

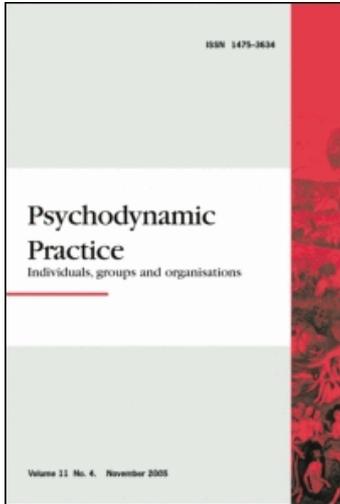
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### Aspects of negation in Freud and Jung

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## Aspects of negation in Freud and Jung

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This article explores the family resemblance between psychoanalysis and negative theology. The frequent use of Keats' concept of negative capability demonstrates the need for ways to think about not knowing. While Freud and Jung deploy negation in different ways within their theories, it is the potency of their denials rather than their affirmations that accounts for the impact and unclassifiable force of psychoanalysis.

**Keywords:** negative capability; negative theology; contingency; desire; experience; renunciation

### Introduction

All too often when I am reflecting on my work as a psychotherapist, reading psychoanalytic theory or preparing for a seminar, I feel that I am in the dark. It is hard to orient oneself in the world of analysis. Leon Grinberg (1969) observed that 'In 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'.

Taking up this conundrum, Gunnar Karlsson (2000) has given it an interesting twist by suggesting a family resemblance between psychoanalysis and negative theology:

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

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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.

My own research into the apophatic elements in the theory and practice of psychoanalysis leads me to believe that there is a lot of mileage to be gained pursuing Karlsson's intuition.

One way this theme is often taken up is through the use of Keats' concept of 'negative capability'. 'Negative capability' made a sudden appearance in the analytic literature in 1969, in papers (Grinberg 1969; Hamilton 1969; Withim 1969) in three different journals and has been in regular use since then.<sup>1</sup> The frequency with which Keats' phrase is used demonstrates the need for ways to think about not knowing, but it also demonstrates the scarcity of ways of thinking about not knowing within psychoanalytic discourse. One aspect of my research is to determine whether there are modes of thinking in the traditions of negative theology that can be resources for psychotherapists in their on-going struggle to think about the unknown and the unknowable.

Today, I am using the framework provided by Bruce Milem (2007) in his paper, 'Four Theories of Negative Theology,' as a lens to look at the work of Freud and Jung. Milem classifies the negative theologies under four headings: metaphysical, desire, experience and renunciation. The metaphysical theory of negative theology, 'identifies God as the first cause of the existence of all things and argues that negative theology offers the most appropriate way to talk about this cause' (Bruce Milem, p. 188). The desire theory 'describes a desire that only the infinite God can satisfy' (Bruce Milem, p. 192). The experience theory understands negative theology as 'an attempt to do justice to a particular experience' (Bruce Milem, p. 194). And finally, the renunciation theory states that negative theology is based on an 'ethical imperative to give up positive concepts of God' (Bruce Milem, p. 197).

### **Metaphysical**

The metaphysical account of negative theology posits the unknowable origin of life. According to a metaphysical perspective,

... although ... we cannot help but say that God made or created the world, we also have to admit that we do not understand how. In this way, when it comes to two major theistic beliefs, that God exists and that God created everything, believers have to confess that they do not understand what these beliefs mean (Bruce Milem, p. 190).

We see this mirrored in a number of ways in Freud (1920) and Jung. They both acknowledge an unfathomable source. Freud writes that, 'The attributes of life were at sometime evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception'.

For Freud, the id is 'the reservoir of libido' (Freud 1923). Just as the creature is contingent on the creator, so the ego is passive in relation to the id. Freud adopted the concept of the id from 'Georg Grodeck, who is never tired of insisting that what we call our ego behaves essentially passively in life and that, as he expresses it, we are 'lived' by unknown and uncontrollable forces' (Freud, 1923, p. 23).

