

APO(CATA)PHATIC INTERPLAY

**AN ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF APOPHATIC
THEOLOGY AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN
APOPHATIC AND CATAPHATIC THEOLOGIES
IN PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS' *MYSTICAL THEOLOGY***

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**CH235: THE SPIRITUALITY AND THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF THE DIONYSIAN FORGERY
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I. INTRODUCTION

You are one.
You are everything.
You are no one.
You are not one.
You are not everything.
O, You who bear all names,
what shall I call You?
You Unique Unnameable,
You Surpassor of All.¹
-Gregory of Nazianzus-

Theologians throughout time have struggled with how to use a limited human-constructed language to describe the Creator of the Universe. Augustine wrote hundreds of theological works, Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologiae*, John Calvin wrote the *Institutes* and Barth wrote thirteen volumes of *Church Dogmatics*. Theologians have never been at a loss for words, but there are many who question the efficacy and ability of language to communicate truth about a God who is known as the Transcendent and Powerful Creator God. For hundreds of years, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite² was thought to be the forerunner of a new way of thinking about the way theologians and philosophers talk about God: the use of the apophatic or negative move in theology. While the Dionysian apophatic is seen in many places throughout his corpus, it is found most clearly in *The Mystical Theology*.

Apophaticism is a way in which one works within the confines of language to describe God; however, at some point, the effectiveness of language begins to break down, and one must step outside of language and learned knowledge to come into the presence of God. Paul Rorem writes the following of Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*: "The fundamental goal of the Dionysian journey and the Dionysian corpus is clearly and repeatedly stated in this first chapter of *The*

¹ Quoted in Bert Blans, "Cloud of Unknowing: An Orientation in Negative Theology from Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, and John of the Cross to Modernity," in *Flight of the Gods*, eds. Ilse Nina Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 65.

² While the author of this paper knows that scholarship has proven that the Dionysius from Acts 17.34 is not the real author of the corpus, for the remainder of this paper, the author will refer to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite simply as *Dionysius*.

Mystical Theology: to pass beyond sense perception and contemplative conceptions in order to be united with God beyond all knowledge.”³

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the role of the apophatic and its relationship with cataphatic theology in Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*. I will assume my audience has some basic knowledge of Pseudo-Dionysius and Neoplatonist thought. First, I will briefly overview some characteristics of both cataphatic and apophatic theologies. Second, I will look at the interplay between the apophatic and cataphatic and analyze various aspects of the relationship between the two theologies. Third, I will look at Janet Williams’ argument for why there is a difference between apopharesis and apophasis, and what that difference means for a comprehensive understanding of the Dionysian apophatic. Finally, I will look at various texts from *The Mystical Theology* and investigate Dionysius’ use of the apophatic and cataphatic.

II. AN INTRODUCTION TO CATAPHATIC THEOLOGY

Cataphatic theology is probably the most common form of “God-talk.” Theologians and philosophers are trained in ways to speak about God; metaphors and analogies are used to communicate various aspects about God’s nature, will, being, purposes, form and desires. Some find some analogies more helpful than others, and the theological journey is an exciting one filled with opportunities to learn how one experiences God best. The cataphatic move is a move of affirmations and assertions. Denys Turner writes the following about cataphatic theology: “It is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God.”⁴ One can make these statements and assertions primarily because of God’s role as Creator of the Universe. Because humans are capable of perceiving created and perceptible

³ Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192.

⁴ Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 20.

things, they can therefore make limited assertions about the Creator of those things. These assertions lay the foundation for a cataphatic theological framework.

One thing to consider during discussion on the cataphatic theology is the Neoplatonist understanding of knowledge. Dionysius, who would be considered a Neoplatonist for a variety of reasons, viewed knowledge as a “turning toward.”⁵ Cataphatic knowledge is thus viewed not as the ability to learn some fact or theory, or as the ability to state facts about God; rather, it is the process of using these statements as tools for turning towards and aligning oneself with the One. “This means that knowledge is not merely ‘learning something about something,’ but is a way of becoming one with the object of our orientation so that we may know it better.”⁶ Being able to make statements and affirmations about the character of God through cataphatic theology does not mean those statements become end-all truth statements. However, the cataphatic element of theology will help direct one to (re)turn toward their Creator, from which all things initially proceeded.⁷

There are three main purposes of the cataphatic move in theology. First, it gives humanity a starting point. It is a basic desire of humanity to attempt to express their emotions, feelings, questions and doubts about their Creator, and that process begins with the language of their culture. Language, being a product of fallible creatures, will not take one to the Creator, but it will help to provide a necessary starting point for theology. Second, the cataphatic affirmations begin the dialectical process of understanding, and can’t be separated from the apophatic, or negative, theology: “A theology of negation, which denies that certain things can be predicated of God, rests on a theology of affirmation, which on a more basic plane affirms certain realities

⁵ Blans, 62.

⁶ Blans, 62.

⁷ Dionysius’ use of the Neoplatonist idea of *procession and return* is clearly seen in much of his philosophy. Blans writes: “All beings *proceeded* from the One or the Good, and return to it in a ‘reversal’ or *turning toward*” (62, *emphasis added*).

of God.”⁸ Finally, cataphatic theology, taken to its limits, will allow those who engage in its use to eventually fully experience the collapse of language. Using the cataphatic as the only tool for critical theological reflection on the nature of God is not what Dionysius is asking of his readers. Dionysius’ hope is that if readers critically begin to positively speak about God, using affirmations and assertions, at some point they will see their conjectures for what they are: simple conjectures made of an invisible God. “According to Dionysius, real speaking about God is a speaking that strikes human language dumb: that before which every imagery is powerless.”⁹ At this point, it seems as though the cataphatic assertions simply serve the apophatic: they are a starting point, they will get denied – they are subservient to the apophatic negations. However, Dionysius obviously believed cataphatic assertions were an important aspect to his theological journey: “Denys [Dionysius] lists fifty-two names for which he can find direct scriptural source and a further set of seventeen names descriptive of properties: a list which in its variety and imaginativeness incidentally reveals the contemporary diet of theological metaphor to be very thin gruel indeed.”¹⁰ As one examines the interplay between the two different theologies, one will begin to understand the complexity of their relationship.

III. AN INTRODUCTION TO APOPHATIC THEOLOGY

*For this I pray; and, Timothy...my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is.*¹¹

Dionysius begins *The Mystical Theology* first with an apophatic prayer, followed by an exhortation to Timothy to leave everything, strive upward and shed everything “by an undivided

⁸ James W. Douglass, “The Negative Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite,” *Downside Review* 81 (1963): 116.

⁹ Blans, 60.

¹⁰ Turner, 23.

¹¹ Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Mystical Theology* (hereafter “MT”), MT 1(997B); Luibheid ed., p. 135.

and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything.”¹² Rorem, in his essay “Empathy and Evaluation in Medieval Church History and Pastoral Ministry: A Lutheran Reading of Pseudo-Dionysius”, discusses four modes or varieties of the apophatic within Christianity’s rich theological tradition. Gregory of Nyssa speaks of the apophatic as *epektēsis*;¹³ life is an endless search for God, seeking out into the dusk, but the dusk never overtakes the seeker. Maximus the Confessor takes a Christological turn with the apophatic. While he acknowledges the utter transcendence of an unknowable God, the result does not lead to endless seeking, or a plunge into an epistemological darkness. Rather, Maximus looks to Christ, who is the God made known. Rorem clearly believes this is the most appropriate use of the apophatic: “This clear linkage of the apophatic and the incarnation is missing in the Dionysian corpus, which moves directly and wrongly from negations in general to silent union with the infinite God.”¹⁴ A third use of the apophatic is the postmodern, or deconstructive, use. Postmodern philosophers such as Derrida take negative theology and the apophatic move as a way of completely destabilizing all language, which in turn leads one into a nihilistic framework, away from being able to understand anything about God. “This modern, or postmodern, isolation of the apophatic insight from its larger context is not at all Dionysian, and should not be charged or credited to the Areopagite’s account. It results in a nihilistic relativism without substantial precedent in all of Christian theology.”¹⁵ All of these are quite different nuances of the apophatic move in theology than Dionysius takes, the postmodern one being the furthest removed. Dionysius seeks to

¹² MT I (1000A), p. 135.

¹³ *Epektēsis* is Greek for *perpetual (endless) seeking*.

¹⁴ Paul Rorem, *Empathy and Evaluation in Medieval Church History and Pastoral Ministry: A Lutheran Reading of Pseudo-Dionysius*, *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 19 (1998): 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111-113.

understand the apophatic in such a way that it leads one to complete surrender: plunging into the darkness of the Unknowability of God. It is here that one experiences true union with God.¹⁶

Apophatic statements of negation and denial are at the core of *The Mystical Theology*. At the basic level, apophaticism says one can't fully express any concept or perception of God through language, be that metaphorical images, allusions or affirmations. Apophatic theology enables one to deny and negate any cataphatic affirmations, because they make use of a limited tool for expressing the inexpressible: language. Because language, a created mode of communication, is limited, thus the assertions and beliefs we come to through its use will also be limited. It is important to acknowledge the limits of language, because that is one of the predominant focuses of the apophatic: to break free from the confines and boundaries set by the human construct of language. While both cataphatic and apophatic theologies rely on the use of letters and words, the ultimate goal of the apophatic move in theology is to move beyond language to mystical experience: the ecstatic union with the Divine.

To get to this ultimate stage of union, Dionysius implores the reader that it is necessary to move beyond both the cataphatic *and* apophatic theologies. Dionysius ends *The Mystical Theology* with these lines: "It is beyond assertion and denial...for it is both beyond every assertion..and...beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial."¹⁷ There are different views concerning this final, ultimate negation,¹⁸ but Denys Turner views this second negation as a total breakdown of the ability of language to communicate: "[f]or the negation of the negation is not a *third* utterance...it is rather the collapse of our affirmation and denials about disorder,

¹⁶ Information concerning Rorem's four apophatic categories also compiled from class lecture notes.

¹⁷ MT V (1048B), p. 141.

¹⁸ For more information concerning the views concerning the possible differentiation between *aphairesis* and *apophasis*, see Section V of this paper.

which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered language, like the babble of a Jeremiah.”¹⁹

Finally, it must be understood that the relationship and interplay between both the cataphatic and apophatic theologies, especially in *The Mystical Theology*, is a very difficult relationship to fully understand. Some view both cataphatic and apophatic as equal in importance, not as two separate and distinct positions which are in competition with one another: “[c]onsequently, we completely misunderstand the character of negative (mystical) theology if we regard it as a knowledge which is competitive with affirmative theology, or as if it were something which takes up a standpoint opposed to that of affirmative theology and, in particular, metaphysics.”²⁰ However, there are others who see the apophatic as having a higher role to play in the relationship. Janet Williams, a lecturer in Religious Studies at King Alfred’s University College in Winchester, is a patristics scholar and recently wrote *Denying Divinity*, in which she analyzes the existence of apophasis in both the Patristic Christian and Soto Zen Buddhist traditions. Williams wrote the following about the hierarchical positioning of the apophatic:

And so there appears to be a second reason why negation, despite its dialectical equivalence to affirmation, assumes priority: it is negation which, when taken far enough, reminds us of the inadequacy not only of each particular image of the divine, but of them all collectively. Where affirmation runs the risk of entangling the divine in conceptualities, negation teaches us that it is transcendent.²¹

For Williams, the apophatic’s careful attention to the transcendent nature of the Divine is reason enough for her to give it priority, even though Williams admits in some aspect it is still equivalent. In order to get a deeper understanding of the interrelationship of these theologies, let us now look at the interplay between them.

¹⁹ Turner, 22.

²⁰ John D. Jones, “The Character of the Negative (Mystical) Theology for Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite,” in *Ethical Wisdom: East and/or West*, ed. George F. McLean (Washington, D.C.: The American Catholic Philosophical Association, 1977), 71.

²¹ Janet Williams, “The Apophatic Theology of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite,” *Downside Review* 117 (July 1999): 159.

IV. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN THE APOPHATIC AND THE CATAPHATIC

in-ter-play (n): the way in which two or more things repeatedly act on and react to each other...²²

After reading key Dionysian texts from the corpus, specifically his *Mystical Theology*, it is easy to assume Dionysius favors the apophatic above the cataphatic. At first, it is not exactly clear what role the cataphatic theology plays in the corpus. It appears as though its role is simply a subservient one to the apophatic. Many Dionysian scholars argue that the apophatic and cataphatic are both equally important, while others seem to say while they are similar, the apophatic clear holds a position of priority importance within the corpus.

The most common observation about the relationship between the cataphatic and apophatic theologies is that it is a dialectical relationship. “Dionysius’ version of Christian speech, therefore, is dialectical: first we ascribe to the divine as Creator all the attributes made manifest in Creation, and then we deny that these attributes describe the Creator who transcends the Creation.”²³ In the dialectical process, they both serve an equal and equivalent purpose, however they approach the problem of “How one talks about God” from different viewpoints and epistemological foundations. It is necessary to start the dialectical process with a theological affirmation, because then one has something to work with, examine and analyze. However, the assertion must be made with a prior acknowledgment that it will not be “high” enough to actually describe anything about God, whether it is a conceptual statement or an allusion to a perceptible image. At times, there is an understandable desire with cataphatic theology to believe one is actually able to express something that is ultimately true about God: “[i]n a pious vocabulary of unshocking, ‘appropriate’ names, lies the danger of the theologian’s being all the more tempted to suppose that our language about God has succeeded in capturing the divine reality in some

²² Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

²³ Williams, 158.

ultimately adequate way.”²⁴ To be sure this theological deception never takes over, the apophatic keeps the cataphatic theologian in check. Thus, both are necessary for this dialectical process and play an equally important role in the dialectical:

...[A]ffirmation and negation are two sides of the same coin, two facets of the same statement. In both treatises, the interpretive theological method is a process of affirmation *and* negation, which are separated only for emphasis and for pedagogical clarity. They are considered separately, with different starting points, for a consistent and anagogical reason: it is easier for our limited interpretive capacities if we start with affirmations with what is closest to the truth and then proceed to affirm what may also be true in the lowly images.²⁵

However, there are some who believe that while both elements are present, it is clearly the apophatic, negative theology of Dionysius that plays a larger and more important role within the corpus: “The negations of *The Mystical Theology* do not counterbalance affirmations in an analogical knowledge of God. Affirmative statements are almost absent from the work. The negations exist by themselves, rung upon rung in a ladder rising farther and farther above the realm of affirmative theology.”²⁶ It seems as though this is the case; while the existence of the cataphatic theology is necessary for the apophatic, Dionysius does focus more on the importance of the apophatic in his *Mystical Theology*.

This is seen clearly in Dionysius’ use of the Neoplatonist idea of procession and return.²⁷ Cataphatic theological statements are associated with the downward movement, the procession; apophatic statements are associated with the return to the Deity. “When we made assertions we began with the first things, moved down through intermediate terms until we reached the last things. But now as we climb from the last things up to the most primary we deny all things...”²⁸

²⁴ Turner, 24.

²⁵ Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 202.

²⁶ Douglass, 119.

²⁷ The Neoplatonist concept of *procession and return* is a difficult one to fully be able to comprehend. Following are two good resources for explaining this concept, and in particular, understanding its role within the Dionysian corpus: Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 200-204 and Luibheid, Colm (trans.) *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, note 17 on page 140 (note by Rorem).

²⁸ MT II (1025B), p. 138.

Clearly, the movement upward, the “turning toward” and return to the Deity, is the goal of Dionysian spirituality. Dionysius associates his negative theology, not the cataphatic, with the return to God. This is a good reason to believe Dionysius himself held the apophatic higher on a theological hierarchy than the cataphatic.

Whatever decision one comes to about which theological moves holds priority, it is important to note both the apophatic and cataphatic theology need each other. “Now any genuine and serious negative theology presupposes a kataphatic or positive theology, and continually needs one to wrestle with and struggle to transcend. Both the apophatic and the kataphatic ways must be continually present to the mind of the apophatic theologian, and there will be a certain tension and a certain oscillation between them.”²⁹ It is a natural inclination for the Christian to attempt to try to describe the relationship between Divinity and humanity, and in doing so, use words and languages to make statements about what God is like; there is no inherent harm in this. However, in order to keep the transcendence of God in the forefront of any theological framework, it is necessary that as soon as one makes positive, cataphatic statements about God, one realizes their words are limited. The apophatic move is thus necessary to allow God to remain transcendent and not within the grasp of would-be-theologians. Hence, in order to allow humanity to speak about God, and in order for Divinity to remain transcendent, both the cataphatic and apophatic are necessary. They need each other to help keep a well-balanced theology in perspective.

However, in the end, it appears neither the apophatic or kataphatic is sufficient to bring one into the ecstatic union that is the goal of Dionysian spirituality. “[T]he more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent

²⁹ A.H. Armstrong, “Apophatic-Kataphatic Tensions in Religious Thought from the Third to the Sixth Century A.D.: A Background for Augustine and Eriugena,” in *From Augustine to Eriugena: Essays on Neoplatonism and Christianity in Honor of John O’Meara*, eds. F.X. Martin, O.S.A. and J.A. Richmond (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 13.

completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.”³⁰ As one continues to return to God and climb up the ladder of negations, language begins to falter and be unable to lead one to union with God. Williams speaks of the silence one encounters when one finally reaches the point of the collapse of language: “it seems that they are equally inadequate to bring the soul to the final stage of its quest. All kinds of language pass away and the divine heights are silent.”³¹ If neither cataphatic or apophatic theology will bring humanity to the divine union, what will serve as the ultimate way to the Indescribable God? Some Dionysian scholars, Williams being one, argue there is another level of Dionysian negation; it is to this discussion we turn now.

V. A THIRD STAGE: ANOTHER POSSIBLE LEVEL OF NEGATION

What has actually to be said about the Cause of everything is this. Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it (kataphaskein) all the affirmations (theseis) we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate (apophaskein) all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations (apophaseis) are simply the opposites of the affirmations (kataphaseis), but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations (stereseis), beyond every denial (aphairesis), beyond every assertion (thesis).³²

This is one of the key texts in *The Mystical Theology* and an important text for the question of this additional level of negation. Williams believes herein lies a translation issue that has caused a significant error in Dionysian study and interpretation. Williams writes: “Thus the confusions of our English-language account, above, are utterly resolved: the ‘apophatic way’ is not simply the same as the way of negation, but refers specifically to the last part of it. The bipartite dialectic of perceptible and conceptual imagery is the realm of aphaeretic or abstractive negation; the negation of the dialectic itself is apophasis.”³³ In order to enter into the silence of ecstatic union, in order to come close to experiencing the goal of Dionysian mystical spirituality,

³⁰ MT III (1033C), p.139.

³¹ Williams, 160.

³² MT I (1000B), p.136 with Greek translations provided by Williams, 168.

³³ Williams, 168.

Williams believes the negation needs to be taken a final step. There needs to be a third step in the process, and that step needs to be the ultimate negation of the entire dialectical process; this is what she believes is the true *apophasis*. Williams is not the only scholar who believes these two processes – the dialectic and the ultimate negation of apophasis – need to be differentiated more strongly: “In considering the *via negativa* it is important to distinguish between the apophatic method of intellectual approach to God...and the experience of supreme transcendence...which impels to and is undergone in the search for..., the Divine mystery beyond speech or thought.”³⁴ There are texts within the corpus, specifically *The Mystical Theology* that lead one to believe there is something *beyond* this process, or at least a third step *within* the process that needs to be taken into account. One of the other key texts used in this discussion of *aphairesis* and *apophasis* is found below:

For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent. One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings. We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of *clearing aside* they show up the beauty which is hidden.³⁵

In this chapter, Dionysius uses a term that, while Rorem equates with the English “denial,”³⁶ Williams believes should in fact be differentiated to be something deeper, a deeper type of denial. “The word used twice in this passage to describe this negation which sweeps aside the images affirmed of God, is ‘*aphairesis*’, technically ‘taking away’ or ‘removal’...So it is the negation of *aphairesis* which is equal-but-opposite to the theological affirmation, and which bears the soteriological priority over affirmation...”³⁷ But simply denying the affirmations is not the goal of this process, so there must be something that goes beyond the dialectic. Both Rorem and Williams see the presence of a type of dialectical process that is key to the interplay between

³⁴ Armstrong, 12.

³⁵ MT II (1025AB), p. 138.

³⁶ Luiheid, note 11 on page 138.

³⁷ Williams, 167.

the apophatic and cataphatic theologies in the corpus. However, it is Williams who believes there is another level to the negation-process, and that lies within the *apophasis* of total negation.

While Williams calls Rorem's view "confused,"³⁸ it seems there are quite a few instances where Rorem at least implies he too believes there is something necessary beyond the process of the dialectic. Here are some quotes to support that claim:

The final goal of this journey is beyond even negations, in perceptible and conceptual silence and union with the indescribable One...³⁹

There is no speech or name or concept that fully and accurately expresses God. But negations are not the end. There is more, and there is nothing more...⁴⁰

Negation is negated, and the human mind, befuddled [disquieted], falls silent.⁴¹

Thus, 'as we climb higher,' Chapter 5 of *The Mystical Theology* denies and moves beyond all our concepts or 'conceptual' attributes of God and concludes by abandoning all speech and thought, even negations.⁴²

While these quotes all allude to a possible additional stage beyond the apophatic-cataphatic dialectic, the most interesting quote is found in Rorem's commentary on the first chapter of *The Mystical Theology*. It is here that Dionysius gives Timothy this encouragement: "leave behind you everything perceived and understood...all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him who is beyond all being and knowledge."⁴³ It seems this section here is descriptive of Williams' argument. Dionysius specifically tells Timothy to leave behind everything; Timothy is to turn away from all affirmations and negations, to *negate* the entire process. If he does this, this will lead to the ecstatic union with the Divine; however, it won't be with the entirety of the divine, it will just be with one ray, of the shadow of the divine. Dionysius is calling Timothy to go one step beyond the affirmations and negations, although Rorem doesn't interpret it exactly in that

³⁸ Williams, 161.

³⁹ Rorem, 200.

⁴⁰ Rorem, 213.

⁴¹ Rorem, 213.

⁴² Luijheid, note 17 on page 140.

⁴³ MT I (997B-1000A), p. 135.

sense. Rorem's quote, that gives insight into his view of what may be beyond the dialectical process, follows: "This abandonment is, literally, an ecstasy in the sense...of standing outside ourselves and our natural, affirmative uses of language about God. The ending of *The Divine Names* explicitly previewed the *ecstatic function of negation* in the scriptures (981B, 130), which is now thoroughly encountered in this treatise."⁴⁴ While Rorem does not differentiate between *aphairesis* and *apophasis*, he does differentiate between *functions* of the apophatic. Here he says the *ecstatic function* is clear in Dionysius' writings, and it seems as though the function that Rorem mentions is in fact the third step in the process Williams talks about. Rorem here makes a differentiation between the dialectical function [of denials] and the ecstatic function [of negations].

Williams summarizes the difference between *aphairesis* and *apophasis* well here:

"Dionysius does have a clear account to give of the role of negation in the Christian life...on the one hand, the denial of concepts of the divine, denial which is a dialectical process inseparable from the affirmative engagement with those images, and on the other hand, the denial of the ability of that whole process of affirmation and denial to bring us to the state which we seek."⁴⁵

Williams believes Rorem sees the apophatic primarily as its role in the dialectic nature of the relation between the apophatic and cataphatic. Williams sees the more total negation, denying everything (speech, language, dialectical process) as the means to knowing God. In reading through Rorem's commentary, while he may not use the same language about this differentiation as Williams, Rorem clearly believes there is something beyond the dialectical process. Whether there is a functional difference for Rorem, or whether there is a categorical difference between a state of *aphairesis* and *apophasis*, seems to be of little consequence. This paper will now turn to a

⁴⁴ Rorem, 186, emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Williams, 169.

brief survey of the various ways in which Dionysius uses the apophatic, cataphatic and the interplay between the two in his *Mystical Theology*.

VI. DIONYSIUS' USE OF THE APOPHATIC AND CATAPHATIC THEOLOGIES IN *THE MYSTICAL THEOLOGY*

*Do not let this chapter disturb you and do not think that this divine man is blaspheming. His purpose is to show that God is not a being among beings, but is beyond beings. For if [God] himself has brought forth all beings in creation, how can he then be found to be one being among other beings?*⁴⁶

“*The Mystical Theology* of the Areopagite is an attempt to fly above the superanalogies of faith into the infinite darkness of the Godhead.”⁴⁷ This final section of the paper will be an attempt to examine some of these *superanalogies* of the faith that Dionysius discusses in *The Mystical Theology*. For each chapter, I will present a brief summary of its contents, followed by analyses of specific content from the chapter itself.

Chapter 1: “What is the divine darkness?”

Dionysius begins with a prayer and an introduction to Timothy, encouraging him to seek the way of the apophatic, to lay aside all things (thoughts, assertions, denials and experiences) and to “strive upward” for the ecstatic union with the One. He warns Timothy this may not be the way for everyone, because there are many who are simply too ignorant in that they think there is nothing beyond their own individual existence, and there are others who are simply too prideful because they think they can explain God and understand the Cause of everything. Nevertheless, there are some who are ready for the way of negations. This path is the way up the mountainside like Moses, who was eventually completely united with the cloud of unknowing at the summit of the mountain.⁴⁸ It is here, in this hidden place, that one experiences the ecstatic

⁴⁶ *Scholia* 429C qtd. in Rorem, 213.

⁴⁷ Douglass, 119.

⁴⁸ Dionysius refers to the biblical account of Moses ascending Mount Sinai, found in Exodus 19 and 20.18-21.

union with the Holy of Holies, the Indescribable One, who takes one out of oneself, so one is “neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown.”⁴⁹

*But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninformed, that is to say, to those caught up with the things of the world, who imagine that there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place.*⁵⁰

This anagogy, the apophatic ascent, is apparently not for all, which fits into the Dionysian hierarchal structure. “What the author is about to discuss is apparently intended only for the truly advanced and spiritually elite.”⁵¹ Apparently, there are those who don’t believe there is anything beyond simply whatever they have experienced as personal beings. There are others who believe they can actually know God and things about God through their direct knowledge of him. In this one sentence, Dionysius casts two very different crowds of people into the same situational category: those who will not be able to handle the apophatic way. This fits into the rest of the hierarchical structure Dionysius has set forth throughout his writings.

*Since it is the Cause of all beings, we should posit and ascribe to it all the affirmations we make in regard to beings, and, more appropriately, we should negate all these affirmations, since it surpasses all being. Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.*⁵²

Herein lies the relation between the cataphatic and apophatic. One must make assertions about God because God is the Cause of all beings. One makes these statements that one would make about beings, but then, because one realizes God is beyond Being, one negates those very affirmations. The negation of the affirmations raises the question discussed earlier in this paper, as to whether the cataphatic theology really serves a unique and important position, or, it is simply at the mercy of the apophatic. The cataphatic starts the dialectical process, but both

⁴⁹ MT I (1000A), p. 137.

⁵⁰ MT I (1000AB), p. 136.

⁵¹ Rorem, 187.

⁵² MT I (1000B), p. 136.

cataphatic and apophatic present different approaches to looking at God. Douglass provides an excellent, though lengthy, explanation of how the cataphatic and apophatic focus on God as

Cause and Transcendent, respectively:

By regarding God as Cause, affirmative theology is able to sing his praises in terms of the perfections flung by his creating hand across the universe. By regarding God as Transcendence, negative theology approaches him more closely in an effort to tear away the veil of creation from the ineffable vision of him who stands beyond. Each theology is therefore justified in its approach towards a God who is both Cause and Transcendence, visible and invisible in the created effects which not radiate, now shade his eternal presence. One theology affirms him through his visible creation; the other seeks a higher goal, an affirmation of his very Being, and in the highest reaches of love negates every reality acting as a barrier between the beloved and the Loved One. In so doing, negative theology does not contradict affirmative theology, lacking which it could never have risen to such heights. It does, however, move to a higher level of truth, inasmuch as it expresses a knowledge of God which is first, experiential, and second, distinct.⁵³

*Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and in the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.*⁵⁴

Moses, following the advice of Dionysius,⁵⁵ takes the plunge into the abyss of God, the unknowable emptiness that will bring about a new contemplation, a new reality of the unknown God. It is at this moment when God is utterly and completely made known to Moses, and to anyone who follows in his footsteps. He experiences the ecstatic union that only can happen with the total negation of all. At this point, Moses is neither himself nor anyone else; he is experiencing the truly mysterious union with the Indescribable, Unnameable One.

Chapter 2: “How should one be united, and attribute praises, to the Cause of all things who is beyond all things.”

Dionysius uses the analogy of a sculptor who is looking to find the ‘inner beauty’ and the ‘hidden image.’ Therefore, the sculptor chips the stone away and has to remove every ‘obstacle’

⁵³ Douglass, 121-2.

⁵⁴ MT I (1001A), p. 137.

⁵⁵ “My advice is to you...is to leave behind...all that is not and all that is...” (MT I 997B-1000A, p. 135).

to find the pure and hidden image. In this process of chipping away, layers are removed to reveal new, previously hidden layers. This is similar to the process of assertions and denials, and ultimately, there is an image to be found that is the goal of the Dionysian process. Dionysius proceeds to discuss how one should praise the denials and the assertions. He believes one should praise them differently because they do have separate and somewhat different functions. However, to some degree they are still both different sides of the same coin. They are both involved in the dialectical anagogic process of descent and ascent, of asserting statements and then denying them.

For this would be really to see and to know: to praise the Transcendent One in a transcending way, namely through the denial of all beings.⁵⁶

True praise comes through the denial of all beings, through acknowledgement of the fact that one cannot speak of the One who can be named, but cannot truly be named. Dionysius speaks of praising in a “transcending way.” The way in which one praises is to transcend the anagogical approach to knowledge: praising the Transcendent One by transcending, which one does through the denial of all beings.

We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside (aphairesis) they show up the beauty which is hidden.⁵⁷

Being a sculptor is all about being in process, being on a journey. It’s also a process of clearing aside, of ‘denying’ one piece of stone after another, until one finally has achieved one’s goal: the inner, hidden beauty the sculptor knew she was looking for. In order to arrive at this place, however, one has to lay aside many other pieces of stone. The work of being a sculptor is the work of following the Dionysian model for spirituality: constantly having to ‘deny’ certain ideas, and certain constructions. The temptation is to stop as soon as something beautiful is seen,

⁵⁶ MT II (1025A), p. 138.

⁵⁷ MT II (1025B), p. 138.

but one has to realize there will always be something beneath it: something deeper, more profound and beautiful. The plunge into the darkness is the final step necessary for the sculptor. The paradox of continuing to search for the “hidden” beauty, is that when one finally finds this “hidden” beauty, the very person will be hidden in the darkness of the cloud of unknowing. To find the hidden beauty, one must be hidden themselves.

Chapter 3: “What are the affirmative theologies and what are the negative?”

Dionysius begins by giving a synopsis of his theology found first in his *Theological Representations* (which were either never written or have never been found), *The Divine Names* and finally *The Symbolic Theology*. Dionysius lists the various images which he has used to speak of God, based on the symbolic representations of God. Dionysius continues by saying the further upward one proceeds (or rather, *returns*), the higher beyond one’s intellect they will get. As one arrives at a higher stage, they will need to search more for the words needed to communicate. As one takes the “plunge of darkness,” they take the next step toward union, and run out of words. At that point, they have ascended to such a high level that they have no words left because there are no concepts left to attempt to understand.

*The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into the darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.*⁵⁸

Again, it is the uplifting of the anagogic, the going above and beyond every statement that gives one the opportunity to plunge into the darkness. The darkness represents the deep, deep presence of God. When one is in God’s presence, they find themselves with no words, hence, the silence of God and the silence of contemplation, meditation, reverence and awe.

⁵⁸ MT III (1033C), p. 139.

But my argument now rises from what is below up to the transcendent, and the more it climbs, the more language falters, and when it has passed up and beyond the ascent, it will turn silent completely, since it will finally be at one with him who is indescribable.⁵⁹

This passage again begs the question about the role of the affirmations in the Dionysian structure. It appears one can start at the bottom, from the basest of all affirmations, and make those claims about God. However, as one continues up the anagogic ladder, the closer and closer one gets to God, “language falters” and they being to falter at being able to describe God. Perhaps affirmations are what are required from those who are lower on the hierarchical ladder. When one begins the ascent up the hierarchical ladder, they also begin to realize language is faltering, and begin to realize the apophatic way is the more appropriate way to come to know God. Yet, as they begin to continue to climb higher and higher, they will eventually come to the understanding that the most true way of coming to be in the presence of God is to negate all affirmations and negations.

Chapter 4: “That the supreme Cause of every perceptible thing is not itself perceptible.”

Dionysius acknowledges God as the supreme Cause of all perceptible things in Creation. Yet, the temptation for those trying to explain God is to use attributes and statements about the perceptible things as ways of expressing who God is, or as ways of talking about God. This can not be done because God Godself is not perceptible. And thus, since God is not perceptible, any of the language which one associates with the perceptible things is not to be afforded to God, the Cause of all. Dionysius goes through many typical attributes that would be afforded to the perceptible, material things, and concludes they may not be attributed to God for God is beyond the perceptible: God, the creator of the perceptible things is not perceptible.

⁵⁹ MT III (1033C), p. 139.

*It is not a material body...it is not in any place...it passes through no change, decay...nothing of which the senses may be aware.*⁶⁰

The Cause of all is not perceptible, even though it is the supreme Cause of all perceptible things. One would think that because the Cause created all perceptible things, that one could use analogies, or one could infer things from the perceptible creations, but Dionysius concludes this is not the case.

*It suffers neither disorder nor disturbance and is overwhelmed by no earthly passion.*⁶¹

Dionysius' Christology is limited to a few short passages within the corpus, but this is an interesting passage in light of the fact that Dionysius does have a Christology. To say God was *overwhelmed by no earthly passion* implies that Jesus, God-in-flesh, would not have dealt with earthly passions, such as hunger, exhaustion, lust or many others. Does that imply Dionysius has a lower view of the humanity of Christ? Or, rather, was Dionysius implying that while Jesus may have dealt with passions, he was never *overcome* by an earthly passion? These are interesting questions.

Chapter 5: "That the supreme Cause of every conceptual thing is not itself conceptual."

Just as one cannot use perceptual language when speaking about the One who created all perceptible things, one also cannot use conceptual language. This becomes even clearer as one approaches the top of the summit as Moses did, because God is beyond concepts. Many of the names Dionysius used to describe God in *The Divine Names* (goodness, true, life, mind, speech, power, eternity, time) are negated and said unworthy of the Unnameable One. Dionysius guides his readers upward until finally even the negations are negated and everyone is left in utter silence.

⁶⁰ MT IV (1040D), p. 140-1.

⁶¹ MT IV (1040D), p. 141.

*Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being...Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are.*⁶²

Dionysius is definitely continuing to move up the ladder of apophatic negation, as he negates Spirit, Son, Father and the incarnation (“known to us or to any other being”). This is the clue that he is getting close to the top of the ladder, to say that he is going to negate such important and crucial aspects of God’s character. There is no concept or image that is off-limits for the apophatic move. While there is some truth in these names and concepts, one cannot fully comprehend these conceptual statements, and so they must now be negated.

*It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.*⁶³

This passage is the closing of Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*. This is where Dionysius leaves his readers: ultimate denial, the negation of everything and nothingness. Though it is Dionysius’ hope that he would have instilled within his readers a desire to continue pursuing deeper and deeper, to keep chiseling away the stone of one’s ‘God-statue’ in order to attempt plumb the depths of the unknown God.

⁶² MT V (1048AB), p. 141.

⁶³ MT V (1048B), p. 141.

VII. CONCLUSION: WHERE DOES THE APOPHATIC LEAVE ONE?

Trinity!! Higher than any being
 any divinity, any goodness!
 Guide of Christians
 in the wisdom of heaven!
 Lead us up beyond unknowing and light,
 up to the farthest, highest peak
 of mystic scripture,
 where the mysteries of God's Word
 lie simple, absolute and unchangeable
 in the brilliant darkness of hidden silence.
 Amid the deepest shadow
 they pour overwhelming light
 on what is most manifest.
 Amid the wholly unsensed and unseen
 they completely fill our sightless minds
 with treasures beyond all beauty.⁶⁴

Pseudo-Dionysius, in his *Mystical Theology*, makes it clear both cataphatic and apophatic statements about the Unknowable God are important. Cataphatic statements bring one to a place where they can realize their inability to express God's character through statements, thus the apophatic move in theology. Apophaticism calls for a denial of statements made about God, because there are no phrases or statements, constructed by a limited language, that can come close to fully expressing any truth about God. The two of these theological moves interact primarily through a dialectical process of affirmation and negation. However, at some point, as one continues to return and turn toward God, there will come a time when even the whole dialectical process, because of its reliance on language, human minds, images and words, will need to be negated. Some argue this to be the only true *apophasis*, the true and ultimate negation that Dionysius sought. It is only at that moment of ultimate negation that one may be able to experience the ecstatic union with God, which is the Dionysian goal of spirituality.

⁶⁴ MT I (997AB), p. 135.

After proceeding down the ladder of affirmations with his readers, Dionysius returns with them, ascending the ladder of negations and leaving them on the summit of Mt. Sinai, standing with Moses, in the brilliant darkness of the hidden presence of God. Everything is silent. Words do not work anymore, and images fall short as well. Dionysian spirituality ends in silence, the goal being radical oneness and union with the Ineffable God.

...but everything which was so dear
that I have lost,
has, only since I have lost it,
really become mine.⁶⁵
-Jean-Pierre Rawie-

⁶⁵ Qtd. in Blans, 77.

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