Comparative Philosophy of Religion 1

Timothy D. Knepper
Leah E. Kalmanson *Editors*

Ineffability: An Exercise in Comparative Philosophy of Religion

Springer

Comparative Philosophy of Religion

Volume 1

This book series publishes works of comparative philosophy of religion—works that are religiously inclusive or diverse, explicitly comparative, and critically evaluative. It serves as the primary publishing output of The Comparison Project, a speaker series in comparative philosophy of religion at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa). It also publishes the essay collections generated by the American Academy of Religion's seminar on "Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion." The Comparison Project organizes a biennial series of scholar lectures, practitioner dialogues, and philosophical comparisons about core, cross-cultural topics in the philosophy of religion. A variety of scholars of religion are invited to describe and analyse the theologies and rituals of a variety of religious traditions pertinent to the selected topic; philosophers of religion are then asked to raise questions of meaning, truth, and value about this topic in comparative perspective. These specialist descriptions and generalist comparisons are published as focused and cohesive efforts in comparative philosophy of religion. Global-Critical Philosophy of Religion is an American Academy of Religion seminar devoted to researching and writing an undergraduate textbook in philosophy of religion that is religiously inclusive and critically informed. Each year the seminar explores the cross-cultural categories for global-critical philosophy of religion. A religiously diverse array of essays for each seminar are published along with a set of comparative conclusions.

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Preface

The Comparison Project is an experimental effort in comparative philosophy of religion. Although its ultimate aim is to raise traditional philosophical questions about the truth and value of religion, its primary sources are not very traditional at all—human acts of reason-giving as they shape and sustain a diversity of religious traditions. It is in this sense, first and foremost, that The Comparison Project is an experimental effort in philosophy of religion, one that compares over and philosophizes about a diversity of concrete religious reasons rather than the ahistorical abstraction of theism.

The Comparison Project is also experimental with regard to its core programming—a biennial series of lectures by scholars of religion, dialogues between practitioners of religion, and comparisons by philosophers of religion, which together concern a common philosophical-religious topic. Most of these events are designed to "stand alone," serving to educate the general public about the religions of the world and to engage local practitioners of religion in interfaith dialogue. But the culminating event of each series is a set of comparisons that attempt to "put it all together," drawing philosophical conclusions about the topic in comparative perspective.

A few brief comments about this method are in order. Although it is true that human acts of *religious* reason-giving are our primary locus of inquiry, it is also true that the topic of each series guides the kinds of reason-giving that we explore. It matters not that some act or form of reason-giving is commonly classified as religious or philosophical or otherwise; it matters that it constitutes a culturally-epistemically distinct and compelling instance of reason-giving relevant to the topic at hand. We try not to get tangled up in the semantic thickets of *religion*; we don't think it matters much for a comparative inquiry into reason-giving about topics of religious concern.[1] We do, though, think it is important to attend critically to the categories that we use to make our comparisons, particularly insofar as they bias the results of our comparisons. And we do not shy away from the philosophical tasks of

[1] See Chap. 4 of Knepper 2013 as well as Knepper's forthcoming essay "Why Philosophers of Religion Don't Need 'Religion'."

explanation and evaluation, though we do try to remain humble and honest in undertaking them. We disagree with those philosophers who maintain that there is no role for explanation in philosophy of religion—insofar as philosophy of religion is religiously diverse in scope, it is comparative, and insofar as it is comparative, it needs to explain the results of its comparisons, be it through traditional philosophical means or the natural and social sciences. We also disagree with those scholars of religion who maintain that there is no role for evaluation in the study of religion—in fact, we think that one of the most important tasks in the study of religion involves raising questions about the value and truth of religious beliefs and practices, provided that this is done from a diversity of perspectives (not just our own) and in a diversity of contexts (not just our own). Moreover, we have found our local audiences eager to raise such questions, if in a way that is respectful of religious difference. It is for this reason, among others, that we believe that our program in comparative philosophy of religion is relevant to a twenty-first-century world—a world that is teeming with religious diversity but does not know how to broach issues of truth and value about this diversity in an open and informed manner.

We also believe that our program in comparative philosophy of religion is relevant to the academic field of philosophy of religion, a field that has been mired in the critical examination of theism since its Enlightenment origins. We aim to influence this field, not only through our programming but also through our publications. Each biennial series of programming is organized around and published under a topic that can serve as a fundamental category of comparative inquiry in philosophy of religion. Each series also contains a diverse set of perspectives about this topic. Thus we hope our publications can contribute to both the categories and the content for a comparative philosophy of religion.

The Comparison Project is directed by two professors of philosophy and religion at Drake University (Des Moines, Iowa, USA): Tim Knepper and Leah Kalmanson. While Tim's training is in a philosophy of religion that is informed by religious studies and analytic philosophy of religion, Leah's is in non-Western and continental philosophy. This collaboration has been mutually enriching for a number of reasons, chief of which is the different emphases of their approaches to comparative philosophy of religion. Put succinctly, Leah's evaluative endeavors often turn on the (un)suitability of comparative categories, whereas Tim seeks to make comparative categories (more) suitable for evaluative endeavors.

The Comparison Project is also steered by a committee composed of other Drake religion faculty, Drake philosophy and religion students, and members of the local Des Moines community who are involved in interfaith activities. In the case of the programming contained in this collection (2013–2015), this steering committee included professors Brad Crowell and Jennifer Harvey; students Todd Brown, Erin Mercurio, and Nora Sullivan; and community representatives Richard Deming (founder and chairman of Above + Beyond Cancer), Mary Gottshalk (local author and interfaith activist), Ted Lyddon-Hatten (director of Drake's Wesley House), Sarai Rice (executive director of the Des Moines Area Religious Council), and Bulent Sengun (director of the Niagara Foundation of Iowa). This collaboration of academy and community has also proved enriching, especially as The Comparison

Project has labored to select topics that resonate with the interests and concerns of the community while also serving as key categories in comparative philosophy of religion.

None of this would have been possible without funding. We therefore end by thanking those who have made possible the 2013–2015 programming efforts of The Comparison Project: Drake University's Center for the Humanities, Drake University's Principal Financial Group Center for Global Citizenship, the Medbury Fund, Humanities Iowa, the Des Moines Area Religious Council, and Cultivating Compassion: The Dr. Richard Deming Foundation.

Des Moines, IA, USA

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Contents

Chapter 1
Introduction: Ineffability in Comparative Philosophical Perspective

Timothy D. Knepper

Abstract This introductory chapter previews the content and conclusions of The Comparison Project's 2013–2015 programming cycle on ineffability. Each of the 13 content lectures on ineffability is summarized, especially as it informs its corresponding essay in this volume. The comparative conclusions of the programming cycle and volume are also discussed, at least with regard to their methods and aims.

