Selected logical aspects of apophatic theology

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In the thesis I investigate three different interpretations of apophatic theology—the doctrine that portrays God as completely ineffable and unknowable—highlighting the logical aspects that go along with each one: semantic, epistemic and order-theoretic.

The most prevalent interpretation of negative theology emphasizes the transcendence of God in the context of language. Shortly speaking, this theory claims that God is completely unspeakable, inexpressible, and ineffable. In the first part of my thesis, I reveal that the paradox lying underneath this theory has a self-referential structure characteristic to well-known semantic paradoxes. I also analyze several attempts to save the "theology of silence" from being inconsistent. My analysis suggests that these attempts are rather unsuccessful.

Another interpretation of negative theology shifts emphasis from speech to thoughts and from language to knowledge. Its central claim is that God is utterly unknowable, inconceivable, and incomprehensible. At first glance the "theological skepticism" appears to be the same as (or very similar to) the theology of silence. There are some reasons to believe that at least one of them implies the other. In the second part of the thesis, I argue, however, that they cannot be thought as equivalent. I attempt to support my claims with the arguments form philosophy and cognitive science. I use epistemic modal logic to demonstrate self-referential nature of theological skepticism showing that its formal reconstruction takes the form of well-known epistemic paradoxes: Moore's problem, the Church-Fitch knowability paradox and so-called knower's paradox.

It is often emphasized that negative theology is a legacy of Platonic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, at least in the western tradition. This idea is the foundation for the third interpretation of negative theology—as a "Neo-Platonically inspired mysticism". It provides me with an excuse to describe and discuss a formal reconstruction of this doctrine that utilizes the power set algebra. In the third part of the thesis, I investigate the conditions under which such a structure produces paradox in the sense of Russell's antinomy.

In my thesis I argue that paradoxical self-reference is an intrinsic and inalienable property of apophatic theology, at least in the sense defined by the above-described interpretations. Nevertheless, this does not mean that formal logic cannot be useful in the analyses of this doctrine. Moreover, I believe that reconstruction of negative theology in terms of formal logical systems can be mutually beneficial.

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