

Of Galaxies and Breakfast: An Apophatic Account of Divine Commands

Wenjun Huang

Chongqing No.8 Secondary School, Chongqing, China
grimes.huang@outlook.com

Abstract. The apparent incongruity between a transcendent Creator and seemingly trivial divine commands presents a challenge for religion, raising the risk of either misrepresenting God's nature or rendering the commands meaningless. This paper starts by examining how conventional frameworks, such as rationalist theism and projectionist psychology, either domesticate divine transcendence or reduce orders to human fabrication, failing to avoid these errors. Then, it argues that an apophatic linguistic analysis, grounded on contemporary theories of metaphor and semantic underdetermination, offers a reconciling model based on Thomas Aquinas's *triplex via* and more effectively illuminates the inherent limitations and function of religious language. This method reinterprets some commands as "floating signifiers" whose meaning is operationalized in practical contexts. Lastly, it examines the implications of this apophatic-reconciliatory framework, showing how it reframes the human struggle against finitude as the lived site of encounter with the divine, grounds obedience in Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling," and converts the paradox of scale into a pedagogy of relational trust.

Keywords: apophaticism, divine commands, religious language, transcendence

1. Introduction

The seeming absurdity that the creator of a trillion galaxies might legislate breakfast confronts any earnest engagement with revealed religion. Belief is strained by this disparity between the cosmic and the everyday, which suggests either human customs disguising themselves as divine decree or a distracted god micromanaging. Whether they reduce God to a mental projection or elevate human reason to the level of divine knowledge, traditional explanatory frameworks ultimately domesticate the mystery they seek to explain. To break this impasse, this essay creates an apophatic-reconciliatory approach. It is predicated on Thomas Aquinas's *triplex via* and the concept of the "floating signifier," and it argues that before the transcendent becomes the medium for divine communication, human language is inadequate. Rather than solving the paradox, this model transposes it: the finite, particular command operates not as a comprehensible proposition, but as a pedagogical site where relational trust is forged through awe and obedience. What appears as a problem of scale is thus reframed as a necessary feature of how the infinite engages the finite.

2. Divine reconciliation through the lens of apophatic language

The encounter between divine revelation and human understanding is fraught with a seeming disproportion of scale, a tension between the infinite nature of the Creator and the finite. This tension is most acutely manifested in the reception of specific divine commands, where cosmic source appears to legislate trivial details. A question presents a stark paradox: how can the Creator of a trillion galaxies be concerned with what one eats for breakfast? This apparent disproportion, however, rests on a linguistic misunderstanding. It assumes God's reasons are positivist, which is fully accessible to human logic like a scientific formula. The divine response to Job (Job 38:4), rejects this framework. It does not answer his question but performs a semantic rupture, revealing the inadequacy of human categories behind the question itself. This rupture is a logical necessity, not an evasion. Human language is a finite system forged within a creaturely world; to apply it to the transcendent is to guarantee its failure. This inadequacy operates on two distinct but interrelated levels:

2.1. The structural level: semantic underdetermination

At this level, language lacks the necessary precision to fix meaning. As Peter van Elswyk argues through “metalinguistic apophaticism”, positive theological statements suffer from permanent “semantic underdetermination” [1]. The signifiers (“good,” “just,” “command”) are incapable of fully determining their infinite divine referent. This echoes William P. Alston’s seminal analysis of theological language [2], which contends that terms applied to God undergo a “univocal attribution” problem. Language is forced into an intrinsically analogical or metaphorical form that admits its own partial failure because we cannot presume that our creaturely sense of “goodness” applies to God in the same way that it does to animals. This structural defect is shown by theology’s attempt to describe divine characteristics. The Everlasting Tautology The definition goes back to itself: “God is Goodness itself”, since “God is good” cannot mean what it means for a creature. Descriptive semantics ends with this philosophical assertion: language alludes to a reality that it is unable to fully capture. The concept of “good” is ill-defined, necessitating an endless regress of explanation that language is unable to offer.

2.2. The mechanical level: the necessity of self-negating metaphor

At this level, the very mechanism of religious language forces it into a form that shows its own inadequacy. As Jacob Hesse demonstrates, religious language defaults to metaphor (“God is a rock”) not by choice but by necessity [3]. Each metaphor logically contains its own negation (He is like a rock but is not a rock), making the via negationis a built-in feature of its grammar. The Hermeneutical Abyss. The central Christian claim, “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14), is a performative instance of this mechanic. It joins two irreconcilable terms, infinite Logos and finite Sarx, into a semantic paradox. Any interpretation that resolves the paradox into comfortable logic (e.g., reducing the divine to a super-human) is deemed heretical, because it denies the necessary self-negation within the metaphor. The formulation requires us to hold both affirmation and negation simultaneously, which stretches language to its breaking point.

