaningful. If it were, it would imply our inability to access the numen (total transcategoriality), with the result that God or whatever supernatural power we refer to would result literally unrelated to us and eventually unreachable.

Secondly, far from saying that religious ineffability is simply absurd, I am assuming that it is *strategic*. Its main purpose is

neither to understand something nor to inform us about a certain matter of fact, but to reflect a certain state of mind (emotion, disposition, belief) and do something with words, for instance, glorifying divinity and induce other people to do the same.

Thirdly, I define strategic ineffability as a text, whose basic articulation consists of human belittlement and praise for God's overwhelming power. This text, in Plato's and other philosophers' narratives, also plays an important ironical function: it softens and excuses the most daring metaphysical speculations, which may sound as impious signs of human overconfidence.

Lastly, as a text, dependence is mostly expressed ambiguously and figuratively, by way of metaphors and hyperboles that results very effective in catching people's attention and awaken emotional response. In this case, communication turns out to be all the more effective because logical consistency and conceptual clarity are not primary concerns.

Strategic ineffability in Plotinus

Let's move forward to Plotinus. Concerning the Good-One, as we saw in our previous contribution, he changed what seems to be the strongest Platonic arguments *against* divine ineffability into an argument *pro* divine ineffability (Montanari 2021). How could this happen? Is he really assuming that the One is epistemically ineffable (unthinkable)? Is he really arguing that we, men, are epistemically prevented from thinking of God? Is his *via negationis* as much logically and consistently pursued as was that undertaken by Plato's *Parmenides* in his first dialectical exercise?

A comprehensive reply to these questions would imply a long examination of the most relevant passages, too long for the present purpose. I will focus only on what seems to me more important. It is impossible even to affirm that something is humanly ineffable (unknowable) without declaring *ipso facto* that we know something about it, say, without being in logical contradiction with ourselves. Thomas Nagel disagreed on this

point, but his arguments do not seem conclusive to me.²⁵ The problem is known as self-stultification, or self-reference antinomy, and it received his traditional formulation by William Alston (1972). I will refer to this problem as the *loop*. The loop shows that the sentence “X is ineffable” is *unreportable*.²⁶ In *De doctrina christiana* (I, 6), Augustine defines this paradox as *pugna verborum*:

And because of this, God is not to be said ineffable, because even when this is said, something is said. This arises some sort of conflict of words, because if the ineffable is what cannot be spoken of, it is not ineffable if it can be called ineffable. This conflict of words is rather to be avoided with silence than to be solved with the voice. God, however, although nothing worthy can be said about him, allowed the gift of human voice and wanted us to rejoice in his praise with our words. This is why there is what is said God.

Ac per hoc ne ineffabilis quidem dicendus est Deus, quia et hoc cum dicitur, aliquid dicitur. Et fit nescio qua pugna verborum, quoniam si illud est ineffabile quod dici non potest, non est ineffabile quod vel ineffabile dici potest. **Quae pugna verborum silentio cavenda potius quam voce pacanda est.** Et tamen Deus, cum de illo nihil digne dici possit, admisit humanae vocis obsequium, et verbis nostris in laude sua gaudere nos voluit. Nam inde est et quod dicitur Deus.

If one defends divine ineffability, as Augustine points out, then consistency would require either silence or praise. Even

²⁵ Nagel 1974: 440-1. He argues that other beings’ consciousness is ineffable in a strong sense: we do not have access to their “phenomenal” consciousness, P-consciousness (the so-called *hard problem*). However, epistemic boundedness is overcome in some sense when he says that, at least, we have access to the idea that other beings actually have their own P-consciousness. I think his argument has a flaw on this point. The loop shows up, again. More consistently, other authors (Dave Chalmers, for instance) consider that P-consciousness is doubtless only for the first-person subject who is actually experiencing it. In all other cases, it is just a matter of plausibility to say that someone or something is conscious.

