Medieval Apophaticism and the Standard Narrative on Metaphors

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Abstract: Apophaticism is usually defined as the view according to which God's essence is unknowable and, thus, ineffable. Despite constituting a venerable tradition in all global faiths, it has been largely ignored by analytic philosophers of religion. In the past decade, efforts have been made to rectify such a situation, and some scholars have sought support for their apophatic views in medieval sources. Against this background, the present paper aims to contribute by offering a new and more accurate depiction of medieval apophaticism. More specifically, the claim is that it should not be conceived as a continuous theoretical spectrum. Departing from the scholarly mainstream, the paper proposes to distinguish between two discrete kinds: 'moderate apophaticism' and 'radical apophaticism' – the latter of which has gone unnoticed in the relevant literature. It will be shown that these very different positions – exemplified by Thomas Aquinas and John Scotus Eriugena, respectively – derive from opposite conceptions of God. To highlight the relevance of this proposal, the paper will demonstrate how the recognition of radical apophaticism leads to challenging the 'standard narrative' on metaphors, especially regarding whether they could be admitted into philosophy.
Keywords: Moderate apophaticism; Radical apophaticism; Aquinas; Eriugena; Metaphor.

ᴱˢ El apofatismo medieval y la narrativa estándar sobre las metáforas

Resumen: El apofatismo se suele definir como la doctrina según la cual la esencia de Dios es incognoscible y, por lo tanto, inefable. Pese a constituir una tradición venerable en todas las religiones globales, el apofatismo ha sido ignorado por los filósofos analíticos de la religión. En la última década, se han llevado a cabo esfuerzos por corregir esta situación y algunos estudiosos han buscado apoyo para su apofatismo en fuentes medievales. En este contexto, el presente artículo pretende contribuir ofreciendo una nueva y más precisa caracterización del apofatismo medieval. En concreto, la tesis es que no se le puede concebir como un espectro teórico continuo. Contrario a la corriente académica dominante, el artículo propone distinguir entre dos tipos discretos: 'apofatismo moderado' y 'apofatismo radical' – de los cuales el último ha pasado desapercibido en la literatura relevante. Se evidenciará que estas diferentes posturas – ejemplificadas por Tomás de Aquino y Juan Escoto Eriúgena, respectivamente – derivan de concepciones opuestas sobre Dios. Para resaltar la relevancia de esta propuesta, el artículo demostrará cómo el reconocimiento del apofatismo radical lleva a desafiar la 'narrativa estándar' sobre las metáforas, especialmente en lo que respecta a si podrían ser admitidas en filosofía.
Palabras clave: Apofatismo moderado; Apofatismo radical; Tomás de Aquino; Eriúgena; Metáfora.

Summary: 1. Introduction. 2. Medieval Apophaticism(s). 3. The Standard Narrative on Metaphors. 4. A Non-Classical Medieval Theory. 5. Bibliography.

1. Introduction

The term 'apophaticism' derives from the Greek *apophasis*, meaning 'denial' or 'negation'. Also known as 'negative theology', it is generally defined as a position about God, according to which the divine essence is unknowable and, therefore, ineffable. Despite constituting a venerable tradition in all global faiths,[1] apophaticism has been largely overlooked by analytic philosophers of religion. Fortunately, in the last decade, a few attempts have been made to redress such a situation, arguing for its consistency.[2] Amidst this revival, some scholars have sought support for their apophatic views in medieval sources. In this context, the present paper aims to contribute by offering a new and more accurate depiction of medieval apophaticism.[3] Particularly, I hold that it is imperative to distinguish between two very different kinds: 'moderate apophaticism' and 'radical apophaticism' – the latter of which has been thus far neglected. To emphasise the relevance of this proposal, I shall demonstrate how the recognition of radical apophaticism leads to challenging the prevailing narrative on metaphors in current scholarship, especially regarding their admission into philosophy.

The paper's structure is divided into three main sections. First, based on a textual analysis, it argues that medieval apophaticism should not be conceived as a continuous theoretical spectrum. Departing from the scholarly mainstream (Cuneo, 2025), I advocate for a discrete division between a moderate and a radical kind. The rationale is that these positions are based upon opposite conceptions of God as exemplified by Thomas Aquinas (13th century) and John Scotus Eriugena (9th century), respectively. Second, the paper outlines what can be labelled as the 'standard narrative' on metaphors, which starkly differentiates 'classical' from 'contemporary' theories. The former is ascribed to all premodern thinkers, for whom metaphors are thereby exclusively a linguistic matter with a mere ornamental role. On the contrary, for the latter, metaphors are indispensable for thinking (and, thus, speaking) about reality. I shall then examine how these two approaches face a widespread argument against the philosophical usage of metaphors based on their ambiguous character. Third, the paper shows how Eriugena's radical apophaticism calls for nuancing the standard narrative by postulating metaphor as a cognitive instrument that makes it possible to think and speak somehow about an otherwise unknowable and ineffable God. To conclude, I make a few remarks hinting at the relevance of Eriugena's position beyond a historical interest.