This dual weakness is frequently acknowledged by the lived reality of faith, which prioritizes performative act over semantic content. Language is employed not so much to describe as to embody surrender in rituals like as glossolalia (also known as “speaking in tongues”), repeated

chant, and liturgy in a sacred language that is not fully understood. This operational change foreshadows divine reconciliation and is a practical admission of language's descriptive failure.

3. The reconciliatory model: triplex via and floating signifier

This proven inadequacy is the arena for divine reconciliation. God does not abandon communication but operationalises our limited language. According to Daniel De Haan [4], Aquinas's triplex via, or threefold road, serves as the theoretical framework for this. According to this theory, people can: 1) affirm God's attributes based on His effects in creation (via causalitatis); 2) deny that these attributes exist in Him in a limited, creaturely way (via negationis); and 3) finally acknowledge that He possesses them in a superior way that is inaccessible to us (via eminentiae). Consequently, God is the causal source of a breakfast mandate; full divine logic is often apophatically hidden from human knowledge (by negationis); and its ultimate purpose is to foster a holiness that takes part in God's love. This process, led by the triplex via, transforms specific rules into what philosophical analysis terms "floating signifiers" [5]. A floating signifier's meaning is not fixed to a single, material referent but is dynamically stabilised by its function within a system of practice and relationship: the mode of being suggested by via eminentiae. It is within this conceptual space that we can examine concrete examples.

3.1. The Akedah: apophatic obedience as relational trust

The theoretical framework of the triplex via and floating signifiers can find concrete expression in religious narratives and practices. The Akedah (Binding of Isaac). This is an apophatic command. It is ethically unintelligible, severing the link between human moral reasoning and divine will to train a terrifying, absolute relational trust. The "reason" is entirely within God's wisdom. This narrative demonstrates the extreme end of apophatic obedience, where trust transcends ethical comprehension.

3.2. Shabbat: operationalising command in daily ritual

In contrast to the singular, traumatic test of the Akedah, the rhythm, of regular ritual shows how apophatic commands structure daily life and communal identity. Think about Shabbat, the Jewish Sabbath. Observant Jews refrain from using electricity, lighting candles, sharing meals, and engaging in any creative activity (melakhah) from Friday sunset until Saturday night. These actions are the concrete manifestation of the directive; they are not arbitrary. However, no positivist "reason" (like commemorating Creation (Gen. 2:2-3)) can fully account for their meaning. Rather, their meaning is operationalized through practices, where it takes the form of acting. Thus, the Shabbat command is a powerful floating sign. Rituals are not solely symbolic nor arbitrary; they are a form of reconciliation in which the limited human participates in sacred time. As a result, the "why" of the order is both apophatically beyond complete understanding and partially recognized (e.g., honoring Creation), with its ultimate meaning revealed by the deed itself.

This withholding of transparent reasons, however, raises a critique. A powerful objection arises here: if reasons are withheld, does this not make divine commands arbitrary, even tyrannical? However, this accusation confuses a logical boundary with a moral defect. The ontological difference between infinite speaker and limited listener, rather than divine whim, is the source of the hiddenness. As the triplex shows, God's simplicity suggests that His desire is the same as His perfect understanding and goodness [4]. Instead of being a void, the "gap" is a place for faith as trust. In a

real-world example, during a challenging procedure, a trainee surgeon obeys a master surgeon's succinct, unintelligible command ("Retract here, now!"). Despite their inability to fully comprehend the anatomical explanation, the pupil accepts the expert's embodied wisdom. In the time of action, the command is supra-comprehensible rather than arbitrary. In the covenant relationship, divine mandates operate in a similar manner.

4. Obedience, emotion, and the existential struggle against finitude

When divine commands reach us in this operationalised, apophatic form, human obedience cannot be reduced to rational assent. It is a response to overwhelming presence. Such a response is what Kierkegaard named "fear and trembling" [6], the primal human reaction to a command whose source is transcendently Other. The obedience elicited is the posture of the child who "trembles yet stretches its arms toward the father", a recognition of power and safety.

4.1. Obedience as a ritual of transcendence

The main force behind humanity's existential struggle against finitude is this obedience. Our lives are defined by non-negotiable constraints like mortality, contingency, and the fleeting nature of self-made meaning. According to Noah Gordon's understanding of theism and secular modality [7], theistic belief offers a transcendent source of necessity that might reconfigure human possibility. A ritual of transcendence is a finite act that decides to enter this transformed potential by following an apophatic command. It is a deliberate rebellion against the limitations of autonomous, analytical reason.