1.1 Content

Ineffability is a common motif in the religions of the world—though not a universal one. Many religious traditions have claimed that their ultimate realities, truths, or experiences are ineffable—but certainly not all, and maybe not even most.[1] Why ineffability has been prominent in some religious traditions and communities is one of the questions that will be taken up in the comparative conclusion of this book. But since this book, and the project from which it derives, is ultimately an exercise in the *philosophy* of religion, its comparative conclusions will push past such explanatory questions to evaluative questions of meaning, truth, and value.

This is of course no easy task; it is, though, one that begins simply—with the religious traditions and communities of the world. In the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 academic years The Comparison Project explored motifs of ineffability in nine religious traditions as well as the fields of literature, poetry, music, and art. It did this through 13 topical lectures and two comparative conclusions, all but the first of which appear here as essays, in the order in which the lectures were originally

[1] The many meanings of *ultimate* need to be allowed to ring out, not just the Tillichian ones: ultimate as "the best or most extreme of its kind"; ultimate as "a final or fundamental fact or principle"; ultimate as "last in a progression or series"; ultimate as "basic, fundamental"; ultimate as "original"; ultimate as "incapable of further analysis, division, or separation."

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delivered.[2] Collectively, these essays constitute an exercise in comparative philosophy of religion: the topical essays provide descriptive content about the deployment of ineffability discourse in different cultural contexts and literary modes, while the comparative conclusions draw philosophical conclusions about this diverse content in comparative perspective.

Our lecture series commenced with a talk on ineffability in Indian Buddhist philosophy by Amy Donahue entitled "Ineffabilities and Conventional Truth in Jñānaśrimitra's Buddhist Philosophy of Language." Unfortunately, Donahue was the only speaker unable to submit an essay to the collection. But the content of her talk nevertheless informs our comparisons, so we include a brief summary of it here. Although Donahue spoke in general about late first- and early second-millennium Buddhist philosophy of language, she focused in particular on the tenth–eleventh century Indian Buddhist philosopher Jñānaśrimitra, for whom all things (*dharmas*) are ineffable, both immediate sensory phenomena (*svalakṣaṇa*-s) and the cognitive objects that are inferred from them (*samānyalakṣaṇa*-s). In the former case, directly sensed particulars do not endure and therefore cannot be signified; in the latter case, inferred cognitive objects are never directly present to thought and therefore derive their meaning not inherently but by excluding every other. Still, in the case of Jñānaśrimitra, the conventional truths that are indirectly inferred provide a ground for practical action based on the degree to which they extinguish the thirst or craving caused by "benighted understandings." Interestingly, ineffability here would seem to serve the end of social critique. Knepper's conclusion in particular is informed by this insight.

In the second lecture of the Fall 2013 semester, Barbara Stafford delivered a multi-media presentation that provided a unique look at the ineffability of "stuff" from a critical cultural and aesthetic perspective (Chap. 2, "From Communicable Matter to Incommunicable 'Stuff': Extreme Combinatorics and the Return of Ineffability"). By "stuff," Stafford's essay refers not only to the countless new technological advances that we moderns encounter almost daily but also to some recent trends in visual art that repurpose everyday objects or utilize mechanistic techniques and products. In each case, Stafford maintains that these "extreme ambiguities, equivocalities, and uncertainties" are "perceptually destabilizing and cognitively bewildering" (Sect. 2.1) and that they are therefore unlike the venerable ineffabilities

[2] Although we order the essays according to the lecture series, one need not read the essays in this order. What we do not—indeed, cannot—include in this volume are the four "special events" of the 2013–2015 series. The entire programming cycle began in F13 with a visit by Tibetan Buddhist monks from the Gaden Shartse monastery, who created a sand mandala, delivered lectures, participated in an intra-Buddhist dialogue featuring local Buddhist leaders, and enacted sacred music and dance. In conjunction with Joseph Hellweg's S14 lecture on the ineffability in the rituals of the dozo hunters of Côte d'Ivoire, Drake hosted a West African dance workshop conducted by Diadié Bathily (the artistic director of Afriky Lolo, a dance company based in St. Louis). The second programming year commenced with a "meditation workshop and dialogue" that featured local meditation instructors from the Buddhist, Christian, and Hindu traditions. And later in the F14 semester, Drake hosted an "ineffability exhibition" that included poetic and musical performances of ineffability, a gallery talk on contemporary abstract painting as a form of wordless communication, and a concert by the jazz sax quartet New Third Stream Quartet.

of philosophy and theology. Stafford concludes her essay by asking how we "stave off the relentless slide of unspeakable things into unspeakable stuff," hinting that this requires the practice "paying close attention" to the processes by which we bring forth definite, substantive, and communicable compositions from the indeterminate boundless (Sect. 2.5).

The final lecture of Fall 2013, Timothy Knepper's address on "Pseudo-Dionysius and Paul's Sermon to the Unknown God," detailed the grammars of ineffability in the corpus of the sixth-century Christian Neoplatonist, who wrote under the name Dionysius the Areopagite, the first-century convert of the apostle Paul mentioned in Acts 17 (Chap. 3). These grammatical techniques include the use of "beyond" (*hyper*) terms to refer to God (e.g., beyond-being, beyond-goodness, beyond-divinity), the negation of properties of God, the use of directive illocutionary acts to lead the reader beyond ordinary knowing and speaking, and the metaphorization of divine things as luminous darkness or clouded summits. Ultimately, though, Knepper's essay maintains that, just as Paul's sermon at the Athenian Areopagus is concerned to set straight misconceptions about who God is, so Pseudo-Dionysius's corpus sets forth a God who is not entirely unknowable and ineffable but rather knowable and effable as the Trinitarian cause of all.

Our Spring 2014 semester featured four lectures, the first of which examined the ineffability of music (Chap. 4, "After Silence, That Which Comes Nearest"). Jonathan Bellman argued against both the classic musical composer Mendelssohn and the contemporary musical theorist Jankelevitch, claiming that music does function as a language that can express particular meanings, notably the particular meaning of ineffability. Music is not, therefore, ineffable due to either its inability to express meanings at all or its expression of meanings that differ wildly from listener to listener. Rather, music can be interpreted to signify ineffability, provided that the listener does just this; indeed, Bellman provides several examples of conventionally established associations between musical motifs and the notion of ineffability in the case of funeral marches from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European composers.

In the second lecture of Spring 2014, Louis Komjathy offered what he called a "radical reading" of the classical Daoist text commonly referred to as the *Zhuangzi* in which he emphasized contemplative practice and mystical experience over philosophical argumentation (Chap. 5, "'Names Are the Guest of Reality': Apophasis, Mysticism, and Soteriology in Daoist Perspective"). Komjathy maintains that in the *Zhuangzi* Daoist apophasis serves both the subversion of conventional philosophical knowing and the transformation of consciousness in contemplative practice and mystical experience. Importantly, a significant section of Komjathy's essay details some of the apophatic grammatical techniques that convey and cultivate a state of union with the Dao that is without conceptual content and therefore without linguistic expression.

