

Where a Silence is Said: The Ambiguities of Apophaticism

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Abstract

It is understood by mystical traditions the world over that none of the predicates offered by cataphatic discourse legitimately describes God as God. As we cannot, according to this thinking, sufficiently posit that God is this or that, we are instead forced through negation to say that God is not this, not that. These denials, however, are still propositions about God, albeit negative ones. To overcome the problem of positive propositions or negative propositions, a method is sought that seeks to negate the propositional altogether and so moves beyond assertion or denial.

In this respect, an apophatic language is employed that is deliberately and necessarily ambiguous or equivocal. This language, which consists of metaphorical opposites rather than literal contradictions, serves through self-subversive imagery to undermine its own meanings, to the point of collapsing in on itself. Accordingly, language of this kind neither seeks to say what God is, nor to say what God is not, but rather unsays what God might or might not be by indicating through saying what cannot be said.

Additionally, this ambiguous unsaying refrains from not saying at all. This unsaying therefore has its emphasis on saying, which tells us that, on the one hand, saying as predication is not adequate to the demands, whilst, on the other hand, the absence of saying altogether is likewise inadequate. Thus, the not-sayable needs the saying of language even if the result is to unsay, just as the saying of language needs in this instance the not-sayable in order to unsay.

This not only serves to disclose in *Being* itself an unavoidable ambiguity resulting from language, but also shows that language on another level is indispensable and a requisite for conveying what it cannot convey. Accordingly, where language is understood to fail, it is nevertheless language itself that informs us of that very failing, which in turn serves to question the supposed failure.¹

Keywords:

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This article is for the most part based on a chapter entitled ‘Cataphatic and the Apophatic in Denys the Areopagite’ from Denys Turner’s book *The Darkness of God*. It is also supported by elements of Michael A. Sells’ book *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. My aims are fourfold. First, I shall explain in detail how apophatic language works, drawing largely on Turner’s chapter for this purpose. Secondly, I shall describe apophaticism’s positively ambiguous nature. Thirdly, moving beyond the scope of Turner’s chapter, I shall put forward a defence of language and challenge the generally held yet limited supposition that apophatic discourse represents the failure of language to say, arguing that this does not pay full heed to the fact that the apophatic act of unsaying must necessarily take its leave from the cataphatic act of saying. Finally, I shall draw attention to a second, equally positive ambiguity, which is to be found in both theological meaning and *Being* itself. This second ambiguity owes its disclosure to the limits that are found in both apophaticism and cataphaticism.

However, before we begin, it would be helpful if we attempt to define what the word ‘apophaticism’ and its opposite ‘cataphaticism’ mean. These two technical terms belong to the vocabulary of late Platonist Christian theology. Etymologically, the word ‘apophasis’ literally means ‘to speak away from’, and in this respect, to deny. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as: ‘(of knowledge of God) obtained through negation.’ Denys Turner writes:

‘Apophaticism’ is the name of that theology which is done against the background of human ignorance of the nature of God. It is the doing of theology in the light of the statement of Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century, that ‘we do not know what kind of being God is.’ It is the conception of theology not as a naïve *pre-critical* ignorance of God, but as a kind of acquired ignorance, a *docta ignorantia* as Nicholas of Cues called it in the fifteenth century. It is the conception of theology as a strategy and practice of unknowing, as the fourteenth century English mystic called it, who, we might say, invented the transitive verb-form ‘to unknow’ in order to describe theological knowledge, in this its deconstructive mode. Finally, ‘apophaticism’ is the same as what the Latin tradition of Christianity called the *via negativa*, ‘the negative way.’²

Cataphaticism on the other hand, is what Turner refers to as the complementary partner of apophaticism. The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as: ‘(of knowledge of God) obtained through affirmation.’ Cataphaticism is what the Latin tradition of Christianity called

² Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 19.

the *via affirmativa*, ‘the affirmative way’.³ Turner describes cataphaticism as the ‘verbose element in theology,’ and continues:⁴

...it is the Christian mind deploying all the resources of language in the effort to express something about God, and in that straining to speak, theology uses as many voices as it can. It is the cataphatic in theology which causes its metaphor-ridden character, causes it to borrow vocabularies by analogy from many another discourse [...] It is its cataphatic tendency which accounts for the sheer *heaviness* of theological language, its character of being linguistically *overburdened*; it is the cataphatic which accounts for that fine *nimietas* of image which we may observe in the best theologies [...]. For in its cataphatic mode, theology is, we might say, a kind of verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes.⁵

