

Apophasis and the turn of philosophy to religion: From Neoplatonic negative theology to postmodern negation of theology

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Abstract This essay represents part of an effort to rewrite the history metaphysics in terms of what philosophy never said, nor could say. It works from the Neoplatonic commentary tradition on Plato's *Parmenides* as the matrix for a distinctively apophatic thinking that takes the truth of metaphysical doctrines as something other than anything that can be logically articulated. It focuses on Damascius in the 5–6th century AD as the culmination of this tradition in the ancient world and emphasizes that Neoplatonism represents the crisis of Greek metaphysics on account of the inability to give a rational account of foundations for knowing and of the ultimate principle of beings. Neoplatonism discovered how all such ultimate principles were necessarily beyond the reach of reason and speech. This apophatic insight is drawn out with the help of contemporary criticism of Neoplatonic philosophy, defining also some points of divergence. The essay then discusses the motives for thinking the unsayable in postmodern times on the basis of this parallel with Neoplatonic thought. Discourse's becoming critical of itself to the point of self-subversion animates them both. However, the tendency in postmodern thought to totally reject theology, including negative theology, is a betrayal of its own deepest motivations. This tendency is debated through an examination of the thought of Jean-Luc Nancy. While any traditional discourse can be negated, the negating and self-negating capacity of discourse itself is infinite, and this is where a perennial negative theological philosophy of the unsayable is to be located. Language, eminently the language of philosophy, as infinitely open, points in a direction which becomes equally and ineluctably theological.

Keywords Apophasis · Negative theology · Neoplatonism · Postmodern thought · Unsayable · Metaphysics · Parmenides · Damascius · Nancy

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The situation of philosophy today makes it peculiarly receptive to a great variety of apophatic discourses, not only to those devolving from traditions concerning the unnameable Name of God in mystical currents, including the Kabbalah and Sufism, but also to negative theological speculations like those of the Neoplatonists. What reasons may be surmised for this receptivity? If the quest for foundations is the inaugural project of modern philosophy since Descartes, it has fallen into crisis and in many quarters today is given up for lost. Neoplatonism was similarly born of a crisis of foundations in ancient philosophy that in crucial ways parallels that of modern and especially postmodern times. In spite of its appearance of propounding elaborate metaphysical systems, Neoplatonism, profoundly considered, contemplates the impossibility of articulating any rational foundation for thought and discourse. It thinks the radical lack of any articulable first principle for metaphysics, especially as this type of thinking evolved out of the late speculations of Plato.

More than this, Neoplatonism provides implicitly a general theory for why philosophy and indeed knowledge in general *must* be foundationless. Its theory of the One as the transcendent, unknowable source of all opens up a fissure in reality that irrep- arably separates everything that is from its ultimate ground. Everything that exists in total dependence on what is *not*—on what has no objective existence in the manner of finite beings, which is to be with and among other beings. The first principle, the One, is beyond being and is therefore unknowable, since knowledge consists necessarily in a Logos of being. It might be said that this unknowable ground alone *is* in a higher, truer sense, but there is no telling what being in this sense might mean. Such an imputation can at best express only a negative knowledge of the ontological dependence of all that is on what is not and cannot be in the ordinary way. All that is known in relation to the absolute transcendence of the Neoplatonic One is that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the world of things and anything that can be their ground.

If the One is to ground all that is, it must *not* be, not at least in the way of being that can be known from the things which are—otherwise its own being would itself have to be grounded. Nothing *within* the set of existing beings can furnish a support from outside for the non-self-sustaining nature of beings. What has been grasped here is the apparently foundationless existence of beings in the world. So far as things within the world are concerned, there is no ground. No worldly being can serve this purpose of grounding things in the world. If there is to be any ground at all for the astonishing fact that things are—and Greek thought had always been profoundly committed to the idea that all that is is somehow grounded—it must be of a wholly other nature, outside of and beyond the world. Whether or not we hold to the presumption that there is any ground at all for beings, the Neoplatonic conception of the radical transcendence of the *only possible* ground has far-reaching consequences: it means that all knowing opens upon and issues ultimately in unknowing.

In this respect, Neoplatonism is based on a critical overcoming and surpassing of classical Greek ontology (Aubenque, 1971). Particularly the metaphysical assumptions of a realist Platonic ontology are discarded, or at least no longer secure, no longer assured by an intuitively certain knowledge descending from above, where the Good as the supreme principle of all intelligibility is ascertained with apodictic certainty. The knowability of things in general is affirmed and even evacuated by the recession of the first principle out of the world into unknowability, into a dimension to which not knowledge but only a kind of mystical experience can gain access. Viewed from within the world, things are foundationless, and yet *that* they are and even somehow hang together is given as a fact, and to account for this Neoplatonists still infer or

imagine that there is some kind of ground. It is just that the ground cannot be anything within the ambit of beings that we can know.

It follows, moreover, from its not being within the ambit of beings and thus of things knowable that nothing at all can be said of the One that must not also at the same time be unsaid. It cannot even be said to be One. It is rather ineffable. Or rather, it is “not even ineffable,” for it is not anything at all. The cleavage between a presumably knowable universe and its necessarily unknowable first principle or ground leaves knowledge without foundation, gaping open and suspended upon an abyss. As an important consequence of this predicament, Neoplatonic discourse attains to a highly refined critical self-consciousness of how even its very own discourse must undermine itself and become self-subverting. That the One is one, that it is ineffable, that it *is* at all become problematic affirmations that must at the same time be negated: whatever is said of this supreme principle must in the same moment be withdrawn. And yet all that is evidently depends upon such an enigma that cannot be said to be anything at all, or even be said to be.