2. Medieval Apophaticism(s)

The novel enterprise of drawing from medieval thought to produce a consistent form of analytic apophaticism has focused mainly on Aquinas (Hector, 2007: 378) – a thinker who had already been incorporated into the Anglo-American tradition since the second half of the 20th century (Shanley, 1999: 125). A prominent representative of this trend has affirmed that «[w]ith Aquinas… Christian negative theology receives its most philosophically developed formulation» (Hewitt, 2020: 9). I believe expressions like this one can be misleading, especially at a time when analytic philosophers have only begun to become acquainted with this tradition. The risk comes from disseminating a monolithic picture of medieval apophaticism, with Aquinas (*à la* Gilson) as the summit of a single position endorsed less proficiently by many before and after him (Gilson, 1952: 154). On top of being historiographically questionable, this can be detrimental to the potential benefit of engaging with such a tradition. As I hope to demonstrate, once the idea of a single medieval apophaticism is left behind, important insights of surprisingly contemporary currency come to light. Particularly, I shall show this to be the case with respect to metaphor.

As previously noted, I hold that an accurate portrayal of medieval apophaticism requires distinguishing, at least, between two very different positions: (i) moderate apophaticism and (ii) radical apophaticism. In my interpretation, the first is endorsed by Aquinas and the second by Eriugena. To substantiate this, I shall examine their respective conceptions of God, unravelling their core disagreement. On this basis, I argue that it is a mistake to subsume those two views under a single category. Yet, before examining the supporting textual evidence, a couple of remarks about my chosen classification are in order.

To the best of my knowledge, this paper employs 'moderate apophaticism' and 'radical apophaticism' in a novel manner. However, these labels are not entirely new in the relevant literature. By and large, the scholarly tendency is to assume that «apophaticism comes in different degrees, being more or less thoroughgoing» (Cuneo, 2025: 339). From this perspective, apophaticism is understood as operating in the form of a continuous theoretical spectrum, such that what separates a moderate apophatic thinker from a radical one is their degree of commitment to certain basic tenets about God that are otherwise shared.[4]

My usage departs from that. I postulate that the shift from moderate to radical apophaticism (and vice versa) involves the adoption of a fundamentally different conception of God, which is incompatible with the

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[1]   An extensive compilation of key apophatic fragments from ancient and modern sources can be located in (Franke, 2007a, 2007b). For apophaticism in Christianism, see (Turner, 1995); in Islam, see (Kars, 2019); in Judaism, see (Fagenblat, 2017). For a comparative study between Christianism and Buddhism, see (Williams, 2000); between Hinduism and Neoplatonism, see (Staal, 1961).

[2]   For a useful state-of-the-art piece on this matter, see (Gäb, 2020).

[3]   In this paper, for the sake of brevity, the expression 'medieval apophaticism' stands for apophaticism as developed by Christian thinkers writing in Latin during the Middle Ages.

[4]   To a certain extent, Williams seems to constitute an exception. For her, «[a]pophaticism may designate two related, yet distinct positions. First, it can signify the claim that God cannot be known at all, and hence cannot be named or described at all; call this 'radical apophaticism'. Second, it may signify the notion that God can only be known and described in negative predicates: we can say what God is not, but these negations do not leave us with any more knowledge than that God is unlike anything else we can name or describe. Call this second position 'moderate apophaticism'» (Williams, 2015: 319). Formulated as such, as it will become obvious, this is not analogous to my usage.

one previously held. But make no mistake. My proposed classification is not merely a matter of terminological preference. This aims to reflect what, in my opinion, is a neglected historical fact: the medieval apophatic tradition is theoretically discrete, not continuous.

Apophaticism posits the unknowability of the divine essence. Now, at the most basic level, knowledge is generally explained as resulting from the interaction of two elements: the knower and what is known (Anderson, 1927: 62) – henceforth, 'the subject' and 'the object'. If knowledge cannot be attained, these are the two possible sources. Therefore, apophaticism might be endorsed due to the subject or the object. This is not trivial insofar as each gives rise to a very different position. To see this, let us begin with Aquinas:

> God comprehends Himself perfectly... Something is said to be comprehended when the limit of cognition of that thing is reached, and this occurs when the thing is known as perfectly as it can be known... Now it is clear that God knows Himself as perfectly as He can be perfectly known. For each thing is knowable according to the degree of its actuality, since... something is known insofar as it exists in actuality and not insofar as it exists in potentiality. But God's power in knowing is as great as His actuality in existing. For... God has cognition because He is actual and separated from any matter or potentiality. Hence, it is clear that He knows Himself to the full extent that He can be known, and because of this He perfectly comprehends Himself (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 14, a. 3, co).[5]

A central tenet of Aquinas's conception of God is that he comprehends himself and is fully knowable (Elders, 1990: 226–228). This is built upon three main theses, which can be expressed in terms of the recently introduced subject-object distinction. First, (a) to comprehend x is to know it 'maximally', i.e., as perfectly as x is knowable. Second, (b) the knowing of the subject is proportional to its cognitive power. Third, (c) the knowability of the object is proportional to its actuality. Accordingly, Aquinas's argument can be formulated like this:[6]

> (P1) The knowing of the subject is proportional to its cognitive power (Thesis b)
>
> (P2) Having maximal cognitive power entails maximally knowing (From P1)
>
> (P3) God has maximal cognitive power
>
> (P4) God knows maximally (From P2 and P3)
>
> (P5) God knows himself
>
> (P6) God knows himself maximally (From P4 and P5)
>
> (P7) To comprehend x is to know it maximally (Thesis a)
>
> (P8) God comprehends himself (From P6 and P7)
>
> (P9) The knowability of the object is proportional to its actuality (Thesis c)
>
> (P10) Being fully actual entails being fully knowable (From P9)
>
> (P11) God is fully actual
>
> (P12) God is fully knowable (From P10 and P11)
>
> (C) God comprehends himself and is fully knowable (From P8 and P12)