The third lecture of Spring 2014, Joseph Hellweg's talk on ineffability in the rituals of the *dozo* hunters of Côte d'Ivoire, took a very different look at the nature and function of ineffability, one that enriches our comparative study in just the ways he says—by making the familiar strange and the strange familiar (Chap. 6, "Translating

the Ineffable: How Hunters Consult the Dead in Northwestern Côte d'Ivoire"). For Hellweg, that which is ineffable for the *dozos* is not some undifferentiated reality or non-dual experience; such matters are rather frivolous to the everyday concerns of the hunters who provide for and protect their communities. Rather, it is the wordless forms of communication that occur between dead and living *dozos* that are ineffable—those that the dead send to the living through dreams, and those that the living return to the dead through sacrifice, song, and dance.

In our final lecture of Spring 2014, Nikky Singh analyzed the grammar of ineffability at the very end of the *Japji*, the opening hymn of Sikh scripture, Guru Granth Sahib (Chap. 7, "Sikh Mysticism and Sensuous Reproductions"). Near the end of the *Japji*, the final stage of Sikh practice and experience—*sach khand*, the realm of truth—is depicted metaphorically as a place of "continents, constellations, and universes" whose "limits cannot be told." The author of the *Japji*, Guru Nanak, exclaims that describing this stage of practice is "as hard as iron," after which he turns to a different metaphor, the metaphor of a smithy, to image Sikh practice. Singh takes this metaphor as one that both conveys and cultivates Sikh mystical experience.

Our Fall 2014 lectures turned to the religious traditions of Zen Buddhism and Advaita Vedānta (Hinduism), as well as to poetic discourses of ineffability. In the first talk of Fall 2014, Gereon Kopf questioned the commonplace view that Zen Buddhist religious philosophy generally embraces ineffability by casting off linguistic description of the ultimate (Chap. 8, "When Expression Is Expressed, Non-Expression Is Not-Expressed: A Zen Buddhist Approach to Talking about the Ineffable"). Drawing on the work of the thirteenth-century Japanese monk Dōgen, whom many consider a paradigmatic Zen figure, Kopf shows how Dōgen's philosophy of "expression" regards both silence and language as adequate means of "expressing" the transcendent. But since all expressions express only part of the totality, no expression can be "complete," even if "full."

In our second lecture of Fall 2014, Anantanand Rambachan spoke about the "distinctive methods of language utilization" in the philosophical tradition of Advaita Vedānta in general and the writings of the eight-century Advaitan philosopher Śaṅkara in particular (Chap. 9, "'That From Which All Words Return': The Distinctive Methods of Language Utilization in Advaita Vedānta"). Rambachan considers the challenge of speaking about *brahman*,[3] the source and ground of reality for most contemporary Hindus, given that *brahman* is neither a sensory object that can be known through perception nor a logical object that can be known through inference. The words of the Upaniṣads are, however, a valid means for knowing *brahman*, thereby opening up the possibility of using "skillful modes of instruction" about *brahman*, three of which Rambachan details: superimposition/de-superimposition, negation, and implication.

The final lecture of Fall 2015, Christopher Janke's "How To Use a Net to Catch the Air," functioned as much as a poetic performance of ineffability as a discursive

[3] Following the convention employed in Rambachan's essay, we do not capitalize *brahman*, even though it/he is considered to be ultimate reality in the Advaita Vedānta tradition in particular and for many contemporary Hindus in general.

lecture on ineffability (Chap. 10). Equating ineffability with indescribability, Janke queries the criteria and uses of description in a manner that unsettles not only the commonplace view that descriptions describe the world in a way that is more or less accurate and useful but also Knepper's view that nothing is ineffable insofar as everything can be minimally described. Calling the former view naïve, the latter, unsatisfactory, Janke illumines how poets try at once to speak the unspeakable and unspeak the speakable, simultaneously putting into words that which cannot be put into words while disclosing the incompleteness and falsity of every attempt to put into words.

Our final semester of the series, Spring 2015, began with a lecture by Craig Owens on the "sayings and missayings" in Samuel Beckett's final published work, the short novel *Worstward Ho* (Chap. 11, "The Sayings and Missayings of Samuel Beckett: Literature, Writing, and Method"). Owens's linguistic analysis not only demonstrates the many creative ambiguities and self-referentialities in Beckett's text but also suggests how *Worstward Ho* ultimately enacts ineffability by "testing the limits of language's ability not to mean" (Chap. 11). In doing so, Owens believes that *Worstward Ho* gives the lie to any "literary narrative that seeks to suggest an origin for its utterance" (Chap. 11). Moreover, as the Derridean notions of *iterability* and *differance* constitute all discourse, Owens suggests that there is ineffability in every utterance—"every saying is a missaying" (Chap. 11).

In the second lecture of Spring 2015, Steven Katz argued against the traditional view that mystical experiences and transcendental realities actually are ineffable, at least as that view is applied to the Jewish mystical tradition (Chap. 12, "Jewish Mysticism Wrestles with Language"). Drawing on numerous examples from Jewish mysticism in general and Kabbalah in particular, Katz details how language serves a positive, kataphatic role for Jewish mystics. The Torah constitutes a "mystical lexicon" regarding transcendent realities and mystical experiences, the Hebrew alphabet is the "vehicle par excellence" for facilitating mystical experiences and communicating mystical insights, and the Hebrew language possesses not only a theurgical power to assist in mystical ascents but also a descriptive function for speaking about supposedly unspeakable mystical realities and experiences (Chap. 12).

Tamara Albertini delivered the final content lecture of Spring 2015, a presentation on love and naming in the eighth-century Sufi mystic Rābi'a. Albertini explored how, for Rābi'a, love of the divine beloved culminates in the renunciation of naming the beloved (Chap. 13, "Meanings, Words, and Names: Rābi'a's Mystical Dance of the Letters"). Such love is *'ishq*, an ardent, passionate, excessive love that longs for intimacy with Allah. Although names themselves are born out of such a longing, Rābi'a is reported to have said that through prayer, the soul is brought to place where no names exist. Albertini's essay picks up several of these themes, ultimately drilling down into Rābi'a's use of *'ishq*. Albertini argues that Rābi'a in fact employed a "semantically-based etymology" by which she detached the letters of *'ishq* from one another, identifying each with its associated name: eye (*'ayn*), desire (*shawq*), and heart (*qalb*). For Rābi'a, *'ishq* thereby becomes a passionate desire for Allah that unites the knowledge of the heart and the seeing of the eye (Sect. 13.8). Thus

Rābi'a effectively creates a discourse for partially expressing, if not cultivating, *'ishq*, even while maintaining that *'ishq* is ultimately ineffable, a state that can only be experienced or "tasted" first hand.

1.2 Comparison

As is perhaps now obvious, there is a good bit of variety in these essays. This is in part explicable by the fact that *ineffability* was intentionally left undefined for the lecturers. We wanted instead to know how *ineffability* could be differently conceived in fields like musicology, anthropology, and Islamic studies. Moreover, we wanted the scholars of these fields to describe, with attention to context, how *ineffability* was differently deployed by the individuals, communities, and texts that they studied. Still, for the sake of uniformity of comparative content, we did ask each scholar to address four basic questions: (1) What is allegedly ineffable? (2) How is this claim conveyed linguistically (or otherwise)? (3) What reasons (if any) are given in support of this claim? (4) To what ends is this claim made and defended?

At the end of this lecture series, it was up to The Comparison Project's director and co-director to make some philosophical sense of this variety of ineffabilities by means of these questions of comparison. Leah Kalmanson's conclusion first imagines alternative frameworks to the philosophy of religion in general, if not also ineffability in particular (Chap. 14, "Dharma and Dao: Key Terms in the Comparative Philosophy of Religion"). Drawing on an eighteenth-century Japanese encounter with European religious categories, Kalmanson's essay helps us see that no comparative category is generic and neutral; rather, all comparative categories come from somewhere and empower those perspectives. Kalmanson's overall objective is therefore to "decolonize" the philosophy of religion, not just by "switching out one dominant discourse for another," but also by "being savvy regarding the realities of ongoing power differences in academia, so as to be strategic with our word choices in ways that make sustained interventions in hegemonic practices" (Sect. 14.4).

Recognizing that even the category of ineffability comes from somewhere, Timothy Knepper's concluding essay seeks to "specify" it with the diverse religious-philosophical-aesthetic content from the lectures; the result is a robust comparison, the results of which can then be explained and evaluated (Chap. 15, "Conclusion: Ineffability in Comparative Philosophical Perspective"). In this sense, Knepper attempts to implement his own method for religiously diverse and historically grounded philosophy of religion: thick description, formal comparison, multidisciplinary explanation, and critical evaluation.[4] In comparing, he identifies important

[4] See Knepper's *Ends of Philosophy of Religion* (2013), but note that the language of "specification" comes from Robert Neville's Comparative Religious Ideas Project. See Neville and Wildman's introductory essay to volume 1: "On Comparing Religious Ideas" in *The Human Condition* (2001). See also Knepper's assessment of Neville's method in chapter five of *The Ends of Philosophy of Religion*.

and interesting similarities and differences in the content essays with respect to the comparative categories. In explaining, he offers models that provide reasons for the similarities and differences identified in his comparisons. And in evaluating, he raises traditional philosophical questions of truth, meaning, and value about ineffability in comparative perspective.

In the interest of letting the collection unfold as the series did, we will not forecast Knepper's conclusions here. But we do want to point out that he makes no assumptions that there actually are ineffable things. Nor does he assume that whatever ineffable things there are, are ineffable in the same ways. Quite the opposite: if Knepper went into this project with any preconceptions about this matter, it was that there are a variety of things that are claimed to be ineffable by the religious philosophies of the world, in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons, and to a variety of ends—but that no thing that is claimed to be ineffable can actually be ineffable.

One can get a glimpse of the varieties of ineffability simply by considering the logical terms involved in any expression of ineffability: (1) that which is claimed to be ineffable, (2) by whom, and (3) with respect to what language. Where things are said to be ineffable for all speakers of all languages, those things either lack determinate content altogether or possess content that cannot be expressed by means of any semantic category. Where things are ineffable only for some speakers of some languages, matters are more complicated; there are cases where some people can speak such things better than others either due to experiential familiarity or special knowledge, cases where some languages can convey such things better than others due to their capacity for creative or paradoxical expression, cases where such things cannot be fully expressed due to their greatness or sacredness, and cases where such things should not be expressed due to taboo or respect. In this latter set of cases, ineffability can be said to be *relative*—ineffable to some degree, to some speakers, in some languages. The former case, by contrast, is one of *absolute* ineffability—that which is in no way identifiable or predicable due to its very nature.

Why study ineffability in comparative perspective? Three reasons guided us. First, given that it is no easy task to express putatively inexpressible things, at least in ways that avoid apparent contradiction or defeat, the study of ineffability discourse discloses the innovative creativity of human expression. Second, insofar as these creative expressions possess cross-cultural similarities and differences, the study of ineffability discourse shows the common and unique ways in which individuals and communities speak about—and thwart speaking about—allegedly ineffable things. Third, in cases where these allegedly ineffable things are ultimate realities and experiences, the study of ineffability discourse reveals important similarities and differences with respect to the ways in which religious traditions, texts, and thinkers conceptualize and express ultimate realities, truths, and values. We hope that our study of ineffability discourse furthers the growth of knowledge in general and comparative philosophy of religion in at least these three ways.

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Chapter 2
From Communicable Matter to Incommunicable "Stuff": Extreme Combinatorics and the Return of Ineffability

Barbara Maria Stafford

Abstract Since Kant, there has been an intense debate around the question of the location of the sublime: Is it in the object or in the subject? In this essay, I tackle what I see as a fast-growing, indeed ubiquitous, socio-cultural phenomenon, namely, the imagistic, linguistic, and ontological inability to configure the rising tide of confounding "objects," leading to the vacuous usage of the non-descriptor "stuff." Today, I argue, the viewer is deliberately presented with experiences, "entities," that are not only without a concept but without the possibility of a concept, thus producing a failure of intuition—that is, not a soaring ascent into comprehension, but a bewildering descent, into ineffability. I will examine this cognitive and emotional impasse from the perspective of ineffability's dark side. By this I mean its fall from Neoplatonic awe at radiant unity into the current shambling inexpressibility. Focusing on a handful of telling cases—both particular and exemplary—ranging from the invasion of the unexamined digital absolute, to terrifying transplant surgeries, to extreme scientific experimentation and its uptake by BioArt, I ask, What does it mean when we completely sever action from reflection and judgment? If the object world is now permeated by the IT and media world, does the "scientization of art" inherit not only science's undoubted wonders but also its ethical ambiguities, the violence of its experimentation, the opacity of its aims, its indifference to social or cultural impact when personal promotionalism is at stake, and its inscrutable darkness or incommunicability?

> Ineffable: Latin, in, not + effabilis, utterable. 1. Too overwhelming to be expressed in words 2. Too sacred to be spoken. (*Webster's New World Dictionary*)
>
> Also: inexpressible, indescribable, indefinable, unutterable, unspeakable, unwhisperable, unmentionable, uncommunicable. (*Roget's International Thesaurus*)

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2.1 Combinations Beyond Name

> Stuff happens.[1]
>
> About me, I make stuff, predominantly for museums and galleries but also for commercial clients and occasionally private individuals. This stuff, is often digital or new media, as with my research into AR, but is often very physical, making furniture or landscaping a playground for example. . . . Making stuff [is somehow allied with] the pressure for early stage identification of end product [and] is also at odds with the much more organic developmental processes that form part of the core methodologies of fine art and design higher education. . . . [So] many graduates are poorly equipped to engage with creative/tech industries that are pursuing a marketable, commercially realized concept. (Jefferies 2015)

If our age is anarchic in mood and rife with nebulous situations—even horrifyingly indescribable scenarios—no wonder material culture studies are booming, embracing a wide range of traditional practices in art and design both inside and outside the art school,[2] as if such object-oriented media and hallowed genres could move us towards making things matter again.

At the same time, as the Internet post above indicates, these empirical substances are in crisis, sharing the stage as they do with the strange entities and perplexing amalgamations emerging genie-like from opaque corporations.[3] This essay attempts to formulate a key question: How do we make sense of this novel, experience-oriented, indefinite stuff that is seemingly everywhere, resulting from the vagaries of everything from the "technologies of the extended mind" to "Bio-Fictions" to "multispecies intra-actions" to, more generally, the "naturally hypernatural"?[4] How do we touch it, speak it, image it? And, in light of the new rule of information technology, is it still worth fitting together—constructing a definite viable "some thing," given the fluid essences of subjects and objects in the twenty-first century? (Fig. 2.1)

Think of the arcane processes required to manufacture "living technology" (i.e., microbial organisms from scratch), or the computational "superpositioning" of quantum entities to be in two states at the same time, or the lightning-quick "entanglement" of electrons, or the conjuring of hypothetical "zombies" that may or may not inhabit the machinic brain bereft of self (McFadden and Al-Khalili 2015). As we sink deeper into a haunted period where "real" assets or concrete objects with discernible physical properties that have lasting power depreciate or vanish, the veil of representational opacity descends.

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[1] Jeb Bush's widely publicized response to the Umpqual Community College shootings on October 1, 2015 in Roseberg, Oregon.

[2] Note the nostalgic interest in "vintage" materials fostered by historic suppliers such as Winsor & Newton, Liquitex, Conté à Paris, and Lefranc & Bourgeois, all of whom still purvey sketching tools, paints, chalks, pastels, gels, fluids, all manner of deeply textured colored powders, creams, and fixatives.

[3] See the "Conference on Material Culture in Action: Practices of Making, Collecting and Re-Enacting Art and Design" at the Glasgow School of Art on September 7–8, 2015.

[4] See the special issue of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* entitled "Naturally Hypernatural" (Anker and Flach, eds., 2015).

Fig. 2.1 SVA bio art lab, BFA fine arts department, New York (Reprinted with permission from photographer Raul Valverde)

Beyond any ethical constraints imposed by the academy—whether in the science fiction outback of game design, or in the apocalyptic artificial intelligence industries, or in the wilderness of open-ended synthetic biology laboratories, or in the esoteric surgeries performed on transformative operating tables—a disturbing question lingers. Are we (or, rather, the adept "they") just making a lot of equivocal stuff that cannot be identified and is of no discernible use—or is even useless—by design? Figuring out what these undecideables "are" and why and to whom they appeal might be dramatic enough. But I propose an even more fundamental issue. How should we tackle the massive breakdown in communication between those who are initiates into the production of weird phenomena and those who are merely confounded users or awestruck beholders of spooky effects and elusive methods?

Consider just one recent medical "new frontier": head transplants coming hard after the previously "unthinkable" face transplant. Clearly the uncanny sight of a "small black mouse with a new brown head" announces a troubling expansion into super-strange domains (Wang 2015a, pp. A1, A8). Dr. Ren, the Chinese microsurgeon who performed the stunning transplant, asserted afterwards that "he always dreamed of fixing the seemingly unfixable." And when contemplating the current marathon of motley organ transplants, he simply asked, "what's the next frontier?" given the possibility of innumerable potential couplings or ingenious unions.[5]

[5] See the original Wall Street Journal article for photos of Dr. Ren's mouse-head transplants: http://www.wsj.com/articles/surgerys-far-frontier-head-transplants-1433525830

In the global fiscal- and conceptual-merger or piecemeal "gig"-economy there seems to be no limit either to our imaginative tendency to exceed the real or to materialize the most jabberwocky of thoughts as bizarre reality. Not unlike *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* (1871)—in which the heroine walks into a shady wood where things have no name ("to step into *what*?")—we cannot summon the words for the host of alien objects ("stuff"?) surrounding us. And, like the mystified Alice under the secretive trees, even our own identity escapes us. ("Then it really has happened after all! And now, who am I?" [Carroll 1946, pp. 192–193].)[6]

Although, and perhaps because, repellently gruesome, the transfigured mouse—for want of a better word—embodies a quasi-metaphysical vision of duality willed into oneness. It also visualizes the presence of the non-present—the absence of the real residue of that other, now unreal, contributing mouse. In essence, the engineering neuroscientist performs like the shape-shifter alchemist, metamorphosing fleshed and unfleshed things (animal + animal + wiring, etc.) into dysfunctional "stuff." Recall that the dichotomous "mouse" represents only a prophetic stage in a cyclical process where revelation follows upon revelation. This fleetingly alive grotesque, we are informed, will soon be replaced by a convergent monkey, and so onward and upward to the ultra-reconstruction: the perfect homo-sapiens synthesis forged through an infinite series of unfathomable transmutations.

Such hard-to-define collages—much like Lewis Carroll's "uffish" Jabberwock or "whiffling" Jubjub bird or "frumious Bandersnatch"—arise both from the hyper-virtuoso skill of the magus-operator as well as from his soaring speculation, the future-oriented recombinant simulations he runs in his head (Carroll 1946, pp. 164–165). Accordingly, we frequently hear the righteous admonition advantageously multiplied to become incantatory: because one can think of it, one can do it. Mattering is not in question.

The tinkered mouse—as a what's-its-name kind of conjuncted thing—stands, I believe, for a vast emergent class of utopian puzzle-creatures similarly manifesting an extreme physical and cognitive undecidability. One might even call it an esoteric incommunicability in terms of ordinary language or descriptive imagery adequate to the heterodox perceptual experience (Stafford 2007).[7] Is this perplexing phenomenon a *corporeal* product of a second creation or a Coleridgean "secondary" imagination (that "dissolves, diffuses, dissipates" the images held in the mind "in order to recreate" them [Coleridge 1983, p. 304])? What in fact is this fearful vision: organism or chimera, reality or ideal construct, natural or supernatural ensemble, correlative with no objective?

Self-stimulating speculation and its resulting imaginary products, then, perturb or disrupt established codes of creation whose historical touchstones were mimetic form, stability, harmony, order. Paradoxically, these intricately layered blends also

[6] Also see the commentary by Robert Douglas-Fairhurst (2015).

[7] Making the befuddling competing story lines of television shows like the *Game of Thrones* or *Orange is the New Black* cohere is a screen analogy to the surgical physico-cognitive problem of making the compelling compounded mouse apprehendable (Jurgensen 2015, pp. D1–D2).

become more iterable over time. That is, they come to inhabit a closed or autonomy-producing, perfection-seeking system, one following a continuous circular or recurring method of iteration whereby every conceivable solution to a question or problem becomes the starting point for another, heightened iteration, over and over again until and unless the whole formal structure collapses or gets violently over-turned.

Intriguingly, then, we find here both the systematic structural features characteristic of a palimpsestic occult Neoplatonism—externalizing as ritual the brain's sophisticated self-generating craft—as well as of a many-layered psychophysical autopoiesis. The ideal unitary nature of the system paradoxically owes to the recurring self-construction of its multiple components. Resembling a self-enclosed sanctuary, the uncorrected looping brain-mind spins a plausible illusion of coherent wholeness for the initiate. Within its cultic confines the most radical mental leap is indistinguishable from a demonstrable proof.[8]

This formulaic logic of repetition is particularly evident in the hybrid computational practices used to expand and control the digital cosmos—built by manipulating lines of self-delimiting code that establish mathematical laws of nature rather than hand-crafting its details. This helps to explain why almost all aspects of science today are wrought from a cryptic IT—permeated by secret societies and Snark-like delirious dreams. Left behind are the empirical truth-testing senses (Bull and Mitchell 2015; Laplantine and Howes 2015). Seeing, touching, hearing, smelling are decommissioned in favor of the invisible, the startling, the mysterious free-wheeling operations of the brain.[9]

The extreme ambiguities, equivocalities, and uncertainties surrounding the new vaporous materiality—captured in the popular adoption of the cloudy non-concept or un-term "stuff"—are perceptually destabilizing and cognitively bewildering (Berthet 2015). This spread of foggy undecidability—perhaps announcing some sort of general change of being—is furthered by the rapid growth of uncoordinated scientific discoveries (for example, the still mystifying connections between micro- and macro-phenomena, single neurons and behavior). Then there is the obfuscation caused by increasingly complex technological devices as well as by the advent of bigger and bigger invisible "Big Data." All this "frabjous" information is not only always already consolidated in transcendent data assemblages but often gathered without assessing the ethical, social, and political consequences.

So what is this pervasive ineffable stuff that leaves the viewer endlessly overwhelmed? Is it merely an ephemeral residue of something more solid, more uniform? Or is it the latent remains of an ancient Neoplatonist "invisible reality" since it magically films different surfaces, miraculously possesses different properties at different locations, and dissolves in different ways (O'Donnell 2015; Stafford 2001)?

[8] Although a disappointing anti-religious crusade, biologist Jerry A. Coyne's stark dichotomies between religion and science usefully raise the specter of science vs. scientism—i.e., excessive trust or faith in all things scientific (Coyne 2015).

[9] For example, the game industry has attempted to create a full-scale digital cosmos (Khatchadourian 2015, pp. 48–57.

The word "residue" already exists as a realtime application on the Internet, as an application on the computer, and on numerous computer screens, large or small. But in our digitized universe the term aphoristically stands for more ineluctable qualities as well, such as seemingly infinite malleability, swift emergings or vanishings, and continual self-reflective iterations, with the result that stuff seems to subsist in a cosmos now so diffuse that diffuseness has become a sort of absolute.

2.2 Magical Thinking

> Gerard had always recognized his friend as being, in some radical, even metaphysical sense, more solid than himself, more dense, more real, more contingently existent, more full of being. This 'being' was what Levquist had referred to when he said of Jenkin, 'Where he is, he *is*.' . . . Whereas Gerard, who was so much more intellectually collected and coherent, felt sparse, extended, abstract by contrast. (Murdoch 1988, pp. 122–123)

Like the marvel-mouse, insofar as it signifies some thing or any thing, misty stuff represents a negative: disconcertingly embracing both an ideal vagueness as well as an impossible unity. Unlike the venerative theological and philosophical ineffables of the past (God, the One, the Absolute, the Unconditional, the Hidden, the Invisible, the Good, the Beautiful, Light or Darkness), the blurry secular ineffables of the present are about the unspeakability, the unsignifiability, of a stream of indefinable and conflicting substances.

If grommeting matter—with its connotations of something that is real, interconnected, potentially assemblable or disassemblable—suggests the cognitively demanding and thus communicable, what does unimageable limitless "stuff" evoke? Undeniably, usage of the word has become ubiquitous, all-encompassing. But the question remains: synonymous with what?

In the epigraph heading this section, the distinguished British novelist and scholar of Platonism, Iris Murdoch, gives an optimistic, animistic definition of matter in her succinct characterization of the earthy Jenkin, whose groundedness reminds us: "you can't bypass where you are by an imaginary leap into the Ideal" (Murdoch 1988, p. 133). Even his perpetually questing Neoplatonic opposite, Gerard, is repulsed by philosophy's alien, "quasi-mystical, pseudo-mystical, Platonic perfectionism" (Murdoch 1988, p. 132). Yet, ironically, neither was he "at home, made continuously restless by a glimpsed ideal far far above him; yet at the same time, the glimpse, as the clouds swirled about the summit, consoled him, even deceived him, as with a swoop of intellectual love he seemed to be beside it, up there in those pure and radiant regions, high above the thing he really was" (Murdoch 1988, p. 132). All mud and matter and dirt, by contrast, Jenkin declares, "I am a slug … I move altogether, if I move at all. I only stretch myself out a little, a very little" (Murdoch 1988, p. 136).

According to the school master Jenkin—accustomed to molding grimy, restless boys—Gerard is someone forever on the edge of things, always looking at something intangible "much farther off." Thus he lacks the immediacy, the nowness, of a

shaped object or graspable thing, finding himself totally ill at ease with being incarnate. By contrast, feeling embedded and living fully within society, Jenkin is not translatable into flimsy stuff, i.e., into a disposable "product" or a labile "brand." Nor does he waste his energy in Idealist acrobatics, trying to vault into the unknown.

Murdoch's acutely observed evocation of these dual moral agents skillfully weaves together persons, things, objects, facts (as in "*This* is what happened") to capture her characters' contrasting facticity—composed of a number of internal and external situations, causally connected events with consequences as far as imputation and accountability are concerned. In the process her novel does not describe, but rather embodies, the obverse and reverse sides of a distinction: between the constructive method of a truthful fiction from its Late Neoplatonic magical reverse. The latter is synonymous with sophistic fabrication, tricking illusion or the act of pretending, and even willful mystification in order to produce a false belief, a mysterious pseudo-stuff.