On this basis, Neoplatonism reaches a penetrating insight into why there can be no knowledge of anything such as a first principle, not even so far as to be able adequately to call it a “first principle.” Just this is, in fact, the conclusion demonstrated by Damascius (c. 462–538? A.D.), the last of the ancient Greek Neoplatonic philosophers, in his treatise *On First Principles* (*De principiis*). (Damascius, 1966. See, further, Combès, 1996; Dillon, 1997.)¹ This work constitutes a culmination of a tradition of thinking the aporiae of any attempt to think the One, that is, to think the first principle or ground of the universe. At the other end, at the beginning, of this tradition of ancient Neoplatonism stands Plotinus (205–270 A.D.). But the tradition actually starts from the aporiae of Plato’s *Parmenides*.

Plotinus had hypothesized a One that cannot be, since if being were added to it, then it would no longer be perfectly one (*Parmenides* 137b–144e). This was a principle basis on which Plotinus was to construct his theory of the One beyond being, the first “hypostasis,” source of all that is. The approach of the mind to this highest principle of its knowing and of every being and even of being as such enjoins a relinquishing of Logos and of discourse and of knowing altogether. Such apophatic speculation develops through a line of Neoplatonic thinkers from Porphyry, Plotinus’s direct successor, through Iamblichus to Proclus. Damascius’s immediate predecessor. In its most mature phase, with Damascius, the apophatic thrust of ancient Neoplatonism is played out *in extremis* and becomes fully explicit and programmatic. It becomes clear that the whole intricate order of things is suspended from something (or rather from nothing) that can be ordered to no articulable principle, nor belong to any order whatsoever.

While this might be taken to be only an extreme consequence, it actually results from what was most essential to Neoplatonic thinking all along. In what might be considered the seminal notion of Neoplatonism, being came to be conceived of as infinite (Armstrong, 1979; see further Heiser, 1991). And that meant that any definition of its ground or even of being in its totality was necessarily inadequate. Every expression for the cause or first principle of being comprehended something only finite and definable and would have to be rejected in opening outwards toward the infinite and indefinable. The result was an open-ended quest, the new style of speculative

¹ My introduction to and translation of Damascius, *Doubts and solutions concerning first principles*, Part I, cc. 3–8 in *Action: A Journal of Hellenism and the Classics* 12(1) (2004): 111–131.

mysticism inaugurated by Plotinus. This quest can still be characterized as a quest for an ultimate ground, however it becomes an endless quest because the ground can never be delimited and defined.

The Neoplatonists are often known mostly for their invention of complicated and artificial metaphysical discourses and systems, but more deeply considered they represent the crisis of all discourse and the confrontation with the ineffable that escapes every possible system. This Neoplatonic philosophy of the ineffable, commonly called negative theology, is critical of all rational formulations as inadequate to what they intend to describe. Negative theology arises at a very advanced stage in the development of rational reflection in any given culture, a stage where the founding myths of that culture, and lastly language itself as the foundation of all culture, come into question. At this point, language can no longer be used self-consciously as having a direct grip on reality and as simply delivering truth. Discourse's constitutive negativity becomes a central theme in Neoplatonism: its self-negating nature and transforming, annihilating powers become a major preoccupation for certain of the Neoplatonists. No longer concentrated exclusively on what language *does* manage to convey by the light of Logos, Damascius attends obsessively to its failures.

In this respect, the hypertrophy of critical thinking that characterizes philosophical discourse today goes down the path once blazed by Neoplatonic thought. From our position today, Neoplatonism can be seen retrospectively to represent an early apotheosis of critical philosophical thinking. It is philosophical thinking critical first and foremost of itself. In fact, every thought that can be thought and therefore expressed is viewed as *ipso facto* inadequate and subject to critique. All that can be thought or said, affirmations and negations alike, must be negated. This critical aspect of Neoplatonic thought reaches its sharpest formulations in Damascius, "the last and most critical of the great pagan Neoplatonists" (Armstrong, Kenney 1993).

The situation of philosophy, especially of continental philosophy, today is likewise one that seems to know no alternative to unrestricted and endless criticism: every positive doctrine that can be formulated encounters objections immediately. If there is any consensus, it is about there being no given foundations or stable principles for philosophy to work from—though this view, too, as soon as it is formulated and stated in words, proves controversial and difficult, if not impossible, to defend. The current philosophical milieu of "limitless criticism," to use a term Hilary Armstrong derives from the French Neoplatonist scholar Jean Trouillard, can be illuminated especially well by the negative theology of the Neoplatonic school and its sequels and spin-offs all through the course of Western intellectual history down to the present. (Trouillard, 1961)² With negative theology, critical philosophical thinking becomes indistinguishable from religious thinking: it becomes infinitely open, open even to the infinite, rather than remaining circumscribed by any method or organon. Philosophical and religious belief alike are subject to this criterion of limitless criticism, according to Armstrong, not only in Hellenistic times but again for us today: "A genuine religious faith in our time must be compatible with limitless criticism."

