ABSTRACT

A Pregnant Silence: Contemporary Apophaticism and Virtues Ethics

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This dissertation surveys and critiques the ethical consequences of the contemporary revival of apophaticism. It examines representative examples of a continuum of contemporary apophatic thought—primarily Jacques Derrida, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, Jean-Luc Marion, and Denys Turner—and assesses the ethical implications of the accounts themselves as well as the compatibility of their accounts with virtues ethics. It concludes with a study of Bonaventure and argues that his Christocentric Exemplarism allows him to harmonize the tensions between both the apophatic and cataphatic and between the relationship of apophaticism with virtues ethics. I suggest that the centrality of humility in Bonaventure's thought offers rich resources for the contemporary theological reconsideration of metaphysics and ethics.

A Pregnant Silence: Contemporary Apophaticism and Virtues Ethics

by

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For my family: in the harmony of faith, hope, and love

CHAPTER ONE

Why Speak of Silence?: The Return to the Apophatic Tradition

> In order to unfold what is implicit in so many discourses, one would have each
> time to make a pedagogical outlay that it is just not reasonable to expect from
> every book. Here the responsibility has to be shared out, mediated; the reading
> has to do its work and the work has to make its reader.[1]
>
> — Jacques Derrida

Introduction

What is Apophaticism?

In the broadest sense of the word, apophaticism identifies a stream of

philosophical or theological thought that stresses the limitations, or even the impossibility,

of human knowledge and language about God. As we shall see, the terms "mystical

theology," "negative theology," or even "mysticism," are often—and often confusingly—

also used to describe this kind of thought and the literary styles that express it. Evidence

of apophatic thought stretches back to the pre-Socratics, finds its earliest influential

expression in Plato's *Timaeus*, and becomes inextricably linked to the western

philosophical tradition through the patristic Christian engagement with Philo and middle-

and neo-Platonism.[2] The Platonic tradition emphasized human inability to know or to say

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[1] Jacques Derrida, "Heidegger, the Philosophers' Hell," in *Points . . .:Interviews, 1974-1994*, Elisabeth Weber, Ed., Peggy Kamuf, Transl. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995). 187-188

[2] For one compendium with commentary which attempts to represent the major strands of apophatic thought in philosophy, theology, and poetry, see both volumes of William Franke, ed., *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts,* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). For another (though problematic) attempt at tracking and interpreting the development of "negative theology" in early Greek and Christian thought up to Pseudo-Dionysius, see both volumes of Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence*, (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986).

what God is, as we read in the *Timaeus* that "To discover the maker and father of this universe is indeed a hard task, and having found him it would be impossible to tell everyone about him."[3]

Especially when referred to as "negative theology," a label used with various and sometimes contradictory meanings, apophatic thought is often summarized by the statement that it is more true to say what God is *not* than to attempt to say what God is.[4] Consistent with this summary, the most influential formulations of apophaticism have a paradoxical character, such as Pseudo-Dionysius' late-6th century teaching in *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* that the ascent to God is a movement to be "supremely united to the completely unknown" and to know "beyond the mind by knowing nothing"—a journey that brings us into a "brilliant darkness."[5] Although other emphases eventually eclipsed awareness of its influence on scholastic theology, apophatic thought played a critical and ubiquitous role in the development of the medieval philosophical and theological tradition which so thoroughly shaped the modern era. For example, Aquinas quotes Pseudo-Dionysius second only to Aristotle. Nevertheless, a renewed interest in apophaticism beginning in the 1980's now seems remarkable considering the

Bernard McGinn's multi-volume *The Presence of God: A History of Western Christian Mysticism* necessarily addresses much of the Christian apophatic tradition, but, while aware of the more philosophically flavored expressions, he focuses more attention on what is later recognized as the mystical mode of expression.

[3] Plato, "Timaeus," in *Timaeus and Critas (Revised)*, transl. Desmond Lee, (New York: Penguin, 1977). 40, 27e; p. 41, 28e.

[4] For an explanation (which stretches to consider Bonaventure, as well) of the sense in which even a robustly Christian interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius should be understood as "negative theology,", see Benedict XVI, "General Audience, St. Peter's Square: Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite," May 14, 2008. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080514_en.html

[5] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Mystical Theology*, in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, Transl. Colm Lubheid, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 137 and 135.

relative inattention given to it in the previous centuries of modern philosophical and theological thought. Furthermore, the engagement, although admittedly piecemeal, with ancient, medieval, and early modern apophatic thinkers marked a shift for many contemporary philosophers who had dealt primarily with the legacy of Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Heidegger.

Although the apophatic tradition includes other important figures, such as Philo and Clement of Alexandria, the primary interlocutors for its revival in contemporary philosophy and theology have been the pre-Socratics, Plato, Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas, Angelus Silesius (a 17th century poet and mystic), Heidegger, and Emmanuel Levinas. Late twentieth century interpretation of these sources, which often reads apophaticism as a critique of metaphysics and language that claims any certainty about God, forms the background for the questions, problems, and goals of an apophatic revival.[6] Accordingly, contemporary readings of the tradition reflect not only variations on older Christian and Greek species of theology and philosophy, but also appropriations of this tradition which attempt to articulate theories of transcendence separate from philosophical metaphysics and theological claims about God.

Philosophers such as Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, and Jacques Derrida show an interest in the apophatic when they turn to it in order to recover a sense of transcendence—some because they reject the Enlightenment accounts of subjectivity,

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[6] For versions of this genealogy not limited to those sources central to the modern revival see Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 39-83, and William Franke, ed., *On What Cannot Be Said: Apophatic Discourses in Philosophy, Religion, Literature, and the Arts, Vol. 1, Classic Formulations*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

others because they need a non-theological formal category of transcendent "other" in order to ground their appeals to a hope for something beyond existing material conditions.[7] However, others in the conversation with modern Continental philosophy, such as Jean-Luc Marion, Richard Kearney, Thomas Carlson, Denys Turner, and Thomas Hibbs, see apophatic discourse as an opportunity to introduce new articulations of theological concerns and categories into philosophical discussions which had previously banned theological considerations.

Additionally, apophaticism—often translated into discourses on "otherness"—seems to open up a new way of doing ethics: by stressing the uncertainty of human language and knowledge, Christian philosophers and theologians can speak about ethics in language which, although ultimately grounded in revelation, is superficially acceptable to an otherwise a-theological ethical context. As Turner and Davies characterize the contemporary situation, "negative theology can be used creatively to explore affinities with an intellectual environment in which negation – as difference, absence, otherness – is frequently judged to be more interesting than affirmation." [8]

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[7] This end of the spectrum represents what Denys Turner calls "that exaggerated 'apophaticism' which can barely distinguish itself from a sophisticated form of atheism." Depending on which examples one reads, and how one defines atheism, many or most of the scholars on this extreme may not even wish to attempt to distinguish themselves from atheism. See Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), xiii-xv, and 234-235.

[8] Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, *Silence and the Word*, Davies, Oliver and Denys Turner, eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 1. Citing Gilles Deleuze that "difference 'is manifestly in the air'," Turner and Davies compare the recent attraction to negative theology to the attraction, in the late 1960's, of discussing "difference" in Continental philosophy.

What is this Project?

This project examines the contemporary revival of apophatic, or negative, theology with regard to its consequences for theological virtues ethics.[9] While many modern accounts of apophaticism either imply or clearly state a prescriptive intent—apophatic thought is supposed to address certain philosophical and theological problems and to suggest constructive solutions—sustained attention to the consequences for ethics of these apophatic prescriptions is quite rare. In response to this, and in recognition of the great need for hearing what the apophatic tradition can teach us, I attempt here to bring some well-known representatives of contemporary apophatic thought into conversation with virtues ethics—which has itself undergone a great revival in the last generation.

From the perspective of virtues ethics, in which habits must be cultivated in order to form virtuous character, much of contemporary apophaticism raises questions about moral formation that it cannot answer and creates problems that it cannot resolve on its own.[10] For example: On what basis can one form habits directed toward the good if the good is ultimately and completely unknowable and "unsayable"? How can someone train

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[9] For scholarly recognition of the revival of interest in the apophatic tradition and attempts to develop new apophatic philosophies and theologies, see: Sarah Coakley's "Introduction," to *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, Sarah Coakley and Charles M. Stang, eds. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009); Richard Kearney, *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness* (New York: Routledge, 2003) and *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutic of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," in *Silence and the Word*, Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also the exchange of essays and responses among Kearney, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion, and John Caputo in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, John Caputo and Michael Scanlan, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

[10] Richard Kearney raises one version of this problem with regard to Derrida and Marion in *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters*, in *The God Who May Be*, and in "Desire of God," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*.

character modeled on virtue if the highest standard of goodness exceeds our ability to know and to articulate it? In order to develop the conceptual and grammatical framework for my ethical critique of contemporary apophaticism, I will look to Alasdair MacIntyre who instigated the modern recovery of classical virtues ethics in the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas. [11] MacIntyre and those who have followed his lead seek to redirect ethical inquiry away from consequentialist and decision procedure models back toward questions of the development of states of character. Consistent with the goals of this project, I will assess contemporary accounts of apophaticism from the specific concern within virtues ethics for the formation and training of character via the practices and habits constitutive of the virtues.

While I eventually conclude that several of my interlocutors are picking and choosing isolated conceptual or stylistic aspects of apophaticism in order to solve recent philosophical problems while ignoring or excising elements of apophaticism crucial to its coherence, I present their positions on their own terms and, as much as is possible in a project of this scope and length, in context. Furthermore, while I am ultimately concerned with the consequences of accounts of apophaticism for theological virtues ethics, I also attempt to gauge the ethic that "rises out of" or is implied from each account, if not stated explicitly by the interlocutor himself or herself.

The thinkers I engage here are in conversation with some form of apophaticism along a wide range of possible interpretations of that term. Some use it to mean a conceptual "negation" of every assertion about God such that we progress into a mystical

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[11] Although the discussion of virtue never completely disappeared (eg. Elizabeth Anscombe and Philippa Foot), the publication of *After Virtue* in 1981 brought virtues ethics to the forefront of philosophical and theological discussion. Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3rd Edition), (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981 (2007)).

union; others find paradoxical language and wholesale rejection of any affirmation to be expressive of the apophatic. Still others find that the lessons of the apophatic have specific bearing on the questions of ontology—particularly with reference to the possibility or impossibility of speaking of God's being while avoiding the error of considering God to be a being. As a result, my engagements with contemporary apophatic thought will be quite diverse: from Derrida's challenge to all determinate language and thought about God, to Marion's challenge of a "God without Being," to Denys Turner's Thomistic dialectic of cataphatic and apophatic, and finally to my own reading of Bonaventure's harmonization through a Christological account of a God beyond being and knowing (who nevertheless becomes incarnate and known as a being). In order to understand what any of these accounts and arguments involve, however, we must first understand the philosophical context common to all.

The Kantian Frame

In this study, I present the recent apophatic turn as part of a long line of reactions to modern epistemological assertions about our knowledge of God. Although there are many paths we could follow to arrive at and to explain the current situation, the most relevant is the influence of Immanuel Kant, from whom the most recognizable of these epistemological assertions have been derived: we cannot know or say anything about God that can be considered as "content" or as "substantive," and any thought or talk of God we do attempt is either mere opinion or only formal or regulative. We may only think and talk "as if" there were a God. Such claims have consequences for philosophy and many other disciplines as well, but, as Philip Clayton notes in *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, "The Kantian challenge to God-language represents the most serious threat to

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theology in the modern era."[12] Even outside of academic theology or philosophy, we might go so far as to say that the "air we breathe" in the West since the 19th century is Kantian with regard to the most basic grammar and conceptual framework for both God-talk and ethics.

However, the dilemma concerning knowledge and speech of God was not created by Kant, of course. Bruce Ellis Benson sums up the theoretical dilemma, for Plato's knowledge of the truly "real" intelligible world and for Christians' knowledge of God, inherent in the claim to know something about that which is really transcendent. "If I can transcend my finitude to understand God in his fullness, then God is—at least to me—no longer transcendent . . . Either God is transcendent and so my knowledge of him never fully transcends the limits of my time and place, or I become transcendent and God thereby becomes fully immanent to me."[13] Benson goes on to suggest the possibility for a middle ground and claims that this is the "properly orthodox Christian conception of God": a limited, but real, immanence "in certain respects, to certain degrees" while maintaining a real transcendence.[14]

Of course, even if conceding the possibility for this limited immanence of the transcendent—and we shall see that this is by no means accepted universally as a coherent position—the difficulty is merely shifted to determining and debating which "certain respects and certain degrees" allow for a God who could be immanent while remaining transcendent. This is precisely the context for the revival of apophaticism—

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[12] Philip Clayton, *The Problem of God in Modern Thought*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2000), 25.

[13] Bruce Ellis Benson, *Graven Ideologies: Nietzsche, Derrida, & Marion on Modern Idolatry*. (Downer's Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2002). 31.

[14] Ibid.

now infused with a postmodern strain of skepticism which both denies and needs

transcendence (or a functionally equivalent substitute) as a formal conceptual category.

As I will argue later in Chapter Six, the Christian account of the Incarnation offers

uniquely rich resources for understanding this philosophical dilemma. While this is

unremarkable for a theological position, I will also suggest that, while it is unrealistic to

insist that contemporary philosophy must adopt orthodox Christian claims, philosophical

projects (like Derrida's) have already recognized the formal problem which can only be

solved by something like the concept of the truly transcendent becoming as fully

immanent as is comprehendible within creaturely limitations. As Chapter Six will argue,

Christian philosophy and theology, especially as articulated by Bonaventure's

exemplarism, have at their center the surprising tenet of incarnational Christology, which,

while certainly not developed to solve this philosophical dilemma, offers such

surprisingly resonant possibilities that thinkers like Derrida were drawn to engage a

tradition saturated with the kind of certainty they reject as dangerous.

Although I will address this challenge in detail later with regard to how each of

my interlocutors responds, it is useful to describe the dilemma in the modern shape given

to it by the "Kantian frame." Most broadly, we may say that, after Kant, an immense

burden is shifted to those who would speak of God using propositional language or who

refer to genuine knowledge of God. Kant's argument concerning what we might call the

"knowability and sayability" of God, helped establish a stark separation between

empirical knowledge and anything else which might be claimed as knowledge apart from

empirical data, including God. Kant famously explains in the Preface to his *Critique of*

Pure Reason that he "had to deny [or remove] knowledge in order to make room for

faith."[15] While one could claim that his project actually, and very effectively, redefines knowledge (and reason) rather than denying it, the distancing effect with respect to the relationship among knowledge, reason, and faith is clear.

This separation of knowledge and faith, seen in the modern notion of the barrier between fact and mere opinion, verifiable truth and unprovable belief, and eventually the sundering of value and fact is so influential that it could stand in as one element of the definition of modernity itself.[16] Although Kant recognizes a purely formal and regulative role for the concept of God, on his account, our attempts to make substantive assertions about God cannot rise above other opinions for which we can offer no empirical support. Denys Turner offers the following summary of what he terms "Kant's rationalist agnosticism":

> For Kant, speculative reason's falling short of God consists in the impossibility that the transcendental conditions of human knowledge and agency—the conditions of possibility of our knowing the world and of acting as free agents within it—could themselves be an object of our knowledge and agency in the world. Hence, they cannot be an object of knowledge at all; not one arrived at, therefore, even by inference, whether from the nature of things, or from the fact of the existence of things rather than of nothing.[17]

Similarly, ethical thought in the modern era bears the distinct stamp of Kant—particularly with regard to the notion that reason alone, over against religious teaching or the traditional conception of the virtues, can offer a path to universally acceptable morality. This is not merely a variation on prior ways of doing ethics, but rather a fundamental recasting of the concept of the human person, the Good, and the relation

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[15] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason (2nd Edition, 1787)*, Transl. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

[16] See Clayton, 18-35 for a summary of his case for this claim.

[17] Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 254.

between them. Allen Wood expresses something of the radical basis and scope of Kant's ethic: "His theory of human nature even shows why people's moral perceptions are untrustworthy to the extent that they have been acquired from socialization in traditional institutions."[18] Moral education should be founded upon an attempt "to teach people to employ rational principles so as to criticize their perceptions and intuitive judgments about particular cases," thus encouraging the progress of enlightenment— the "self-thinking or the pure self-legislation of human beings as autonomous rational agents."[19]

Accordingly, the individual must subject to a Kantian critical rationality whatever he has inherited, assumed, and previously accepted from social institutions and religious tradition and doctrine. Kant's law of morality, which rests solely upon his definition of "pure" reason and needs no historical doctrine, is "a practical cognition. . . [which] either already leads of itself alone to faith in God, or at least determines the concept of him as that of a moral legislator, thus guiding toward a pure religious faith which is not only within the grasp of every human being but also in the highest degree worthy of respect."[20] This confluence of vocabulary, concepts, and aims—practical, pure, moral, universal access—when combined with Kant's larger project of rejecting the authority of any tradition helps us to understand two relevant issues for this dissertation. First, all the interlocutors discussed here are, like everyone else in the (post)modern world, thoroughly influenced by the Kantian frame—even when attempting to break out of or defeat it. Second, we must explore how contemporary thinkers understand the challenge posed by

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[18] Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 332.

[19] Ibid., 332, 331.

[20] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, transl. and ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1998), 175.

Kant—what important things are at stake— such that a turn to the apophatic seems a helpful response for both the epistemological and the ethical problems.

The Revival

In the wake of several important essays, books, conferences, debates, and colloquia throughout the 1980's and 1990's, several scholars have identified the renewed interest in the apophatic as a major trend, theme, or even, as Martin Laird termed it in 2001, "the Current Apophatic Rage." Sarah Coakley suggests that Laird's somewhat facetious comparison to a frenzy for new fashion is not too great an exaggeration. As she points out in an introduction to a 2008 "re-thinking" of Pseudo-Dionysius, " 'rages' are not always tempered by scholarly caution of philosophical precision; and 'apophatic' ones are arguable the more dangerous for being, by definition, hard to define."[21] While this is a sobering thought for anyone attempting to explore contemporary apophaticism, Coakley goes on to hint at a useful starting point—a hint I follow in this project—by invoking, albeit with a sense of foreboding similar to one Coakley expresses, the influence of Jacques Derrida.[22]

Clearly, this dissertation cannot even survey, much less properly analyze and critique, the dozens of related metaphysical, phenomenological, epistemological, and ethical threads involved in the centuries of thought summed up so far. Accordingly, I am beginning from the position of accepting the judgment of scholars, such as those listed in footnote 8 above, who see a broad and vigorous "apophatic revival" over the last thirty

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[21] Sarah Coakley, "Introduction—Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite," in *Modern Theology* 24:4, October 2008, 531.

[22] Ibid., and Footnote 3, 527. Coakley refers to the danger and annoyance of "student essays written in sometimes unconstrained 'post-modernese'" as one consequence of recent apophatic revivals. She warns: "'Loose talk costs lives—even 'apophatic' talk of the intoxicating Derridean variety."

years. The first step for this project, then, is selecting representative examples. Even this task, however, is aided by the fact that most commentators who recognize the revival also focus on a few scholars as central interlocutors—philosopher or theologian—for contemporary writing about apophaticism.

For the second major element of this study, an examination of the consequences for ethics, we must remember that any analysis and critique must stand somewhere, within some context of accepted standards and an account of the good and true, in order to understand and to assess. Since an ethical critique must come out of a particular account of ethics, it remains to explain the standpoint from which I will assess and gauge the ethical consequences of these various apophaticisms. From a purely historical perspective, a basis in virtues ethics seems fitting. The contemporary revival of virtues ethics in its "MacIntyrean" variant happens at roughly the same time as the apophatic revival. Furthermore, interest in this new articulation of virtues ethics was motivated in large part by the recognition that the Kantian-based models of ethics, as with Kantian-based models for epistemology or metaphysics, had either already failed, could not avoid failing soon, or had never actually worked.

So both historically and conceptually, the revivals of apophaticism and virtues ethics are very closely related. For these reasons, and because of my own commitment to models of virtues ethics, this dissertation will base the analysis and critique of the contemporary revival of apophaticism from the perspective of one committed to a "MacIntyre-derived" account of virtues ethics. In particular, I will operate from the position which sees virtues ethics as concerned primarily with the development of habits

and the participation in practices that form a virtue-guided character, the performance of which cultivates practical goods which have as their *telos* a participation in The Good.

<p style="text-align:center">*Whose Virtues?: Contemporary Virtues Formation as Hermeneutical Lens*</p>

While I will devote the next chapter to a limited survey of some of the main voices in the apophatic tradition, in this section I will venture only a very cursory explanation of to what I mean by virtues ethics. One reason for this is the simple recognition that this dissertation is primarily about apophaticism and only about virtues ethics insofar as it provides a hermeneutical lens through which to assess a critical consequence of contemporary apophaticism. Another reason for presenting such a brief sketch of contemporary virtues ethics is the relatively simple and straightforward nature of such a sketch when compared to the immensely more difficult task of explaining apophaticism. Furthermore, I will eventually offer a sketch of Bonaventure's thought, which harmonizes his particular, perhaps uniquely harmonious, accounts of the apophatic and virtues ethics. Therefore, the description of contemporary virtues ethics must remain—due to limitations of space, as well—modest and compact, offering only what is necessary to function as a hermeneutic and diagnostic tool for the contemporary continuum.

At its Aristotelian root, an ethic based on virtues is concerned with the formation of a kind of person rather than the formation of a system or set of rules which would enable any person anywhere to master and apply. The contemporary revival sees in Aristotle an attempt to focus on and define "excellences" inherent to human flourishing over against modern procedural methods focusing on a process or "decision flow-chart" which attempts to guarantee the protection of a few universal principles. Modern

"situational ethics" that relies on such procedural approaches reaches a dead end, because the endless number of variables involved in moral action guarantees the failure of any system attempting to predict and prescribe the right choice in every hypothetical possibility. Even if all right-thinking people could agree on certain moral principles that should inform such a system, this kind of situational ethic would still founder upon the rocks of that aspect of human nature expressed in St. Paul's frustrated observation in Romans 7:19: "For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do— this I keep on doing." If systematic knowledge of set principles and procedures is insufficient to promote ethical behavior, who indeed will deliver us?

Virtues ethics aims at forming a person in whom moral and intellectual goodness inhere because of the practices which cultivate virtues and the habits of reasoning and action they build. Early in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle condenses the question of moral excellence down to the issue of pleasures and pains. Attributing the kernel of the insight to Plato, he observes that since we do bad things on account of pleasures and abstain from doing noble things because of pain, "we ought to have been brought up in a particular way from our very youth, as Plato says, so as both to delight in and to be pained by the things that we ought; this is the right education"[23] Therefore, "in educating the young we steer them by the rudders of pleasure and pain; it is thought, too, that to enjoy the things we ought and to hate the things we ought has the greatest bearing on virtue of character."[24]

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[23] Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, David Ross, transl., J.L. Ackrill and J.O. Urmson, eds. and rev., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980). II.3.

[24] Ibid., X.1

However, the question of forming the person who hates or loves the right things involves all sorts of difficult assumptions about human nature, epistemology, and the relationship between knowledge and action. Famously, Aristotle argues that moral virtues do not arise in us by nature, as if, like our senses of sight or touch, we have some potential for moral virtues regardless of whether or not we use them. In the case of the moral virtues, "we get [them] first by exercising them, as also happens in the case of the arts as well."[25] For example, lyre players become lyre players by practicing or performing on the lyre, so the virtuous man becomes virtuous by "performing" the virtues. Aristotle recognizes that in order to teach or to form someone, you cannot rely on argument to dissuade her from following the passions—rather, "the soul of the student must first have been cultivated by means of habit for noble joy and noble hatred, like earth which is to nourish the seed . . . The character then, must somehow be there already with a kinship to virtue, loving what is noble and hating what is base"[26]

The degree and type of preparation is critical, as is the recognition that the *telos* of the preparation is a kind of performance of the character. As MacIntyre and others have long explained, "The conclusion of sound and practical reasoning is an action, that action which it is best for this particular agent to do in these particular circumstances."[27] This action is not limited to a narrow sense of doing a morally good action, however. Virtuous formation must also proceed from the assumption that the virtues which enable people to become practical reasoners are good "just because they also enable us to participate in

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[25] Ibid., II.1.

[26] Ibid., X.9.

[27] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*, (Chicago: Open Court, 1999), 92.

relationships of giving and receiving through which our ends as practical reasoners are to be achieved."[28] Virtuous people, then, have characters bearing the form of the moral and intellectual excellences which aim at the highest human flourishing.

Because of the necessity for formation through some kind of guided practice, the modern discussion of virtues often focuses upon and emphasizes the importance of community and tradition. Whether by using structures such as mentor-teachers, exemplars, or a larger community for correction and training, the formation of virtues requires the concerted aid of multiple people. In the absence of an Aristotelian *polis*, contemporary ethicists often struggle to identify an alternate institution capable of sustaining and propagating an account of the virtues and the goods they aim to achieve. In MacIntyre's version, where the many accounts of virtues throughout history have in common the centrality of practices, he offers examples such as small fishing villages or groups of loom weavers. However, since he eventually concludes that Thomas Aquinas gives a better account of the virtues even than Aristotle, and that a new kind of St. Benedict (and corresponding community) may be the only hope for preserving the moral coherence of the virtues, MacIntyre is well aware that the Church is an institution-community that has long performed and cultivated practices which constitute and theorize virtues.

Since this is a dissertation concerned with a theological analysis of ethical consequences, we must recognize the apparent intensification of a tension seen already in Aristotle: the relationship between theoretical or contemplative emphases and practical or active emphases. That is, what is the proper ordering of knowledge of the good and thought about the practices which pursue the good and the doing or enacting of those

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[28] Ibid., 120.

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practices and the resulting good? To some extent, this involves both aspects of the current project, where apophaticism, while focusing on the limitations, is still centered on questions of knowledge and thought often to the exclusion of considerations about how this will affect practical reasoning and action.

Thomas Hibbs gives one articulation of this position most relevant for this study. Addressing the Thomistic account (itself an engagement with Aristotle) of the proper valuation of and relationship between the contemplative life and the active life, Hibbs cites Aquinas: "the active life of preaching and teaching wherein one hands on to others things contemplated, is more perfect than an exclusively contemplative life because the former presupposes an abundance of contemplation."[29] This guides a vision of virtues ethics, because when we recognize that this "mixed life" of contemplation and action aimed at education/formation was the life chosen by Christ, we realize that

> A complicated pattern of ascent and descent, rather than a simple ascent from the things of the world to the transcendent good, characterizes the Christian understanding of the good life. In this context, the practice of virtue is intimately tied to theological metaphysics; it involves a mimesis of the very life and activity of God.[30]

Accordingly, "Charity and its allied virtues inform the Christian way or form of life . . . The practice of virtue is a participation in the 'form of life' proper to the gospel, which is itself a revelation of the fullness of being as beautiful and lovable."[31]

Returning to the MacIntyrean context of the account of virtues ethics I will accept here, we may say that these theological heights are based upon the foundation of practices, habits, and inclinations which, as Hibbs notes, Christians do not "possess" in

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[29] Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion*, 132.

[30] Ibid., 132.

[31] Ibid., 134.

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the Aristotelian sense, but which nevertheless form and instruct them. Therefore, the standpoint from which I will analyze and critique contemporary apophaticism is a position that affirms a teleological account of human life and insists on the availability of resources, intelligible to humans, which may reliably guide us toward a form of life modeled after and consistent with the Good—that is, an incarnational, Christocentric model.

This does not mean that any account of apophaticism that emerges from, for example, an explicitly a-theological philosophy must be ruled out a *prima facie* because it does not recognize the legitimacy, or existence, of a Christocentric model for creation or human life. It does mean that philosophies which assume non-teleological accounts of the world and humanity create fundamental tension with teleological approaches. However, I contend that the burden lies with non-teleological accounts of ethics and anti-metaphysics to offer a convincing argument for any kind of moral or ethical "ought," to borrow from C.S. Lewis's famous point. In other words, if an account of apophaticism proves incompatible or hostile to the version of virtues ethics with which we are here concerned, it will not be a simple case of my arbitrary decision to judge postmodern apples by the criteria of what makes a good Christian orange. It will be, rather, because non-teleological and anti-metaphysical philosophies first rule themselves out of one "ground" for discussing and determining ethical theories and second cannot overcome this deprivation via their new account of apophaticism.

Since we can neither gauge contemporary apophaticism against all models of ethics nor against some undefined notion of general universal ethics, we must begin by assessing it in the terms of some specific account of ethics. And, as noted above, since

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the MacIntyre-inspired version of virtues ethics arises in roughly the same historical moment and engages many of the same schools of thought, contemporary virtues ethics is a timely model for engaging contemporary apophaticism. Accordingly, after analyzing each representative stage on the contemporary apophatic continuum, I will pose questions designed to assess the compatibility (or capacity for harmony) between the account of apophaticism and virtues ethics.

I will focus especially on issues related to formation—the teaching, training, and development of habits which virtues ethics relies upon to shape and to form character. While I will give further account below of my understanding and application of this aspect of virtues ethics, it is important to understand now that the general aim of this project is to view contemporary apophaticism through the lens of virtues ethics and to ask if they are at all compatible, or if adherence to one necessarily rules out the other. So while I will certainly offer a thorough reading and analysis of each part of the apophatic continuum, the choices necessary to maintain the proper scope of the project will have this aim in mind.

The Continuum

As broad as this range of concerns can seem, an appeal to apophaticism plays a critical role in each of them. While I will describe the context in which these thinkers come to serve as representative examples in greater detail later, it is useful to note here that I am following both a broad sense that these particular thinkers represent "stages" on the continuum of contemporary apophaticism as well as the specific discernment of numerous scholars, including Thomas S. Hibbs and Denys Turner, both of whom I

discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four.[32] Turner, for example, identifies the post-modern engagement with apophaticism, via its theories of difference, by looking to Derrida, Caputo, and Marion as similarly inspired by the need to react to Nietzsche. While Turner is more narrowly focused on the specific consequences of post-modern difference for his argument about the possibility and form of "proofs" for the existence of God, he offers a short summary of the same options which we will encounter in this project. The post-modern appropriation of apophatic language seems to create the following dilemma: "must our account of 'difference' be such that theology is impossible, being dissolved into an endlessness of 'difference', or, if not impossible, then idolatrous and onto-theological, because settling down on a stably *divine* difference."[33]

Ultimately, I will argue that the first two stages on the continuum—represented first by Derrida and Caputo and second by Kearney and Marion—allow similar problems to weaken their accounts of apophaticism and ethics. First, they ignore or misunderstand the crucial relationship between cataphatic and apophatic in the most influential proponents of apophaticism or mystical theology in the Christian tradition. Second, they do not appreciate the extent to which their overemphasis on negativity or "undecidability" with respect to knowledge of God weakens their options for a complementary ethic. The accounts of God and of ethics (whether explicit or consequentially implicit) which emerge from most contemporary thought on apophaticism display a striking consistency: as goes thought on the knowability and sayability of God, so goes the thought on ethics.

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[32] For the broad sense, one need only look at the consistent selection of Derrida, Caputo, Kearney, and Marion as interlocutors for these issues in both monographs and articles or chapters. Several of these serve as sources for this project, of course, such as *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Derrida, Kearney, and Caputo), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Derrida, Caputo, Marion, and Kearney), *Graven Ideologies*, and *After God* (Derrida and Marion).

[33] Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 149.

In the next chapter, we must survey briefly the most relevant representatives of the apophatic tradition in order to get a basic sense of what drew the contemporary discussion towards it. The Christian apophatic tradition, while not identified or limited by any authoritative list, includes a few key thinkers and texts, some of which are also considered representative by non-Christians (though often via different interpretations). No doubt, connecting the main "dots" of the Christian tradition results in a different outline of what "apophasis" means compared to many postmodern accounts. By filling in, or re-narrating, some of the gaps in the postmodern genealogy, I am admittedly setting the stage for the very different account of apophasis and ethics (which we will begin to see with Turner and realize in full with Bonaventure). However, for a theological project, it is fitting that we should begin with those Christian authors and accounts which created the tradition of apophaticism that has proved so intriguing and hopeful to postmodern thinkers—despite the frequent rejection of its foundations or loose canon of what and who constitutes "the tradition."

CHAPTER TWO

Shaping the Tradition of Wonder and Silence

An Occasional and Subjective Selectivity

As noted in Chapter One, others—such as Franke, Mortley, Turner, and McGinn, all mentioned and cited above—have already written much more detailed and thorough surveys of apophatic sources and thought than is possible here. However, even a project of this limited a scope must present some account of the representatives of apophaticism which are most normative for this study. Most engagements with apophaticism recognize a few key thinkers like Plato and Pseudo-Dionysius as seminal influences for all apophatic thought, however, the multiplicity of styles, emphases, and application over thousands of years leads to a markedly selective and diverse use of sources as functional exemplars and primary interlocutors for different projects. In the current context, even though I present and analyze each contemporary thinker's account of apophaticism on its own terms, as a particpant in this dialogue, I have, of course, my own conclusions concerning the sources and interpretations which have proved most influential and internally coherent.

In the context of this project, I use "coherence" in a more etymologically grounded sense than some common usage. Rather than signaling something akin to a system or something susceptible to systematization, I call coherent that which at minimum "sticks together." So an argument or account of apophaticism may be coherent or incoherent not because every element is logically necessary and filtered by or fit into a

system, but rather because they have or lack an internal integrity in the same way that musical ideas and "moves" in a Mozart quartet cohere rather than jumping randomly or clamorously contradicting each other. This is the sense in which I will refer to coherence with regard to both the account of apophaticism and of ethics.

Although this is a theological project, ultimately focused on the consequences for theological thinking and practice, the particular framing of the driving questions and analysis comes from the intentionally non-theological philosophical context of the "Kantian frame" introduced above. Therefore, the brief survey of apophatic sources in this section will focus on those thinkers and texts which are most influential and normative with regard to the question of the knowledge of God. In later chapters, my analysis of contemporary thinkers requires me to return to specific sources in very specific detail, while, since Augustine is central only to Denys Turner's account, I treat him only in Chapter Four. In order to serve the particular argument in this dissertation, therefore, I give only a cursory treatment to an important figure like Gregory of Nyssa, and then skip over Augustine to a more substantial summary of Pseudo-Dionysius in this introductory section. However, when I turn, for example, to Denys Turner's recent work, I will not only revisit Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius on very particular issues, I will also discuss Turner's engagement with Bonaventure before giving my own analysis of Bonaventure in the final two chapters. Similarly, I will address other influences for the interlocutors on the contemporary spectrum when discussing their work.

The exception to this will come at the end of the survey when I discuss Emmanuel Levinas. Although the phenomenological background of the postmodern representatives is also greatly influenced by Schleiermacher, Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger,

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Levinas is the most substantial and immediate influence on Derrida, Caputo, and Marion. Though Heidegger frames the modern question of Being and "onto-theology," Levinas's treatment of "alterity" and the language of otherness, both with respect to an Absolute Other and the other humans (in whom we encounter the Absolute Other), constructs the grammar and the conceptual bridge between apophaticism and ethics which the postmodern thinkers adopt.

Immediately, we must address more specifically the problem of terminology mentioned above. Bernard McGinn and Denys Turner begin their respective studies by noting this problem: the terms mystical theology, mysticism, apophaticism, and negative theology are often used imprecisely and almost synonymously by modern scholars. McGinn notes some historical development of terminology—the widespread usage of "mystical theology" preceding the invention of "mysticism" by over a millennium, for example—but the modern context has added a real confusion of the phenomenon in question.[1] As both he and Turner explain, mysticism now has an almost exclusive connotation of experience, mystical theology often refers to the written texts of a few specific authors, apophatic theology might mean both, and negative theology, though usually used as a synonym for apophatic theology, might also mean a narrowly philosophical use of negation.

However, even the confusing array of usages reveals the more significant aspect of this discussion concerning the relationship of knowledge and experience. McGinn explains that "Mystical theology has often been understood in terms of misleading models of a simple distinction between experience and understanding that do justice

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[1] Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Volume I, Origins to the Fifth Century*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), xiv.

neither to the texts of the mystics nor to the complexities of the relations between experience and understanding that modern epistemological and cognitional theories have presented to us."[2] Not only is the distinction misleading, but contrary to the modern presumption of the primacy of practice over theory, "mystical theory in most cases precedes and guides the mystic's whole way of life."[3] Furthermore, McGinn offers another excellent corrective when he insists that mystical theory and practice are not merely "outer layers" stuck onto a core of regular Christian belief: "No mystics (at least before the present century) believed in or practiced 'mysticism.' They believed in and practiced Christianity," a religion which "contained mystical elements as parts of a wider historical whole."[4]

While the contemporary revival shares in this imprecision of terminology and of conceptual accuracy with regard to usage in the traditions, we may at least rely on the fact that modern interlocutors cite a small list of authors as their most significant influences. Whatever term they use, these contemporary scholars mean to indicate some selective elements of what Plato, Gregory of Nyssa, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Aquinas, Bonaventure, Eckhart, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and a few others have in common when they speak of negation and limits of knowledge and language.

The lineage traced here is by no means comprehensive, either with regard to the authors treated or their works. My intent, rather, is to present representative examples of those patristic writers who are the most influential for later Christian thinkers and whose use of apophatic language and concepts helps to reveal this aspect of early Christian

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid., xvi.

thought. Although the timeline covered here stretches from the 6th century BC pre-Socratic philosophers to the 6th century AD, the focus of this section is on early Church authors from the 2nd – 4th centuries. Specifically, I will treat Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, and finally Pseudo-Dionysius.

Complicating an investigation of the earliest uses of apophatic, or negative, Christian theological language is the "Dionysian" character of the rebirth in Western academic circles. In constructive theology and ethics, as well as in non-theological approaches to philosophy and ethics, the studies or appropriations of apophatic language have focused primarily on the work and legacy of the 5th/6th century author originally thought to be the same Dionysius the Areopagite who, after hearing Paul's discourse with the philosophers in Athens, "joined [Paul] and believed"—now most commonly identified as Pseudo-Dionysius or Pseudo-Denys.[5] Because of the influence of the *Corpus Areopagiticum*, as the four extant books and nine letters are called, especially on medieval theologians such as Aquinas, and because of the doggedly or "systematically" apophatic character of the works, it is understandable that Pseudo-Dionysius has become practically synonymous with apophatic language and theology.

Despite the fact that Pseudo-Dionysius's patristic influences and sources are plain to see, and have been noted over the centuries, his own historical influence and the contemporary predilection for his version of apophatic theology often distort the older approaches to and understanding of the role of apophatic language. Frequently, modern appropriations of apophaticism look back only as far as the Neoplatonic roots of Pseudo-Dionysius' system. Because most contemporary appropriations of apophaticism draw exclusively from Pseudo-Denys and the Plotinian trajectory in which he sits, the volume

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[5] See Acts 17:16-34.

and distinctive accent of early patristic era expressions of apophatic language is less often known or studied.

As it turns out, there are more than enough apophatic currents running through the streams of Christian thought in the first six centuries for one moderate study. Although some of the scholarship in this area casts an overly wide net with regard to what counts as apophaticism, I will focus here on the specific use of language and concepts that assert something about the knowability of God – most often in the form of insisting upon the limits of human knowledge and speech because of the unknowability of God.[6]

The Ancient Greek Tradition

In this section, I will only sketch the outlines of the existing philosophical expressions of apophaticism that served (or could have served) as influences on patristic authors. However, further details and treatments of these ancient authors will surface as we engage specifics of those patristic expressions.

The early Christians wrote from within an intellectual culture thoroughly saturated with variants of Platonism. Although much philosophical and historical scholarship is devoted to examining the intellectual genealogy, subtle distinctions among, and development of "Platonisms," Middle Platonism is considered the immediate context for 1st and 2nd century Christians living in Hellenized areas. However, with regard to the specific question of apophaticism concerning a supreme god, some scholars point further back – to pre-Socratics such as Anaximander and Xenophanes.

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[6] One common tendency in the secondary literature is to describe any reaction against anthropomorphism as "apophatic" when, in fact, such a rejection may or may not be paired with an assertion about the knowability of God.

As seems to have been common, the criticism of "popular religion" or an older understanding of the gods took the form of assertions about the "unbounded" (Anaximander's *apeiron*) and inexhaustible nature of the source of all things. Accordingly, Xenophanes' arguments against anthropomorphism assert something about the one god by saying what he is not: "One god, greatest among gods and men, in no way similar to mortals either in body or thought."[7] So different is this one god, that he is "undifferentiated throughout," so that it is said, "'all of him sees, all thinks, and all hears.'"[8] Just as later Greek philosophers would adopt a similar line of attack upon anthropomorphized and polytheistic accounts of the gods, so too would Christian apologists later cite Xenophanes, for example, to point out that just as men make gods in their own image, so too would horses and oxen imagine gods with bodies like their own. According to Clement, for example, Xenophanes concluded that "there must be one god who is quite unlike mortals in form and thought."[9]

From this kind of nascent negative language that denies the likeness of the supreme god to humans or other physical creatures, we move to Plato himself and the roots of an emphasis on the limits of language. The *Timaeus* is quoted by many early Fathers in order to enlist Plato in the cause of defending against or attacking efforts to

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[7] D.W. Palmer, "Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century," *Vigiliae Christianae*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (Sep., 1983), 234-259. Pg. 235 quoting Xenophanes, Fragment 173, in G.S. Kirk and J.E. Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, (Cambridge 1957), 169.

[8] Xenophanes, Fragment 24, quoted in William R. Schoedel, "The Early Christian Doctrine of God," *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, Ed. William R. Schoedel and Robert L. Wilken, (Paris: Editions Beauchesne, 1979), 75-86. p. 78.

[9] Frances M. Young, "The God of the Greeks and the Nature of Religious Language," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Tradition: In Honorem Robert M. Grant (Théologie Historique, 54)*, (Paris: Éditions Beauchesne, 1978), 45-74. Pp. 48-49 (citing unidentified quotation of Xenophanes by Clement of Alexandria as recorded in Ritter and Preller, *Historia Philosophiae Graecae*, (Gotha, 1913).

reduce God to something susceptible to description or comparison to humans. The conversation in the dialogue turns to the importance of distinguishing "that which always is and never becomes from that which is always becoming but never is." Timaeus himself reasons that since the world has come into being, it changes, and therefore must have some cause. In what reads almost as an aside, the often used 28e passage, he remarks, "To discover the maker and father of this universe is indeed a hard task, and having found him it would be impossible to tell everyone about him."[10]

Obviously, this is by no means a *via negativa* nor even the basis for any kind of theology, cataphatic or apophatic. Raoul Mortley notes that Plato develops none of the three Greek terms associated with negative theology (apophasis, aphairesis, and steraesis) and does not seem to have "developed a theory of negation in an epistemological context."[11] For anything approaching a process or even steps of negation, much less a developed system, we must look to later interpretations of specific Platonic dialogues.

Middle Platonism

The question of influence and intellectual genealogy is, of course, a complicated, and perhaps impossible knot to untie. In their separate accounts of Numenius, Young and Henny Fiska Hägg provide good examples of the problem of pinpointing the philosophical influences on any one thinker. Numenius, writes Young, "describes ways of knowing God with the mind exactly like the Middle Platonists, and yet asserts that Plato said he was totally unknown," and, while accurately reflecting this "basic tension in

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[10] Plato, "Timaeus," in *Timaeus and Critas (Revised)*, transl. Desmond Lee, (New York: Penguin, 1977). 40, 27e; p. 41, 28e. See also Young, 48, and his list of citations of this passage in Nazianzus, Clement, and Origen.

[11] Raoul Mortley, *From Word to Silence, Vol. II: The Way of negation, Christian and Greek*, (Bonn: Hanstein, 1986), 18.

the Platonic tradition," he claims himself to be a "Neopythagorean."[12] Hägg claims that,

although many ancient authors call Numenius a Pythagorean, "we do not actually know

whether he described himself as a Pythagorean or a Platonist."[13] On the other hand,

Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus list him among prominent, or even "first on the list of"

Platonic leaders, whereas others "call him a Pythagorean [and] refer to him as a

representative of Platonic teaching."[14]

However, even while keeping this, perhaps extreme, example in mind, we can

cautiously note a few relevant characteristics of the more influential interpretations of

Plato current in the 1st and 2nd centuries. One reading of Plato important to these Middle

Platonists, the importance of which grew as Christian engagement with the Greek

tradition grew, was the identification of the two hypotheses from the *Parmenides* as

something more or less like actual entities rather than mere concepts.[15] Thus, whereas the

Platonic first hypothesis remained a simple unity which we cannot describe or know, the

complex unity, the unity of all things itself, or second hypothesis, became a kind of being,

however vaguely constituted, which we could perceive and name and about which we

could know.[16] John D. Turner sees the shift toward greater use of the *Parmenides* and

away from the *Timaeus* as "the primary dialogue of reference" as indicative of the

development of Middle Platonism's "Neopythagorean hierarchy of hypostatic

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[12] Young, 52.

[13] Henny Fiska Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism*, (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 76.

[14] Ibid., 77.

[15] Ibid., 215.

[16] *Parmenides*, 142a, and 155d-e. Cited in Hägg, 215.

principles."[17] Although the triadic arrangement of these principles (the "supreme One," a "Monad," and a third hypostasis that "participates in unity") is intriguing to compare to later Christological and Trinitarian developments, the importance for the early Christian apophatic tradition rests in the simultaneous affirmation of "knowability" and unknowability.

Eric Osborn describes the Middle Platonism of the 2nd century as "Platonism now modified by a strong religious tendency . . . a Platonic theology, and not merely of Platonic propositions that may have theological relevance."[18] The transcendence of the first principle is emphasized, but an anti-dualist impulse leads to an insistence on "the two-level divinity (visible and intellectual)" over against claims of a conflict between a "visible god" and "the intellectual god."[19] Additionally, ambivalence to "the world of forms" is another important characteristic of Middle Platonism that holds relevance for early Christian thought. By combining a "heightened significance of the first cause," an appropriation of "the Stoic unified cosmos," and a pro-Creation counter-reaction to the "Gnostic denigration of the visible world" influential strands of 1st and 2nd century Platonism can help to explain the simultaneous assertions that God is both unknowable and knowable and that Creation is His good work (rather than that of a competing god).[20]

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[17] John D. Turner, "Victorinus, *Parmenides* Commentaries and the Platonizing Sethian Treatises," in *Platonisms: Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern*, Corrigan, Kevin and John D. Turner, Eds., (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 55-96. p. 58.

[18] Eric Osborn, *The Beginning of Christian Philosophy,* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), 28.

[19] Osborn, 28.

[20] Ibid., 147.

Philo

Moving on to an influential appropriation of Platonic reading with a specific theological interpretation, we reach Philo of Alexandria. His emphasis on the unity and transcendence of God, communicated in ways consistent with both Middle Platonism and 1st century Judaism, was influential on his immediate "successors" Clement and Origen. Ferguson explicitly characterizes an attempt to "coordinate the Jewish faith with the philosophies of Plato and Zeno, associated above all with the name of Philo." Via a combination of a form of Logos theology with "his use of allegorical interpretation of Scripture to harmonize it with Greek philosophy," Philo created part of the theological framework and language that would directly influence at least two generations of early Christian thinkers.[21]

John Dillon describes as "thoroughly Stoic" Philo's "system" of an intelligible world, "presented as none other than the Logos," created by the supreme God, and a physical world permeated by the "spermatic reason-principles," which themselves make up the Logos.[22] However, because God remains immaterial and transcendent, Philo has presented a Platonist, or "Platonised" Logos – a kind of theology which "[a]part from the evidence provided by Philo, [. . .] is not much evident in Platonism before Plotinus."[23]

Regardless of the relationship or importance to later Christian conceptualizations of Logos, Philo's theological concern for the transcendence of God, specifically with

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[21] John Ferguson, "Introduction" in *Clement of Alexandria: Stromateis, Books One To Three (The Fathers of the Church, vol. 85)*, (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), 8.

