

RESEARCH IN ANALYTICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND JUNGIAN
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Apophatic Elements in the Theory and Practice of Psychoanalysis

Pseudo-Dionysius and C. G. Jung

David Henderson



Apophatic Elements in the Theory and Practice of Psychoanalysis

How can the psychotherapist think about not knowing? Is psychoanalysis a contemplative practice? This book explores the possibility that there are resources in philosophy and theology which can help psychoanalysts and psychotherapists think more clearly about the unknown and the unknowable.

The book applies the lens of *apophasis* to psychoanalysis, providing a detailed reading of *apophasis* in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius and exploring C. G. Jung's engagement with apophatic discourse. Pseudo-Dionysius brought together Greek and biblical currents of negative theology and the *via negativa*, and the psychology of Jung can be read as a continuation and extension of the apophatic tradition. Henderson discusses the concept of the transcendent function as an apophatic dynamic at the heart of Jung's thought, and suggests that *apophasis* can provide the key to understanding the family resemblance among the disparate schools of psychoanalysis.

Chapters consider:

- Jung's discussion of opposites, including his reception of Nicholas of Cusa's concept of the coincidence of opposites.
- Jung's engagement with Neoplatonism and Pseudo-Dionysius.
- The work of Jung in relation to Deleuze, Derrida and other writers.
- How motifs in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* resonate with contemporary psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

The in-depth examination of primary sources in this comprehensive volume provides a platform for research into *apophasis* in the wider field of psychoanalysis. It will prove valuable reading for scholars and analysts of Jungian psychology studying religion and mysticism.

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For Susan

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Introduction

The lonely cells of the recluses of Egypt have been revealed, by the archaeologist, to have had well-furnished consulting rooms.¹

In former times people went into monasteries. Were they stupid or insensitive people? – Well, if people like that found they needed to take such measures in order to be able to go on living, the problem cannot be an easy one!²

The aim of this study is to identify apophatic elements in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. It will do so by an examination of the works of the sixth-century philosopher Dionysius³ and the twentieth-century psychoanalyst Carl Gustav Jung.

I am using ‘apophatic elements’ as an umbrella term to cover a range of concepts, images, metaphors and behaviour which are characterized by negation or denial. *Apophasis* can be translated literally as ‘unsaying’. It is ‘away from speech’ or ‘saying away’. *Apo* is ‘from’ or ‘away’. *Phasis* is ‘assertion’, from *phemi*, ‘assert’ or ‘say’. *Apophasis*, denial, stands in relation to *kataphasis*, affirmation. The *via negativa* and negative theology are concerned with the apophatic in philosophy and religion. ‘Unknowing’ as an epistemological problem and as an experience is at the heart of apophatic writing.

Freud described psychoanalysis both as a theory for understanding the mind and culture and as a therapy for neurosis. This mirrors the debate among the interpreters of the writings of Dionysius. Some interpret his work as philosophy, others interpret it as a description of personal experience. Lossky, perhaps, embraces both sides when he describes apophaticism as ‘an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God’.⁴ Coakley asserts that this division, while having ‘some remaining heuristic worth, is far too blunt a tool to account for the historic variety of Dionysian influences down the centuries’.⁵ Psychoanalysis has had a similarly varied influence, albeit for a much shorter period of time. Grinberg observed that ‘[i]n spite of its tremendous impact on mankind, paradoxically enough, it has not yet been possible to place and classify psychoanalysis within any of the existing fields of knowledge’.⁶

The problem of unknowing is central to the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. One of the motives behind this research is to explore whether or not there are resources within the discourse of the *via negativa* and negative theology to help the psychotherapist to think about unknowing in the psychoanalytic setting. Does the apophatic literature provide tools for understanding the process of psychoanalysis? Is it possible that, in the words of Dionysius, ‘If one considers these texts [his own and those of psychoanalysis] with a reverent eye one will see something that both brings about unity and manifests a single empathy?’⁷

Passing reference to the apophatic tradition has been made in a few histories of psychotherapy. Ellenberger⁸ and Whyte⁹ identify Dionysius as one of a number of philosophers who contributed to pre-Freudian concepts of the unconscious:

Plotin and the neo-Platonic philosophers defined God by means of a negative approach: God is not at all what we conceive him to be; he is unimaginable to us. The great mystic known as Dionysios the Areopagite, gave to this concept a Christian formulation: ‘The most godly knowledge of God is that which is known by unknowing.’¹⁰

Burke characterizes Freud’s theory as a ‘secular variant of negative theology’.¹¹ Sells and Webb have written a paper about apophatic elements in Lacan and Bion.¹² Goudsmit in a study of the *via negativa* in psychotherapy compares Merleau-Ponty’s ‘negative philosophy’ and Nicholas of Cusa’s ‘learned ignorance’.¹³ Anderson used the work of Thomas Merton to develop an apophatic approach to psychotherapy.¹⁴ Dourley, in a chapter entitled ‘Toward an Apophatic Psychology’, explores Jung’s understanding of Eckhart.¹⁵ Karlsson observes that:

One of the reasons that psychoanalysis as a science struggles with difficult epistemological problems is that its subject matter – the unconscious – is constituted in terms of negativity. What other science investigates something which is defined by the prefix un-?! The only resembling discipline, in this sense, may be the so-called ‘negative theology’, which claims that an understanding of God can only be reached by stating what God is not.¹⁶

Frank asserts that ‘all “psychology” which really *sees* its object and really takes account of its peculiar character must be “negative psychology” (by analogy to negative theology)’.¹⁷ If Karlsson and Frank are right, psychoanalysis and negative theology share a concern to clarify how to think about negation.

Psychoanalysis has been widely and effectively used as a tool to study religious experience and mystical thought. However, *Essai sur l’Introversion Mystique: Etude Psychologique de Pseudo-Denys l’Areopagite et de Quelques Autres cas de Mysticisme* is, as far as I am aware, the only sustained psychoanalytic study of Dionysius. It was written by Morel in 1918 and dedicated to Flournoy. In

his introduction Morel references Charcot, Janet, Freud, Jung, Bleuler and Bergson. He concludes that:

le 'système' de Denys offre cette double analogie essentielle avec la pensée autistique: 1. Il est égocentrique. 2. Le critère de la vraisemblance est totalement exclue et remplacé par le seul critère de la jouissance. [...] Or, cette confusion de la réalité objective interne et d'un égocentrisme métaphysique est une forme particulière et très répandue de mythomanie: création, réalisation de fictions, et confusion pseudo-hallucinatoire de celles-ci avec la réalité.¹⁸

The approach taken here turns the tables on psychoanalysis. It asks what sort of a practice and theory is psychoanalysis, and where is it located within the history of the European contemplative tradition, by use of the concept of *apophasis*. It asks in what ways, if any, the language of apophatic writing can illuminate the theory and practice of psychoanalysis. This process necessarily alters our perceptions of both ancient *apophasis* and modern psychoanalysis. As Turner observes:

One understands a tradition when one understands *how* that past lives in the present ... to call upon a tradition is *always* to reread it, that is to say, to access a tradition *is already to have changed it*. Therefore the past is alive *as* tradition in so far as we transform it, so the normativity of the tradition is the product of what it yields to us by way of given achievement in the past in conjunction with our present strategies of rereading those achievements, that conjunction of past and present constituting its character and life *as tradition*.¹⁹

In addition to the theoretical and historical objectives and motives for this study, it has a philological dimension. In the section on Dionysius I will describe ways in which apophatic themes appear in his texts. This is the first time that these features of his writing have been identified in such detail. In the section on Jung, I can claim to have identified his use of the notion of opposites in a more thorough manner than has been attempted before.

Chapters 2 and 3 of this study focus on Dionysius, the sixth-century Syrian writer whose works are often portrayed as the zenith of apophatic thought. He brought together the Greek and biblical currents of negative theology and the *via negativa*. Apophatic elements can be found in the writings of Plato, Philo, the Gnostics, Plotinus, Augustine, Gregory of Nyssa and Proclus, all of whom predate Dionysius. Dionysius' thought has been interpreted and made use of in a variety of ways by philosophers and theologians from his own time up to the present, including Eriugena, Aquinas, Cusa, Eckhart and the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*.