²⁶ Unreportability is defined by A. Kukla as “a type of ineffability—it’s another way of construing the claim that something ‘can’t be said’”. For instance, in the case of the following sentence – Snow is white, but I do not say “Snow is white” – what can’t be said is the fact that S is true and that I do not say ‘S is true’ (Kukla 2005: 149-150).

without being so radical, it is clear enough that epistemic ineffability implies dealing with dead-end questions, under the form of either logical absurdity, like in *Parmenides*' first exercise, or insuperable epistemic barriers, such as the Platonic $\chi\omega\rho\alpha$. It would be strange if Plotinus had this kind of ineffability in mind concerning the One. Perhaps, something else is at stake.

As a matter of fact, what is immediately observable is that the "noetic quality" is central in the Plotinian representation and experience of the One.²⁷ Personal experience has manifestly a strong impact on cognition. Plotinus often says that the One, due to its absolute simplicity and remoteness, does not allow positive predication (III, 8, 11; V, 5, 6; VI, 9, 3; VI, 8, 8-9). This seems to imply unspeakability rather than unrepresentability, namely, a subjective sense of the inadequacy to express in words what we feel rather than an actual inability to represent and conceptualize.²⁸ As a matter of fact, he also defends many times that the One is a matter of thought, knowledge and experience. Through his negative way, he actually says much about the One and our relation with it. So, his negative way does not resemble at all the way of epistemic ineffability.

Plotinus also suggests that the One may be figured out as if it had two sides, one accessible and related to our knowledge, the other not. After all, could it remain in itself alone, as if it were jealous of itself and without power? (V, 4, 1, 35). But of course, splitting the One in more parts cannot help solve the question. It means simply shifting the problem. To suggest that there is a part of the One that is inaccessible and unrelated leads again into the same loop: we are now predicating no-accessibility and no-relatedness about the part of something which in fact should be unattainable by any sort of predication. Our sentence is still unreportable. This cannot be what Plotinus had in mind, otherwise he would have simply not said a word, as Augustine suggests. On the contrary, however, he said a lot.

This loquacity is paradoxical (though not at all strange), both (1) logically and (2) religiously. (1) Logically, Plotinus resorts

²⁷ On noetic quality, see James 2002: 295.

²⁸ Kukla 2005: 135-9, 146-8.

to the negative way not because he thinks that the One is absolutely unreachable to us, but, quite on the contrary, because he believes that this is the best way for us to talk, think, experience and remember the supreme divinity, which must be our only concern in life. Now, to talk, think and experience something already implies some relation with that something, at least, by acquaintance. If I believe of X that it is *not* a, b, c, ...n (the One is not “a generic this”, is not “the whole”, is not “the number”, is not “the being”, etc.), this means that I believe I know something about X. This belief is the only way I can feel justified in my search. It allows me at least to realize what X is not, so I realize something after all. The loop cannot be avoided.

(2) Religiously, mystical narratives almost always presuppose the memory of their central experience and thus some knowledge of the divine (a first-person knowledge). This depends on what William James calls the “non-interruptive” nature of mystical knowledge: say, the subject preserves a memory of what happened to him and a vivid sense of its extraordinary importance (James 2002: 295-6). This also explains mystic loquacity *post factum*. Memory and noetic quality, however, contrast with divine ineffability, because, as I previously said, a full-fledged, consistent concept of epistemic ineffability entails the impossibility of all sort of knowledge, including experience. Divine ineffability, if it were logically consistent, would require that human mind is prevented both from saying and experiencing the divine, thus, it would turn out to be irreligious. So, what to do with Plotinian ineffability? He manifestly knows and says many things about the One, but he is also saying that we cannot know and say anything about it. This means that he might not have in mind epistemic ineffability concerning the One.