[22] John Dillon, "Origen and Plotinus: The Platonic Influence on Early Christianity," in *The Relationship Between Neoplatonism and Christianity,* Thomas Finan and Vincent Twomey, eds., (Dublin: Four Courts, 1992), 7-26. 10.

[23] Ibid., 11.

regard to the sensible and material world, is largely the focus of the linguistic concerns which will give rise to the apophatic insistence in Christian writers who engage in philosophically informed debates. D.A. Giulea goes so far as to say that "Philo is the real initiator of the apophatic theology in its proper sense."[24] Tracing the development from a symbolic means of communicating divine transcendence to a conceptual, philosophical means, Giulea points to Philo's shift away from visual expressions ("dazzling light" or "dark cloud") to assertions that God's essence is incomprehensible and ineffable. So, for example, Philo describes the theophany to Moses of "YHWH" as God's name in terms of ineffable being itself and an existence that cannot be described by names.[25] Giulea finds this example representative of the way that "Hellenistic culture gradually imposed a philosophical translation of the idea of divine inaccessibility."[26]

Several currents of thought, then, contributed to the context and language of talk about God in the 1st and 2nd centuries. However, in addition to the exposure to various texts and interpretations of the pre-Socratics and Plato, the patristic writers saw apophatic elements in Scripture itself. Of course, these would carry the highest authority when it came to thinking through and arguing about what we can say and know of God.

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[24] Dragos A. Giulea, "The Divine Essence, that Inaccessible *Kabod* Enthroned in Heaven: Nazianzen's *Oratio*28, 3 and the Tradition of Apophatic Theology from Symbols to Philosophical Concepts," *Numen*, 57 (2010), 1-29. Pg. 14.

[25] Ibid., 14-15. Quoting Philo, *Mos.* I.75-76.

[26] Giulea, 13.

Scripture

Despite the great influence exerted both by the philosophical tradition and by Philo, the scriptural expressions of apophatic claims and language are critical. Without scriptural referents and parallels, had the language and concepts been found solely in philosophic Platonism, it is doubtful that the early Fathers would have made increasing appeal to apophatic claims. Although a comprehensive, book-length survey of Scripture used in an apophatic "mode" during the 2nd and 3rd centuries would surely give a valuable perspective on early Christian development, I will mention only a few important passages here.

As we have already seen with Philo in a Jewish context, the accounts of Moses encountering God at the burning bush and at Sinai (Ex. 20:21; 24; 33:12-34:35) are central also to Christian apophaticism. Exodus 3-4:17 reveal God's enigmatic name even as He identifies Himself clearly as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Ex. 20:21 tells of Moses approaching "the thick darkness where God was" while the people stay distant out of fear. Similarly, in Ex. 24:15 Moses leaves behind the elders to go up the mountain at which point "the cloud covered it, and the glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai."[27] In these encounters, we see the confluence of several essential elements: knowledge of God that is incomplete and enigmatic despite coming via revelation, the importance, mystery, and impossibility of names for God, and the intersection of experience and cognition.

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[27] It is worth further research to see how (or if) Jewish and Christian writers who draw on this passage in an apophatic mode address or explain Ex. 24:9-11 in which Moses and seventy-three others "saw the God of Israel" standing on sapphire pavement. Verse 11 repeats "they saw God."

Colossians 1:15-23 is another important text that features language relevant to the development of Christian apophaticism. Christ "is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation" by whom and for whom all things were created and in whom all things hold together – because "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him." In 1 Timothy 6:15-16, we read of God as "only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see." Read from within a context of Middle Platonism and a growing recognition of the threat of varieties of Gnosticism, these passages lend themselves to, or even suggest new and Christian ways of using philosophical language and concepts in order to explain Scriptural claims about God.

Additionally, by using allegorical interpretations of Scripture, passages that do not seem to suggest any kind of apophatic reading are understood in light of what would later be called the *via negative*. Gregory of Nyssa, to cite one example, finds in Song of Songs 5 the bride's movement from "the darkness of ignorance to the light of truth," which in turn "gives way to darkness as she is embraced by the divine night and receives the drops of night [dew] which flow down from the locks of her Beloved." As Laird notes, Gregory understands this movement from darkness to light to divinely "luminous darkness" as a parallel or an echo of Moses' entrance into the thick darkness where God is.[28]

Justin Martyr

If it is indeed "a commonplace of Justin scholarship to portray him as an apophatic thinker," as Peter Widdicombe asserts, it can only be because of his limited reference to those negative assertions about God which protect divine transcendence.

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[28] Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004). 177, 179.

Even after following his philosophical predecessors' lead by quoting the *Timaeus* and

Parmenides, "Justin provides no commentary on this material, and he does not go on to

draw out its significance for the status of religious language" or, I would add, of the

significance for religious epistemology.[29] However consistent he may be in places with

the logic and vocabulary of his philosophical predecessors, Justin does not really advance

a thorough "negative theology" as such. His seems to be an exclusively tactical use of

apophaticism. His context, like that of many Christian thinkers to follow, was largely

determined by his interlocutors or accusers, and his use of apophaticism was similarly

determined.

Justin displays his familiarity with some of the Platonic apophatic texts in the

Second Apology and the *Dialogue with Trypho.* In *Trypho*, he cites Plato approvingly for

his description of God as the Being "that is beyond all essence, unutterable and

inexplicable, but alone honourable and good" (Ch. 4).[30] In Chapter 10 of the *Second

Apology*, Justin cites and expands upon *Timaeus* 28e, beginning by recalling that Socrates

"exhorted [men] to become acquainted with the God who was to them unknown, by

means of the investigation of reason, saying, 'That it is neither easy to find the Father and

Maker of all, nor, having found Him, is it safe[31] to declare Him to all.'"[32] However, he

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[29] Peter Widdicombe, "Justin Martyr's Apophaticism," in *Studia Patristica Vol. XXXVI*, (Louvain: Peeters, 2001), 313-319. Pp. 313, 315.

[30] Justin Martyr, *Dialogue With Trypho*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, Ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Transl. Marcus Dods and George Reith, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885.) Revised and edited by Kevin Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0128.htm. Accessed July 20, 2010.

[31] Obviously, the difference between "impossible" (in the earlier quotation from the *Timaeus*) and "safe"– whether in Justin or this edition – is significant and would require further investigation into the most reliable texts.

[32] Justin Martyr, *Second Apology*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1*, Ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Transl. Marcus Dods and George Reith, (Buffalo, NY: Christian

goes on to say that "these things our Christ did through His own power," and, "since He is a power of the ineffable Father, not the mere instrument of human reason," all manner of people believed.

In the *First Apology,* while explaining Christian baptism as a cleansing from the former status of "children of necessity and ignorance," Justin notes that the leaders call on God only by the name "God the Father and Master of all." This is because "no one may give a proper name to the ineffable God, and if anyone should dare to say that there is one, he is hopelessly insane."[33] That his concern is for protecting the transcendence of God becomes clear in the next sections where he rejects the claim that "the unnamed God himself spoke to Moses" in the burning bush. The Jews teach this, Justin explains, because they do not know the Son – the only one who truly knows the Father (Lk.10:22, Mt. 11:27). In fact, "our Christ addressed [Moses] in the form of fire out of a bush."[34] Consistent with, though not demonstrably derived from, 2nd century Platonic thought, the supreme God remains ineffable and some "second place" entity is the source of revelation.[35]

D.W. Palmer argues that Justin's "main use of negative theological terminology occurs at particular stages within [his] defence against the charge of atheism" in the *First*

Literature Publishing, 1885.) Revised, edited by K. Knight. http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0127.htm. Accessed July 20, 2010.

[33] Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, Ed. and Transl. Edward Rochie Hardy, in *Early Christian Fathers*, Ed. Cyril C. Richardson, (New York: Touchstone, 1996), §61.

[34] *First Apology*, §63, §62.

[35] Widdicombe, 316, ascribes Justin's assertion of God's ineffability to his fear "that to suggest in any way that God was describable would be seriously to undermine the idea of divine transcendence."

Apology.[36] For example, to contrast the Christian God with pagan gods, Justin notes that

God does not need offerings of material things and is "called by no set name."[37] Again,

we know things about God because Jesus Christ, held "to be in the second place," himself

"has taught us these things, having been born for this purpose and crucified."[38]

Although Justin's (not uncommon) subordination of Son and Holy Spirit becomes

theologically troublesome, his instinct to preserve the "ingenerateness, ineffability,

unnameability, incorruptibility, immutability, and impassibility" of the supreme God is

consistent with his philosophical and limited theological forbearers.[39] The Christian God

is beyond names, and what we think of as names are really "designations derived from

his good deeds and works."[40] Here, as in Chapter 10 of the *Second Apology*, we see the

distinction between essence and activities or powers , although it is further complicated

by Justin's distinction among the Father Creator and the Son and Holy Spirit.

Whether or not we can agree with Osborn that "[i]t is Justin who first states

clearly the consequences of God's unity" by denying multiple attributes and insisting that

God is "unbegotten, ineffable, and invisible," it does seem justifiable to say that "Justin

wants to unravel man's introverted talk about God."[41] More to the point, however, and

more important, we can see that Justin is attempting to address the problem of a God who

must be unknowable in full with the claim that Christ is the divine Son who revealed God.

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[36] Palmer, 241.

[37] *First Apology,* §10.

[38] Ibid.,§13.

[39] Widdicombe, 316.

[40] *Second Apology*, Ch. 6.

[41] Osborn, 32.

Apophaticism for Justin, then, seems to function as a conceptual and linguistic given with regard to "God" which problematizes the need to speak of God's divine Son who provides cataphatic revelation.

Clement

Although Hägg's claim that Clement is "the first Christian writer who systematically employs the method of abstraction in relation to God" invites pointed investigation (especially with regard to the characterization of "systematic" use), Clement certainly made thorough use of apophaticism. Signaling his familiarity with the link to the Platonic tradition, Clement offers a gloss on the *Timaeus* after paraphrasing 28c concerning the difficulty of discovering the Father and Maker and the impossibility of declaring Him to all:

> "For this is by no means capable of expression" [. . .] says the truth loving Plato. For he that had heard right well that the all-wise Moses, ascending the mount for holy contemplation, [. . .] commands that the whole people do not accompany him. And when the Scripture says, "Moses entered into the thick darkness where God was", this shows to those capable of understanding that God is invisible and beyond expression by words [*arretos*].[42]

Following on this link to Moses' ascent, which will play a critical role in almost all subsequent Christian apophaticism, Clement goes on to explain that "the darkness, which is in reality the unbelief (*apistía*) and ignorance of many, is a screen in front of the brightness of the truth (fait écran devant l'éclat de la vérité)."[43] Similarly, he asserts that we only use names, and even then incorrectly, for God "because of our helplessness . . .

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[42] *Stromates*., V.78.1-3. Quoted in Hägg, 155. English translation mine. Unless otherwise noted, all references to Stromates V are from *Les Stromates: Stromate V, Vol. I (Sources Chrétiennes, No. 278)*, Ed. Alain Le Boulluec, Transl. Pierre Voulet, S.J., (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1981).

[43] *Strom*., V.78.3.

so that our mind may have these things to lean upon and not wander at random. For one by one they do not contain information about God."[44]

Regardless of this equation of the darkness with unbelief, ignorance or helplessness, which seem to suggest that the condition is variable, Clement most often locates the source of "unknowability" in God Himself. Focusing specifically on the notion of teaching about God, and building off of what he sees as Paul's own contrast between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God's mystery, Clement argues that "the God of the universe who is above all speech, all thought, and all concept can never be the object of written learning, being, in his own power [*dunamei*], ineffable."[45] Even more succinctly, he insists that "we know Him not by what he is, but by what he is not."[46]

For all of this negation and emphasis of the distance between weak and ignorant man and the perfect and transcendent God, Clement's understanding of the unity promised by God presents a picture, according to Osborn, which "has no rival in Christian literature for optimism and beauty."[47] Despite the failure of language and human understanding to capture God fully, faith leads to unity: "to believe in [the Son] and through him is to become something unified, being indivisibly made one in him; but

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[44] Ibid., V.82.1-2. Quoted in Hägg, 156.

[45] *Strom.*, V.65.2. Translation mine. It is interesting that Clement uses *dunamei*, often read as "energies" in later Greek Christian thought, to describe the aspect of God that is *in*effable— but the genealogy of that term and its history of interpretation in what became the Orthodox tradition are beyond the scope of this project.

[46] *Strom.*, V.71.3. Translation mine.

[47] Osborn, 108.

to disbelieve means separation, estrangement, and division."[48] Prompted by this kind of

faith and by the pursuit of purification, Clement's Christian "Gnostic" both believes and

knows differently than his gnostic opponents. By recognizing the limits of knowledge,

Clement asserts, the Christian "Gnostic" knows more and more accurately.

Origen

As Clement's student and author of books numbering at least into the high

hundreds (or thousands if Epiphanius is to be believed), Origen might be able to lay claim

to having made the best attempt at becoming a true Christian "Gnostic" in Clement's

sense. In *De Principiis*, Origen famously brings to bear a wealth of philosophical and

theological resources. Thus, in Book I, §5, Origen moves from refuting corporeal notions

of God to insist that "according to strict truth, God is incomprehensible, and incapable of

being measured" and his "nature cannot be grasped or seen by the power of any human

understanding, even the purest and brightest."[49] Suspecting that such philosophically

rooted declarations might be less convincing to those who value Scripture, Origen points

to Paul for support that "the nature of God surpasses the nature of bodies." He cites Col.

1:15 for the emphasis on invisibility of God and the visibility of Christ, and Matt. 11:27

to argue that the Son may *know* the Father, since they share the nature of deity, but does

not see him (since seeing is a property of bodies).[50]

In his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, Origen doggedly pursues the question

of how Christ is to be understood by the title "Word" by examining the other titles of

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[48] *Strom.*, IV.25.157. Quoted in Osborn, 224.

[49] Origen, *De Principiis*, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. IV, (American Edition),* Ed. Alexander Roberts. James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, Transl. Frederick Crombie, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972). I, §5.

[50] *De Principiis*, I, §8.

Christ. Although a comparison to other treatments of "the Divine Names" would be fascinating and fruitful, the relevant consequence of Origen's inquiry comes after his initial treatment of Christ as Logos and light. After giving his distinctive interpretation of Christ as Logos of *the* Logos, "the first to be with God, and to attract to Himself divinity," and "archetypal image," Origen uses an *excursus to* defend a "good sense" of darkness.[51] Although there is an evil darkness, the one that failed to overcome the light, Origen points to familiar Scripture that attests to a "divine darkness."

Not only does he note darkness and clouds which Moses enters in Exodus as indicative of the knowledge of God "beyond the power of human nature to take in," but Origen also points to "the 'dark sayings' and . . . the 'treasures of darkness,' hidden, invisible, which are given to Christ by God." Citing Prov. 1:6, he goes on to conflate the treasures of darkness hidden in Christ to the "parable and dark saying [or riddle]" of wisdom. Furthermore, "a still stranger feature of this darkness" is that it "hastens to the light and overtakes it, and so at last, after having been unknown as darkness, undergoes for him who does not see its power such a change that he comes to know it and to declare that what was formerly known to him as darkness has now become light."[52]

Although Origen's Christology often draws the most attention in these passages, the motivation for apophaticism here is thoroughly consistent with the trajectory of his predecessors. While he searches for means to explain the relationship between Father and Son, he insists on maintaining the transcendence and essential ineffability and unknowability of God.

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[51] Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 9,* Ed. and Transl. Allan Menzies, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). Bk. II, §2, §23.

[52] Ibid., II, §23.

The Cappadocian Horizon

Although the Cappadocians deserve the numerous individual studies devoted to each of them, I will merely offer a few anecdotes from the "two Gregories" as indicative of the next major stage of Christian apophaticism. However, we should note that Gregory of Nazianzus, caught up in the same context that made anti-Eunomian polemic a necessity, emphatically and clearly argues that "it is necessary to go beyond Plato" in order to assert "both the indescribability and the incomprehensibility of God."[53] In the face of claims that God's essence could be known, Nazianzus argues that though we begin, with the *Timaeus* again, by recognizing the difficulty of conceiving of God (and the impossibility of defining him in words), we must eventually come to realize that no conceptualization, no matter how highly exalted, can "comprehend the whole of so great a subject."[54]

Striking directly at the Eunomians, Nazianzus admits that our language can be true, but wholly inadequate: "this term 'incorporeal,' though granted, does not yet set before us – or contain within itself – his essence, any more than 'unbegotten,' or 'unoriginate,' or 'unchanging,' or 'incorruptible,' or any other predicate which is used concerning God or in reference to him." In fact, he continues, "the whole question of his being is still left for the further consideration and exposition of him who truly has the mind of God and is advanced in contemplation."[55] Although the *Orations* contain a trove

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[53] Young, 48. Young treats at length the question of whether or not Plato or his major interpreters actually advocated incomprehensibility as well as indescribability.

[54] Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Second Theological Oration*, in *Christology of the Later Fathers,* Ed. Edward Rochie Hardy, Transl. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow, (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox, 1954), §4.

[55] Ibid., §9.

of similar emphatic confirmations of apophaticism as a necessary means of honoring

God's unknowable and ineffable nature, the mention of advancement in contemplation

and sharing in the mind of God points us to Nyssa and his development of a mystical

apophaticism.

Because of Nyssa's influence on the "mystical" interpretations which came to

define Christian apophaticism, at first in the East, but then in the West via Pseudo-

Dionysius, I will quote from his *Life of Moses*. By developing the ancient interpretation

of a fusion of knowledge and experience, though incomplete on both accounts, in the

Exodus accounts of Moses, Nyssa opens the door for a new articulation of how to resolve

the tension inherent in affirming the revelation of the unknowable God. In this lengthy

passage, we see awareness of the ancient tensions between the sensible and the

intelligible, the knowable and the unknowable, and Scripture and philosophy.

> For leaving behind everything that is observed, not only what sense comprehends but also what the intelligence thinks it sees, [the mind] keeps on penetrating deeper until by the intelligence's yearning for understanding it gains access to the invisible and the incomprehensible, and there it sees God. This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness. Wherefore John the sublime, who penetrated into the luminous darkness, says, *No one has ever seen God*, thus asserting that knowledge of the divine essence is unattainable not only by men but also by every intelligent creature.[56]

Moses, therefore, gives us the final insight into the highest knowledge of God.

When he claims to have "seen God in the darkness," he meant that he now knew "that

what is divine is beyond all knowledge and comprehension."[57] As we shall see below,

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[56] Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, Ed. and Transl. Abraham J. Malherbe and Everett Ferguson, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978). Book II, §163.

[57] Ibid., II, §164.

Pseudo-Dionysius also sees Moses as an allegorical exemplar of the highest encounter beyond knowing, while, by some readings, finding a practical complementary practical lesson by inscribing the mystical progression into the liturgical life of the church.

Deirdre Carabine suggests that we have Eunomius to credit for forcing Gregory into such a comprehensive defense of God's unknowability. Without such heretical audacity to combat, we would never have seen how what she terms a "radical form of apophasis" could "maintain a prominent position within a formative source for the philosophical and theological tradition of Eastern Christianity."[58] Certainly, we can agree with Laird that, "[w]hatever Gregory's contribution, original or derivative, to the development of the theme of divine darkness, he (along with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite) is identified with this theme more than any other Christian author in late antiquity."[59] Although writing specifically of Nyssa, Robert S. Brightman might provide us with a fitting, though incomplete summation of Christian apophaticism up to the final decades of the 4th century. Simultaneously, his characterization might suggest a lens through which to view and criteria by which to assess later attempts to develop the "tradition" represented by Nyssa. Brightman suggests that Nyssa's apophaticism is no mere polemical tool or language game. Rather, "[i]t is a standing in silence in an attitude of wonder, love, and praise before the majesty of the transcendent God who is incomprehensible to the human mind."[60]

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[58] Deirdre Carabine, "Gregory of Nyssa on the Incomprehensibility of God," in *The Relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity*, (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1992), 79-99. Pg. 99.

[59] Laird, 176.

[60] Robert S. Brightman, "Apophatic Theology and Divine Infinity," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review*, 18, (1973), 97-114. p. 101.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: Overflowing Order and the Affirmation and Negation of Negativity

Holy Inadequate Names

In Chapter One of *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius sums up his assessment of our language about God:

> what happens is this. We use whatever appropriate symbols we can for the things of God. With these analogies we are raised up toward the truth of the mind's vision, a truth which is simple and one. We leave behind us all our notions of the divine. We call a halt to the activities of our minds and, to the extent that is proper, we approach the ray which transcends being. Here, in a manner no words can describe, preexisted all the goals of all knowledge and it is of a kind that neither intelligence nor speech can lay hold of nor can it at all be contemplated since it surpasses everything and is wholly beyond our capacity to know it. Transcendently it contains within itself the boundaries of every natural knowledge and energy. At the same time it is established by an unlimited power beyond all the celestial minds. And if all knowledge is of that which is and is limited to the realm of the existent, then whatever transcends being must also transcend knowledge.[61]

Thus the question central for this project remains, as it does for a text entitled *The Divine Names*: What is the relationship between the language and concepts we use for God and 1) how much certain knowledge we may have of God as well as 2) how this language and knowledge moves us toward "the truth of the mind's vision" concerning "the ray which transcends being"?

The final four chapters of *The Divine Names* address some of the more familiar names for God - including Omnipotent, eternal, peace, being-it-self, Holy of Holies, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, God of Gods—in a kind of crescendo or ascent to Perfect and One. There are several theories about the pattern of names that Pseudo-Dionysius

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[61] Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Divine* Names, in Pseudo-*Dionysius: The Complete Works,* transl. Colm Luibheid, (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1, 592C-593A. All further citations of Pseudo-Dionysius will be parenthetical and will be preceded by the initials *DN* for *The Divine Names* and *MT* for *The Mystical Theology*.

chooses for his larger structure (see fn. 261, p. 127), but few readers acquainted with the neo-Platonist background can be surprised that "Perfect" and "One," the "most enduring," sit near the climax of the work. However, consistent with the larger project, Pseudo-Dionysius concludes his argument by insisting that all of these names, even "Good" and "goodness," are inadequate to describe the "ineffable nature" of God (*DN* 13 981A).

In a passage that could function as the climax and summary of *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius explains:

> As we prepare to sing this truth we use the names Trinity and Unity for that which is in fact beyond every name, calling it transcendent being above every being. But no unity or trinity, no number or oneness, no fruitfulness, indeed, nothing that is or is known can proclaim that hiddenness beyond every mind and reason of the transcendent Godhead which transcends every being. There is no name for it or expression. We cannot follow it into its inaccessible dwelling place so far above us . . . the real truth of these matters is in fact far beyond us. That is why [the scripture writers'] preference is for the way up through negations, since this stands the soul outside everything which is correlative with its own finite nature. (*DN* 13 981A-981B).

Truth, revealed only in the union of the soul with God ("when it is made one with the dazzling rays" (*DN* 7, 872B), lies "[b]eyond the outermost boundaries of the world" (*DN* 13, 981B).

Nevertheless, the names tell us something about God; they do, in fact, signify. Earlier, in between discussing God as "Mind," and "Logos" in Chapter 7, Pseudo-Dionysius has suggested that we know God "from the arrangement of everything, because everything is, in a sense, projected out from him, and this order possesses certain images and semblances of his divine paradigms" (*DN* 7 869D). Since our knowledge comes from the *sacred* order of this divine projection—so important that Denys invents

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the word "hierarchy" to name it[62]—"God is therefore known in all things and as distinct from all things" (*DN* 7, 869D). When addressing the divine name "Omnipotent" in Chapter X, Pseudo-Dionysius refers again to God generating everything "from out of himself" – He maintains total control as the omnipotent foundation and arranger of our world, the very order(ing) of which provides knowledge of Him (*DN* 10 936D-937A).

Similarly, the name "peace" tells us of the harmony produced by ordering—the unification and agreement of all things (*DN* 11 948D)—while even being itself, life itself, and divinity itself are signified in the shape or order by which "each creature, according to capacity, has his share of these" (*DN* 11 956A). Although "King" and "Lord" seem to have qualities more obviously associated with ordering than do "Holy of Holies" and "God of Gods," Denys links all of the names in Book 12 with "every law and ranking of all things which gets rid of all disharmony, inequality, and disproportion, which rejoices in well-ordered consistency and rightness." Because these names "must be praised in the absolute sense of that cause which transcends everything," we see again the link between knowledge of the Cause and awareness of the order created and maintained.

It may be safe to say, then, that the more we understand of the order(ing) of the cosmos, the better our glimpse can be of the attributes that help bridge the conceptual gap between human understanding and divine reality. Yet even understanding cosmic order is still a third or fourth generation of detachment from true knowledge. In descending order of mystery and unknowability, there is God, there is the divine projection or procession and return generated by God, there is awareness of the ongoing divine

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[62] Cf. *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 3 165A: "The goal of a hierarchy, then, is to enable beings to be as like as possible to God and to be at one with him." On the difference between "hierarchy" and *taxis* or *seira*, see Louis Bouyer, *The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, transl. Mary P. Ryan, (Minneapolis: Seabury Press, 1963), 402-405.

ordering of everything proceeding from God, and there is the recognition of order itself in

a static historical sense that recognizes evidence of things having been ordered in general.

However, even in the case of omnipotence, a conceptual name easily grasped by

humans, the analogy dissolves just as easily: the human mind cannot conceive of power

so perfectly comprehensive that the *very existence* of the objects controlled *proceeds*

from the life of the Creator and Cause. What sense is there in such a "brimming causality"

(*DN* 12 972A-B) – in an overflowing which creates order? Even our own words, which

we seem to have breathed into existence, were given to us by someone else and live only

in a medium (air) which we did not create or order. If such a familiar and comprehendible

name as "power" breaks down, its potential to signify a distinct concept bleeding over

into "identity" or "being," it is easy to understand why the more confusing names "One"

and "unity" drive us either to heresy or to fascinated contemplative silence.

The Mystical Theology

Pseudo-Dionysius ultimately does not expect or desire us to be silent, however.

Even if we miss the numerous references to hymns, singing, and praising in *The Divine*

Names,[63] the liturgical language used to frame *The Mystical Theology* indicates that

silence is only part of the story. At the end of Chapter 1 of *The Mystical Theology*,

Pseudo-Dionysius commends to Timothy the example of Moses as proof of the necessity

to go beyond "the summit of every holy ascent" (*MT* 1 1000C). As Rorem notes, "Moses

is a Dionysian prototype . . . for the hierarch in particular," and the end of Chapter 1

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[63] Note the end of Ch. 1 ("I pray that God should allow me to praise"), the opening lines of Chapters 5 ("a hymn of praise"), 6, 7, 11 ("With reverent hymns of peace we should now sing"), and 12 ("a hymn of praise"), and the climactic third section of Chapter 13 quoted above ("as we prepare to sing this truth").

follows the sequence of a liturgy of purification, separation, ascent, transcendence and contemplation.[64] Timothy, therefore, is being urged to consider the sacred acts of the hierarch in worship as a parallel to Moses' ascent of Sinai and his plunge "into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing" (*MT* 1 1001A). The association of the contemplative, mystical ascent toward unity with the ritual actions of worship suggests that we read the remainder of *The Mystical Theology*, as well as *The Divine Names*, through an ecclesial lens.

However closely Pseudo-Dionysius may have understood each liturgical action of the hierarch to be aligned with the ascent and return, and however he understood the hierarch's actions to redound to the rest of the ecclesia, the most basic point to understand is the effect the liturgical context has on our understanding of the unity he has in mind. Every component in his description, from the Moses narrative to the litany of "beyond" that ends *The Mystical Theology,* seemingly ends at the moment of unity: Moses "is supremely united . . . and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing" (*MT* 1 1001A), and the entire treatise ends when we go "beyond every limitation . . . beyond every denial" (*MT* 5 1048B). When we consider the entire corpus in an ecclesial context, however, we can see that reaching the goal does not necessarily mean reaching the end.

Moses enters the "mysterious darkness of unknowing," and the hierarch contemplates or suffers the divine things at the altar, but both travelers on the *via negativa* then return to the people who await them in expectation of some sign, perhaps even words, from the One. Both Moses and the hierarch leave multiplicity – of the people

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[64] Footnote 10, p. 137; See more detailed versions of this account in two other volumes, both by Rorem: *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols within the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), 141-142 and *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to Their Influence*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993), 189-192.

and symbols that constitute their *koinonia* – and return to union in the mysterious, brilliant darkness, but both are also sent back down into the murky brightness of multiplicity bearing some form of words or talk about God. This is why Pseudo-Dionysius provides such complementary accounts in Chapters Two and Three of *The Mystical Theology* of the descent through assertions and the ascent via negations. The hierarchy, the order of things, encourages and even requires affirmations in order to reach the denial of everything perceptible (Chapter Four) and everything conceptual (Chapter Five).[65]

Pseudo-Dionysius versus the Postmoderns?: A Pre-emptive Narration

While we will discuss in later chapters some of the postmodern interpretations of Pseudo-Dionysius, it will be in the service of very specific points arising from contemporary accounts of apophaticism. Therefore, I will conclude this portion of the survey chapter with some of the broader critiques of contemporary appropriations of Pseudo-Dionysius himself. Not surprisingly, most of these center on whether or not modern readers have overemphasized negativity at the cost of a greater balance crucial to Pseudo-Dionyisus' whole project.

As Denys Turner explains: "You cannot understand the role of the apophatic, or the extent to which it is necessary to go in denying things of God, until you have understood the role of the cataphatic and the extent to which it is necessary to go in

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[65] One denial in Chapter Five of *The Mystical Theology* continues to trouble me. Denys writes that "[e]xisting beings do not know it [the Cause] as it actually is and *it does not know them as they are*." Certainly God does not know us as we know ourselves with our limited knowing, but surely His knowledge of us includes that mode of knowing even though it surpasses it to an infinite degree?

affirming things of God."[66] In fact, not only is it incorrect to view negation as a peeling away of "the imperfect crust of human language to arrive at an intelligible core,"[67] it is precisely "in multiplying acts of reasoning" and through "the excess, the proliferation, of discourse about God that we discover its failure as a whole."[68] William Riordan includes even the negations in this excess of discourse by calling them "*super*-affirmations" which deny "any limiting of God by the measure of *our* senses and intellect."[69]

Of course, these modern re-statements are entirely consistent with Pseudo-Dionysius' own warning at the beginning of *The Mystical Theology*: "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" (*MT* 1 1000B). Nevertheless, the misunderstanding of or inaccurate emphasis upon the motifs of silence and unknowing, almost reframed as ignorance, are common mistakes in contemporary theology, perhaps especially in theological ethics. Since silence and unknowing are at the apex of the apophatic ascent, some argue that the best and most, or perhaps only, legitimate theological language and assertions are those closest to silence or admissions of unknowing.

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[66] Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," in *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, ed. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 16. See also fn. 9 in which Turner corrects some reviewers of *The Darkness of God* for misunderstanding that affirmative statements ultimately fail, "not of truth, but of God."

[67] Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2007), 126.

[68] Turner, "Apophaticism," 16. See also fn. 9 on the same page in which Turner corrects some reviewers of *The Darkness of God* for misunderstanding that affirmative statements ultimately fail, "not of truth, but of God."

[69] William K. Riordan, *Divine Light: The Theology of Denys the Areopagite*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2008), 186. As we shall see, this interpretation is in line with several postmodern interpreters.

Thomas Hibbs reports that Jean-Luc Marion makes the "broad assertion that the sole point of the divine names is to undermine all language about God" despite getting much else right in his interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius and apophaticism.[70] Without the critical recognition that affirmations about God are both true and necessary, however, Marion's valuable insights are rendered incoherent. For example, if all language about God is undermined and false, what can we make of Marion's statement that Pseudo-Dionysius' "realm of prayer or praise" functions not for the " 'naming or attributing something to something, but of aiming in the direction of . . ., of relating to . . ., of comporting oneself towards.'"[71] To what could we relate or comport ourselves toward if all language about God is empty? How would we know if we were succeeding?

Turner provides another example by noting Derrida's attempt to harmonize deconstruction with negative theology. Such a synthesis was only possible, Turner notes, if apophaticism were "reduced to a post-metaphysical rhetoric of *différance* from which is excised any residue of 'hyperessentiality', any residual appeal to an *existent* 'other.'"[72] Although Pseudo-Dionysius would agree that we must ultimately deny any kind of "essentiality" or "existence," as we think of those concepts, to God, his denial would come after affirming the symbolic and conceptual truth, as well as the necessity, of speaking in such terms. To excise the affirmation of excess and "otherness" would render the denials meaningless and prohibit the ascent beyond such categories. Certainly,

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[70] Hibbs, 127.

[71] Ibid., 119. Hibbs is quoting from Marion's essay "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology'."

[72] Turner, 21. Turner ultimately suggests that Derrida and other post-modern appropriators of negative theology are merely pushing further on the extremes of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa. Turner concludes that the Thomistic versions of metaphysics, theism, apophasis, and rationalism have "the potential to loosen the grip" of the various antinomies "which so constrain the philosophies and theologies of our day" (34).

Pseudo-Dionysius would never accept the mutation of the Good and the One, whose "brimming causality" creates the great procession of being, into the "structures of conscience" or "invisible interiority."

More encouraging is Ysabel de Andia's recognition, even within a chapter devoted to "Apophasis and Silence," that Pseudo-Dionysius' apophatic way, "the axis" of *The Mystical Theology*, is a far more balanced method. She describes "the affirmative and the negative theologies as the two great movements of every procession from God and of the transformation of the soul."[73] Again, these are not opposing forces, nor are they evidence of a necessary mutual cancellation. The cataphatic and the apophatic do not join in a synthesis, but rather work together distinctly to reveal the failure of our categories and concepts to grasp or to contain that which is beyond category and containment.

Concluding Thoughts on Early Christian Apophaticism

How do we arrive at any determination that we may loosely describe as the "mainstream of Christian apophaticism?" The figures of Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus and Pseudo-Dionysius loom over any attempt to answer this question. In his study on the history of alpha privatives in the *via negativa*, Mortley observes that what he terms the second generation of negative theologians engage in a practice of "hyper-negation, the two-fold negative maneuver" that negates negations. Mortley claims, however, that he does not find it at all in Justin, Clement, Origen, or even Plotinus.[74]

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[73] Ysabel de Andia, *Henosis: L'Union À Dieu Chez Denys L'Aréopagite*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 375. Translation mine.

[74] Raoul Mortley, "The Fundamentals of the Via Negativa," *American Journal of* Philology, Vol. 131, No. 4 (Winter, 1982), 429-439. 431.

In trying to separate a specifically "gnostic apophasis" from a "Neoplatonic theology" that was "*endemically* apophatic," John Peter Kenney suggests that the "negative theism" of Neoplatonism is "the result of the gradual effort to explore the divine unity behind the surface tale of polytheism."[75] Because of this endemic tendency,

> [n]egative theology was, on this account, part of the theological grammar of Hellenic theism. Its limited use among pre-Plotinian thinkers, such as Alcinous or Numenius, was nonetheless important to their representation of the first deity. In Plotinus, apophatic discourse became a *preeminent* tool for philosophical theology, the *chief method* for clarifying the character of the first principle.[76]

Such a distinction, between apophaticism as a tool to be used in certain contexts and a Neo-Platonist preeminence or method, factors greatly in suspicions that patristic and medieval theologians have elevated the apophatic to an improper influence on Christian theological thought. The legitimacy of these suspicions is strengthened, of course, when considering the authority granted to Pseudo-Dionysius due to his mistaken identity. But, considering what we have seen above even in this very brief survey of earlier Christian apophaticism among the most influential Fathers, any objection has to be one of relative influence rather than a claim of a wholly foreign influence.

Regardless of any assessment of Pseudo-Dionysius or any of the other thinkers surveyed here, their influence on the medieval theologians is irrefutable and, through them, especially Thomas and Bonaventure, the influence of these earliest authors continues even into the 20th and 21st century attempts at apophatic thought. While some of our interlocutors on the contemporary continuum of apophaticism choose much later

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[75] John Peter Kenney, "Ancient Apophatic Theology," in *Gnostic and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures, and Texts*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000), 259-275. Pg. 270, emphasis added.

[76] Ibid., 269. Emphasis added.

and far less influential sources as exemplars of apophaticism, the earliest Christian sources remain decisive, even if only "negatively," for this discussion.

<center>*A Bridge to Levinas, The Postmodern Bridge*</center>

The Other, Beyond

Although I have mentioned, and even ventured to characterize, some aspects of postmodern thought on apophaticism, as we move to look directly and briefly at one of its most influential sources two difficulties must be addressed. First, although this discourse has always been concerned with the limitations of language, and which early on developed a necessarily challenging linguistic or literary style, the terminology of apophaticism goes through another translation in the modern and postmodern era. For our immediate concerns, we need only note that Levinas's focus on alterity or otherness must now be understood alongside classical apophatic language such as "highest" or "beyond" as indicative of the transcendent. The similarity, or even equivocation, that this creates between talk of God and talk of human otherness is, for most postmodern thought, precisely the point.

Second, for better or for worse, and the disagreements on this point are ferocious and plentiful, Derrida and Levinas are exemplary instances of an intentional and studied "indirectness"—both with respect to their mode of discourse itself and by their refusal, in many if not all cases, to identify the statements, texts, or even authors with whom they are engaging. Even collaborators and editors are left wondering when, or even if, a statement or argument is directed toward or in response to, either affirmatively or negatively, a particular interpretation, accusation, or challenge. As Bernasconi and

Critchley note in their introduction to *Re-Reading Levinas*, "Because Levinas has not referred to [Derrida's critique of him] in "Violence and Metaphysics" by name in any of his books or essays, all such arguments [that Levinas has read carefully and is responding to Derrida's argument], are for the most part based upon allusion and conjecture."[77]

How, then, can one accurately explicate, much less put forward convincing criticism about, the accounts, arguments, and consequences thereof? To some extent, there is no way to pre-empt the simple rejoinder: "You haven't read Levinas (or Derrida or Marion) carefully enough to really understand his analysis (or point, conclusion, suggestion)." Nevertheless, by means of a close reading and comparison, it may be possible to engage and even critique postmodern thought, and its most notoriously slippery, exemplars. And, while no level of engagement, especially if accompanied by serious critique, will satisfy some devotees, it should still be possible to accredit as charitable a serious and broad engagement with the ideas presented in key texts.

Levinas's (Still Holy) Wholly Other

While every postmodern thinker has been significantly influenced by Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, a brief introduction to Emmanuel Levinas serves the purposes of this study best. Not only was Levinas one of Derrida's teachers (and Derrida a teacher of Marion), but their interaction in books and essays is one of the most sustained and fruitful in the development of postmodern thought. In order to begin our more detailed exploration of Derrida's and Marion's apophaticism and ethics, we need to understand at least a few aspects of Levinas's thought which will help set the context and language of their work—primarily those that relate directly to the shift in postmodern

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[77] Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley, "Editor's Introduction," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, Bernasconi and Critchley, Eds., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). xiii.

terminology from older terms and concepts of the apophatic tradition to "alterity" and "otherness." By briefly surveying Levinas here, therefore, I hope to prepare for the shift in language we will see in the engagement with the continuum of contemporary apophaticism while emphasizing the commonality of concepts, questions, and possibilities.

Levinas himself suggests both the Kantian frame within which this project operates as well as the interpretation I eventually offer regarding postmodernism's (Derrida's version in particular) inability to "escape from" the Kantian frame. He begins one of his few direct engagements with Derrida to be known as such with the question: "May not Derrida's work cut into the development of Western thinking with a line of demarcation similar to that of Kantianism, which separated dogmatic philosophy from critical philosophy?"[78]

What Levinas is wondering aloud is whether Derrida might serve the same "wake-up call" role that Kant did with regard to signaling "the end of naivete, of an unsuspected dogmatism which slumbered at the base of that which we took for critical spirit."[79] While we deal in detail with Derrida later, I mention these comments here in order to highlight the self-aware character postmodernism's recognition of its alignment with Kant (over against Hegel) while simultaneously seeking to break free of the "Kantian frame" described above. In other words, Levinas, Derrida, and others realize that phenomenology can no longer be bound within the strict rational or speculative boundaries of Kantian thought. Phenomenology, if it is to offer alternatives to ontological

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[78] Emmanuel Levinas, "Wholly Otherwise," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, Robert Bernasconi, Ed., Simon Critchley, Transl., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3-10. 3.

[79] Ibid.

metaphysics and the ethics based upon it, must have some kind of transcendence—or at least a formal replacement for it that provides some structural locus of the Beyond (or at least "other than this").

Because he retains the resources of Judaism, even while suggesting radical reinterpretations, Levinas is able to gesture to a fascinating phenomenological grammar that emphasizes an ethical engagement, surprising in its mutuality, with human others and with an Absolute Other. Bruce Ellis Benson groups Levinas and Marion together, over against Husserl and Derrida, as phenomenologists who "argue that phenomena remain transcendent (or 'other' to us) and thus outside of our control."[80] We can note already the intersection with apophatic theology in the description of Levinas seeing "any claims of having 'grasped' not only God but even our neighbor or 'the world as it really is' as idolatrous, for we in effect claim to take the place that can be filled only by One."[81] Benson goes on to suggest that it may require an awareness of Levinas to spot the "underlying ethical, political and even religious concerns" that mark Derrida's writing from the beginning"—yet, as we shall see in Chapter Three, Derrida remains distinct from those phenomenologists who accept any form of transcendence consistent with a "religious meaning" of God.[82] Nevertheless, Levinas's link between the Face of the Other (human) and an Absolute Other or God has raised suspicions, common toward postmodern thinkers on these topics, that he reduces God to ethics or to an utterly immanent domain of other humans.

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[80] *Graven Ideologies*, 10.

[81] Ibid., 10.

[82] Ibid., 111.

In an interview titled "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," Levinas addresses this question directly, while gesturing toward the same kind of theo-phenomenology we shall see later from Jean-Luc Marion. Asked if the "intuition of being" inherent to "the origin of philosophizing . . .would be close to religion," Levinas replies "yes, insofar as I say that the relation to the other is the beginning of the intelligible. I cannot describe the relation to God without speaking of my concern for the other."[83] He goes on to cite Matthew 25 ("When you have done it to the least of these, my brethren, you have done it to me") in a way that prepares us for the overlapping of postmodern concerns for idolatry, metaphysics, knowledge of God, transcendence, immanence, and ethics:

> the relation to God is presented there [Matthew 25] as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor: in the other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God. It is not a metaphor; it is not only extremely important, it is literally true. I'm not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God.[84]

Levinas goes on to offer an interpretation of Cain's reply to God after the murder of Abel which helps us understand one of the goals of most postmodern philosophical and theological projects: an attempt to find and to articulate the confluence of a non-metaphysical means of speaking of God and an intensified ethic of responsibility rooted in a warrant which still carries the authority usually held by the transcendent God. When Cain answers "Am I my brother's keeper?" he fails to recognize that the Face of the other bears "the Word of God" and relegated his brother to "an image among images."[85] Diagnosing this failure in terms which parallel the suspicion of metaphysics, Levinas

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[83] Emmanuel Levinas, "Philosophy, Justice, and Love," in *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 103-121. 109-110.

[84] Ibid., 110.

[85] Ibid. The phrase "an image among images" also helps reveal Levinas as a key figure in the concern with idolatry we will see from every interlocutor on the continuum of contemporary apophaticism.

argues that for Cain, "Ethics is the only things lacking in his answer; there is only ontology: I am I, and he is he. We are separate ontological beings."[86]

This refusal to imply—or simply to rule out, reject, or label as onto-theology every possibility other than—an identity between the ontological response and ethical responsibility and what has been called "God," if you will, differentiates Levinas from one branch of his students and followers. While Derrida and Caputo attempt, and no doubt sincerely hope, to emphasize and strengthen the ethical demand for responsibility, the turn to *khōra* and undecidability over against any notion of God, leaves us, I will contend, with an assertion of responsibility which seems to involve "separate ontological beings" among whom there is no common term such as "bearers of the Word of God."

Again, the importance of Levinas as bridge between apophaticism and ethics is seen in his echo, in an ethical context, of claims which sound—intentionally, as the reference to Epiphany reveals—more like epistemological limitations on thinking and speaking of God: "The face [of the other] resists possession, resists my powers. In its epiphany, in expression, the sensible, still graspable, turns into total resistance to the grasp."[87] This fear of totalizing schema develops, to different extents in different thinkers, into an aversion to order, as a form of totalizing bondage. However, this aversion actually gives birth to a replacement for order (in this way mirroring the replacement of transcendence with mysterious interiority and human otherness).

When asked why he attributes such ontological importance to the Face, which we "encounter in everyday life," rather than judging it simply "a phenomenon, a simple

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[86] Ibid.

[87] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Alphonso Lingis, Transl. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1979). 197.

experience," Levinas responds: "I have always described the face of the neighbor as the bearer of an order, imposing on me, with respect to the other, a gratuitous and non-transferable responsibility, as if the *I* were chosen and unique—and in which the other were absolutely other, i.e., still incomparable, and thus unique."[88] The shape, parameters, or "logic" of this order bears the name "responsibility"—a concept open to wide interpretation and whose emphasis shifts from what kinds of ethical claims inhere with responsibility to a focus on the conditions under which one may, and even more so may not, respond.

When paired with the concern for "the gift," which we shall see picked up in Derrida, Marion, and others, we may see the dynamic between these phenomenological arguments about ethics and the development of contemporary apophatic conclusions concerning God. Governing this discussion of gift is a fear of allowing an exchange, an economic restitution, to destroy gift, a parallel to the fear of idolatrously violating God's transcendence—hence the complication of thinking and describing the heart of ethics: we encounter the absolute Other in the face of the other before us, but even naming as "gift," much less responding to, whatever is given destroys it as gift. Just as the idolatry of reducing God to a being should generate outraged rejection, the "capturing of gift in a cycle of economic exchange"—which even giving thanks must necessarily do, according to Derrida, Marion and others—causes most postmodern thinkers to recoil in disgust.

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[88] Emmanuel Levinas, "Violence of the Face," in *Alterity and Transcendence*, Michael B. Smith, transl., (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 169-182. 169-170. Though this dissertation is not primarily concerned with comparing Levinas and Derrida, it bears remarking that, although he addresses his distinctions with Derrida's "*tout autre*" formula elsewhere, Levinas's explanatory "i.e., incomparable, and thus unique" in this comment suggests that his "absolutely other" is not the entirely the same as Derrida's "entirely other."

With respect to ethics, these perceived boundaries are so inviolable that Simon Critchley notes approvingly that when Derrida responds to Levinas's essay "Wholly Otherwise," he must respond with "radical ingratitude" in order to give an ethical response, i.e. a response that does not, must not recognize with gratitude even a gracious gift. To do otherwise, "to reciprocate the generosity of the ethical gesture is to return to the Other the Same and consequently to deny ethics." Therefore, "in order to maintain the ethical moment, Derrida must commit an ungrateful violence against Levinas's work: he must show how *the work does not work*."[89]

This rough introductory sketch of Levinas, as with the necessarily longer sketch of early Christian apophaticism, serves mainly to prepare us for an analysis of those influenced both by Levinas and by the tradition shaped by thinkers like Clement, Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius. As confessed at the beginning of this survey, the sources and influences covered here can only be cursory and aimed primarily at providing the bare minimum of context—conceptual, historical, and grammatical—that will make the following analyses possible. Hopefully, as we examine and assess the contemporary revival in the remaining chapters, which will involve the occasional return back to the sources and influences surveyed here as well as others barely mentioned, the explications and critiques offered will help develop a clearer picture of the historical expressions and applications of apophaticism, the current conversations, and the differences and similarities among them.