1. How apophaticism works

Within the profusion of cataphatic discourse descriptive of God, Turner tells us that, in his work *Mystical Theology*, the fifth-century author Denys the Areopagite detects a hierarchy consisting of those descriptions that are similar similarities to God and those that are dissimilar similarities to God.⁶ The similar similarities refer to ‘conceptual’ descriptions of God, which we might deem to mean anything that is of an intelligible nature rather than a sensible one.⁷ The dissimilar similarities refer to ‘perceptual’ descriptions, that is, anything ‘of which the senses may be aware.’⁸ We can recognise this distinction as a Platonic one, in that the conceptual realm relates to Plato’s theory of the Forms known only by the mind, which are understood to be ‘more’ real, while the perceptual realm pertains to those things known only by the senses, which are

³ We should note that these ways are not exclusive to Christianity. For example, negation is found in the form of the Sanskrit phrase, *neti neti*, meaning ‘not this, not this.’ Employed in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad and later used by the Indian philosopher, Shankara, this phrase is understood to be the only appropriate definition of Brahman, without using inadequate affirmations. Again regarding negation, the opening statement in the Taoist *Tao Te Ching* includes the line: ‘The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name.’ (Lao Tze, *Tao Te Ching*, trans. by James Legge, Dover, 1891, p. 1). Another example of negation might be the Mahayana Buddhist *Vimalakirti Sutra*, which states: ‘All constructs are empty’, and then continues to say: ‘The construct that all constructs are empty is empty’, and yet again: ‘The construct that the construct that all constructs are empty is empty is empty.’ (*The Holy Teaching of Vimalakirti*, trans. R. F. Thurman, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976, quoted in Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, p. 4).

⁴ Turner, p. 20.

⁵ Ibid., p. 20.

⁶ Denys is also referred to as Dionysius the Areopagite. Denys took the pseudonym of Paul’s Athenian convert. He is, as such, given the modern appellations ‘the Pseudo-Dionysius’ and ‘the Pseudo-Denys’. Turner writes: ‘He wrote as if he were the Denys mentioned in Acts 17, 34 as having been one of Paul’s successes in the Areopagus at Athens. This, of course, is untrue, but his credentials were not seriously or widely doubted until the sixteenth century. In the meantime he was credited with sub-apostolic authority in the High and Late Middle Ages.’ (Turner, p. 12, fn. 1).

⁷ Referring to chapter 5 of Denys the Areopagite’s *Mystical Theology*, Turner writes: ‘we deny that the Cause of all is mind, has imagination, conviction, speech, understanding; it has no number, order, magnitude, equality, likeness or unlikeness; it is neither eternity nor time, life, wisdom, oneness, goodness, not even divinity. It neither exists nor does not exist.’ (Ibid., p. 27).

⁸ Denys the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, 1040D. Turner, referring to chapter 4 of *Mystical Theology*, writes that ‘[...] it is denied that the Cause of all is material, has shape, form, quality, quantity, weight, is found in place, is seen, touched, perceived, suffers, feels, is deprived of light, changes, decays, is divided, is diminished, ebbs, flows [...]’ (Ibid., p. 27).

understood to be ‘less’ real.⁹ Turner writes: ‘For us, existence cannot come in degrees, for the rules governing the logic of existence are those of zero-sum: a thing either exists or it does not.’¹⁰ This is to say that today we tend to regard something as either real or not real, rather than more real or less real. However, it was once understood that one thing could be more real than another within a hierarchical chain of being, that began in the sensible realm and ascended to the intelligible. This means that something more or less exists, in respect of realising more or less of what it is to be. A thing, as Turner states, realises more or less of what *is*. For example: a horse was once considered more real than a cabbage, a man more real than a horse, and an angel more real than a man. This is because, in terms of its life, each thing exists more or less depending on where it stands in ascending the scale that measures the degree of reality as such. Thus, the more a thing befits what it truly is to be, that is, attains to the Ideal, the closer it is to the Divine as that which most truly is.¹¹ Hence, in respect of what *is*, a horse is seen to realise more of what it is to be than a cabbage, a man more than a horse and an angel more than a man. And in relation to that which most truly is, namely God, man is seen to bear a more similar similarity to God than a horse, while a cabbage bears a more dissimilar similarity to God than a horse.