If Aquinas takes God to be fully knowable, including his essence, does not this contradict his alleged apophaticism?[7] Not at all. As he explains, «what is maximally knowable in its own right may not be knowable to some intellect because its intelligibility is too great for that intellect» (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, co). Hence, God's essence is fully knowable in itself, being known as such by himself. It is only in relation to created subjects that God is considered to be unknowable since the excellence of his essence surpasses their cognitive power.

Aquinas, however, immediately adds a restriction to his apophaticism based on eschatological considerations. In Christianity, the ultimate end of intellectual creatures is often called 'beatitude', consisting in eternal bliss that results from the highest operation of their highest faculty. For Aquinas, this means that beatitude can only be achieved by knowing the highest object, i.e., God. Yet, if the divine essence remains forever unknown, God would have brought about creatures unable to reach their ultimate end, which Aquinas judges inadmissible (*ST* I, q. 12, a. 1, co). To be clear, he does not back down on the cognitive insufficiency of creatures with respect to God's essence. Beatitude, he says, requires «for some supernatural disposition to be added to the intellect in order for it to be elevated to such great sublimity» (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 5, co). So, no creature reaches beatitude without God's grace.

For Aquinas, then, God's unknowability is not insurmountable. But is it, at least, insurmountable *de facto*, such that knowledge of the divine essence is impossible to attain until some eschatological future? Aquinas

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[5]   For Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* (*ST*), I rely on Freddoso's new translation.

[6]   Disclaimer: in this section, I confine myself to present the relevant arguments endorsed by Aquinas and Eriugena. It is not my intention to fully explain all ideas involved, given that this is not indispensable to appreciate my thesis that both thinkers are committed to different kinds of apophaticism.

[7]   The apophatic reading of Aquinas is not universally accepted. Most notably, (Stump, 2003) has opposed to it. Contrary to her, I side with (Elders, 1990; Davies, 2006; Porro, 2015); among others. For a rebuttal specifically tailored to Stump's arguments, see (Hewitt, 2020a).

denies this, thereby weakening his position even more (*De veritate* q. 8, a. 3, ad 1). Christians usually list two types of intellectual creatures, i.e., angels and humans. In Aquinas's view, although both of them require supernatural grace for beatitude, some angels have already received it (Goris, 2012: 164). Thus, Aquinas's apophaticism tends to concentrate on humanity in their postlapsarian condition. In this life (*in via*), humans lack knowledge of God's essence, which some of them will obtain thanks to supernatural aid in heaven (*in patria*) (Ortlund, 2021: 325).[8]

To see how different Eriugena's apophaticism is, take the following passage:

> How, therefore, can the Divine Nature understand of itself what it is, seeing that it is nothing? For it surpasses everything that is, since it is not even being but all being derives from it… by virtue of its excellence it is supereminent over every essence and every substance… So God does not know of Himself what He is because He is not a «what», being in everything incomprehensible both to Himself and to every intellect… Therefore He does not know what He Himself is, that is, He does not know that He is a «what», because He recognizes that He is none at all of the things which are known in something and about which it can be said or understood what they are. For if He were to recognize Himself in something He would show that He is not in every respect infinite and incomprehensible… (Eriugena, *PP*. II, 589B-589C).[9]

At the core of Eriugena's apophaticism is the view of God as infinite. Based on this, he concludes that «the Divine Essence is incomprehensible in itself» (Eriugena, *PP*. I, 450B), «being unknowable to every intellect» (Eriugena, *PP*. II, 525A). Three theses underlie his supporting argument. First, (a) to be definable is to be finite (i.e., limited). Second, (b) the essence of what is undefinable is fully unknowable. Third, (c) if something is undefinable, it cannot be comprehended by anyone. This can be formulated thusly:

> (P1) To be definable is to be finite (Thesis a)
>
> (P2) God is infinite
>
> (P3) God is undefinable (From P1 and P2)
>
> (P4) The essence of what is undefinable is fully unknowable (Thesis b)
>
> (P5) God's essence is fully unknowable (From P3 and P4)
>
> (P6) If something is undefinable, it cannot be comprehended by anyone (Thesis c)
>
> (P7) God cannot be comprehended by anyone (From P3 and P6)
>
> (P8) God cannot comprehend himself (From P7)
>
> (C) God cannot comprehend himself, and his essence is fully unknowable (From P8 and P5)

Eriugena holds that God cannot be comprehended due to his excellence, not even by himself. So, the divine essence is fully unknowable, with insurmountable unknowability. It is plainly evident that this conception of God clashes with Aquinas's. To be sure, they are complete opposites. Given that each is found at the basis of their respective apophaticisms, these are bound to be fundamentally different. Consequently, they cannot be subsumed under a single category.