In the last thirty years there has been a resurgence of interest in apophatic literature. Mortley,²⁰ McGinn,²¹ de Certeau,²² Carabine²³ and Sells²⁴ have

written historical studies of apophatic philosophy, theology and mysticism. In debates related to deconstruction and postmodernism, Derrida²⁵ and Marion²⁶ have written significantly about Dionysius. Yannaras²⁷ and Carlson,²⁸ who develops what he calls the ‘apophatic analogy’, have compared Heidegger and Dionysius. Boeve uses the concept of ‘cultural apophaticism’ to reflect on contemporary relations between theology and culture.²⁹ Fitzpatrick³⁰ and Walker³¹ have used *apophasis* within the context of the social sciences. Zembylas³² and Abunuwara³³ argue for the importance of ‘the unknowable’ in education. Wolosky has explored *apophasis* in Eliot, Beckett and Celan.³⁴ Franke has used the theme of *apophasis* to compile an anthology, which includes work from literature and the arts.³⁵ He observes:

As a newly emerging logic, or rather a/logic, of language in the humanities, this new (though also very old) quasi-epistemic paradigm for criticism, as well as for language-based disciplines and practices in general, can help us learn to read in hitherto unsuspectedly limber and sensitive ways.³⁶

Saward developed the concept of ‘apophatic anthropology’ based on patristic texts, especially Gregory of Nyssa, which he links with Wittgenstein’s ‘silence’.³⁷ Independently, Bernauer described Foucault’s ‘apophatic anthropology’.³⁸ Carlson³⁹ and Otten⁴⁰ use the notion of ‘negative anthropology’. Caputo argues for a ‘generalized apophatics’:

So to the *theologia negativa*, one could add a *anthropologia negativa*, an *ethica negativa*, *politica negativa*, where of the humanity, or the ethics, or the politics, or the democracy to come we cannot say a thing, except that they want to twist free from the regimes of presence, from the historically restricted concepts of humanity, ethics and democracy under which we presently labor. Humanity, ethics, politics – or whatever, *n’importe* – would belong to a general apophatics [...] The effect of this ignorancia is to keep the possibility of the impossible open, to keep the future open, to have a future.⁴¹

While these varied uses of *apophasis* are not referred to explicitly in what follows, they provide part of the wider context of this study.

In the context of his discussion of the relationship between continental philosophy and the *via negativa*, Bradley asks whether the relationship is one of kinship or opposition:

Is continental thought ... a philosophical *continuation* and *extension* of negative theology’s critique of language, identity and ontology or is it a *rejection* or *reaction* against a negative theological tradition that, for all its subversiveness, remains deeply indebted to the metaphysical and ontotheological tradition from which it departs?⁴²

I am asking a similar question about the relationship between psychoanalysis and *apophysis*. My argument is that psychoanalysis, in this case the psychoanalysis of Jung, can be read as a continuation and extension of the apophatic tradition.

Chapter 4 examines apophatic elements in the work of Jung. The limits of consciousness, reason and language are ubiquitous themes in Jung's writings. In his view the unconscious is simply 'the unknown'. The inner and the outer worlds are ultimately both unknowable. Subjectivity and matter are both mysteries:

The relation of a psychic content to the ego forms the criterion of its consciousness, for no content can be conscious unless it is represented to a subject. With this definition we have described and delimited the *scope* of the subject. Theoretically, no limits can be set to the field of consciousness, since it is capable of indefinite extension. Empirically, however, it always finds its limit when it comes up against the *unknown*. This consists of everything we do not know, which, therefore, is not related to the ego as the centre of the field of consciousness. The unknown falls into two groups of objects: those which are outside and can be experienced by the senses, and those which are inside and are experienced immediately. The first group comprises the unknown in the outer world; the second the unknown in the inner world. We call this latter territory the *unconscious*.⁴³

The symbol is the most appropriate way of expressing a content that is ultimately unknowable. Jung felt that the writings of the Gnostics and the alchemists prefigured the paradoxical findings of psychoanalysis:

Paradox is a characteristic of the Gnostic writings. It does more justice to the *unknowable* than clarity can do, for uniformity of meaning robs the mystery of its darkness and sets it up as something that is *known*. That is a usurpation, and it leads the human intellect into hybris by pretending that it, the intellect, has got hold of the transcendent mystery by a cognitive act and has 'grasped' it. The paradox therefore reflects a higher level of intellect and, by not forcibly representing the unknowable as known, gives a more faithful picture of the real state of affairs.⁴⁴