Despite this hierarchical chain of being where one thing is deemed to be closer to God than another in terms of its reality, for Denys, God (as such) is beyond *any* conceptual or perceptual assertion. So while one thing might be more similar to God than another, neither of these affirmations attain to what God in truth is. Turner writes: ‘Creatures may be more or less “like” God. But there cannot be any respect at all in which God is “like” any creature.’¹² However, in that all positive affirmation is understood to fail in saying what God is as such (precisely because it limits the unlimited), the way of negation is seen to be more apt, in that the negative seeks to *more accurately deny* rather than affirm. It does this by contrasting with the assertion made concerning God, which has the effect of refusing and thereby nullifying the original claim. An example is to positively (but inadequately) affirm that ‘God is light.’ A negation that might

⁹ Turner writes: ‘The more rooted our language about God is in the objects of our perceptual, bodily powers, the more ‘dissimilar’ is the similarity that language describes. The less our language is thus dependent, the more ‘similar’ are the similarities it describes.’ (Ibid.).

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ This hierarchy ascending from the less real to the more real is also seen to work within each group. For example, Turner writes: ‘if, by contrast with another, Red Rum is a better horse, then this is because, Plato thought, Red Rum participates more fully in that complete reality which is equanimity *as such*. That is to say, Red rum *realises* more of what-it-is-to-be-a-horse than that other horse does.’ (Ibid, p. 28).

¹² Ibid, p. 32.

follow this is to say that on the contrary, ‘God is darkness.’ To say that ‘God is darkness,’ attempts to render invalid the insufficient claim that ‘God is light.’

There is, however, a problem here. Although a denial is given that is designed to counter the positive assertion, that denial is itself an assertion, albeit a negative one. Despite any attempt to negate, and *because* of any attempt to negate, the denial in fact ‘posits’ a claim about God. This has the curious effect of making it a positive negation, so to speak. In trying to negate the original affirmation, it too becomes an affirmation by likewise attaching a predicate to God. Turner writes: ‘a negative image is as much an image as the affirmative image it negates, the negativity of the image doing nothing to qualify its character as an image.’¹³ The point here is that the negative image, though appearing to be apophatic, is in fact still cataphatic.

If the negative image is understood to be cataphatic along with the positive image, what then is regarded as genuinely apophatic? One way this is thought, wrongly, to be achieved is through out and out ‘contradiction.’ That is, rather than negate the assertion ‘God is light’ by saying ‘God is darkness’, and so positing another claim about God, one simply says ‘God is *not* light.’¹⁴ This follows Aristotle’s *principium contradicitionis* or ‘principle of contradiction’ which states that ‘the same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect [...]’ or more concisely: ‘[...] it is impossible for any one to believe the same thing to be and not to be [...]’¹⁵

We can see perhaps the slight difference between the two counterclaims ‘God is darkness’ and ‘God is *not* light’ more clearly through the use of logical operatives or constants. Where, on the one hand, ‘God is light’ and ‘God is darkness’ can be understood as *p* and *q*, ‘God is light’ and ‘God is *not* light’ can be understood as *p* and *not p*. Still, in either respect, they are each subject to the principle of contradiction, so that *one or neither but not both must be true*. However, while it may appear that saying ‘God is *not* light’, and so saying logically ‘*not p*’ instead of ‘*q*’, is an out and out negation, it nevertheless has the same effect as the assertion ‘God is darkness’, in that both posit a negative claim about God.¹⁶ There is, as Turner states:

¹³ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁴ ‘God is light’ and ‘God is *not* light’ cannot be affirmed together as they are seen as contradictions pure and simple. The point of saying ‘God is *not* light,’ is to prevent one from also saying ‘God is light.’

¹⁵ The *principium contradictionis* is also known as ‘the principle of non-contradiction’ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. by W.D. Ross, (The Internet Classics Archive, «<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.html>» Active March, 2009), Book IV, Part 3, 1005, b19-20, 1006 a1.

¹⁶ Turner writes: ‘It is of the greatest consequence to see that negative language about God is no more apophatic in itself than is affirmative language.’ Quoting Denys the Areopagite, Turner adds: ‘[The Cause of all] is beyond assertion *and denial*,’ and again: ‘We make assertions *and denials* of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion...[and] *also beyond every denial*,’ and yet again: ‘[The One is] beyond...the assertion of all things and the denial of all things, [is] that which is beyond assertion *and denial*.’ (See Turner, pp. 34–35).