The kind of apophaticism endorsed by Aquinas postulates that God's unknowability is relative. Those adopting this position can modulate their commitment to such unknowability by adding or removing certain stipulations over the subject's cognitive power. Because of this, I call it 'moderate'. Accordingly, a stronger commitment to relative divine unknowability than Aquinas's could be obtained by lifting one of the restrictions he established. For example, while claiming that God is fully knowable, one can maintain that all creatures must wait until judgment day to receive the supernatural aid to know his essence. Or else, someone can reject that any creature whatsoever will ever reach this knowledge, which is then reserved solely to God. All these views share the same conception of God, admitting different degrees of commitment to his relative unknowability. This certainly constitutes a single position operating as a continuous theoretical spectrum.

On the contrary, Eriugena's apophaticism posits that God's unknowability is absolute. The divine essence, as a cognitive object, excludes the possibility of being known by anyone, including God himself. Once the object is unknowable in itself, no further stipulation, which can only proceed in relation to the subject's cognitive power, does anything to modulate the commitment to divine unknowability. I denominate this kind of apophaticism 'radical' because unknowability constitutes the very root (*radix*) of this conception of God.[10]

Undoubtedly, the medieval apophatic tradition does not constitute a theoretical continuum when considered as a whole. Rather, it is discrete, such that to shift from moderate to radical apophaticism (and vice

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[8]   Here, I am not considering explicitly Aquinas's stance concerning fallen angels and damned souls. However, this could be considered an additional stipulation in his apophaticism: some angels and humans, but not all, will know God's essence.

[9]   Quotations from the *Periphyseon* (*PP*.) are taken from (O'Meara, 1987).

[10] Precisely because of this, Williams' proposal is not analogous to mine, despite sharing the same terminology (see note 4). In her view, both kinds of apophaticism concern God's unknowability in relation to humans: «… the difficulties inherent in using human language, a tool arising from and sharpened by its use for designating the created order, to denote and describe what does not belong to that order. One response to this dilemma is radical apophaticism, the denial that it is impossible to speak of or conceptualize God at all. Another is moderate apophaticism, the notion that one can only describe divine nature in negatives… stipulating what God is not» (Williams, 2011: 130–131).

versa) requires substituting a determinate conception of God for one that is very much its opposite. In light of this, it makes no sense to proclaim that Aquinas provides 'the most philosophically developed formulation' of apophaticism, once Eriugena enters the picture. To prevent any misunderstanding, this has nothing to do with which kind is philosophically superior. Whatever their respective merits are, they are different and standalone positions. Hence, neither of them can formulate the other better. Otherwise, it would be like saying, *mutatis mutandis*, that rationalism is the most philosophically developed formulation of empiricism, rather than a whole different conceptual alternative.

The problem is that most – if not all – relevant literature on the topic simply presents apophaticism as postulating the relative unknowability of God. For instance, while surveying several medieval sources, it has been reported that:

> […] literature on apophaticism usually takes its proponents to be committed to some combination of the following three propositions: 1. *We* cannot know what God's nature is. 2. *We* cannot successfully describe God's nature. 3. *We* cannot successfully conceive of God's nature (Scott and Citron, 2016: 25–26. My emphasis).

Reducing medieval apophaticism to its moderate kind has provoked a form of scholarly myopia, which has kept the achievements of the radical type off the radar for too long. To begin filling this gap, I shall show that recognising radical apophaticism leads to challenging widespread assumptions about metaphor.

3. The Standard Narrative on Metaphors

Although most theorists tend to agree on which statements contain metaphors, they seem unable to reach a consensus about what exactly they are and how they operate (Leidl, 2003: 35). Broadly put, metaphor has been usually presented as a figure of speech, a rhetorical tool that expands language by using words figuratively rather than literally. To be slightly more specific, in contemporary parlance,[11] metaphors serve to think and speak about one thing (the tenor) as and in terms of another (the vehicle) due to some kind of relation (the ground) between them, despite their being markedly different. In doing so, metaphors may take various grammatical forms, such as 'Achilles is a lion' or 'Achilles crouched, snarled, and pounced'.[12]

No other figure of speech has captivated philosophers more than metaphor (Hills, 2024). Yet, paradoxically, they have mostly proscribed it as unfitting throughout history. As has been observed, «[t]he history of western philosophy is, for the most part, one long development of the... dismissal of metaphor» (Johnson, 2008: 39). But what is it about metaphor that would explain such a misfortune? The answer is found within the larger framework of what Plato famously described as 'the ancient quarrel' between philosophy and poetry (*Republic* X, 607b). From early on, Western thinkers have constantly strived to differentiate between these disciplines. In this vein, Plato himself goes as far as issuing a ban on poetry,[13] arguing that:

> ... all the *poetic tribe...* are imitators of images of excellence and of the other things that they 'create' and do not lay hold on truth... the poet himself, *knowing nothing* but how to imitate, lays on *with words and phrases* the colours of the several arts in such fashion that others equally ignorant, who see things only through words, will deem his words most excellent, whether he speaks in rhythm, metre and harmony about... anything whatsoever. So mighty is the spell that these *adornments* naturally exercise... (Plato, *Republic* X, 600c-601b. My emphasis).[14]

A glance at the historical context is key to understanding Plato's harsh stance. During the classical period, poets were commonly regarded as wise men, to the point that they became educators of society concerning moral conduct, religion, and politics (Thayer, 1975: 6). Plato reacted against this. For him, the role should be reserved for philosophers because only they could attain knowledge of such difficult matters «by means of words and discussion» (Plato, *Republic* IX, 582d). By contrast, he portrays poets as ignorant people who, nevertheless, managed to persuade the masses (mis-)using what was genuinely the philosopher's instrument par excellence: language (Barfield, 2011, p. 16). Hence, Plato perceived a dangerous overlap between philosophy and poetry, which drove him to forbid the latter to safeguard the former, having society's benefit at heart.