The principle of limitless criticism has a "positive" and even a prescriptive content—although it cannot be stated. In fact, it cannot be stated because it is so purely "positive." Any statement requires differentiating what is as stated from what is not,

² Underwriting how Plotinus's spiritual, religious approach to reality, in the context of Hellenistic mysticism, radically curtailed the claims of natural reason and philosophy to gain access to an intelligible Truth, Trouillard concludes that philosophy is left with essentially a critical function ("Il reste à la philosophie une fonction indispensable qui est essentiellement critique," p. 440).

and hence only a delimited positivity. By contrast, the unsayable principle that makes further criticism always possible and any correction never definitive is purely positive and absolutely negative at the same time, indeed more positive and more negative than any proposition that can be stated. Nevertheless, this ultra-positive, ultra-negative unsayability makes a claim to being normative for philosophical discourse: it is necessary in order to prevent philosophical discourse from absolutizing itself or some one of its conceptions, including such concepts as experience and openness, just as much as those of matter or substance or structure. The ways of experiencing and of being open and responsive to this indefinable absoluteness are exactly what apophatic tradition is concerned to explore and so must not presuppose as having any known or definable shape or content.

Apophatic awareness as a form of critical consciousness entails the negation of all discourses. However, all discourses, from this point of view, can be recognized as themselves, in effect, already negations. Any discourse we start with, anything we conceptualize and say, is itself always already a negation—the negation of reality itself as it transcends all our concepts and discourses. Apophatic discourse is, then, the negation of this negation. It intends to point back towards what, anterior to all negations in statements, is simply there, unarticulated by any speech. Apophasis does not presume to say what is really real but leaves it alone—and thereby lets it show itself as what this discourse (and any discourse) is not and cannot say. The specific ways in which language withdraws and is undone in the face of what it cannot say offer images testifying to this transcendent-of-discourse. The ruins of discourse remain as ruins witnessing to what they cannot depict or determine in any reliable or even readable way. Their very unreadability says all that can be said about the unsayable.

What distinguishes apophatic thought is that its truth is not in what it affirms and articulates but in the ... unsayable it knows-not-what that its self-negation simply makes room for. In terms of content, it has nothing particular or positive to offer, but methodologically it can play a key regulatory role, given the pluralistic situation of philosophy today, by offering a theory as to why this pluralism of discourses is necessary in the first place. For when different philosophies are re-positioned and re-defined as attempts to say what cannot be said, they reflect upon each other as reflecting a common ... something/nothing that they cannot say—except each in its own inadequate way, illuminating in withdrawing, in taking its positive affirmations back, yet leaving some indefinable sense of what they were getting at. Different philosophies are revealed thereby as necessary to each other rather than as excluding and having to suppress each other.

Apophatic thought does, then, have something normative to offer to the whole spectrum of philosophical discourses, even without being able to say anything at all directly about reality as such. From the perspective of Christian, Jewish and Muslim negative theologies, all of them derivative from pagan, Greek Neoplatonic negative theology as the cradle of apophaticism historically, it is imperative to acknowledge the ineffable "God" as absolute in order to avoid falling into belief in idols. We might think that we need believe in no gods at all. But somewhere in our logic there is bound to be a fixed point or foundation that will in effect be our Absolute, and if this is not a truly absolute Absolute, one that cannot be said at all, like the "God" sought in vain by negative theology, it will be rather a relative absolute, one conditioned by some form of representation, and as such it will be an idol. We will be tempted to take it for the absolute Absolute if we do not keep that position open through some discourse about why it must remain empty for us and for all our discourses. Empty though it

must be, still this place of the Absolute (or “place” as itself absolute) needs to be kept under surveillance to prevent its being falsely usurped. This is the vital role of negative theology as a sort of empty metaphysic and quasi-transcendental logic of the unsayable.

Philosophy without absolutes is an illusion. We always assume something absolute even in denying it. In effect, we contradict ourselves in saying that nothing, *absolutely* nothing can be absolute. We need an understanding of how this absoluteness impinges on our discourses in order to keep them translucent and open, and in order to keep the absolute and the relative in relation with one another, and yet not utterly confounded together, in which case they would become, each of them, imposters. The ancient wisdom of negative theology, from its matrices in Neoplatonic thought, developed just this sort of theoretical alertness and understanding. That is why it has so much to offer to our philosophizing today. This wisdom entails self-awareness of the relativity of all our thinking and its articulations, yet this relativity remains, nevertheless, intimately bound in relation to what it cannot delimit or in any way relativize. It is affected and disturbed from outside itself, from above (or below).

Not only does this critical, negative thinking guard against usurpations by false systems of closed, self-sufficient rationality; it can also help open us to the inarticulable experience of all that is or at least appears, all that tantalizingly escapes the grasp of discourse and reason. For it disabuses us of rational systems that would close off possibilities outside and beyond themselves. Cultivating an apophatic outlook can train us to look again and let happen what is truly incomprehensible to us, for negative theology is a discourse reflecting on our discourse that shows and reminds us that it is only discourse and thereby opens it to what it cannot comprehend. This special character and virtue of negative theology has been brought out especially by the recent revival of apophatic thinking leveraged from scholarship on Neoplatonist philosophers. I wish now to situate the view I am articulating within this revival and at the same time to take positions differing from some current scholarship based on my sense of the overall thrust and significance of apophatic thinking.

