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# Ineffable Understanding

By **John Shand**

## 1.

The purpose here is to show that the seemingly intractable putative paradoxes involved in speaking of the ineffable – as if you are speaking about the ineffable it cannot be ineffable, indeed you cannot even say it is ineffable as you are thereby saying something about it – are based on a mistake if what is at stake is understanding the ineffable.

Permitting contradiction is unnecessary to deal with the ineffable if the putative problem removed by such a permission is understanding the ineffable. The solution lies in noticing something that is commonplace yet overlooked. Essentially this is that understanding does not have to involve linguistic articulation, and such understanding is commonplace, indeed everyday.

In a recent paper on the subject, Graham Priest proposes – although he claims no originality for it as he points precursors among Eastern thinkers – that the solution to the problem of talking about that which cannot be talked about, forming a contradiction, is to abandon the law of non-contradiction in such cases<sup>1</sup>. The contradiction is thrown up and illustrated, for example, by the case Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*, Heidegger in *Being and Time*, and in Buddhist thought. In the case of the last of these, which Priest commends to us, the solution put forward by Buddhist thinkers is to embrace the contradiction – holding that there's nothing wrong with it. So now you can just go ahead and do what you cannot do, say what you cannot say. Desperate measures. It will be argued here that this move is not only desperate, but hasty and unnecessary.

## 2.

To begin with, embracing contradictions does not solve the problem even if the move is accepted.

So let us look at that first. The move suggesting that the contradiction involved in speaking about the ineffable, rendering it both effable and ineffable, is just fine, merely shifts the problem somewhere else. This is because it involves, assuming the embrace of contradiction not to be global, another discourse by which one asserts that it is unproblematic to form contradictions in certain discourses but not others,

which in turn points to yet another discourse saying whether that discourse was one of the discourses within which contradiction is permitted, and so on *ad infinitum*.

To attempt to assert instead that it is all right to form contradictions globally would be impossible, as then the distinction between assertion and denial is rendered vacuous, meaning there is no sense to the doing of one rather than the other. If one then says that that in turn is all right and one can assert and deny things even though the distinction between assertion and denial is lost – thus embracing that contradiction – one would be begging the question. If one then goes on and says that there is nothing wrong with begging the question and hold that one has not begged the question we are back to an *ad infinitum* regress. One might also suspect that the game is up and meaningful discourse abandoned.

### 3.

Of course it could be argued that every putative problem would be splendidly rendered unproblematic, a non-problem, by permitting contradictions.

But that result is surely trivial. It's hard to see how any 'problems', albeit perhaps only ones that had no practical effects, could exist at all. What could a problem amount to if  $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$  may be the case? Problems only arise at all, it may be argued, because  $\sim(p \ \& \ \sim p)$  must be the case and  $(p \ \& \ \sim p)$  may not be the case – the former is accepted as a necessity and the latter rejected as a possibility.

That there are problems depends on contradiction being in place. If it is the case that contradictions are permitted in a localized manner, but not globally, then we are back with the problem identified in the previous section of expressing that in a language that arbitrarily, for a fear of regress, either does or does not permit contradictions. Thus, as has been said, the solution of accepting contradictions to solve problems is a trivial one amounting to saying that the solution to any problem is that there are no problems.

### 4.

However, this is not the central matter here. This is that the desperate measure of permitting contradiction as a solution to not being able to talk of the ineffable – an effable ineffable – is not required and that there is another way of dealing with the matter. The first consideration is to make a distinction between referring to or *naming* the ineffable and articulating the nature of, or *giving sense to*, the ineffable. The second is to point to the contradiction-embracing solution being unnecessary in that what chiefly motivates it is a desire to understand the ineffable. These two matters are connected, and the latter leads from the first.

First then, referring to, or naming, things that are ineffable is indeed commonplace. We do not need to suppose in this that we are concerned here with some mysterious transcendent realm beloved of the spiritual and religious. Huge swathes of our lives involve things that are ineffable. The feeling of the wind on one's face while walking along a cliff <sup>2</sup> is something one may refer to, but something whose nature, the sense of it – the what-it-is-like of it – it is impossible to articulate in language. It is

ineffable. Yet we feel no need to reach for the doomsday option of countenancing contradictions in order to cope with the large parts of our lives that we encounter being ineffable. What follows next explains why.

Second, the thought that we are required to embrace contradiction if we are to have any understanding of the ineffable is plainly false. Yet that, the failure to understand, of being unable to give sense to something, is a primary motivation for countenancing contradiction in respect of that which is deemed ineffable.