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[89] Simon Critchely, " 'Bois'—Derrida's Final Word on Levinas," in *Re-Reading Levinas*, Robert Bernasconi, Ed., Simon Critchley, Transl., (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 162-189. 169.

CHAPTER THREE

Undecidable Responsibility

Some souls believe themselves to have found in Deconstruction . . . a modern
form of immorality, of amorality, or of irresponsibility . . . while others, more
serious, in less of a hurry, better disposed toward so-called Deconstruction . . .
discern encouraging signs and in increasing numbers (at times, I must admit, in
some of my texts) which would testify to a permanent, extreme, direct, or oblique,
in any event, increasingly intense attention, to those things which one could
identify under the fine names of "ethics," "morality," "responsibility," "subject,"
etc.[1]

—Jacques Derrida

The echoes of Nietzsche's and Heidegger's struggles with the absolute and its
designations still reverberate. Is it nihilism or anarchic celebration? Are we
floundering in primal chaos or flaunting the erratic nature of our existence? Or
both at once? Or neither? Ambiguous, absurd, cynical, elusive, irrational,
equivocal, sophistic, undecidable . . .Is Derrida's refusal to conform to logocentric
norms a symptom of a fatal metaphysical disease or a cure for what ails the
Western mind-set? Is Derrida's strategy of deconstruction the *pharmakon* that can
either kill or cure?. . .[his] work avoids prescribing a solution. It remains
deliberately indeterminate.[2]

—Morny Joy

We move now from a historical overview of the Christian apophatic tradition to

examine more closely the representative examples of the contemporary apophatic revival

and its consequences for ethics. As noted in Chapter One, the conversation of

philosophers and theologians in response to Derrida, and later to Marion, created to a

large extent the apophatic revival. Mary-Jane Rubenstein attributes an "outpouring of

scholarship" specifically to Derrida's frequent and insistent disavowals of apophatic

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[1] Jacques Derrida, "Passions: An Oblique Offering," in *Save the Name*, transl. David Wood,
(Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 15.

[2] "Conclusion: Divine Reservations," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Ed. Harold Coward and
Toby Foshay, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 255-282. (pp. 257-258).

theology.[3] Accordingly, the work of influential scholars such as John Caputo and Richard Kearney, both of whom acknowledge their debt to and ongoing engagement with Derrida, helps make the point that this revival is a major facet of the western philosophical and theological landscape of the last quarter of a century. Furthermore, it is Derrida who sets much of the framework—the grammar, interlocutors, problems, and context—for most of the contemporary revival, and many of the secondary voices speak in response to his framing, even when modifying, adding to, or disagreeing with his account.

As explained in Chapter One, the scope of this dissertation requires me to focus on those aspects of the various apophaticisms which have the most direct effect on ethics—particularly concerning issues of moral formation for virtues ethics. When focusing in this chapter on the ethical consequences of the Derridean end of the contemporary apophatic contiuunm, I attempt to assess these accounts of the apophatic not against a different, normative strand of the apophatic, but rather by the internal coherence of the postmodern accounts themselves and a comparison with other accounts. While I ultimately find Bonaventure's account superior—precisely because it allows for a harmonization of the apophatic and virtues ethics—I attempt in this chapter a charitable reading of the nuances of postmodern interpretations and a critique of their effect on ethics based upon their own stated goals and logical consequences (as much as those can be determined).

The connection between the apophatic and ethics is inherent in the contemporary engagement which intertwines assertions and conclusions about God so closely with ethical considerations that it is often difficult to determine which concern is dominant.

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[3] Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of 'Ontotheology,'" *Modern Theology* 24:4, October 28, 725-741 (727).

Nevertheless, in each exploration of a section of the modern continuum, I will attempt to explicate first the particular attempt to address the "question of God" via apophatic thought and then move to address the consequences for ethics.

Derrida's (Non-)Apophaticism: Playing with Denials

At this end of the continuum, it is important to remember how broadly "the apophatic" has been interpreted since the early modern period. The survey in Chapter Two focused on the most influential apophatic strands of the Christian tradition, largely because this is the primary Western philosophical and theological context which developed apophaticism between the neo-Platonists and the late modern era. The post-Heideggarian revival extends the theological application of the tradition to the broader concerns of knowledge as such and the contingency of all language. As a result, when we look at the post-modern and deconstructionist engagement with apophaticism, we must keep in mind that the concern for and grammar of silence, secrets, (non)communicability, and signifying are applied to radical claims about all knowledge, language, and writing. While never ignorant of the relationship, the stream with which we are concerned here came later and in response to the recognition that these claims bore resemblance to older theological apophatic claims focused on knowledge and language about God.[4]

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[4] As with any genealogy, we could push the starting point further back almost indefinitely. Since, however, the continuum here involves scholarly contemporaries engaged in, at times, direct conversation and debate, it must suffice to say that we begin with Derrida even while recognizing that his involvement in the modern revival of apophaticism is a consequence of his background in Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Levinas. While I have already addressed some of the ancient sources as well as Levinas, I will make reference to other predecessors—though their treatment here must by necessity be cursory and only with respect to the narrow issues in question for the ethical consequences of the apophatic thought of Derrida, Caputo, Marion, Kearney, Turner, et al.

Appropriately enough for a tradition characterized by the denial of affirmative statements, the primary catalyst for the contemporary revival is a series of denials. Derrida's engagement with apophaticism, which triggers many of the subsequent discussions that make up the revival, comes primarily through his explicit and implicit denials that he is doing anything that could accurately be labeled apophatic.[5] Of course, he invites the question by recognizing commonalities among apophatic theology, his neologism *différance*, his interpretation and application of the Platonic notion of *khōra*, and the radical alterity suggested by his phrase *tout autre est tout autre*.

However, it is in his attempt to distance himself and distinguish his work from the apophatic tradition that we may see best what the tradition means to him and what he believes he offers in its place. After assembling a sketch of what Derrida's own "negativity" and practice of "pure denial" look like, we may ask about the ethical consequences which arise from his thought. While I ultimately find the postmodern appropriation of apophaticism incoherent, and its consequences for ethics destructive, Derrida and his followers in the postmodern strand of contemporary philosophy contribute a great deal to any attempt to engage both the apophatic and ethics.[6]

Distinct Differences?

As Rubenstein tracks it, Derrida first recognizes overlapping concerns and claims with apophaticism in his landmark 1968 lecture "*Différance*." While the differing

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[5] For Derrida as part of a tradition of "heretical" rabbinic hermeneutics, Joy refers to Susan Handelman, *The Slayers of Moses*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 163-78.

[6] Of course, I cannot address the full range of Derrida's engagement with the apophatic on every front. As is appropriate for this study, I am here focusing on the aspects of his interpretation and use of the apophatic which factor most into his dealings with the Kantian frame established in Chapter One and the ethical orientation of my project.

contexts over the subsequent three and a half decades of writing and speaking make it difficult to offer a precise assessment of any development or modification of his position on the apophatic, we can see key commonalities over the range of his engagement. The broadest sense in which Derrida refers to his writing as apophatic can be seen in "Passions: 'An Oblique Offering'" when he refers to the "apophatic aspect" of his "exercise on the essence and existence" of "an absolute secret" which creates the possibility for discourse and response.[7] Although this essay uses the notion of response (Derrida's essay itself is a response to essays on his thought) as a catalyst for consideration of duty and responsibility, Derrida seems ultimately to be concerned with the limits of communicability. Or, as he eventually puts it, the "something secret" that makes it an impossibility "for any testimony to guarantee itself by expressing itself in the following form and grammar: 'Let us testify that. . .'"[8]

Although Derrida labels this "an apophatic aspect," he also recognizes that it is not "necessarily dependent on negative theology, even if it makes it possible, too."[9] He further distinguishes this secret from any theological context by insisting that the secret "concerns neither that into which a revealed religion *initiates* us nor that which it *reveals* (namely a mystery of passion), nor a learned ignorance (in a Christian brotherhood practicing a kind of negative theology), nor the content of an esoteric doctrine (for example, in a Pythagorean, Platonic, or neo-Platonic community). . . The secret is not

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[7] "Passions: "An Oblique Offering," in *On The Name*, trans. David Wood, ed. Thomas Dutoit, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995. 24. The characterization of the secret in question as absolute comes from Derrida's introductory text for the French edition, which Dutoit includes in his preface "Translating the Name?" (xiv).

[8] Ibid., 24.

[9] Ibid.

mystical."[10] In fact, this is "a secret that is without content, without a content separable from its performative experience."[11] Furthermore, this secret is "neither sacred nor profane," and the unconditional respect due to it is a problem equally for religion, philosophy, morality, politics, and law alike.[12]

So in what sense is any of this apophatic? The translator of "Passions," David Wood, footnotes the phrase "apophatic aspect" with an OED entry defining apophasis as "a kind of Irony, whereby we deny that we say or do that which we especially say or do."[13] While Derrida may have this thoroughly traditionless sense in mind as he attempts the paradox of "saying an absolute secret," his pointed denial that the secret is not mystical reflects his concern for a distinction from some form of apophatic theology. And yet, while Derrida thinks the content of the secret is not separable from "its performative experience," his qualification that it may only be separable "from its performative *enunciation* or from its *propositional argumentation*"[14] invites comparisons precisely with an experiential interpretation of the mystical apophatic theological tradition.[15] By suggesting that this secret can only be performed, but not enunciated or

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[10] Ibid., 25-26.

[11] Ibid., 24.

[12] Ibid., 25.

[13] Ibid., 141, fn. 11.

[14] Ibid., 24
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[15] As Turner argues in *The Darkness of God*, and as we shall discuss below in Chapter Four, the experiential interpretation of the mystical, while popular and operative among the philosophers and theologians involved in these discussions, is a late and largely unfaithful variant of the mystical character of Christian apophaticism. However, we must deal with the fact that many of the interlocutors discussed here assume experientialist qualities when they refer to the apophatic and the mystical.

communicated in propositions, Derrida attempts to reserve for the secret the role of "condition of the possibility" for one of the constitutive qualities of apophatic theology.

Affirming the Negative

Rubenstein and Mark C. Taylor have both noted and catalogued the most famous of many similar denials Derrida makes in various works.[16] From his insistence in "*Différance*" that his proposals "are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies" to his 1992 essay "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in which he uses both the blunt declaration that "what I write is not 'negative theology'" and the more typically circumspect assessment that he "would hesitate to inscribe what I put forward under the familiar heading of negative theology," Derrida consistently posits a separation between his work and apophatic theology of any species. The most important element in his explanation for this separation is also his most serious critique of apophatic theology: ultimately, it is not really negative. As he explains in "*Différance*" (1968), even the most negative of negative theologies "are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being."[17]

In "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," along with "*Sauf le nom*" his most sustained treatment of apophaticism, Derrida writes that he felt he had already articulated

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[16] See Rubenstein, 387-388 and Mark C. Taylor, "nO, nOt, nO," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

[17] "*Différance*," trans. Alan Bass, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 6.

the difference between his own thought and negative theology.[18] He points to the latter's

reservation "beyond all positive predication, beyond all negation, even beyond Being, [of]

some hyperessentiality, a being beyond Being," as in the *hyperousios* of Pseudo-

Dionysius, or even "God as being beyond Being or also God as *without* Being."[19] He

labels this reserve of essence an "ontological wager of hyperessentiality" concerning God

which leads to an unwelcome "promise of that presence given to intuition or vision"

which "often accompanies the apophatic voyage."[20] Therefore, despite the similarities of

paradoxical language and the emphasis on inherent impossibilities of saying and un-

saying between apophatic theology and *différance* (or deconstructionist methodology in

general), they aim at incommensurable targets. While apophatic theology promises the

mystery of "the vision of a dark light" or "more than luminous darkness," it fails truly to

deconstruct or to be *différance* because "still it is the immediacy of a presence. Leading

to union with God."[21]

At this point, we may recognize more clearly both what Derrida understands as

apophatic theology and what he proposes as a more radical alternative with his own

theorizing. Apophatic theology, by claiming even to point to the God who remains a

mystery beyond language, concept, sense, or intellect still claims to point to a particular

God—even if the certainty only touches on the character of mystery. As Morny Joy

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[18] For a discussion of which sources should be considered as representative of negative theology, a question which Derrida calls "grave and limitless," see "*Sauf le nom*," in *On The Name*, trans. David Wood, ed. Thomas Dutoit, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 41 and 85 and Mark C. Taylor's treatment of the question of a "classic" negative theology in "nO, nOt, nO," 176 and 186.

[19] "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, eds., (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). 77.

[20] Ibid., 78-79.

[21] Ibid., 79.

describes it, for Derrida "behind the seeming disaffirmations of negative theology lurks an ontological *telos*, the ultimate *deus ex machina* who informs the whole undertaking."[22] Where postmodern thought following Derrida prefers gestures toward endless undecidability and strong claims about the uncertainty of any claim, the Christian apophatic tradition recognizes a decisive and certain given.

In "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," Derrida goes on to explore a triad of approaches to the negative—which he labels Greek, Christian, and the "neither Greek nor Christian" elements of Heidegger's thought—focusing on the tensions inherent in saying and writing about the un-sayable and un-writable, spoken and written prayer as a means of addressing that which cannot be named and which dwells in silence, being and Being, and claims for the manifestation and revealing of that which still remains secret. Far from offering a simplistic explication of conveniently insufficiently negative theologies, Derrida recognizes the difficulty of isolating what precisely it is that he denies doing.

In "*Sauf le Nom*," he debates himself over his own proposal that "What is called 'negative theology' is a language"—a two-part monologue which asserts, parabolically, that discussing something called 'negative theology' is to discuss nothing, because negative theology itself "means (to say) very little, almost nothing, perhaps something other than something."[23] Taking a cue from Augustine's confession to a God who already knows everything, Derrida draws negative theology into the class of discourse which is a performance or event, rather than communication about something. Since confession to an omniscient God does not make anything known, "it teaches that teaching as the

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[22] Joy, "Conclusion: Divine Reservations," 261.

[23] "*Sauf le Nom*," 50.

transmission of positive knowledge is not essential. The avowal does not belong in essence to the order of cognitive determination; it is quasi-apophatic in this regard. It has nothing to do with knowledge—with knowledge as such."[24] As such, if the apophatic, and negative theology in particular, is a language, then it is a language (and not a genre or literary art)[25] the performance of which is aimed at communicating something other than knowledge.

Negation As Emptiness

Derrida reveals another important element in his analysis of negative theology in an interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius. He reads negative theology as being inherently self-subverting inasmuch as "the statement of negative theology empties itself by definition, by vocation, of all intuitive plenitude. *Kenosis* of discourse."[26] Here we may begin to detect an important tension between what even the informal Christian canon of apophatic theology understands itself to be doing and what Derrida asserts about its goal and method. He connects apophatic statements to Husserl's "moment of *crisis*" in which we find a "forgetting of the full and originary intuition, empty functioning of symbolic language, objectivism, etc."[27] Derrida, however, finds that apophatic statements go beyond the mere description of such moments, and in fact effect his version of *kenosis*: "in revealing the originary and final necessity of this crisis, in denouncing from the language of crisis the snares of intuitive consciousness and of phenomenology, they

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[24] Ibid., 39.

[25] Ibid., 41.

[26] Ibid., 50.

[27] Ibid.

destabilize the very axiomatics of the phenomenological, which is also the ontological and transcendental, critique."[28]

Derrida believes that this destabilizing effect, much like that of deconstruction itself, is inherent in the statements of apophatic theology because "Emptiness is essential and necessary to them."[29] This is a revealing interpretation of the apophatic and a striking theological claim. He offers further clarity (again, apparently, alluding to Pseudo-Dionysius) by identifying those aspects of theological texts which do not speak to emptiness and seem to fall back within the phenomenological, the ontological, and the transcendental. If apophatic statements try to "guard against this" absolute destabilization and emptiness, "it is through the moment of prayer or the hymn. But this protective moment remains structurally exterior to the apophatic instance, that is to *negative* theology as such, if there is any in the strict sense, which can at times be doubted."[30] In other words, he presents the "protective moment" of prayers or hymns in otherwise apophatic discourse as part of his critique of apophatic theology: its reservation of some super-essential affirmation is a failure of negativity.

He has, effectively, isolated an "essence" of pure apophaticism—denouncing, destabilizing, bound to emptiness—which he will use to gauge the purity of negativity. He proposes that where the grammar of theological apophaticism seems not to coincide with this "essence," it is exterior, separate from "the purely apophatic instance."[31] What is not clear is the source of the standard of anti-cataphatic apophaticism with which

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[28] Ibid., 50-51.

[29] Ibid., 51.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

Derrida gauges the Christian tradition and finds it lacking (in its insufficient lack). It also remains an open question whether or not Derrida recognizes that the development of the Christian apophatic tradition, which is indispensable to the philosophical tradition funding deconstruction, requires, at least, a dialectic between the cataphatic and the apophatic.

As for the claim itself—that the prayers and hymns are alien guards and protections against demolishing the super-essential cataphatic which theology always desires to reserve—it seems that, by his rules, the only theology which could properly be recognized as apophatic would be either an a-theology or simply deconstruction re-named as theology. As we shall see, this seems to be precisely the trend for some philosophies and theologies which attempt to maintain dialogue with Derrida's school of thinking. However, here both Derrida's analysis and his sourcing fail him and those who accept his account as persuasive or even unavoidable. For Pseudo-Dionysius, and later, for Bonaventure, the hymn is not exterior to the apophatic. It is integral in the sense that it is integrated profoundly into the most apophatic moments of his work, especially *Mystical Theology* itself. In fact, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the songs of praise are at once the goal of negation and the means by which we arrive at negation.

In a passage that Bonaventure will follow explicitly in his influential *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, Pseudo-Dionysius presents mystical blindness, unknowing, and silence in true harmony with prayer and songs of praise:

> in ceasing thus to see or to know we may learn to know that which is beyond all perception and understanding (for this is emptying our faculties is true sight and knowledge), and that we may offer Him that transcends all things the praise of a transcendent hymnody, which we shall do by denying or removing all things that are—like as men who, carving a statue out of marble remove all the impediments

that hinder the clear perceptive of the latent image and by this mere removal display the hidden statute itself in its hidden beauty.[32]

Thus we see that, apparently, Derrida seems to discount such claims by Pseudo-Dionysius and the main representatives of the Christian practice of apophatic theology that prayer and hymns are harmonious with, rather than contradictory to, real negation.

As we shall see below, Denys Turner argues that for the Christian tradition, as represented at least up until Bonaventure, even the cataphatic must be in a dialectical relationship in order to "know" (like a bride and groom) the apophatic. The invitation to "sing" at the moments of transition is not even properly or entirely cataphatic in the same way that symbolic language is cataphatic. Singing and praying are preparation for participation, and thus always already participation, in the apophatic. This is no external guard: it is invitation, as we shall see most strikingly with Bonaventure's midrashic elaboration on Pseudo-Dionysius at the end of the *Itinerarium*. We will return to Bonaventure in much greater detail in Chapter Five, but to understand Derrida's position here, we must see already the contrast between his account and that of the main font of Christian apophatic theology.

Bruce Milem points out this disjuncture between the mainstream of tradition and Derrida's account by arguing that, while negative theology recognizes the crucial impossibility of knowing and speaking about God, Derrida "depicts the impossible that exercises both deconstruction and negative theology as an impossible event in the future that has yet to arrive."[33] However, Derrida either fails to realize or to account fully for the

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[32] *Mystical Theology*, II.

[33] Bruce Milem, "The Impossible Has Already Occurred: Derrida and Negative Theology," *Philosophy Today*, Supplement 1997, 180-185. 180.

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also crucial fact that "negative theology understands this impossibility as having already occurred."[34] While Milem does not fully develop the "already and not yet" nature of the arrival of the impossible in the apophatic tradition, he does clearly articulate its primary conflict with Derrida's account and competing theory: "negative theology seeks to demonstrate the absolute distinctiveness of Scripture and its ultimate incompatibility with human language and understanding. In regarding Scripture as the voice of the hidden, unknowable God, negative theology seeks to confront and live with the impossible event of that God speaking and revealing God in time and history, a disruptive event which has already happened."[35] As we shall see below, this stark difference has direct impact on the implications of Derrida's counter-apophatic proposals (*différance*, *khōra*, and undecidability) for both knowledge and ethics.

Derrida seems to settle on the idea that negative theology violates itself and the "secret" and the "gift" by failing in what he maintains is its own goal "to say nothing"—it thus fails even when it seeks to communicate the ineffability of the ineffable. Since negative theology is founded upon and maintains the claim that God, a "something other than something" which is really no thing, lies beyond the senses, knowledge, etc., it fails in its negativity. For Derrida, any determinability, and certainly any presence or Person, establishes a semi-ontotheological ground just as surely as if one imagined God as a giant bearded man in the sky. This includes, apparently, even the determinability required to address a prayer of thanksgiving—regardless of its inscription in a context which emphasizes the ineffability of the gift, the giver, and the mystery of the possibility of address itself.

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[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 184.

Nothing Can Be Revealed (Even as Nothing)

However, he turns this line of thinking into an opportunity to demonstrate, via an analysis of his own delay in fulfilling a promise to speak of negative theology, his own alternative to apophatic theology: the endless deferral of discourse and knowledge made necessary by the phenomenon of the secret or unknowable.[36] Regardless of the multiple species of negative theologies, through his critique of Pseudo-Dionysius, Derrida clarifies his objection to any sort of arrival, no matter how enigmatic or incomplete: "this mystic union, this act of *un*knowing, is also 'a genuine vision and a genuine knowledge'. . . it knows unknowing itself in its truth, a truth that is not an adequation but an unveiling."[37] It is this unveiling, and any unveiling or true revealing, which cannot be harmonized with *différance* or Derrida's project of deconstruction. Put another way, he argues that "In the most apophatic moment, when one says: 'God is not,' 'God is neither this nor that, neither that nor its contrary" or 'being is not,' etc., even then it is still a matter of saying the entity such as it is, in its truth, even were it meta-metaphysical, meta-ontological."[38]

Furthermore, he finds an exclusivity or elitism in the secret-keeping of priests, theologians, or indeed anyone who claims access to the means of this revealing via faith in any God we may address or about whom we may say something. Emerging from Derrida's analysis of *Mystical Theology*, we see a desire that seems strangely parallel to a Kantian universalism: apophatic theology fails inasmuch as the secret which it keeps— even if defined as broadly as "the knowledge of the promise" of God's unveiling—is not

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[36] "How To Avoid Speaking: Denials," 83-90.

[37] Ibid., 80. Quoting *Mystical Theology*, II.

[38] *Sauf le Nom*, 68.

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accessible outside of that which Christians claim to know. The instruction from Pseudo-Dionysius in *Mystical Theology* to avoid disclosure of the promise (or the itinerary to its unveiling) to the uninitiated reveals that the "allegorical veil becomes a political shield, the solid barrier of a social division" invented to "protect against access to a knowledge which remains in *itself* inaccessible, untransmissible, unteachable."[39]

No Gift is Really a Gift

In an exchange with Jean-Luc Marion published in *God, the Gift and Post-Modernism*, Derrida clarified a companion dynamic to the keeping or knowing of a secret—that of inscribing language of the secret or the gift into an "economic circle" of exchange. He argues that "as soon as gift is identified as gift, with the meaning of gift, then it is canceled as a gift. It is reintroduced into the circle of exchange and destroyed as a gift. As soon as the donee knows it is a gift, he already thanks the donator, and cancels the gift."[40] As Derrida continues to elaborate, we see that presence and knowledge are again the essential terms, for "the gift does not exist as such, if by existence we understand being present and intuitively identified as such . . . it is impossible for the gift to exist and appear as such."[41]

However, and this is crucial for understanding Marion's and others' belief that they share enough common ground with Derrida to sustain dialogue, Derrida insists that

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[39] Ibid., 92-93.

[40] Derrida, "On the Gift: Exchange with Jean-Luc Marion," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon, eds., (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), 54-78. 59.

[41] Ibid.

he "never concluded that there is no gift."[42] Returning again to the phenomenological

grounds of this discussion, he concludes that "if there is a gift, through this impossibility,

it must be the experience of this impossibility"—rather than an experience, awareness, or

intuition of the gift itself—"and it should appear as impossible. The event called gift is

totally heterogeneous to theoretical identification, to phenomenological identification."[43]

When we realize that Derrida does not want to preclude the existence of a gift, but that it

cannot be said to exist beyond the "experience of an impossibility" which has not and

never will arrive, we begin to hone in on what he proposes in opposition to—in place

of—negative theology and the apophatic tradition. Furthermore, he identifies his effort

within one aspect of the Kantian frame of the issue described in Chapter One: "what this

question of the gift compels us to do, perhaps, is to re-activate, while displacing, the

famous distinction that Kant made between knowing and thinking, for instance."[44]

One implication of Derrida's repeated, emphatic denials distancing his own

proposals from the falsely-negative "most negative of negative theologies" is that he

finds the negativity he offers to be "pure"—which is to say that positivity is entirely

absent from it. In fact, his, and Caputo's, accounts of "the secret" and *différance* are so

entirely negative that they cannot even claim absence or their own associated term "trace,"

since both concepts require the existence of something that was once present or has the

capacity to be present. *Différance* cannot truly use the verb "is" (as Derrida famously

demonstrates in the essay) because, since it is "never offered" as some thing or as a being,

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[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., 60

it is never presented as being what "is" is: that which "makes possible the presentation of the being-present."[45] Getting right to the heart of the Heideggarian roots of his involvement with the topic, Derrida claims that it "is not only irreducible to any ontological or theological—ontotheological—reappropriation, but as the very opening of the space in which ontotheology—philosophy—produces its system and its history, it includes ontotheology, inscribing it and exceeding it without return."[46]

The Evacuated Desert of the Khōra[47]

From arguing the fact of *différance* as a genuine phenomenon, Derrida moves one step further to question not its origin, but the condition of its possibility. The site and primordial enabler or "nurse" of *différance* cannot, of course, be as determinative or distinct as God, or even a first cause. Instead, Derrida follows Heidegger to an enigmatic reference in the *Timaeus* in order to offer a name and a concept for that place or site that is no place or no site and defies concepts and naming: *khōra*.[48] In the dialogue itself, Timaeus discusses it as the space or receptacle "which is eternal and indestructible, which provides a position for everything that comes to be, and which is apprehended without the senses by a sort of spurious reasoning and so is hard to believe in."[49] Defining it as "an exemplary aporia in the Platonic text," Derrida reads *khōra* as a "thing" outside of

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[45] "*Différance*," 6.

[46] Ibid.

[47] For another short summary of both Derrida's reading of *Timaeus* and his presentation of *khōra*, see John Manoussakis, "*Khōra*: The Hermeneutics of Hyphenation," *Revista Portugesa de Filosofia*, T. 58, Fasc. 1, Fé e Razão & Outros Ensaios (Jan. – Mar., 2002), pp. 93-100.

[48] They follow but expand significantly the scope and application of Heidegger's interest in the term to identify *khōra* as the "place" where being takes place.

[49] Plato, "Timaeus," in *Timaeus and Critas (Revised)*, transl. Desmond Lee, (New York: Penguin, 1977). 71, 52a8.

typical Platonic categories which "seems to 'give place'—without, however, this 'thing' ever *giving* anything: neither the ideal paradigms of things nor the copies that an insistent demiurge, the fixed idea before his eyes, inscribes in it."[50]

As with Heidegger's context of thinking being rather than beings, Derrida's analysis of *khōra* notes that, despite being named as a kind of "receptacle" by Plato, and despite Derrida's own speech concerning it as a receiver: "It does not have the characteristics of an existent, by which we mean an existent that would be receivable in the *ontologic*, that is, those of an intelligible *or* sensible existent. There is *khōra*, but *the khōra* does not exist."[51] *Khōra* "anachronizes being"—its name does not "designate an essence, the stable being of an *eidos* . . . *Khōra* is not, is above all not, anything but a support or a subject which would *give* place by receiving or conceiving, or indeed by letting itself be conceived."[52] Unable to be captured or even described by the language of "things" or existence, all *khōra* does—though it cannot be said to do anything—is receive. However, while "giving place to" being, to every thing, and "all the determinations . . . she/it does not possess any of them as her/its own. She possesses them, she has them, since she receives them, but she does not possess them as properties."[53]

In *khōra*, we do not even deal with absence: "Simply this excess is nothing, nothing that may be and be said ontologically. This absence of support, which cannot be translated into absent support or into absence as support, provokes *and* resists any binary

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[50] *Priere d'insere* to the French publications of "Passions," "*Sauf le nom*," and "*Khōra*," translated by Thomas Dutoit in "Translating the Name," in *On the Name*, ix-xvi, (xv).

[51] *Khōra*, 97.

[52] Ibid., 94, 95.

[53] Ibid., 99.

or dialectical determination, any inspection of a philosophical *type*, or let us say, more rigorously, of an *ontological* type."[54] Once again, however, we must remember that however much this may appear analogous to the claims of negative theology or even a generic *Deus Absconditus*, it is opposed to both ideas. Even a claim to know the God who is now absent, or that there is such a (non)thing or presence that could be present or absent is to violate the negativity and the conceptual and phenomenological impossibility that Derrida proposes. *Khōra* somehow (we may not know, much less speak of how) gives place for the otherness of *différance* without giving anything or in any way touching the thought or language of being.

Preferring Nothing

While Derrida's descriptions and claims about *khōra* deserve a rigorous discussion from a theoretical context, we may also learn a great deal about his argument by seeing the practical stakes of proposing *différance* and *khōra* over negative theology. With the goal (or reality, as Derrida might insist) of a perduring indeterminability in mind, we may now return to Derrida's treatment of negative theology and see it in light of what he prefers—and why he insists on separating himself from it. While, again, Derrida is not dismissive of negative theology in general or the Christian apophatic tradition, we must understand that his description and analysis serves his critique and his counter-proposal of absolute indeterminability in the *khōra*. In his account, negative theology "belongs, without fulfilling, to the space of the philosophical or onto-theological promise that it seems to break: to record . . . the referential transcendence of language: to say God such as he is, beyond his images, beyond this idol that being can still be, beyond what is

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[54] Ibid., 99-100.

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said, seen, or known of him."[55] While recognizing that "it does so in the name of a way of truth and in order to hear the name of a just voice," Derrida can only underwrite such a project by imagining a hypothetical "apophatic design" which is "anxious to render itself independent of revelation, of all the literal language of New Testament eventness, of the coming of Christ, of the Passion, of the dogma of the Trinity, etc."[56]

Caputo describes this contrast in familiar terms, while also hinting at one aspect of the superiority of *khōra* over theology—true humility—which he and Derrida narrate by subverting the Christian concept of *kenosis*. Where the negations of negative theology are really aimed at the hyper-essential, the reservation of "something hyper-present, hyper-real or sur-real," *différance* actually is—without actually being, of course—"less than real, not quite real, never gets as far as being or entity or presence."[57] Rather than being signaled or signed by any notion of a being or person, *différance* is only "emblematized by insubstantial quasi-beings like ashes and ghosts . . .or with humble *khōra*, say, rather than with the prestigious Platonic sun. *Différance* is but a quasi-transcendental anteriority, not a supereminent, transcendent ulteriority."[58]

While Derrida does not argue explicitly for *khōra* in place of God, we may at least say that, in his argument, *différance* and *khōra* serve the purely formal function of a transcendent referent that destabilizes all language and knowledge in a way similar to

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[55] *Sauf le Nom*, 69.

[56] Ibid., 71.

[57] Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion,* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997). 2.

[58] Ibid., 2-3.

divine transcendence in the Christian apophatic tradition.[59] However, by insisting on a "pure" negativity with no content or anything determinable, he has won absolute universality (for what could be more universal than the primordial space in which being itself "takes place"?) at the cost of any and all personality. As with many other positions among postmodern thinkers, this rejection of even the most minimalist knowledge claims about God, while raising crucial questions and barriers for Christians and others, poses no inherent problem within a postmodern, atheist context. Indeed, if one is convinced that religious certainty is the driving force, or at least the *sine qua non*, of violence and many social ills, then substituting accounts of God with a purely formal transcendent, such as *khōra* or *différance*, about which nothing can be certain, could seem a very welcome sign of progress—perhaps a necessary condition for a more enlightened political order.

However, as discussed in greater detail below, this substitution has serious consequences not only for the possibility of dialogue with Christians but also for the possibility of an internally coherent ethic, irrespective of any affirmation of or certainty about reliable knowledge of God. The potential problems for serious Christian interlocutors should be obvious: where Christian apophaticism challenges confidence in language and concepts to grasp the God attested to in Scripture and tradition, *khōra* or *différance* seem to propose an alternative that is explicit about its goal of independence from all revelation—even revelation humbled by apophaticism. While overtly diagnosing epistemological confidence in revelation as the problem, rather than revelation as such, Derrida nevertheless prescribes a cure which eliminates any trace of revelation as

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[59] For another argument that both Derrida and Caputo intend *khōra* as a desirable alternative for God, see Richard Kearney's characterization of Deconstruction's "preferential option for *khōra*," and "its allies, over its rivals" rather than God or theology, even apophatic theology, in his *Strangers, Gods, and Monsters: Interpreting Otherness*, (London: Routledge, 2003). 203.

understood in most Christian and Jewish traditions—relativizing, as we shall see below, all claims of revelation to equivocal testimonies from unknowable others.

Furthermore, while Derrida offers an alternative which may fulfill, in a purely theoretical sense, a similar formal transcendent function as does a theoretical notion of God, his alternative entails a shift in epistemology and ontology which would reject or alter radically not only the most hesitantly stated Christian claims about a Trinitarian God but also pose a challenge to basic claims of Christian anthropology. It would be pointless, for example, to appeal to the *imago dei* as the basis for inherent human dignity when we may express no epistemological confidence in any account of *Deus*, much less how we might know any particular exemplars of His *imago*. This, however, may be precisely the point for Derrida and others who believe that any confidence in such knowledge must lead to dangerous consequences for those who occupy themselves with things too great and too marvelous for the human mind and heart.

While we shall see examples of attempts to synthesize Christian dogma and belief with the Derridean position, we must note here the significant difference between the quieted soul of Psalm 131, for example, and the sort of silence imposed by the epistemological desert of *khōra* and *différance*. Derrida's argument proposes an impersonal and anonymous space—an impossibly generic womb rather than a mother who might teach or quiet us. Furthermore, anyone who might speak of knowing anything about such a mother is implicated in a kind of epistemological imperialism, as any claim of distinguishability, much less certainty, is deemed an ontotheological power grab resting upon ontologically impossible knowledge.

With regard to ethics, and now speaking irrespective of any positions on God or revelation, Derrida's argument causes other serious problems. In order to protect the universality of nothing-in-particular, Derrida jettisons anything which may be translated or related—thereby removing the condition of any recognizable kind of ethos or politics. Gesturing toward one pre-condition of ethics, translatability—that which "makes philosophy go outside itself"—Derrida reminds us of the Kantian background for this discussion by issuing a call "for a community that overflows [philosophy's] tongue and broaches a process of universalization."[60] It only follows, then, that the "purely negative" aspect of negative theology would be that which desires independence from any particular claim of any particular philosophical tradition (whether based upon or consistent with theological assumptions or not) and to become, perhaps "An immediate but intuitionless mysticism, a sort of abstract kenosis," which "frees this language from all authority, all narrative, all dogma, all belief—and at the limit from all faith."[61]

Pouring Out Nothing?

For Christian theologians and philosophers, at least, a purely abstract kenosis, drained of the Jewish context which situates and gives meaning to the Christian meaning of the term, should be considered a category error. In fact, even for Derrida, it is only the particular *kenosis* of Philippians 2—embedded as it is within the narrative of Israel's calling, the prophetic and messianic traditions, and above all in the Person of the Incarnation and Crucifixion—that establishes *kenosis* as something meaningful and positive for his appropriation. Since the context of kenotic hymn of Philippians 2 is

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[60] *Sauf le Nom*, 70.

[61] Ibid., 71.

perhaps the most striking ethical plea in Paul's writing, to "be of the same mind as Christ,"

we may use Derrida's appropriation of the term as a transition to examine the ethical

consequences of his vision of the apophatic.

Once again, we must note that the problem remains even from a perspective

different than Christian theology and poses a significant challenge to Derrida's use of the

term and concept. Along with removing or emptying out the troublesome particularities

of revelation, an appeal to an "abstract kenosis" denies the crucial details of what was

"poured out," destroying the thought of it entirely. Without narrative and dogmatic details,

we are not left with an emptying at all, but rather the mere vestige of a conceptual form—

for Derrida's abstraction makes a concept out of what is originally a poetic utterance

about a particular life and event[62]—an appeal to self-emptying vaguely tied to (repeating?

expressing?) the primordial desert emptiness of *khōra*.

Put another way, why is *kenosis* freeing? On what basis can Derrida appeal to, or

riff on, *kenosis* as something self-evidently good? Without the poetic irony of the

Christian context—the human freedom somehow made possible by Christ's self-

emptying of divine plenitude —the concept is flattened out; the mysterious emptiness of

an infinite God is replaced with the gritty (non-)gift of dry sand, if you will, offered by no

one and impossible to receive. Since this is certainly not what Derrida or those, like

Caputo, who follow his thought intend to do, we must look at what this post-modern ethic

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[62] I read Philippians 2 as a "Christ hymn" used by Paul to make an appeal for moral exemplarism to an audience which would recognize the hymn as a constitutive, perhaps baptismal, text for their understanding both of Christ and of the Church.

believes it accomplishes in its mirroring of a quasi-apophatic transcendence of *khōra* and undecidability in its ethics.[63]

A Postmodern Ethic?: Responsibility Without Response and Purely Formal Formation

As noted above, I cannot offer a full account of the "ethics of postmodernism"—in no small part because postmodernism questions the desirability or even existence of something called "ethics." Additionally, any attempt to offer even a survey of the ethical developments of post-modernism would require a massive genealogical narrative covering everyone from Kant and Hume through Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Levinas. Therefore, I attempt here to highlight only those ethical implications which either arise out of or are ignored by the strand of apophaticism described and analyzed above. Another way to describe this effort is to say that I attempt to show the connection—often intentional—between the pseudo-apophatic elimination of God and the ethic promoted by Derrida and his followers. Specifically, and with a mind toward my later argument about virtues ethics, I will test ethical claims or implications based on their consequences for ethical formation. While virtues ethics in particular focuses on issues of formation and aims explicitly at forming a particular kind of character, all approaches to ethics must take into account the kinds of people encouraged, developed, and formed by their approach—even if only in order to test their practical enactment or to describe the kind of agent they aim to create (or to avoid creating).

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[63] While Derrida believes his account gives more than sand, it is nevertheless his goal with regard to the notion of God and religion as such, as Caputo says, to "head out into the desert, to denude the definiteness of Abrahamic faith, to empty Abrahamic messianism of its biblical determinacy, in the name of a general messianic structure, of a generalized Abrahamism, of a naked ankhôral religion without religion." See *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 189.

Asking about the consequences for formation in Derrida's ethic raises the additional problem of scope. Due to the nature of postmodern discourse, whatever distinction existed between politics and ethics in the philosophical tradition is frequently blurred in contemporary debates. Key discussions of responsibility, duty to the other, and obligation shift fluidly from the limited sense of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*—which, while always looking toward and relying on the *polis*, sought to arrive at politics via the formation of individual character—to the larger scope of the *Politics* or Plato's *Republic*. Derrida signals this consistent large-scale political framing of ethical concerns at the end of his "*Priere d'insere*" to the French editions of "Passions," "*Sauf le nom*," and "*Khōra*," when he identifies the "incredible and improbable experience of *khōra* as "*political*"—a determination he links with a politics "beyond exchange and beyond the gift" which "announces, without promising, a thought, or rather, a putting to the test of the political."[64]

Beyond (An Other) Otherness

Because of this consistent choice of a political scope when speaking of responsibility and duty, Derrida's implied ethics would require a separate, immense analysis of his political writing in order to offer a corollary for the sense of ethics which tracks with the scope of virtues ethics with which we are here concerned. One of Derrida's most famous formulations demonstrates both the significance and scope of his ethical claims while also highlighting the close relationship to and tension with his thoughts on apophaticism: *tout autre est tout autre*. While every word of this phrase is

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[64] *Priere d'insere* to the French publications of "Passions," "*Sauf le nom*," and "*Khōra*," translated by Thomas Dutoit in "Translating the Name," in *On the Name*, ix-xvi, (xv).

subject to multiple meanings and senses—which Derrida would have us consider dialectically or even simultaneously—he suggests that it must be understood, at least, in both the sense of the universal and the very particular. Every other is every, or entirely, other; "Every other (one) is every (bit) other."[65]

While I have already mentioned in Chapter One the importance of Levinas for the apophatic revival, his influence on this crucial aspect of Derrida's thought—and its function as a bridge between the apophatic and ethics—is very significant.[66] Levinas' "Other" referred both to God, a term which held at least some connection to the God of Israel worshiped by the Jews, and to the face of other individuals as part of a phenomenological precondition to establishing a sense of "I." As we shall see, it is clear that Derrida's "*tout autre est tout autre*" formulation is just one point of engagement between him and his former teacher, but for an examination of the ethical consequences of Derrida's version of apophaticism, it may be the most significant. As I suggest below in my analysis, by remaining consistent to a pure negativity with respect to language of God, Derrida effectively collapses Levinas' conceptual pairing of God and the face of the other human into what we may know and be accountable to with respect only to other creatures.

God, where Levinas spoke of God, even "the Word of God" (as described above in Chapter Two) as an Other distinct from the face of the other human, becomes "God, if you will" in Derrida's formula of every other which is entirely other. However, Derrida

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[65] Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, transl. David Wills, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995 (1992)), 82.

[66] Along with Derrida's own frequent engagement with Levinas, see Barry Stocker, "Editor's Introduction," in *Jacques Derrida: Basic Writings*, (NY: Routledge, 2007), 1-23. Stocker names Levinas and Blanchot as the "strongest positive examples" on Derrida's philosophy.

remains consistent to Levinas' notion that recognition of an other, even another human, is a kind of transcendence of the self which helps to constitute the self. It remains an open question, and far beyond the scope of this project, to determine if Levinas' own logic demands the possibility of the completely immanentized version that Derrida develops—a version of Levinas' Other which admits of no distinction between the otherness of God and humans, or between the otherness among humans. However, as we have seen above in Chapter Two, Levinas himself drew a distinction between the other (human Face) and God—even though "hearing the Word" in the Face of the other.

One aspect of Derrida's criticism of Levinas is instructive in this context. When placing Levinas's version of negative theology in the context of Meister Eckhart's radical apophatic theology, he argues that inasmuch as "negative theology is still a theology" it is still "concerned with liberating and acknowledging the ineffable transcendence of an infinite *étant*" in the form of a "more elevated Being."[67] Essentially, Derrida is classifying Levinas's thought as a species of the same negation-towards-hyperessentialism that he attributes to Christian negative theology in general. The invisibility or non-appearance of the face of God in Levinas does not exempt his work from being theological. Derrida's critique here is part of his larger critique of Levinas's "ethical metaphysics" in *Totality and Infinity*—a project which he concludes is, "despite all Levinas's precautions," marked by "the equivocal complicity of theology and metaphysics."[68] With this in mind, Derrida's own formulation of otherness is clearly a response to Levinas, and, as we shall see, is an extension of it on precisely that trajectory

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[67] Jacques Derrida, "Violence and Metaphysics," in *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, transl., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978). 146.

[68] Ibid., 109.

which will avoid and even reject whatever theological "complicity" lived in Levinas's thought.[69]

As Derrida argues in the conclusion to *The Gift of Death*, "*tout autre est tout autre* signifies that every other is singular, that every one is a singularity, which also means that every one is each one, a proposition that seals the contract between universality and the exception of singularity."[70] But what can this mean for ethics, or whatever we call the inquiry that asks about the descriptions and norms of human social interaction on the smallest scales? Does Derrida mean, as this formulation seems to say, that his ethic is both universal and singular/particular solely by dint of the fact of the "non-identicalness" of every person—that is, that the only thing we have in common is that we are not each other, and that the thing that makes us singular is that we are not each other?

For this quick summary, it is helpful to keep in mind (perhaps both dialectically and simultaneously) the most important chords with which Derrida attempts to compose his impressionistic account of ethics. Within the context of the quasi-metaphysical conditions of *khōra* and *différance*, he plays again and again with the sounds of responsibility, duty, the gift, economic exchange, the secret, the Levinas-ian "other," sacrifice, and justice. The result is an impressionistic evocation of an ethical mode, gesture, or even mood rather than an ethical position or proposition, much less a system—and this is precisely the point for Derrida. As we shall see, this point holds true

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[69] Jean-Luc Marion's comment, quoted below in Chapter Four, that Levinas remains "outside the reach of J. Derrida" is a pointed reference to this aspect of Derrida's critique and the direction it inspired in Derrida's work. See *The Idol and Distance*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001). 230, FN 41.

[70] Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, Trans. David Wills, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). 87.

for other deconstructionist or postmodernist philosophers as well, with the title of Caputo's creative apologia for "undecidability," *Against Ethics*, serving as one succinct example.

Two Lenses: Universality and Relationality

I will ultimately focus here on two aspects of the postmodern ethic which arise out of the postmodern appropriation of apophaticism: first, insisting on an ethical universalism which is not secured by assertions about God and humanity such as the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, but rather via a pseudo-apophatic "undecidability," and second, linking ethics with a disordered notion of relationality—the "ethical other" which mirrors the pseudo-apophatic account of God. While only the concern with universality may seem directly related to the Kantian frame established in Chapter One, we shall see that the post-modern approach to an ethical universality not based on Kantian duty drives the move to establish a substitute order to replace the notion of order Kant could rely upon due to his maintenance of a noumenal, divine origin for the sense of duty. I conclude that Derrida and his followers ultimately recognize the need for some kind of transcendence that is cognizable enough to act as an ethical warrant in place of an ordering of the world toward a transcendent Good. Where much of the philosophical tradition assumed some kind of theological grounds for this account of a transcendent Good, the postmodern position attempts to secure these necessary elements by offering an alternative order— one that takes the place of the relationship between Creator and creature in favor of an ambiguous and ultimately incoherent 'other' who is both source and object of responsibility.

While post-modern thought that follows Derrida does not set out an affirmative system, a set of principles, or even an authoritative generative source for an ethic, the "school" is nevertheless very clear on what current systems, principles, and sources must be opposed. In fact, non- or even anti-affirmation may be the primary characteristic of the ethic we may derive from Derrida's thought. His ongoing attempt to resist another of his main interlocutors, Hegel this time, may lie behind this commitment to undermining any sort of "confidence" in both claims to knowledge of God and to ethics. In fact, by concluding, as we saw in the survey of Levinas in Chapter Two, that Levinas's "theological" complicity was an attempt to think and speak God outside the boundaries of the Kantian frame, Derrida likely saw the spectre of Hegel's own anti-Kantian philosophy of religion in his former teacher's "ethical metaphysics."