4.2. Case study: the Hajj as an apophatic ordeal

The Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca (Hajj) provides an illustration of the entire framework.

First, its rites are operationalised commands. The pilgrim is given precise, non-negotiable actions: circumambulate the Kaaba seven times, run between Safa and Marwah, stand in vigil at Arafat. These are "floating signifiers", in which their immediate physical description does not exhaust their meaning. Their significance is realised only in the performance, the embodied submission to the divine prescription (via causalitatis).

Second, the experience is apophatic. For many pilgrims, the "why" of each ritual is partially shrouded. While theological explanations exist, the overwhelming scale, fatigue, and chaos of the Hajj often strip away intellectual comprehension, plunging the pilgrim into a state of pure, willed obedience (via negationis). The goal is to emerge with a sense of purified submission (islam) and a glimpse of divine majesty (via eminentiae).

Third, it elicits "fear and trembling". The crush of millions, the physical ordeal, the confrontation with one's own smallness before the sacred centre—all generate Otto's mysterium tremendum [8]. The pilgrim's obedience is a visceral response to this awe.

Finally, it is a quintessential ritual of transcendence in the fight against finitude. The pilgrim leaves home, status, and routine, symbolically shedding worldly identity. The pilgrim is faced with the stark reality of human equality before God and the limitations of earthly hierarchies as a result of the white ihram robes, which remove social divisions. The pilgrim aims to transcend the boundaries of the ego and reach a state of grace (taqwa) by following the ritual script. Thus, the entire journey—from operationalized command to apophatic anguish and emotional awe to an enacted struggle against the limited self—is summed up in the Hajj.

This apophatic logic, experienced communally in pilgrimage, finds its expression in the mystic's crisis. If the Hajj pilgrim's understanding is stripped away by external chaos, the mystic experiences this stripping internally. St. John of the Cross's "Dark Night of the Soul" represents the via negationis applied to the psyche itself: the believer feels abandoned by God; prayer feels empty, rituals meaningless. Here, obedience persists when every emotional reward and intellectual foothold (via causalitatis) has been annihilated. This pure, willed submission is the ultimate "fear and trembling", a fight against the finitude of despair by clinging to trust in God's presence, which is paradoxically affirmed through its felt absence. The Dark Night demonstrates that the struggle against finitude is not merely a social ritual but can become the defining, desolate reality of individual faith.

4.3. The social dimension: re-moralisation and the management of finitude

This argument between individual apophatic crisis and communal practice highlights that the struggle is not isolated. Society itself engages in the perpetual re-moralisation of the operationalised signs that make such experiences possible. The evolution of the bacon taboo in Judaism, from a marker of hygiene to one of sin to a signal of health, exemplifies this. This is not proof of mere human projection, but of a community continually re-applying a transcendent anchor point to new historical contexts. The divine command provides the stable "form" (e.g., "exercise dominion over the body"), and each generation fills it with contingent "content", thereby managing the anxiety that arises from chaos and finitude.

4.4. Addressing the projectionist critique

A challenge must be met: existentialist and psychoanalytic viewpoints seem to be able to criticize this approach. Ludwig Feuerbach would contend that the "fight against finitude" and the "fear and trembling" are the very engines of projection rather than reactions to a true God [9]. According to this perspective, the creation of a divine father figure is necessary because humanity's existential dread in the face of a silent universe (Angst) is so intolerable. The apophatic concealment of God's purposes is not a sign of transcendence; rather, it is the empty center of this projection, a blank screen that we project our own desires for comfort, authority, and moral order upon. As a result, what you refer to as "divine reconciliation" is really just human self-reconciliation accomplished via a complex, unconscious act of desire fulfillment.. The operationalisation of language is not God's gracious accommodation, but our own desperate attempt to make our self-authored myths feel objective and binding.

Although potent, this projectionist criticism makes a mistake by conflating an idea's provenance with its veracity or worth and neglecting to take into consideration the transformational impact of the apophatic encounter. It accurately recognizes the human psychological landscape (finitude, worry), but it erroneously believes that if a need exists, its satisfaction must be a delusion. The Kierkegaardian "fear and trembling" is the opposite of fulfilling desires; it is the destruction of comfortable illusions and the experience of a demand that transcends and assesses human self-interest. If this were really a projection, it would project a God who upholds our prejudices and desires. The God of the Akedah or Job, who commands the unthinkable and speaks from the whirlwind, is an example of a paradoxical projection. In actuality, the apophatic tradition's methodical rejection of images (by negationis) is a theological defense against the same human-like gods Feuerbach [9] talks about. The ensuing obedience is the serenity of being reconciled to a Reality that is still enigmatic, not the solace of a resolved anxiety.