For J. P. Williams, who claims to be following Hilary Armstrong and Denny’s Turner, apophasis is fundamentally about discourse itself and represents a possibility of “flawless criticism.” It makes no ontological claims (Williams, 2000; see also Kenny, 1991). Williams differentiates sharply, indeed categorically, between negation that is self-referential so as to negate even negation, and negation which only qualifies affirmations, revising them into a higher form of affirmation according to the *via eminentiae* (Introduction and p. 18). The latter is the doctrine of negation in Thomas Aquinas and in Middle Platonism, and it is to be held rigorously separate from truly apophatic negation in the strict sense of negation of the negation. Yet these distinctions in the history of philosophy deal with doctrines codified and interpreted in words, not directly with the deeper apophatic intent of the discourses in question. It is not truly apophatic to make any distinctions *in discourse* ultimate. So granting the heuristic value of the differences Williams points to, which are in fact commonly evoked in the scholarship on apophaticism, I do not believe that they discriminate between what is and is not authentically apophatic. All discourses in words fall short of the apophatic, as apophatic writers concordantly insist.³ The attempt to delimit and define apophasis so as to avoid promiscuous and indiscriminate use of the term has strong scientific

³ Good examples can be found in the readings of selected classic authors in O. Davies and D. Turner (Eds.) (2002).

motivation, but apophasis remains recalcitrant to all definition and simply does not lend itself to being made a useful and well-behaved scientific term. My conviction is that it cannot be sharply delineated by any unequivocally stateable formula or concept, but must be discerned through a finer, indefinable sort of sensibility.

I do not mean to charge that these leading interpreters do not understand apophasis—except to the extent that apophasis, by its very nature, withdraws from any and every attempt to understand it. It is just that the formulation which makes apophasis a discourse about discourse gives it a positive object. Like all formulas, this one too must be withdrawn. Apophasis is not about that either, nor about anything that can be said. As Denny’s Turner states, “The apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language” (Turner, 1995). He points out how negative language *per se* is no more apophatic than affirmative language is, distinguishing crucially between “the strategy of *negative propositions* and the strategy of *negating the propositional*,” between that of the *negative image* and that of the *negation of imagery*” (p. 35). We must, then, also remind ourselves that the negation of imagery is not simply its absence; images must appear in order to be negated.

Sara Rappe’s conception of Neoplatonism, culminating in Damascius, as text-oriented and exegetical in essence, likewise makes apophatic philosophy essentially a second-order discourse about discourse rather than a discourse making ontological claims (Sara Rappe, 2000). Yet Rappe realizes—and Damascius in her reading is well aware—that it is wrong to say that apophasis is *only* about discourse itself. It demonstrates discourse to be not sufficient unto itself and to be beholden rather to what is neither discourse nor susceptible of being incorporated into discourse. There is a strong temptation to interpret apophasis as being only about discourse, since then we can say definitely what it is about. But this sells it short, for then apophatic discourse is presented as having no bearing upon extralinguistic reality, no ontological import. While apophasis makes no particular ontological claims, its negations do bear upon what has traditionally been treated under the rubric of ontology. This realm is redefined by apophasis as the open space into which discourse opens at the limits of what it is able to articulate—as what it cannot formulate and determine in terms of itself. So beyond its necessary self-critical moment, apophatic discourse is all about this something other, other than itself, other than discourse altogether.

Apophatic discourses testify to some dimension (or at least limit) of experience: they are touched by experience that cannot be spoken in words (whether it is of reality or unreality, being or non-being, is not finally decidable). Presumably, this experience cannot be made manifest “itself,” “directly,” at all, for it is beyond representation altogether. Yet for Wittgenstein the unsayable nevertheless “shows itself” (L. Wittgenstein, [1922]). There must, by any account, be some way of “showing” or apprehending at least *that* there is something that cannot be said, even if *what* it is can in no way be determined. Still this indeterminate “it” may actually be, as Benjamin and Blanchot in different ways suggest, more immediate than any immediacy that is caught between the poles of presence and absence, more present than any presence, though the unmediated experience of it could only be madness, or perhaps the bliss of beatitude. (Benjamin, 1977; Blanchot, 1993).

Like ancient Neoplatonic thinking, modern and phenomenological philosophy too have their apophatic moments. And here again generally only withdrawal from representation, and even from every possibility of presentation, can be allowed to characterize what cannot be said. This is the movement of withdrawal—apprehended as having taken place always already—from the zone of articulable experience.

Language for what cannot be said is in this sense a “trace” which can never be traced back to any origin. In deconstructive thinking, the linguistic trace of what cannot be said must precede – and in fact constitute – any presenting or evidencing of the unsayable, which is to this extent intrinsically linguistic, that is, an effect of language. The possibility of talking about what cannot be said originates with language as its trace, and indeed there is first something to talk about at all as what cannot be said only retrospectively – as what has always already vanished, leaving but a trace. Rather than the trace being derived from the presence of traces, the trace is all that ever becomes real and effectual of the presence, which is never manifest as presence itself and as such but always only as some recognizable, specifiable trait, an instituted trace, which refers to what it is not and cannot re-present but can only mark as vanished, absent, inaccessible.⁴

Admittedly, then, all that can be said about apophatic discourse fails to attain anything like its “essence.” Such discourse can be defined only by its relation to something it does not comprehend and cannot adequately or commensurately express. It is what this discourse arises in the face of and in response to that constitutes its essential, albeit essentially incommunicable, meaning or rather import. This “in-the-face-of” can be inexpressibly concrete and singular. But in attempting to name it, we can only generate myths and metaphors like Nameless, Inexpressible, Secret or Ineffable, expressions that testify to what they cannot say and cancel themselves out as expressions, leaving only a trace indicating what cannot be represented or characterized or expressed.

This is to understand apophasis in essentially performative terms. Certain performances of language can hint at what it cannot articulate but somehow shows in the very cancellation of expression, or of attempted expression. It is language’s faculty for *unbecoming* (from Meister Eckhart’s “entwerdende”) that is the clue to its designating, or rather adumbrating, what cannot be said, the other of everything that is anything and so *can* be said.

That is indeed how recent interpreters have instructed us to understand apophatic discourse. Stephen Katz observes that apophatic discourse actually does something different from what it says. For the terms used to deny expressibility are themselves laden with descriptive value. He concludes that apophasis is generally only an abstract, programmatic position that mystical discourse in practice believes, or at least qualifies (Katz, 1992). But precisely this inconsistency has been recognized as the cunning of apophatic discourse, its distinctive character and strategy, by other interpreters. The ineluctable disjunction between what is said and what is concretely realized in practice is exactly what apophatic discourses mean to focus attention on and illuminate. Michael Sells defines apophasis as a “meaning event” in which language unsays itself. His readings of apophatic texts aim to show how they can “perform (rather than assert) a referential openness” (Sells, 1994).⁵ Mystical union is initiated in language that effaces grammatical distinctions between subject and object and thereby collapses or displaces reference.

We have arrived, in some strains of our culture, at a predominantly apophatic phase that repeats moments of this loosely coherent “tradition” reaching back to the Neoplatonists. Apophasis tends to emerge at a late stage in the development of

an historical cycle of thought and culture, when critical faculties are prodigious and creative faculties appear somewhat atrophied by comparison. Creation and criticism, of course, elicit each other and are often inextricably interwoven. Nevertheless, the weight of tradition is most acutely sensed at a stage where philosophy is often essentially about philosophizing itself and self-criticism accompanies its every act. Yet the characteristic emphasis of negative theological thinking is to turn this introversion inside out. The very emptiness of the self-reflexive concentration of thought and discourse in our late age issues in a turn towards the unsayable (Other of thought and discourse and discloses their inexhaustible richness as indicators of what no thought or discourse can fathom. Such is the provocation of apophasis in its very emptiness (of articulable concepts), which evokes everything, its very silence suggesting all. Discourse shows itself to be empty not of content but only of conceptual purchase on absolute reality, while at the same time it is let loose to express in crazy ways all that it could never properly say. This phase turns out to be exceptionally fecund in the invention of discourse reflecting from different angles, and in its very disintegration as discourse, upon what cannot be said.

This openness to apophasis, especially to some of its mystical and religious tendencies is, of course, far from uncontested in philosophy today. Some postmodern thought can best be understood primarily as the denial of the tradition of negative theology that has been traced here from its Neoplatonic matrices. Much philosophy since the Enlightenment has understood itself as anti-theology and therefore equally as against every form of negative theology, which is seen as a sly effort to recuperate the myth or lie of God that is viewed as nevertheless doomed by rights and without appeal. Progressive politics and a revolutionary ideology have been posed as intrinsically antithetical to theology in any form whatsoever. Of course, this denial of its discourse is exactly what apophasis expects and invites. Being contradicted is not so much a denial as a confirmation of its vision of the necessary inadequacy of any discourse whatsoever, including its own. Nevertheless, the intent of such attacks is to take an attitude opposed to the sort of philosophy of the unsayable that is here in question. It will be instructive to consider at least one line of thought that understands itself as attacking negative theology for being still a theology and therefore, presumptively, the enemy of free philosophical thinking.

In order to develop this assessment of apophasis as crucial to the situation of philosophy today, I would like to respond to one thinker who has taken just the opposite tack from me in interpreting the whole tradition of negative theology. I will respond specifically to Jean-Luc Nancy’s masterful and provocative essay “Des lieux divins” (“Of Divine Places”). Nancy’s essay appeared originally as a contribution to a collection of essays written by 36 of France’s leading thinkers in philosophy, theology and literature on the question “What is God?”⁶ Addressing this public of mixed professions, Nancy transposes the question concerning the essence of God into a question of the “place” of the divine, thereby making it possible to breach the question of God in a de-essentialized form. He is interested in how divinity, emptied of all content, becomes no more than a place, a topos. As a recipient of attributions, divinity itself

⁴ For the theory of the trace, see especially Levinas (1967). My descriptions are obviously indebted also to numerous discussions of the trace by Derrida.

⁵ See also conclusion.

⁶ “Des lieux divins” in *Qui est-ce que Dieu? Hommage à Lubet Daniel Coppieters de Gibson (1920–1983)* (pp. 541–553). Bruxelles: Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, 1985. The essay has also appeared more than once in book form, for example, *Des lieux divins* (Doubtless, *Mémoires*, 1987). It is translated into English by Peter Connor as “Of Divine Places” in *The Inoperative Community* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), pp. 110–125, though I translate citations directly from the French myself.

has no characteristics and is nothing but a place of pure receptivity. This might be thought to put divinity in a place of peculiar power, but Nancy interprets it as bearing only the opposite significance: he wishes to depotentiate theology and render God not just dead but, much more radically and devastatingly, irrelevant.⁷

Nancy acutely analyzes monotheism as consisting essentially in an identification of divinity with Being, or rather with “the excellency of Being” in which all Being is one (“l’idée de l’excellence de l’existence dans l’être-un fait l’essence du monothéisme,” sec. 1, p. 254). But he rejects the idea that Being or its unity can in any way be God. For Nancy, Being is *not* at all, but only beings, and so, by the same token, the monotheistic God is not. Of course, the whole tradition of negative theology also insists that God is Nothing just as much as—or more than—he is Being, since he is rather beyond Being. But for Nancy there is nothing whatsoever besides beings. He even chooses to consider beings, not Being or the beyond of Being, as divine, and thus to concern himself not with God but rather with *a* god or *the* god. He does not allow these terms any genuine theological content as attempts to conceptualize a divinity transcending beings, since for him there can be no such thing: neither does he accord them any ontological import as designating what somehow conditions beings. The powers, if any, of *a* god or *the* god are none other than those pertaining to just one more kind of beings. Nancy is above all concerned to deny theology its privilege as the discourse par excellence on the Other, the Infinite, the infinitely other. In our age, he maintains, there is nothing to say about God that cannot just as well be said about things like love, poetry, the “event,” etc. *D’ accord*. But it is (and always was) what *cannot* be said about these subjects, or about any subject, that is most important about them. And the word “God”—with its perhaps annoyingly pretentious aura of something supernatural or transcendent—marks this difference. Though possessed of no determinate, sayable content, the name “God” is evidently not a normal subject like the *presumably* familiar subjects Nancy evokes as coextensive, and in fact as coinciding with everything that God can possibly be.

For Nancy there is really no problem about the concept of God, for there is for him no God that exceeds conceptualization, as there is for Pseudo-Dionysius and the whole tradition in his wake. What Nancy really wants to deny, like Hegel before him, is what cannot be said. This is not just to deny that what cannot be said, the ineffable, is anything. That much was conceded and in fact insisted upon from Plotinus to Pseudo-Dionysius, Maimonides, Eckhart, etc. Nancy’s point, rather, is to deny any special meaning and pertinence to language about God. In Nancy’s view—using Hölderlin’s phrase—the names of the gods are lacking, that is, lacking in gods to name. The gods that were previously manifest to preceding civilizations are no longer present or even extant. Modern Western civilization, reason, secularization, and even the Christian religion itself have done the gods to death, as was clearly proclaimed by Hegel and Nietzsche.

Thus Nancy describes the contemporary situation as one of extreme deprivation of all possibility of naming God. God is no longer even a distinct theme of discourse; theology has been dissolved into ontology, anthropology, cosmology, etc. The unnameability of God consequently takes on quite different motivations from those of

the divine transcendence evoked by negative theologies. God is not unnameable for lack of an adequate concept of divinity or due to divine transcendence beyond the reach of language. It is rather that to name God, even by address in prayer, cannot be serious, sincere or even meaningful. The very function of addressing, whether directed to the divine or to anyone else, has become impossible. Indeed all names that things or persons can be called have some vestigial remnants of divinity in them, and therefore the very gesture of appellation or address in general has become impossible today, according to Nancy.

Nancy rightly admonishes that the extreme destination, the lack of plenitude and presence experienced everywhere in modernity, should not arbitrarily be called God in a gesture simply of interpreting every negative as infinitely positive. But he seems deliberately to miss the point that it is what is not being called anything, or being said at all, that is the place of the divine—to use his own eloquent idiom. The talk of “God” in radical negative theologies attempts to call up this anonymous, unnameable place.

Nancy is aggressively anti-theological. He proposes in effect an anti-theology, a philosophy of the finitude of being as absolute and final (sec. 29). He secures and deplores the idea of a return of the religious, that he admits to be much touted about today, as ridiculous. For him, echoing Hegel (though not perhaps in a sense faithful to Hegel’s meaning), the death of God is the final thought of philosophy: “The death of God is the *final* thought of philosophy, which proposes it as the *end* of religion: it is the thought towards which the Occident (which in this respect excludes neither Islam nor Buddhism) will not have ceased to tend” [“La mort de Dieu est la pensée *finale* de la philosophie, qui la propose ainsi comme *fin* à la religion: c’est la pensée à laquelle l’Occident (qui n’exclut, à ce titre, ni l’Islam ni le bouddhisme) n’aura pas cessé de tendre,” p. 561].

Nancy keeps saying what is no longer possible *for us* as belated Westerners (“au cœur de notre expérience, au cœur de notre tardive nécessité occidentale,” etc., p. 552) and legislates what is a legitimate stance for “*la* pensée,” at least for thought in general today. But by what right is he speaking for us all? This could perhaps have been plausible for Hegel, but how can such a “we” be persuasive, let alone meaningful today in the age of shattered subjectivity? Surely a “we” that is “singular plural” (Nancy’s “singulier pluriel”) should not rule out the possibility of others who think differently. Nancy practically ventriloquizes Hegel, but without Hegel’s respect for religion. When Nancy denounces all talk of a “return of the religious” as ridiculous, he asserts in polemical and even dogmatic terms the death of God as “irrefutable and non-displaceable” (“cet événement irréductible et indéplacable, qui a d’avance rendu dérisoires tous les ‘retours du religieux,’” p. 553). But how can any thought be final? Is not the very life of thinking in constant displacements of every achieved formulation? This indeed has been the irresistible lesson of French post-structuralist styles of thinking like his own. With respect to religion, however, Nancy bears down blindly to resist it. His essay in certain moments evinces a deep and personal familiarity with Roman Catholicism and the Latin liturgy. But when he speaks with a voice affected by this heritage, it is as if he has not overcome it sufficiently to permit him to reach an objective stance towards it.⁸

Nancy writes as if he had the right description of the abyss of unknowing—so rich in tradition—as a purely human lack, a fragmentation of the human subject that is only

⁷ I restrict myself to discussing Nancy’s position in this essay. The argument of Nancy (2015), volume 1, *La Déduction*, is new and in crucial ways reverses his thinking about theology. Here Christianity turns out to be eminently a negative theology that carries out its own deconstruction of itself and of Western tradition. It is the agent rather than only the object of deconstruction. I completely agree with Nancy’s outlook here and will treat it separately.

⁸ Nancy reverses constantly to this matrix, for example, Nancy (2001, 2013).

menchiously “baptized” in the name of an unknowable God. A more open tack is taken by Thomas A. Carlson in the programmatic statement of his book *Indiscretion*, proposing to leave open the question, which Nancy perhaps over-zealously decides, of the identity or distinctness of the divine and the human. This is the question of whether negative discourse about God is or is not another vocabulary for expressing what can also be articulated in terms of human finitude.

I argue here that this question can be answered—or, better, suspended and kept open—insofar as one can signal a point at which the negative logic of Being-toward-God within classic apophatic and mystical forms of language and representation reveals a strikingly forceful analogy to the negative logic of Being-toward-death in contemporary (Heideggerian and post-Heideggerian) discourse on human finitude. In and through the development of this ‘apophatic analogy,’ the work moves toward a point of ‘indiscretion’ at which the negativity of the divine and of the human, of the theological and the thanatological, can (and do) prove to be neither distinct nor identical—but bound in the radical indeterminacy that haunts the experience of all language and representation regarding an ineffable God and/or an impossible death (Carlson, 1999).

The refusal of binary, oppositional logic and the proposal to read the strikingly forceful analogies between Being-toward-God in premodern apophatic discourses, signally (Pseudo-Dionysius’s, and Being-toward-death in post-Heideggerian and postmodern discourses on human finitude has guided Carlson’s work in this area along a more Derridean line. Whereas Nancy takes a trenchantly anti-theological stance, Derrida has been twisting away from such oppositional stances, conspicuously in his deconstructive engagements with negative theology (See especially Derrida, 1993) Mark C. Taylor, too, has explored in innovative ways the space that opens for theology in the very tearing of its text, in the insurmountable check to its discourse. This happens in the face of “‘Altearität,’ the wholly or Holy Other, “das ganz Andere,” as marked by the surplus (“‘Überschuss”) of the religious beyond all conceptual or even moral meaning. This is the order of significance inaccessible to reason and speech that was characterized as numinous or uncanny or even monstrous (“ungeheuer”) by Rudolf Ott in *Das Heilige* (Taylor, 1987, 1990).

Nancy uses many of the same critical and deconstructive insights that animate negative theology and its contemporary interpreters, but he pursues them with opposite ends and purposes, taking these theological ends and purposes to be what most need to be deconstructed and disposed of. Were these ends and purposes articulated or articulable, were negative theology a positive doctrine rather than negation even of itself, one could be in agreement with him. What negative theology is becomes moot once we admit that it has no essence or even that its “essence” or pseudo-essence is to refuse every essence. What differentiates Nancy’s viewpoint from the one developed in this essay is the attitude we take towards this tradition of negative theology—whether we resist and resent it, or gratefully receive and willingly work with it. These choices are about us—and about our acknowledgments towards traditions that exist and that inform us. Christianity is Nancy’s own spiritual heritage and cultural matrix, so it is natural that he should struggle to overcome it. Nevertheless, the result is that, with great insight and acuteness, Nancy is insisting on the impossibility of what has proved itself, as we have just seen, to be a perennial possibility of thinking from age to age.

Jean-Luc Nancy’s refusal of Christianity along with all theologies, including negative theologies, is not a philosophical necessity so much as a personal choice and

perhaps exigency. Many other thinkers sharing fundamental convictions and commitments in common with him enthusiastically embrace elements of this and other religious traditions. Even the refusal is a continuation of dialogue with what proves an indispensable adversary for as long as the discussion goes on. As in Blanchot’s infinite conversation, the reference to theology has never really been erased so long as it is in the process of being erased (Blanchot, 1969).⁹ The declared intent to forget theology and so to cease to be conditioned by it is contradicted by the very discourse that declares this intent. Just this sort of recursive significance of discourse, beyond its explicitly stated intent, must be taken with the utmost seriousness by both apostles of apophasis and their denigrators.

The larger burden of Nancy’s essay is an extremely penetrating analysis of religions and their conceptualizations of God. Yet the method remains purely conceptual. It is a method peculiarly appropriate to philosophy, but it cannot begin to sound the depths of theology, much less of religion. It remains willfully blind to the possible revivals of religion that have been witnessed recently, and in fact right within the movements styled “postmodern.” Indeed a host of thinkers and scholars, notably many working within the ambit of Derrida and deconstruction, have given ear to precisely the return of the religious that Nancy refuses to hear anything about. Such interest has found a certain forum, for example, in the series of conferences organized by John Caputo at Villanova University and in a slew of publications dealing with “the postmodern return of God” (Caputo & Scanlon, 1999; Caputo, Scanlon, & Dooley, 2001; Schachtelmann, 1992; Summerell, 1998; Ward, 1977, 2001).

A parallel investment of the postmodern in the rediscovery of the religious has been fostered in Italy by, among others, Gianni Vattimo, Massimo Cacciari, Vincenzo Vitiello,¹⁰ Giorgio Agamben, moreover, sharing many of the same points of reference in postmodern thinking, is acutely receptive to the apophatic dimension. Agamben has linked his speculations in an apophatic mode explicitly with the Neoplatonic negative theological tradition of Damascius by beginning a recent book with a reconsideration of this largely forgotten philosopher. (Agamben, 2002) There is similarly a very active effort of Dutch philosophers of religion to read contemporary thought against the background of traditions of negative theology. (Bulthof & Laurens ten Kate, 2000). Henri de Vries’s thinking in the wake of Derrida takes its decisive impulse from the need to explain the return to religion. The adieu or goodbye to God and religion in modern times is, at the same time, and perhaps even before all times, a movement commending oneself, or those one addresses, “to God.” “à Dieu” (Henri de Vries, 1999). De Vries interprets the philosophies of Adorno and Levinas as minimal negative theologies, and suggests how a variety of other modern thinkers and writers can likewise be reassessed through these optics (Henri de Vries, 1989).

My own view is that apophatic or negative theology has held in keeping the keys to the perennial vitality of philosophical thinking that does not define and then exhaust arbitrarily laid down, heuristic limits for its thinking. The willingness to let go of all definitions, to negate all its own formulations, opens thought to what is moving within it, beyond or beneath the definitive grasp of words and concepts. Philosophy at this level is not merely cognitive but shades into and merges with other dimensions, affective

⁹ Derrida speaks of Nancy’s “intermittent” deconstruction of Christianity (“intermittante déconstruction du christianisme”) in Derrida & Spive (2002)

¹⁰ See, for example, *Almanacco di filosofia. MicroMega* 2 (2000) and the journal *Filosofia*, edited by Gianni Vattimo, from the 1990s through 2001

and connative, of human being and experience. In the ancient world, notably among the Neoplatonists, philosophy was understood as a spiritual exercise involving all the faculties of human intellection and sensibility and praxis (Hadot, 2002).

Damascius presents the ripest fruit of the philosophical reflection of the Hellenistic Age. Some would say over-ripe. I have exalted as a perennial and necessary development in philosophy, by nature critical and critical especially of itself, the phase of hypercritical and even self-crippling reflection that makes a virtue of self-destruction, recognizing in the self-subversion of discourse an unveiling, or at least an indicating, of a radical Other to all discourse. But this might also be deplored as the fall from grace of the genuine philosophical spirit and inspiration that first dawned in archaic and classical Greece. In this latter historical perspective, philosophy in its classical form would have observed the just measures of reason, but would have turned grotesque over time. Hellenistic forms of art with their overemphasis and distortion of nature may be seen analogously as illustrative of what happens in thinking that similarly foreshadows the measure of nature, stretching ideas to extremes where they are no longer plausible. Such thinking would be held to overstep the limits within which it is really useful and creative.

There must be truth in this assessment, too, if we consider the widespread, perennial appreciation for classical models of thought and art and their periodically reasserting themselves as incomparably to be preferred to all others. Yet such views too prove always to be passing. So we also need to understand why thinking analogous rather to Hellenistic forms of conceptual mannerism has such a prominent place and appeal repeatedly throughout the history of philosophy and again in philosophy today. This is crucial to the task of understanding the predicament of thought at the present. We can thereby better see postmodern thought in historical perspective, and perhaps move beyond it. The point here is not so much to argue over what is the right paradigm for thinking as to feel out the furthest potential of each framework, including our own, so as to be able to carry it further or surpass it. Accordingly, I want to acknowledge the limits of Neoplatonic thought as it can be represented in a contemporary context: the positive metaphysical program does not have the same direct claim upon us as it did upon late antiquity and as the apophatic underpinnings of such thought still do for us.

The philosophy of the unsayable advanced in these pages may come across as an apology for metaphysical and mystical currents of thinking valorized for their appeal to critical reason and more broadly to “philosophy” as the love of wisdom. The reevaluation of Neoplatonism as philosophical critique turning in metaphysical and mystical directions is only exemplary of similar reassessments that could be made of philosophies thinking beyond the limits of word and reason in almost every age. I have sketched out some nodal points for a history of such thinking in *On What Cannot Be Said* (Franke forthcoming). Much more work has been done, particularly by John Milbank, in bringing out theological undercurrents submerged beneath dominant rational paradigms of the Enlightenment in thinkers like Vico, Hamann, and Herder (Milbank, 1997).

The thrust of such philosophies of the unsayable is not to undermine reason, but rather the contrary. Recognition of the limits of reason as logos or word restores reason to its proper place at the center of intellectual illumination and yet surrounded at the same time by the circumambient penumbra of what it ignores and cannot penetrate. Its light shines within and even thanks to this darkness (again *Denken* proves to be *Danken*). Indeed rational critique has proved essential to discovering the philosophy of the unsayable in Neoplatonism, as well as in every subsequent avatar

of apophatic thought. Reason has constantly been called forth by the call of this Other that it cannot comprehend. The eminently rational philosophies of Aristotle or Hegel are not dismissed or diminished in the perspective of a philosophy of the unsayable. Quite the opposite. But just as both these thinkers showed unprecedented understanding for their own predecessors, their philosophies too, for all their systematic articulation, are to be viewed in the end as indispensable moments within the whole movement of thought that irrepressibly forges beyond thought itself, beyond any determinate formulation of thinking in speech, beyond anything that can be said.

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