Panmetaphoricism
Daniel Howard-Snyder

Abstract. Panmetaphoricism is the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical. I argue that panmetaphoricism is self-defeating. To avoid this worry, I distinguish a first-order speech about God from second-order speech about God, and I posit two-domain panmetaphoricism, the view that first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical. More worries lead to restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism. Oddly enough, worries about restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism reveal how the two-domain panmetaphoricist can fully recover her unrestricted view. Unfortunately, the rationale for the recovery implies that, at best, two-domain panmetaphoricism implies nontheism and, at worst, the God of two-domain panmetaphoricism is not worthy of our recognition, much less our devotion and love.

When the Presiding Bishop of The Episcopal Church, Katherine Jefferts-Schori, gave the homily at the closing Eucharist of General Convention in 2006, she said, ‘[Paul’s letter to the] Colossians calls Jesus the firstborn of all creation, the firstborn from the dead. That sweaty, bloody, tear-stained labor of the cross bears new life. Our mother Jesus gives birth to a new creation—and you and I are His children.’ Jefferts-Schori’s gender-bending reference to ‘mother Jesus’ raised more than just a few eyebrows. When an Australian reporter inquired about it, she said, ‘It’s a metaphor, as all language about God is a metaphor.’

The claim that all of our talk about God is metaphorical is not new. In recent years, we’ve heard it from more than one theologian. For example, here’s Sallie McFague:

Increasingly…, the idea of metaphor as unsubstitutable is winning acceptance: what a metaphor expresses cannot be said directly or apart from it. (McFague (1982), 33)

The basic point of metaphorical assertion is that something is there that we do not know how to talk about and which we have no access to except through metaphors. If then we apply metaphorical thinking to the reality that is the referent of our metaphors, what would, could that mean? I think it means most basically that we say God both ‘is’ and ‘is not’. Metaphorical
theology applied to the ‘being of God’ agrees with the tradition of the via negativa and with the
deconstructionists in stressing the absence of God over our presumptuous insistence in Western
religious thought on the presence of the divine. God is not, not just in the sense of being
unavailable to us or absent from experience but as a basic aspect of the being of God….To affirm
this, however, does not mean that there is not a reality (nor does it mean that there is), though the
presumption of metaphorical discourse…is that these metaphors…are of something, or there
would be no point in arguing for one rather than the other. (McFague (1982), 196, n13)

Models are necessary…but also dangerous, for they exclude other ways of thinking and talking,
and in so doing they can easily become literalized, that is, identified as the one and only one way
of understanding a subject. (McFague (1982), 24)

And here’s Walter Kaufman:

God is ultimately profound Mystery and utterly escapes our every effort to grasp or comprehend
him. Our concepts are at best metaphors and symbols of his being, not literally applicable.
(Kaufman (1975), 95)

Let me be clear from the outset. I have no problem with metaphorical speech about God. Without it,
religious life would be a dry ordeal indeed; without it, many great truths about God and God’s purposes and
activities would not capture the imaginations and guide the lives of the faithful as well as they do. Moreover, I have
no problem referring to Jesus as a mother, as Jefferts-Schori did. Those scarred by relationships with neglectful,
abusive, and violent males may have no alternative to imaging, thinking, and talking about God with feminine
metaphors; arguably, such metaphors are frequently more apt, anyway. Furthermore, if we can trust the Gospel of
Matthew, Jesus encouraged applying feminine metaphors to himself when, lamenting over Jerusalem, he cried: ‘O,
Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you; how often I have longed to gather your
children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.’ (Matthew 23:37 NSRV)
And the Song of Moses famously speaks of God mothering Jacob: ‘He set him atop the heights of the land, and fed
him with produce of the field; he nursed him with honey from the crags, with oil from flinty rock.’ (Deuteronomy 32:13, NSRV) As far as I’m concerned, let a thousand metaphorical flowers bloom, whether they be feminine, masculine, or gendered as you like!

What I do have a problem with, however, is panmetaphoricism, the view that our speech about God can only be metaphorical.³ In what follows, I argue that panmetaphoricism suffers from severe debilities. Before I get down to work, some preliminary remarks are in order.

Preliminaries

First: a word about the literal-metaphorical distinction. The literal-nonliteral distinction marks different ways in which terms (words or phrases) in a language can be used. It falls on the speech side of the language-speech divide. When one uses a term in accordance with one of the standard meanings established within a language or when one uses a term in accordance with an explicitly stipulated meaning, one uses it literally. When one does not use a term in accordance with one of its standard or stipulated meanings, one uses it nonliterally. One way to use a term nonliterally is to use it metaphorically.

Second, panmetaphoricists tend to use the term ‘metaphor’ loosely, not in contrast with simile, parable, symbol, and other forms of figurative speech but rather in contrast with the literal use of language. You might say they use the term ‘metaphor’ metaphorically. When they say that our talk about God can only be metaphorical, they mean to imply that none of our talk about God can be literal. I agree with them: if our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then none of it can be literal. This implication is important to them; it is likewise important to me.

Third, when panmetaphoricists say that we cannot speak literally of God, they do not mean to imply that we cannot form a subject-predicate sentence with ‘God’ as the subject term and make a literal use of the predicate while intending to utter a truth. That’s easy. Rather, what they mean to imply is that no such intention can succeed. No literal use of a predicate in relation to God can successfully result in a true utterance, or, as I will say, no predicate of ours applies literally to God.