5. Situating the model: against projectionism and rationalism

The apophasic-reconciliatory model developed here occupies a distinct middle ground between two dominant but problematic interpretations of divine commands: projectionism and rationalist theism.

5.1. Against Projectionism

Against Projectionism (e.g., Freud, Feuerbach): As argued above, projectionism reduces divine commands to symptoms of human psychology. It explains their existence but removes their claim to transcendent truth, rendering obedience a form of self-deception. Our model accepts the psychological context but insists on a transcendent cause. It argues that God works through human linguistic and existential limits, not that those limits invent God.

5.2. Against Pationalist Theism

Against Rationalist Theism (e.g., some strands of Natural Law, Enlightenment Deism): This view seeks to close the apophasic gap. It posits that divine commands are rational principles accessible to and fully justifiable by unaided human reason. Bacon is clearly unhealthy and socially disruptive, thus eating it is wrong. God is therefore a divine legislator whose laws are in perfect harmony with a secular moral calculus. Our concept, based on the triplex via, challenges this as a domestication of transcendence. This is contested as a domestication of transcendence by this paradigm, which is based on the triplex via. It can be argued, in accordance with academics such as David Burrell [10], that although divine wisdom is not irrational, it is supra-rational; it is the source from which human reason draws its validity rather than a conclusion that reason can entirely circumscribe. The mistake made by rationalists is to confuse involvement in this wisdom (by eminentiae) with total ownership of it. It asserts that while divine instructions are not irrational, human reason can never fully map them since God's knowledge (via eminentiae) contains the entire ratio. The "arbitrary" dietary ordinance is a crucial test case because, despite the absence of a totally transparent, positivist justification, its purpose is not just sanitary but also pedagogical and relational, forming a people in obedience.

Thus, the model stands in a middle course: it acknowledges the human realities that projectionism identifies, yet insists, against rationalist overconfidence, on God's mysteriously transcendent nature. In doing so, it renders the whirlwind's answer to Job not an evasion but a revelation, preserving both divine mystery and the meaningfulness of human obedience.

6. Synthesis: how the cosmic paradox is resolved? reconciling the cosmic and the mundane

6.1. The core resolution: reframing the paradox

The argument thus returns to the question that launched this inquiry: why would the creator of a trillion galaxies care about what to eat for breakfast? The answer lies in a category error. The question assumes God's attention is a scarce resource distracted from galaxies to breakfast, and that His commands are comprehensive propositions.

The apophasic-reconciliatory model reframes the issue entirely. The Creator's concern with the mundane is not a matter of cosmic scale but of relational pedagogy. The Creator makes use of the limited, material components of human existence because relational beings are made and learn from them, not because He is a micromanager. The command's apparent "triviality" is what turns the ordinary into a possible meeting place.

6.2. Addressing a key objection: the authoritarianism critique

The core tension can thus be confronted: the seeming absurdity of a galactic creator legislating breakfast. The apophatic-reconciliatory model does not merely answer this question; it dismantles the framework that makes it seem like a paradox in the first place. A vital objection should be considered: does this model not grant a blank cheque to authoritarianism, allowing any edict to be justified by an appeal to inscrutable divine will? This challenge raise a clarification and reveals the balanced strength of the apophatic-reconciliatory framework.

The framework does not advocate blind obedience to claims of divine command. Instead, it provides the very criteria by which such claims must be judged. A command that is used to promote violence, entrenched dominance, or societal division is fundamentally at odds with the framework's own principles. Recall that the triplex via is a model for divine reconciliation, the telos of God's goodness (via eminentiae), an act centered on love, unity, and relationship restoration. By definition, a hermeneutic that leads to oppression and alienation is not a true engagement in divine reconciliation, but rather a failure of human interpretation. It is not an operationalization of transcendent love, but rather a projection of human despotism.

The critical function of the framework can be understood through an analogy. Consider the relationship between a constitution and its case law. The constitution (like the cosmic revelation) establishes the foundational principles, where the transcendent “nature” of the legal order (e.g., “due process,” “equal protection”). An application of that lofty idea to a practical, everyday situation is a particular traffic legislation or contract ruling (such as the dietary mandate). When evaluating a minor case, the judge does not “forget” the constitution; rather, the little case is where the idea of the constitution is made tangible and applicable. The trivial is not the reverse of the spectacular; rather, it is the application of the enormous. Similarly, eating habits do not lessen God's justice and love; rather, they offer an opportunity for them to be practically expressed in human life.