Fear of the unknown inhibits personality development and is a source of resistance in psychotherapy:

In studying the history of the human mind one is impressed again and again by the fact that its growth keeps pace with a widening range of consciousness, and that each step forward is an extremely painful and laborious achievement. One could almost say that nothing is more hateful to man than to give up the smallest particle of unconsciousness. He has a profound fear of the unknown. Ask anybody who has ever tried to introduce new ideas! If even the allegedly mature man is afraid of the unknown, why

shouldn't the child hesitate also? The *horror novi* is one of the most striking qualities of primitive man. This is a natural enough obstacle, as obstacles go; but excessive attachment to the parents is unnatural and pathological, because a too great fear of the unknown is itself pathological.⁴⁵

The unknown within the context of psychoanalytic therapy is not solely the result of repression. The attitude of not knowing is an important element of analytic technique:

There are naturally cases where the doctor sees something which is undoubtedly there, but which the patient will not or cannot admit. As the truth is often hidden as much from the doctor as from the patient, various methods have been evolved for gaining access to the unknown contents. I purposely say 'unknown' and not 'repressed' because I think it altogether wrong to assume that whenever a content is unknown it is necessarily repressed. The doctor who really thinks that way gives the appearance of knowing everything beforehand. Such a pretence stymies the patient and will most likely make it impossible for him to confess the truth.⁴⁶

Jung argues that 'there are four methods for investigating the unknown in the patient'⁴⁷ – the association method, symptom analysis, anamnestic analysis and analysis of the unconscious.

These quotations from Jung, which I have cited at length, exhaust the explicit references to the 'unknowable' and the 'unknown' in the *Collected Works* Volume 20. However, I will demonstrate that apophatic motifs saturate Jung's theory and practice. I examine references in the *Collected Works* to writers and concepts from the Platonic tradition, with special attention to their apophatic elements. In [Chapter 5](#) there is a systematic review of all references to Dionysius in Jung's work. There is a detailed analysis of Jung's writing on opposites, including *coincidentia oppositorum*, *complexio oppositorum*, *coniunctio oppositorum* and the union of opposites. I examine Jung's appropriation of Nicholas of Cusa's concept of the coincidence of opposites. Jung's concept of the transcendent function is discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

I have already made reference to the contemporary discussions within a number of fields about the status and role of apophatic discourse. In [Chapter 7](#) I use the work of a number of contemporary writers to reflect on apophatic themes in Jung. Aside from the intrinsic interest this may hold, it functions here to dispel the suspicion that Jung's preoccupation with the unknown is anachronistic or that it represents a regressive feature in his theory.

A first group of writers, Sells, Milem and Rorem, have provided interpretive frameworks with which to understand negative theology. I will identify elements of Jung's work which resonate with these schemas. A second pair of writers, Deleuze and Derrida, are of interest because aspects of their work can be read with an apophatic lens and compared with Jung's. Finally, the

discussions about unknowing in two contemporary Jungian theorists, Dourley and Tacey, are examined.

In [Chapter 8](#) there is an extended and impressionistic comparison of the process of psychotherapy and the liturgical practices described by Dionysius in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. While it is not unusual to discuss psychotherapy in light of ritual processes described in anthropological literature, I hope to demonstrate that bringing to bear on the psychoanalytic process images and concepts from liturgical studies offers an additional insight into the nature of psychoanalysis. This highlights the performative and social dimensions of *apophysis* in the texts of Dionysius and Jung.