Fourth, if a predicate applies to a thing literally, then there is something about it in virtue of which it does so. Since I prefer an ontology according to which there are things and their properties, in what follows I will assume that if a predicate applies to a thing literally, then that predicate signifies or is associated with some property (or
complex of properties), and it is in virtue of that thing having that property (or complex of properties) that the predicate applies to it literally.⁴

Fifth, contemporary panmetaphoricists defend their view in a variety of ways. In this essay, I will mainly have in mind McFague’s contention, as indicated in the quotation above, that if a predicate of ours were to apply literally to God, that would ‘exclude other ways of thinking and talking’ about God, and that’s ‘dangerous’ since we might then be led to suppose that there is just ‘one and only one way of understanding [God].’ But, obviously enough, there are a lot of different ways to understand God. I’ll have more to say about this line of thought later.

**Panmetaphoricism is self-refuting**

Panmetaphoricism possesses an unenviable property: if it is true, then it is false. For if our speech about God can only be metaphorical, then the predicate ‘can be talked about by us only metaphorically’ applies to God literally, in which case it is false that our speech about God can only be metaphorical. Panmetaphoricism is self-refuting.

The strictly consistent panmetaphoricist will deny the premise that her view entails that the predicate ‘can be talked about by us only metaphorically’ applies to God literally. After all, she will insist, since our talk about God can only be metaphorical, then *every* predicate of ours can only apply to God metaphorically, including the predicate ‘can be talked about by us only metaphorically’. What should we make of this strictly consistent panmetaphoricism?

Consider an analogy. Marcus Borg says that God is ineffable, by which he means that none of our concepts apply to God. When we remind him that one of our concepts is the concept of *a concept not applying to something*, he replies: that one doesn’t either.⁵ In Borg’s case, strict consistency results in contradiction. For if none of our concepts apply to God, then at least one of our concepts does not apply to God, in which case our concept of *a concept not applying to something* must apply to God, and so some of our concepts apply to God, contradicting the initial claim that none do. In Borg’s case, self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Something similar holds for the strictly consistent panmetaphoricist. She says that no predicate of ours can apply literally to God. When we remind her of the predicate ‘cannot be talked about literally by us’, she replies, ‘And that one doesn’t either.’ But if that’s the case, there must be something about God in virtue of which no predicate of ours can apply literally to God, not even the predicate ‘cannot be talked about literally by us’. It isn’t just magic, or an inexplicable brute fact. But then we can introduce a new predicate into our lexicon—say, ‘is illiterable’—and we can stipulate that it signifies literally whatever that something is, in which case some predicate
of ours can apply literally to God after all. As with Borg, so with the strictly consistent panmetaphoricist: self-refutation tracks strict consistency.

Of course, the panmetaphoricist might simply deny that there must be something about God in virtue of which no predicate of ours can apply literally to God. When we ask her why no predicate of ours can apply literally to God, she answers: ‘No reason. It’s just an inexplicable brute fact.’

Two thoughts in response. First, no panmetaphoricist I know of takes this line. Rather, the panmetaphoricists I know of appeal to the origin of human language, the nature of our concepts, the transcendence of God, the danger of exclusivity, or something else besides to explain why none of our concepts can apply literally to God. Second, even if no actual panmetaphoricist is a brute panmetaphoricist, the panmetaphoricist could go brute. But doing so comes at a price. For even if we grant that there are some inexplicable brute facts—perhaps the fact that there is something rather than nothing is one of them—the (alleged) fact that none of our concepts can apply literally to God does not seem, on the face of it, to be one of them. That’s because when we countenance the idea that none of our predicates apply literally to God, the most natural question to ask is Why?’, and we naturally expect there to be an answer even if we have a difficult time discerning what it is. Moreover, the only good reason to suppose that a fact is inexplicably brute is when it seems plausible that it is the case and all attempts at explaining why it is the case have failed. Now, I agree with the brute panmetaphoricist that attempts at explaining why none of our concepts can apply literally to God are one and all miserable failures, but I have not the least initial attraction to the suggestion that it is in fact the case that none of our concepts can apply literally to God. You consider the proposition that $2 + 2 = 4$, or that all bachelors are unmarried, or that the conditional corresponding to *modus ponens* is true. At least these have some initial intellectual attraction to them, by my lights. But the proposition that none of our concepts apply literally to God? Does it just seem true, to anyone? Well, perhaps there are some people who, when they bring this proposition before their mind’s eye, think to themselves, ‘There is no explanation at all as to why it is true, but it seems true to me all the same.’ I can only report that I’m not one of them, and neither are the panmetaphoricists that I have met. The upshot is that, by my lights, and those of the panmetaphoricists I know, brute panmetaphoricism has little if anything going for it—even if panmetaphoricism is true. Still, I grant that it is a position in logical space, even if no one has occupied it. In what follows, however, the panmetaphoricist with whom I will engage—our panmetaphoricist, as I will call her—is not a brutist.
Our panmetaphoricist, therefore, has no recourse, it seems to me, but to distinguish two domains of speech about God. In the domain of *first-order speech*, there is only speech *about God*, such as utterances of ‘God is merciful,’ ‘God spoke to Moses,’ and the like, as well as ‘God is our fortress,’ ‘God stands with us in our suffering,’ and their ilk. In the domain of *second-order speech* about God, there is only speech *about our first-order speech about God*, such as utterances of ‘Our speech about God can only be metaphorical,’ ‘None of our speech about God can be literal,’ and so on, as well as equivalent speech, for example utterances of ‘God is such that our speech about God can only be metaphorical’ and ‘God is such that our speech about God cannot be literal.’ I submit that panmetaphoricism is better seen as the view that first-order speech can only apply to God metaphorically, and so no first-order speech can apply to God literally. This leaves it wide open whether second-order speech can apply to God literally. As a consequence, the panmetaphoricist can say that the predicates ‘can only be spoken of metaphorically’ and ‘cannot be spoken of literally’ can both apply to God literally—and so her view can thereby avoid self-refutation.