Hegel used his lectures on the Philosophy of Religion to launch a "general attack on those who would vacate religion of all content and/or reduce theology to merely historical feeling. This included . . . the rationalist theologians who concluded with Kant that knowledge is limited to objects of sense experience and that therefore God cannot be known cognitively."[71] Despite any sympathy with this basic argument, Levinas was committed to combating Hegel as a representative of that tradition of philosophy (or philosophy itself up to that point) which accomplished "the ontological event" which "consists in suppressing or transmuting the alterity of all that is Other, in universalizing the immanence of the Same or of Freedom, in effacing the boundaries, and in expelling

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[71] Peter C. Hodgson, "Hegel's Christology: Shifting Nuances in the Berlin Lectures," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 53, No.1 (March, 1985), 23-40. 27. Hodgson here refers to the 1824 lectures, but as we see below, this summary is valid for the later versions, as well.

the violence of Being. The knowing I is the melting pot of such a transmutation. . . When

the Other enters into the horizon of knowledge, it already renounces alterity."[72]

Hegel sees faith, which he recognizes has been used to indicate the purely

"practical" knowledge to which Kant limits God, as preparatory to a more systematic

thought. Where "The Enlightenment of the understanding," i.e. Kant, "and Pietism," i.e.

Schleiermacher, "volatize all content," the "standpoint of *philosophy*, according to which

the content takes place in the concept" is an "objective standpoint"—which is "alone

capable of bearing witness to, and thus of expressing the witness of, spirit in a developed,

thoughtful fashion."[73] By knowing the content of religion, Hegel's objective standpoint

"is the justification of religion, especially of the Christian religion, the true religion."[74]

From this assertion of objective knowledge of content about God and religion—also

defined as "the knowing of our knowing" of both our theoretical and practical

relationships to God[75]—over against the "negative" Kantian position, Hegel draws a clear

conclusion about the nature of ethics: "Ethical life is the most genuine cultus . . . to this

extent philosophy [too] is a continual cultus; it has as its object the true, and the true in its

highest shape as absolute spirit, as God."[76]

While Hegel certainly insists that the kind of thinking elevated by his definitions

involves one's entire life—"Thinking means reconciledness," the highest stage of which

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[72] Emmanuel Levinas, "Transcendence and Height (1962)," *Emmanuel Levinas: Basic Philosophical Writings*, Adriaan Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi, Eds.,(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 11-31. 11-12.

[73] G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion (1827)*, Transl. R.F. Brown, P.C. Hodgson, and J.M. Stewart, Ed. Peter C. Hodgson, (Berkely: University of California Press, 1988). 487.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Ibid., I. C ("Cultus"), 197

[76] Ibid., 194

is ethical life—his account of ethics is grounded upon the certainty of knowledge of God. For good reason, Derrida and Caputo conclude and assert that a dangerous and totalizing systematization is an inevitable consequence of the Hegelian logic. Indeed, familiarity with Derrida's positions suggests that he has essentially chosen to combat Hegel, and any religiously motivated Hegelian schema in Levinas, by taking up and extending, perhaps completing, the Kantian project of rejecting any certainty from such "speculative" matters. Appropriately enough, one of the most telling accounts makes the case for *khōra* negatively—by contrasting it with a description of what life (ethics, politics, society) has been while under the sway of those systems of thought and belief which rely on a confident determinability commonly associated with Hegel.

In order to defend Derrida from Richard Kearney's critiques (described in Chapter Four), Caputo offers an excellent and direct summary of the case, argued negatively, for the Derridean variant of postmodern ethic. He paints a rich portrait of the consequences of rejecting Derrida's *khōra*-grounded and *différance*-centered alternative to the philosophical, Hegelian, especially, and Christian traditions. This long quotation, to which I will refer in the following sections, serves as a representative of the post-modern account of philosophical and political history—an indictment of a world certain of anything, anything more than the nothing of *khōra*. This indictment reveals a great deal about what Caputo and Derrida believe their alternative redeems us from—the inevitable totalizing consequences of Hegelian assertion of "objective" religion and its ethics— and what it delivers us to. Caputo argues that

> [w]ithout *khōra*, there is triumphalism, dogmatism, and the illusion that we have been granted a secret access to the Secret. That is the illusion that makes religion so consummately dangerous and fires the fundamental religious hallucination. That is why religious people think that they have been hardwired to

the Almighty, that they know in some privileged way the Secret that has been communicated to *them*, because God prefers *them* to others, Jews to Egyptians, or Christians to Jews, or Protestants to Catholics, or Unionists to Republicans, or xenophobic, homophobic, gun-toting redneck Southern Baptists to effete, Northeastern liberals! Without *khōra* there is no "impossible," no poetics of the possible, no poetics of the possibility of the impossible, because there would be nothing to drive us to the impossible. Without *khōra*, we would know everything that we need to know, and we would not be pushed to the point of keeping *faith* alive just when faith seems incredible and impossible.[77]

As Manoussalikis recognizes, this approach addresses the many related perceived threats arising from dangerous notions of God and the ethics and politics which arise from them. This strand of postmodernism seeks "a divinity at last free from the three-headed monster of metaphysics."[78] These characterizations help us understand more about both the alternative universalism and the "disordered ordering" the post-modern approach believes it offers.

The Post-Modern Case for Undecidability as Ethic

In order to extract an account of the ethic arising from this strand of post-modern apphaticism, we must see how many of the terms, concepts, and denials used to appropriate negation in terms of knowledge and speech are also given an ethical function or character as well. To understand more about how such a relationality-based order might allow for or even encourage new hope for "ethics," we must ask how Derrida imagines this matrix of identity and relationship playing out against the quasi-metaphysical backdrop of *khōra*. Once again, and consistent with his version of apophaticism, he leaves us to draw conclusions from what he rejects or negates in order

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[77] John D. Caputo, "Richard Kearney's Enthusiasm," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 317.

[78] Manoussakis, "Introduction," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), xvi.

to imagine the conditions within which his claims would function as, or even gesture toward an ethic.

Derrida offers one illuminating rejection at the conclusion of his essay "Passions." While offering, as discussed above, the "apophatic aspect" of his critique of "the secret," he also intends to question, in direct relation to Kant, the phenomenon of "an incalculable debt" by asking:

> if there is duty, shouldn't it consist in not having to, in having to without having to, in having to not have to? In having to not have to act "in conformity with duty," not even, as Kant would say, "by duty"? What could the ethical or political consequences of that be? What should one understand under the name "duty"? And who can undertake to carry it, in and through responsibility?[79]

While Derrida draws out the significant "play" within the meanings of secret and duty, using the example of the particular duty imposed upon him by an invitation to write a response essay (for a critical reader on his own work), his real topic is the dynamic of the Kantian context of a universal moral duty. As he struggles to find a way of speaking about what might prompt ethical or moral responsibility, Derrida rejects again and again anything—even the names "ethics, morality, politics, responsibility, or the subject"— which might risk "reassuring itself in order to reassure the other and to promote the consensus of a new dogmatic slumber."[80] He rejects assurance so forcefully and repeatedly that this negation becomes his most reliable affirmation. Not only must we reject attempts to conceptualize, much less codify, propositions or rules to guarantee the

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[79] *Priere d'insere*, xiv-xv.

[80] "Passions," 15-16.

"fine names," we must also reject any attempt to base morality or ethics on a sense or sensibility of duty and responsibility.[81]

The play of duty and responsibility remains "absolutely aporetic," and Derrida's driving questions—"What is the ethicity of ethics? The morality of morality? What is responsibility?"—lead him to decide that they "must remain [in a certain way] urgent and unanswered, at any rate without a general and rule-governed response, without a response other than that which is linked specifically each time, to the occurrence of a decision without rules and without will in in the course of a new test of the undecidable."[82] The undecidable is so firmly fixed as the only acceptable hermeneutic (so as to function as an anti-teleological *telos*) that Derrida makes certain to destabilize even this groundless ground. Lest anyone accuse him of simply hiding or pushing one level down the assurance of resting upon an ethical or moral rule for his goal of undecidability, he cautions anyone from saying "that these questions or these propositions are *already* inspired by a concern that could by right be called ethical, moral, responsible, etc."[83]

He concludes this discussion by tying together his "non-response" to the questions of secret and duty by emphasizing the impossibility of offering any example, even and especially an actual testimony, to guarantee the truth of anything. Here we see a significant intersection of Derrida's account of apophaticism and its consequences for ethics: his interpretation of the secret via an exercise with an "apophatic aspect" inscribes both the question of the knowledge of God and the question of ethics within a postmodern discourse of a profound phenomenological and moral isolationism. If the

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[81] Ibid., 16.

[82] Ibid., 16-17.

[83] Ibid., 17.

secret to which we testify is "without a content separable from its performative experience," then every secret may be no other's secret and cannot become any other's secret. Any "decision without rules and without will" is the punctiliar act of an individual responding to no one knows what (except that it cannot be a "what," much less a "who" about which/whom we might know or say anything). One can appeal with certainty neither to the secret itself (to what content could one appeal if it is truly secret?), to any history or tradition informing the secret or decision, nor to any testimony of experience or decision proceeding from the secret.

Not only is testimony in a limited sense impossible for these purposes, but "the secret will remain secret, mute, impassive as the *khōra*, as *Khōra* foreign to every history, as much in the sense of *Geschichte* or *res gestae* as of knowledge and of historical narrative (*epistémè*, *historia rerum gestarum*)."[84] Under this apophatic aspect, God, ethics, morality, and responsibility become universally accessible via an event unique in its isolation of a mute non-knowing or non-intuiting. Every other is every other in part, and in whole, because any testimony that differs, and certainly any testimony to the contrary, cannot be assured. Even, or precisely, the accumulated testimonies of dogma or history are as irrelevant here as they must be to any reader of Kant's "What is Enlightenment?" who does not wish to be numbered among those enslaved to a condition of tutelage. Now we begin to see the extent of his radical challenge to the notion of relationality historically associated with broad accounts or assumptions of order.

Derrida, mercilessly consistent, finally attempts to dissolve even his own testimony on the matter by denying that citing the secret as "an impregnable resource"—

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[84] Ibid., 27.

a good description of how Derrida's account has functioned in subsequent theological

discussions—can "secure for oneself a phantasmatic power over others."[85] Even

recognition of the secret must remain so undecidable that one cannot be this assured of its

dynamic. This use of the secret as "a simulacrum . . . or yet another strategy . . . still

bears witness to a possibility which exceeds it."[86] Once again, Derrida assures us of a

resulting isolation, rather than of some socially formative event : "It does not exceed in

the direction of some ideal community"—not even the "community of complacent

deconstructionists, reassured reconciled with the world in ethical certainty, good

conscience, satisfaction of service rendered, and the consciousness of duty accomplished

(or, more heroically still, yet to be accomplished)"[87]—but "rather toward a solitude

without any measure common to that of an isolated subject."[88]

So central is this solitude, it is "the other name of the secret to which the

simulacrum still bears witness."[89] However, and consistent with Derrida's account of all

naming, solitude does not make possible anything which actually grasps or says the secret.

It "never allows itself to be captured or covered over by the relation to the other, by

being-with or by any form of 'social bond'. Even if [the secret] makes them possible, it

does not answer to them, it is what does not answer. No *responsiveness*."[90]

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[85] Ibid., 30.

[86] Ibid., 30.

[87] Ibid., 17.

[88] Ibid., 30.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid., 30-31.

In *The Gift of Death*, Derrida reiterates his deconstruction of the gift in a manner which allows us to see the consequences of his determination to trouble or disrupt any confidence in traditional notions of order. Via his reading of Baudelaire, filtered through Nietzsche, Derrida finds that certainty in the gift of salvation, "the salary promised in heaven by the Father who sees in secret and will pay it back," masks a "sort of sublime and secret calculation" to "win paradise economically."[91] While repeating his case that giving, recognizing, and thanking in response to gifts inscribes the concept of gift into an economic circle of commerce which actually destroys the gift, he reveals the underlying "apophatic logic" common to both his discussion of God and of ethics: knowledge, whether simple awareness of gift giving or any amount of cognitive certainty, corrupts all.

The Certain Purity of the Uncertain

Just as he promotes the "pure negativity" of the undecidable which mirrors *khōra* over against the apophatic tradition, Derrida's ethical equivalents (notions of gift, responsibility, and justice) are redeemed only by a similar "pure negativity": quarantine from the dangerous diseases of calculation, exchange, and certainty. This account will accept nothing but purity: "The moment the gift, however generous it be, is infected with the slightest hint of calculation, the moment it takes account of knowledge or recognition, it falls within the ambit of an economy: it exchanges . . . since it gives in exchange for payment."[92] He goes on to assert that, in order to avoid the gift suppressing the object of

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[91] *Gift of Death*, 111-112.

[92] *Gift of Death*, 112. This absolute, presupposed equivalence of exchange with economic corruption raises the spectre of Derrida's continued reliance on some species of Marxist thought. While beyond the scope of this study, the consequences—starting with the pathologization of thanks and thanksgiving—of Derrida's refusal to question the anthropological assumptions behind the Marxist accounts of exchange deserve a serious exploration.

the gift, "one must proceed to *another* suppression of the object: that of keeping in the gift only the giving, the act of giving and intention to give, not the given, which in the end doesn't count."[93] Finally, Derrida arrives at what we might call the "apophatic aspect" of his ethic: "One must give without knowing, without knowledge or recognition, without *thanks*: without anything, or at least without any object."[94] As it is with Derrida's notion of God, so it seems to be with his ethic—which is to say, it must not be any thing or anything about which we can know or say. So what must we do, and how can we do (justly, responsibly, or ethically) anything?

Clearly, Derrida is certain that his ethic must be without or beyond any sort of content about which we can be certain, just as the only gift must be without or beyond anything given or even the knowledge of something given or received. In fact, we might hazard to summarize Derrida's critique of ethics and counter-proposal as the pairing of a claim of absolute negation unaware that it immediately (and with all certainty) insists upon an affirmation: "No, beyond." While denying the possibility of certainty, this ethic is continually certain that true responsibility or truth itself is always beyond every determinable suggestion. In fact, he offers the equivalent of a mathematical absurdity in which any particular number is rejected as too uncertain while an uncertain remainder is, with utmost certainty, invested with all importance as the only true representative of reality.

He concludes his essay "Passions," by asserting precisely this strangely disordered scenario, a testimony to the impossibility of testimony—given the demands of Derrida's system, in which knowing something necessarily reduces the object of

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[93] Ibid.

[94] Ibid.

knowledge to mere object. For if using—talking, writing, theorizing about—the secret as

a strategy or simulacrum

> still bears witness to a possibility which exceeds it, this exceeding remains, it (is)
> *the* remainder, and it remains such . . . even if one precisely cannot here trust any
> definite witness, nor even any guaranteed value to bearing witness, or, to put it
> another way, as the name suggests, to the history of any *martyrdom* (*martyria*).
> For one will never reconcile the value of a testimony with that of knowledge or of
> certainty—it is impossible and it ought not be done. One will never reduce the
> one to the other—it is impossible and it ought not be done. That remains,
> according to me, the absolute solitude of a passion without martyrdom.[95]

It now remains for us to see how Derrida has attempted to address the Kantian framework

described in Chapter One and to assess what this wide strand of post-modern thought

believes it has achieved.

Undecidability: Kantian Universality by Other Means

Recall Caputo's statement above that only embracing the quasi-metaphysic of

khōra saves us from the "triumphalism, dogmatism, and the illusion that we have been

granted a secret access to the Secret . . . that makes religion so consummately dangerous

and fires the fundamental religious hallucination." The alternative, according to both

Derrida and Caputo, is a false certainty in our knowledge which actually destroys the

possibility of faith. To have faith *in* or the faith *of* anything in particular, to have access

to "the secret" such that one can be said to know anything about it, is to be under the

sway of a dangerous hallucination. On the other hand, the postmodern ethic of

responsibility in the face of *khōra*, undecidability, and *différance* believes that rejecting

any account claiming to "know a secret"—anything which requires assent to an initiation,

anything which asserts the truth of a particular word from "outside"—opens the way for a

universal ethic. While this account shares with Kant the belief that a universal ethic

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[95] *Passions*, 31.

requires universal access, free from all tradition, hierarchy, and authority, it rejects the Kantian component of duty—which Derrida finds logically incoherent and reliant on a transcendental source for duty. To do something out of duty destroys the element of choice which makes it free, and the limits on knowledge and language rule out a reliable foundation on anything transcendent (if such exists).

However, by rejecting a foundation upon both the power of reason to know or say anything certain and the existence of a quasi-transcendental duty, Derrida sets the standard for a legitimate universalism so high that he is left with a parody of negative theology itself: since his own definitions reject any referent about which we could know or say anything, the only way to gesture toward an acceptable ethic is to say what it is not. Put another way, the expanse of Derrida's universalism is so vast and simultaneously so resistant to human epistemology and language that it may as well be called transcendent. He has kept the formal transcendence of Kant's divine source for duty, located it either within the self or the untranslatable spaces between selves, jettisoned any claims to know anything about the transcendent source, and replaced the Kantian ground or source with formal conceptual notions such as *khōra*. At the same time, he attempts to construct an ethic reliant upon the positive value of notions such as responsibility and universality by drawing substantially upon the traditions he rejects—for certainly *khōra* cannot provide any warrant of the goodness or even relative desirability of those notions.

Without any such tradition or Kant's universally-felt duty which drives obligation, the post-modern universality can only claim its scope by pointing to competing claims and saying "no." Thought and language about God, and any ethic which might issue from them, cannot and must not make appeal to affirmative claims such as the *imago Dei* or

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the particular substance of the Christian *kenosis*. By appealing to apophaticism as a warrant to negate in the service of truth, Derrida's project actually accomplishes the kind of hyper-essentialism with which he charges apophatic theology: undecidability has an essence, and elements of it include "not-*imago dei*," "not-duty," "not-hierarchy." These elements may be asserted as confidently as dogmatic assertions about the attributes of God treated by Pseudo-Dionysius.

Without some transcendent referent serving as an establishment and standard of judgment with regard to responsibility, the post-modern ethic has no claim to universal scope other than its negation of established traditions of transcendent standards (while at the same time relying upon the norms and conceptual "achievements" of those traditions). It is as if post-modern thinkers believe that negating in a manner similar to apophatic theology brings about the same kind of positive "super-essential" that apophatic theology encounters. By rejecting such "super-essentialism" and denying the existence of a competing transcendent, they are left with nothing (other than nothing) as the basis for claiming both universal scope and the "preferability" or goodness of the version of responsibility to which it appeals.

The recognition of a missing element, that reference which may act as a standard-against-which, or a principle-according-to-which, leads us to the question of order. In light of the rejection of the cosmic hierarchy and created order presumed to different degrees from Plato through Bonaventure and, though in a purely formal sense, Kant, the question of which order governs or maps ethical inquiry, it seems that we are barely able to use the word order at all. Nevertheless, the post-modern ethic not only insists that its undecidable universality allows for constellations of relationality, this ethic seems to

substitute a kind of order-less relation as the only kind of order congruent with "factical reality." However, by attempting to inscribe his ethic within the formal language of an otherness so specific that "every other (one) is every (bit) other," he also believes he has reserved for his account an absolute dedication to particularity. This moves us to consider the next consequence for ethics of the post-modern account of apophaticism.

Non-relatable Relationality as Non-ordered Order

A second consequence of Derrida's apophaticism is the embrace of a "purely horizontal relationality"[96]: state of non-order which attempts to function as both a formal ordering principle and the source of a true "ethical content" in the "factical life"—the phenomenological label for the ambiguous, pre-theoretical, life-as-really-lived—asserted by post-modernism.[97] While denying any kind of order in which relationships of obligation or responsibility may be assessed, acted upon, and judged as fulfilled or neglected, the concept of relationality itself comes to serve the function of an ordering principle.[98] Otherness somehow creates obligation and responsibility. The obligation is to respond to the others who are entirely and every bit other and the response cannot be defined beyond an imperative to acknowledge uncertainty and otherness.

By acknowledging otherness, we are somehow, for the first time, attempting to do justice to the reality that no "other" can be generalized or treated according to general

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[96] The horizontal/vertical orientation is not used in the service of a simplistic "God lives above us" verticality and "only humans are around us" horizontal topography. I echo it here because Caputo uses it, and we will see a significant development of this metaphor in Bonaventure in Chapters Four and Five.

[97] Caputo, in *Against Ethics*, in particular, makes frequent use of the sense of "factical life" used by Heidegger. John D. Caputo, *Against Ethics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993).

[98] In Chapter Five we shall see a different approach to relationality. While space does not allow for a treatment of Adrian Pabst's analysis and suggestions, I believe that future studies concerning his work, Bonaventure, and my approach here to relationality as harmony would be very fruitful. See Adrian Pabst, *Metaphysics: The Creation of Hierarchy*, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 2012).

rules or principles. But then our responsibility consists in nothing beyond "respecting" otherness. Is all otherness equal, or are some kinds of otherness good and others evil? The only possible answer for post-modern thought is to deny the validity of such questions and the categories assumed in them. After all, to judge anything as "good" or "bad" or "true" or "beautiful" requires a third term against which we can measure such characteristics. But here, recognition of an entirely "other" is both the formal limit and the full extent of what we can say about the "content" or qualities of the "other." It is as if the attempt to move the ground of ethics to a practical, merely functional quasi-transcendence, post-modern thought has created a purely immanentized version of Kant's noumenal.

As we can observe when, as in *The Gift of Death*, especially, Derrida discusses with any rigor his statement that *tout autre est tout autre*, this phrase is deployed primarily as a guiding claim for questions of responsibility, obligation, and politics. Regardless of whether or not, as Denys Turner notes, Derrida means the phrase ironically as a *reductio ad absurdum* argument against the possibility of a "general logic of difference," he uses the phrase with "a principally ethical force."[99] I suggest that this formulation of a pure relationality, severed from any ties to other ordering traditions or concepts, sums up the post-modern attempt to find a replacement for the cosmic, hierarchical order underlying the apophatic traditions Derrida and others engage. As with the purely formal transcendence of *khōra* and *différance*, which attempt to serve the function of transcendence while denying transcendence, this is an attempt to have order

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[99] Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 154, fn. 11.

while denying even the possibility or reality of order.[100] In place of the metaphysical order governing the "horizontal" relationality between humans (and all creatures) via the "vertical" relationship between all creatures and Creator, the post-modern move posits an absolute "horizontal" relationality (nothing else exists, after all) as both an anti-metaphysical metaphysic and an anti-ethical ethic.

Following both the logic of his claim and his insistence on solitude as the fundamental human state, Derrida insists that "since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest . . . then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to *tout autre comme tout autre*."[101] Accordingly, every neighbor or loved one is "as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh."[102]

Here we see the logical conclusion of this strand of post-modern apophaticism, and it is as profound for ethics as it is for knowledge and talk of God. In the absence of any acceptable revelation, the possibility of which is bracketed out as *prima facie* impossible, what some may call God can only be addressed in the "purely" negative, absolutely other sense. The corollary is that other humans become equally as inaccessible: what was once reserved for God is now applied to humans. Precisely at the

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[100] Richard Kearney draws a similar conclusion and suggests similar consequences for the "factical life" with which both Derrida and Caputo are concerned. Faith in a "messianism" detached from any particularity or content "serves [for Derrida] as a purely transcendental move, a 'formal structure of promise' that does not call for realization or incarnation in the world of particular beliefs. . . for Derrida this suspension of content seems to be a *nec plus ultra*, a point of no return. Here messianicity becomes, arguably, so devoid of any kind of concrete faith in a person or presence (human or divine) that it loses any claim to historical reality" and may "risk becoming so empty that it loses faith in the here and now altogether." See *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 62.

[101] *The Gift of Death*, 78.

[102] Ibid.

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moment when post-modernism claims to rescue ethics from triumphalist systems based on a false certainty about grey and undecidable life—by calling on obligation and responsibility in a realm of pure horizontal relationality—it finds that it has pushed all "others" beyond all response or relation into an abyss of undifferentiated unrelatability.

As we shall see in more detail in Chapter Four, Turner diagnoses and critiques the logical problems with this claim, especially as it relates to the rejection or avoidance of hierarchy, but his observation of the ethical consequences bears mention here. Turner looks to *The Gift of Death* and labels the *tout autre* an "ethically offensive" principle "for all its apparently benign origins in Levinas's less radically stated ethics of 'alterity.'"[103] Derrida's basic articulation of relationality turns every other person into "an absolute heterogeneity; an incorrigible and incommunicable 'thisness' which is not a this *something or other . . .* an absolutely inaccessible 'singularity.'" If this were true, Turner argues, the ethic that corresponds to such relationality must "be founded upon the otherness of the other as some blank, anonymous reference point of a semantically empty demonstrative pronoun."[104] To attempt to love (or to recognize responsibility for) a "wholly other . . .is to love them into a vacuous non-entity."[105]

Turner's choice of words, "a vacuous non-entity" confronts us again with the likelihood that what becomes of the post-modern God is the same as what becomes of a post-modern ethic. For ethics, however, the ambiguity of *tout autre* requires us to state two different, but equally unacceptable consequences: either "all the differentiations of

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[103] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 167.

[104] Ibid.

[105] Ibid.

difference" are collapsed into a "monolithically, logically and ethically vacuous univocity of absolute difference," or they are all reduced to "a multifarious equivocity."[106] One need not come anywhere near desiring ethical "systems" or intricate and triumphalist principles and criteria to realize that neither of these paradoxical possibilities helps us think through how we might help form good people. Indeed, the possibility of considering, much less discussing, what might be good in particular, much less aimed at the Good, is ruled out from the start. If we protect the complexity of factical life via these pure negations of God and decidability, what motivates and enables responsibility and obligation?

Obligation Against Ethics: (Nothing More Than) A Feeling?

As already noted, the post-modern remedy of undecidability for hyper-certain ethics mirrors the remedy of "pure negativity" offered for apophatic theology's hidden infection of hyper-cataphaticism. Caputo, attempting to elaborate on Derrida, articulates an "ethic against ethics" consistent with the post-modern critique of metaphysics, order, and ethics which emanates from *khōra* and *différance*. Life, real "factical life," is simply too slippery, complicated, grey, and as Derrida proposed, solitary for any ethics that claims and forms people to believe in anything certain, stable, or ordered. The clear-eyed assessment of reality, untainted by triumphalist certainty, aided by deconstruction— which, as Caputo claims, doesn't really do or argue anything, and merely shows or describes "ethics' own undoing"—tells us that "one is more on one's own than one likes to think, than ethics would have us think."[107]

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[106] Ibid., 168.

[107] *Against Ethics*, 4.

This isolation, already seen in Derrida's alternative for both metaphysics (*khōra*) and relationality (the *différance* of *tout autre est tout autre*) goes beyond a repudiation of the relationships among Creator, creation, and creatures sharing in the common status of creatureliness or fellowship with others created in the image of God. Caputo attempts his "poetics of obligation" in an attempt to find some articulation of responsibility in a "factical life" in which even direction toward others, much less a Good, is impossible. Caputo is against ethics, in part, because it hopes to "hand out maps" for an imaginary and smooth "superhighway" of certainty when reality is actually unmappable and arbitrarily shifting.[108] Contra Aristotle, Boethius, Dante, and even Kant, not even the stars shine in Caputo's account of how things really are.[109] This goes far beyond a rejection of totalizing Hegelian logic. To claim any reliable knowledge of God or ethical orientation is to impose a violent denial of the reality which postmodern thought sees clearly: we are all, along with Caputo, like "a man who discovers that the ground he hitherto took to be a *terra firma* is in fact an island adrift in a vast sea. . . endless, the sky starless, and the island's drift aimless."[110]

At its best, Derrida's and Caputo's deconstruction (of) ethics "underlines the difficulty" which indeed does always underlie any ethic that claims to offer any direction or standard against which one can judge. And yet, a "poetics of obligation" rests upon, and indeed may consist solely of, the repudiation of anything beyond, higher, or other than the "very earthbound signal, a superficial-horizontal communication between one

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid., 6, with specific reference to Kant's "starry skies above and the moral law within."

[110] Ibid., 3.

human being and another."[111] On this reading, which is consistent with the main threads of this end of the post-modern, phenomenological continuum, we find an appropriately mundane notion of obligation. The ethic of obligation and responsibility is nothing more than a "feeling that comes over us when others need our help, when they call out for help, or support, or freedom, or whatever they need, a feeling that grows in strength directly in proportion to the desperateness of the situation of the other."[112]

While it may seem puzzling, with the benefit of twenty years' worth of perspective and critique, that Derrida, Caputo, and those convinced by their accounts ultimately offer nothing to ground ethics beyond a feeling or awareness of the neediness of others, we must keep in mind that their anti-grounding quasi-metaphysic demands such an intentionally weak "ground." Convinced that certainty in transcendent things (which, if real at all, cannot be known with any certainty—as their version of apophaticism insists) is responsible, via Hegel, for the philosophical, socio-ethical, and political nightmares of recent human history, this strand of post-modernism attempts to magnify, to purify, and to complete Kant's call for maturity and enlightenment.

What Derrida accomplishes, and why he is indispensable for every Christian philosopher and theologian, is to continue the sort of critique for which Nietzsche has become so valued in recent scholarship. Any metaphysical account which affirms both transcendence and some legitimacy of knowledge and language about God must consider Derrida's questions. While Derrida's may be a much friendlier challenge than Nietzsche's and has many profound observations and critiques, it should nevertheless be seen as a challenge which goes beyond mere critique in order to offer a non-Christian alternative

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[111] Ibid., 5.

[112] Ibid.

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and competitor. As such, his thought should function as a vision of one path which can result either from reading the apophatic tradition and its lessons incorrectly or from reading all of theology through a lens which presupposes the unavoidability of ontotheology. Although considering such a vision offers useful lessons about the consequences of selective engagement with complex traditions, the resulting ethic should prompt a note of warning.

The Cacophonous Silence of Two-Dimensional Ethics

This alternative ethic is something very like the most famous product of the radical musical movement of the Second Viennese School championed by Arnold Schönberg. By creating his "twelve-tone" method of atonal composition in the early 20th century, Schönberg intended to purify music from the structural, harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic paradigms of all traditions. Rather than following conventional order governed by tonal centers or by forms such as sonata allegro or symphonies, for example, every structural decision would now look only at the relation of notes to other notes. Every note is equal to every other note and treated only according to a "horizontal" relation rather than ordered "vertically" by overarching traditions of harmony, form, or counterpoint. While Schönberg was motivated by an explicitly reactionary and anti-tradition ideology, Derrida turns away from traditions of metaphysical and ethical certainty because he believes they simply do not represent real "factical life" and therefore cannot be treated as certain or true.

Nevertheless, Derrida's ethic shares with Schönberg's "twelve-tone" music the faith that a purely horizontal relationality can liberate us from traditions which must be resisted because they do not stand up to the scrutiny of contemporary, realistic thought.

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Similarly, the proposals of both men have proven to be very resistant to actual practice beyond a rote adherence to mechanical method: Schönberg and his students usually imposed mathematically consistent sub-structures (derivations, partitions, etc.) to provide ordered patterns as compositional techniques for their music, and any "Derridean ethic," when not existing solely in a mode of reactionary purifying negation, must inevitably order its pure horizontal relationality within existing structures and traditions. Thus both projects, while either ignoring, trying to escape from, or rejecting all "traditions of verticality," must, like Kant, ultimately rely upon and participate in some kind of vertical ordering to articulate an intelligible diagnosis and prescription.[113]

As suggested in Chapter One, I will argue in Chapters Five and Six that we must look to the remarkable resolution of the relationship between the vertical and the horizontal in Bonaventure in order to find a proper account of the harmonization of the cataphatic and the apophatic, and the tension between relationality and individuality. Only then can we see the harmonious relationship between the apophatic and an approach to ethics that claims to know enough about the Good to be able to form character aimed at habituating and performing it.

In Chapter Four, however, we shall look at philosophers and theologians, some of whom are also considered post-modernists, whose thought sits at a different section of the continuum of the contemporary revival of apophaticism. As we shall see, however, their distance from Derrida and Caputo, on what I treat as "the far side" of the continuum, is due mainly to a more coherent and historically faithful account of apophaticism itself rather than to a better harmonization of the apophatic and ethics. Derrida's end of the

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[113] While space and focus do not allow for exploration of this dynamic in Kant, the charge can also be leveled at him with respect to his need to appeal to a mysterious origin for the sense of moral duty while building the barrier between the speculative and practical, the phenomenal and the noumenal.

continuum is certainly not alone in its aversion to certainty. It is a clear testimony to his influence that even those who disagree with him about the fundamental issue—the possibility of a knowable revelation from a God who is (or who at least may be)—maintain a commitment to extreme skepticism concerning the cataphatic. As we shall see, an inability to properly harmonize the cataphatic and apophatic seriously hampers any attempt to articulate a coherent ethic, even for those who turn their back on the desert of pure *khōra*-reflected undecidability to face a God who may be or who is (though without being).

CHAPTER FOUR

Knowledge, Language, and Silence: Dialectic and Beyond

Il n'y a pas eu de tournant théologique de la phéoménologie : la phéoménologie s'est simplement déployée.[1]

- Jean-Luc Marion

In much continental philosophy, from Heidegger to Levinas and Derrida, it is acknowledged, with varying degrees of unease at having to concede the point, that the predicaments of our culture have an ineradicably *theological* character.[2]

- Denys Turner

Now, how things will turn out regarding God and religion in contemporary Continental thought is not at all clear . . . The religion of deconstruction has no particular content; instead, it replicates the general structure of religion and its form of hope . . .advocating a set of religious abstractions and formalisms derived, but quite distant from, concrete traditions of faith.[3]

- Thomas Hibbs

Moving from the Derridean species of postmodernism at one end of the spectrum of contemporary apophaticism, we find a crowded middle ground of those straining against Kantian division, but who nevertheless accept many of the same premises which drive Derrida. This middle range of the continuum is still broadly considered post-modern, but scholars such as Richard Kearney and Jean-Luc Marion, while largely accepting the critique of metaphysics and any traditional claims of transcendence, still

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[1] Jean-Luc Marion, "La Théologie," in *La Rigeur Des Choses: Entretiens avec Dan Arib*, (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), 204. In my judgment, "déployée" could signify either "deployed" or "unfolded" in this context.

[2] Denys Turner, "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," in *Silence and the Word*, Eds. Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 11.

[3] Thomas Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion: Metaphysics and Practice*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007. 117-118, and fn. 2, 209.

attempt to reserve "a place for God." That is, each attempts to reserve, however transformed or re-narrated, some conceptual space for "that which we might consider God." This convoluted construction—"that which we might consider as God"—is necessary because, while these thinkers diverge from Derrida's pure negation of any thinking or speaking of God, they nevertheless reject almost all usual technical language for speaking of God. The conceptual space they attempt to reserve, for we cannot even refer to it as a "role," resists referring to a being, a person, presence, or even to a "God who is."

When John Panteleimon Manoussakis points to Kearney as the architect of a "middle" or "third" way within contemporary philosophical thought about God, he does more than just provide a sympathetic characterization of how Kearney and his followers (like Manoussakis himself) see his project. He frames the issue as seen not just by Kearney, but by a collection of thinkers all of whom see themselves as attempting a "middle way." Furthermore, Manoussakis does us the great service of summing up the contemporary context as understood by those explicitly seeking a middle way. We find that the two extremes of the philosophical debate are "(a) the unmediated, uncritical rapport with the Other epitomized by Levinas's infinity, Derrida's *différance*, and Caputo's *khora*, and (b) certain rigid and outdated conceptions of ontotheology and metaphysics."[4]

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[4] John Panteleimon Manoussakis, "Introduction," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), xviii-xix. It is unclear why Manoussakis attaches *khōra* solely to Caputo here, rather than to both Derrida and Caputo. Then again, it further supports the general impression, and my specific argument in Chapter Three, that Caputo's approach to both formal transcendence and to ethics are largely elaborations and articulations of the logical conclusions of Derrida's thought. Along with Manoussakis, many other scholars invested in these discussions count Caputo among the "good readers" of Derrida.

As we shall see, a range of approaches is represented even within this middle section of the continuum. From Kearney's "possibilized" God-Who-May-Be—who needs human action to come into being—to Jean-Luc Marion's "God Without Being"—which attempts to describe a God who is both post-modern and non-cataphatic but consistent with a narration of sacramental presence—the positions of those in the crowded middle share a concern to stay within a post-modern framework suspicious of any language or conceptual certainty about God. Kearney and Marion largely accept the critique of cataphatic language and conceptual knowledge seen in Derrida and Caputo—all of which aligns with the Kantian division between the phenomenal and noumenal described above in Chapter One and traced in Chapter Three—while striving for some slight justification for speaking of and calling on God, although their notions of God differs greatly.

Richard Kearney's God, Maybe

A Third Way?

Richard Kearney places himself within the continuum proposed here, admitting that he subscribes "to that new turn in the contemporary philosophy of religion which strives to overcome the metaphysical God of pure act and ask the question: what kind of divinity comes after metaphysics?"[5] For Kearney, as with most others involved in the contemporary discussion, the Kantian framework of metaphysics is almost synonymous with "ontotheology," although Kearney focuses as much upon the tension between potentiality and actuality than he does upon the question of the manner or meaning of God's being. Kearney argues for a somewhat moderated version of Derrida's and

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[5] Richard Kearney, *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2001), 2.

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Caputo's undecidability—professing similar fear of any "triumphalist" claims to know or understand God as "fixed"—which nevertheless allows for a God (albeit one who only may be), and who in fact perpetually "becomes" within the sphere of human existence because of human action.

> Refusing to impose a kingdom, or to declare it already accomplished from the beginning, the God-who-may-be offers us the possibility of realizing a promised kingdom by opening ourselves to the transfiguring power of transcendence. Each human person carries within him/herself the capacity to be transfigured in this way and to transfigure God in turn–by making divine possibility ever more incarnate and alive.[6]

In his critique of Marion's *God Without Being*, Kearney takes Marion to task for positing a God-without-being or "transfiguring Word. . . [that] does not depend on us in any way" or "need our response" after revelation in burning bush or Eucharist such that "We have little or no part to play in the transfiguring mission of the Word."[7] We will deal below, when examining the ethical consequences of the God-who-may-be, with Kearney's equation of this transfiguring mission with "the quest for historical justice."[8] For our examination of the apophatic in Kearney's thought, it is enough to note that his criticism of Marion appears to come from a position of demanding a less apophatic account of God. Marion's association of God with a phenomenological encounter "by mystical union" may fail of Derrida's "pure negativity" by positing something knowable at least by description, but it fails Kearney's test by positing such "*hyper*-excess" that human action—the central criterion of Kearney's thought—is precluded.[9]

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[6] Ibid., 2.

[7] Ibid., 32.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

As we shall see, Kearney's critique of Marion is justifiable where it suggests that Marion is so concerned to "point to a God radically devoid of being and safely beyond the reaches of onto-theology understood as metaphysics of presence" that he cannot account for any human ability to "tell the difference between the divine and its opposites."[10] This seems to suggest that Kearney belongs, not in between Derrida and Marion on our continuum, but closer to the opposite end from Derrida—one that insists on more certainty about God. However, the reasons for Kearney's insistence on a "less apophatic God" than Marion's alienating "hyper-cataphatic" God place him between Derrida and Marion. For while he seems to insist on a more-knowable or accessible God than Marion, Kearney's insistence on a God who may-only-be through particular human agency—that which deserves his label of justice—signals that Kearney has prior and therefore higher "metaphysical" commitments than God, even while rejecting traditional metaphysics.

Where the Derridean end of the contemporary apophatic continuum insists upon the inability to know, to speak, or even to recognize in articulable terms the gift, the other, or God, Kearney argues for a God we may describe and "know about," to some extent, but a God who can only be God if we recognize our own powerlessness and "find ourselves empowered to respond to God's own primordial powerlessness and to make the potential Word flesh."[11] Accordingly, Kearney is sympathetic to Derrida's critique of the contemporary theological use of apophaticism as ultimately a delayed or back-door

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[10] Ibid., 32-33. This is precisely the point of Kearney's which Thomas Hibbs emphasizes with regard to problems in Marion's account. See below and Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion*, 120.

[11] Ibid., 2.

approach to re-establishing a hyper-cataphatic, and therefore onto-theological, "fixed"

notion of God. Even "recent phenomenological 'overcomings'" by Jean-Luc Marion or

Hans Urs von Balthasar, for example, allow the "Omnipotence of Cause" to sneak back

in "disguised as an Omnipotence of Love, or Beauty, or Self-Affection." According to

Kearney, even where Marion replaces the "omni-God of the philosophers," the "God of

Love who replaces it is, in important respects, just as overwhelming and invasive."[12]

Thus does Kearney, while not engaging directly with apophatic sources nearly as much as

our other interlocutors, nevertheless embrace the same opponent as other contemporary

apophatic thinkers as well as the same species of alternative.

On the other hand, Kearney also critiques the notion of the "postmodern God"

which "can sometimes appear *so alien* as to be not just strange but radically

estranging."[13] In contrast to the overwhelming hyper-present God behind Marion's work,

which Kearney links with "certain negative theologians" in an "*ecclesiastical mysticism*,"

he detects a similarly overwhelming monstrosity in the traumatically sublime alterity of

an "*apocalyptic postmodernism*."[14] Kearney therefore presents as a "via tertia" the

proposal of a God consistent with his earlier work on poetics of the possible: susceptible

to some description, but not fixed in terms of being, tradition, or personality. Kearney

cites the "thin" and "small" character of the voice Elijah hears, and "the word that

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[12] Kearney, "Enabling God,"in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 40.

[13] *The God Who May Be*, 34.

[14] Ibid., 34. Kearney names Slavoj Zizek, rather than Derrida, as his representative example for the "monstrous" option distinct from Marion. However, in Kearney's reading at least, Zizek is less extreme than Derrida in this respect, because Zizek maintains a notion of God which is at least susceptible to some description, and therefore to some knowing or "decidability."

announced itself in Mary's room" as "A million miles away from omnipotence."[15] This is

Kearney's "God who may be": "another kind of God – one who cannot come or come

back, who cannot be conceived or become incarnate, until we knock, until we open the

door, until we give the cup of cold water, until we share the bread, until we cry."[16]

Maybe, God May Be

    The basis of Kearney's God who may be is an effort to "rethink God as *posse*"

rather than as a self-sufficient God of power, being, and causality. Pitting this new god

over against the "'metaphysical' thinkers who presuppose an ontological priority of

actuality over possibility," Kearney hopes to draw from "more 'poetical' minds" in order

to arrive at "a new category of possibility" that is not susceptible to the "traditional

opposition between the possible and the impossible."[17] By turning to mystical, poetic

thinkers such as Angelus Silesius for a precedent of "the possible as a ludic and liberal

outpouring of divine play," Kearney reframes creation as "an endless giving of possibility

which calls us toward the Kingdom."[18]

    One of the central images or conceptual keys for understanding God as *posse* in

The God Who May Be is transfiguration—both in the sense of the transfigured Christ and

Kearney's project of "Transfiguring God." Kearney reads the narrative of the

Transfiguration as a lesson in how possibility trumps any attempt to "fix" God even in

terms of presence. Where the disciples respond to the event on Mount Tabor by

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., 43.

[18] Ibid., 44.

suggesting that they build booths or tabernacles, Kearney sees an "effort to fix Christ as a fetish of presence, imposing their own designs on him."[19] The disciples' had missed the point that, by renewing human nature in himself, the transfiguration "is as much about us as it is about God."[20]

He finds support in the patristic testimony of John Damascene and Saint Anastasius whose interpretation of the Transfiguration concludes that Christ's "transfiguring mission includes all who seek justice-to-come."[21] And although Anastasius links the renewal of human souls to a configuration to Christ's image, Kearney insists that a properly eschatological reading of the Transfiguration "does not seek to *exclude* other messianic (or non-messianic) religions in the name of some Christo-centric triumph."[22]

While Kearney recognizes several radical implications of the Transfiguration, most notably the infinite excess of a Christ who is really present but "not reducible to his actual presence there and then" even on Mount Tabor, the rejection of traditional notions of transcendence which he shares with Derrida and Caputo guarantee an ultimately domesticated, immanentized scope for the God-Who-May-Be. We shall see below that Kearney adopts a distinctly ethical and political hermeneutic from poets when it comes to re-imagining God. Even the mystical aspect of his preferred thinkers, and his operative understanding of what it means to be a mystic, however, is governed by an anthropocentric and ethical schema (with profound metaphysical consequences).

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[19] Ibid., 42.

[20] Ibid., 46.

[21] *The God Who May Be*, 46.

[22] Ibid., 47.

While he values the same mystical elements of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, Silesius, and Nicholas of Cusa that fascinate Derrida, he notes that both he and Derrida do not have time for mysticism marked by "the fusional and somewhat hysterical claim to be 'one with God.'"[23] Kearney further clarifies the acceptable form of mysticism when he concludes that mystics who speak about God by affirming dogmas such as the Trinitarian God are engaged in "totalizing discourses" and "are not really good mystics."[24] To be a "really profound mystical thinker" or to practice "a responsible mysticism" is to recognize that the God-Who-May-Be can only be thought in terms of "A poetics of interpreting the ineffable and unnameable."[25]

In this quasi-metaphysical context, poetics is closely linked with the concept of play—both in the sense of 'playing with' and the notion of a certain looseness (as of a bolt or screw which is not firmly fixed in place). In fact, Kearney appeals to an understanding of "Godplay" and an "eschatological vision of a kingdom of play" found in "early church fathers and later mystics" which can help us realize that God has chosen "to be a player rather than an emperor of creation."[26] With this in mind, we may understand more clearly what "God as *posse*" means for Kearney: the call of the God-Who-May-Be who "calls us toward the Kingdom" is the call to actualize God and to

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[23] "In Place of a Response," in *After God: Richard Kearney and the Religious Turn in Continental Philosophy*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 385.

[24] Ibid. This is an exchange with Mark Manolopoulos in which Manolopoulos offers the examples of mystical theologians who affirm "all the dogmas" such as a Trinitarian God and Kearney responds that "they're not really good mystics, I would say."

[25] Ibid.

[26] *The God Who May Be*, 106, 108.

"supplement and co-accomplish creation."[27] In fact, "God cannot become fully God, nor the Word fully flesh, until creation becomes a 'new heaven and a new earth'"—an eschatological becoming which "can come about only when humanity says yes by joining the dance, entering the play of ongoing genesis, transfiguring the earth."[28]

A Justice Ethic: Just Us Enabling God

To understand the extent to which Kearney's prior and higher commitments to a notion of human-enacted justice govern his thought, we must explore the ethical dimension of his thought, which he openly pushes to the forefront of his thought on God. To Kearney's credit, he sees apophatic or semi-apophatic accounts of God as firmly related to ethics. However, he lets presupposed notions of ethics ("justice") root, or perhaps even determine, his account of God: Kearney calls God that which comports with his prior and generalized commitment to justice. As we shall see, the ethical dimension of his thought reveals that he is not positing "more God" or a more-knowable God than Derrida. God is still purely undecidable because God *is not* except via human action consistent with some higher standard which funds "justice."

Kearney seems to make the same critique of Derrida that we will see below from Turner—and in an area that helps us understand the ethical consequences of Kearney's species of apophaticism. Reacting to Derrida's "changing of the messianic into 'every other,'" Kearney asks "If every other is wholly other, does it still *matter* who or what

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[27] Ibid., 108.

[28] Ibid., 110.