Besides, the negative way is by no means the unique expressive modality used by Plotinus to address the supreme principle. He also makes a substantial and even preeminent use of the positive one, which proceed by normal predication (Gerson 2013). Plotinus positively predicates many things about the One, to say but a few: unity, simplicity, action, generation, will, freedom, power, causation, anteriority, etc. He says about the One that it

“is” the Good, it is “in itself”, etc. (VI, 9, 3, 50-51). He also tells us what or how the One “was” before generating the whole. He refers to it by using spatial and orientational metaphors: up, above, beyond, before, etc.²⁹ Lastly, he uses a vast repertory of more or less conventional metaphors and similes (it is like a dwell, a tree, a light, the beloved, etc.). The Plotinian way is thus made of two modalities, one positive and one negative, which continually intersects and result highly interdependent, almost inseparable in the texts. Negative way is never alone.

Divine ineffability means here something different from a consistent epistemic closure. Neither positive nor negative attributions are conceived as denoting and telling us what actually the One is. They seem rather used as signs, hints that the master suggests in order to evoke in the disciple a propitious state of mind. R. Otto said that mystical language is deictic. Attributions, in Plotinus, rather than denoting aspects of the One, are used figuratively, more or less loosely, “so to say” (VI, 8, 18, 47-50), as *μυήματα* (VI, 9, 11, 27) or hieroglyphics (V, 8, 6). Plotinus seemingly talks about the One *in order not to explain or denote it, but to evoke and propitiate* certain states of mind in the addressee. He declares this intention explicitly:

This is why [the One] is said not-to-be-told and not-to-be-written, but we say and write *in order to induce toward it and lead an arousal* from the discourses to the vision, like showing a path to the man who wants to contemplate (VI, 9, 4, 11-14, cursive mine).³⁰

If this is the case, by arguing for the ineffability of the One, Plotinus is not really defending epistemic, but only strategic ineffability. Rather than saying something, Plotinus is hinting at something and inducing somebody toward something. Λόγοι, discourses, are not used to understand the One, but to awake the soul who listens and lead it to mystical vision. By saying that

²⁹ For the importance of these primary metaphors in structuring human thought, see Lakoff 1980: ch. 4.

³⁰ “For this reason, Plato says it is neither to be spoken nor written of. We do speak and write of it, by way of directing others towards it, waking them up from discursive accounts to actual looking, as though we were showing the way to those wanting to see something” (transl. by Lloyd P. Gerson, George Boys Stones, et al., 2018)

human mind cannot think of the God, that truth is beyond conceptualization, he does not mean to say something about the One as such, but to enhance contemplation and prompt his addressees to mystical experience. His statements are but means to express and incite a certain experience: “dans l'expérience, l'énoncé n'est rien, sinon un moyen et même, autant qu'un moyen, un obstacle” (Bataille 1978, I.3).

Strategic ineffability is nowhere so explicit as when Plotinus tells us about the mystical union or convergence between man and God (VI, 9, 4, 1-17; VI, 9, 8, 25-29; VI, 9, 10, 5-9). “Convergence” – Plotinus uses the word *σύνεσις*, which means intelligence, awareness and reunion – of course is possible (how could it be otherwise for a religious mind?), but it is something that occurs beyond science, beyond reason and intelligence, beyond that reciprocal mirroring between human and divine reason that is a supreme value for philosophers (Montanari 2021). *Σύνεσις* is no more a matter of rational knowledge or thought, but a sign that denotes an experience, an experience of vision and presence (*παρουσία*). Intellectual specularity, or self-cognition, is not negated, but overcome in a superior, actual unity.³¹ The philosophical drive to the equivalence-principle has been substituted by mystical union.

Plotinus' *λόγοι* about the One and the experience of the One manifest a strong feeling of dependence. Ambiguity prevails in the description of the experience. Self-assertion and self-annihilation, “personal” and “impersonal”,³² which I defined as the contrasting aspects of dependence, are both emphasized in Plotinus' fascinating description of ecstatic experience (VI, 9, 8-11). This is described like a dance (*χορεία*) “around the One” and condensed in the formula *φυγή μόνου πρὸς μόνον*. Mystical vision is at the same time the celebration of an individual soul and the union of that soul with God. The union of God and man's soul is strategically affirmed beyond any possible human concept.