McFague alludes to another reason to distinguish two domains of speech about God when she sensibly observes in the second quotation above that ‘the presumption of metaphorical discourse…is that these metaphors…are of something’. I think she means to imply that when we speak of God metaphorically, we presume that our utterances are *of something*, something we refer to with the subject term ‘God’. Of course, how we should characterize the referent of that term is up for grabs. Nevertheless, when we take ourselves to speak metaphorically of God, at least we presume that the predicate ‘can be referred to by us with our words’ applies literally to God. The distinction between first- and second-order speech about God allows our panmetaphoricist to endorse McFague’s sensible ‘presumption of metaphorical discourse’ since she can locate utterances of ‘God can be referred to by us with our words’ in the second-order domain of speech about God because it is equivalent to ‘Our words can be used by us to refer to God.’

**Two-domain panmetaphoricism**

To distinguish the initial wholly unrestricted version of panmetaphoricism from our restricted second version, let’s call the latter **two-domain panmetaphoricism**, which we can represent like this:

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Although two-domain panmetaphoricism avoids self-refutation, a serious concern remains. For, according to theism, God exists. However, if our first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical—as our panmetaphoricist insists—then none of it can be used literally. And if none of our first-order speech can be used literally of God, then the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used literally of God. But if the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used literally of God, then there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply literally to God. And, if there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply literally to God, then the statement ‘God exists’ is false. But if the statement ‘God exists’ is false, then the statement ‘God does not exist’ is true. And, if the statement ‘God does not exist’ is true, then God does not exist. Thus, panmetaphoricism entails atheism.

Suppose our panmetaphoricist accepts the implication that, on her view, God does not exist. She might yet argue that theism is compatible with that implication. ‘True enough,’ she might say, ‘God does not exist. But, even so, it does not follow that there is no God. And what is essential to theism is not that God exists but that there is a God.’

How could it be that God does not exist even though there is a God? Here our panmetaphoricist might turn to Alexius Meinong who, among others, thought that statements of the form $x$ does not exist were compatible with statements of the form there is an $x$. That’s because the plenitude of objects includes not only those that exist (the real ones) but those that do not exist (the unreal ones). Our panmetaphoricist might concur and then posit that God is not an existent object but a nonexistent object, that God is not a denizen of reality but unreality, that God is not real but unreal. Perhaps God is an imaginary object like the Fountain of Youth or unicorns; or perhaps God is an impossible object like a squircle or the set of all sets that are not members of themselves; or perhaps God is a fictional object like Harry Potter or Bilbo Baggins. In any case, the predicate ‘exists’ does not apply to God literally and so God does not exist, God is not real; nevertheless, there is a God. And it is this claim that is essential to theism, not the claim that God exists. Theism, therefore, is compatible with panmetaphoricism.

We might well be unimpressed. For starters, we might deny the distinction between objects that exist and objects that do not exist. The only objects that there are are those that exist. Alternatively, we might endorse the
distinction but reject the recommended application to God. For example, we might insist that God is an existent object, unlike the Fountain of Youth, squircles, or Harry Potter.

But a deeper difficulty lies in the neighborhood. According to the reply to the objection, the predicates that signify these ontological categories—for example, ‘is a non-existent object,’ ‘is an imaginary object,’ ‘is an impossible object,’ and the like—apply literally to God, even if God does not exist. In that case, some first-order speech can apply to God literally after all. If our panmetaphoricist replies that her use of these categorial predicates is purely metaphorical, she will fail to explain how it is that even though God does not exist, there is a God. For, on the ontology she invokes for that explanation, if those predicates don’t apply to God literally, God won’t show up anywhere on the ontological map, not as an existent or a non-existent object, not as a denizen of reality or unreality, not as real or unreal—which, on the terms of the ontology she invokes, is incoherent.

Our panmetaphoricist might pursue a different tack altogether. Perhaps she will deny that if the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used of God literally, then God lacks the property of existence. She might insist that, even if ‘exists’ is a grammatical predicate, it is not a real one; there is no property attributable to anything by its literal use since existence is not a property.

By way of reply, it seems to me that reasons to conclude that ‘exists’ is not a real predicate are dubious, and the same goes for reason to conclude that existence is not a property. Since, as a general rule, we should allow grammatical predicates to be real predicates unless we have good reason to think otherwise, we should allow that ‘exists’ is a real predicate and existence a real property. More importantly, however, there is no premise in my argument according to which if the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used of God literally, then God lacks the property of existence. My argument contains the premise that if the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used of God literally, then there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply to God literally, and it contains the premise that, if there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply to God literally, then the statement ‘God exists,’ when used literally, is false. But these premises, and those surrounding them, are compatible with existence not being a property; indeed, they are compatible with there being no properties at all.