The above embodies, more or less, a common and enduring view: philosophy and poetry are at odds – one leads to knowledge, the other does not (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018: 99). Moreover, poetry might actually hinder access to knowledge by distracting (or, worse, deceiving) with ornamental linguistic devices. At the centre of this antagonistic relationship lies a difference between basic attitudes regarding one specific phenomenon: ambiguity.

As a general criterion, words or statements are said to be ambiguous if they simultaneously admit multiple meanings. Ambiguity has been consistently recognised as a distinctive feature of poetry (Gerbig and

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[11]   In this paper, I am adopting the terminology established by (Richards, 1965), which is roughly equivalent to the source-target distinction introduced by (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980).

[12]   On the grammatical richness of metaphorical statements, see the foundational study by (Brooke-Rose, 1958).

[13]   Several scholars (e.g., Capra, 2014; Burns, 2015: 326; Burnyeat, 2022: 33); etc. insist that Plato does not reject poetry outrightly. Instead, they propose that he only establishes the subordination of poetry to philosophy as a necessary condition for its correct exercise. I take no part in this debate. Here, I only point to a well-known fact, i.e., Plato explicitly refuses to include poets within the organisation of the state in *Republic* X, 595a.

[14]   For the English translation of Plato's *Republic*, see (Shorey, 1935).

Müller-Wood, 2002: 77).[15] Indeed, ancient and medieval poets thrived in it (Copeland, 2024: 252), using it for evocation and aesthetic effects.[16] Contrarily, classical philosophers identified ambiguity as one of the main factors behind fallacious argumentation; thus, they tried to avoid it at all costs. This thesis is found inchoately in Plato (Campbell, 2020: 91), being subsequently developed in much more detail by Aristotle. More precisely, Aristotle catalogued ambiguity as a vice of language, exploited by sophists and poets in their enterprise of persuading for the sake of it. Accordingly, Aristotle frequently relied on disambiguation as a device to address some of the most pressing philosophical puzzles inherited from his predecessors (Golitsis, 2021: 11–20). Since then, the majority of the Western philosophical tradition has followed suit, opting to eliminate ambiguity as much as possible.[17]

Starting with Aristotle, «[t]he philosophical discussion of metaphor has focused almost entirely on the cognitive problem created by metaphorical ambiguity» (White, 2020: 246). Thus, once philosophers turned their backs on ambiguity, the condemnation of metaphor ensued.

To start appreciating the characteristic ambiguity of metaphors, imagine the following scenario. While chatting with a friend, you ask about a man named 'Achilles', and get the metaphorical statement 'Achilles is a lion' as an answer. You know your friend is thinking and speaking of 'Achilles' (the tenor) as and in terms of 'a lion' (the vehicle). So far, so good. But what does this mean? To discover this, you might assume the relevant ground is a relation of similarity regarding a property (or properties) ascribed to the vehicle. Excellent. Supposing this is correct, all that is left is to find out which one(s) exactly. After realising that lions have many properties, you list those which, in your opinion, are more salient, e.g., bravery, power, size, and appearance. The problem arises because, by uttering such a statement, your friend could have referred to one of them, some of them, all of them, or even none of them, but rather some other property you did not consider. Evidently, 'Achilles is a lion' could equally mean 'Achilles is brave', 'Achilles's hair resembles a lion's mane', 'Achilles is very strong', or something completely different. Therefore, considered in itself, such a metaphorical statement exhibits much ambiguity.[18] Given that it is possible to construe a similar argument for many, if not all, metaphorical statements, the philosophical tendency to reject them is no surprise.

In sum, the longstanding refusal to admit metaphors in philosophy follows from embracing what I call 'the Argument from Ambiguity' (TAFA):

(P1) If one aims at *a*, one should avoid *b* if it poses a threat to it

(P2) The philosopher aims at acquiring knowledge

(P3) Ambiguity poses a threat to acquiring knowledge

(P4) The philosopher should avoid ambiguity (From P1, P2, and P3)

(P5) Metaphors are ambiguous

(C) The philosopher should avoid metaphors (From P4 and P5)

A widespread narrative, which has become 'standard' in the relevant literature, posits that such an argument was held by all ancient and medieval thinkers, who concluded that «whereof one can speak only metaphorically, thereof one ought not to speak at all» (Black, 1955: 273). In this context, it is believed that it was not until the mid-twentieth century that a substantial re-examination of the nature of metaphor and its relation to philosophy occurred. This has motivated a distinction between 'classical' and 'contemporary' theories of metaphor. In what comes next, I shall outline how they are generally conceived from this perspective.[19]

The standard narrative on metaphors, whereby all premodern thinkers endorsed a classical approach, was disseminated by contemporary theorists, who characterised their own views in strict opposition to those (Kövecses, 2002: vii–viii). Accordingly, classical theories are said to conceive of metaphors as an exclusively linguistic phenomenon. Moreover, they are further restricted since they are ascribed a mere ornamental role. Borrowing a very eloquent way to express this, metaphors are considered like «verbal wrapping-paper brought in only after the serious business of meaning has taken place» (Boys-Stones, 2003: 1). In line with this, metaphors are treated as secondary to ordinary, i.e., literal language. More precisely, they are considered to be deviations in which, as it were, a term is moved from its original framework to a different, unusual one. Such an idea appears to be reflected in the Greek word for this figure of speech, as *metaphor* derives from

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[15]   As an example of the intimate relationship between poetry and philosophy, take (Black, 1984). He postulates that poems admit 'radical ambiguity', whereby some of them legitimately exclude all possibility of being able to choose between mutually incompatible interpretations.