Therefore, the model gives a coherence of response:

- Humble, as it accepts that the full ratio of any command flows from God's simple, eminent wisdom (via eminentiae), not from a comprehensible cost-benefit analysis of cosmic versus mundane importance.
- Critical, as it uses the reconciling telos of divine love, the very “principle” revealed in both creation and covenant, as the test for any interpretation. An interpretation that breeds oppression fails as “bad case law”, distorting the foundational principle.
- Existential, because this posture is itself the means by which humans, in their finitude, engage the infinite. We cannot relate to the galaxy-creating power directly, but we can relate to it through the obedient, trembling response it asks of us in our daily, particular context.

6.3. The three themes of the resolution

This resolution is achieved through the interweaving of our three core themes: the Apophatic Linguistic Frame, which explains why the full “why” is withheld, protecting God's transcendence and making room for faith; the Kierkegaardian Emotional Core [6], which grounds the response in awe; and the Communal Struggle Against Finitude, which shows how this obedience is lived out as a shared, transformative fight against meaninglessness and mortality.

6.4. Concluding synthesis

There is no conflict between the command's specificity and the majesty of the universe. They are two manifestations of the same transcendent reality: one declares God's overwhelming grandeur (*mysterium tremendum*), while the other invites us to a reconciled relationship with that majesty via the humble, inspirational discipline of daily life. The whirlwind's creator is also the one who summons individuals on the journey and is the quiet presence in the Dark Night. Therefore, asking him why he is worried about breakfast would be a mistake. This view holds that both the inquiry and the trembling yearning feeling that underpins it are the meeting place of the limited and the infinite.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the apophatic-reconciliatory model reframes the perceived paradox between divine transcendence and mundane command not as a contradiction to be solved, but as a linguistic and relational necessity to be embraced. Heavenly instructions function through the triplex as “floating signifiers”, operationalized within specific activities but grounded in a wisdom that is yet incomprehensible to humans. This approach neither domesticates the supernatural within human reason nor reduces God to a psychological projection, preserving spiritual mystery while facilitating meaningful obedience. Consequently, the infinite is encountered in the ordinary and finite.

Such a model reorients the believer's posture toward awe, trust, and participatory reconciliation. Whether in the stark obedience of the Akedah, the rhythmic sanctity of Shabbat, or the communal ordeal of the Hajj, apophatic logic trains reliance not on comprehensible reasons, but on relationship with the transcendent Other. This obedience, charged with Kierkegaardian “fear and trembling”, becomes the means by which humanity engages its existential struggle against finitude.

Ultimately, this framework suggests that diverse religious practices across traditions need not be seen as competing claims to exclusive truth, but as varied, context-specific mediations of the same transcendent reality. If all theological language is inherently inadequate and operationalized through metaphor and practice, diverse traditions may employ complementary but different terminology to pursue the holy. In a society that is becoming increasingly pluralistic, such an apophatic sensibility could foster intellectual humility within traditions and provide more room for interreligious engagement. The focus shifts from asserting one's own understanding of God to embarking with others in the humble and remarkable task of reconciliation with the mystery that underlies all creation.

References

- [1] Van Elswyk, Peter (2025). Metalinguistic apophaticism. *Oxford Studies in Philosophy of Religion*, 11, 139-167.
- [2] Alston, W. P. (1989). *Divine Nature and Human Language: Essays in Philosophical Theology*. Cornell University Press.
- [3] Hesse, Jacob (2023). Metaphors, religious language and linguistic expressibility. *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 93 (3), 239-258.
- [4] De Haan, Daniel D. (2023). Thomist Classical Theism: Divine Simplicity within Aquinas' Triplex Via Theology. In Robert C. Koons & Jonathan Fuqua, *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*. Routledge, 101-122.
- [5] Derrida, J. (1982). *Margins of philosophy* (A. Bass, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
- [6] Kierkegaard, S. (1843). *Fear and trembling* (H. V. Hong & E. H. Hong, Trans.). Princeton University Press.
- [7] Gordon, Noah (2023). Theism and Secular Modality. Dissertation, University of Southern California.
- [8] Otto, R. (1923). *The idea of the holy* (J. W. Harvey, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- [9] Feuerbach, L. (1841). *The essence of Christianity* (G. Eliot, Trans.). John Chapman.
- [10] Burrell, David B. (2008). *Faith and Freedom: An Interfaith Perspective*. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell.