

Apophatic elements in the theory and practice of analytical psychology

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Today I am exploring the role of *apophasis* in the theory and practice of analytical psychology. *Apophasis* means unsaying, and is usually translated as negation or denial. It is associated with negative theology and the *via negativa*. The theme of negation is a perennial one within philosophy and theology.

I am not going to develop a sustained argument, but, in true Jungian fashion, offer you series of aphorisms and unsubstantiated assertions, accompanied by short amplifications. I am deliberately refraining from giving you a tight definition of apophasis or negation, in the hope that a general sense of apophatic thinking might emerge.

1. **The role of negation is a neglected aspect of the disagreement between Freud and Jung.** In his 1915 essay, 'The Unconscious,' Freud wrote, "There are in this system no negation, no doubt, no degrees of certainty: all this is only introduced by the work of the censorship between the *Ucs.* And the *Pcs.*"ⁱ Ten years later, in 1925, in 'On negation' he wrote, "in analysis we never discover a 'no' in the unconscious."ⁱⁱ In that essay Freud was arguing that judgement is a function of consciousness in its relationship with the unconscious, as there is no capacity for negation in the unconscious. He eventually filled this lacuna with the concept of the death drive. In his 1925 seminar Jung stated that beyond the negation exercised by the conscious in relation to the unconscious, the

unconscious has within itself, as he puts it, “the yea and the nay.” “In those days I saw a compensatory principle that seemed to show a balance between the conscious and unconscious. But I saw later that the unconscious was balanced in itself. It is the yea and the nay... The unconscious is balance in itself, as is the conscious.”ⁱⁱⁱ For Freud negation is an aspect of the reality principle and the death drive. For Jung negation is a function of compensation and the self-balancing psyche.

2. **Freud and Jung are equally, but differently, negative.** When he was clarifying the differences between his methodology and that of Freud, Jung described his own approach as ‘constructive’ and Freud’s as ‘reductive’. Jung claimed that “constructive understanding also *analyses*, but it does not *reduce*. It breaks the system down into *typical* components.”^{iv} Thus both constructive and reductive approaches are exercises in negation. While Freud analyses or reduces to causes, Jung analyses or reduces to types. This element of negation constitutes the family resemblance among the clans of psychoanalysis, whether Freudian, Jungian, Lacanian, object relations, interpersonal, existential, and so on.

Whether or not this was Jung’s intention, many of his followers have taken ‘constructive’ to mean good or positive and ‘reductive’ to mean bad or negative. ‘Constructive’ and ‘reductive’ stopped being scientific descriptions and become moral statements. In such an environment, the concept of *apophasis* can perform an ecumenical function in relations between psychoanalytic schools, each of which performs negation in its own particular fashion.

3. **Negation is the way forward for analytical psychology.** Two types of negation have been suggested as ways of developing analytical theory. One is deconstruction. It is argued that deconstruction provides a method congruent with our postmodern context.^v The other is sublation. Here it is argued that a revolutionary transformation in the understanding of the project of analytical psychology is urgently needed.^{vi} I think that in addition to deconstruction and sublation it would be useful to think in terms of *apophasis*. It is a concept which has a long history and is not tied so exclusively to specific philosophical premises as are deconstruction and sublation. *Apophasis* can be used to think about process or content, about language or experience. It can be used as a verb, a noun, an adjective or adverb.

An analysis of Jung's relationship with Eckhart using the lens of *apophasis* led John Dourley, in his chapter entitled 'Toward an Apophatic Psychology,' to suggest that, "one cannot avoid the feeling that Eckhart experienced some void beyond even the archetypal world in that experience he calls the breakthrough. Obviously Jung could appreciate and was manifestly aware of this dimension of reality in his linking Eckhart with Zen... But the experience of so radical a self-loss is only questionably a component of Jung's model of the psyche and its working."^{vii} Dourley asks whether it was "something to do with the terror that attached to Jung's first experience of the deep unconscious and its powers in the period following his break with Freud."^{viii}

I think that it is also possible to see Jung's hesitancy not as a consequence of trauma but as a result of his epistemology. Unlike Eckhart Jung did not conceive of the first principle as the Good, so the abandonment of the self in God has for Jung a regressive dimension that is not present in apophatic mysticism. You might say that for Eckhart the capital G Good has logical precedence over the capital S Self. Despite Jung's claim that the metaphysical window has been firmly shut, human beings still wonder what is outside... even in our days of double-glazing. Apophasis is an expression of this unquenchable curiosity. Jung wanted to demonstrate that the *arche* is always with us, but what about the *an-arche*?