However, there are lots of things that we understand well that are ineffable, and to suppose otherwise is to make the false supposition that only that which may be articulated in language is understandable.<sup>3</sup> But the feeling of the wind on your face is both understandable and yet something that cannot be articulated in language. The language may point you at what is involved in the experience, it may refer to that way of encountering the world, and thus perhaps enable you to know what to do in order to understand it, but it cannot give you an understanding of what is involved in the experienced encounter.

Saying something about the ineffable should not be confused with evoking it. Of course, there may be ways of evoking an understanding of something, perhaps even through language – this is often an aim of art, or perhaps the result of a happenstance of an associative experience<sup>4</sup> – but that is nothing to do with making the ineffable effable.

Thus, we must make a distinction not only between reference and sense in language, but also between *sense*, in the sense of articulation, and *evocation*. Debussy did not write *La Mer* in order to *articulate* an understanding of the sea; if he did anything that is outside the music itself it was to *evoke* an understanding, or one might say, experience, of the sea. One does the same by kissing someone to show that and how much you love them. One can: evoke, demonstrate, show, express, embody, all sorts of things, and thereby an understanding of those things without articulating that understanding, and one may do so in a huge range of cases where articulated understanding is impossible. In this way a chief, possibly the chief, motivation for permitting and making unproblematic the effability of the ineffable, by in turn permitting and making unproblematic the contradiction involved, is cut away. We can and very commonly do understand, and well, things that are ineffable, despite their ineffability. There is no need for the embracing of contradiction move if understanding the ineffable, and fear of not understanding it, rendering it a mysterious oppressive blank, is the chief purpose of such an embrace.

There are many features of our life that are ineffable, and are unproblematically so, while we do not suppose that we can articulate them, and yet we have no difficulty at all in rightly claiming an understanding of them, for we do not suppose that in order to understand them that understanding has to be linguistic.

## 5.

There is, thus, an erroneous model of understanding that supposes that that which cannot be articulated in language cannot properly be said to be understood, which

lies behind the desperate contradiction-embracing move. This is not only a mistake, but would, if true, be highly surprising.

Language is primarily a practical tool for communicating with our fellow human being in a way that helps us negotiate the world in the course of our lives. But a colossal amount and range of our encounters with the world slip through the crude net of language. The warp and weft of our experience – how we experience things, what it is like to have certain experiences, our encounters with the world and being-in-the-world – is simply too fine-grained, nuanced, and particular, to be articulated in normal language.

Of course the experiences may be referred to, they may be named – but the terms doing this give no sense to what it is like *to have* these experiences. We might evoke such encounters with the world, but language may not do so except by some non-semantic accidental causal association, and without actually encountering those features of the world, language, in referring to them, is helpless in giving us an understanding of them. This encountered world might be characterized as, ‘the bits in between’.<sup>5</sup>

The model of language proposed is that of a net. We drag it through the world crudely picking up some objects that, as they say, fall under concepts, and we then combine these concepts by certain rules, derived both *a priori* and empirically, to present a relational understanding of things that are true or false of the objects so delineated, and go on to predict consequences. But many of the things we encounter in the world either fail to fall under concepts but are yet understood in and only in the act of encounter – and are therefore impossible to transmit to others by an attempt to articulating them in language – or fall under concepts such that by being referred to their relations may be given and their behaviour predicted, but again without giving an understanding of what it would be to encounter them.<sup>6</sup>

## 6.

The upshot of the argument here is that the move to embrace contradictions, as a solution to the problem of talking about the ineffable, is rationally disastrous in its consequences, fails to solve the putative problem even if adopted, and is in any case unnecessary if the aim is to permit the understanding of the ineffable.

We understand the ineffable all the time, although we may not realise that that is what are doing. This is partly because we confuse reference and sense, and sense and evocation (and the other ways of passing on an understanding of what we are referring to), and partly because such ineffable unarticulated understanding is so pervasive and everyday.

There is nothing problematic about the ineffable if that means understanding it, for this is accomplished without the requirement to articulate it in language that could only be said to do so, if at all, by recklessly permitting contradiction. It might be claimed that the requirement of language coming to a supposed understanding of the ineffable only by permitting contradiction, is proof enough that it not through language that the ineffable is understood. The ineffable is indeed ineffable just as one

might logically suppose, but is not thereby not understood, and our understanding of it is unproblematic.

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