³¹ The difference between these two moments – intellectual and super-intellectual contact, dialectic and erotic drive – are well illustrated in Gerson 2013 (214-219). Gerson does not seem to recognize any mystical quality in the intellectual contact.

³² Gerson 2013: 221.

So, it seems that a change of perspective is needed if we want to evade the paradox of Plotinian ineffability. One must not look for the exact meaning, but for the relevant one. Plotinus does not mean to say something specific about the One, either by negative or positive way, but is trying to express something of his own experience and prompt somebody else to move along the same path. Theories of aesthetic and religious meaning can help us find a way out of the paradox.³³ In particular, a good theory of communication could help.³⁴

According to Sperber and Wilson communication is a matter of relevance (Sperber, Wilson 1995). In communicative processes, relevant information is usually what the addresser wants to provide and the addressee is seeking for. Now, in order to grasp what is relevant, the message does not need either to be a clear, consistent argument or a full description of what the addresser has in mind. Quite on the contrary, it needs only to be effective, and this basically depends on context, audience, shared background knowledge, “mutual cognitive environment”, etc. In this case, loose use of language (metaphors, hyperboles, irony etc.) and weak implicatures (like poetic effects) may become dominant. This means that relevance is compatible with a certain, even high, degree of semantic ambiguity that would result unacceptable for logical reasoning and scientific communication (Sperber, Wilson 2015; Sperber 2008). This is why relevance theory could help also in the hermeneutics of philosophical texts.

So, let see how relevance may apply to our case. The *Enneads* are a collection of treaties based on concrete teaching experiences, whose aim is to lead the disciple into a process of

³³ Following Wittgenstein remarks on aesthetical meanings, for instance, Guy Bennett-Hunter proposes to understand also religious meaning as having a performative character. “[R]eligious language and ritual practices – he says – are not best understood as obviously bad attempts to describe the ‘religious object’ experienced, but rather as evocations of what cannot be described: through the way in which the story is told and the manner in which the rite is performed, rather than primarily through their cognitive content” (Bennett-Hunter 2015: 14).

³⁴ I ignore whether relevance-theory has been applied to philosophical texts, but it has been used to interpret literary and religious texts. See for instance Pattemore 2004 (ch. 1 and bibliography).

spiritual purification and conversion experienced by a master.³⁵ Therefore, it is legitimate to expect that expressive, performative and interpretive uses of language play a major role, particularly when the One and its experience are concerned. Now, what is relevant when Plotinus talks about the One? If our answer is “the One” as such, then we will be soon caught again in the loop of unreportability and self-stultification, from where there is no (logical) way out. Instead, suppose that when Plotinus tells us something about the One, he is not making a descriptive use of language, but he is pointing at something else, which is only indirectly or loosely related with the One. For instance, he may be thinking of how his disciple’s soul would react to this or that sign, or how to produce in his mind some state which may be favorable to contemplation.

In this case, logic, conceptualization and descriptive use of language are certainly not the most important aspects, whereas the main goal is *psychagogy*: how to lead a soul on its path to purification, conversion and mystical vision. Accordingly, our main hermeneutical criterium for Plotinian ineffability should be set by a relevance-theory. The same could be said for other theologians. Take for instance the theology of Thomas of Aquinas (e.g. *Summa contra gentiles*, first book), whose aim is certainly not to grasp divine essence, which the great theologian deems ineffable, but to set human soul along the path of faith (*preambula fidei*).

To sum up, what is relevant under a psychagogic perspective is not so much knowledge, denotation, correspondence between thoughts and a specific referent (*adaequatio rei et intellectus*), but the way words and thoughts *do* something else, e.g. contribute to the conversion of the soul, exhort to virtue, etc. This communication is strategic, protreptic, that is, conceived of to bring about a spiritual change. For instance, what really seems to be relevant for the soul in his conversion to the One is to suppress any reference to multiplicity

³⁵ “Il filosofo è un professore e un direttore di coscienza che non mira a esporre la propria visione dell’universo, ma a formare discepoli attraverso esercizi spirituali. Gli scritti di Plotino sono quindi soprattutto discussioni ed esortazioni, spesso in strettissima relazione con i corsi tenuti pubblicamente” (Hadot 1992: 4).

when referring to it (V, 5, 6, 27). In this case, the name “One” will neither properly mean “unity” nor the attribution of unity to something called the One (VI, 9, 5, 39-46). Rather, it will be a “half-understood” analogical notion that acts, by generating a certain mental state, as a help or reminder for the disciple in his path to spiritual conversion.