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exactly the other is?"[29] As I noted in Chapter Three, this is precisely the consequence of a thoroughgoing rejection of any so-called metaphysical account of transcendence and a translation into a purely immanent alterity. Derrida and Caputo argue that this is essentially an accusation of relativism and defend Derrida's motto accordingly, but Kearney focuses on a different weakness. Noting his agreement with Derrida and Caputo regarding the necessity of resisting a reduction of alterity "to the rubric of species and genus, to the identifiable features or fingerprints of a nameable being," Kearney nevertheless issues a strong challenge: does this postmodern move in fact remove "the very criteria whereby we distinguish and differentiate one kind of other from another—divine from human, good from evil, true from false? Are we not in fact confounding the otherness of God with everything and everyone that is not-God, thereby compromising God's unique transcendence?"[30]

As I have indicated above, it seems likely that, while adding some amount of qualification here or there, both Derrida and Caputo would respond to Kearney with a simple "Yes. That is, in fact, the point, though we would state it less absolutely." Regardless of their response, and, to some extent, regardless of whether Kearney's or my challenge is a fair conclusion to draw from Derrida or Caputo, the key point here is that Kearney believes his God Who May Be avoids or solves this problem of abandoning all criteria by which to know or judge in matters of God. As we shall see, Kearney is not too far from Derrida's own, more oblique defense to such charges. Where Derrida and his defenders typically reply that he is merely insisting upon the undecidable and "troubled"

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[29] "Desire of God," in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, eds. John Caputo and Michael Scanlan, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 124.

[30] Ibid., 125.

nature of all such discourse and determinations, Kearney moves a half-step toward

decidability via an invocation of justice as the overriding criterion.

Kearney exempts Derrida from his most dire assessment of the ethical

consequences of a complete vacuum of criteria and decidability, because Derrida invokes

justice as the real desire of any "desire beyond desire," once one has "released the

'desire of God'" from the ethical constraints of biblical affiliation.[31] Here we see another

close alliance between Derrida's end of the spectrum and Kearney's *via tertia*: both seek

to make use of reference to the messianic shorn of ties to any particular tradition,

definition, or criteria of the messianic.[32] Kearney does gently challenge Derrida to

explain how we may know, read, decide, or act "in the dark" of pure undecidability and

unsayability, but his own solution to the ethical aporia suggests that, while he may be in

the middle of the contemporary continuum by asserting that there may at least be a God

Who May Be, his ethical elaboration travels essentially the same *via*.

Kearney's concept of justice functions as such a fundamental schema that every

aspect of theological thought filters through it. His "onto-eschatological" vision of the

renewal of human nature through Christ's transfiguration "includes all who seek justice-

to-come."[33] Justice is the hermeneutic lens for Scriptural exegesis such that "we should

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[31] "Desire of God," 128. Kearney is citing Derrida from *Specters of Marxism* in order to show that Derrida's move to the "messianic" is part and parcel of the new ethical criterion for any talk of God.

[32] Kearney recognizes this consequence in Derrida, but does not recognize it in his own work. He refers to Derrida's particular "discretion for naming the divine" as "mystical atheism"—noting that, despite his "passing for an atheist," Derrida's attempt to save the divine name "still calls our attention to a moment of radical receptivity that he terms messianic—a moment when one abandons all inherited certainties, assumptions, and expectations (including religious ones) in order to open oneself to the radical surprise, and shock, of the incoming Other." However, Kearney points out once again that total undecidability necessary for "sense of emptiness" (in the absence of the old God) "that may provoke a new desire" for "the return of the Other God." See *Anatheism: Returning to God After God*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 61-62.

[33] *The God Who May Be*, 46.

read every story in the Gospel according to the principle 'Where is justice being served here and where injustice?'"[34] But it is in his appropriation of the early 20th century poet Rainer Maria Rilke that Kearney evokes the strongest images for this God Who May Be and raises the most pointed questions of ethical consequence.

In Rilke's urging to project the birth of God "into the ages that are coming into existence, and living your life as a painful and lovely day in the history of a great pregnancy," a constant beginning again and again which may be God's beginning, Kearney finds the "vigilant attention and expectancy" of "Messianism at its best."[35] These examples of "poetic epiphanies of the possible" give voice to a cosmic yearning, an "eschatological desire" experienced as a "'pregnant sense of the possible'—the interweaving of the divine and the human in patient prayer and longing."[36]

Although poetry is certainly capable of expressing a sense of what is otherwise unsayable, the enthusiastic enlistments of these particular poetic expressions raise questions about some of Kearney's operative definitions. Although we will postpone a thorough testing of the ethical consequences of this "middle stage" on the continuum until after the engagement with Marion, we may keep a few questions in mind about the implications of Kearney's thought. For example, what does it mean to give attention to or to expect something that is still so much in the process of becoming—of being helped to become—that we cannot "fix" it to know any representative characteristic of what we expect? What sort of ethical thought is available via a continual becoming to serve as a guide or critique of action?

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[34] "In Place of a Response," 382.

[35] Ibid., 48-49.

[36] Ibid.

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Jean-Luc Marion: Loving Without Being

Although Marion, who seems not to grant even "being" to God, may seem closer to Derrida's end of the spectrum than Kearney, who at least proposes that God may be, we shall see that Marion's argument actually presents a much stronger and theological challenge to Derrida. We see this even in Marion's reading and account of the apophatic tradition, which he very tellingly identifies as the "first serious rival" to deconstruction.[37] The attack by deconstruction upon "negative theology" is really self-defense against an older, alternative deconstruction that claims "to deconstruct God and nevertheless to reach him."[38] Marion's is an attenuated theological challenge which remains firmly, perhaps stubbornly, rooted within the parameters of postmodern phenomenology, but it does present a challenge nonetheless in the center of our continuum.

This not the first project to locate Marion in the middle ground of a contemporary debate. As Tamsin Jones has noted, Marion's partly phenomenological and partly theological identity has led him to be criticized for being "too theological, not theological enough, or not theological in the right way. . . as having destroyed the 'subject'. . . and as remaining too 'egological'" and for being both "too much of a hermeneut and not hermeneutical enough."[39] His engagement with apophatic theology is susceptible to the

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[37] Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of Negative Theology," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 20-41. 22.

[38] Ibid. Marion made this case directly to an audience including Derrida. Derrida offered a response immediately after which implied that Marion was not reading him properly or closely enough. Derrida hints that Marion's argument would be challenged by "micrologically" close readings of Derrida's actual texts which take into account "another kind of analysis" required by the "pragmatic" and "performative" aspect of those texts. See "Derrida's Response to Marion," in *God, the Gift and Postmodernism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 42-47. 42-43.

[39] Tamsin Jones, *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 3.

same polarized interpretations. On the one hand, he defends the Christian apophatic tradition —Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa in particular—from Derrida's critique and attempts to use that tradition constructively in his own theologically-guided phenomenology. On the other hand, as I will argue here, Marion pays for his admission into the post-modern philosophical debate at the cost of a willingness to undermine practically every theological undertaking that maintains the validity of the cataphatic.

Like Derrida and Kearney, Marion wants to reveal the errors in what he sees as a triumphalist certainty about the ability of language and conceptual thought to say anything substantive about God. For Marion, a return to the apophatic removes the idolatrous devotion to a reductionist and anthropomorphizing metaphysical grasping and domesticating of God.[40] While sharing the desire to liberate talk and thought about God from the shackles of Being, Marion reserves for God the role of giver—a role in tension with Kearney's God who relies on humans for becoming and in opposition to Derrida's attempt to reserve for postmodern deconstruction that which apophatic theology accomplished earlier and perhaps more convincingly. Even while remaining dedicated to the postmodern philosophical discussions which set the context for the apophatic revival, Marion draws explicitly from his distinctive interpretations of Christian theological tradition and doctrine. This is most evident in the critical role Marion reserves for the Eucharist—participation in which makes possible a "eucharistic hermeneutic" (a move which Kearney suspects of being exclusionary).[41]

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[40] For the charge that "reductionist" and "anthropological" treatments of the Eucharist are therefore metaphysical treatments, see Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, transl. Thomas A. Carlson, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 171.

[41] *God Without Being*, 149-152. Kearney's question in "Hermeneutics of Revelation," in *After God*, 320.

Accordingly, Marion is an important marker on our continuum of contemporary apophaticism. He describes his work as "postmodern" and "close to Derrida" in the sense that he "plays against Heidegger" in an attempt to "shoot for God according to his most theological name—charity." Yet, he recognizes that his project

> does not remain 'postmodern' all the way through, however, since it claims in the end to be able to refer to charity, the *agape* properly revealed in and as the Christ according to an essential anachronism: charity belongs neither to pre-, nor to post-, nor to modernity, but rather, at once abandoned to and removed from historical destiny, it dominates any situation of thought.[42]

Being Silent Without Being

Transposed into Marion's key, the conversation about the knowability and sayability of God centers around the question of what kind of being, if any, God may be said to have. In what way may we say and understand that God is? Marion seeks to develop the possibilities of "the freedom of God with regard to his own existence" by asking "does Being relate, more than anything, to God? Does God have anything to gain by being?"[43] Most important is Marion's question about Being itself: if "everything that is" manifests Being—the quality of be-ing or existing—"Can Being. . . even accommodate any(thing of) God?"[44]

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[42] "Preface to the English Edition", *God Without Being*, xxi-xxii.

[43] *God Without Being*, 2. Quoting Schelling on God's freedom.

[44] Ibid. In 1995, four years after the publication of the English translation of *God Without Being*, Marion famously reconsidered his assessment of Aquinas, judging that Thomas avoids ontotheology when he speaks of God's being. See the translation of the original *Revue Thomiste* essay in "Thomas Aquinas and Onto-theo-logy," trans. B. Gendreau, J-L Marion, R. Rethy, and M. Sweeney, in *Mystics:Presence and Aporia*, eds. M. Kessler and C. Sheppard, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). However, based on Marion's subsequent writings surveyed below from 1999 onward, I believe that my critique here remains valid concerning the insufficient harmonization of the cataphatic and apophatic in his current position.

In a few key respects, Marion's framing of this issue reflects his interest in the Cappadocian variety of early Christian apophaticism, especially Gregory of Nyssa's.[45] The fourth century appeal to the apophatic stressed the inviolable barrier between God and man's knowledge and language in order to argue for the inability of names or categories to capture God's essence (against the Eunomians, for example). Marion suggests a God without Being, beyond knowing or saying. A God without Being is therefore safe from the idolatrous grasping of the theorizing and preeminence of Being which characterizes the history of both metaphysics and theological conceptualizations. Accordingly, the engagement with apophatic theology appears in Marion primarily in the form of a critique and rejection of a too-cataphatic conceptual metaphysics in favor of the limitless and never-seen "saturated phenomena"—a revelation that can only be apophatic.[46]

Similar to Derrida, Caputo, and Kearney, Marion warns against any false sense of certainty in our speaking of God and pits this over against the need to protect the mystery and even confusion that properly denotes an encounter with God. However, as with his deconstructionist and/or postmodern colleagues, the question for Marion is the nature of the relationship between the cataphatic and apophatic—is all cataphatic language essentially rendered idolatrous by Marion's account?

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[45] Tamsin Jones' central thesis in *A Genealogy of Marion's Philosophy of Religion* is that Marion draws heavily from both Pseudo-Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa without distinguishing between their fundamentally "distinct theories of apophasis [which] emerge out of their different ontologies." See Jones, 155 for a summary and Chapter Two for her comparison.

[46] For the development of Marion's "saturated phenomenon" in relation to the context of phenomenology of religion in general and to Kant in particular see especially "The Possible and Revelation" and "The Saturated Phenomenon" in *The Visible and the Revealed*, Transl. Christina M. Gschwandtner and others, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 1-48.

He begins *God Without Being* by exploring the "infallibly" united relationship between idol and icon.[47] On one hand there is the idolatry of philosophical and theological thinking that stops or "fills the gaze" and "saturates it with visibility, hence dazzles it."[48] The idol actually "acts as a mirror, not as a portrait" of the divine, and thus "consigns the divine to the measure of a human gaze."[49] Thus the knowledge that one may take from an idol is pre-fit or schematized according to human limitations. The key move here for Marion is his equation of conceptual knowledge and language based upon that knowledge with the idol: concepts are bound by human limits and are therefore impose the same kind of limitation and mirror-effect on God as do idols.

In a characteristic and often repeated pairing, Marion links metaphysics and the idolatrous concept as the context and mechanism by which western minds find a "means to grasp the idol," despite their resistance to the aesthetic means of more traditional idolatry. We turn to the concept as our delivery mechanism for idolatry:

> The concept consigns to a sign what at first the mind grasps with it. . . but such a grasp is measured not so much by the amplitude of the divine as by the scope of a *capacitas*, which can fix the divine in a specific concept only at the moment when a conception of the divine fills it, hence appeases, stops, and freezes it.[50]

By means of this diagnostic description, Marion establishes the direct parallel between the concept, an offspring of metaphysics, and the idol. In this way, both metaphysics and

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[47] *God Without Being*, 7.

[48] Ibid., 11-12.

[49] Ibid., 12, 14.

[50] Ibid., 16.

the concept are anathematized: "When a philosophical thought expresses a concept of what it then names "God," this concept functions exactly as an idol."[51]

When pressed about even the possibility of revelation within the categories of phenomenology, Marion replies that

> it is possible to describe, in the horizon of phenomenology of givenness, what I would call the empty and just possible figure of revelation. . . I suggest that revelation [including the revelation of Christ] can acquire phenomenological status and match other kinds of phenomena. In that precise sense, the distinction between the field of philosophy and the field of theology, the "limits" between them in the meanings of Kant and Fichte, could be bridged to some extent.[52]

Marion attempts to conclude by saying that he disagrees with Derrida regarding the possibility of describing the gift. However, Marion seems to step toward Kearney's insistence on human actualization of gift potential by remarking that

> we cannot make this description [of the gift] if we have not previously, in pragmatic experience, enacted by ourselves a gift without a receiver [as in charitable donations], or a gift without a giver [as with inheritance from unknown relative or Robinson Crusoe's 'lucky' discovery of something on the beach], or a gift without anything [any thing] given [as with giving a president power]. And indeed this is not a neutral description: We have to commit ourselves by achieving the gift by ourselves, in such a way that we become able to describe it.[53]

Of course it may seem that we need merely to subject our conceptualization to God rather than naming our concepts as "God." However, Marion's explanation of his prescription, the icon rather than the idol, raises the question of any concept's ability to escape idolatry. Even more critical for theology is the postmodern zeal with which Marion deconstructs any potential theological use of language arising from concepts. Through his definition of the preferred icon, Marion risks implicating all cataphatic

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[51] Ibid.

[52] "On the Gift," 63.

[53] Ibid., 64.

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language or knowledge of God in idolatry—a risky proposition if Catholic philosophy claims to say anything distinct from other philosophies.

Invisibly Presenting the Invisible

The icon does not stop or freeze the gaze but rather directs the gaze through it toward the invisible. However, the invisible does not thereby become an object susceptible to the gaze of the seeing subject: "the icon summons sight in letting the visible. . . be saturated little by little with the invisible. The invisible seems, it appears in semblance. . . which, however, never reduces the invisible to the slackened wave of the visible."[54] The invisible remains invisible, and although the icon does present it to the visible, it "attempts to render visible the invisible as such."[55] The icon reveals it *in* its invisibility.

Marion cites Paul's quotation of the Christ hymn in Colossians to set the norm for this kind of gift from the invisible to the visible. For even though Christ can be known and named as "*eikon tou theou tou aoratou*, icon of the invisible God (Col. 1:15)," Marion stresses that even this perfect icon does not render the invisible visible.[56] Every icon "summons the gaze to surpass itself by never freezing on a visible." The icon does not allow the gaze to rest upon it but teaches the gaze to "rebound upon the visible, in order to go back in it up the infinite stream of the invisible. . . the icon makes visible only by giving rise to an infinite gaze."[57]

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[54] *God Without Being*, 17.

[55] Ibid., 18.

[56] Ibid., 17.

[57] Ibid., 18.

Translated into the context of knowledge and language, we see that Marion has followed the contours of apophatic thought concerning the human inability to know and to speak of God. His "infinite gaze" is as impossibly paradoxical as Dionysius' brilliant darkness—both rule out any normal kind of sight and suggest a kind of blindness caused by excess. This account of the icon is Marion's means of maintaining a claim to the reality of the phenomenon of God without having to violate the Kantian division between the actually knowable and the speculative. Where Derrida and Caputo posit a wasteland of pure undecidability and ever-but-never becoming, Marion tries to reserve at least the phenomena and related practices proceeding from an actual God who is still beyond Being, beyond speaking, and beyond knowing to an extent recognizable to the postmodern conversation.

However, the question for Marion, which Dionysius himself could pose, is, given his account of the idol and the icon, whether anything short of the infinite gaze must be deemed idolatry. For Dionysius, the divine names, while analogous and insufficient, are not idols but rather appropriate signs within a hierarchy of ascending and descending signifiers and concepts for God. They are necessary and holy, because they participate in God.

Again, it is important to keep in mind the influence of the postmodern conversation, in which, as we have seen, Kant still sets the parameters for any conversation about the possibilities for knowledge and Heidegger narrates the errors of the past which must now be overcome. Marion gives a thorough and sensitive reading of Heidegger's challenge to the perceived "ontotheology" which has supposedly held sway in western philosophy for centuries. However, when he turns to give an alternative—a

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brilliantly described vision of the Eucharist and an emphasis upon charity (which we

shall discuss below)—he imports many of Heidegger's (and therefore Derrida's)

presuppositions about the limitations and logic of the language of Being in theology. In

his "Preface to the English Edition" of *God Without Being*, Marion frames "the heart of

the question" this way: "can the conceptual thought of God. . . be developed outside of

the doctrine of Being (in the metaphysical sense, or even in the nonmetaphysical sense)?

Does God give himself to be known according to the horizon of Being or according to a

more radical horizon?"[58]

To his credit, Marion addresses head-on the most obvious rebuttal to his attempt

to keep God beyond the realm of conceptual knowledge or propositional language: Isn't

God within Being enough that confessional statements like "Jesus is Lord" must reflect

some true knowledge and accurate language? Marion's deconstruction of "Jesus is Lord"

as an impossible speculative proposition—based upon his reliance on a critique of the

"dialectical movement" of subject and predicate—leads him to question if "the rigor of

Love" might save a propositional confession by developing a "logic of charity."[59]

As it turns out, the ability to refer to charity is as far from the postmodern

orthodoxy as Marion is willing to go. Rather than posit a competing logic or order of

charity which rejects the subjectivity and domesticity of propositional speculative

concepts while still offering some quantum of knowledge about the source or giver of

love, Marion claims that asking charity to become a logic is to risk violating charity.

Asking for a logic of love is to ask for assurance by seeking "a tie between him who

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[58] Ibid., xxiv.

[59] Ibid., 192.

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states and his utterance, the effectiveness (the designation) of that utterance and the qualification of him who states."[60] Even if one were to ask for assurance only "that he who confesses the faith does not contradict, by his simple presence, what he states, and that what he states ('Jesus [is] Lord') corresponds to a state of things," a logic of love would refuse to assure.[61]

The logic of love by which subject and predicate pass into the other in the confession "Jesus is Lord" speaks not of the science of logic but rather of the rigor of *kenosis*, "a constraining rigor without. . . giving any assurances—especially assurances formalizable in modal terms."[62] Thus, even for what would seem to be the minimally acceptable cataphatic theological expression, Marion insists that the conversion involved in the confessional statement must be entirely apophatic:

> The Christian is not attested as such by calling himself Christian, but by saying: "Jesus [is] Lord," and expecting of Jesus alone that he confirms both the utterance and the one who speaks. . . and, in the interval, he endures that the others call him *Christian* (Acts 11:26). He thus endures, as much as the suffering of an often persecuted minority, the pain of not knowing the one he names.[63]

Recognizing that this seems to condemn the confession of faith to a discovery that the love is dereliction, Marion concludes his discussion of conversion by claiming that, "On the contrary, it discovers that, to confess the faith, love suffices."[64] Nevertheless, it is difficult to avoid the sense that even for the simplest, scriptural confession of faith, the fear of ontotheology drives Marion to reject any connection between the sorts of words said at conversion and any cataphatic statement about God. Essentially, Marion reads

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid.
[62] Ibid., 193.

[63] Ibid., 195.

[64] Ibid.

any sort of logic or order or conceptual purchase on the thought of God as another species of idolatrous cataphaticism.

Marion is surely engaging here in a defense against accusations that the anti- or non-postmodern move of his work in *God Without Being*, the ability to refer to charity, is merely a re-naming or disguise of a metaphysical grounding. Paralleling Derrida's case against apophatic theology, the suggestion would be that Marion has transferred the being-centric grounding of ontotheology with *agape* and then proceeded with the same untroubled confidence in a domesticated and controllable God-Being. Marion reiterates, desperately it seems at times, that there is no assurance, no guarantee in either the confessions of faith themselves or in the charity which that faith confesses—and upon which we might be tempted to rely to render those confessions intelligible (if intelligibility is not a desire for idolatry). As a result, he wedges an ontological gap between charity and any logic in order to reserve for charity an existence and a function entirely beyond anything humans might rely upon to underwrite knowledge or grounded assurance in the God they confess.[65]

Based on what Marion goes on to write about Eucharist, he clearly believes that God "gives himself" to some extent as gift in the sacrament. The issue, however, specifically when we are discussing the apophatic tradition and its appropriation in the post-Kantian contemporary context, is whether God's gift includes anything susceptible to description as knowledge. In other words, is the cataphatic necessarily idolatrous for Marion? If so, how would doctrine, which can, and in some important cases such as

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[65] Ibid., 192.

Trinity, must be articulated conceptually even in order to shape and maintain practice, escape the charge of idolatry?

Brian Robinette recognizes the danger in Marion's willingness to emphasize the "essentially performative character of theological discourse" at the expense of any substantive role for reflective secondary (theoretical and after-the-fact) theology. Even though Robinette relegates reflective theology "and its employment of assorted methodologies" to the task of "ongoing self-critique and communication," he nevertheless finds that Marion "courts an untenable extreme: of not affirming the rightful place of secondary theology."[66]

This is not to say that Marion leaves the question of knowledge in the apophaticism of pure undecidability with Derrida or with Kearney's God who needs us to become. In fact, Marion offers a rich account of "the Eucharistic Site of Theology" that is remarkable for its integration of Scripture and his own highly developed phenomenological encounter with Christian practice and claims.

Eucharistic Sight

Marion turns to the climax of the narrative sequence in Luke 24 that begins with the encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Emmaus. Here, two of Jesus' own followers fail to recognize him—despite Christ himself drawing near and recounting to them "in all the scriptures the things concerning himself" in order to address their foolishness about the apparent failure to redeem Israel. Yet, when he later blesses, breaks, and serves bread "their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Here, Marion finds a

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[66] Brian Robinette, "A Gift to Theology? Jean-Luc Marion's 'Saturated Phenomenon' in Christological Perspective," *Heythrop Journal*, XLVIII (2007), 86-108. 100.

parable about the hermeneutics of knowledge: the only possible hermeneutic by which

we might come to true knowledge of God is accomplished as the "central moment" of the

Eucharist. The Eucharist "alone allows the text to pass to its referent, recognized as the

nontextual Word of the words. . . because the Word interprets in person. . . the Word

intervenes in person in the Eucharist. . . the Eucharist assures the [hermeneutic] its

condition of possibility."[67]

Christ is there, and in the uniquely complete sense of presence in Catholic

Eucharist, but this is not a knowable Christ. The presence "opens up" the word about the

Word, but the encounter is limited to the mysterious gift of a hermeneutical lens. The text

is foreclosed to us, and even the theologian—and even with Marion's unexpected

prerequisites of holiness and episcopal appointment—can only "aim through the text, at

the event, the referent" by "transgressing the text by the text, as far as to the Word."[68]

Echoing part of the logic which we will encounter later when discussing

Bonavnture in Chapters Five and Six, Marion explains that Eucharist assures this

condition because of "the intervention in person of the referent of the text as center of its

meaning, of the Word, outside of the words, to reappropriate them to himself as 'what

concerns him' (Luke 24:27)."[69] Therefore, the norm for the theologian, one who does

strive to know and to speak of God, is to secure "the place of his hermeneutic - the one

that passes through the text toward the Word-referant onthe basis of the Word-interpreter

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[67] *God Without Being*, 150.

[68] Ibid., 146, 148.

[69] Ibid., 150-151.

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- only in the Eucharist, where the Word in person, silently, speaks and blesses, speaks to the extent that he blesses."[70]

Furthermore, argues Marion, making a point in sympathy with both patristic and medieval hermeneutics and theology, the theologian who would attempt to speak outside of knowing "by experience, charity" as it is offered uniquely in the Eucharist, does so outside of a requisite saintliness.[71] If not interpreting the text from the Eucharistic Site, the theologian has either renounced "aiming at the referent (positivistic 'scientific' exegesis) without admitting any spiritual meaning, and the text has no meaning - it says nothing - or else to produce by himself, hence ideologically, a new site of interpretation, in view of a new referent."[72]

In order to interpret the text, Marion insists "one must speak *of* him [the Word-referent]," the theologian must encounter the referent "by mystical union" thereby addressing her "competence acquired in the matter of charity, in short of knowing the Word nonverbally, in flesh and Eucharist."[73]

Without seeking to diminish the profound theological resonances in Marion's account, it is nevertheless clear, as he seeks to reinscribe these liturgical and scriptural analyses back into the language and categories of postmodern phenomenology, that knowledge and language about God are little better off here than with Derrida or Kearney. Even as Marion's explication of the Eucharistic site may allow a place and event that

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[70] Ibid., 151.

[71] Ibid., 155.

[72] Ibid., 154.

[73] Ibid., 155.

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make theology possible, his elaboration of that theology suggests that we have by no means found justification for the cataphatic.

Robinette's assessment that Marion eliminates "secondary theology" finds support when Marion vigorously attacks the attempt to underwrite with a "logic of charity" any commonly understood sense of affirmative communication about God. Here, even more than with Derrida, the spectre of Hegel looms visibly over Marion's vehement, at times harshly hyperbolic, rejections and warnings.

Analyzing the assertion, mentioned already above, "Jesus is Lord" as an exemplary statement of faith, Marion concludes that, in the absence of some empirical evidence, the burden of legitimacy for the statement is pushed back to the speaker himself—the utterance itself does no work in establishing its own legitimacy. Marion concludes that attempts to validate such an attestation of faith as anything other than "a cry" constitute "terrorism . . . by making the validity of the utterance 'Jesus is Lord' rest on the sole strength of its conviction."[74] Continuing in this same dire mode, and echoing the polemical tone in Caputo's warning about triumphalism, Marion suggests that when justifying cataphatic statements about God via a "logic of charity": "The lordship of the Christ becomes a 'message'; that one dressed it up with the 'evangelical' epithet hardly masks its status as slogan. Hence militancy, which shares a common characteristic with heresy: to modify as it wishes that which already no longer appears but as a content."[75] Thus the saying of "Jesus is Lord" as a cataphatic statement which carries "content" is to disappear precisely that lordship and replace it with militancy and terrorism.

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[74] Ibid., 185.

[75] Ibid., 185-186.

When he directly invokes Hegel, it is in the service of showing the danger of subjecting "Jesus is Lord" to the "rigor" of "the dialectical model of the speculative proposition."[76] Marion quotes *Phenomenology of the Spirit* to name the "seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative" as that which "puts to work" the dialectical movement which makes into a speculative proposition the properly reciprocal relationship between subject and predicate in "Jesus is Lord." Hegel's dialectic, Marion suggests, would attempt to subject "the rigor of Love" to the totalizing effect of "the science of logic."[77] By this reading, and given Marion's account of charity, we may see why Marion goes on to insist that the only sort of logic appropriate to charity is precisely an anti-Hegelian "un-logic." Again, even to request the "rigor of a logic" from charity is to desire "to assure . . . the effectiveness (the designation) of that utterance and the qualification of him who states . . . to assure that he who confesses the faith does not contradict, by his simple presence, what he states, and that what he states ('Jesus [is] Lord') corresponds to a state of things."[78]

However, any actual "logic of love," while indeed having some "constraining rigor" with regard to, and inspired by, the "eternal and absolute will" attested in the kenotic Incarnation and powerful Resurrection, "is developed . . . without, for all that, giving any assurance—especially assurances formalizable in modal terms."[79] Invoking Hegel again, Marion states that "Charity will give us assurances only if, like the Spirit acceding by the negative itself to the transparency of Absolute Knowledge, it produces,

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[76] Ibid., 191.

[77] Ibid., 192.

[78] Ibid.

[79] Ibid., 193.

hence first *aims at* assurance."[80] Thus Marion suspects that "it belongs to the very rigor

of a logic of love (in the figure of the *logos tou staurou*) not to assure conversion by any

assurance at all."[81]

Thus, far from any cataphatic knowledge which we may be able to communicate

to others, this last rigor suggests uncertainty, if not pure undecidability, even with respect

to calling oneself a Christian. For "The Christian is not attested as such by calling himself

Christian, but by saying: 'Jesus [is] Lord,' and expecting of Jesus alone that he confirm

both the utterance and the one who speaks . . . He thus endures, as much as the suffering

of an often persecuted minority, the pain of not knowing the one he names, and especially

of knowing himself disqualified from every qualification to know him, and even to

confess him."[82]

To some extent, Marion represents accurately the "efficacy" of liturgical and

sacramental performance which accomplishes what it signifies regardless of fixed

theoretical knowledge. However, his insistence that there is no assurance or guarantee

with respect to our language and knowledge denies the performative efficacy or reality to

the language or knowledge constituting those performances. Tamsin Jones poses the

question this way: "When, in other words, no ontological relationship is claimed between

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[80] Ibid., 192.

[81] Ibid., 193.

[82] Ibid., 195. While the focus here must be on explicating Marion's account with respect to the consequences of his apophaticism for ethics, it should not go without comment that it is unclear whether Marion intends for this "knowing oneself disqualified" to refer to anything beyond a phenomenological or simple logical awareness of the impossibility of knowing that which is transcendent. The Christian and Jewish sense in which fallenness disqualifies us, the sense in which God's action re-qualifies us via His own means and love—the sense that Marion invokes out throughout his conclusion to *God Without Being*—would require certain and communicable knowledge about our relationship to God our Creator. Otherwise, we would not know ourselves to be disqualified, and more to the point, could not possibly be convinced of our disqualification. Certainty in our disqualification and the naming of it as sin or fallenness requires assured cataphatic knowledge of the sort Marion argues cannot be communicated.

our words and the reality they refer to, what remains dangerous about the substantially humbled claim to talk 'about' the divine, to praise, precisely because one must respond in some way, even in the face of an infinite inadequacy so to do?"[83]

Where the Christian tradition in general and the apophatic tradition in particular would affirm the pure giftedness of all revelation and the overwhelming abundance of all that God gives, including and especially Himself, there is nevertheless confidence in the human ability to know and speak enough about God to say confidently that the gift and abundance comes from and bears the character of God. But for Marion's unavoidable saturated phenomena, if we are to avoid idolatry as he defines it, how can anyone "begin to establish a mode of judging such phenomena and their intent"?[84] Is this demonic or divine?

Ethics Without God Without Being?

When we look at the consequences for ethics of Marion's Christian variant of postmodern apophaticism, we may see that Levinas is again a central figure. In a text that pre-dates even Derrida's most direct and sustained engagements with apophaticism, Marion follows a somewhat apophatic logic as he interprets the ethical ramifications of Levinas' attack on ontotheology. Elaborating on passages from Levinas' *Totality and Infinity*, Marion speaks of distance as a key factor in protecting both God and human others from the grasping of idolatry - distance counters ontotheology with respect to God and a kind of onto-ethics with respect to humans.

> Distance, which thematizes the thing, to the point of granting it a finally ethical irreducibility, does not only prohibit a possession; it reveals that a relation other

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[83] Jones, 151.
[84] Jones, 157.

than possession, can be established with that which, then, finally becomes other; and other that offers itself, and therefore is not to be touched, nor tasted, nor possessed, because in it there opens a distance more precious than taction, a non-possession more precious than possession, a hunger that is not nourished by bread but by hunger itself.[85]

Before moving further into Marion's engagement with Levinas, we should pause and note the interesting resonance with Marion's later treatment of the Eucharist. While echoing some sort of divine erotics in his quotation of Levinas on "hunger itself" as nourishing, the challenge is already set before Marion as a Christian philosopher: is the cataphatic to be limited even to the point that even the Eucharistic body, while nourishing as performance, cannot be known or said to be nourishing in any certain way? Returning to Marion's development of Levinasian distance, we may see precisely the parallel between God and ethics diagnosed in our study of Derrida in Chapter Three. Here we find that distance saves our thought of God from idolatry and is inextricably bound to (mirrored by? repetitive of?) the saving of the ethical Other from ontological violence.

> "Distance therefore does not open in order that one should cross it; but nor in order that one should not cross it; . . . distance, and therefore the Other, is reinforced all the more insofar as one does not cease to traverse it as the other in which, in a utopia, the most intimate presents itself. Only now can one return to God, starting from the distance where the Other arises, for 'divinity keeps a distance.' In admitting distance, we are admitted to the sole place that the divine can recognize as its own, or, more exactly than this 'neuter,' the Other, who brings it about. Distance delivers access without conditions or precautions to the Other, God beyond all ontology. Thus distance would be delivered from the ontological difference, and the ethical injunction would carry the day over the care of Being. Onto-theology would yield to the dramatics of the Other.[86]

To complete our analysis of Marion at the middle of the continuum, we may note the critical distinction, recognized as early as 1977, which he sees between not only

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[85] *The Idol and Distance*, 217-218. Marion is directly engaging Levinas via *Totality and Infinity*.

[86] Ibid., 218. Again elaborating on, quoting, and paraphrasing Levinas from *Totality and Infinity*.

himself and Derrida, but between their interpretations of their mutual influence Levinas.

As Marion concludes *The Idol and Distance*, shifting from Levinas to Derrida to

Heidegger and ultimately even to von Balthasar, he attempts to reinscribe—or perhaps

translate—the dynamics of his many engagements into explicitly Christian terms. Citing

Scripture as well as von Balthasar, Marion argues that the love of God, charity and agape,

reinforces a non-idolatrous and distance-preserving otherness, both with regard to God

and to the "ethical other" human.

During this theological transposition, Marion notes that, while Derrida's

différance does lead us "further forward, certainly not in the way of an answer, but in the

seriousness of the question," *différance* "remains idolatrous itself, no doubt, but

negatively, in rejecting under the vague term 'negative theology' the possibility of any

non-onto-theological theology."[87] Marion has in mind a key passage in the original "La

Différance" in which Derrida first accuses "negative theology" of aiming to establish a

"superessentiality." Marion dismisses Derrida's "quick and brutal liquidation of what one

registers polemically under the name of 'negative theology'" as a transparent defensive

maneuver against the Christian tradition Derrida recognizes now as a threat. Derrida's

treatment of "negative theology" "has no other function than to secure *differance* from

the rear, against a nonidolatrous (nonontological) face of God."[88] Marion even claims that

this error is one not found in Levinas, that "Perhaps E. Levinas remains, here at least,

outside the reach of J. Derrida."[89]

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[87] *Idol and Distance*, 232.

[88] Ibid., 229-230, FN 41.

[89] Ibid., 230, FN 41.

So Marion sees the danger of proscribing theology entirely while himself cutting at the roots of any and all cataphatic knowledge or language. He believes he has reserved only that aspect – a performative exception to pure negativity and undecidability and reference only to charity – of theological knowing that will simultaneously pass the test of postmodern deconstruction and allow for a non-onto-theological theology. As his exchanges with Derrida show, he seems frustrated that this move—repeatedly spoken in the language of "pure phenomenology"—is not accepted by the cultured postmodern despisers.

Marion pursues this performative aspect in more recent work which argues that "mystical theology" is not interested at all in the "constative [or predicative] use of language" but looks for freedom in a "strictly pragmatic usage."[90] In an interesting twist on his previous work, he considers the question "Do you love me?" and the response "I love you!" as emblematic of a discourse which affirms nothing verifiable or guaranteed, negates nothing, and tells nothing. Precisely because of and by "speaking this nothing, or rather these nothings, we place ourselves (pragmatically) face to face, each receptive to the (perlocutionary) effect of the other, in the distance that both separates and unites us."[91] As a result, we see Marion gesturing toward an ethic of gesture which gives the name "Love" to this "radical pragmatic usage" of language via a Levinasian face-to-face encounter. Not at all coincidentally, he offers a significantly transposed echo of Pseudo-

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[90] Jean-Luc Marion, "The Unspoken: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 76, 2003, 39-56. 39. As mentioned above, Marion's writing since *God Without Being* certainly shows signs of development, specifically with regard to his reading of Aquinas and the possibility of non-ontotheological thought about God. However, it is my position that the "pragmatic" focus upon love signaled in this and other recent essays remains susceptible to my critique here of his account of the proper relationship between catapahtic and apophatic as well as the consequences of his position for ethics.

[91] Ibid., 52.

Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*—which concludes with instruction that God is beyond every affirmation and every denial—at precisely this moment of ethical encounter: the pragmatic face-to-face of "speaking nothings" is "neither speaking nor negating anything about anything, but acting on the other, and allowing the other to act on me."[92]

Marion completes his ethical model with another clever reading of Scripture—finding a "kataphasis [that] actually signifies an apophasis" in Peter's denial of Christ.[93] Here, Marion points out that Peter's previous insistence on his love for Jesus ("Yes Lord, you know that I love you") "in fact proves nothing," as we learn from the three denials. What matters here, for Jesus, for Peter, and for us according to Marion, is that "it is not about what Peter says about things . . . nor is it about him behaving in all sincerity [repeating his declaration of love] . . . but rather it is about the perlocutionary effect that Christ expects to have on him: 'Tend my sheep.'"[94] Thus Marion's apophatically disciplined ethic of "mystical theology" looks neither for professions nor denials of love for Christ, but that we love, out of love of him, the other believers, present and to come.[95]

This pragmatic usage bears a resemblance to the focus on practices common to contemporary appropriations of virtues ethics, especially the MacIntyrean streams. While this face-to-face "acting upon one another" while speaking Love could, no doubt, be a profound practice, Marion's own proscription against the cataphatic raises serious problems for it as a guide to ethics. If we are to love others out of love for Christ, it seems untenable that we could or should do so without some ability to refer, with assurance, to

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[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid., 53. Marion jumps back and forth between the accounts in John 21 and Mark 14.

[94] Ibid., 53-54.

[95] Ibid., 54.

the unique character and performance of his love for us. Otherwise, to re-frame an earlier challenge to Marion, how do we know that our motivation or performance is "Love" rather than "Hate?"

Again, when we consider ethical formation or training we recognize the limitations of an account of the apophatic that severely restricts our ability to know and to speak about the God who defines the Good and who modeled the goods of human life. Whose definition of love is being spoken? Which account of the responsibility entailed by that love will govern it? If this is to be self-sacrificial love modeled on Jesus (or any other exemplar), does the affirmative "content" or meaning now attached to the act relegate the speech to idolatry by fixing the gaze on a particular meaning of the exemplar? Does "loving the other as Christ loved the Church" add a cataphatic mediation which destroys the phenomenological encounter with the (immediate) other by adding the distance to or detour through the Other?

While Marion certainly offers more (and more hopeful) accounts of the apophatic for our ethical concerns, the severe limitation on the cataphatic places his project in an unsettled middle state. It seems that any ethic, even one that makes robust appeals to Eucharist and Scripture, that requires reliable knowledge and speech about a transcendent source or model cannot bear the strictures of postmodern phenomenological discourse. Since, as I have noted above, virtues ethics requires confidence in and the ability to articulate and shape people toward the Good via concrete practices, we must look at the next and final representatives on the continuum of contemporary apophaticism to see if their accounts allow for such confidence in knowledge and speech.

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Denys Turner's Dialectic of Knowing

By proposing Denys Turner as the third representative point on the spectrum of contemporary apophaticism, I emphasize the approach most characteristic of academic theology.[96] While every scholar on this spectrum presents something of the modern, academic, philosophically and theologically engaged articulations of the apophatic, Turner, largely because of his allegiance to Thomistic philosophy, does so with much more concern for the contours of the Christian tradition. We see this in his choice to identify and to examine carefully the major proponents of the tradition and also in his determination to render them legible and coherent to the modern understanding—but with the stance that it is the modern re-interpretation which must explain and defend itself where it proposes radical departures from the tradition.

This is not to say that other philosophers, as well as theologians and historians, who address the apophatic tradition lack considerable respect for the Christian tradition. It is rather to say that many, perhaps most, do not find that tradition to be authoritative or even relevant, much less normative, in the post-modern context. Turner, however, by linking together the realms of post-modern philosophy, Christian philosophy (in the form of modern Thomism), and Christian theology (both historical and constructive), offers the strongest interlocutor who can put forward the best case for a thoughtful theological

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[96] The most promising alternative to Turner as the representative for this end of the continuum is Sarah Coakley, whose work I have cited above in Chapter One. However, while Coakley could serve this purpose, her engagement with apophatic theology—while also robustly engaging the tradition, especially Gregory of Nyssa—is aimed more specifically for the purposes of her constructive projects which focus especially on gender. Turner's focus is more aligned with the broad question of the possibility of any knowledge and language about God within the Kantian framework. He therefore serves as a better representative on a continuum with Derrida, Caputo, Kearney, and Marion. Rowan Williams is also an important voice for contemporary apophaticism on this end of the continuum, but he has not published a project focused solely upon it. For his most recent treatment, see his chapter "Saying the Unsayable: Where Silence Happens," in *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014).

apophaticism sympathetic with a virtues ethics critique. At the same time, Turner's extant

work on this topic reinforces my broad diagnosis from Chapter One: even the most

sympathetic retrieval and defense of the tradition has not yet seriously engaged its ethical

implications.

To some extent, and especially in comparison with Derrida's and Marion's

approaches, Turner's main work on this topic may seem more like "mere" historical

studies and interpretation than the creatively constructive efforts of other philosophers

and theologians. However, as we shall see, it is precisely because of his serious and

faithful engagement with, and willingness to learn from, the most influential sources for

the 1200 year-old Christian apophatic tradition that Turner is able to recognize many

flaws within contemporary apophaticism. As I will also argue, his *ressourcement*

approach is also responsible for his ability to point toward the characteristics that new,

creative and constructive appropriations should have.

Past Darkness for Present Illumination

Turner's 1995 book *The Darkness of God* makes one of the most important

contributions to the modern conversation about apophaticism. By offering close readings

of several of the primary sources of the apophatic revival, he provides a much more

thorough account of the apophatic tradition than those accounts which fund the modern

notion of "mysticism" and apophaticism.[97] In doing so, he also gives a more coherent

description of the range of meaning and dynamic relationships that constituted the

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[97] Since Turner's project was inspired by the use and abuse of the mystical tradition, where this section is specifically treating Turner's analysis and conclusions, I will move fluidly between using the terms mystical and apophatic synonymously. This is not meant to suggest that either Turner or I believe the terms should be used interchangeably or that there might not be a good argument for using each only in specific contexts.

Christian concept of the apophatic for 1200 years. Although not directly addressing the post-modern interpretations, Turner's explication in *Darkness of God* lays the groundwork for his later engagement with Derrida and others on this topic in his essay "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," and book *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*.

Inspired by the recognition that "the mystical" has recently come to stand for a species of emotivist spiritual interiority, Turner differentiates between modern psychological and philosophical notions of interiority and the mystical apophatic as developed in the most influential expressions of Christian apophaticism. The key point for the current discussion is his description of how the early emphasis on the limits of reason for understanding God led to the development of a Platonist-derived language of mystical ascent and union-based knowledge of God. As Turner tracks it, the apophatic has always been a path into a "mystical knowing," properly understood. Accordingly, even this kind of interpretive genealogical study reveals key fault lines separating the traditional and modern/post-modern understandings of the apophatic.

From his first examination of the topic in *The Darkness of God*, we may see clearly significant contrasts with the previous points on the spectrum of contemporary apophaticism. Turner finds an emphasis on the dialectic or "self-subverting" employment of mystical imagery and metaphors which creates harmony, not conflict, between the affirmative and negative, interior and outward motion, and ontological immediacy and real hierarchy . In fact, any account of the apophatic which denies or destroys a dialectic dynamic creates a fundamental break with the "one thousand year tradition of seeking the terms in which to state, with a theological precision which alone can sustain an adequate

Christian practice, the relation between the apophatic and the cataphatic 'moments' within the trajectory of the Christian *itinerarium in Deum*."[98] By means of his historical analysis Turner attempts to develop a faithful account of the apophatic that, in precise opposition to Derrida, et al., re-claims the epistemic validity of philosophical and theological thought and language about God.

True Apophatic: Dialectic I—Affirmation and Denial

In "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," Turner presents a succinct statement of the dynamic between affirmative and negative theological language that we find in Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius and, as we shall see, in Bonaventure.

> An adequately apophatic theology has to be unremitting in its denials of theological language, for all talk of God is tainted with ultimate failure. But this is because an adequate cataphatic theology has to be unremitting in its affirmations of theological language, for everything about the world tells us something of its creator. You cannot understand the role of the apophatic, or the extent to which it is necessary to go in denying things of God, until you have understood the role of the cataphatic and the extent to which it is necessary to go in affirming things of God.[99]

By describing this relationship between the apophatic and the cataphatic in dialectical terms, Turner outlines a standard for any contemporary theological project which seeks to be both truly apophatic and truly theological. In a formulation that draws into sharp relief the distance between this end of the spectrum and the silent wasteland of Derrida's apophaticism, Turner insists that "it is in and through the very excess, the proliferation, of discourse about God that we discover its failure as a whole."[100]

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[98] *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 256.

[99] "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," in *Silence and the Word*, Oliver Davies and Denys Turner. eds., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). 16.

[100] Ibid.

As Derrida points out, it would be possible to hold this high estimation of the cataphatic while still maintaining a tacit belief that one eventually arrives back at a "hyper-cataphatic" language about God. Such a reading might even seem to be a stunted form of a "dialectic theology" in which one must pass through the inferior cataphatic in order to graduate to the higher, more accurate forms of affirmative knowledge that are merely couched in the language and symbols of apophaticism. Turner, however, in accord with his reading of Pseudo-Dionysius, firmly rejects this. The cataphatic aspect of doing theology is not a "naive and unself-critical indulgence of affirmation" which we later submit to a separate critique of negation.[101] Rather, "We must both affirm and deny all things of God; and then we must negate the contradiction between the affirmed and the denied."[102] Furthermore, "in seeking to determine that complexity of relation between the cataphatic and the apophatic" we are examining "the very nature of the theological act of knowing as such."[103]

True Apophatic: Dialectic II—Inward and Upward

In addition to the dialectic between affirmation and denial, Turner highlights the dialectic of interiority and exteriority which finds its most influential articulation in the mystical description of inwardness and ascent. Here we see one of the most important distinctions between Turner and the previous representatives of the contemporary apophatic spectrum. Where Derrida, Caputo, Marion, and Kearney largely decontextualize the theological apophatic tradition from its role in the contemplative

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[101] Ibid., 18.

[102] *Darkness of God*, 22.

[103] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 49.

mystical journey to union with God, Turner finds this goal intrinsic to defining and understanding the apophatic.

In *The Darkness of God*, Turner presents Augustine's account of inward-directed contemplation, driven by memory, as a key component in the development of the apophatic tradition. The path to knowing God, familiar from *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*, involves a journey into one's own soul which ultimately arrives at an encounter with God. The notion of encountering the transcendent in the space most immanent to a person—his own soul—presents a paradox which itself seems worthy of Pseudo-Dionysius, but the imagery emphasized by Augustine re-asserts the "distance" between the human soul and God. Inasmuch as the journey inward is a journey toward God, it is also a journey upward, an ascent into God.

Turner rightly focuses on this as an epistemological claim—"Reflecting ever more deeply into the abyss of memory, the mind strikes upon the light itself which informs all its powers of perception, imagination and judgment"[104]—which Augustine expresses in the poetic geography which becomes characteristic of the entire apophatic tradition: inwardness and ascent "intersect at the point where God and the self intersect, so that that which is most interior to me is also that which is above and beyond me; so that the God who is within me is also the God I am in."[105] This point—the *acies mentis* (cutting edge of the mind)—is "where the greatest inwardness has been achieved, [and] the memory is also projected 'above' itself on a contrary, vertical axis."[106]

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[104] *Darkness of God*, 99.