Philo of Alexandria, 2000 years ago in *On the Contemplative Life*, described a community of men and women who lived in solitude:

They are called therapeutae and therapeutrides, either because they process an art of medicine more excellent than that in general use in cities (for that only heals bodies, but the other heals souls which are under the mastery of terrible and almost incurable diseases, which pleasures and appetites, fears and griefs, and covetousness, and follies, and injustice, and all the rest of the innumerable multitude of other passions and vices, have inflicted upon them), or else because they have been instructed by nature and the sacred laws to serve the living God, who is superior to the good, and more simple than the one, and more ancient than the unit.⁴⁸

Analysts could be considered contemporary hermits. They dwell within the solitude of their consulting rooms and meet their clients in a liminal space.⁴⁹

Hans Jonas comments ironically that the Gnostic writer of the Apocryphon of John displays:

the kind of emphatic and pathetic verbosity which the ‘ineffable’ seems to have incited in many of its professors ... [the] effusive description devoted to the very indescribability of the divine Absolute – expatiating on the theme of His purity, boundlessness, perfection, etc. being beyond measure, quality, quantity, and time; beyond comprehension, description, name, distinction; beyond life, beatitude, divinity, and even existence – are a typical example of the rising ‘negative theology’, whose spokesmen did not tire for centuries of the self-defeating nature of their task.⁵⁰

Despite this warning about ‘the self-defeating nature’ of my task, I hope to show that there are significant parallels between the apophatic thought of Dionysius and the work of Jung.⁵¹ Indeed, perhaps the very ‘self-defeating nature’ of apophatic discourse provides us with another parallel with psychoanalysis, ‘the impossible profession’.

Turner uses the concept of ‘recursive contradictoriness’ to describe ‘a structure of an individual or social practice within which there is a built-in and

systemic conflict between the elements which constitute it; a conflict which is not resolvable within the practice itself, for it is from its structural features as such that the conflict arises'.⁵² Reflecting on the dilemmas of teaching Dionysius within the academy, he describes the conflict between an accurate appreciation of the ecclesial experience presupposed in the *Corpus Dionysiacum* and the requirements of the secular academic 'doctrine of decontextualization'.

Within psychoanalysis there is a similar conflict between the experiential knowledge of psychoanalysis available to the patient or the therapist, and the academic disciplines of psychoanalytic studies. These tensions contain an apophatic dynamic as the language and practices of the experiential and the academic constantly challenge, undermine and amplify each other. I attempt to be alive to these tensions throughout this study.

Notes

- 1 Brown, Peter (1982), 'The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity', in *Society and the Holy in Late Antiquity*. London: Faber and Faber, p. 135.
- 2 Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1980), *Culture and Value*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 49, quoted by David M. Hay (1998), 'The Veiled Thoughts of the Therapeutae', in *Mediators of the Divine: Horizons of Prophecy, Divination, Dreams and Theurgy in Mediterranean Antiquity*, Robert M. Berchman (ed.). Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press.
- 3 Dionysius has been variously referred to as Pseudo-Dionysius, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite, Pseudo-Denys etc. For the sake of simplicity I will refer to him as Dionysius throughout, unless I am making a direct quotation from another author. Further comments on his identity can be found in [Chapter 2](#). All quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from Colm Luibheid (trans.) (1987), *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, P. Rorem (foreword, notes, trans. collaboration), R. Roques (preface), J. Pelikan, J. Leclercq and K. Froehlich (introductions), New York: Paulist Press. They follow established convention whereby the name of the work is indicated in initials followed the line number. I will indicate the name of the work the first time it appears. Thereafter it will appear as an initial, i.e. *The Divine Names* line 893B is DN 839B.
- 4 Lossky, Vladimir (1957), *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, pp. 38–9.
- 5 Coakley, Sarah (2008), 'Introduction: Re-Thinking Dionysius the Areopagite', *Modern Theology*, 24(4): 537.
- 6 Grinberg, Leon (1969), 'New Ideas: Conflict and Evolution', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 50: 517.
- 7 *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, EH 432B.
- 8 Ellenberger, Henri (1970), *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. New York: Basic Books.
- 9 Whyte, L. L. (1978), *The Unconscious Before Freud*. London: Julian Friedmann, p. 80.
- 10 Ellenberger, Henri (1957), 'The Unconscious before Freud', *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic*, 21(1): 4.
- 11 Burke, Kenneth (1969), *A Grammar of Motives*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 317.
- 12 Sells, Michael A. and James Webb (1997), 'Lacan and Bion: Psychoanalysis and the Mystical Language of "Un-Saying"', *Journal of Melanie Klein and Object Relations*, 15(2): 243–264.
- 13 Goudsmit, Arno L. (1998), *Towards a Negative Understanding of Psychotherapy*. PhD thesis. Rijksuniversiteit Groningen.