The relationship between the ego and the id reflects aspects of the relationship between God and creation. In metaphysical forms of negative theology affirmative or positive statements about God must eventually defeat themselves, language 'will eventually breakdown'. Freud says in 'Beyond the pleasure principle,'

The indefiniteness of all our discussions on what we describe as metapsychology is of course due to the fact that we know nothing of the nature of the excitatory process that takes place in the elements of the psychical systems, and that we do not feel justified in framing any hypothesis on the subject. We are consequently operating all the time with a large unknown factor, which we are obliged to carry over into every new formula. (Freud, 1920, pp. 30–31)

The theologian's statement that language 'will eventually breakdown' is echoed in Freud's observation that 'everything living dies for *internal* reasons,' because the first instinct is 'the instinct to return to an inanimate state'. Life is a postponement of death. All creatures return to God. All language ends in silence.

Freud's discussion of the ego and the id is similar to Jung's work on the relationship between the archetype and the archetypal image.

Jung describes a psychoid dimension, which is an incomprehensible unity of psyche and matter. The archetypes, with their psychoid foundations, are unknowable in themselves although we can apprehend constellations of archetypal images under the influence of, in Grodeck's words, these 'unknown and uncontrollable forces'. Jung argues that only symbols are adequate containers for the multiplicity of meanings and energies that are at play in the psyche, but he is in agreement with the negative theologian in accepting that not only is there an excess that the symbol cannot contain, but that symbols die. The language of symbols breaks down. The life cycle of the symbol is completed in its return to the pleroma.

Freud and Jung share with the metaphysical negative theologian a sensibility that acknowledges the contingency of human nature and language in the face of an incomprehensible origin and destiny.

## Desire

Milem's second theory of negative theology is based on desire. He describes this approach in the following ways:

... human beings have some desires that no experience, phenomenon, or thing in this world can satisfy ... negative theology expresses the fact that our deepest desires go unsatisfied in this world ... What we notice in the things around us and in ourselves is God's absence ... Negative theology is the natural expression of insatiable desire (Bruce Milem, pp. 192–193).

Freud's description of the human being subjected to the constantly renewed demands of eros resonates here. The sexual drive is an impersonal imperative, which the individual must find a way to accommodate through sublimation or neurosis. The movement of desire transgresses the limits of language and undermines identity. Repression does not finally inhibit desire. Sounding very much like Gregory of Nyssa, Freud writes,

The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction. No substitute or reactive formations and no sublimations will suffice to remove the repressed instinct's persisting tension; and it is the difference in amount between the pleasure of satisfaction which is *demande*d and that which is actually *achieve*d that provides the driving factor which will permit of no halting at any position attained, but in the poet's words, 'Presses ever forward unsubdued' (Freud, 1920, p. 40).

For Jung, there is no end to individuation. The drive/insistence of the self to achieve its own purposes places a continuous pressure on the ego, which must adapt one way or another. The desire of the archetype is endless. In his essay on psychic energy, Jung (1928) writes,

The unconscious continues to produce symbols which one could obviously go on reducing to their elements *ad infinitum*. But man can never rest content with the natural course of things because he always has an excess of libido that can be offered a more favourable gradient than the merely natural one. For this reason he will inevitably seek it, no matter how often he may be forced back by reduction to the natural gradient.

While Freud and Jung formulate the nature of desire differently, they agree with the negative theologian that there is something in human nature that cannot be satisfied.

### Experience

According to Milem, the experience theory of negative theology is concerned with trying to articulate a particular experience. 'Instead of delivering knowledge about God, it carries the mind in God's direction and produces reverence and wonder' (Bruce Milem, p. 195). Milem uses Jean-Luc Marion as an example of this type of theologian. Marion is interested in 'the saturated phenomenon'.

The mind tries to apply a multitude of concepts to the phenomenon, but none of them is sufficient . . . This excess is unknowable by means of any concept and cannot be put into words. Someone encountering this phenomenon does not have an experience of any object. She primarily perceives her own bedazzlement in the face of something that shows itself unconditionally without accommodating itself to the structure of human understanding (Bruce Milem, p. 196).