[105] Ibid., 99.

[106] Ibid., 99.

Again, we can note that these motions are best understood as a mutually influential dialectic rather than a linear progression of successive stages. Progress inward becomes progress upward which further informs and deepens continuing inwardness. Although the dialectic dynamic helps us to understand rightly each of these pairings—affirmation and denial, inwardness and exterior ascent—Turner argues that the language and imagery of interiority creates a serious tension with the notion of order or hierarchy by Pseudo-Dionysius.

True Apophatic: Immediacy within Hierarchy

At the end of his section on Pseudo-Dionysius in *The Darkness of God*, Turner suggests that the centrality of hierarchy in the Dionysian account of the apophatic creates a potentially serious problem. Drawing from Augustine, Pseudo-Dionysius, and Bonaventure, Turner suggests that the patristic and medieval apophaticism, which for this aspect culminates in Bonaventure, recognized a possible conflict between the claims of hierarchy and the bedrock ground of ontological immediacy.

The concept of hierarchy is key to this discussion, so it is important to clarify it in its original Dionysian context (he created the term). On one level, hierarchy is a Dionysian expression of the Platonic concept that some things are closer, more full of, or more engaged with God. As Turner describes it, hierarchy is a "metaphor of ontological distance and proximity" which we might see as a scale of which "things and properties are more or less 'real.'"[107] So the celestial and ecclesial hierarchies reflect both "an ontological structure and a rule of governance of the universe." The concept of hierarchy, therefore, allows us to include both the fundamental regulation of "the good order of the

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[107] *Darkness of God*, 27.

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universe" but also what determines "degrees of 'reality'" or even "degrees of 'distance' from the Cause of existence."[108]

The problem Turner finds at the culmination of Pseudo-Dionysius' work is this: Where hierarchy implies distance, primarily through the metaphor of ascent, even at the level of participation in being and reality, it seems to conflict with the "ontological immediacy of the relation of created dependence."[109] Ontological immediacy describes the conceptual underpinning of the Christian confession of an immanent God, present in all things and "present" in His sustaining of fundamental being which He created *ex nihilo* with no mediating agents or principles. Thus "each being . . . is in an absolutely *direct* and unmediated relation of existential dependence on God. Between each being and God there is nothing."[110] This fundamental directness is true regardless of the accuracy of speaking of a "scale of beings" or legitimate observations that some things exist in "relations of dependence . . . to those ontologically higher" things.

Turner believes that Pseudo-Dionysius resolves some of the tensions (or at least maintains them constructively) because of an insistence on the thoroughgoing dialectic dynamic in all of our language and understanding. However, while the "dialectics of light and darkness" prove Pseudo-Dionysius' lasting influence on the apophatic mystical tradition, the increased importance of the "Augustinian emphases on interiority and ascent" in the medieval period makes the tension between hierarchy/ascent and ontological immediacy more dissonant.

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[108] Ibid., 28.

[109] Ibid., 48.

[110] Ibid., 31.

This increasing dissonance poses a problem for ethical applications, for example: where virtues ethics relies on the confidence to know and to articulate goods constituent of being on the way to The Good, it matters greatly if we must factor in ontologically established mediating agents who populate a vast space between us and the knowledge and person of The Good. For although we may recognize varying levels of virtuous practice and theory as practiced or understood and articulated by, for example, an adolescent versus an elderly saint, the notion that a more basic and simple notion and practice of virtue is more basic and simple because it is separated by more mediating agents would entail a metamorphosis of virtues ethics into something like a gnostic attitude: true, higher virtue comes with the sloughing off of mediated goodness.

True Apophatic: Non-experientialist Hierarchized Interiority

In Bonaventure, Turner finds what he refers to as a fusion or synthesis of the Dionysian and the Augustinian language and emphases. Although I will eventually make the case for why Bonaventure's great accomplishment is better understood as a harmonization, a characterization with which I believe Turner would agree, his meaning is clear: Bonaventure puts together two aspects of the tradition which, because of interpretations of Augustine which were prevalent moving into the 13th century, were growing more and more dissonant.

The synthesis, Turner argues, is possible because of Bonaventure's "adaptation of the Augustinian theme of interiority" by means of his application of exemplarism, in which "the objective hierarchy" of the created cosmos is recapitulated within the human "microcosm"—an exemplarism only possible because of the Christocentric orientation of

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both cosmos and human soul.[111] Through Christ the center, the exemplary co-incidence

of opposites, Bonaventure harmonizes the "subjective closeness" of interiority and the

"objective distance" of hierarchy.

Paving the way for this synthesis is a basic feature of Bonaventure's metaphysics

which already calls into question the modern and postmodern assumption about

theological apophaticism. Turner finds in Bonaventure a distinctly non-ontotheological

description of God and being. While he concludes that "being" is the highest or proper

name of God, Turner argues, "this 'Being' is not an object of our knowledge, which it

eludes . . . God is not *a* being; it is beings which are the natural objects of knowledge."[112]

This constitutes

> a neat reversal of Heidegger's description of the 'onto-theological' logic,
> according to which, he says, 'metaphysics thinks about beings as being . . .
> Metaphysical representation owes this sight to the light of Being. The light itself,
> i.e.m that which such thinking experiences as light, does not come within the
> range of the metaphysical thinking; *for metaphysics always represents beings as
> only beings*'—which Bonaventure clearly does not do.[113]

Furthermore, Turner finds that Bonaventure transforms Pseudo-Dionysius in two

critical ways. First, influenced by Gallus' assertion of a "mysticism of affectivity" in

Mystical Theology rather than Pseudo-Dionysius' own intellectualist "mysticism of

vision," Bonaventure shifts the emphasis from the intellect "toward the voluntarism of a

mysticism of love." [114] This shift has substantive consequences. The apophatic ecstasy of

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[111] *Darkness of God*, 133-134.

[112] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 27.

[113] Ibid.

[114] *Darkness*, 131. Turner explains and compares the variance between Gallus' interpretation, with which Bonaventure and the *Cloud* author were both very familiar, here and in much greater detail at 186-195.

Pseudo-Dionysius remains an ecstasy of intellect, because, Turner argues, he means that "all intellectual activities must be relinquished" in the sense that "intellect is transported *as intellect* beyond what it can do by itself into its own dazzling darkness." Bonaventure's shift, however, transforms this into an ecstasy in which love, with which intellect has been "engaged in perfect unity" all along, "*takes over from* intellect, leaving it behind."[115]

The second critical transformation, which will figure even more importantly in Chapters Five and Six, is the centrality of Christ for any attempt to understand both the dialectic of apophaticism as a conceptual principle and the embodied location for all the coincidences of divine transcendence and immanence. From a historical perspective, this should seem fitting since the interplay of cataphatic and apophatic, the "dialectic of affirmative and negative tensions . . .arises first and foremost out of strictly Christian theological, above all Christological necessities . . .[inherited in] conceptual opportunities already embedded in the patristic articulations of Christian teaching which bear witness to tensions of knowing and unknowing inherent within the structure and dynamic of that faith itself."[116] In other words, Bonaventure (and other medievals) recognized that the Incarnation, by both problematizing claims of transcendence and offering new possibilities for immanence, inherently brings an entirely new dimension to the pre-Christian discussion of the limits of knowledge about God.

As we shall see in more detail in Chapter Five, understanding the degree to which Christ is "the center" for Bonaventure requires a great deal of explanation and

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[115] Ibid., 131-132.

[116] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 51.

exploration. Turner provides a succinct summary that helps begin to explain why Bonaventure emerges as the key figure for his explication of the proper understanding of the apophatic and for the current study: "For Bonaventure, the dialectic of affirmative and negative derives, as the structuring principle of *all* revealed theology, from its ultimate, Christological, source."[117] Considering Bonaventure's account of exemplarism, also engaged in Chapter Five, he would be unsurprised to find contemporary philosophers positing the same tensions, grasping for the nature of the dialectic, about all knowledge and language. Since reason and language were created through Christ, both would bear the imprint of their cosmic exemplar and Logos, in whom we encounter the greatest of all co-incidence of opposites, the tension between affirmative and negative and transcendent and immanent. For the same reason, Bonaventure finds harmony in the multiple layers of paradox in all knowing and speaking of God: "paradoxicality at the level of ontology which *has to* flow into a consequent paradoxicality in our language of the union of the soul with God."[118]

Thomas vs. Kant

Turner's main project in *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* centers around the claims for reason made by Thomas and in Vatican I. Although Bonaventure ultimately articulates his account of the powers of reason in more cautious terms, he remains in fundamental agreement with Thomas (even when disagreeing about the proper relationship between philosophy and theology). Therefore, we may look to Turner's analysis of Thomas' more philosophically framed account of the powers and limits of

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[117] Ibid., 52.

[118] Denys Turner, "Dionysius and Some Late Medieval Mystical Theologians of Northern Europe," *Modern Theology* (24:4), October 2008, 651-665. 662

reason to help translate the consequences of Bonaventure's Christocentric apophaticism into the contemporary discussion. Also, since Turner sees the relevance of engaging Kant at this crucial point, we encounter again the importance of the "Kantian Frame" for this and all contemporary projects.

Turner posits a simple summary of Thomas' fundamental apophaticism: What is revealed, certainly and to our human reason, is that God is unknowable. In other words, the knowledge that God is unknowable *is* actual, true, and certain knowledge about God. Although Thomas is certainly not silent in the *Summa*, Turner argues that his understatement and economy of speech, relative to Eckhart, "probably derives from a fundamental confidence in theological speech, a trust that our ordinary ways of talking about God are fundamentally *in order*, needing only to be subordinated to a governing apophaticism, expressed as an epistemological principle."[119] The governing apophaticism insists that our speech and concepts fail, but it governs speech and concepts which help reveal to us that we are created by an unknowable God. Rather than stifling or even silencing speech, this recognition allows us to "freely indulge the materiality of those metaphors, the carnality of that imagery, calmly exploit all those possibilities of formal inference and logic."[120]

At the end of his project on Thomas and the proper boundaries of reason, Turner draws direct contrast between the account of knowledge and reason of Kant and the account common to Thomas and Bonaventure. The deficiency of reason to explain God, or even the existence of the world—why there is something rather than nothing—helps

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[119] "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," 32.

[120] Ibid., 32-33.

reveal a key distinction: "for Thomas, the mystery *that* [the world] is at all compels upon reason an acknowledgement that its deficiency is already theological: but not for Kant."[121] Nevertheless, Kant, Thomas, and Bonaventure would all deny that God could ever be the object of knowledge in the same way that created things can be objects of knowledge.

Turner goes on to offer a fitting summation for the end of our representative continuum of contemporary apophatic responses to the Kantian frame. While a commitment to the apophatic means that Turner, following Bonaventure and Thomas, agrees emphatically about the limitations of reason with respect to God,

> Kant's agnosticism is the proposition that God is unknowable to reason in the sense that no speculative inference from the world could get you to God, [whereas] Thomas' apophaticism begins with the proposition that God can be demonstrated to exist, but what such inference to God succeeds in showing is precisely the unknowability of the God thus shown. The difference would thus appear to be this: that for Thomas, what the proofs prove is that God's existence could not be an object of thought; whereas for Kant, *because* God could not be an object of thought, there can be no showing that God exists.[122]

Turner describes the two positions as "an 'apophaticism' of reason," which allows reason to infer, beyond its own bound, the unknowability of God, whereas the Kantian position is "a simple agnostic curtailment of reason."[123]

Turner vs. the Continuum

In yet another sign of the importance of the representatives on our continuum, Turner acknowledges the seriousness of the postmodern case against any claim to a non-

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[121] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 254.

[122] Ibid., 254-255.

[123] Ibid., 255.

onto-theological knowledge of God by engaging Derrida at several points in *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*. He first recognizes that Derrida both understands correctly the implications of apophaticism for disciplining thought and speech about God and recognizes the impossibility of any "new ultimacy," even a purely negative one. Turner also sees that Derrida's move to "*desist* from all possible forms of ultimacy . . .from every 'destination'" is consistent with the apophaticism of Pseudo-Dionysius, Eckhart, and Thomas.[124] However, Derrida's complete investment in a "place of indeterminacy" (i.e. *khōra*) forces him into the "logically incoherent nonsense" of "collapsing all 'otherness', whether created or uncreated, into a uniformly 'total' otherness" via the assertion that *tout autre est tout autre*.[125]

Turner makes clear that both the "'parasitical' atheist and the counterpart Christian believer" who is parasitic upon the atheist in his anti-atheist theism, share in a "common bond of intellectual complacency . . . a failure to concede to reason either its rootedness in our animal nature or its power of self-transcendence, or both."[126] When he turns to Derrida in particular, he notes that the escape from the "Derridean dilemma"— the assertion that the only resistance to "onto-theology" is to deny all knowledge of any sort of God, much less the proofs with which Thomas and Vatican I are concerned—goes "*through* its horns."[127]

First of all, Turner notes, correctly, that the "post-modern crux" is still fundamentally Kantian. However, the claim for knowability of the "apophaticism of

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[124] Ibid., 165.

[125] Ibid., 165-166.

[126] Ibid., 232.

[127] Ibid., 256.

reason" suggested by Thomas and, even here to some extent by Bonaventure, can be described as "the justification principally of a *question*—the question 'Why anything?'"[128] Thus, contra Derrida and every accusation that theological apophaticism is merely a deferred and hidden assertion of hyper-essentiality, reason is able to know a question "which lies on the 'inside' of language, and so of reason, and so of logic, and it is the answer which must lie on the other side of all three."[129] Thus the post-modern position is ultimately a denial of the nature of our intellect and a curtailing of reason.

We can see substantial overlap between Turner's critique of post-medieval apophaticism or mysticism and the critique he directs at post-modern appropriations. It is perhaps even likely that he had the "Derridean" end of the spectrum in mind when writing of Eckhart's "strained and strenuous, hyperactively apophatic nimiety."[130] The unnerved and anxious reaction Turner imagines from Eckhart (when confronted with confident and "indulgent" theological speech) can just as easily be imagined of Derrida, Caputo, and perhaps even of Marion. Surely this is the same anxiety that leads postmodern thinkers explicitly to call for what Eckhart may only have been unfairly suspected of desiring: the "reduction of theology to a rhetoric of postponement."[131]

Turner, offering an echo of Caputo's and Derrida's fear of politically-asserted theological triumphalism, warns that "Whenever responsibilities to reason have been shirked, either on the side of belief in God or in its mirror-image of atheism, then space is

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[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid.

[130] "Apophaticism, idolatry and the claims of reason," 32.

[131] Ibid., 33.

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left free for its occupation by the exercise of mere, irrational, power."[132] He concludes

that most of the contemporary appropriations of apophaticism fall victim to the same

problem that the modern sense of mysticism does. In addition to the curtailment of reason,

both approaches lose the dialectic between affirmation and negation—leaving only a

decontextualized experiential reduction on the one hand and a decontextualized illogical

pure negativity of "total otherness" on the other.[133]

Unethical non-Apophaticism

Unlike Derrida, Caputo, Kearney, and Marion, Turner's major studies on the

apophatic have not been concerned with ethics as a major element of his explication or

argument. While he certainly considers contemporary apophaticism to be an important

topic beyond the realm of academic discussion, his scholarly projects have focused

mainly on historical, philosophical, and theological explication.[134] However, his critique

of Derrida on this point reveals that he sees clear and significant ethical consequences of

contemporary positions on apophaticism. Turner is quite blunt:

> Derrida's principle, 'every other is completely other', is not only a
> straightforward logical absurdity, it is also an ethically offensive one, for all its
> apparently benign origins in Levinas's less radically stated ethics of 'alterity.' For
> the 'otherness' of another person is not and cannot be an absolute heterogeneity;
> an incorrigible and incommunicable 'thisness' which is not a this *something or
> other*; it cannot be an absolutely inaccessible 'singularity', not unless some ethic

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[132] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 262.

[133] Ibid., 166

[134] When asked at the American Academy of Religion national meeting in 2009 about the importance of clear and responsible discussion of apophaticism among non-academics, particularly among Christians or atheists who misunderstand what "negation" of God's attributes means, Turner stated emphatically that "anyone writing or speaking about the apophatic has an *apologetic* responsibility" to disabuse an audience of the notion that it renders religious faith illogical or revelation unreliable.

is to be founded upon the otherness of the other as some blank, anonymous reference point of a semantically empty demonstrative pronoun.[135]

In a move echoing Marion's focus on an expression of love as both a demonstration of acceptable assertions about God and an exemplary linguistic and ethical action, Turner argues, weaving in and out of references to Derrida's *The Gift of Death*, that he loves his "'loved ones' certainly as 'other', perhaps as 'irreducibly other', but certainly not as '*wholly* other', for that is to love them into vacuous non-entity."[136] If we love someone "as making 'all the difference', it is as making all the difference to a shared whatness, that is, to what we humans are."[137] Where Turner agrees that "It is God whom we cannot love on terms of any antecedently given common ground," he sees Derrida shifting human relations into the same ontologically and ethically groundless space.[138]

Turner judges Derrida to have shifted the complete transcendence of God, which goes beyond any common term, to apply to human ethical interaction. While he believes that Derrida's fundamental challenge concerning the grounds upon which theologians can say God exists is both important and fair, Turner finds his conclusions and suggestions unhelpful for thought and speech about both God and ethics: "Derrida can have no God precisely because either he collapses all the differentiations of difference into a monolithic, logically and ethically vacuous univocity of absolute difference, or else he reduces it to a multifarious equivocity, depending on which we (and he) read it."[139]

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[135] *Faith , Reason and the Existence of God*, 167.

[136] Ibid.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Ibid., 168.

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Assessment of Turner's Account

Turner finds himself "inclined toward McGinn's suggestion that ['mysticism' in the modern sense] is a product of nineteenth-century scholarship."[140] His analysis and critique of the philosophical version of contemporary apophaticism suggests a parallel indebtedness to recent scholarship rather than to historically more important sources and traditions. When Turner makes the "surprisingly exceptionless" generalization that "perhaps from the late fourteenth century, the canon of those now called 'mystics' ceases to include theologians of repute," one cannot help but think of the consequences of Derrida's choice (following Heidegger) to elevate a 17th century poet—who, even during his own lifetime had to correct pantheist interpretations of his work—to a place of authority for representing the shape and direction of apophaticism.[141]

Agreement with Turner's other points on this topic, the loss of the essential dialectic character of apophaticism and the replacement of Augustinian interiority with a psychological "experientialism," suggests further similarities between the modern misappropriation of the terms and traditions of the mystical and the apophatic. Inasmuch as the strand of postmodern interest in the apophatic proceeds from the conversation prompted by and centered around Heidegger's framing of "ontotheology" (itself driven by Kant) and Derrida's development of the apophatic response, we must recognize the importance played by their choice of sources. If Turner is correct, it is folly to draw from the peripheral sources of apophaticism which invited the modern misreading of

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[140] *Darkness of God*, 7.

[141] Ibid. Derrida seems to recognize this as a source of potential criticism when he makes the implicit argument that since there are many apophaticisms, it doesn't matter if the (ontotheologist) Christian theological tradition considers Silesius a minor and relatively unimportant figure for determining "the tradition."

mysticism in order to address modern problems (ontotheology) which were caused, or at least made possible by, those sources.

The attention given to the specifics of historical expression and development give Turner's account a great advantage over the previous representatives of the contemporary apophatic spectrum. In fact, and contrary to any accusations that engaging tradition means slavish adherence to authority, by wrestling to articulate the interpretations and claims of the primary voices of the apophatic tradition—rather than peripheral figures like Angelus Silesius—Turner helps us see problems with other modern appropriations as well as tensions internal to the tradition. In fact, just as he challenges accounts of apophaticism which attempt to isolate it as a free-standing and subversive element detached from any cataphatic account of theological knowledge, Turner argues that "any intellectual enquiry deserving of the name 'theology'" must be structured with attention to the complex relationship between cataphatic and apophatic—again, this dialectic is "the very nature of the theological act of knowing as such."[142]

Once again, the contours of the problem and the conceptual boundaries of its framing run up against the Kantian challenge. Turner's interpretation of the apophatic tradition and his attempt at a coherent modern appropriation offers creative and constructive possibilities for addressing contemporary problems—in part by allowing ancient and medieval sources to speak and to model thinking not bound by Kantian categories and definitions. Engagement with the details of the tradition seems to be generative precisely because that tradition, while maintaining recognizable boundaries, attests to the tensions and the varieties of apophatic expression.

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[142] *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 49.

Transition: From the Continuum to Ethics

Returning now specifically to the challenge presented by virtues ethics to apophaticism, we find that Turner provides some helpful context when he explicitly recognizes the importance of order, even while seeming suspicious of some kinds of order inherent in hierarchy. However, and this may explain part of his attraction to Bonaventure even when writing a book on Thomas, the reason he suggests for the success of Bonaventure's synthesis of hierarchy with immediacy and interiority is closely related to the reason for a potential harmonization of apophaticism with ethics. Where theological speech itself must be a dialectic of affirmative and negative, we may also find, I will argue, in Bonaventure a dialectic or harmonization of the "unknowing" emphasized in the apophatic and the "knowing" required for virtues ethics.

We may pose the relationship between apophaticism and ethics as another tension, and, consistent with our previous discussion, suggest that dialectic offers a valid way to understand the right relationship of tension. However, as will become apparent, I will transpose the language of dialectic into one of harmony, rightly understood. This allows us to maintain the language of tension, now understood in its musical aspect which I will discuss below, while being able to hear differently, and I think more accurately, the sound of things in a dynamic dialectic relationship which do not need to be "resolved" in the crude sense usually labeled "Hegelian."

Thomas Hibbs brings many of these elements and authors into conversation on precisely this question of the ethical implications of accounts of apophaticism. Hibbs' primary concern in *Aquinas, Metaphysics, and the Philosophy of Religion* is to offer interpretations of Thomas which engage questions about metaphysics and practice—a

concern whose contemporary framing necessarily involves the relationship between apophaticism and ethics. Because of the centrality of practice for the theological virtues ethics of 13th century thinkers such as Thomas and Bonaventure, Hibbs sides with Turner and Kearney in assessing the deconstructionist/post-modernist reading of the apophatic as problematic for any coherent ethic, and especially for virtues ethics.

He cites approvingly Kearney's critique of Derrida on the question of the absolute alterity of God. Furthermore, despite Marion's attempt to remain rooted in a Christian philosophical engagement while in discourse with Derrida and Caputo, Hibbs finds Marion to be similarly at risk of overstating the radical otherness of God. While Marion means to encompass more than a mere philosophical ethic or system among other systems, the fact that Christian virtues ethics has always seen itself as a "way of life" rather than as a list of propositions and principles makes it all the more striking that Marion's apophaticism, his metaphysic without metaphysics, turns out to be so incompatible with virtues ethics.

We have already noted that "as goes God, so goes ethics" with respect to our knowledge and ability to articulate that knowledge. Hibbs states clearly why Christians believe this to be so:

> A complicated pattern of ascent and descent, rather than a simple ascent from the things of the world to the transcendent good, characterizes the Christian understanding of the good life. In this context, the practice of virtue is intimately tied to theological metaphysics; it involves a mimesis of the very life and activity of God.[143]

As I have already noted with respect to the cataphatic and apophatic, the unknowing of apophaticism and the knowledge required to practice virtue, harmony best describes the

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[143] Hibbs, *Aquinas, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion*,132.

rightly ordered, dynamic relationships. Hibbs recognizes the need for such a harmony between notions of ascent and descent and our understanding of metaphysics and virtues.

Fittingly, for our context here, we see the tension in Marion's account precisely when considering the move to ethics which, while taking into account the post-modern challenge to whatever concepts have traditionally been covered under the name of ethics, is essentially what he has in mind when he invokes Wittgenstein's "form of life." Marion claims that the "language of praise. . .through the intention and 'form of life'" somehow delivers "an intelligible and in fact understood meaning"—and that "the usage of linguistic praise" is founded in "the quasi-liturgical 'form of life' that establishes it in distance."[144] As Hibbs notes, however: "questions about the intelligibility of our comportment toward a God utterly beyond being persist. What is the intelligibility of this 'form of life?'"[145]

Although not as desolate or indeterminate as Derrida's *khora* wasteland, Marion's "confused bedazzlement" strains the intelligibility of "praise as form of life," and it seems difficult indeed to see how it could "give way to, or at least be understood within the context of, a set of virtuous practices."[146] In the remaining chapters, we shall explore the possibilities for apophaticism and ethics to affirm that "The practice of virtue is a participation in the 'form of life' proper to the gospel, which is itself a revelation of the fullness of being as beautiful and lovable."[147]

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[144] *The Idol and Distance*, 192.

[145] Hibbs, 134.

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid.

Turning Back: Apophatic Enlightenment from the 'Dark Ages'

Although none of the interlocutors on the continuum sought to answer, or even to explain in detail, the specific question of the consequences of apophaticism for ethical formation, the question surely matters to all of them. Where ethics has been introduced into the conversation, it has primarily been an open question offered at least in part "rhetorically"—where the implications for ethics of a specific claim or logical conclusion seem to be manifestly bad or even absurd. Thus Derrida's "responsibility" and Marion's "pragmatic usage" of love are as much rejections of more "systematic" and dangerously certain approaches to ethics as they are gestures toward or sketches of their own visions.

The problem—and it is of serious consequence for theologians who imagine their work to maintain some importance for the Church as well as for the academy—is that the sympathetic engagement with apophaticism, which continues to grow and to receive greater attention, usually stresses the absolute need for an apophatic reconfiguring of our language and thought about God while at the same time failing to address how this will reconfigure people themselves. I have suggested that asking about the kind of people likely to be formed by particular accounts of the apophatic is a fruitful hermeneutic for assessing those accounts.

The approach and measure of success for answering this question about the formation of people will differ fundamentally based upon whether or not the question is asked from within or without the theological orientation of Christian ethics. However, inasmuch as those whose primary frame of reference is outside the Christian community (or even over against it) direct their accounts of the apophatic with an ethical result in mind, we must consider what kind of people they seek to form. One way of describing

this approach is that concerns for ethical formation should function as a hermeneutical lens for our reading and promotion of the apophatic. If, as the Christian tradition has held, an apophatic understanding of God is consistent with the Scriptural witness and intellectual working-out of its implications, then this hermeneutic is not at all the imposition of a foreign standard.

A constructive model, then, would accept a thoroughly apophatic account of the limits of human language and knowledge while embracing the notions of formation concerned with the development of habits and character seen in the virtues. For this reason, we turn to Bonaventure as a guide for our attempt to address the seeming cacophony of contemporary apophatic thought and virtues ethics.

CHAPTER FIVE

Praise, Silence, and Knowing Virtue: Bonaventure's Harmony

We may gather that the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity, at three different levels: as a vestige, as an image, and as a likeness. The aspect of vestige ('footprint') is found in every creature; the aspect of image, only in intelligent creatures or rational spirits; the aspect of likeness, only in those spirits that are God-conformed. Through these successive levels, comparable to steps, the human intellect is designed to ascend gradually to the supreme Principle, which is God.[1]

—Bonaventure

When does one ever know a human being? Perhaps only after one has realized the impossibility of knowledge and renounced the desire for it and finally ceased to feel even the need of it. But then what one achieves is no longer knowledge, it is simply a kind of coexistence; and this too is one of the guides of love.

—Iris Murdoch, *Under the Net*

Why Bonaventure?

Although we have seen Denys Turner's high opinion of Bonaventure's historical importance and usefulness for analyzing contemporary species of the mystical, Bonaventure may seem an unusual choice for the "hero" of a study of apophaticism and ethics. Timothy J. Johnson notes that even within a postmodern context which enlists many ancient and medieval Christian authors, "Bonaventure's work is unexplainably absent from most contemporary engagements with historical theology."[2] Despite this inattention, Johnson insists that Bonaventure's thought is a "potentially rich . . . source

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[1] *Breviloquium*, II, 12.1. See similar statements in his *Commentaries on the Sentences*: *In 1 Sent*., 3.1.3 etc., *In 2 Sent*. 16.2.3 etc., as well as in *Hexaemeron* 2.20-27, 3.3-9, and *Itinerarium*. 1.2.

[2] Timothy J. Johnson, "Reading Between the Lines: Apophatic Knowledge and Naming the Divine in Bonaventure's Book of Creation," *Franciscan Studies*, 60 (2002), 139-158. 141, fn 7. Johnson mentions the relative lack of attention given to Bonaventure by theologians in the Radical Orthodoxy orbit while noting that contemporary philosophers, Marion in particular, have paid more attention to him.

for the current dialogue between medieval and postmodern theologies."[3] The final two chapters of this dissertation are an attempt to provide the kind of "precise implications" of Bonaventure's thought for contemporary theological discourse that Johnson invites.

However, Bonaventure's fittingness as a provider of constructive solutions may seem doubtful even to those who are familiar with his thought. We must recognize his paradoxical status within the modern reception of medieval theology. On one hand, scholars have long contrasted Bonaventure's supposedly less rigorous mystical or "spiritual" character with Aquinas' scholastic sophistication. On the other hand, Gilson famously described Bonaventure's "system" as so tightly integrated and rigorous that a failure to understand its entirety would guarantee the misunderstanding or incoherence of isolated parts.[4] Although this study cannot even summarize, much less resolve, the seven centuries of debate about Bonaventure's proper place within the history of mysticism or 13th century scholasticism, my argument demands that I offer here at least a tentative account of how I understand his work.

Building off of J.A. Wayne Hellmann's and Jay Hammond's demonstration of the intricate underlying order of Bonaventure's texts themselves, discussed in more detail below, I suggest that Bonaventure never ceases to be a scholastic.[5] Although he does not maintain the *quaestio* method at the surface level of texts such as the *Itinerarium*, *The Tree of Life*, or *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, a scholastic method is still embedded both in

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[3] Ibid., 141

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[4] See Etienne Gilson, *The Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*, Dom Illtyd Trehtowan and Frank J. Sheed, transl., (Paterson, N.J.: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1965), 436.

[5] J.A. Wayne Hellmann, *Divine and Created Order in Bonaventure's Theology*, trans. and ed. Jay M. Hammond, St. Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2001 (1974) and Jay M. Hammond, "Appendix: Order in the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*," in Hellmann, *Divine and Created Order in Bonaventure's Theology*, 191-271.

the broad structure and in the interrelations of various sections of each text. Where the scholastic method remains the melody, so to speak, in Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences* and *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, he eventually comes to rely on it primarily as the underlying harmonic and conceptual substructure.[6] On top of this substructure, his mystical or "spiritual" texts offer a different, though still consonant, melody shaped by his Franciscan emphasis, context, and target audience.

Keeping in mind the presence of a sometimes unseen yet rigorous scholastic order, we can appreciate more fully Bonaventure's achievement in the specific context of his treatment of apophaticism and ethics. The hierarchical order, which we hear as melody in so many of these mystical texts, which allows for both a thoroughgoing apophaticism and virtues ethic, always relates to, is supported by, and sings in concert with the scholastic structure beneath it. As we shall see, these multiple interrelated layers of order and ongoing ordering allow Bonaventure to harmonize what postmodern philosophers and theologians cannot.

 In order to remain focused on the issue at hand—Bonaventure's account of the relationship between apophatic and cataphatic and his harmonization of these with virtues ethics—I do not address all the layers of order in his "system." Gilson notes that Bonaventure's thought follows the same robust, but non-linear, order that Pascal has in mind as that which "consists principally in digressions upon each point to relate it to the

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[6] In the introduction to his translation of *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, Zachary Hayes recognizes the disjuncture between Bonaventure's actual method and his eventual reputation: "The *Questions* offer a powerful picture of a mind well trained in the art of logic in a theologian who is all too often viewed only as a mystical theologian." Hayes, "Introduction," *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, transl. Zachary Hayes, OFM, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1979), 27.

end and keep the end always in sight."[7] Accordingly, each of Bonaventure's multiple

layers or orders "is legitimate because in each the mind is moving about a centre whose

position grows ever more precise as the movements of thought that bear upon it are more

numerous and more diverse in their starting points."[8]

Hammond's account of the intricate layered structure of the *Itinerarium*, for

example, demands an eighty page appendix, and a treatment of the layering of angelic

and priestly orders, thrones, powers, dominations in cycles of 3's and 12's as proposed by

Bonaventure in the last three *Collationes in Hexaemeron* surely demands a book unto

itself. Similarly, although many Bonaventure scholars have tracked his sources and

influences for the topics of hierarchy and exemplarism, with Jacques Bougerol and

Zachary Hayes foremost among them, I will present the analysis and arguments of this

chapter against a greatly simplified backdrop.[9] While focusing on the primary texts

themselves, I draw from work by the major Bonaventure scholarship of the last hundred

years, especially that of Bougerol, Etienne Gilson, Ewert Cousins, Wayne Hellmann,

Edward Coughlin, and Hayes, in order to situate my argument within the main stream of

interpretation.

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[7] Gilson, *Philosophy of St. Bonaventure*,427.

[8] Ibid.

[9] For the most influential modern treatments of Bonaventure's primary sources for the topics at issue here, see Bougerol, *Saint Bonaventure: Études sur les sources de sa pensée*. Northampton, England: Variorum Reprints, 1989, and "Saint Bonaventure Et La Hiérarchie Dionysienne," *Archives d'histoire doctrionale et littéraire de moyen âge*, 365: 1969, 131-167. We need only recognize here that the conceptual and grammatical framework of the account of hierarchy adopted and transformed by Bonaventure proceeds from Pseudo-Dionysius, via a Victorine-influenced reading of Eriugena's edition (and perhaps another, as yet unidentified edition). I will refer to source and interpretive issues only when Bonaventure's variation on the tradition he received is indicative of a significant shift important for this argument.

There are few studies of Bonaventure which focus specifically on his presentation of apophatic theology as it is understood in the contemporary context.[10] This is partly because, as we have seen in previous chapters, much of the recent interest in apophaticism involves interpretations which embrace an extreme skepticism toward any certain knowledge of God and sever ties to traditional metaphysical and theological roots. As I argue below, such a redefinition necessarily excludes Bonaventure's "negative theology," for the same reasons that Bonaventure would have insisted on the adjective "mystical," rather than "negative," and insisted that it not be isolated from "cataphatic theology." Additionally, most Bonaventure studies rightly weave together aspects of the mystical which include but go beyond the limited epistemological and broader philosophical concerns of the contemporary apophatic discussion. As with so much else concerning our reading of medieval theology, especially in thirteenth century Paris, we must keep in mind that Bonaventure did not see himself as drawing from a separate well of apophatic theology. As with Aquinas, the influence of Dionysian and Victorine thought manifests itself in Bonaventure's work simply as received tradition.[11]

Significantly, what we may describe as Bonaventure's metaphysics make special appeal to Pseudo-Dionysius, and this is nowhere more obvious than in his development

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[10] Adriaan Peperzak is a rare case among contemporary scholars who draw substantially from Bonaventure in order to address contemporary philosophical and theological problems. See *The Quest For Meaning: Friends of Wisdom from Plato to Levinas*, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2003). Marianne Schlosser's *Lux Inaccessibilis* stands out as a thorough and contextual study of this particular area of Bonaventure's thought which, although written before the modern resurgence treated here, still lends itself to understanding Bonaventure's "negative theology" in terms of, for example, the difference between comprehension and apprehension. Marianne Schlosser, "Lux inaccessibilis: Zur negativen Theologie bei Bonaventura," *Franziskanische Studien* 68 (1968), 3-140.

[11] See Bougerol, ""Saint Bonaventure Et La Hiérarchie Dionysienne."

of hierarchy.[12] However, by following Pseudo-Dionysius in the mirroring of the celestial hierarchy in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, Bonaventure perhaps goes beyond even sophisticated scholastic notions of analogy and into a species of exemplarism that may be his most important and characteristic contribution to both metaphysics and ethics.[13] As a result, Bonaventure seems less amenable to modern discussions than, for example, Thomas or even Anselm.

Ultimately, I argue that Bonaventure's Christology draws into harmony the cataphatic, the apophatic, and virtues ethics without becoming susceptible to charges either of ontotheology or of an unavoidably univocal "hyper-cataphaticism." However, since, contra the modern and post-modern position on metaphysics since Kant, his polyphonic account of metaphysics is what makes this delicately ordered balance possible, we must consider it first. Also, where our analysis of contemporary apophaticism required not only the context of the Kantian frame but also mention of the more immediate influence of Heidegger's thesis of ontotheology and Levinas's divine and ethical alterity, an engagement with Bonaventure requires at least the context of an introduction to exemplarism and hierarchy: the most relevant aspect of his metaphysics. While he follows particular teachers and older sources, of course, some of whom I will mention, the task here requires focus on those aspects of his thought which help to explain his account of apophaticism and ethics. Accordingly, instead of tracking his

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[12] Opinions differ on this and other topics concerning the extent to which Bonaventure follows or partially follows or modifies Pseudo-Dionysius. See Bougerol, "Saint Bonaventure et le Pseudo-Denys l'Areopagite." *Actes du Colloque Saint Bonaventure, Études Franciscaines* XVIII, Supplement Annuel (1968): 33-123, and "Saint Bonaventure Et La Hiérarchie Dionysienne," Hayes' introduction to *Disputed Questions on the Trinity*, and as we have seen in Chapter Four, Turner, *The Darkness of God*.

[13] Bonaventure considers exemplarism so central to the truth of the cosmos that he lists an erroneous understanding of it in *Hexaemeron* I.17 and VII.1 among the errors or part of the "threefold blindness" of the philosophers—Aristotle in particular. It would be fruitful for a future study to compare Bonaventure and Thomas on this point.

sources—tasks which have already been undertaken in classic studies of Bonaventure by Bougerol and others—I will present an introduction here to Bonaventure's understanding of exemplarism and hierarchy.

Exemplarism and Hierarchy: The Harmonic Order of Existence

In order to understand fully Bonaventure's account of either the apophatic or cataphatic, and especially in order to understand the dialectical or harmonious relationship between them, we must also understand his embrace and modification of the hierarchical tradition he inherited. One effect of his understanding of cosmic exemplarism is the hierarchical nature of all created reality.[14] To some extent, the fundamental difference between Bonaventure's apophaticism and the post-modern appropriation of the apophatic could almost be accounted for entirely by noting that Derrida, Caputo, Kearney do not feel any need to establish the character, or even existence, of the cosmic order in which their apophaticism is coherent. To the extent that it rejects metaphysics as an idolatry of the concept, even Marion's Christian "God without Being" seems to reserve any dynamic ordering of reality for the event and elements of the Eucharist alone.

For Bonaventure, however, hierarchy, rightly understood, is a necessary precondition for any notion of a harmonic relationship between cataphatic knowledge, apophatic negation, the transcending knowing of the "beyond affirmation and negation," and the life of virtues. Given that hierarchy is a characteristic of creation because of its

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[14] In his opening chapter of *The Hidden Center*, Hayes reflects this inherent connection between exemplarity and hierarchy by describing the metaphysics of Bonaventure's "Christology and World View" as emanation, exemplarity, hierarchy, and reduction—inserting hierarchy into the usual Platonic framework and noting that this "dimension to [Bonaventure's] vision of reality complicates our understanding" of the typical, Neo-Platonic cyclical symbolism. See Zachary Hayes, O.F.M, *The Hidden Center: Spirituality and Speculative Christology in St. Bonaventure*, (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981). 15-17.

creation by the Trinitarian God, and that Bonaventure articulates the metaphysics of that

creation in terms of "emanation, exemplarity, and consummation," we will discuss

exemplarity first.[15]

Exemplarism: The Law in Which We're Made

Modern ears have some familiarity with the idea of moral exemplarism such that

calling someone "a good example" still has enough popular currency that the average

person understands the claim: this person is worthy of emulation because she lives up to a

standard of excellence or models the good. However, the cosmic exemplarism seen by

Bonaventure has become utterly foreign. Even for those familiar with ancient philosophy

and theology, an incautious description of Bonaventure's metaphysics can lead to the

mistaken assumption that he is simply repackaging a neo-Platonic account of emanation.

Many philosophers and theologians associate entirely talk of emanation and cosmic

ordering with some variety of Neo-Platonism, and whether considering Pseudo-Dionysius

or Bonaventure, we must recognize similarities and debts for both concepts and

terminology.

As noted in Chapter Two, the influence on Pseudo-Dionysius of philosophers

such as Proclus is substantial and prompts legitimate debates about whether the

Dionysian corpus actually baptizes Neo-Platonism into Christian thought or merely

applies a Christian veneer to unconverted Neo-Platonism. Even with Bonaventure, for

whom, I contend, the "conversion" of concepts and terminology is so thoroughgoing,

incautious readings—often aided by a longstanding generalization pitting him against

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[15] *Hexaemeron*, I, 16. From *Collations on the Six Days*, Trans. José de Vinck, (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970).

Thomas and their mutual Aristotelian training—can lead to the impression that he has returned entirely to an earlier form of Christian Platonism. But, as with many aspects of Bonaventure's great synthesis, the selectivity of his alignment with and departures from Proclus and Plotinus are precisely the point.[16]

Zachary Hayes's analysis of Bonaventure's "speculative" thought in *The Hidden Center* is perhaps the most important study for understanding the tight, Christocentric integration of the familiar Platonic emanation, exemplarism, and return (or reduction or consummation). Hayes explains that Bonaventure saw exemplarity as the "most properly metaphysical question": "the deepest mystery" of the world "is that of the Exemplar in whose likeness it is created."[17] While philosophy can raise this question, and in the case of the Neo-Platonists, perhaps deduce a basic cyclical rhythm, only theology can describe the dynamics involved, however imperfectly and analogously.

Bonaventure offers an analogy of God as artist in the *Reductio* which outlines one layer of his vision of creation within which his accounts of apophatic and cataphatic harmonize:

> If we consider the *production*, we shall see that the work of art proceeds from the artisan according to a similitude that exists in the mind. The artisan studies this pattern or model carefully before producing the artifact and then produces the object as planned. Moreover the artisan produces an external work bearing the closest possible resemblance to the interior exemplar. And if it were possible to produce an effect which could know and love the artisan, the artisan would certainly do this. And if that effect could know its maker, this would be by means of the similitude according to which it came from the hands of the artisan.[18]

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[16] Dominic Monti demonstrates the influence of the *Liber de causis*—"a concise and creative re-working" of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*. See "Introduction," in *Breviloquium*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2005), xxx-xxxi.

[17] *Hidden Center*, 13.

[18] *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*, Transl. Emma Therese Healey and Zachary Hayes, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute, 1996). Section 12.

When we read further examples of Bonaventure's account of emanation and exemplarism, we find that the concepts have been so thoroughly filtered or translated through a profound Christology that no confusion with Plotinus, Proclus, or even earlier "Christian Platonists" should result.

Hayes summarizes the logic as follows:

The triune structure of God Himself is expressed in the Son. . . As the Word is the inner self-expression of God, the created order is the external expression of the inner Word. Whatever created reality exists possesses in its inner constitution a relation to the uncreated Word. Since the Word, in turn, is the expression of the inner trinitarian structure of God, that which is created as an expression of the Word bears the imprint of the trinity.[19]

The Son is the center of the Trinity, the central term of the causality and teleology of creation (cosmic Exemplar), and, by becoming incarnate in Jesus provides a moral Exemplar as the Way to return, consummation, or *reductio*. A Christocentric exemplarism describes a coincidence of opposites with regard to transcendence and immanence, the cosmic exemplar through whom all "emanation" took place and who himself entered into creation to perform a life as the ultimate moral exemplar in order to make possible the return to God. Along with the theological import, we can recognize that this bridge between universal and particular also allows Bonaventure to harmonize his understanding of Plato and Aristotle.

Put differently, Bougerol finds that even the Neo-Platonist conception of a *reductio* is more thoroughly fulfilled in Bonaventure's Christological transposition of exemplarism:

The supreme Cause of all things enlightens human intelligence in order that this intelligence may return to Him by means of natural reason and the lights of faith. Enlightened by the Word made flesh, man is re-created in the likeness of God and

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[19] *Hidden Center*, 14.

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prepared for attaining the wisdom of contemplation infinitely beyond the most piercing vision of the wisest of the Greeks.[20]

Although elsewhere Bougerol finds it necessary to draw a too-sharp distinction between Bonaventure and Pseudo-Dionysius, his assessment of the dynamic synthesis of exemplarism, which links metaphysics, human knowledge via nature and revelation, and mystical re-union with God, seems justified. However, while true that the humanity of the God-Man "allows us to reach beyond the darkness of mystery unto light,"[21] we will see later how the reaching and "attaining of wisdom" in Bougerol's interpretation must be understood in light of a sincere Bonaventurean apophaticism that maintains its reverent ties to Pseudo-Dionysius.

The central, mediating position of the Word in both the Trinity itself and in the created order explains why "all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" are hidden in Christ, whom Bonaventure describes as "the central point in a sevenfold sense"—a designation explained in metaphysical, physical, mathematical, logical, ethical, political, and theological senses. This begins to communicate the extent of the Bonaventurean notion of exemplarism: a performance in Scholastic and Franciscan language of the meaning of John 1:3, Colossians 1:16 and 2:3, Romans 11:36, James 1:17, and the Nicene Creed.

For this study, we shall see that Bonaventure's Christological exemplarism provides not only a theological model for harmony between apophaticism and virtues ethics, it suggests, from a purely formal standpoint, what postmodern attempts—both Christian and atheist—lack when trying to harmonize a non-metaphysical transcendence

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[20] Guy Bougerol, *Introduction to the Works of Bonaventure*, transl. José de Vinck, (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1964), 168.

[21] Ibid., 125.

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with any ethic at all. Christocentric exemplarism allows us to see a conceptualization of order—hierarchy, for Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure—in which a non-rigid, non-fixing, dynamic ordering is expressed at every level of creation.

We get a further proof of the rich harmonization of all of Bonaventure's thought, from every source of his training, when he draws from Aristotle's *Perihermenias* and the *Prior Analytics* to support a key element of his Christocentric exemplarism which also presupposes the expression of this exemplarism at every level of created order. While explicating the "sevenfold sense" in which Christ is "the central point of all understanding," Bonaventure argues that the center, i.e. fourth, of these seven senses (or orders) is the "Order of Doctrine."[22] In a move which surely sounds counter-intuitive to modern philosophical and theological ears, especially those familiar with Bonaventure's strong apophatic positions, he states that the order of doctrine is "most clear by rational proof."

To make sense of this, we must realize that Bonaventure hears in *ratio* the connotation of relationship which we often forget (or rarely consider) when thinking of rationality and reason. This helps us understand the multiple senses operational in Bonaventure's statement that "The intermediate term (center), therefore, by its evidence and manifestation and fittingness, forces the mind to give assent to the extremes, so that while the proper relationship between the extremes was not manifest at first, now by virtue of the intermediate term's fittingness to both, this relationship is made manifest."[23] Exemplarism explains the context within which thought can be rational—able to

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[22] See *Hexaemeron*, I, 11 and 25. All the references in the subsequent discussion are from Section 25. English translations from *Collations on the Six Days*, trans. José de Vinck, (Paterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1970).

[23] *Hexaemeron*, I, 25.

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determine fittingness, which relies upon the proper judgment or intuition of well-ordered relationship (*ratio*).