Strategic ineffability in Plato

Strategic ineffability is also crucial in Plato. Plato rejects divine ineffability epistemically but is constantly playing with religious ineffability strategically. In Plato religiosity assumes many shapes and cannot be reduced to theological and psychological speculation. As I said, Plato is not only a philosopher, he is also a writer and a religious thinker. Ancient commentators were very sensitive to this variety and were right when they put it in connection with the global purpose of the Platonic quest, which is not primarily demonstrative and epistemic, but protreptic, cathartic and redemptive (aiming at the purification of concrete individual souls), thus, sensitive to a certain use of language (interpretive, loose, etc.). They identified various forms of expression in the Dialogues, like exhortations, dissuasions, refutation, elicitation, praise and blame, each one fulfilling some indispensable narrative function in a psychagogic sense.³⁶ Proclus, for instance, mentions three kinds of knowledge used by Socrates in his communication with his disciples (Alcibiades, Theaetetus, etc.): philosophy (logical argument), elicitation (e.g. recollection and maieutic) and love (which embraces the previous two).³⁷

Besides, Platonic discourse on religion is largely shaped by popular, commonsensical and traditional representations.³⁸

³⁶ “[T]he philosopher needs praise in order to familiarize the youth, and blame to cleanse him from excessive conceit; exhortation in order to arouse him to communion with virtue, dissuasion to turn him away from becoming like the common run of demagogues and from emulation of those with great power in the state; and elicitation in order to entice him to the consideration of the nature of man and the care appropriate to this kind of nature” (O’Neill 1971: 8).

³⁷ O’Neill 1971: 117.

³⁸ Traditionalism is nowhere else so evident as in the *Laws*. See at least Morrow 1960.

Religion is by no mean a matter of purely intellectual comprehension (theology). When Plato talks about divinity, sometimes he shows a respectful adherence to traditional wisdom, oracles for example, sometimes he praises the simplicity of devotional attitude (εὐήθεια) of certain people, sometimes he shows submission before the spectacle of divinity and stigmatizes the man complaining before his fate (typically, *Laws*X). Irrational behaviors such as superstitions, magic and ritual frenzy are often severely stigmatized, but other practices, like divination, anti-intellectualistic devotion, traditionalism, erotic and poetic inspiration are crucial aspects in Plato's discourse. What seems clear is that Plato, by mobilizing this huge arsenal of not strictly speaking logical arguments, is playing consciously with emotions, feelings, beliefs and desire. He is not only talking to reason. He is talking to the soul, to the man as a whole, to his reason as much as to his individual existential concerns. Both his thought and his narrative, *logos* and *pathos*, are symbiotically intertwined (Montanari 2022).

If what we have just said has some plausibility, it will result likewise acceptable that many statements about ineffability, in Plato, should not be taken as if they had a definite epistemic value and derived from logical demonstrations, but simply as strategic communication. Let's consider some examples.

1) In the *Apology*, for instance, the words of the Oracle referred by Chaerephon are interpreted by Socrates as a declaration of ineffability (ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός) and dependence (ὁ θεὸς σοφός).³⁹ Socrates is emphasizing that his ignorance is better than that of other men, who are not even aware of their ignorance. He is also stressing the complete subordination of his whole life to the God's service (ὑπηρεσία) and command. The text emphasizes a strong