‘[...] a very great difference 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*.’¹⁷ Whilst one posits a negative image, the other claims to negate all imagery entirely. In this way it seeks to *unsay* altogether.

But how can we *unsay* without being subject to the principle of contradiction? For, in terms of ascending the scale to what God truly is as God, we attempt to deny the inadequate assertion that ‘God is light’ by saying instead that ‘God is darkness’ or indeed ‘God is *not* light.’ And yet, if these statements too are mere predicates and inadequate assertions, we are left with no choice according to the principle of contradiction but to try and deny these claims also. The only way we can deny the claims ‘God is darkness’ or ‘God is *not* light’ is to posit again the opposite proposition, ‘God is light.’ The result is an endless to and fro from one assertion to the other, which not only prevents ascent to what God in truth is as God, but *thwarts the negation of the propositional*. As we can see, rather than attaining the negation of the propositional, we simply end up swapping positive and negative propositions *ad infinitum*. So what is the solution to this problem?

This vicious circle only occurs if the assertions are understood to be literal propositions.¹⁸ For if I believe that the assertion ‘God is light’ is literally true, then the literal assertion to the contrary, ‘God is darkness’ or ‘God is *not* light’, will in effect say that ‘God is light’ is literally false, because according to the principle of contradiction they cannot both be literally true. This, however, does not so simply apply if the images are instead understood to be metaphors, the reason being that they are not literally true, but metaphorically true. Turner writes: ‘[...] it is in the nature of metaphors that they succeed in conveying the truths which they convey only on condition that they are recognized to be literal falsehoods, for it is part of their metaphorical meaning that they are literally false.’¹⁹ This tells us that literal truths cannot be said together because only one can be true, whereas metaphorical truths can be said together because, although they do negate one another, neither is literally true and so cannot, therefore invalidate the other. This then marks the difference between ‘metaphorical opposition’ and ‘literal

¹⁷ Turner also adds: ‘The first of each of these pairs belongs to the cataphatic in theology, and only the second is the strategy of the apophatic.’ (Ibid., p. 35).

¹⁸ Turner tells us that Denys the Areopagite treats both the perceptual affirmations and denials made about God as metaphors. Turner argues: ‘if treated as literal, the attributions of the perceptual’ names are all false, and no special strategy of denying them is required. We all know that God is not literally ‘lifeless’ or ‘material’ and that literally God does not have ‘weight,’ ‘quantity’ or ‘shape.’ Since they are all literally false, the negation of these names, taken as literal, would simply yield the contraries of these names as literally true. And that is not at all what is involved in the apophatic strategy of denial.’ (Ibid., p. 36).

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 37.

contradiction'.²⁰ Metaphorically speaking, what one image affirms the other can in the same instance deny, whereas literally speaking, what one image affirms the other cannot in the same instance deny.²¹ Where opposites are mutually inclusive and so coincide, the *coincidentia oppositorum*, contraries are mutually exclusive and so, we might say, 'coexcide.' That is, while opposites fall in with one another, contradictions fall out with one another. Opposition concerns 'both-and', while contradiction concerns 'either-or.' Opposed metaphors can be simultaneously affirmed, whilst literal contradictions cannot. But for what reason do the opposed metaphors need to be simultaneously affirmed?

The answer is that the juxtaposition of, for example, the affirmative image 'God is light' with the negative image 'God is darkness' results in the negation of each image by the other because both are being affirmed. And the same is true with the juxtaposition of the images 'God is light' and 'God is *not* light.' These can be said together because they are not literally true, which leaves aside contradiction. This being the case, it begs a second question: how exactly are the opposed metaphors simultaneously affirmed? The answer is through 'paradox', or, more specifically, through an 'oxymoron.' Thus, we might juxtapose the affirmative image 'God is light' and the negative image 'God is darkness' by saying, for example, 'God is a dazzling darkness.' Likewise, we might juxtapose the affirmative image 'God is light' and the negative image 'God is *not* light' by saying, for example, 'God is a lightless light.'