So far I have been exploring the consequences of our panmetaphoricist accepting the implication that, on her view, God does not exist. She might resist that implication, however. She might say something like this: ‘At one point in your argument, you said these words: “if there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply literally to God, then the statement ‘God exists’ is false.” While I agree that my view has the consequence
that there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply literally to God, it does not follow that the statement “God exists” is false, full stop, without qualification. All that follows is that the statement “God exists” is false provided that the predicate “exists” in that sentence is used literally. If “exists” in the statement “God exists” is used metaphorically, your premises leave it open whether “God exists” is true. And that’s the way I intend to use “exists” in “God exists”. Thus, by the time we arrive at the very end of your argument, all you’ve really shown is that, on my view, God does not exist, provided that we are speaking literally. That’s hardly surprising, however, since, on my view, first-order speech can apply to God only metaphorically.

What should we make of the suggestion that ‘exists’ can apply to God only metaphorically?

Recall that one of the reasons our panmetaphoricist moved from the wholly unrestricted to the two-domain version of her view was McFague’s ‘presumption of metaphorical discourse’ about God, i.e. that ‘these metaphors…are of something’, something we who participate in that discourse take ourselves to refer to with the subject term ‘God’. But to say that those metaphors are ‘of something’ while at the same time saying that ‘exists’ does not apply literally to what they are of seems to me incoherent. How could David’s utterance, for example, of ‘God is my refuge and strength’ be of something and yet not be of something that, speaking literally, exists? So, if we endorse McFague’s sensible ‘presumption of metaphorical discourse,’ it seems that we cannot say that ‘exists’ can apply to God only metaphorically.

Of course, our panmetaphoricist can dig in her heels. She can simply deny McFague’s presupposition of metaphorical discourse. Alternatively, she can endorse it but insist that metaphorical utterances about God presuppose that they are ‘of something’ only metaphorically speaking. What should we make of these suggestions?

It is difficult to know what to say to our panmetaphoricist if she does either of these things. As for the first, it seems to be a presupposition of any sincere assertion of a simple subject-predicate sentence that the speaker takes it that the subject term refers to something or other, takes it to be ‘of something’. As for the second, suppose David sincerely asserts ‘God is my refuge and strength,’ and that a presupposition of his assertion is that there is something that his assertion is about, something referred to by his use of the term ‘God’. What would it be for the thing that is presupposed by his assertion to be ‘something’ only metaphorically? What sort of thing is it, exactly, that our panmetaphoricist would say David’s assertion presupposes? Presumably the only options are the sorts of things I’ve already mentioned: things like the Fountain of Youth, squircles, Harry Potter, etc., things that, speaking quite literally, don’t exist but rather are, again speaking literally, imaginary objects, impossible objects, fictional objects,
etc. But, as I have said, by the terms of the ontologies that invoke these categories, God would then be, speaking literally, an imaginary object, an impossible object, a fictional object, or what have you.

Our panmetaphoricist might persist: ‘When I say that “exists” in “God exists” can only be used metaphorically, not literally, but that, nevertheless, in saying “God is our refuge and strength,” we presuppose that we are speaking of something, where “something” in that last sentence is also used metaphorically, I do not imply that the referent of the subject term “God” is real or unreal, possible or impossible, fictional or nonfictional, or that it belongs to any other category. Indeed, not only do I not imply that God is any sort of thing, I do not imply that God is something either. Speaking literally, there is no such thing as God. Only when we speak metaphorically can we say something true when we say that God exists or that our discourse about God is of something.’

I have never met a panmetaphoricist, in person or in print, who gives anything like this speech, but if our panmetaphoricist wishes to give it, she has some explaining to do. She must explain what it is about God in virtue of which ‘exists’ and ‘is something’ can only apply metaphorically to God. Toward the end of this essay, I will give on her behalf what I regard as the best explanation of which I am aware. Until then, I bracket this version of panmetaphoricism. For now, I want to explore another option she might take.

Suppose our panmetaphoricist endorses McFague’s ‘presumption of metaphorical discourse’ and grants that metaphors about God are, quite literally, ‘of something,’ and so grants that God exists, speaking literally. Even so, she might adopt a friendly suggestion from John Hick, who observed that ‘classical thinkers who have affirmed the ultimate ineffability of the divine nature,’ ‘need not have worried’ since these points—the points we’ve just been discussing, namely whether ‘exists’ and ‘is something’ apply literally to God, to which we might add ‘is identical with God,’ ‘is such that modus ponens is valid,’ ‘is either pentagonal or nonpentagonal’ and the like—are just ‘logical pedantries’. He continues:

Such points might however usefully have prompted them to distinguish between what we might call substantial predicates, such as “is good”, “is powerful”, “knows”, and purely formal or logically generated predicates such as “is a referent of a term” and “is such that our substantial predicates do not apply”. What they wanted to affirm was that the substantial characterizations do not apply to God in God’s self-existent being, beyond the range of human experience. They often expressed this by saying that we can only make negative statements about the Ultimate….This via
negativa (or via remotionis) consists in applying negative predicates to the Ultimate—the predicate “is not finite”, and so on—as a way of saying that it lies beyond the range of all of our positive substantial characterizations. It is in this qualified sense that it makes perfectly good sense to say that our substantial predicates do not apply to the Ultimate.  