[16]   On the pervasiveness of ambiguity in Ancient Greek literature, see (Stanford, 1939).

[17]   For instance, some important ancient thinkers who explicitly uphold the incompatibility between knowledge and ambiguity are the Stoics (Edlow, 1975: 424), Galen (Edlow, 1977: 7), Augustine (Toom, 2007: 411), etc.

[18]   I am aware that my example presupposes a 'substitution-based approach' to metaphors. Nevertheless, this does not affect its validity, since I do not see how adopting instead an 'interaction-based approach' would eliminate metaphorical ambiguity as outlined above. I shall explain these approaches in a moment.

[19]   Following the relevant bibliography on the subject, I use 'classical' and 'contemporary' as umbrella terms, each comprising various accounts that, despite some differences, are said to share a common outlook on metaphors. In presenting an overview of both approaches, I shall focus on their contrast. This is a methodological choice, which attempts to capture the standard narrative, which is characterised for positing a stark theoretical division. For a more detailed piece on the evolution of theory of metaphor according to this narrative, see (Duffy and Feist, 2023), especially the second chapter, titled 'The Theory of Metaphor. From Language to Cognition'.

metapherein, which can be translated as 'to carry across', 'to transfer', or 'to transport'. Two basic principles have been identified at the core of the classical approach (Innes, 2003: 7):

> Substitution Principle: The meaning of a metaphorical statement corresponds to a literal one; thus, the latter can substitute the former.

> Similarity Principle: A metaphorical statement is grounded in pre-existing similarities between the tenor and the vehicle.

For the sake of illustration, take, once again, the metaphorical statement 'Achilles is a lion'. Within a classical approach, the relevant ground is a pre-existing similarity between 'Achilles' and 'a lion' – for instance, with respect to the property of 'being strong'. The ornamental character of this statement follows from the conviction that it amounts to a rhetorical reformulation of a literal statement. This means that 'Achilles is a lion' can – and, when it comes to philosophy, should – be substituted by a statement such as 'Achilles is very strong'. If this is done, nothing is lost at the semantic level because the literal statement constitutes the genuine meaning of the metaphorical one.

No premodern theorist of metaphor exerted more influence than Aristotle (Silk, 2003: 116). For him, metaphor is «giving the thing *a name that belongs to something else*; the *transference* being either from genus to species, or from species to genus, or from species to species, or on grounds of analogy» (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b. My emphasis).[20] He also remarked that «metaphor implies an intuitive perception of the *similarity* in dissimilars» (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1459a. My emphasis). On this basis, Aristotle is often credited with being the father of the classical account (Wood, 2017: 64). It seems clear that Aristotle endorses the Similarity Principle and, by associating metaphors with a process of term transference, he has been said to do the same concerning the Substitution Principle (Contini, 2018).[21]

As previously observed, contemporary theories arose as an explicit rejection of all the above, advocating for a thorough re-evaluation of metaphors. This 'new' account maintains that the authentic locus of metaphor is thought and, only derivatively, language. Furthermore, metaphor no longer constitutes a decorative resource but is deemed indispensable for thinking and speaking about reality (Lakoff, 1993: 202–204). Therefore, it is far from being reduced to a simple linguistic deviation. In accordance with this, contemporary theorists abandoned the two aforementioned principles. Specifically, they proscribed the Substitution Principle in favour of an interaction-based approach, which ultimately overrode the Similarity Principle. To unpack all this, let us focus on one of the most influential representatives of the contemporary theory within the analytic tradition: Black (1909 – 1988).

Black continued the tradition of considering metaphors as necessarily ambiguous (Black, 1977: 444). Yet, he then introduced two famous technical notions. For him, a metaphorical statement must contain at least one word employed metaphorically (the focus) and, of the remaining words, at least one should be used literally (the frame). To exemplify this, he resorted to the metaphorical statement 'The chairman ploughed through the discussion'. Here, 'ploughed' is the focus of the metaphor, whereas the remainder is its frame (Black, 1955: 275–276).

In Black's view, the meaning of metaphorical statements cannot be captured by any literal counterpart; hence, the latter cannot substitute the former without a semantic loss. Going back to his example, in such a metaphorical statement, the word 'ploughed' acquires a new meaning in relation to the remaining words. To put it plainly, the meaning of a metaphor originates anew from the interaction between focus and frame. Because of this, it cannot correspond to any literal formulation (Black, 1955: 286). Due to this semantic novelty, it is more appropriate «to say that the metaphor *creates the similarity* than to say that it formulates some similarity antecedently existing» (Black, 1955: 285). I shall briefly return to the notion of 'similarity-creating metaphors' in section 4. For now, this suffices as a general introduction to the standard narrative.

Given the above, where do classical and contemporary theories stand on whether to admit metaphors in philosophy? According to TAFA, philosophers should avoid metaphors due to their ambiguity. But is there any form to resist the argument? As I see it, the first three premises do the heavy lifting:

> (P1) If one aims at *a*, one should avoid *b* if it poses a threat to it

> (P2) The philosopher aims at acquiring knowledge

> (P3) Ambiguity poses a threat to acquiring knowledge

Technically, it is possible to reject (P2) and/or (P3). However, it would be very unlikely for an analytic philosopher to take this route. After all, this tradition relies on formal logic to attain knowledge precisely due to its unambiguous character (Wurm, 2021: 143). So, the only reasonable strategy available is to focus on (P1).[22] Nevertheless, since it contains a seemingly uncontroversial claim, the best way to deal with (P1) is to introduce a further stipulation, allowing for certain exceptions. This is it:

> (P1)' If one aims at *a*, one should avoid *b* if it poses a threat to it, unless *b*'s contribution to *a* outweighs such a threat

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[20] For the English translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*, I use (Barnes, 1984).
[21] However, at least since (Ricoeur, 1975), the claim that Aristotle's theory of metaphor embraces the Substitution Principle has been contested.
[22] Another possibility to resists TAFA would be to reject (P5), i.e., to deny that metaphors are ambiguous. Yet, this is not what classical or contemporary theorists like Black do.

In light of (P1)', to escape from TAFA, one must prove that metaphors contribute to knowledge sufficiently despite their ambiguity. Obviously, decorative purposes do not make the cut. Hence, classical theorists cannot refute the argument insofar as they confine metaphor to an ornamental linguistic device. For them, «metaphor can have no serious place in philosophical discussions» (Black, 1955: 282). Contrastingly, by considering metaphors to be indispensable, contemporary theorists were best positioned to face the challenge. And so they did.

Following the decline of logical positivism, many analytic thinkers have become fierce advocates of the philosophical value of metaphors on account of their cognitive contribution.[23] A very enlightening example comes from the field of science.[24] Indeed, scientific models have been revealed as extended metaphors. Regardless of not being literally true, they are useful representations of the world, with real predictive power and, thus, essential for scientific progress (Kittay, 1990: 7). Many important scientific theories, for instance, «the wave theory of light or the billiard ball model of atoms, have their origins in metaphorical language» (Reynolds, 2022: 4). As it turns out, metaphors shape how we think and speak about the world through our scientific theories. So, in cases like this, where their cognitive contribution is such that it outweighs their ambiguity, metaphors can be admitted in philosophy.

Departing from the standard narrative, in the final section of this paper, I shall argue that a robust defence of the philosophical usage of metaphors, akin to the contemporary one, was already developed by Eriugena, driven by his radical apophaticism.

4. A Non-Classical Medieval Theory

The contemporary revalorisation of metaphor highlighted that «conceptual systems of... religions are metaphorical in nature» (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 40). In this way, once again, metaphors are revealed to be crucial, on this occasion, when it comes to dealing with none other than the divine. Several studies have confirmed the ubiquitous presence of metaphor in religions across time (Dorst, 2021: 235). Yet, the standard narrative asserts that, for many centuries, no religious thinker recognised the cognitive contribution of metaphors, which would allow their admission in philosophy. More specifically, no premodern thinker was able to rebuke TAFA.

In this framework, it has often been concluded that «there exists no medieval theory of metaphor as an instrument of knowledge» (Eco, 2014: 95). My counterexample to this claim looks at the medieval apophatic tradition, whose proponents deliberately resorted to metaphors in their philosophical discussions of God, holding him to be unknowable and ineffable. If metaphor served to think and speak somehow about what cannot be thought or spoken otherwise, how could these medievals fail to recognise its significant cognitive contribution? I shall contend they did not or, at least, not all of them.

As per the standard narrative, two different attitudes can be adopted in cases where the cognitive contribution of metaphor is to be the only resource available to think and speak about something. By virtue of the Substitution Principle, classical theorists would, at best, tolerate metaphors as having literal statements would always be better. Contrarily, contemporary theorists would embrace such metaphors and acknowledge their unique input, understanding that the alternative would be to remain silent. In accordance with their distinct apophaticisms, these two attitudes are embodied by Aquinas and Eriugena, respectively. Therefore, this reveals a non-classical medieval theory of metaphor heretofore overlooked.

Aquinas's moderate apophaticism admits literal statements. If God is fully knowable in itself, and genuine knowledge consists in knowing true statements, it follows that there are statements of the form 'God is x' that properly (i.e., truly) apply to him:

> Perfections that proceed from God to creatures are signified by some of these names in such a way that the imperfect way in which the creature participates in the divine perfection is itself included in what the name signifies. For instance, 'rock' signifies something that exists materially. Names of this sort can be predicated of God only metaphorically.
> On the other hand, some names signify the perfections themselves absolutely speaking, without including in their signification any mode of participation. Examples are 'being', 'good', 'living', and others of this sort. Such names are said of God properly (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 13, a. 3, ad 1).