The crux of the matter is that in being said together in the form of a coincidence of opposites, they inevitably serve in cancelling out the propositional itself. That which dazzles cannot be dark, whilst that which is dark cannot dazzle. And that which is lightless cannot be light, whilst that which is light cannot be lightless. The assertions 'God is a dazzling darkness' and 'God is a lightless light' effect the negation of *each* image in that what one affirms the other necessarily denies. And so crucially, what is said to befall is the 'transcendence' of the imagery itself, which in turn has the effect of *negating the propositional*. In his book, *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael A. Sells writes:

[...] in the apophatic use of metaphors, causal explanation is displaced as the metaphor turns back upon itself in the hard version of paradox. [...] The meaning event with apophatic language includes a moment that is nihilistic or "anarchic" — without *arche* or first principle. The anarchic moment is intimated in the turning back of the second proposition upon the first in order to remove the delimitation.²²

²⁰ Their relation, we might say, is one of conflict and resistance, rather than the vanquishing of one by the other. That is, they 'struggle against' one another so as to remain antagonists.

²¹ Turner maintains that 'the logic of negation in respect of metaphors is [...] different from that of literal utterances [...] in that opposed metaphors, unlike literal contradictions, can be simultaneously affirmed'. (Ibid., p. 38).

²² Michael A. Sells, *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994, pp. 208–09.

Sells refers to this momentary liberation as ‘ontological pre-construction’.²³

The way to the apophatic then, is through the dialectics of the cataphatic. For example, the assertion ‘God is light’ is the *affirmation*, the assertion ‘God is darkness’ the *negation*, and finally the assertion ‘God is a dazzling darkness’ serves in *negating the negation*. The coincidence of the opposites negates the propositional nature of language, in that the imagery is undercut by the imagery. That is to say, each image (insofar as they can be affirmed together) subverts the other. Sells writes:

Any saying (even a negative saying) demands a corrective proposition, an unsaying. But that correcting proposition which unsays the previous proposition is in itself a “saying” that must be “unsaid” in turn. It is in the tension between the two propositions that the discourse becomes meaningful.²⁴

A little later, Sells also writes: ‘The coincidence of opposites is a form of dialectical logic that plays against and upon the linear logic of delimited reference.’²⁵ Turner refers to this as the combined and mutually cancelling forces that crack open the surface of language, so as to leave a fissure in our discourse through which the apophatic is glimpsed.²⁶

2. The ambiguity of apophaticism

We have seen that, unambiguously, according to the principle of contradiction, one or neither proposition *but not both* must be true. However, with the coincidence of opposite metaphors that negate the propositional altogether, it is the case that ‘neither proposition *because of both* must be true.’ The coincidence of opposites that grants the apophatic, is in its very nature ambiguous. Something is ambiguous precisely because it wanders in two directions or drives two ways. It is owing to this double nature that the ambiguous is in turn understood to be doubtful or dubious. This is to say, that the words ‘doubtful’ and ‘dubious’ each refer in meaning to being twofold. Typically, whenever something is referred to as ambiguous and for that doubtful and dubious, it is meant disparagingly on account of its failure to distinguish between alternatives. It therefore fails to successfully provide any clear and certain meaning. It is for this reason likewise ‘equivocal’, which is to say of doubtful sense, in that it gives equal significance to alternatives and is therefore capable of a twofold interpretation. It is seen therefore to deceive. Accordingly, the ambiguous or equivocal is deemed unreliable. However, the ambiguous or equivocal is precisely what apophatic discourse relies upon. Here, it is the distinguishing between alternatives and providing a clear and certain meaning that proves to be

²³ Ibid., p. 10.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 3.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 21.

²⁶ See Turner, p. 33.

the failing. In this respect the unambiguous is unreliable, which is to say the ambiguous *is* reliable. The ambiguous is reliable in that its double meaning grants the necessarily unclear and uncertain outcome on which the apophatic depends.²⁷

The ambiguity of apophaticism relies upon paradox, which literally means, ‘contrary to received opinion.’ And yet, as tends to be the case with paradox, the seemingly absurd or self-contradictory statement that is logically unacceptable nevertheless points to an order of truth that supersedes logic. It is for this reason that the paradoxical is often understood to be ‘strange, but true.’ Accordingly, whilst the paradoxical ambiguity of apophaticism is in form oxymoronic, it is *not* ‘pointedly foolish’, as the word ‘oxymoron’ in fact means.²⁸

However, the ambiguity posed by apophatic discourse is transcended *by way of* the ambiguity. The ambiguity indeed occurs, but because it occurs it exceeds or surpasses itself. Both meanings occur at once in order for each to undermine the other. That is, where both images can be said together, the one is cancelled out by the other, so that the ambiguity cancels out the ambiguity. The doubtful and dubious do not in this respect imply problems proposing a solution, for they in fact grant the solution through their mutual subversion.