³⁹ 23. (a) [...] τὸ δὲ κινδυνεύει, ὃ ἄνδρες, τῷ ὄντι ὁ θεὸς σοφός εἶναι, καὶ ἐν τῷ χρησμῷ τοῦτ' αὐτοῦ λέγειν, ὅτι ἡ ἀνθρωπίνη σοφία ὀλίγου τινὸς ἀξία ἐστὶν καὶ οὐδενός.

prophetic commitment that is presented in terms of life-long sacrifice in the interest of the polis.⁴⁰

2) In the *Phaedo*, Socrates says that men will attain the intelligible world only after death, due to the ill-fated influence of the body while he is alive (66b-67b). In the *Phaedrus*, he tells in mythical form that even in the afterlife the best soul will be hardly able to give more than a glimpse at the eternal beings (μόγισ καθορῶσα τὰ ὄντα).⁴¹ These texts are emphasizing to what extent the body may affect (corrupt) our moral-epistemic capacity and aim to stir the disciple's awareness on this point. As for the *Phaedo*, where the theme of the uncertainty of human knowledge reaches its peak, the question at stake is not divine ineffability, but the problematic relation between rational demonstration and intimate persuasion (Montanari 2022).

3) In the *Cratylus* (400d-e), Socrates states that the best route to approach the question of the divine names is to declare our complete ignorance about the gods and their names (περὶ θεῶν οὐδὲν ἴσμεν, οὔτε περὶ αὐτῶν οὔτε περὶ τῶν ὀνομάτων).⁴² The passage also suggests a second-best: keep using the names according to what tradition (νόμος) says, because we are ignorant and tradition is good (καλῶς γὰρ... νενομίσθαι). Lastly, as a third minor option, he says we can try to make some guess (σκοπῶμεν) about gods' names, but previously we have to please them by saying that there is no pride (ὑβρις) in our efforts and that we are fully aware of the limited character of our investigation. This passage is another good example of strategic communication dictated by dependence. It also sounds as a *captatio benevolentiae* addressed to the gods, an invitation to look with benignity at our miserable efforts.

⁴⁰ On prophecy and prophetic character, including its connection with ancient philosophy, is still fundamental Weber 1980: 268-75 (V.4, Prophet). On prophecy and political implications, see also Nikiprowetski 1992.

⁴¹ 246. (b) [...] ἔνθα δὴ πόνοσ τε καὶ ἀγὼν ἔσχατος ψυχῆ πρόκειται. [...] 248. (a) [...] αἱ δὲ ἄλλαι ψυχαί, ἡ μὲν ἄριστα θεῶ ἐπομένη καὶ εἰκασμένη ὑπερῆρεν εἰς τὸν ἕξω τόπον τὴν τοῦ ἠνιόχου κεφαλὴν, καὶ συμπεριηρέθη τὴν περιφορὰν, θορυβομένη ὑπὸ τῶν ἴππων καὶ μόγισ καθορῶσα τὰ ὄντα.

⁴² On the divine names in Homer, see Lazzeroni 1957.

4) Socrates' argument in the *Philebus* leads the reader until the vestibule of the Good and its dwelling (ἐπι... τοῖς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ... προθύροις καὶ τῆς οἰκήσεως, 64c). The Good remains unsayable, impossible to capture with one single idea (μῦ... ἰδέα τὸ ἀγαθὸν θηρεῦσαι), though it can be grasped with three: beauty, symmetry and truth (65a). The dialogue ends with the list of what is closer to the Good in decreasing order (measure, beauty, intelligence, sciences and pleasures) and emphasizes the remoteness of the numen (dependence).

These few examples show the same point, namely, that divine ineffability in Plato is often a strategic resort: it has not a conceptual value per se but works as an ambiguous sign used by the master to indicate, persuade, exhort, praise, inspire, awake, move in one way or another the souls of his addressees. Our epistemic boundedness is certainly not at stake here. The communication of our insufficiency and dependence are certainly a much more relevant piece of information. This is why Plato, though rejecting divine ineffability epistemically, frequently asserts or implies that God and divine wisdom are ineffable. In the first case he is speaking technically and philosophically, while in the second he is speaking religiously and strategically.

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