This metaphysical fascination with a difficult-to-speak invisibility—a longstanding preoccupation of mine beginning with the publication of *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Stafford 1991)—embraces incorporeality, unperceivability, the yearning for luminous transparency, as well as for all those optical technologies past and present opening up unseen extra dimensions to which we aspire (Stafford 2016). The central condition of these desires and devices is beyondness—their capacity to exceed the natural world and its expressions so as to attain unnatural vision into the otherwise hidden elements of our bodies, minds, matter, the universe. Today, we are engulfed by new invisibles often made distortedly visible by hyper-instruments: neurons, molecules, genes, viruses, pixels, and voxels. Yet unlike the prisoners shackled inside Plato's Cave—mistaking the dirty shadow play on the wall for Ideal Forms—we can see or say almost nothing about the matter that matters.

2.3 The Digital Absolute

digitize
from the Latin "to finger
or handle" as if

to sink your fingers
deeply

into this
flood of light (Youn 2015, pp. 46–47)

Today the digital is absolute. Without regretting the rise of e-readers and laptops, one can still question this mighty revolution: what other foggy action-at-a-distance has been so unconditionally accepted with apparently limitless, although ill-defined, benefits and inadequately analyzed drawbacks? A tautological argument in favor of this radical technological upheaval is that a data-hungry public requires constant feeding. One form this over-brimming need takes is the demand for dramatically

Fig. 2.2 Suzanne Anker, *Remote Sensing (21)*, 2013, plaster, pigment, and resin, 4 × 4 × 2″ (Reprinted with permission by photographer Raul Valverde)

increased wireless spectrum—that eerie ether or incandescent net of invisible radio frequencies that transmit high-speed information to and from proliferating mobile devices. Eager auction bidders for licensing and "zoning space" argue that as hordes of consumers upgrade to smartphones, tablets, wearables, and multitudinous other connected apps, much more—how much?—than the current deployment of 4G wireless technologies and existing bandwidth will be required (Genachowski and McDowell 2015, p. A13).

It's not without significance that entrepreneurs and private investors urge this expansion—whereby the digital becomes a habit, a reflex, an impulse—as crucial to fostering the budding "Internet of Things" (Fig. 2.2). This questionable invention—whereby even the human brain is distributed and manipulated like any other algorithm—alludes to the accelerating pro-growth economy of as yet unrealizable "stuff" produced through the click or touch of a screen. The trouble with too-much pointless automation ranges from the laughable to the grave. Witness Apple, Google, and Samsung rolling out pre-programmed "smart-home" technologies that frequently add thoughtless complexity and frustration to otherwise simple tasks like turning on and off the light. Or, more sinister, consider the turning of the brain into a product through technologies that invade the privacy of our thought.

Gaming is yet another phenomenon illustrating that digital data has become our daily diet. Video games—ranging from those that involve non-stop visual-pattern processing monopolizing our cerebral resources to totally immersive 3-D life games—numb us to our own surroundings. This, despite the fact that playing video games is now being touted as aiding our biological condition, giving purpose to leisure, improving our work ethic—by increasing dopamine levels and generating more gray matter in reward processing centers—thus fostering productivity. Yet the lucrative gameification of everything hardly frees the mind. Rather it "habituates us to the tidy mechanisms of effort and reward, to established paths, and to prefab narratives" (Heller 2015, p. 90). It means tuning out direct engagement with what stands or exists beside you, outside you.

Coming to grips with the ominous dynamics of tailoring more and more automatic control applications to a subject's behavior patterns is one of the many challenges faced by the multidisciplinary fields of media, communication and culture. By definition, these future-oriented investigations must constantly position themselves to respond to the metamorphic and unseizable landscape that they study. In recent years, these fields have shifted considerably due to the rise in digital and open media, the turn to affect, and the ways in which we are now trying to articulate the relationship between bodies, images and environments as fuzzily permeable and algorithmically interconnected.

Given the drift to undecidability, how have manual objects been exploded by an economy of unseen wireless networks and hidden infrastructures? Nothing underscores the disaggregating power of such simulated mixtures than the attempt to make virtual reality an actual reality. As one proponent put it: "to try to do things how we would do them if we didn't have any physical laws governing how we do them"; and again, "it allows you to experience anything, anywhere in the world with the fidelity of real life" (qtd. in Wolfe 2015, p. C11). The growing market of virtual reality consumer products tellingly shows how a boundless IT and enthralling digital stuff have created a new orthodox universe, while the established world exists merely as a heterodox space enclosed within it. The systematic, and often unexamined, invasion of IT into every phase of contemporary life involves a reciprocal causality in which local causes produce global effects that cause those local operations to produce precisely those effects. Consequently, this supposedly commonsense "transparent" technology has become the largely invisible reflexive engine not only of all interpersonal relations, but of any action whatsoever.

Suzanne Anker, in a conference on *Media Materiality: Towards Critical Economies of New Media*, as well as in a subsequent book with Sabine Flach (2015), stated that the claim to newness draws meaning from what is supposed to be the peculiar nature of digital technologies. This progressivist narrative is mirrored in the analysis of a historical shift from an industrial age, based in the logic of mass factory production (i.e., of material objects, vintage things like those paints, pigments, creams, and gels with which this essay opened) and mass consumption, to an information age centered on the production and communication of immaterial information. In an industrial logic, "material" referred primarily to a critique of a utilitarian political economy of real objects, whereas "immaterial" referred to a politics of

identity and culture. She challenges this definition by arguing what is evident is that so-called "new" media (a phrase inexpressive to the point of vacancy) does not simply and definably extend the notion of "old" media.

In fact, I would say it does not begin to address the undecidable nature of the research being produced in this entangled art/science/technology domain. Consider the vast domain of computer art that makes itself via intricate cellular automata. Such autopoietic systems were foreseen by Friederich Nake, one of the earliest computer art pioneers. Mesmeric stuff that automatically generates itself poses special challenges of creating, conserving, collecting, and containing within the context of a relentlessly ongoing digital revolution.

Multiplicative and additive technologies and their arresting, if unnameable, stuff continue to yield uncanny mergers and unforeseeable outcomes. Graphic designers as well as new media industries, for example, are beginning to investigate the real possibility of tailored or privately produced objects ("the Internet of things"). Some do this by carefully testing the constraints and potentials of 3D printing with metal powders to produce everything from near-exact replicas of items ranging from auto parts to coffee cups. But do-it-yourself consumer products—especially alluring to hobbyists who like to print their own collectibles instead of purchasing them—also raise the specter of spreading digital piracy and counterfeiting just as it did with the digital distribution of music.

These fears about lack of control over licensed or copyrighted products are accompanied by the expanding problem of indefinition, because 3-D printed stuff—what else to call it since it is not yet some thing or, rather, because the data hovers between becoming and being?—exists in the digital ether before becoming a tangible item, thus presenting a judicial conundrum. Legal experts on infringement say it is difficult to know who exactly conceptualized the design: the person who wrote its code or the person who operated the printer (Schwarzel 2015, p. B1).