All in all, the negation of the propositional *through* the propositional is seen as necessary in that, as Turner points out, to know what God is like, we would have to know what he is not like, and to know what he is not like, we would have to know what he is like. The point is, as Turner indicates, that we do not know what God is similar to, or what God is different from, precisely because God as God is beyond all similarity and difference. We do not know to what extent we can say what God is, nor for that matter to what extent we can say what God is not. In that God is identified as not being like or unlike anything, our affirmations and negations fall by the wayside, which is why each must be affirmed so as to refute the other. It is here, says Turner that, ‘[...] on the other side of both our affirmations and our denials that the silence of the transcendent is glimpsed, seen through the fissures opened up in our language by the dialectical strategy of self-subversion.’²⁹ Similarly, Sells writes: ‘Apophasis moves towards the

²⁷ We might add, that the coincidence of opposite metaphors refers to a more genuine sense of the word ‘rely’, which means to ‘bind together.’ Incidentally, ‘binding together’ was understood by the ancients to be the meaning of the word ‘religion.’

²⁸ The paradoxical and oxymoronic are understood as logically unacceptable and therefore absurd, when taken to be literal truths. But this should not be the case when they are taken as metaphorical truths, for the metaphorical points to an order of truth that supersedes logic. In this respect, truth points to uncertainty rather than certainty, to the infinite rather than the definite. However, to the logical positivist kind of thinking that by nature is exact, specific, or precise, this poetic manner of thinking is generally regarded as erroneous, fallacious, and so not valid in that it cannot be verified as true.

²⁹ Turner, p. 45.

transreferential. It cannot dispense with reference, but through the constant turning back upon its own referential delimitations, it seeks a momentary liberation from such delimitations.³⁰

3. A defence of language

Given what we have argued so far, apophatic discourse is often understood to highlight a deficiency in language. Turner, for example, says of apophasis that it is: '[...] a Greek neologism for the breakdown of *speech*, which, in face of the unknowability of God, falls infinitely short of the mark.'³¹ He also says of the term 'apophatic theology' that it: '[...] ought to mean something like: "that speech about God which is the failure of speech".'³² This is true, but only insofar as speech by naming delimits, thereby determining the limits or boundaries of something as something.³³ Consequently, its delimiting nature cannot be relied upon to name the unlimited. Even if we refer to the unlimited as the 'unlimited', we still refer to it by name and so delimit the unlimited. That is, both the referent and the name imply a delimited entity. Whatever we say, by so saying, we refer to a grammatical object.³⁴ But, as Sells argues, 'the prime motivation of apophatic language is to subvert or displace the grammatical object.'³⁵ In this respect, the dialectical strategy of self-subversion seems to direct our attention to the breakdown or failure of speech. And it is for this reason that Turner asserts the following:

the negation of the negation is not a *third* utterance, additional to the affirmative and the negative, in good linguistic order; it is not some intelligible *synthesis* of affirmation and negation; it is rather the collapse of our affirmation and denials into disorder, which we can only express, *a fortiori*, in bits of collapsed, disordered language.³⁶

This, I venture to argue, is not entirely the case. For the paradoxical coincidence of opposite metaphors that serves to negate the negation is surely a *third* utterance, which is why Turner refers to it as a dialectical strategy. It may indeed represent the collapse of affirmations and denials into disordered language, and yet it is language, and aptly, I say, after all is said and done, that not only suffers this collapse but permits it as suffering. The collapse that language suffers is indicative of language, in that suffering in terms of 'bearing' and 'carrying' is language's function as a meaning event. The only difference here is that language suffers in such a way as to attempt to unsay. Language 'says' *nothing*, which is not to say that language

³⁰ Sells, pp. 8–9.

³¹ Turner, p. 20.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³³ Sells asserts: 'The very act of naming delimits. A name's referent is, by the act of naming, marked off in some manner from those things which it is not. It is... a some-thing, a delimited entity.' (Sells, pp. 15–16).

³⁴ Sells, for example, refers to the apophatic event as 'the evocation of a sense of mystery.' (Sells, p. 16). However, he then deliberately qualifies this by saying the following: 'To evaluate mystical union as an experience of mystery is a kataphatic judgment. The experience has a grammatical object (mystery).' (Sells, p. 217).