While the reference to mediating between extremes leads Bonaventure to a fascinating theological reading of Christ's work as the mediating power of the incarnate divine reason and the perfections of divine nature assuming the imperfections of human nature, the important element here is the recognition of an ordered and ordering influence in creation. This is a holy ordering (hierarchy) manifest so thoroughly in the natural world that Bonaventure feels free to cite Aristotelian logic, despite his vigorous critique of Aristotle in the same work. Furthermore, this holy ordering exists because of an exemplarism present in creation because the Father created by and through the Son—the center of the Trinity is necessarily the center of the creation.

While such a sense of order may be described as the broad foundation upon which Bonaventure builds his theological structure, his account of hierarchy is the dynamic expression of how exemplarism takes shape in creation. Hierarchy is the way that we see the order inherent in and constitutive of a created cosmos whose Creator is, in some mystical fashion approachable only by the imperfect language of Trinity and love, Himself ordered—that is to say, God is self-ordering and creates by and through the center Person of the Trinitarian life. We move, therefore, to a description of the element of Bonaventure's thought most foreign to, and opposed by, modern thought.

Hierarchy Reconsidered

We have already seen in Chapter Four that Denys Turner credits Bonaventure with a "synthesis" of the tension between the distance inherent in hierarchy and the immanence of "Augustinian interiority" via a transition from intellect to affect. Here, I

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will offer a correction to Turner via an elaboration of Bonaventure's account of hierarchy in order to show that "distance," however correctly associated with some hierarchies, is not a relevant term here. Therefore, my first section will explicate the dynamic character of Bonaventure's hierarchy with special attention to the relationality of this system of order.

In order to see how Bonaventure's thought concerning the cataphatic and apophatic aspects of human knowledge about God works within this framework, and to prepare for the discussion of his harmonization of apophaticism and ethics, it is most useful to see how he understood the hierarchical ordering of the universe reflected in the human soul. For, despite the general sense that Bonaventure's later writings are "spiritual"—in the modern sense of avoiding or rejecting more philosophically rigorous theology—we find that his works concerned specifically with the purification of the soul on its journey back to God rely entirely for their structure and method upon the metaphysical framework of hierarchy. Because his metaphysics is centered around his understanding of exemplarism, we must discuss this, as well.

In a very general sense, hierarchy means precisely what etymology suggests: a holy order. But from its earliest use as a neologism by Pseudo-Dionysius, it was much more than a kind of celestial organizational seniority chart. In both his *Commentary on the Sentences* and in *Hexaemeron* XXI, Bonaventure quotes Pseudo-Dionysius' deceptively simple definition from the *Celestial Hierarchy*: "Hierarchy is a divine order, a knowledge and action assimilated as much as possible to the deiform, and rising proportionately in the likeness of God toward the lights conferred upon it from on

high."[24] It is of critical importance to recognize that this order is divine because the divine is ordered within itself—Trinity is the supreme hierarchy, the exemplar for all ordering. Accordingly, the logic of cosmic exemplarism, by and through which all things were created and are continually sustained in their existence, tells us that angelic orders, the Church, and even the human soul are all hierarchical as well.

Already we have to pause and consider how the modern and post-modern thinkers we have surveyed above might react to such statements. Hierarchy seems a dangerous invitation to take human notions of order, set them up as idols by attributing them to God, and then justify the human notions of order as divine. Asserting divine warrant for such an account of order must domesticate and debase the supposedly transcendent and unknowable by claiming to capture it within human categories of systems and boundaries. Where the indeterminacy of *khōra*, *différance*, and the endless deferral of an undecidable messianism are important coins of an intellectual realm, the wholly other cannot be the Holy Other of such a rigid and systematic ordering as what is generally indicated by the concept of hierarchy.

As it turns out, however, Bonaventure has instead fulfilled his role as theologian precisely by undermining any humanly appropriable notion of order. He accomplishes this, as we shall see below, ultimately in his Christology, and therefore begins to establish The order of Trinity is the supreme hierarchy "because it is the perfect order of persons. There is perfect personal distinction and fullness of perfect unity."[25] Bonaventure describes this kind of transcendent order as perfect beauty—perfect in both equality and unity—and as perfect peace (consider the repetition of the word "peace" in the Prologue

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[24] *Celestial Hierarchy*, 3, 1 quoted in *Hex.* XXI,17 and in *II Sent. d. 9, Praenotata*.

[25] Hellmann, 53.

to the *Itinerarium*). No human order can mirror this, and perhaps only in music can we find an analogy to the idea of perfect distinction *and* perfect unity.[26] Yet this is what Bonaventure posits as the template and ongoing character of existence for the cosmos, such that we may see the image of the holy ordering in the human soul and its *vestigia* or footprint even in the material world. And in fact, further hierarchization is not only possible for the soul, it is precisely that end toward which the soul is naturally inclined. Furthermore, as we shall see, Bonaventure's thought should lead us to understand a context in which hierarchy and equality, both rightly understood within the cosmic order of exemplarism, are not in opposition.

Hellmann's *Divine and Created Order in Bonaventure's Theology* provides us with an indispensable overview of how hierarchy is the theme underlying Bonaventure's seemingly endless variations of layers upon layers of ordering. After the sacred order of the uncreated first and supreme hierarchy, we find the created hierarchies of the celestial (angelic) hierarchy and the earthly ecclesial hierarchy. The key observation for the current study is that the three hierarchies are marked by "constant interaction and communion" via the influence of light, life, and grace.[27] This influence comes always via the middle or central person of Christ who is the central person of the Trinity and the exemplar for all creation through, by, and for whom all things are created and hold

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[26] I address this below when I argue that musical harmony provides the best metaphor for understanding the dynamic between cataphatic and apophatic in Bonaventure's thought.

[27] Hellmann, 123.

together.[28] Thus the Son "is the *media persona* who always remains the basis of any hierarchy."[29]

The fact that Bonaventure's exemplarism—already differentiated from Neo-Platonism by its Christological character—maintains the hierarchical ordering of the Trinity adds further distance between his account of the relation between Creator and creation and any version of neo-Platonic emanationism. Where Pseudo-Dionysius described an analogous mirroring between the celestial and ecclesial hierarchies, Bonaventure, following Augustine and Hugh of St. Victor, maintains that the mirroring extends into the soul. Accordingly, we find a correspondence between the hierarchy and exemplarism at the cosmic level also at an internal, spiritual level in the soul as it is influenced by Christ to become "more hierarchized."[30] As is often the case in Bonaventure, we see a "coincidence of opposites" uniting the apophatic and the cataphatic: that which is beyond even our most abstract conceptual framework is manifest, incarnate, in fact, within the very precise order of hierarchy, and the unsayably and unapproachably good provides an exemplar for even our most mundane ethical practices.

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[28] See John 1, Romans 11, 1 Cor 8, Colossians 1:16.

[29] Hellmann, 124. The increasingly Christological character of Bonaventure's account and application of hierarchy does deserve mention here, however. Hayes notes that although hierarchy plays an important role even in Bonaventure's early work, the integration of hierarchy with his central, and all-pervasive, Christological focus in later works suggests that it took time "for the possibilities of the hierarchical model to unfold themselves" (Hayes, 158). This is entirely consistent with Bonaventure's own understanding of the development of knowledge of spiritual things. Where previously he may have seen the centrality of Christology and the hierarchical template of the cosmos and church as complementary truths, his mature thought brought greater illumination about the dynamic interaction within the entire "system"—up to and including the human soul.

[30] This can be transposed into the more neo-Platonic language of emanation, exemplarism, and consummation to further emphasize Bonaventure's shift. For in his account "Christ is the metaphysical basis" for all three: "As the uncreated Word, Christ emanates from the Father . . . As the incarnate Word. . . the perfection of the created order [and] thus. . . the center of all exemplarity. As the inspired Word, Christ is the mediator returning everything to union with the Father in the love of the Spirit, and is thus the realization of all consummation." See Hammond, 270.

This exemplarity at the microcosm scale allows us to see some of the fundamental characteristics of Bonaventure's ethics which will become our focus in Chapter Six. The soul receives the influence of Christ as the ordering of the ecclesial hierarchy and as the ordering of the individual soul; both are conformed to the order of the Trinity.[31] As Hellmann points out, the familiar Bonaventurean claims about the *reductio* of all things to God is a *reductio* of the church and of the soul, since both have "an inner similitude or conformity to the triune God, and the *anima*, which so conforms to the divine hierarchy through grace, is called *anima hierarchizata*."[32] Christ, the *hierarcha*, accomplishes the threefold process of purgation, illumination, and purification of both the church and the individual soul.[33] This "descending" motion by Christ through which the ecclesial order and the individual soul are hierarchized triggers an "ascending," and therefore "returning," motion.

With this conceptual context in mind, analogous to the historical context of Kant, Heidegger, and Levinas for our post-modern interlocutors, we may now move to explore Bonaventure's account of the apophatic. As with every other account, modern, medieval, or ancient, we must keep in mind the overlapping and paradoxical metaphors—brilliant darkness, resonant silence, unknowing knowledge, etc.—which indicate apophaticism even in the absence of more thorough philosophical signals that we are discussing the limits of knowledge and language about God.

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[31] Hellmann, 154.

[32] Ibid.

[33] See *Itin.*, 4.5.

Negation: Every Thing is a Lie

In order to offer as close a contrast to the postmodern enlistments of apophaticism, I will attempt to draw out the ramifications for knowledge and language about God even while remembering that Bonaventure was not bound by the Kantian problematic. Through this analysis, I will establish the first plank in my argument that Bonaventure's theological account of the apophatic remains, *contra* Derrida's accusation, both genuinely apophatic and coherent and harmonious with his account of the cataphatic. This harmony between affirmation and negation, I will argue further, is a necessary precondition for any sort of harmonization of apophaticism and virtues ethics.

While the *Itinerarium* and the *Hexaemeron* are correctly seen as the most thorough and detailed presentations of Bonaventure's apophatic theology, we must recognize how integral the apophatic is in earlier, more obviously systematic scholastic works which are not considered under the heading "mystical." Apophatic language and concepts do not simply show up when Bonaventure makes his supposedly mystical or "spiritual" turn when his attentions are directed more toward the tasks of being Minister General of the Franciscan order rather than to academic life at the University of Paris.

Even in a text confident of theological knowledge, focused on sorting through specific speculative questions, we see a relative negativity with regard to what we may know of God. Timothy J. Johnson finds a "dialectic of dissimilarity" even in the strongly cataphatic contexts of traditionally scholastic works such as *De Scientia Christi* and Bonaventure's *Commentary on the Sentences*. Such works assume that certain knowledge is possible, "but that all knowledge is veiled" due to what is "ultimately, an unbridgeable

chasm between created and Creator, between what is signified and the Signifier."[34] As we will see below, Bonaventure affirmed the "Book of Creation" as a source for knowledge about God, but even this fundamentally cataphatic position necessarily involves an equally apophatic negation. Every creation, whether shadow, vestige, image, or similitude, does indeed offer "a profoundly eloquent expression of the *Verbum Dei*," but at the same time, they all fail.[35]

While not rising to the level of negativity of the apophaticism at issue here, we must observe the "epistemological baseline" established by the recognition that all language and concepts ultimately fail of God. Thus even in the texts treating primarily the knowledge accessible through Scripture, language always has a limit. At the same time human reason and language reveal something about God, the insufficiency and ultimate inaccuracy of reason and language can be said to hide God. Combined with the common division between what reason alone can know of God and the knowledge accessible only through the cleansing of faith and grace, we can see that boundaries and limitations of reason and language are fundamental to Bonaventure's thought.

Apophaticism in the Itinerarium

When we move to the classic apophatic texts, the context is properly mystical. That is, Bonaventure's teaching in the *Itinerarium* and in the *Hexaemeron* is directed at true contemplatives rather than philosophers. Nevertheless, his claims about human reason, knowledge, and language in the journey into God are meant to be accurate presentations of the state of human knowledge and of God Himself regardless of the

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[34] Timothy J. Johnson, "Reading Between the Lines: Apophatic Knowledge and Naming the Divine in Bonaventure's Book of Creation," *Franciscan Studies*, 60 (2002), 139-158. 148.

[35] Ibid., 149.

seeker. The discovery of the seventh step of the journey would be the same for anyone who seeks God, whether philosopher, skeptic, or holy saint. All must make the *transitus* and all will find it necessary to reject or negate many of the tools that brought them there.

Bonaventure begins the prologue to the *Itinerarium* drawing attention to Francis' emphasis on the peace which surpasses all understanding, linking the opening exhortation to prayer with the enkindling of desire via the "brightness of contemplation by which the mind turns most directly and intently to the rays of light."[36] Yet, in Chapter One, rather than contrasting mind and body or mind and soul (or *cognitio* and *contemplatio*), he describes the first stage of the soul's journey "not by an ascent of the body, but of the heart."[37] Thus we see from the beginning that Bonaventure strains, if not explodes, modern epistemological categories: this is a journey of the soul (or mind) into God which is marked by insight enkindling desire and knowledge drawn from the turning of the mind toward the divine light in an ascent of the heart. He describes a whirlwind process filled with words, knowledge, and light that leads us into silence, desire, and darkness. Although, as I will detail below, Bonaventure does not reject the cataphatic or reduce it to a merely instrumental role, the conclusion of the *Itinerarium* offers one of the most renowned statements of thoroughgoing apophaticism in Western thought until the 20th century.

The catalyst for the *Itinerarium* is Bonaventure's own interpretive revelation concerning Francis' miraculous vision of a Seraph with, as he describes it in *The Life of St.Francis*, "six fiery and shining wings" descending from "the height of heaven" to

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[36] *Itinerarium Mentis In Deum*, Zachary Hayes, transl., (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2002), Prologue, 3 (39). In future citations, I will abbreviate this source as *Itin.*, Book, Section (page).

[37] Ibid.*, I, 1 (59)

reveal "the figure of a man crucified, with his hands and feet extended in the form of a cross and fastened to a cross."[38] Recognizing the six wings as symbolic of "six levels of illumination," Bonaventure proceeds through six chapters of descriptions and explanation in order to reveal how we may journey into God via knowledge of the created, natural world, the powers of the human soul, and the highest names of God—"Being" and "Good."

Bonaventure labels the sixth stage, the arrival at which he compares to the great work of creation in Genesis 2:2, "the perfection of the mind's illumination."[39] After the progress of the first six "days," "it now remains for our mind, by contemplating these things [of the sixth stage], to transcend and pass over not only in this sense world but even itself."[40] Of critical importance is the dual revealing/hiding dynamic suffusing the final stage of the *Itinerarium*. In addition to being both the way and the door, ladder and vehicle, Christ is the "*mystery hidden from eternity.*" The perfect "passing over" requires that "all intellectual activities must be left behind and the height of our affection must be totally transferred and transformed into God."[41]

At the top of "the six steps of the true Solomon's throne," which are also the six wings of the Seraph, "the mind has been trained" in the form of "the first six days" so that it may now "reach the sabbath of rest."[42] At this point, the language of illumination, the vibrant images, and the attention to created things of any sort transforms into, to a

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[38] Ibid., Prologue, 2 (54) and *The Life of St. Francis*, 13,3 (303).

[39] *Itin.*, VI, 7 (109).

[40] Ibid., VII.1 (111).

[41] Ibid., VII.4 (113).

[42] Ibid., VII, 1 (110).

large extent, block quotations, paraphrases, and applications of Pseudo-Dionysius to Francis' vision. In a litany of negations, Bonaventure's apophaticism explicitly counsels rejection of instruction, understanding, reading, clarity, light, and, ultimately, life. Instead, the pilgrim must ask for grace, desire, "the groaning of prayer," darkness, "the fire that totally inflames and carries us into God," and, ultimately, death. While he does describe the proper response "when the Father is shown to us," we have entered darkness and imposed "silence upon our cares, our desires, and our imagining."[43]

There are a few details which must inform our understanding of Bonaventure's apophatic, mystical silence. The first is the comprehensive rejection—though perhaps transcendence is the better term, in light of what we will see concerning Bonaventure's account of the cataphatic—of any sort of knowledge which would justify Derrida's accusation that this theological apophaticism is really a hyper-cataphaticism on the sly. However, the second detail will help us to see why Bonaventure's silent darkness is not the *khōra* and, because of this difference, why it is both more coherent and allows for a coherent ethic. When we die and pass into the darkness, we are not alone but "With Christ crucified." Furthermore, while we have left behind any claims to an ultimately accurate cataphatic knowledge of God, we nevertheless know that we may praise Him as "enough for us," whose "grace is sufficient," and perhaps most importantly, that we may sing a psalm which proclaims that we know a Person in this darkness of whom, while all that we have known and all language and concepts by which we have known Him prior fails, we can still say "You are the God of my heart and the God of my portion forever."[44]

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[43] Ibid., VII, 6 (116).

[44] Ibid.

This is a 'knowing,' which, as with any description of what we know when we know a person, is not reducible to propositions about God's being or goodness as unity or Trinity. Nevertheless, just as with propositions about the character of a spouse, those kinds of propositions are true despite being insufficient. These are relational statements about an Other which are not susceptible to the Feuerbachian anthropological reduction, because they are manifestly the language of a creature recognizing relationship to her Creator.

Apophaticisim in the Hexaemeron

Addressing the fourth "face of wisdom" in Collation Two of the *Collationes in Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure asks "This wisdom is veiled in mystery, but how?. . . how can it be understood , since it is without form?"[45] As in the *Itinerarium*, he moves into a dialogue with Pseudo-Dionysius, noting that we are now addressing "the highest state of achievement of Christian wisdom."[46] In *Hexaemeron*, however, the emphasis on love as the mode of wisdom and knowing stands out even more prominently, perhaps because of the context as a lecture rather than as a spiritual guide for pilgrims on a mystical journey.

As at the end of the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure again quotes Ps-Deny's opening advice from *The Mystical Theology* to give up or leave behind the senses and "everything perceived and understood, perceptible and understandable" so that "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."[47] In

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[45] *Hexaemeron*, II.29.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid. quoting *Mystical Theology* I.1.

Collation II of the *Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure offers a subsequent interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius: "What he means is that a man must be free of all the things he enumerates there, and that he reject them all, as if he were saying: 'The One I want to love is above any substance or knowledge.'"[48]

In *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius explicitly equates "love" in Scripture with "yearning" and argues that both signify "a capacity to effect a unity, an alliance, and a particular commingling in the Beautiful and the Good."[49] This capacity binds "things of the same order in a mutually regarding union" while moving "the superior to provide for the subordinate, and. . . the subordinate in a return toward the superior."[50] Bonaventure surely has this in mind when he writes in the *Itinerarium* of the desire of "he who is inflamed in his very marrow by the fire of the Holy Spirit"[51] and the "ecstatic unctions and burning affections" which lead us to "die and enter into the darkness."[52] However, he returns again and again in *Hexaemeron* II to love (*amoris*) as an affective power, as wisdom, and as an enforcer of a vigilant sleep.

While not inconsistent with the very Dionysian imagery of the *Itinerarium*, Bonaventure's presentation here is different. This summit is a "union of love"—"an operation that transcends every intellect" and every apprehensive power of the soul including "the sensitive, the imaginative, the estimative, the intellective. . . and every

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[48] Ibid.

[49] *Divine Names*, IV.12.

[50] Ibid.

[51] *Itin*., VII.4.

[52] Ibid., VII.6.

science."[53] Again asking "how can this wisdom be seen," if it transcends science, Bonaventure answers "Only the affective power keeps vigil and imposes silence upon all the other powers; then man becomes foreign [*alienatus*] to his senses: he is in ecstasy and hears *secret words that man may not repeat*, because they are only in the heart."[54] Yet, although "a man can hardly speak or explain anything" about this union, because "nothing can be expressed unless it is conceived, or conceived unless it is understood," it is counted as wisdom—a wisdom "attained only through grace."[55]

Here is a species of wisdom which puts to sleep all powers except the capacity to love—a love of which man must die in order to ascend to the union at the summit. However, in a simultaneous movement, "the power of the soul is recollected, and it becomes more unified, and enters in its intimate self, and consequently it rises up to its summit."[56] Interpreting Pseudo-Dionysius again, Bonaventure explains that the radiant darkness "is called darkness because it does not bear upon the intelligence, and yet the soul is supremely flooded with light."[57] There is enlightenment, but it is a flood of light into the soul rather than into the mature intellect.

However, although "this ascent comes about by affirmation and negation," we must note that the affirmation comes "by going from the summit to the depth"—even the cataphatic is given by God. And, contra Bougerol, Bonaventure leaves no question as to his commitment to the ultimately apophatic character of the mystical union with God:

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[53] *Hexaemeron*, II.29-30.

[54] Ibid., II.30. Quoting 2 Cor. 12:4.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Ibid., II.31.

[57] Ibid., II.32.

the negation which comes "by going from the depth to the summit . . . is the best, for instance, He is not this, He is not that."[58] The knowing inherent to the union of love must be an apophatic knowing, because, as when Moses had to be separated from the people and the elders to ascend to the cloud where God was, "Love is always preceded by negation (removal)."[59] So negation attributes to God "what is His or within Him . . . in a higher and better manner" that we are able to understand, and "the notion of God obtained through removal (negation) leaves us in the most noble disposition."[60]

Any remaining doubt about Bonaventure's sincere position on apophaticism comes in a concise treatment of the failure of all intellect, conceptual categories, and language to grasp God. Despite the nobler attributes and greater participation in the Word of an angel, "in the order of exemplarity, the principle 'angel' is not nobler that the principle 'worm' . . . For any creature is a mere shadow in regard to the Creator."[61] The categories and words are not merely deficient, they fail profoundly. Putting it even more bluntly, and following Augustine, Bonaventure insists "*omnis creatura* mendacium *est*"—every creature is a *lie*.[62] Accordingly, when placed in the context of the metaphor of the Book of Creation: although all creatures are a shadowy or vestigial *verbum* of the cosmic *Verbum*, it is fair to say that for Bonaventure, every word—all language—is also a lie.

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[58] Ibid., II.33.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Ibid.

[61] Ibid., III.8

[62] Ibid.

In light of the charge that theological apophaticism merely masks an ultimately "hyper-cataphatic" certainty about God, we must now look at Bonaventure's account of the cataphatic to ask: Does he in fact negate all that he claims for the affirmative? As Turner has pointed out, while not nearly as central to modern discussions of apophaticism as it should be, the question of what precisely is being negated is crucial for understanding the apopahtic.[63] As it turns out, Bonaventure's ability to offer a harmonious account of the apophatic and virtues ethics turns in large part on his rich, careful description of a cosmic vision of the cataphatic.

Affirmation: Every Thing is True

We must understand clearly how Bonaventure understands the cataphatic in order to appreciate the role and degree of apophaticism in his thought. At first glance, the high status Bonaventure invests in the knowledge of God in and by creation—in even the most humble of created things—seems to be a repudiation of an apophatic theology. Although mediated through a theory of analogy, Bonaventure's account tells us that real knowledge of God, even of the Father in Himself, is expressed in our knowledge of creation. Surely this must seem a "natural theology" that opposes apophatic negation.

Leonard Bowman comes close to characterizing it this way when he writes that "Bonaventure considers the created world in itself an adequate revelation of God to man."[64] Although he tempers this statement by noting that Bonaventure, like Thomas, stresses our inability to read the "book of the world," Bowman does not, perhaps, place

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[63] See discussion above in Ch. Four and Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 26-28.

[64] Leonard Bowman, "The Cosmic Exemplarism of Bonaventure," *The Journal of Religion* 55, no. 2 (Apr., 1975), 181-198. (185).

enough importance on Bonaventure's subsequent statement that "This wisdom is spread out among all things."[65] Accordingly, it seems doubtful that Bonaventure imagines even an un-fallen human reason capable of comprehending "all things" to achieve the wisdom of knowing God fully or even adequately (although Bowman does not explain this presumably lower standard). Indeed, Bonaventure recognizes mortality itself as a barrier to any delusions of epistemological mastery when he notes that even knowledge of one dimension of Scripture, the "length," is unattainable since "no mortal lives long enough to see all this with bodily eyes." [66] Nevertheless, when compared to Pseudo-Dionysius' overwhelming emphasis on the insufficiency of knowledge, and to the Dionysian conclusion of his own *Itinerarium*, the epistemological optimism of Bonaventure's exemplarist metaphysic as stated in the *Hexaemeron* seems discordant.

In general, I accept Turner's preference for seeing a dialectic relationship between the cataphatic and apophatic. When Turner gives his best summary of the functional dynamic between cataphatic and apophatic in Bonaventure's thought, he highlights the perpetual necessity of both. In fact, there is no separate "apophatic discourse" which either takes over from or yields back to a separate "cataphatic discourse." Bonaventure leads us to conclude that "the tensions between affirmation and negation within all theological speech are, precisely, what determine it to be theological speech."[67]

Turner goes on to claim that the characteristic tensions of theological language, the tension between what would normally be termed theological and mystical, "are

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[65] *Hex.*, II, 21.

[66] *Breviloquium*, Prologue, 2.4

[67] Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God*, 61.

finally unresolvable."[68] Although he does not reject the language of dialectic, Timothy J.

Johnson reveals dissatisfaction with the tendency to "separate the kataphatic and

apophatic into separate, semi-autonomous categories" when they should instead be

understood as inextricably "intertwined in the ever-deepening, self-negating

contemplative *reductio* into the silent darkness of divine love."[69] While agreeing both

with Turner's characterization as dialectic and Johnson's desire to stretch for a

description more fitted to a mutual "intertwinement," I will frame Bonaventure's

dynamic in terms of harmony. Chapter Six will explain the full ramifications of turning to

musical harmony, but, even at the level of basic description, Bonaventure's presentation

of the interrelation of distinct things—in a whole that both preserves distinction while

expressing itself most fully in relationship—invites musical language.

While I argue that he particularly achieves this harmony among the cataphatic,

the apophatic, and ethics, Bonaventure's fellow scholastics also find reliable, true

knowledge about God in both the things of the natural world and in the multi-layered

teaching of revealed Scripture. Critical to understanding his position is the realization that

he, again like other medievals, does not fit at all into the modern caricature of a Christian

thinker who might simply accept the revealed nature of Scripture as the only proof

necessary for claiming the truth of the knowledge of God. Bonaventure does believe in

the reliable knowledge from the divine inspiration of Scripture, of course, but his account

of the cataphatic knowledge of God includes much that is outside of Scripture. In fact,

part of his argument for the accuracy and reliability of scriptural knowledge focuses on

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[68] Ibid., 62.

[69] Timothy J. Johnson, "Reading Between the Lines: Apophatic Knowledge and Naming the Divine   in Bonaventure's Book of Creation," *Franciscan Studies*, 60, (2002): 139-158. 158.

demonstrating the fittingness of Scripture for human understanding and the correspondence between Scripture and the natural world.

Fittingness is one way of recognizing a kind of limited expression of the order of God's cosmos—an order we shall see in much greater detail and richness in the account of hierarchy and exemplarism at the end of this chapter.[70] As such, we need to recognize Bonaventure's affirmation of the cataphatic via fittingness even within his more overtly scholastic works which seem to treat mainly of the knowledge gained from Scripture. Accordingly, before addressing the most frequently cited occasions for Bonaventure's account of the cataphatic, the *Reductio* and the first half of the *Itinerarium*, we must see how this account is evident even in arguments focused on other topics.

Because of its scholastic structure and style, relative to Bonaventure's most known works, the *Breviloquium* is sometimes called his miniature *Summa*. It is not surprising, then, to find near the beginning of this text an attempt to address the ways that Creation itself suggests the human capacity for knowledge of God. One of the most important medieval metaphors describes human existence in terms of two books: the Book of Scripture and the Book of Creation or the World. The Book of Scripture tells us about both God and the world, and the world itself, and every thing in the world, is a sign—in the same that words are signs—meant to be read as part of a book that tells us about God. Each book, of course, has a distinct and ordered role to play. So, when discussing our knowledge of the creation of the world by and through one First Principle, for example, we find that

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[70] Fittingness is, of course, a critically important claim in patristic apologetics and anti-heretical writings. It is also a term which can be divested of any connotation of rigidity—the fixed quality which troubles postmodern thinkers—when understood in the dynamic sense in which something that is poetic or harmonious "fits" without being divested of dynamic relationship.

order exists not only in the way God created things in time and arranged them in space, but also in the way God governs their influence on one another. But there is also order in the way Scripture gives us sufficient teaching about all these things . . . The First Principle reveals itself to our minds through the Scriptures and through creatures. In the book of creation it manifests itself as the effective Principle, and in the book of the Scripture as the restorative Principle.[71]

From this broad sense of the Two Books of existence, Bonaventure develops greater specificity about the levels of signs in the world: "we may gather that the created world is a kind of book reflecting, representing, and describing its Maker, the Trinity, at three different levels: as a vestige, as an image, and as a likeness."[72] These three levels, coherent only when one understands that they are reflections of God within the Book of Creation, become, as we shall see, the key concepts for Bonaventure's increasingly harmonized account of cataphatic and apophatic aspects of theology as well as for his understanding of virtues ethics.

In the Prologue to *Breviloquium*, Bonaventure focuses on the character and understanding of Holy Scripture.[73] Yet even here, he cannot help but speak according to the fitting and harmonious relationship between the knowledge gained from either of the "two books." The knowledge contained in Scripture must be understood, following Ephesians 3, in terms of its breadth, length, height, and depth, and Bonaventure relates these qualities to those inherent in a river, music, the ladder-like hierarchy of the Church Militant, and the multiplicity and variety of creaturely life.[74]

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[71] *Breviloquium*, II, 5.1-2.

[72] *Breviloquium*, II, 12.1.

[73] See Monti, xxxviii-xl, for a brief summary of scholarly theories on the relationship between the Prologue and the rest of the *Breviloquium*.

[74] See *Breviloquium*, Prologue, 1-4, respectively, for his explanation of these metaphorical approximations to the breadth, length, height, and depth.

In a general sense, this reflects Bonaventure's elevated opinion of cataphatic theology by suggesting that not only does Scripture contain reliable knowledge, but "its manner of proceeding corresponds to the demands of our human capacities."[75] Scripture offers knowledge specifically fitted to the human mind. At a more specific level, we find even more precise correspondences between God's communication in Scripture and those things found outside of Scripture in the natural world. So, for example, we find that the length of Holy Scripture "consists of its description of [three] times and [six] ages from the beginning of the world until the Day of Judgment."[76]

Building from this recognition, we are to understand that "the whole course of this world is shown by Scripture to run in a most orderly fashion from beginning to end, like an artfully composed melody."[77] Rather than providing a simple "fortune-teller's guide" to world events, the goal of Scripture with regard to history is to show that it is ordered and crafted such that we may even speak of the unfolding of human time and events in terms of symmetry, order, and even rectitude. In addition to the revelation of God in Scripture, the Scripture wants us to know God via a more complete and, above all, ordered knowledge of the world's order and ongoing divine ordering. For "Just as no one can appreciate the loveliness of a song unless one's perspective embraces it as whole, so none of us can see the beauty of the order and governance of the world without an integral view of its course."[78]

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[75] *Breviloquium*, Prologue, 1.

[76] Ibid., Prologue, 2.1

[77] Ibid., Prologue, 2.4.

[78] Ibid.

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Even in a text seemingly focused entirely on knowledge gained only through the revelation of Scripture such as the *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity*, Bonaventure begins by emphasizing the importance of a kind of "natural cataphatic" knowledge. After citing Damascene and Hugh regarding the natural implantation of the knowledge of God's existence in humanity—humans can never be totally ignorant "of the fact that God exists" nor can they "totally comprehend what God is"—Bonaventure draws from Boethius, Augustine, and Aristotle to show that, whether posed as a knowledge of existence or desire for the good or for peace, knowledge of God is ingrained in the human creature. Our default setting, as it were, toward discovering truth speaks of the possibility of knowing the truth: "An inclination toward the true and the good presupposes knowledge thereof"[79]

Just as discussions focused upon knowledge from scriptural revelation inevitably speak of cataphatic knowledge accessible to "reason alone," so too do discussions focused upon claims about knowledge from nature speak of Scripture. The concentrated account of these claims in the *Reductio* reinforces Bonaventure's case that knowledge of God from all of the "lights" is inextricably tied to, and leads back to, the teaching of Scripture. As in the *Hexaemeron* and *Itinerarium*, James 1:17 provides a critical foundation for the link between claims about God, the claim that the world reflects God, and the claim that reason should be able to glean some knowledge of God from the world.

The concern of the *Reductio* is not to argue or even explain these claims, but rather to explain how everything explored and created by "the arts" proceed from the "source of all illumination" and, therefore, that the study and knowledge of the arts

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[79] *Disputed Questions on the Mystery of the Trinity.* transl. Zachary Hayes, OFM, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 1979), Q1 A1 aa3, p. 108.

inevitably lead us back to that source. While Bonaventure seems to have written the *Reductio* as a pointed entry in the controversy concerning the arts faculty in Paris—specifically the overextended reach of philosophers into theological matters—and is therefore most concerned with elaborating the proper divisions and sub-categories of arts under their respective "lights," it is clear that his argument relies on the expectation of general agreement on the fundamental claims. The claim that everything is led back to theology is effective in the university context only because Bonaventure, and presumably most of his colleagues, already agreed with the underlying assertions about this kind of emanation, exemplarity, and return.

Since "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father [God] of Lights," we should know that just as all lights "had their origin in a single light, so too all these branches of knowledge are ordered to the knowledge of Sacred Scripture."[80] Being "ordered to" Scripture signifies that Scripture contains and perfects all branches of knowledge, but it also means that "they are ordered to the eternal illumination by means of it."[81] This order means that all knowledge—even that gleaned from the mechanical arts of hunting or armor-making—should come to rest in (i.e. return to) knowledge of Scripture "and particularly in the *anagogical* understanding of Scripture through which any illumination is traced back to God from whom it took its origin."[82]

At first glance, this may seem a "backhanded compliment" of sorts to the branches of knowledge which are the proper object for the arts. One can imagine a response from the philosophy faculty similar to an argument among twentieth century

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[80] *Reductio*, 7, 45.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., 7, 44-45.

Thomists regarding the possibility for accurate knowledge of God without the intermediary role of Scripture as "special revelation." However, Bonaventure could pay no higher compliment to the knowledge gleaned from outside of Scripture than to say that it should inevitably lead back to Scripture. While not actually accomplishing what they signify, even the objects of the mechanical arts reflect the same light which is revealed in the sacraments and Scripture. Christ himself is not present materially in the mechanical arts, and they do not lead to what Bonaventure calls saving knowledge, but knowledge of them is light reflected from the Word, the original light of creation.

The Cataphatic in the Itinerarium

When we examine the role of cataphatic knowledge in the *Itinerarium*, we find detailed explanations how even the vestiges of God in the material world are steps in the mystical journey of the soul into God. For a text most famous for its apophatic conclusion, many readers are no doubt surprised to find that Books One and Two deal specifically with the vestiges of God in created, material things. One likely assumption, encouraged by the kind of experiential "mysticism" Turner rejects, is that Bonaventure discusses vestiges primarily to emphasize that they are a hindrance to real knowledge and must be rejected and abandoned for higher things. And indeed, at the end of the *Itinerarium*, he does join Pseudo-Dionysius to counsel that we must "leave behind" all things including "senses and intellectual activities, sensible and invisible things," and so on.[83]

However, in his introduction to the treatment of the vestiges and in his two-part explanation of how we may contemplate God both "through" (*per*) and "in" (*in*) His vestiges, Bonaventure takes great care to ennoble the vestiges as part of the ladder of the

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[83] *Itin*. VII, 5.

universe and a legitimate segment on the *itinerarium*—the path or way into God. He stresses that "In order to arrive at that First Principle which is most spiritual and eternal, and above us, it is necessary that we move through the vestiges which are bodily and temporal and outside us. And this is to be led in the way of God [et hoc est *deduci in via Dei*]."[84]

Rather than a gnostic repulsion, "spiritualist" denial, or intellectual shame of human involvement and implication in the level of the material and sensible vestiges, Bonaventure goes so far as to say that "the bodily senses assist the intellect when it investigates rationally, or believes faithfully, or contemplates intellectually."[85] It is critical to understand why this should be the case when discussing the same God who we may only approach by leaving these things and powers behind. The senses may assist the intellect and the intellect may know only because of the internal order and ongoing ordering of creation by God: "The supreme power, wisdom, and benevolence of the Creator shines forth in created things as the bodily senses make this known to the interior senses."[86] The same will hold true in Chapters Three and Four of the *Itinerarium* when we learn of what we may know when contemplating God in and through the image of our created souls. This is simply how the cosmos is ordered: "for it is in harmony with our created condition that the universe itself might serve as a ladder by which we can ascend to God."[87]

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[84] *Itin.*, I, 2.

[85] *Itin.*, I, 10.

[86] Ibid.

[87] *Itin.*, I, 2.

The Cataphatic in the Hexaemeron

In the Fourth Collation of the *Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure offers another variation on the account of creation as a book or word which tells of the truth of God. To explain "Understanding Naturally Given," Bonaventure turns again to the metaphor of light and, interpreting Ecclesiasticus, distinguishes "three primary radiations" sent out by the light of truth: "a truth of things, a truth of signs or words and a truth of behavior."[88] Mapped on to the soul, he finds three ways that "every radiation of truth" affects our soul's power of understanding. Truth shines upon the soul "absolutely, and then refers to things to be seen; or in relation to the interpretive faculty, and then consists in the truth of words; or in relation to the affective or motive faculty, and then it is the truth of things to be done."[89] These ordered sets of threes, reflecting fitting levels of hierarchy once more, help us to see that "In so far as the vision of understanding naturally give is turned toward things, it is truth."[90]

While Bonaventure goes on to bolster his point by proving that various divisions of essences or quiddities, quantities, and the mixed (partially hidden) properties of natures, he has already stated his principle point: things, words, and even behavior speak truth. While recognizing that theologians may have serious disagreements about whether or not knowledge gleaned from "reason or nature alone" constitutes a dangerous "natural theology," the key point for the current argument is that Bonaventure sees several places, within and without Scripture, where humans are capable of finding and understanding reliable and accurate knowledge about God.

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[88] *Hexaemeron*, IV, 2.

[89] *Hexaemeron*, IV, 4.

[90] Ibid., IV, 6.

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However, because it is so foreign to our post-Kantian thinking, the exemplaristic reasoning supporting the explanation of *why* this is so demands our special attention and articulation. Rather than a rational, empiricist epistemology or a conventional phenomenological approach which begin with an account of general knowledge or phenomena prior to some separate knowing of God, a knowing which then must be interrogated and made to fit according to modern epistemologies, Bonaventure's most basic epistemology or phenomenology begins with metaphysics. It is prior, and the dynamics of exemplarism posit that the knowledge of things other than God bear the stamp of, or already fit within the knowledge of God because they are created and held in a ratio of proper relationship best described as harmony.

To hear one note in isolation would require the mutilation of the ear or auditory nerve itself, or even more twistedly, the damaging of the brain's ability to interpret the sense data proclaiming the harmony. Being tuned to hear is then a process of hearing the infinite harmonies underlying and singing out over any particular note. We may scientifically focus on a particular note, or even the component properties of a tone down to the wave pattern itself, but, just as Bonaventure insists in the more familiar language of vision that anyone "not enlightened by such splendor of created things is blind," we must recognize that he continues his sensory ennobling by proclaiming that "whoever is not awakened by such outcries [*clamoribus*] is deaf."[91]

As is fitting for such a discussion, even if thought of in terms of dialectic rather than the more dynamic relationship of harmony I have been steadily adopting, the moment of transition requires us to reassert the "both and" nature of the issue. While we

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[91] *Itin.*, I, 15.

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would be deaf not to be awakened by such a clamor of speaking-about-God even in the vestiges, we must note that knowledge at this level, if frozen and isolated here, still hears a clamor rather than the beautifully ordered relating of what the music really is. To borrow from C.S. Lewis's point in *The Great Divorce*, it may be that, with the hindsight of eternity, we may recall the early recognition of what we thought was mere clamor and realize that such listening, attending to the outcries of the vestiges, was always hearing the music of God. Nevertheless, and here is our apophatic counterpoint, it remains true conceptually and even in terms of the raw mathematics of the ratio that the clamor we hear is far more unlike the actual music of God than it is like that music. Having asserted both the cataphatic and apophatic themes, the question moves naturally now to the conceptual bridge of transition between the two.

A Bonaventurean Distinction: The Transitus

With these claims in mind, when we consider the relationship between the cataphatic and the apophatic, we are presented with an apparent tension for a Christian theological vision which, as such, must accept, proclaim, and attempt to teach and live in accord with affirmative claims about Christ. As it turns out, the Christological centering of Bonaventure's apophaticism, seen in the death with Christ as door into the apophatic in the *Itinerarium* and the stress on love in *Hexaemeron*, is precisely what allows him to hold together his claims about knowledge and the negation of knowledge in a dialectic or harmonic order. Knowing Christ, the cataphatic truth about whom even philosophical knowledge cannot tell us, is the way into the apophatic negation of knowledge even of Christ. We may see this critical conceptual and mystical seam in the account of the relationship between cataphatic and apophatic at the crossing over of the *transitus*.

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The transition between Chapter Six and Chapter Seven of the *Itinerarium* is a key moment for understanding Bonaventure's conception of the border between valuable, transformative knowledge and an ecstatic peace that is another species of knowing. Before moving into the very Dionysian apophaticism of Chapter Seven, we must appreciate fully that the penultimate step in VI.7 is "the perfection of the mind's illumination when, as if on the sixth day of creation, it sees man made to the image of God."[92] The mind's illumination is now perfect because it may now see the coincidence of opposites revealed in the incarnate Christ: "our humanity so wonderfully exalted, so ineffably united" with the "Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God by nature." Able now to see, at the same time "united the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the center, *the Alpha and the Omega*, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature, that is, *the book written within and without*, it now reaches something perfect." All that remains is the seventh day, "the day of rest on which through mystical ecstasy the mind's discernment comes to rest *from all the work which* it *has done*."

By putting the human mind in parallel with the account of God creating in Genesis 1, Bonaventure demonstrates the value of the stages leading up to mystical unknowing. If, in the final stage of the *Itinerarium*, the soul must "seek grace not instruction, desire not understanding . . . darkness not clarity" and to "impose silence upon our cares, our desires and our imaginings," it is not with a spirit of indeterminacy about the character of that grace, desire, darkness, and silence.[93] Rather, the intelligible

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[92] Ibid., VI.7 (108).

[93] Ibid., VII.6 (115-116).

knowledge and practices of the first six chapters are "like the six steps of Solomon's throne," and "like the first six days in which the mind has been trained so that it may reach the sabbath of rest."[94] Although Bonaventure will affirm the apophatic nature of the mystical union, he insists that it is reached with a determinacy or certainty about its character similar to the certainty one has about the top of a stairway or the telos of a regimen of training. In the same way one may not even know most of the detail about the throne at the top of the stairs or the precise combination and sequence of skills needed to perform athletically or musically, yet still know a great deal about what has not been seen fully, the soul knows something true and certain about the unknowable God waiting in the silence.

So it is in light of—not despite or apart from—this determined progress toward a determinate end that we reach Bonaventure's incorporation of Pseudo-Dionysius. As Chapter Seven shows, these steps are necessary, and though left physically behind, they cannot be abandoned as empty fables or phantom linguistic wisps that merely provided therapy to get us to the point of pure indeterminacy. The mind has indeed been illumined and keeps (treasures these things in its "heart") what it knows in order to go beyond—to know what lies beyond without knowing it fully or even in the same mode of knowing. The mind has passed through the courtship and the wedding and now stands at the threshold of the wedding chamber, about to enter into a different knowing—a knowing that is both restful and ecstatic, a knowing beyond discerning but not dismissive of the discernment which led it to know how to ascend the steps to the church and then to the chamber and to the Person who waits beyond the threshold.

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[94] Ibid., VII.1 (110-111).

In *Hexaemeron* II.32, Bonaventure echoes Pseudo-Dionysius on the necessity of prayer for ascending the summit. Again we see a clear distinction with the postmodern account of the movement between (what is for them the illusion of) cataphatic knowledge and the   apophatic negation. Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure recognize that arrival in the darkness that "does not bear upon the intelligence" which paradoxically floods the soul with light "cannot be had without prayer."[95] And, while all names and forms of address ultimately fail of God, it is still right and true to begin by addressing "Supersubstantial Trinity, super-divine and super-good."[96] At the same time, while we pray with certainty, "Christ goes away when the mind attempts to behold this wisdom through intellectual eyes; since it is not the intellect that can go in there, but the heart . . . for the heart reaches down into the depths of Christ."[97]

The *transitus* into this God we may address and call by name requires the abandonment of address and names, but without addressing and naming, there is nothing to abandon and no passing over. The journey into the brilliant darkness "comes about by affirmation and negation," and the affirmation is not merely instrumental, seen in hindsight to have been something better avoided if possible. Yet, the mode of negation "is the best, for instance, He is not this, He is not that. In so doing I do not deprive God of what is His or within Him, but I attribute it in a higher and better manner than I am able to understand."[98] So attribution remains in the form of a negation of a proposition— nevertheless, the relationship remains and, most importantly, the "is" remains.

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[95] *Hexaemeron*, II.32.

[96] Ibid. Bonaventure is quoting from *Mystical Theology*, I.1.

[97] Ibid., II.32.

[98] Ibid. II.33.

Here we begin to see more clearly what is at stake in some modern versions of apophaticism which want only silence and indeterminacy. When even the "is" of the apophatic "God is not" must be in doubt, we are no longer dealing with apophaticism or even negation. We certainly cannot complete the *transitus* into God where something more excellent awaits. When Bonaventure closes Collation II by concluding that "Love is always preceded by negation," he offers not the certainty of a hyper-cataphatic proposition about God but a qualitative naming of the ratio of the Divine-creature relationship.[99] Knowing this love beyond negation increases rather than dispels the paradoxical mystery of what we may not know and say of a God beyond knowledge.

When Bonaventure returns to St. Francis in Section Three of Chapter Seven of the *Itinerarium*, he offers a human instantiation of this paradoxical *transitus*. He points to Francis as the "example of perfect contemplation. . . so that through him, more by example than by word, God might invite all truly spiritual men to this kind of passing over and spiritual ecstasy."[100] The role of Francis as exemplar offers us another perfect paradox of Bonaventure's apophasis. As the precursor to long quotations of Pseudo-Dionysius' paradoxes about brilliant darkness, Bonaventure presents a visible human—an exemplar who is therefore susceptible to very concrete modes of knowledge and knowing—as the example for the ecstatic passing over. However, Bonventure is also clear that this is something communicated/exchanged not by words but "more by example."

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[99] Ibid

[100] Ibid., VII.3 (112-113)

Accordingly, Francis gives us knowledge of the paradigmatic *itinerarium*, but it is a way that we may follow—no more imprisoned within intellectual concepts and propositions than is an actual road or ladder. With Francis as exemplar for both the valuing of the material, knowable, sensible world and the passing over into the contemplative beyond, Bonaventure demonstrates the harmonization of the "high epistemology" of the knowledge of God through vestiges in creation with the apophaticism of Pseudo-Dionysius. In the two quotations from *Mystical Theology* which make up most of Chapter Seven, Section Five, Bonaventure first emphasizes the apophatic presentation of God in His essence and then what is required by the human seeker to "ascend to the superessential ray of the divine darkness."[101] In the final section, we find further apophatic reversals in his admonitions to seek "grace not instruction, desire not understanding. . . darkness not clarity, not light but the fire that totally inflames and carries us into God by ecstatic unctions and burning affections."[102]

By seeking the fire, the source of light, rather than the light, Bonaventure signals a slight modification of Pseudo-Dionysius who, at the end of *Mystical Theology*, leaves us with an abstract language of pure negating paradox about the "the perfect and unique Cause of all things."[103] Most important, Bonaventure tells us that our *itinerarium* ends in union with the crucified Christ. Because some One is there in the darkness and silence, we are in relation and know via means other than our intellect. Only then do we understand most fully that the cataphatic concepts and language which led us to that

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[101] Ibid., VII.5. Quoting Pseudo-Dionysius, *Mystical Theology*, I,1.