This case—at the moment primarily relevant to the entertainment industry—nonetheless highlights the more general fragility of the online marketplace. Think of its astounding ability to produce endless quasi-exact or mutated reproductions at top speed. It also helps to make intelligible the lack of clarity occurring when the immaterial world of digital technology collides with the conventions governing the physical materiality of sculptural form.

2.4 Creating Undecidables

> … one may understand that no matter how wide the perspectives which the human mind may reach, how broad the loyalties which the human imagination may conceive, how universal the community which human statecraft may organize or how pure the aspirations of the saintliest idealists may be, there is no level of human moral or social achievement in which there is not some corruption of inordinate self-love. (Niebuhr 1944, p. 16–17)

So wrote one of the great Protestant theologians of the twentieth century. Reinhold Niebuhr, whose interests lay in Christianity's social and political ideas rather than in its theological doctrines, rejected liberal Protestantism's rosy view of

man and willfully blind optimism about human progress. His observations thus seem especially apt for today as we ponder a range of art/science-situations vested in desires for human perfectionism and social utopianism (Fig. 2.2).

Certainly if alive now, one of Niebuhr's "unhappy realit[ies]" would be the restless fabrication of impossible objects through swarming, merging, morphing, cantilevering, imploding, exploding all manner of substances into matters-of-fact. Think of the idealizing conflation of the machinic with the human, or animate/inanimate "stuff" compounded through spellbinding pattern generation, or random aggregates caused or brought into ephemeral existence by themselves.[10] Interestingly, the medically hard-to-define misfold, clump, or bunch characterizing the misshapen tau and amyloid proteins typical of Alzheimer's disease no longer do what they are supposed to do and confusingly stick together. The resulting pathological mazy plaques and tangles—also found in the misshapen alpha-synuclein aggregates of Parkinson's or the clumping prions of mad-cow disease—all defy description in contrast to the geometry of undamaged proteins (Wang 2015b, p. D2).

Unlike researchers investigating these progressive neurological disorders, BioArt does not focus on identifying or speaking the name of the toxic aggregation, collective behavior, or manner of grouping together of cells and what might go awry leading to faulty clustering. Hovering between utopian promise and dystopian fear, bio/technological-conceptual stuff spurs sublime visions of supernatural powers, seduces techno-dreamers, and fosters the growth of "razzrezz" laboratories as experimental places with limitless synthesizing capabilities (Bright 2015). Although there are many questions to be posed about such explorations, for me the central question is not so much what all these new bifurcated bodies can do. The question is: what *are* they, as a matter of fact?

As we have seen, in today's museums, artworks, as well as in digital- and biotechnologies, we seem to be witnessing again the rise of cabinets of curiosities. Unlike the boxed Wunderkammer of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, however, these heteroclite collections of singular objects no longer display cosmic relationships and far-flung powers of attraction or repulsion, sympathy or antipathy. Chaotic juxtapositions of hoarded stuff without rhyme or reason replace the acute idiosyncrasies of early modern natural history classificatory systems—where even the oddest specimen had the hope of eventually belonging to some as yet undiscovered taxonomy or undefined family of objects.[11]

Consider the crafting, arranging, and displaying of dislocated biological materials and strange morphologies made for difficult-to-articulate reasons. We have BioArt, Neolife, Alien Art, Enstranged Objects, and so on—intellectually as well as physically disturbingly fuzzy compositions inhabiting labile gray zones. The Dadaesque groping for new, usually hyphenated, names for collaged forms indicates

[10] On self-causation, see the recent exhibition "Causa Sui," featuring artworks by Ann Stewart, Whitespace gallery, Atlanta, Georgia, June 2015.

[11] See for example the following exhibitions by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr: *NoArk*, *The Tissue Culture & Art Project* (2007); *NoArk II*, *The Tissue Culture & Art Project* (2008–2010); *Odd Neolifism* (2010); and *NoArk Revisited; Odd Neolifism* (2011).

the pursuit of a convergent concept to match the weirdly commingled end product. But in the contemporary festival of bizarre and extreme unions or technological panspermia—unlike the cross-fertilization fables of antiquity—there are no mythic dragons and chameleons, chimeras and harpies, giants and minotaurs.

Already in 1962, Anthony Burgess prophetically defined *A Clockwork Orange*:

> That's a fair gloopy title [for a book]. Who ever heard of a CLOCKWORK ORANGE … The attempt to impose upon man a creature of growth and capable of sweetness, to ooze juicily at the last round the bearded lips of God, to attempt to impose, I say, laws and conditions appropriate to a mechanical creation, against this I raise my swordpen—. (Burgess 1986, p. 25)

Burgess intended the compound term to stand for the application of a mechanistic morality to a living organism tastily succulent and oozing with juice. Since the late 1980s the seemingly more straightforward scientific-sounding name Bio-Art or BioArt has become familiar in art practice and supplanted Burgess' neo-Latinate lingo, "synthemesc" or druggy "drencrom" speech, and outlandish word mergers. But what is Bio-Art? How is it different from Bio-Design? What relationship does it have to the biological sciences and to their ambiguous ethics?

In a "real horrorshow" age in which alterations of nature produce immortal strains, how is biotechnology changing what it means to be human when we split into two, three, on to infinity, or even to an indefinable "it"? As Primo Levi has Trachi—"born of a secret union between a man and one of the numerous Thessalian horses that are still wild on the island"—say in his short story "Quaestio de Centauris," about all the innumerable couplings that are possible in these sorts of second creation: "I am changing. I have changed. I have become another" (Levi 2015, p. 59).

Chris Salter, artist, co-director of the Hexagram network, and University Research Chair in New Media, Technology and the Senses at Concordia University, Montreal, tackles such far-from-lucid entities in his *Alien Agency* (2015). The book examines three "not-humanly organized" or "self-organizing" works in which the materials of art—the "stuff of the world," which is defined as "alien," i.e., as behaving and performing in ways "beyond the creator's intent," and therefore "self-organizing"—becomes unknown, surprising.

Salter importantly identifies some of the key researcher-creators organizing the conditions for these experimental, performative assemblages—or anarchic "stuff" that sidestep dichotomies between subjects and objects, human and nonhuman, mind and body, knowing and experiencing. One of the most avant-garde is the multi-year project TEMA (Tissue Engineered Muscle Actuators) at the University of Western Australia, SymbioticA, which is notorious for its construction of an equivocal stuff or "semi-living" machine.[12] "Semi-Alive" stuff thus far outreaches surreal "Bio-Life" design since these non-viable (mortal?) entities are given at the

[12] The term *semi-living* was first coined in 1996 by Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr and first appears in print in their 1998 *Tissue Culture & Art Stage One* exhibition catalogue (ISBN 1875386335, PICA Press). See also Catts and Zurr 2000. See below for photographs of the final TEMA project, Futile Labor, which was first displayed in October 2015.