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³⁶ Turner, p. 22.

fails to speak. Language permits this unsaying in that the unsaying must ‘pass through’ saying. It is language’s unsaying that momentarily ‘gives leave’ of language’s saying. This dialectical utterance does not simply produce a *tertium aliquid*, or ‘third something’, but rather what we might call a *tertium inaliquid*, or ‘third un-something.’

Furthermore, Turner says of the reality of the divine, that it is ‘a language-defeating silence’, adding later, as we have already quoted, that on the other side of our affirmations and denials ‘the silence of the transcendent is glimpsed.’³⁷ Again, I would argue that the silence Turner speaks of is only glimpsed because of language. And that this is so, we can assert that what is glimpsed is not simply a silence, for the silence is said. Accordingly, the silence is not a pure, or so to speak, silent silence, but an acquired silence. The silence is not simply silent, but is in addition to the speaking.³⁸ Given this situation, commentators such as Turner are forced to admit that ‘[t]he apophatic is the linguistic strategy of somehow showing by means of language that which lies beyond language’ and that ‘the proper route to the apophatic is [...] through the dialectics of the cataphatic.’³⁹ Likewise, we have already quoted Sells, who in asserting that apophasis moves towards the transreferential, also adds that: ‘It cannot dispense with reference [...]’⁴⁰

4. The ambiguity of theology

To conclude, both the cataphatic and the apophatic fail in their respective intentions. For in its particular approach to God, the cataphatic necessarily excludes what it cannot include. Whilst in its particular approach to God, the apophatic necessarily includes what it cannot exclude. The cataphatic cannot say it, whilst the apophatic cannot *not* say it. The cataphatic feigns to affirm God, whilst the apophatic feigns to deny God. The combined failure of both cataphaticism and apophaticism discloses, I believe, a fundamental ambiguity in theological meaning and, indeed, in *Being* itself in the form of an *aporia*, which is to say, an impassable or irresolvable situation: this ambiguity being that a substantial ontology and a non-substantial dis-ontology mutually presuppose and are each indebted to the other.

This indebtedness tells us that a more genuine approach to God is ambiguous, which simply points to its having a double meaning. This ambiguity might be considered doubtful and

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 22, 45.

³⁸ Meister Eckhart wrestles with this problem when he writes: ‘I say God is unspoken. But St Augustine says that God is not unspoken, for if He were unspoken that would be speech, and he is more silence than speech.’ (Meister, Eckhart, *Sermons and Treatises, Volume 1*, trans. and ed. by Maurice, O’Connell, Walshe, Element, 1987, Sermon Thirty Eight, p. 274).

³⁹ Turner, pp. 34, 39.

⁴⁰ Sells, p. 8.

dubious, owing to the failure to distinguish between the two alternatives that the approach to God offers. But as we have seen, the ambiguous nature of God is such that it must be doubtful and dubious, because any decision to choose, or indeed, choice to decide, that is characteristic of a thinking that hankers after proof and certainty, will have already gone awry in its intended approach to God. Indeed, I would argue that theology must *strive to be* doubtful and dubious in order to be ‘reliable’, that is to say, binding. That both the cataphatic and the apophatic fail in their respective intentions, that failure on both accounts, albeit unwittingly, is their actual success. It is here, according to ambiguity, that theology *as* theology must be done. It must be unashamedly ambiguous, and for that doubtful and dubious, for whilst being guilty of the charges made against it, it is not affected by these charges because, by its nature, it overrides their limitations. Hence it is immune to those charges, owing to the fact that it is not subject to the framework of thinking according to which those charges are made. In strictly theological terms, any charges of being doubtful or dubious are in themselves doubtful or dubious.

To close, I would repeat that the mutual failings of both cataphaticism and apophaticism, according to their respective feignings, in fact disclose an innate ambiguity in mystical theology that *each* method implies. The challenge is to see how this failing in either respect, nevertheless succeeds in opening up the approach of theology as ‘the study of the nature of God.’ This does not simply suggest, as might appear, that a new approach beyond that of cataphaticism and apophaticism is required, but demands the recognition that the tension, struggle, and feigning in each of these two disciplines is an integral part of their method, as well as a nod to the necessity of the other. Accordingly, this should also be taken into consideration when contemplating the metaphorical truths of any religious scripture itself, or commentary on that scripture. Finally, we might say that the ‘favourable failing’ of each method points to yet another ambiguity, worthy of our respect and attention.

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