For Aquinas, human knowledge of God begins with the senses in the material world (*ST* I, q. 1, a. 9, co). Based on this, humans can formulate two types of statements about him, e.g., 'God is goodness' and 'God is a lion'. The first example constitutes a literal statement because 'goodness' is a perfection found properly in God, and only derivatively in creatures. By contrast, the second example can only be applied to God metaphorically. This is because 'lion' signifies a material creature, and there is no matter in God. Hence, the ground to formulate this statement is «a resemblance based on one property of the lion» (Aquinas, *De veritate* q. 7, a. 2, co).[25]

Furthermore, Aquinas recognises that humans rely on metaphors to think and speak about God «out of necessity and because of their usefulness» (Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 1, a. 9, ad 1). Thus, the accuracy of the standard narrative already starts to crumble. Still, although he does not deem metaphors to be merely ornamental, he

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[23] For a detailed survey on analytic theories of metaphor, see (Mácha, 2019).
[24] On this topic, (Hesse, 1966) remains an important resource.
[25] For the English translation of Aquinas's *De veritate*, see (Mulligan, 1952).

fairly remains a classical theorist. While distinguishing between literal and metaphorical statements about God, he obviously assumes the inferiority of the latter ones, which remain then «parasitic» (White, 2015: 230).

At this stage, it should be evident that Eriugena's radical apophaticism proposes something different. For him, it is impossible to formulate literal statements about God. Naturally, any statement of the form 'God is x' cannot properly mean that God is x if he is fully unknowable in itself. Eriugena is very explicit about this: «we predicate all things of Him [i.e., God], whether by nouns or by verbs, though not properly but in a metaphorical sense» (Eriugena, *PP*. I, 522A). To be more specific, he takes that:

> The one has conceded and conferred to pious inquirers the ability to think and say many things about the incomprehensible and ineffable Nature, so that the study of true religion should not be silent on all matters... lest they should either believe or think anything unworthy of God, or should suppose that everything that Holy Scripture predicates of the Cause of all things is predicated properly, whether it is a question of the most glorious and exalted names such as Life or Virtue or the names of the other virtues; or... names such as Sun, Light, Star... or those... such as Breadth, Cloud, Brightness... also Water, River Earth... Man, Lion, Ox... Worm; also Eagle, Dove, Fish, Monster, and the numberless other names which are taken from the created nature and applied to the Creative Nature by a kind of metaphor and figurative manner of expression... (Eriugena, *PP*. I, 511B-512A).

Eriugena goes far beyond any of his predecessors by claiming that every statement about God cannot but be metaphorical (Blankenhorn, 2015: 40). Unlike Aquinas, he does not merely recognise some cognitive contribution from metaphor, albeit continuing to consider it secondary. In this case, Eriugena outrightly rejects the Substitution Principle since the only alternative to metaphorical statements about God is silence. Accordingly, metaphor becomes a cognitive instrument of the utmost importance, making it possible to think and speak somehow about the divine, which is otherwise unknowable and ineffable.[26] This is a very solid defence against TAFA. As it turns out, contrary to the standard narrative, it is undeniable that Eriugena embraced what is considered a contemporary theory of metaphor all the way back in the early Middle Ages.

I want to conclude this paper very speculatively by hinting at how, beyond historical interest, paying attention to Eriugena's radical apophaticism could be relevant for current debates. As previously mentioned, contemporary theorists discard the Similarity Principle, positing instead 'similarity-creating metaphors'. However, it has been argued that they take this notion for granted, without being «established in any reasonable fashion» (Indurkhya, 1992: 39). The problem arises due to a widespread metaphysical explanation, whereby A holds a similarity (also called resemblance) relation to B if they share objectively given properties (Koons and Pickavance, 2017: 126). In this sense, the metaphorical statement 'Achilles is a lion' results from recognising the property of 'being strong' previously existing in the tenor and the vehicle. From this standpoint, metaphors express similarities that are discovered, not created.

According to my interpretation, his radical apophaticism obliges Eriugena to reject the Similarity Principle. If one can only think and speak about God metaphorically, it is impossible that this is based on discovered pre-existing similarities. For Eriugena, there are no objectively given properties in God. This is why no literal statement can be formulated about him. Thus, like contemporary theorists, Eriugena also faces the challenge of accounting for similarity-creating metaphors.

To solve the problem, it has been observed that «[w]e need an account which ties similarity more closely to the judgements we make concerning the world than its 'objectively given' features» (Kittay, 1982: 394). In my reading, this is exactly what Eriugena does by developing an «extremely radical, almost fantastical, idealism» (Moran, 1999: 54). For Eriugena, everything is existentially mind-dependent, such that «there is no world without the unfolding of the human mind» (Moran, 2006: 124). Once everything is existentially mind-dependent, so are relations. Now, since similarity is a relation, it follows that it too is existentially mind-dependent. Therefore, rather than being discovered, similarities are created by the mind. So, if all knowledge about God is based on similarity-creating metaphors, it follows that all knowledge about God depends on the human mind. This might be behind Eriugena's enigmatic words: «God, by manifesting Himself, in a marvellous and ineffable manner creates Himself in the creature» (Eriugena, *PP*. III, 678C). A more comprehensive study of Eriugena's radical apophaticism is long overdue.[27]

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[26]   Although I do not agree with some of his claims, (Paparella, 2008) remains the most extensive study on Eriugena's theory of figurative language.

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