Of course, our panmetaphoricist will want to remind Hick that although our substantial predicates cannot apply to God literally, they can apply metaphorically. With that caveat in place, she can adopt his recommendation as follows: whereas many purely formal and logically generated predicates of first-order speech apply to God literally, and whereas negative substantial predicates do as well, this need not concern us any more than it concerns the friends of ineffability. Yes, formal predicates—all those ‘logical pedantries,’ as Hick calls them—belong to first-order speech about God, as do negative substantial predicates; and, yes, they apply to God literally. And the same goes for ‘exists’ and all the rest. But none of this undermines the main thrust of panmetaphoricism, which is that our positive substantial first-order speech about God can only be metaphorical, that none of it can apply to God literally.

**Restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism**

We began with panmetaphoricism, the view that all of our speech about God can only be metaphorical. Self-refutation and McFague’s ‘presumption of metaphorical discourse’ led us to restrict the view to first-order speech about God. Incompatibility with theism and Hick’s remarks about formal speech and negative substantial predicates have now led us to further restrict the view to positive substantial speech about God. Call the result **restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism**, which we can represent as follows:

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<td>Formal speech about God</td>
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<td>First-order domain</td>
<td>Negative substantial speech about God</td>
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<td>Positive substantial speech about God</td>
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I have several concerns about restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism. Meeting those concerns will, oddly enough, give us reason to lift the restriction of metaphoricity to positive substantial speech. As a result, we’ll have a clearer view of the God of panmetaphoricism.

My initial concern is that some negative predicates can apply to God literally only if certain positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally. Consider the predicate ‘is unlimited’, which our panmetaphoricist, following Hick, says can apply to God literally. This predicate is incomplete: is unlimited with respect to what? Presumably, unlimited with respect to whatever it is that might be limited. And what might that be? Well, properties that come in degrees, such as power, knowledge, and compassion. But there’s the rub. Nothing can be unlimited with respect to power, knowledge, compassion and other degreeed properties unless it has at least some power, knowledge, compassion, and the like, in which case the positive substantial predicates ‘has some power’, ‘knows something’, ‘is compassionate’, etc. apply to it literally. Therefore, if negative substantial predicates such as these can apply to God literally, then many positive substantial predicates can apply to God literally as well.

Our panmetaphoricist might well reply, ‘Not so fast.’ After all, statements such as ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’ are best analyzed impredicatively. That is, the predicative

- ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’

is best analyzed as the impredicative

- ‘It is not the case that God is limited with respect to power.’

And now our panmetaphoricist can explain why the impredicative last statement, spoken literally, is true, while retaining her ban on positive substantial predication of power to God. Here’s how: ‘God is limited with respect to power’, spoken literally, entails ‘God has some power’, spoken literally. But, ‘God has some power’, spoken literally, is false—a consequence of our panmetaphoricist’s ban on positive substantial predication of God. Therefore, ‘God is limited with respect to power’, spoken literally, is false. That is, speaking literally, ‘It is not the case that God is limited with respect to power’ is true. Consequently, ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’, spoken literally, can be true, even though ‘God has some power’, spoken literally, is false.

What should we make of this suggestion? While I grant that some negative predications—e.g. negative existential statements—are best analyzed impredicatively, ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’ is not one of them. That’s because ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’ implies that God exists while ‘It is not the case that
God is limited with respect to power’ does not imply that God exists. Of course, our panmetaphoricist might alter her analysis. She might instead say that the predicative

- ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’

is best analyzed as the conjunction

- ‘God exists and it is not the case that God is limited with respect to power’,

which, obviously enough, implies that God exists. Although this is an improvement, it strikes me as well-nigh obvious that ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’, spoken literally, implies ‘God has some power’, spoken literally, an implication our panmetaphoricist’s analyzans lacks. To suppose ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’ lacks this implication is like supposing that ‘The number one is unlimited with respect to successors’ does not imply ‘The number one has some successors’; it is like supposing that ‘You are unlimited with respect to future times at which you exist’ does not imply ‘You exist at some future times’. Moreover, if we permit our panmetaphoricist’s treatment of ‘God is unlimited with respect to power’, according to which it does not imply ‘God has some power’, then we should do the same for ‘God is unlimited with respect to wickedness’, which would likewise fail to imply ‘God has some wickedness’. But then what’s to keep our panmetaphoricist from affirming, quite literally, that God is unlimited with respect to both power and wickedness? Nothing, so far as I can see. I conclude that my first concern stands.

My second concern is that the reason McFague offered for panmetaphoricism conflicts with our panmetaphoricist’s contention that no positive substantial predicate of ours applies to God literally. If a predicate were to apply to God literally, she said, that would ‘exclude other ways of thinking and talking’ about God, which is ‘dangerous’ because it might lead us to suppose that there is just ‘one and only one way of understanding [God]’. But she herself has not avoided this (alleged) danger. She has excluded applying positive substantial predicates to God literally. Moreover, she insists that the one and only one way of understanding God is that God lacks those properties associated with the literal application of our positive substantial predicates, which excludes every religion according to which we can apply some such predicates to God literally. Furthermore, her reason for thinking that positive substantial predicates don’t apply to God literally applies with equal force to the literal application of negative predicates. If a negative predicate applies to God literally, other ways of thinking and talking about God are excluded, notably, those that involve the literal application of their positive logical complements.
It seems to me that our panmetaphoricist cannot sensibly retain McFague’s rationale for her view. However, she might once again seek succor from Hick to develop a new rationale, one that honors the spirit of McFague’s rationale. Speaking of what he calls ‘the Ultimate’, which is much like our panmetaphoricist’s God, Hick writes:

If we regard the major religious traditions as humanly conditioned responses to such a reality we have a reason to think that these predicates [like “is a creator” and “is a noncreator”] do not apply to it—namely,…that if they did it would have mutually contradictory attributes…. So if, in view of their fruits in human life, you regard Buddhism, advaitic Hinduism, and Taoism, as well as the theistic faiths, as responses to the Ultimate, you must postulate a reality to which these predicative dualisms do not apply, although it is nevertheless humanly thought and experienced by means of them.8

Hick’s line of thought here seems to be this: suppose you want to affirm those traditions whose members experience the Ultimate as personal as well as those whose members experience the Ultimate as nonpersonal. You can’t do so by saying both sorts of experience are veridical. For then the Ultimate ‘would have mutually contradictory attributes’. But neither do you want to say that just one is veridical since you would not be regarding with sufficient equanimity the ‘fruits in human life’ of both. So what to say? Answer: ‘postulate a reality to which these predicative dualisms do not apply’. That is, the Ultimate is neither personal nor nonpersonal, neither a creator nor a noncreator, neither compassionate nor noncompassionate, etc.

Perhaps our panmetaphoricist can say something similar. She wants to affirm those traditions whose members apply ‘is personal’ to God as well as those whose members apply ‘is nonpersonal’. She can’t do so, however, if she says that all such predicates apply to God literally since God would then have contradictory attributes. But neither does she want to say that one predicate applies literally while its logical complement does not. That would involve taking sides with one tradition over another. Moreover, she recognizes that each tradition has a stake in preserving its speech about God because of the moral, social, and spiritual value embedded in the linguistic practices of its adherents. So what to do? Answer: our speech about God can only be metaphorical. Or, more accurately at this point in the dialectic: we can postulate that each predicate of a staked-out predicative dualism
applies to God only metaphorically, where a *predicative dualism* is an instance of the schema ‘is F or nonF’ and a predicative dualism is *staked out* if and only if different religious traditions have a stake in applying *each* of its constituent predicates to God; otherwise, a staked-out predicative dualism applies literally to God.

To sum up: restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism allowed some negative substantial predicates to apply literally to God that, on further reflection, must apply only metaphorically; specifically, (i) those negative substantial predicates whose literal application implies the literal application of positive substantial predicates and (ii) those negative substantial predicates that partly constitute a staked-out predicative dualism. Moreover, restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism allowed some formal predicates to apply literally to God that, on further reflection, must apply only metaphorically—namely staked-out predicative dualisms. Consequently, the restriction of metaphoricity to positive substantial speech about God must be lifted. Furthermore, unlike McFague’s rationale for panmetaphoricism, the Hickian rationale on offer does not conflict with the position for which it is offered. Finally, I recover some of the ‘pan’ in panmetaphoricism that restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism gave up. This is good news for our panmetaphoricist.

I now want to argue that she should recover even more of the ‘pan’ in panmetaphoricism. To see why, note that the recovery project as it stands still allows some predicative dualisms to apply to God literally, namely those not all of whose constituent predicates are staked-out by some religious tradition. For example, since no tradition has a stake in thinking of God as a platypus, it allows the negative substantial predicate ‘is a nonplatypus’ to apply literally to God, and consequently it allows the staked-out predicative dualism ‘is either a platypus or a nonplatypus’ to apply literally as well. Here a difficulty begins to emerge.

For given what some traditions have actually deemed special foci of God’s relation to the natural order, it is not all that far-fetched to consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved in such a way that some culture had a stake in thinking of God as specially related to platypi—say, by becoming one of them—and so had a stake in applying ‘is a platypus’ to God. Or consider what would have been the case if our species had evolved in such a way that no religious tradition had a stake in thinking of God as personal and so had no stake in applying ‘is personal’ to God. In the first case, restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism implies that ‘is a nonplatypus’ would not have applied literally to God; God would not have had the property of being a nonplatypus, although he actually does have it. In the second case, it implies that ‘is nonpersonal’ would have applied literally to God; God would have had the property of being nonpersonal, although he actually does not have it. But surely we can’t be expected
to concede that simply by virtue of the historic accident of ‘is a platypus’ not being staked-out, ‘is a nonplatypus’ applies literally to God; surely we can’t be expected to concede that simply by virtue of the historic accident of ‘is personal’ being staked-out, ‘is nonpersonal’ does not apply literally to God.

Think of it this way. On restricted two-domain panmetaphoricism, sometimes there’s a third option to God’s being F or non-F, namely in those cases where, due to historical contingencies, different religious communities have a stake in whether each constituent of the predicate ‘is either F or non-F’ applies to God. But whether or not there’s a third option has to do with God, surely, and not the chanciness of terrestrial evolution in general or human biological or cultural evolution in particular. In that case, the sensible thing for the panmetaphoricist to say seems to be that none of our substantive predicates apply to God literally, whether positive or negative, in which case no substantive predicative dualism applies to God literally—full stop. Of course, she might yet say that some of our first-order formal speech can apply literally to God. For example, she can still say that God is identical with God, that God exists, that God is such that modus-ponens is valid, that God is something, and so forth—all literally. But other than that, first-order speech about God is metaphorical across the board.

**Partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism**

If I’m right, then the two-domain panmetaphoricist should not restrict metaphoricity to positive substantial speech about God. Call the resulting view *partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism*, which we can represent like this:

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<td>First-order domain</td>
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<td>Positive substantial speech about God</td>
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At this point, we might well wonder whether the recovery will put the panmetaphoricist back on the sickbed. For how could God fail to fall into one of the mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive classes expressed
by a predicative dualism? After all, everything is either a platypus or a nonplatypus. Everything is either personal or nonpersonal. How could it be otherwise? These are important questions, one our panmetaphoricist must answer if we are to accept her view. So, then, how can it be that God is neither a platypus nor a nonplatypus, neither personal nor nonpersonal, and so on? How could there be a third option?

The most plausible answer to this question that I can think of can be illustrated with a homely example. Consider the predicate ‘is bald’. Now imagine a man who is a borderline case of baldness, a man who is such that no amount of empirical research or conceptual analysis can decide the question of whether the quantity and distribution of his hair renders him bald. In such a case, some philosophers—in particular those who characterize vagueness as metaphysical rather than epistemic or linguistic—will say that there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether he has the property of being bald. Or, to express the view without talk of properties, these philosophers will say that there is no determinate fact of the matter in virtue of which the predicate ‘is bald’ applies literally to him. Thus, the proposition that he is bald is neither true nor false. Likewise, the proposition that he is either bald or nonbald is neither true nor false. In our panmetaphoricist’s vocabulary, the predicative dualism ‘is either bald or nonbald’ does not apply literally to him. Why? Because there is no determinate fact of the matter about him such that in virtue of that fact ‘is bald’ or ‘is nonbald’ applies literally to him. And the same goes for most other positive and negative substantial predicates in a natural language. We can imagine borderline cases of their application and get similar results.

Here our panmetaphoricist might well take note. For what these philosophers say about our borderline case of a bald man and the predicate ‘is bald,’ she can say about God and every substantial predicate of ours. For every substantial predicate ‘is F’ of ours, there is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God has the property of being F. Or to express the view without reference to properties, for any substantial predicate ‘F’ of ours, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact ‘is F’ applies literally to God. Thus, for any proposition of the form God is F, it is neither true nor false that God is F, where ‘is F’ is a substantial predicate. Likewise, for any proposition of the form God is either F or nonF, it is neither true nor false that God is either F or nonF, where ‘is F’ is a substantial positive predicate and ‘is nonF’ is a substantial negative predicate. Thus, for example, the predicative dualism ‘is either personal or nonpersonal’ does not apply literally to God since there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact ‘is personal’ or ‘is nonpersonal’ applies literally to God. At best, we can apply substantial positive and negative predicates to God only metaphorically.
This way of understanding panmetaphoricism strikes me as a significant advance since it nicely explains what is otherwise left unexplained, namely why our substantial predicates cannot apply to God literally, whether positive or negative. There simply is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which our substantial predicates could apply to God. When it comes to substantial predication, we are left with metaphor alone, which is exactly what our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist wants to say.

Might the two-domain panmetaphoricist fully recover her position? Might she extend what I have suggested that she say about substantive predication to formal speech about God? Maybe. At any rate, philosophers who say vagueness is metaphysical also say that identity and existence are vague. Suppose they’re right. Then our two-domain panmetaphoricist might insist that the same goes for God. There is no determinate fact of the matter about whether God has the property of existence or self-identity. Or, to express the view without reference to properties, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact ‘exists’ and ‘is self-identical’ apply literally to God. Thus, the propositions that \textit{God exists} and \textit{God is self-identical} are neither true nor false. Likewise, the predicative dualisms ‘is either existent or nonexistent’ and ‘is either self-identical or non-self-identical’ do not apply literally to God since there is no determinate fact of the matter about God such that in virtue of that fact ‘is existent’ or ‘is nonexistent’ and ‘is self-identical’ or ‘is non-self-identical’ can apply literally to God. At best, we can only apply predicates of existence and identity to God metaphorically. We might well suspect that, if there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which predicates of existence and identity can apply literally to God, then there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which \textit{any} formal predicate can apply literally to God. There just isn’t enough determinately there, so to speak, for them to latch onto. If our suspicions are correct, then our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist will have made a full recovery: our first-order speech about God, whether substantial or merely formal, can only be metaphorical.

(Earlier, I bracketed a version of panmetaphoricism according to which, speaking literally, God is not only not any sort of thing, God is nothing at all; and I said that I would later explain how that might be. The explanation is the one I just gave. Since there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which ‘exists’ or ‘is something’ can literally apply to God, God is nothing at all.)

But won’t our fully recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist still be subject to our earlier objection, according to which, if the predicate ‘exists’ cannot be used of God literally, then there is nothing about God in virtue
of which the predicate ‘exists’ can apply to God literally, in which case the statement ‘God exists’ is false—which is to say that God does not exist? And so won’t we have to conclude that her view entails atheism?

In short, the answer is ‘No’. For on the view of our fully recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist, the inference from ‘there is nothing about God in virtue of which the predicate “exists” can apply to God literally’ to ‘the statement “God exists” is false’ is invalid. That’s because, on her view, although there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which ‘exists’ can apply to God literally, and although, as a consequence, the statement ‘God exists’ is not true, it is also the case that there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which the statement ‘God exists’ is false, and so it does not follow that God does not exist. Our fully-recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist is not an atheist.

Let’s return to partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism. I have two concerns about it.

My first concern is that since, according to partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism, none of our substantial predicates can apply literally to God, it follows that no substantial predicate of ours applies to God more aptly than any other. You say God is compassionate and a nonplatypus; I say God is a platypus and noncompassionate. According to our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricist, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God that could settle the question of whose substantial predicates more aptly apply, yours or mine.

She might well reply: ‘Although no substantial predicate of ours can apply literally to God more aptly than any other, it does not follow that no substantial predicate of ours can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than any other. The latter possibility remains.’

But does it? Is it really possible for one substantial predicate to apply metaphorically to God more aptly than another if there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which one substantial predicate can apply literally to God more aptly than another? I think not. For a predicate can apply metaphorically to something more aptly than another only if there is a determinate fact of the matter about it in virtue of which it does so. That’s why ‘is divided by an iron curtain’ applied metaphorically to the political and social conditions of post-WWII Europe more aptly than did ‘is divided by an open window’. Absent any such explanation, there is no basis for supposing that one metaphor more aptly applies to something than another. Likewise, ‘is compassionate’ can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than ‘is a platypus’ only if there is a determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which it does so. There is no such fact, however, according to the view we are considering. Of course, the point here applies to any substantial speech about God. Thus, our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism
frustrates any expectation we might have otherwise had of God being more aptly metaphorically described one way rather than another.

So it seems that partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism implies that no substantial predicate of ours can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than any other. Three things follow. (i) We can’t use any of our substantial predicates metaphorically to express a truth about God. That’s because we can express a truth about God by applying substantial predicates metaphorically to God only if some of them apply more aptly to God than others. (ii) We can’t use substantial predicates metaphorically to reason about God. That’s because we can use substantial predicates metaphorically to reason about God only if some of them can be used to express truths about God, but we can’t use any of our substantial predicates metaphorically to express a truth about God. (iii) We can’t use substantial predicates metaphorically to express what is good about God, and so we can’t use them to express metaphorically what is desirable about being related in any way to God. Thus, we have no basis for any hope that we might find fulfillment either by being in relation to God or by participating in a form of life centered on God. To sum up metaphorically: panmetaphoricism entails acute religious anemia—or worse.

My second concern about our partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism is that, since, on that view, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which ‘is personal’ can apply literally to God, and since, on that view, there is no determinate fact of the matter about God in virtue of which ‘is personal’ can apply metaphorically to God more aptly than ‘is nonpersonal’, it follows that the statement ‘God is personal’ is not true. However, if the statement ‘God is personal’ is not true, then God is not personal. But if God is not personal, then theism is false since a minimal necessary condition on the truth of theism is that God is personal. Thus, partly recovered two-domain panmetaphoricism entails atheism.

Of course, as we’ve seen, there is a case to be made for our two-domain panmetaphoricist to move to the fully recovered version of her position and, if she does, we won’t be able to infer that her view implies atheism. But we will still be able to infer that since her view implies that it is not the case that God is personal, her view implies what we might call nontheism. And nontheism is every bit as incompatible with theism as atheism.

It goes without saying that, according to theism, there are some respects in which God is unlike everything else. And, it goes without saying that, according to theism, God, in God’s entirety, so to speak, is beyond our comprehension, our conceptual and linguistic nets. Panmetaphoricism goes way beyond these platitudes, however. For to say with Bishop Jefferts-Schori and others that ‘all language about God is a metaphor’ is to say something
that implies atheism or nontheism, neither of which is compatible with theism; moreover, the God of panmetaphoricism is a not a God worthy of our recognition, much less our love and devotion.\textsuperscript{11}

\section*{References}


\hspace{1cm} (1995) \textit{The Rainbow of Faiths} (London: SCM).


\textsuperscript{1} \url{http://www.episcopalchurch.org/3577_76300_ENG_HTM.htm}.

\textsuperscript{2} \url{http://www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/2006/1696173.htm}.

\textsuperscript{3} The term ‘panmetaphoricism’ is William Alston’s. See Alston 1989, chs 1 and 2. See also van Woudenberg (1998) for critical discussion of the view.

\textsuperscript{4} I borrow the above four points from Alston 1989, chs 1 and 2.

\textsuperscript{5} The ineffable is beyond all our concepts, even this one.’ (Borg (1997), 48-49)

\textsuperscript{6} See Plantinga (1967), ch 2.

\textsuperscript{7} Hick (1989), 239. Actually, Hick speaks of formal and negative ‘concepts’ and ‘properties,’ but what he says about them is true only if it is also true of predicates. Hence, in order to accommodate the present terms of the discussion, I have slightly modified Hick’s words in my quotation. Note also that the two predicates Hick uses to illustrate what
he means by ‘purely formal or logically generated’ predicates belong to the domain of second-order speech. Two-domain panmetaphoricism already allows their literal application to God. On the assumption that Hick did not intend to restrict the class of purely formal or logically generated predicates to second-order speech about God, the purely formal and logically generated predicates indicated in the previous paragraph will count as such. I am encouraged in that assumption since, as we just saw in the quotations in the text, Hick allows that the predicates ‘has a nature’ and ‘is self-existent’ apply literally to God.

8 Hick (1995), 64. As I indicated in note 7, I have substituted talk of predicates for Hick’s talk of concepts and properties. Note also that what Hick says about negative predicates here is incompatible with what he said about them in Hick (1989), quoted above.


10 For discussion, see Howard-Snyder (1991) and van Inwagen (1996).

11 Acknowledgements…..