4. **Where transference was, there imagination shall be.** Transference can be an embryonic form of imagination or a failure of imagination. Analysing the transference is both an act of imagination and productive of imagination. According to Bachelard, "We always think of the imagination as the faculty that *forms* images. On the contrary, it *deforms* what we perceive; it is, above all, the faculty that frees us from immediate images and *changes* them... If the image that is *present* does not make us think of one that is *absent*... there is no imagination."^{ix} In other words imagination is the capacity for *apophasis*. Bachelard goes so far as to use the terms "imageless imagination" and "imageless thought." The vortex of faith, in Bion's sense, gives birth to the capacity for imagination.

Pseudo-Dionysius portrays Moses as the exemplar because "he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing (*agnousias*). Here, being neither oneself nor someone

else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown (*agnoustou*) by an inactivity of all knowledge, and know beyond the mind by knowing nothing.”

5. **Ignorance is a key learning outcome in psychotherapy training.** Unknowing is part of the folk-knowledge of psychotherapy. In supervision, case discussions and small groups at conferences there is talk about coping with not-knowing. We know that Freud recommended evenly hovering attention and that Jung said that theories are the very devil. But in practice the epistemological status of analytical interpretations is something best not investigated too closely, a kind of don't ask, don't tell policy. We have a long way to go before introducing any systematic study of ways of unknowing into psychotherapy training. You could argue that every bit of psychological knowledge a trainee grasps opens up new aspects of not-knowing. To paraphrase Bachelard, if the known does not make us think of the unknown, there is no imagination.

Modern psychotherapy trainings have no texts equivalent to the *Cloud of Unknowing* or Nicholas of Cusa's *Learned Ignorance*, but I think that there are resources within the traditions of negative theology and the *via negativa* that can help the psychotherapist think about not-knowing and unknowing. For example Gregory of Nyssa observes that God is incomprehensible and that human beings are incomprehensible to themselves. He links these incomprehensibilities by identifying the fact that we are incomprehensible to ourselves as the *imago dei*. Incomprehensibility is the God image. This raises intriguing problems, such as how to distinguish incomprehensibility from defenses of the self, delusions or apathy. For Jean-Luc Marion this incomprehensibility constitutes what he

calls the privilege of unknowing. It guarantees the dignity of the human being which always exceeds understanding.^x In some respects, I prefer Gregory's concept of incomprehensibility to Jung's numinous when thinking about the unknowable core of the individual because it is less fevered and has less content.

6. **The aim of analysis is ecstasy.** This is of course the secret wish of many clients, but the sort of ecstasy they are likely to get is not the one they expected. By ecstasy I don't mean dissociation, bliss, pleasure or *jouissance*. I mean what I would call the ordinary ecstasy of the historical subject. It is being alive to the particularity of objects within one's world. It is the erotic appreciation of the singularity of persons, psychological contents and material objects. Through the continuous process of differentiation and representation of difference, analysis starts in unconscious identity and arrives via the path of negation at everyday ecstasy.

Pseudo-Dionysius described life as an erotic union of God and creation. His triadic structure of affirmation-negation-ecstasy (*kataphasis-apophasis-ekstasis*) describes the logic of the intercourse between creation and the divine. In his description of what he calls "our hierarchy," meaning the human dimension, he sets out a vision of a society which is animated by providential *eros* – what *we* might think of as a sense of meaningfulness or coherence. For Dionysius, this good is not something that has to be achieved, it just is, it is a gift.

Analogously, when a person enters in the analytic frame, or dwelling place, there is nowhere else they need be. Within the mind of the therapist at least, the client can be free of the tyranny of the causal *and* the teleological. From this perspective the therapeutic space is not a ritual space, but a liturgical space. Ritual has an element of instrumental reason, liturgy is communion. In psychotherapy people are searching for contact or communion with the good – the good breast, the good object, the good feed, the good self, the good relationship. The therapist's clarification of the logic of affirmation-negation-ecstasy leaves the window open to the incomprehensible thought that being alive might be worth it after all.

In conclusion, let me repeat my six provocations and action points. They are:

1. The role of negation is a neglected aspect of the disagreement between Freud and Jung.
2. Freud and Jung are equally, but differently, negative.
3. Negation is the way forward for analytical psychology.
4. Where transference was, there imagination shall be.
5. Ignorance is a key learning outcome in psychotherapy training.
6. The aim of analysis is ecstasy.

ⁱ Freud, SE14 p. 186

ⁱⁱ Freud SE19 p. 239

ⁱⁱⁱ Jung 1925 seminar, p. 93

^{iv} Jung, CW3 413

^v Miller, Kugler,

^{vi} Giegerich

^{vii} Dourley, John (1992), *A Strategy for a Loss of Faith*, Toronto: Inner City, pp. 134-5

^{viii} Dourley, p. 135

^{ix} Bachelard, Gaston, cited by David Miller, in 'The Word/Image Problem',
www.rubedo.psc.br

^x Marion, Jean-Luc (2005), '*Mihi magna quaestio factus sum: The Privilege of Unknowing*,' *The Journal of Religion*, Vol. 85, No. 1, pp. 1-24