Freud's discussions on religion include a number of experiences that require seemingly endless digestion. In *Totem and Taboo*, he postulates that the dismemberment of the father by the hoard of brothers was an actual historical event, which is at the root of civilisation. It is a saturated event whose weird light continues to bedazzle us. The repetition of murder and remembrance is a dynamic, which exceeds the will or comprehension of any individual. Another experience that Freud discusses is the oceanic feeling. He interprets it as a regression to infantile experience. Within psychoanalytic writing about religion, however, this way of theorising the oceanic feeling has not had the final word. There appears to be a pressure arising from the experience that undermines the theory.

The obvious link with Jung is in terms of his ideas about the numinous. Numinous experience has a transformative effect. A Jung (1958) puts it, 'This numinous transformation is not the result of conscious intention or intellectual conviction, but is brought about by the impact of overwhelming archetypal impressions'.

This impact can be positive or negative. Like a negative theologian, the person who is subjected to a numinous experience is obliged to make repeated attempts to articulate the content and significance of the experience while acknowledging that in certain important respects it is ineffable.

Both Freud and Jung confront, the saturated phenomena brought to them by their patients and push language to its limits in their attempts to articulate their own and their patients' experiences in the consulting room.

### **Renunciation**

Finally, in the renunciation theory, 'negative theology can be interpreted as a project of renunciation motivated by an ethical concern about the possibility of selfishness tainting one's devotion to God'. Milem uses Eckhart as his exemplar for this type of theology.

It seems to me that this aspect of negative theology resonates strongly with the moral demands of analysis. For Freud, the fundamental rule (to say everything that comes into one's mind), the rule of abstinence and the resolution of the transference are acts of renunciation. Renouncing gratification opens the space for the dream work and neurotic symptoms

to be unravelled to uncover repressed wishes. The analyst's evenly suspended attention is a form of renunciation of will and desire. Free association, on the part of the patient, is a way of speaking that has relinquished defensiveness, pretence and vanity. The rule for the analyst mirrors the rule for the patient.

The rule for the doctor may be expressed: 'He should withhold all conscious influences from his capacity to attend, and give himself over completely to his 'unconscious memory'. Or, to put it purely in terms of technique: 'He should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind' Sigmund Freud (1912).

At approximately the same time that Freud was formulating this advice, Jung (1961) was having the following reflections:

I knew of no technique whereby I might get to the bottom of my inner processes, and so there remained nothing for me to do but wait, go on with my life, and pay close attention to my fantasies . . . I said to myself, 'Since I know nothing at all, I shall simply do whatever occurs to me.' Thus I consciously submitted myself to the impulses of the unconscious.

For Jung, the withdrawal of projections is crucial in analysis. Elie Humbert (1988) highlighted three elements of Jung's practice that contain aspects of renunciation: *Geschelenlassen* (to let happen), *Betrachten* (to consider, to impregnate) and *Sich auseinanderseyzen* (to confront oneself with). In the period after his break with Freud, Jung 'gave himself the task of experiencing and learning from his own psyche without relying on any preconceived ideas'. The images that Jung encountered presented an ethical challenge. As Humbert puts it, 'the images that well up from the unconscious call the subject into question'(Elie Humbert, p. 13).

The ethic of renunciation is a leitmotif in Freud and Jung.

## Conclusion

This brief excursion into the interface of negative theology and psychoanalysis shows that there are grounds for considering psychoanalysis to be a contemplative practice, a contemporary version of the *via negativa*. While Freud and Jung deploy negation in different ways within their theories, I am convinced that it is the potency of their denials, rather than of their affirmations, that accounts for the impact and unclassifiable force of psychoanalysis.

## Note

1. The term was referred to 3 years earlier, in 1966, in a paper on a poem by Keats, but not given a psychoanalytic spin (Williams 1966).

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