[102] Ibid., 7.6 (115).

[103] *Mystical Theology*, V.

silence, while true as it pertains to our relationship, are "a lie" with regard to God in Himself. However, it is also in the silence that we realize that the truth of the relationship between creature and Creator, the ordered *ratio* of existence itself, is the highest knowledge we may know and a real knowing of God.

Hierarchizing the Soul: A Journey through Three Ways into Ethics

As noted earlier in the discussion of hierarchy, the basic definition of hierarchy referred to an order or power, to knowledge, and to action. Having discussed the order, we move now to discuss the role of knowledge and action in the hierarchization of the soul. As the soul becomes hierarchized or contemplative, it is conformed and harmonized with the divine hierarchy such that it may see "the sphere of the universe described."[104] It is "absorbed" in the "supersubstantial radiation. . . through a transformation of the mind in God."[105] That which was created (emanation) lives into the ordering modeled in and by its exemplar (exemplarism) and, by and through the cosmic Exemplar, is brought to more perfect, harmonized, relation with God (consummation and return). As we discuss this transformation, we will keep in mind the question of models for training and practice that cultivate progress toward such a cosmically holy goal.

In his introduction to a volume of spiritual writings, Edward Coughlin surveys the most crucial texts in order to present a detailed overview of Bonaventure's anthropology, with special attention to the function and capacities of the soul. Here we find the same triad of memory, understanding (*intelligentia*), and will familiar from Augustine and others, and described with the Trinitarian analogy of "generating mind, the word, and

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[104] *Hex.*, XX.8.

[105] Ibid.

love." Furthermore, memory, understanding, and will are "consubstantial, coqual and coeval, and interpenetrate each other."[106] In several texts, he gives accounts in varying detail of the function, subdivisions, and interrelations of the powers of the soul.

However, Bonaventure's "systematic" efforts are aimed more at the consequences of the "tendency to rectitude" which remain in the soul despite the devastation of sin.[107] In the Prologue to his Commentary on Book II of the Sentences, he notes that we "lost the habit but not the appetite for rectitude. Thus humankind lost its 'likeness,' but retained its image."[108] To hierarchize the soul, then, is to veer back toward the original likeness – a task I will argue is best described as harmonization. As noted earlier , this is accomplished in three ways: purgation or purification, illumination, and perfection. Bonaventure assumes that we begin in a state of disorder or dis-harmony with the order or harmony within which we were originally created.

In the Purgative Way, we must continually purify ourselves of various kinds of disorder via an internal "accusation" with regard to negligence, disordered desire, and the choice of evil.[109] This is in part a quest for "True Knowledge of the Self" to "discuss, examine, and look carefully" at all our "defects. . . customary habits" and other

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[106] *Itin.*, III.5, and Coughlin, F. Edward, "Introduction" in *Works of St. Bonaventure: Writings on the Spiritual Life*, Saint Bonaventure, NY: The Franciscan Institute, 2006. 9.

[107] For some reason, Coughlin, among others, seems determined to minimize Bonaventure's unflinching account of the substantive effects of sin—even to the extent of ascribing his assumption "that the soul needs to be cleansed, strengthened, and uplifted" to Bonaventure's "medieval understanding"!

[108] *Prologue, Commentary on Book II of the Sentences.,* Trans. Girard Etzkorn, in *Writings on the Spiritual Life*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), 13.

[109] See *The Threefold Way*, Trans. Girard Etzkorn, in *Writings on the Spiritual Life*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), fn 26, 95, regarding the definition of *nequitia* as the failure to choose the good, right and just in favor of the morally worthless – which Bonaventure sees as a failure of power or will.

disordered affections and behavior.[110] Bonaventure instructs us that we can cooperate with grace to accomplish purgation by the cultivation of virtues via "a variety of spiritual exercises through which the 'eye of one's heart' may be purified, one's mental powers may be sharpened, one's understanding be expanded."[111]

When we move later to examine Bonaventure's account of the virtues, we will find a consistent characterization of virtues as helping the soul bend back toward, or become harmonious with the original likeness. Accordingly, Bonaventure writes in the *Breviloquium*: "Hence, the grace that makes pleasing branches out in the habits of the virtues, which rectify the soul; into those of the gifts [of the Holy Spirit], which advance it; and into those of the beatitudes, which bring it to perfection."[112]

In the Illuminative Way, we seek the truth via the imitation of Christ, always seeking "the highest and most spiritual understanding of all things and choose a pattern of life in conformity with Christ."[113] While this stage involves the *transitus* into the mystical apophatic which I detail below, we must recognize that the mind is not annihilated when it journeys into God. Furthermore, the mind that journeys into the apophatic union with God does not cease its involvement with cataphatic knowledge and, in fact, would re-engage the cataphatic in new and enhanced ways because of the sort of knowing that comes with apophatic union. The knowledge gained during this illumination is not mere propositional data, but a combination of knowledge (*scientia*) and understanding

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[110] *On the Perfection of Life Addressed to the Sisters*, Trans. Girard Etzkorn, in *Writings on the Spiritual Life*, (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 2006), I.1.

[111] Coughlin, 50. See also *Perfection*, I.5.

[112] *Breviloquium*, V.3, 184. Coughlin's fn 191, 52 puts it this way: "the cardinal virtues order the soul toward its end, rectify its affective dispositions, and heal (cleanse) all of the soul's powers."

[113] Coughlin, 54.

(*intelligentia*) that leads to true wisdom (*sapientia*). As any careful reader of Bonaventure's *Itinerarium* will remember, he begins and ends the journey with the admonition that all our study, reading, and investigation must be joined with, and ultimately rejected in favor of, unction, grace, wonder, joy, groaning prayer, piety, and a burning desire.[114] Coughlin summarizes this dynamic of the Illuminative Way by noting that "the struggle to know and understand must be pursued with the intention of arousing affective desire for ultimate Truth and Goodness." This will also "incline a person to live in conformity with what is believed, understood, and loved."[115]

With the soul thus aware of and being continually purged of its failings and weaknesses, and striving toward an integrated quest for an affectively-inspiring knowledge, it is empowered for the kind of meditation that focuses on continued purgation and illumination, along with Scripture, human deeds, and divine acts. This seemingly overwhelming task is only possible because, again cooperating with grace, "Our entire soul must concentrate on this sort of meditation, by using all its powers; namely, reason, synderesis, conscience, and will."[116] Bonaventure describes this well-ordered, properly harmonized soul performing these meditative steps for each of the Three Ways thus: "reason by gathering together forms the proposition; synderesis by sensing [correctly] offers the definition; conscience by witnessing draws the conclusion; the will by choosing provides the solution."[117]

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[114] *Itin.*, Prologue, 4 and VII, 6.

[115] Coughlin, 55.

[116] *The Threefold Way*, I.18-19.

[117] *The Threefold Way*, I.19.

Isolated from its rich context, this summary of the roles of the soul's powers can be misunderstood and misrepresented as a "flow-chart" for a medieval proposition based decision-process ethical model similar to those of modernity. The crucial difference of course, even if one were to take the Three Ways out of context, is that Bonaventure's ethical itinerarium assumes an anthropology defined by an account of creation via Christocentric exemplarism. The hierarchized soul is a miraculously complex series of interrelated faculties and capacities which, through the actions of grace and spiritual and intellectual disciplines, is steadily being "un-bent," conformed to, or rather tuned and harmonized with the divine exemplar via the constantly mediating presence and power of Christ.

From "our side" of the relationship, we engage knowledge of Scripture, tradition (especially in the form of theological discourse), the examples of the saints, information about the natural world, the promptings of synderesis and conscience, and strive to follow the disciplines which cultivate the habits of the virtues. At the same time, there is an affective and intuitive dimension at play, the training of which is the *telos* of the more conscious side of hierarchization. We know that our appetites and judgment are being shaped— perhaps the most basic goal of Aristotle's version of virtues ethics—by a steady re-tuning of our desires to be drawn into the right relationship of harmony with the good.

Conclusion: Illumination Beyond Enlightenment

Summarizing the hierarchization of the soul through the Three Ways serves as an obvious transition to the discussion in Chapter Six of how Bonaventure offers a constructive model for a contemporary theological ethics informed by a thoroughgoing apophaticism. However, we may first end this chapter by noting the degree to which

every aspect of Bonaventure's thought seems to harmonize—or synthesize, or lead into—every other aspect. The most important aspect of this harmony, the relational ordering of Bonaventure's thought, is that its source, and contingency, is found not in a predetermined commitment to systematization but rather in its recognition of an existential, cosmic contingency and ordering.

When considered as a potential solution to the dilemma posed by "the problem of God" in modern and postmodern thought, Bonaventure's harmony offers the great benefit of addressing the same questions and problems from outside of the parameters of the Kantian frame. This is particularly important when we consider that, in light of a clear understanding of the metaphysical framework and nuanced relationship between catapahtic and apopahtic in Bonaventure's thought about God, the spectre of ontotheology as defined and rejected by Kant and Heidegger does not trouble him. Ultimately, the harmonious relationship of the apophatic and cataphatic in Bonaventure's thought is a function of an anti-ontotheological account of God and his Christocentric, and therefore relational-centric, account of metaphysical order. While quite clearly insisting that God is not a being, or even in the same order as created being, Bonaventure's metaphysics insist that the creation by this God necessarily bears witness to Him. While quite clearly insisting that Scripture, without becoming idolatrous, reveals true, reliable knowledge of God, Bonaventure's metaphysics insist that our highest knowing of God is not knowledge or mastery.

From Bonaventure's perspective, it would be absurd to speak of a purely regulative, formal function for God while denying any reliable particular knowledge of (at least) whether or not this God regulates and forms according to an order in which

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harmonious relationality is the template. Similarly, it would be absurd to hold as the only reliable and true statement about God that we must remain uncertain and silent. For Bonaventure, the regulative logical function of God and the character of apophatic silence only exist because this is a God who makes Himself susceptible to our knowing.

Bonaventure quite clearly shares with Kant and postmodern thinkers, as well as with Clement, the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius, the earnest concern for recognizing and articulating the limits of knowledge and language about God. His approach, however, grows out of a tradition which cannot accept the easier option of rejecting entirely, bracketing out, or relegating knowledge and language to a separate realm of total uncertainty, impractical speculation, or undecidability. The task set for Bonaventure requires the more difficult explanation of how we may know and speak truth of an unknowable God whose truth transcends our minds and language. Thus Bonaventure arrives at his account of both the cataphatic and apophatic speaking (and ceasing to speak) about a Creator who is harmonious in Himself and created through and according to His own fundamental harmony of Persons. Accordingly, Bonaventure describes the cataphatic and apophatic as harmonious—both are part of the order, or music, of creation.

This does not mean that Bonaventure has simply shifted the grounding claim of a hidden "super-affirmation" from the more familiar attributes of God to a ground of "divine harmony"—but it does mean that he insists that we know at least that God's existence, creation, and revelation all have the quality of ordered relationality. We cannot know the nature of this order, much less claim to know with certainty the structure or

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precise development of its music, but we know that it bears the character or tonality of its creator and exemplar.

Bonaventure's Christocentric exemplarism offers an apophaticism that naturally issues into a virtues ethic and a virtues ethics which is, as we shall see in Chapter Six, governed by and generative of a type of "apophatic moral vision." His account of apophaticism recognizes a non-ontotheological God beyond being who creates us within an order centered on relationship to Him such that our knowledge of him draws us to a knowing beyond knowledge—a listening to and recognition of and attraction toward harmony, the sound of relationship, even when we cannot discern, understand, or articulate accurately the individual "notes" which sound this harmony.

The incarnational emphasis in this Christocentric exemplarism concentrates the knowing-without-knowledge aspect of this order: the transcendent and unknowable becomes immanent and knowable as one of us, bringing a co-incidence of metaphysics and ethics, revealing the oft separated disciplines as harmonious (perhaps even contrapuntally so). Furthermore, and whether or not Bonaventure thinks of it as a kind of apophatic restraint, his emphasis on the centrality of humility provides an ethical governor parallel to the metaphysical governor of his thoroughgoing apophaticism. The holiness Bonaventure assumes at the beginning of the *Itinerarium* and reiterates throughout *The Three Ways* cannot issue in the triumphalist certainty which the postmoderns fear. We shall explore the constructive possibilities which emerge from these consequences of Bonaventure's thought in the next and final chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

Knowing, Speaking, and Becoming in a Pregnant Silence

Night had been like that: a risk, the distance
from evening to waking a raised conductor's wand:

the entire orchestra holding its breath,
a rustle of movement settling:
the reed tongued wet, the pattern, whispered

paisley, thinning: an old desire
swept up into his mouth, sent out: a quaver: over shapeless air.
—Lyrae Van-Clief Stefanon, "Come Sunday"

As a sweet chant results from a great number of voices united in a certain
proportion and harmony, so also a spiritual harmony pleasing to the Most
High comes forth from the harmony of the love of many.
—Bonaventure, *Collationes In Hexaemeron*

In this final chapter, I offer a few suggestions for how Bonaventure might guide

contemporary theology toward a faithful and constructive participation in both

apophaticism and virtues ethics. While drawing from him in both explicit and implicit

ways, this constructive proposal is not an attempt to use selectively or to update

Bonaventure for twenty-first century purposes. It is, rather, an effort to follow his

Christocentric template for a dynamic, interpenetrating account of the apophatic and

virtues ethics. Just as a modern composer might observe the general rules of counterpoint

demonstrated in "The Well-Tempered Klavier" without "applying" or "updating" J.S.

Bach for contemporary music, I seek here to follow the logic underlying Bonaventure's

thought based on the judgment that his "voicing" of apophaticism and virtue is, and

encourages further, a faithful and fruitful harmonization.

The goal of my critique of contemporary apophatic thought and its ethical consequences is to draw apophaticism into a more hopeful, participatory, harmonious relationship with an ethics whose grounding in harmony truly embraces the other. I contend that this embrace requires acknowledgment of both the limitless mystery and the knowledge of God necessary for responsibility and charity. Only with such acknowledgement can we be oriented into the awareness of contingency that allows the harmonization of humility and certainty which must constitute both metaphysics and ethics. Knowledge and experience of contingency, which Bonaventure expresses in terms of a polyphonic humility, is a crucial consequence of Christocentric exemplarism and the most important aspect of our knowing of the Holy Other through ongoing participation in His mysterious music.

Recapitulation

In the previous chapters, I have focused critical attention on the absence or insufficiency of attention to ethics across the spectrum of contemporary apophaticism. In some cases, this involves deficiencies in the account of apophaticism itself which preclude the development of coherent approaches to moral formation. In other cases, the authors in question have either misjudged, justified, or ignored destructive consequences for ethics. My approach in this chapter will be 1) to re-state the contemporary challenge of articulating an ethics mindful of and consistent with a serious apophaticism and then 2) to develop constructive possibilities for contemporary theology suggested by my analysis of Bonaventure's harmonious account of apophaticism and virtues within the ordered relationality of hierarchy and exemplarism.

While this constructive sketch is distinctly theological, my hope is that such an approach can offer something even to a-theological postmodern thought—if only by demonstrating the elements in Bonaventure's thought which postmodern thought would have to supply from its own resources in order for apophaticism and virtues ethics, or any ethics which seeks to form habits of character, to harmonize. Central to this is my contention that one cannot separate form from content in these matters—or rather that knowing and imitating form based on relationality requires knowledge and endorsement of content. As such, a-theological attempts at a purely formal transcendent based on Christian expressions and tradition of apophaticism cannot cohere if they also attempt to draw from that transcendent some basis for hope, the Good, ethical responsibility, and other relational phenomena. These attempts jettison the very things that allow Christian apophaticism its orientation toward hope, the Good, and ethical responsibility.

To extend the musical analogy already in use in previous chapters, we can imagine someone attempting to use the classical sonata-allegro form while simultaneously insisting that he will reject any of the traditional "content" with respect to harmony, key changes, structure, etc.[1] The problem for this experiment is that ordered relationships—transitions between major and minor, between tonic and dominant key centers, among lengths of component sections, rhythmic modulations, etc.—help constitute the form itself, and one cannot order relationships without the "content" which

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[1] The fact that there is great flexibility of application of the sonata-allegro form (as with symphonic form, etc.) even within classical music, such that Mozart and others gradually "break the rules" to varying extents, only serves to strengthen the point here. Even variations on the form are still recognizable as that form because the patterns of relationships are determinative (rather than strict adherence to a formula or system). If one uses drastically different relationships and orders them very differently, a different form results.

both makes relationships intelligible as one type or another and makes them susceptible to particular identifiable orderings.

While one could certainly create something quite different from a classical piece of music with the intent to violate all previous rules of content while following form, the piece simply could not maintain its formal description without continuing to "borrow" from, and therefore substantially follow—even if only "negatively"—the "content" of the classical model. The incoherence of the musical equivalent of the postmodern attempt to take only formal aspects of apophatic transcendence—a claim to compose something in the sonata-allegro form while rejecting even the possibility of knowing enough harmony to distinguish tonic from dominant, major from minor, etc.—helps us to see the challenge for postmodern a-theological apophaticism that aspires to any ethics.

Derrida and Caputo attempt to achieve an account of apophatic transcendence in which even Kant's merely regulative and speculative God or noumenal source of duty "say too much" while they simultaneously appeal to a hope for justice or responsibility emerging from greater attention to their version of transcendence. This is the hope underlying the creed of *tout autre est tout autre*—that the surrender of all claims to certainty, determinative authority, or control over even the knowing of any and every other will yield a humbled ethic of responsibility purified of the influence of triumphalist metaphysics grounded in certainty about God. However, as I have noted before, there can be no harmony among that which is entirely and undecidably other, so the nature of the hoped for postmodern relationality seems hopelessly cacophonous. In the case of justice, Kearney's main guiding hermeneutic, the postmodern thinkers surveyed here cannot account for why a just *polis*, community, or State—the good ordering of social or

political relationships—can possibly result from the rejection of all decidability concerning order and knowledge of absolute alterity beyond the fact of its role as the "basic unit" for human awareness of self and others. This is to declare hope for harmony while insisting that all talk of theory is idolatry and that all one may know about different notes is that one is not another.

In some ways, this provides the mirror image to MacIntyre's framing allegory in *After Virtue* (modeled upon Walter Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz*) about the incoherence of contemporary moral discourse which merely uses the "content" of well-developed traditions of morality while severing it from its practiced forms and philosophical and theological context.[2] The postmodern thinkers attempt to separate form from content without recognizing that they are condemning their thought to be, to use MacIntyre's diagnosis, "parasitic upon" the content they either reject as untrue or to relegate to the realm of the impossible-to-know-if-true. Even Marion's theological account risks undermining itself by relegating the "content," in the form of the cataphatic, to the realm of the perpetually uncertain while going even further than Derrida and Caputo in endorsing quite beautifully the "formal" aspects of the Eucharist.

Marion seems simultaneously to recognize these problems and to invest even more fully in the flight from cataphatic "content." As noted already in Chapter Four, he attempts to reserve space within postmodern phenomenology for something as "content-laden" as the peculiarly Christian account of charity/love enacted in the Eucharist by

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[2] Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (3rd Edition), (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007). He presents the allegory itself in Chapter One, "A Disquieting Suggestion." For the most succinct, though mythologized, presentation of the background events in the novel itself, see Walter Miller, *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1959 (2007)), 62-67.

categorizing Christ's call to faithful love as a "radical pragmatic usage" of language.[3] However, this variation of the pragmatic anti-cataphatic— love as "neither speaking nor negating anything about anything, but acting on the other, and allowing the other to act on me"—while perhaps avoiding Hegel, remains within the Kantian frame.[4]

Where Kant may be interpreted as aligning the noumenal and "practical" via the concern for how we constitute an autonomous self (over against the phenomenal awareness of and concern for others), it seems Marion's "pragmatic" remains mired in the same subjective orientation by rejecting all knowledge and language about the transcendent ordering and qualifying of this action. Furthermore, he, like many proponents of the recent *sola practica* strain of MacIntyrean virtues ethics, cannot appeal solely to this anti-cataphatic approach to explain why the "speculative" metaphysical reasoning behind the development of Christian practices like Eucharist, and therefore the practices themselves, should be considered valid in light of his phenomenological critique of theology. By rejecting all "decidability" about God, speaking or negating "anything about anything," as idolatrous (by Christian and Jewish standards) and threateningly triumphalist (by some late 20th century and 21st century political and cultural standards), Derrida, Caputo, and, to some extent, Marion exclude their accounts of the apophatic and of ethics from true relationality. Without at least the certainty that there is order, there is no relationality other than the thin recognition of simple alterity.

Accordingly, by demanding that all we may say for certain is that the world of other people and "God," if you will, consists of "entirely not me" and "me," the account

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[3] See Chapter Four, 33, citing Jean-Luc Marion, "The Unspoken: Apophasis and the Discourse of Love," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association*, Vol. 76, 2003, 39-56.

[4] Ibid., 52.

of relationality that emerges is a kind of neo-Cartesian variation on Kant: God remains speculative and un-speakable, and, in place of a transcendent source for a call to duty, ethics can claim only an undecidable notion of response to others about whom we may know only that they are entirely other to ourselves. Insisting on a humbled subjectivity rooted in the recognition that we only arrive at ourselves via relationality merely offers a thin substitute for the contingency of created-ness. In place of the *imago Dei* we have an amendment to the *cogito* consisting of an irrelevant parenthetical preface and, in Turner's judgment, an "ethically offensive" conclusion: "(there you are, and you are not me), I think, therefore I am . . . and since you are entirely other, this "I" is unchanged, and certainly not determined by you, about whom I remain completely uncertain."

Of course, every challenge that theology offers the postmodern account may be avoided entirely by rejecting any account of God and embracing a "pure" atheist account in which any claims to any order is simply ruled out from the start. I do not intend to argue that Derrida and others cannot have their apophaticism. They may certainly go on denying—being troubled even by the words they must use to deny and to identify what they deny. But it is to argue that they have not met the challenge of explaining how hope and justice and responsibility might grow in the *khōra* of pure undecidability, much less emerge out of it capable of speaking to us, being understood by us, and pointing us toward their ends.

The interpretation of the Christian apophatic tradition I have offered here, with Bonaventure as its exemplary voice, insists that apophaticism is not merely a limitation of language or knowledge or certainty. It is a conceptual and linguistic recognition of the contingency of human existence. For Christian theology, the apophatic is intimately tied

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to creatureliness: the limitations of language and knowing are logically necessary for creatures attempting to know their creator. However, even the atheist appropriations are forced to give explanations that only appear to avoid embracing metaphysics via an alternate vocabulary specifically designed to assert the denial of metaphysics.

Indeed, postmodern apophaticism sets out to deny traditional transcendence while gesturing, and only gesturing, at a paradox: the regulative formal function of the Kantian noumenal transcendent is now located in a purely immanent, which is to say materalist, subjective interiority known only through the otherness of other humans. Rather than the transcendent Son bridging the gap by becoming an immanent human other, postmodern thought simultaneously denies any true transcendent (in the old metaphysical sense), insists, in Derrida's case, that other humans are absolutely transcendent (*tout autre...*), and then posits a regulative formal function for ethics in the form of an always pre-existent responsibility to these absolutely others. Humans become like God at last—taking the place of both the transcendent, wholly other and the bearers of a self-generating duty to bridge the gap between themselves and the transcendent.

As an alternative to these interpretations and approaches, I will offer next a sketch of some possibilities suggested by Bonaventure's competing accounts of the apophatic, cataphatic, exemplaristic metaphysics, and the virtues. While these brief constructive suggestions cannot address all possible problems, questions, or rebuttals, I contend that they do contribute a legitimate and faithful approach for Christian theologians as well as a charitable challenge for non-Christian thinkers concerned with the relationship between apophaticism and ethics.

Resolutions: Silence and Praise, Humility and Practices of Hope

My case for Bonaventure as a guide into a contemporary theological expression of apophaticism and virtues ethics rests upon the recognition that his account of both metaphysics and ethics begins in and maintains an emphasis on humility. When expressed in metaphysics, his Christocentric exemplarism highlights the contingency of creatureliness both as simple fact and in the account of the ordered relationality of all reality in hierarchy. Furthermore, this already contingent metaphysics must always recognize that the orientation toward and possibility for realizing harmonious relationality within the created order comes only because the trinitarian Creator, the "fundamental" of creation, is Himself harmony. Rather than expressing self-satisfying pride in systematic perfection or hierarchical thoroughness, a true metaphysics is humble—knowing that any right-ordering and fittingness is entirely a function of the contingency of all creation upon its Exemplar.

Furthermore, the apophaticism explicated and analyzed in Chapter Five demands an added layer of humility by emphasizing the limits of human knowledge and language. As I argued above, certainty is reserved for claims that concepts and language revealed by God point us to the truth about God and for claims that our ability to know and to speak about God is based on the ordered relationality of reality. We hear the harmony, the sound of relationship, without being able to explain, to describe accurately (or even to hear all of) the "notes," or to comprehend the principles guiding the ordering. Nevertheless, an apophatic metaphysics of Christocentric exemplarism recognizes that a

precondition for harmony, and thus for rationality, is a kind of knowing-within and knowing-of order.

When Bonaventure gives his most thorough and unique account of metaphysics, he guides us to this relational aspect of the discipline, rooting it in strongly exemplarist language about Christ. *Collationes In Hexaemeron* begins with a repetition similar to what Bonaventure's multiple invocations of peace in the Prologue to the *Itinerarium*. But in *Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure identifies one aspect of the character of the peace that Francis taught and preached: it is the harmony expected of the Church in response to its call to wisdom and understanding. The peace of Francis invoked in the *Itinerarium* was, of course, never a neo-Platonic stasis, but a call to make the pilgrim journey to holiness and wisdom which ultimately leads to the peace of mystical union via being crucified with Christ. However, in the context of creation appropriate to the *Hexaemeron*, Bonaventure elaborates on peace as a harmonious relationship to the order of God.

When he specifies that the proper audience for his spiritual teaching about the six days of creation is the Church, Bonaventure makes the point that "the Church" properly refers to "a union of rational men living in harmony and uniformity through harmonious and uniform observance of divine Law, harmonious and uniform adherence to divine peace, [and] harmonious and uniform concelebration of divine praise."[5] While he uses versions of the word *concord*, rather than *harmonia*, in this opening section, the context—as well as the etymology of *concord*—lends itself to the standard English translation "harmonious" in order to communicate the sense of multiple hearts and minds joined together. Bonaventure insists that those in the Church must observe the Law, adhere to peace, and praise together in a manner that is harmonious, with respect to the

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[5] *Hexaemeron*, I.2.

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nature of the participation of many in one "music," and uniform, with respect to the object and the precise use of language and thought.

Appropriately, Bonaventure shifts to the specific language of music when he explains more thoroughly his third definition of the Church, concerning those who praise: "As a sweet chant results from a great number of voices united in certain proportion and harmony [*harmonia*], so also a spiritual harmony pleasing to the Most High comes forth from the harmony of the love of many."[6] While we should not overstate the case here, and I do not suggest, despite Bonaventure's familiarity with Augustine's and Boethius' work on the philosophical and theological nature of musical proportion, that Bonaventure is proposing a theology of musical harmony. Nevertheless, his reliance on proportionality and logical, narrative, and perhaps "poetic" fittingness with regard to metaphysics provides him with both the inherent sense of order and the inherent humility of a theoretical foundation in relationality.[7]

Indeed, when Bonaventure offers to his audience the most frequently cited summary definition of metaphysics, he precedes it with the most stern warning against over-confident certainty or "triumphalism" imaginable. After cataloguing the several senses in which Christ is the Center and ultimate expression of all the God created and provides for us to know—again, summed up in Christ, the *Tree of Life* itself by which "we return to the very *fountain of life* and are revived in it"—Bonaventure reminds his audience that when "investigating beyond what is conceded to us, we fall from true

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[6] Ibid., I.5.

[7] This is why it should not seem surprising that Bonaventure presents a logic that is both partially generative of and consistent with a model of relational, humble metaphysics and ethics based on musical harmony more advanced than what he and other medievals would have known.

contemplation and taste of the forbidden *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*, as did Lucifer."[8]

Only after this reminder, which he repeats in various forms throughout his explication of Christocentric metaphysics, does Bonaventure define and commend thought and speech about God "in the order of essence" via contemplation of Christ, the Center "that produces knowledge": "Such is the metaphysical Center that leads us back, and this is the sum total of our metaphysics: concerned with emanation, exemplarity, and consummation, that is, illumination through spiritual radiations and return to the Supreme Being. And in this you will be a true metaphysician."[9]

Furthermore, whatever wisdom we may receive never ceases to invoke wonder rather than any sense of complacent, confident mastery, and one of the specific reasons to wonder is its expression of the same strange harmony of unity and multiplicity we find in the Trinity and Christ's two natures. Even those "true metaphysicians" find "wondrous" the beauty of Wisdom, "for at times it is uniform and at others manifold; at times it assumes every form, and at others none . . . uniform in the rules of divine Law, as manifold in the mysteries of divine Scripture, as assuming every form in the traces of the divine works, and as without any form in the elevations of divine raptures."[10] Indeed, even our ability to wonder, a goal far from triumphalist certainty, is completely contingent upon God rather than our own intellect or even affective powers. Part of the reconciliation effected in the Incarnation is that Christ, the Center, re-establishes the

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[8] *Hexaemeron*, I.17.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., II.8.

proper relational order of all creation: "He it is who restored the hierarchy of heaven, and that below heaven which had totally fallen."[11]

There are many more examples in the *Hexaemeron* of Bonaventure's emphasis on a metaphysics of contingency and order, marked by humility and governed by the same emphasis on the transcendence of intellect seen at the end of the *Itinerarium*, but we may conclude this section with one of his clearest statements of how even the "true metaphysician" must regard her understanding. [12] We know "something about God," when we see the vestiges of divine order in the created world such as "mode, species, and order" because these vestiges lead to a different, and apophatically paradoxical knowing—we are led "to that Wisdom in whom there is mode without qualification, number without quantity, and order without ordination."[13] Furthermore, the wisdom of "the supreme union of love" that "transcends every intellect and every science" comes only through grace.[14]

Here Bonaventure expresses most explicitly the centrality of humility as the only fitting response to the contingency of our knowledge of and participation in God. The contemplation of Christ the Center, the "operation that transcends every intellect" which constitutes metaphysics, "comes about through grace . . . And because this wisdom is attained only through grace, a wise writer attributes all hidden and unforeseeable things

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[11] Ibid., III.12.

[12] For other examples, see particularly the preliminary sections of *Hexaemeron* where Bonaventure is concerned to prepare his audience for the explication of the various visions concerning the mystical meaning of the Six Days. For example: II.16ff., as well as III.8 where he repeats the "every creature is a lie" emphasis addressed above in Chapter Five of the current study.

[13] *Hexaemeron*, II.23. Bonaventure is relying on Augustine's *De Nature Boni* for the categories of mode, species, and order.

[14] Ibid., II.30.

to the Holy Spirit and to the Word Himself, as having to be revealed by them."[15]

Although we then pass into the brilliant darkness in which Pseudo-Dionysius ends his

Mystical Theology, Bonaventure elaborates on both the brilliance and the darkness. Just

as at the conclusion of the *Itinerarium* the process of leaving behind intellect, sense, and

knowledge does not leave the soul alone in a wasteland but crucified with Christ and in a

state of sufficiency, the summit to which the soul is raised in the *Hexaemeron's*

metaphysical contemplation is a place of overflowing abundance: "It is called darkness

because it does not bear upon the intelligence, and yet the soul is supremely flooded with

light . . . since it is not intellect that can go [into the presence of God], but the heart."[16]

The heart or "affective power" is able to know this love, a relational and therefore

rational knowing, that the reason of intellect cannot know. Yet knowing this ordered and

ordering love affects the reason and intellect, perhaps primarily through the humbling

reminder that the intellect cannot know beyond the "fact" of harmony itself—hearing the

sound of relationship without grasping as knowledge the elements of that sound.

Furthermore, the intellect must be transformed by this revelation: to know that all it

knows must be negated, and that the knowing of the heart eventually goes further.

Bonaventure sums up this harmony of metaphysical cataphatic and apophatic by

reiterating that, in traveling this *via negativa*, "I do not deprive God of what is His or

within Him, but I attribute it in a higher and better manner than I am able to

understand."[17]

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[15] Ibid., II.29-30.

[16] Ibid., II.32.

[17] Ibid., II.33.

Yet, in those same sections, Bonaventure prepares us to recognize the crucial role of practical, even "personal," effort as participation in this journey toward wisdom.[18] The coincidence of metaphysics and concern for "form of life" that Hibbs finds in Aquinas is no less present in Bonaventure. As we have already seen in *The Three Ways*, the transformation and hierarchization of the soul is precisely where we hear most clearly Bonaventure's mystical harmonization of cataphatic and apophatic, metaphysical and ethical. While I have already pointed out the general consistency of this approach with virtues ethics, it remains for us to see how Bonaventure explains how the virtues are already part of the music even though significantly transposed from Aristotle's account. As with the humility inherent in a Christocentric exemplarist metaphysics, humility is central to a virtues ethics based in Christocentric exemplarism.

The Connection

As with other expressions of variations on cosmic exemplarism—neo-Platonisms, for example—there are consequences for the created order of the particular mode of emanation or creation in Christian exemplarism and hierarchy. I have argued that Bonaventure offers a unique and distinctly Christian exemplarism that opposes and avoids modern (Kantian) and postmodern concerns with grand metaphysical systems, and the basis for his account of the ethical implications establishes a similar character for his robust moral exemplarism. As we have seen, Bonaventure acknowledges an apophatic, mystical sensibility throughout every level of his description of the cosmos and the soul's journey within it. Fittingly, we may understand the connection—which, of course, is actually a recognition of harmonious whole rather than the construction of a conceptual

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[18] Ibid., II.30.

bridge—between an apophatic metaphysics and ethics, between metaphysics and practice, in narrative scriptural terms which also serve to highlight the development of Pseudo-Dionysius offered by Bonaventure.

Following Pseudo-Dionysius (and Nyssa, as well as the Victorines who follow Pseudo-Dionyisus in this allegory), Bonaventure sees Moses' encounters with God—especially his ascent up Mt. Sinai—as paradigmatic of the mystical ascent and ultimate encounter with the transcendent God. But where Pseudo-Dionysius stops in the moment of unknowing, silence, and brilliant darkness at the end of *Mystical Theology*, Bonaventure continues onward both in the story of Moses and the explication of its import for Christian thought and living. Unlike many of the postmodern readings, Bonaventure's harmonization of cataphatic and apophatic along with his care for a transformational ethic reflects more of Moses's story than what occurs on the mountaintop: after entering into the cloud of unknowing and darkness to encounter God, Moses comes down from the mountain. Moses descends from his encounter not in order to discourage all thought and speech about the God he now knows can never be truly be approached—even with respect to His name—in either thought or speech but carrying laws governing practical human behavior in light of claims of varying cataphaticism about and from the transcendent God. Furthermore, in the response to the golden calf we see the opposition to idolatry intensified at precisely the same time that the people are being called to a higher standard of ethical, relational expectation based on the—still incomplete, still mysterious—new knowledge of God.

We have seen that Bonaventure follows this narrative logic in the hierarchization of the soul via *The Three Ways,* and he pursues this line of thinking into the Aristotelian

virtues language consistent with his training.[19] One text in which Bonaventure makes precisely these links, between an apophasis of "the cloud" and the reliable knowledge of virtues, is *Hexaemeron* I, 31-33 while explaining Christ as the Fifth Center "in the order of moderation." He begins with the Aristotelian points we would expect: linking the moral good with moderation, moderation with virtue, and identifying virtue as the middle way. Bonaventure chooses Scriptural support that simultaneously emphasizes "central" and "middle" language as well as language of hiddenness.[20]

After comparing Moses' sojourn in the midst of a cloud on Sinai to Christ's ascension on or in a cloud, Bonaventure moves even further from Aristotle to state "the foundation of virtue is faith, and we place it as a center." Noting that faith as center ties it to Aristotle's ("the moralist") location of the center as "that which determines right reason," Bonaventure cites Ecclus. 50:6 comparing faith to "the morning star in the midst of a cloud."[21] In baptism, the Christian rises to this star; "He enters darkness, and this darkness of faith is accompanied by a mysterious light. . . Through it faith goes forward by rising to the practical virtues, as if reaching the foot of the mountain where Moses offered twelve sacrfices."[22] From here, Bonaventure links the "cleansing virtues" with

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[19] For discussion of the hierarchization of the soul in Bonaventure's complicated reading of the Six Days of Creation, see *Hexaemeron* XXII.34ff.

[20] *Hexaemeron*, I. 31-33. He may also have in mind, at least in the "poetically fitting" sense that Bonaventure often makes connections based on etymology, the passage from Luke 4 where the crowd tries to throw Jesus off a cliff, but he walks, unseen, through the midst of them and escapes.

[21] *Hexaemeron*, I, 33.

[22] Ibid.

Moses being at "mid-slope," and "the virtues of the cleansed soul as at the mountain's top, a place well suited to the contemplation of the exemplary virtues."[23]

In this extraordinary passage, Bonaventure has mirrored the same scriptural journey used by Pseudo-Dionysius in *Mystical Theology* which ends with the passage into "a brilliant darkness," an apophatic knowing beyond silence or word and beyond assertions and denials, in order to describe a progressive attainment of the hierarchy of the virtues.[24]

Throughout, we see the themes of clouds, hiddenness, darkness, and a light that does not cease to be mysterious even while serving as an image of faith: "this foundation. . . by which Christ is established in us."[25] Just as Bonaventure's extensive quoting and paraphrasing of Pseudo-Dionysius at the end of the *Itinerarium* hints at a knowing participation in something beyond sheer absence and indeterminate unknowability, his most developed apophaticism in *Hexaemeron* issues, not in super-essential cataphatic knowledge of an ontotheological God, but in the proper re-ordering, re-tuning of existence in accordance with the Divine harmony.

As I suggested above, Bonaventure's exemplarist metaphysic leads him naturally to connect something as seemingly mundane, or at least non-mystical, as the practice of the virtues with the highest and most mystical of all moments of his apophatic tradition. Rather than neo-Platonic emanations which underscore the lamentable influence of multiplicity diluting the One, Bonaventure's notion of exemplarist order retains the value

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[23] Ibid.

[24] *Mystical Theology*, V. After considering the interplay between narrating Moses' ascent and the explicit mention of entering darkness and encountering a mysterious light, it seems impossible that Bonaventure would have been unaware of both the echo of *Mystical Theology* interesting resonance he was creating by arriving at the virtues via the scriptural, structural paradigm of *Mystical Theology*.

[25] *Hexaemeron,* I, 33.

and connection of even the lowest of material objects to God. While, as we have seen above, still embracing the ineffable and unknowable mystery of God, Bonaventure nevertheless finds that practice and knowledge of the virtues help people to find and stay on the "straight path" of the *Itinerarium* and to participate in the *Reductio*.

Virtues as Apophatic Practices

For Bonaventure, then, the virtues function not less perfectly because revelation has supplanted them, making the practice of philosophical excellences obsolete, but more perfectly because Christ perfects the virtues themselves—redefining and reorienting the classical virtues and adding new, more perfect and perfecting virtues. When the soul moves to contemplate God in his image in Chapter Four of the *Itinerarium*, it is on account of the image of our soul being "clothed with the three theological virtues, by which the soul is purified, illumined and perfected."[26] Therefore, while Bonaventure reaffirms the practice of good habits,[27] the "middle ways" of various cardinal virtues such as temperance and fortitude,[28] he also transposes Aristotelian categories such that the particular justice of friendship is named as kindness,[29] and, most significantly, magnanimity is re-thought as humility.[30] Aristotle could only be speaking truth, reasons Bonaventure, if by the desire for honor, he means "honor of eternal things" such that one practices the virtue of the "great soul" by recognizing a Christocentric logic: "humility

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[26] *Itin.*, 4.3.

[27] *Hexaemeron*, V.2.

[28] Ibid., V.3 and 7.

[29] Ibid., V.9.

[30] Ibid., V.10.

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which despises the appearance of greatness and appreciates what seems small, but is great in reality."[31]

Bonaventure finds that the Philosophers were correct in assuming that the soul does rise to the heights of contemplation through the practice of the virtues, and, of course, that the perfected Christian practice of the virtues goes beyond the Philosophers.[32] However, the superiority of Christian wisdom is, once again, due precisely to its contingency, humility, and, ultimately, the apophatic quality of faith—itself yet another invocation of humility. The grace-granted theological virtue of faith is the medicine which both diagnoses and cures the disease corrupting our ability to practice the highest virtues perfectly. Faith, which "heals the soul by placing the roots of merits in God," not only heals and changes the soul, it "straightens and ordains" that which is bent and disordered.[33] Yet, although it is a theological virtue, and can be practiced, faith remains something that inspires humility, not pride. It comes exclusively from God, "goes beyond every reason and investigation of the mind," and, like hope, its merit "is founded on non-seeing."[34]

Even the greatest of these theological virtues "must be healed"—but our love, which alone can heal the affective dispositions, can itself only be healed by divine love. Love, *caritas*, "is the end and form of all the virtues" and is "the gold" which must clothe

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid., V.33.

[33] Ibid., VII.13.

[34] Ibid., VIII.2-3.

all virtues.[35] Thus all classical and cardinal virtues must be healed and perfected by the theological virtues, and the theological virtues themselves are only accessible to humans as contingent upon their own healing and grace-giftedness. The most Christian of all virtues exist in a harmony of cataphatic and apophatic. We practice faith and hope in things unseen, yet our souls and virtues are straightened and ordered. Love must heal and adorn all the virtues and affections, lest they remain tuneless noise like a clanging gong, but its power is contingent upon a continual healing by God's love.

Humility in Silence and Praise: A Servant's Contingent Confidence

With Christ again the center, source, and form for love, the highest virtue, we turn finally to Bonaventure's treatment of humility among the virtues. While we have already seen that he transposes Aristotle's magnanimity into a properly ordered humility with regard to all that is not eternal, Bonaventure reserves a broader and more fundamental role for humility in his virtues ethic. Once again, he follows the Exemplar, the Tree of Life himself, and notes "the humility of his mode of life" as demonstrated by his obedience to the requirement of circumcision—a humility to even the fleshiest of laws. Thus, along with the mystical wonder that accompanies contemplation of His kenotic Incarnation, we see in his obedience to law that He took "his beginning from humility, which is the root and guardian of all virtues."[36] This is a multilayered and very particular exemplary humility which marks all of his life, teaching, and self-sacrifice.

In this context, we see again the crucial importance of the cataphatic for any ethical plea for humility and responsiveness to justice and alterity. Over against an

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[35] Ibid., VII.14-15. For more detail on Bonaventure's engagement with Aristotle and the particular transformation or replacement of each virtue, see *Hexaemeron* V-VII.

[36] *Tree of Life*, 5.

abstract kenosis or entirely undecidable version of responsibility, our self-emptying is good, or ethical, or noble, only because and only when it is tune with the specific "music" of Christ's exemplary "pouring out." His demonstration of perfect justice, submitting to baptism by John, emerges from his humility—which is adorned with three other virtues giving witness to the specific character of this exemplary humility: poverty, patience, and obedience.[37] As a result, his resistance to temptation and endurance of suffering inform our knowledge of these virtues, giving witness to their decidedly specific character which is meant to "arouse the souls of the faithful to strive toward perfection and strengthen them to endure hardships."[38]

Virtues ethics, then, inasmuch as the excellences of the virtues correspond to an unbending or tuning of the body and soul toward the Good by which they were made, are the proper mode for thinking, acting, and teaching about the journey of the soul into God. Rooted in and guarded by humility, we seek to practice and build habits of being in right relationship—being in tune, harmonizing—with the one who enables us to hear the orderliness of His creation in the first place, makes us aware of both the relationality inherent in reality and our dissonance with its proper order, and aids us in recognizing and pursuing this proper ordering Himself by performing rightly a harmonious human life.

When Bonaventure adds the crucial element of a direct appeal to humility as the "root and guardian of all virtues" we find a confluence of the exemplarist logic already at work in both metaphysics and ethics and in the specific context of Bonaventure's historical moment as leader of the Franciscans during a time of multiple controversies. Where ethics rooted in the Aristotelian account of the virtues is adopted and developed

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[37] Ibid., 8-9.

[38] Ibid., 10.

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for Christian thought and practice, one must ask whether the virtues become the property of those practicing and being formed into them. In Bonaventure's explanation, even the humility which roots and guards all virtues is a contingent humility modeled ultimately upon Christ, but also upon purely human exemplars like Francis and Mary. We need their examples, perhaps like the section leaders in an orchestra, to guide our steps toward more faithful tuning and harmony with the music in which we all participate.

As noted at the end of Chapter Five, St. Francis becomes, for Bonaventure and the Franciscans, the "bridge to the bridge" or an exemplar of the Exemplar. For Bonaventure, Francis' experience is definitive and determinative: such an *itinerarium* marks the wayfarer in a way peculiar to the God encountered on this journey. The stigmata of Francis witnesses, which is itself a form of knowing beyond intellect, to the Presence and Persons who are beyond knowing and saying. The marks of Christ are themselves a mystery, revealing something about the hidden God—doing so in a manner which is at once inexplicable and yet obvious to the glance, which points to the paradoxical manner of revelation in the Incarnate, suffering, dying God-Man. Francis's response is exemplary in its focus on humility, specifically in the form of poverty, and peace.

Where we might loosely characterize Francis's encounter with and response to the mysteries of Christ as external—he sees the vision and his stigmata, he directs his faith, hope, and love in humble service and teaching to others—we may learn from Mary the inward focused part of this theme. She encounters Christ first within her as a direct consequence of her humble assent to God. She sees nothing of this mystery even as it grows within her, and even after the birth of Jesus, when she can see and touch him, we learn that while angels and shepherds alike proclaim and wonder at the mystery, she

keeps or treasures these things in her heart, pondering them as they continue to grow inside her.

Rather than a womb which must always remain empty, waiting and filled only with primordial potential, we find in Bonaventure a metaphysics and an ethics centered upon transcendent and unknowable fullness. Rather than a notion of relationality and responsibility which cannot transcend the fundamental aloneness of one to whom all others are entirely other, Bonaventure embraces the fundamental harmony of reality in the Trinitarian One who becomes entirely with and in us. In so doing, Bonaventure helps us to break out of the Kantian frame and its postmodern intensifications in order to recover a metaphysics and an ethics expressive of both apophatic wonder and humility as well as care for the re-tuning and proper harmonization of human "forms of life" with the exemplary life.

This is the fitting silence, then, for the unknowable knowing of the God beyond or without being. Rather than the silence of one who is blind and knows nothing and no one to speak of, this is the silence of a man who now sees, and indeed sees his Lord and healer, but is mysteriously told to tell no one. It is a silence that acts as a witness to what lies beyond itself—a witness to the one who led us into that silence and into a blinding light that nevertheless reveals the greatest of all revelations. The apophatic silence of Bonaventure is a pregnant silence, filled, as Mary was even after Jesus's birth, with the gestating presence of all we have heard of Israel, the law, the Psalms, and the prophets. Only after such a flood of *verbum*-filled music can we recognize and begin to contemplate the significance of the resonant silence to which it leads. Only in a pregnant

silence like Mary's quiet treasuring can we hear what we must do and become in order to

live into a harmonious response amidst both pain and praise.

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