

# THE APOPHATIC AND THE POLITICAL



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*The following are two short lectures delivered at a conference on “Nothing in Common: Apophatic Philosophy and Political Theology” held at Boston College in April 2024. The first addresses the general question of apophasis and the second is a response to the writings of Reiner Schürmann and John Caputo on anarchism and the dismantling of principles. As they were both addressed to an audience of theologians and philosophers, the arguments were drawn up in a terra nullius where apophasis and the case against ethical universals seek a foothold in ordinary experience and the commonsense limits of critical reason.*

## THE APOPHASIS OF THE EVERYDAY

I HAVE LONG defended the mysticism of the everyday as a necessary condition for appreciating the higher reaches of mystical thought and experience. Rather than think of mysticism primarily as an exceptional temperament or influx of divine grace, closer attention to how it forms a continuum with ordinary thought and experience seemed the solidier approach: to make the strangeness of mysticism more familiar and their familiarity with the everyday stranger. The same may be said of apophatic theology. For all its esoteric philosophical pedigree, at its core, apophasis is part and parcel of the most ordinary circumstances of human communication.

The exercise of apophasis in *negative theology* is usually set up as a systematic erasure of verbal expression, if not the whole of logic and grammar, with the aim of heightening the sense of divine mystery that language obscures. Varieties of this sort of rhetorical tool have stalked rational doctrine throughout religious and philosophical history, across cultures and intellectual traditions, with such regularity that it seems to be a universal condition for any system of thought to survive the shifts of time and the challenges of competing modes of thought. Language, after all, is more than a tool at our service. It makes demands of its own on us that

turn the master-servant relationship inside out. At bottom, apophasis is a rebellion against the chronic unsureness of language itself.

So, apart from the exercise of apophasis as a rational discipline, at some point we have to ask whether it might not just be a permanent feature of all human communication. If not, it remains a curiosity, a kind of mental museum designed to temper the tedium and excesses of doctrinal apologetics and tone down the general mood of confidence in which philosophers present their work. In other words, aside from the forms of apophasis deliberately cultivated to protect reason from its tendencies to arrogance, its roots may reach deeper, into the routine requirements of human language itself. Follow that thought for a moment with me, if you will, and I think you will find that evidence for the primal prestige of the everyday floods in almost effortlessly.

Obviously, reality does not coincide with our expressions of it. How often we are not dazzled by words in their purest and sublimest form that we need to be reminded of just how trapped and misshapen they are, like Michelangelo's unfinished *schiaivi*. What we intend to communicate with our words and the gestures that punctuate them is always and forever more than we can tell. At the same time, the telling always communicates more than we intend. The way in which the telling resonates in the mind of the recipient never quite coincides with what we have in mind. Then, too, we may find ourselves the unwitting voice of ideas and sentiments not of our own doing, wisdom and stupidities alike—*ex ore infantium*.

For these simplest of reasons, even statements generated in a publicly verifiable community of knowledge are never more than a low common denominator, lower than the reality that is spoken of and less than the fullness of how our statements are received. The world itself and the minds that process it are both too full of mystery to cater to language, however we manipulate it. Not even the cold logic of basic arithmetic is exempt from this condition. In the bigger picture, literalism and objectivity are fictions. The truth of those fictions—that is, whether they are guiding or misguiding, convivial or discordant—is not a function of their independent distance from the tellers and the hearers but of their consequences for our relations with others and the wider natural world. But that is another discussion for another time.

For now, let us imagine communication as a continuum, at one extreme of which we have *speech*—articulate, made of pieces linked by the conventions of grammar and usage—and at the other end, *utterance*—inarticulate and unconventional. Opposite the pure *logos*, typified in the arithmetic formula, is pure *pathos* marked by the typesetter's exclamatory *pling*. As we move from one exchange of words to the next, we shift our balance on the spectrum. The crude order of everyday communication is always a mixture of the articulate and the inarticulate which can never be torn completely from that continuum.

The apophasis of the everyday, I would suggest, begins as the pull of *pathos* on *logos* across the continuum. The unwelcome silence of having words stuck in one's throat or feeling tongue-tied reminds us again and again, with a frequency all the more shameful for our refusal to stop and think about it, that we don't really know what we are talking about. The negation or verbal "shunting" of apophasis—the *apo*—is clearest when it works *transitively*, deliberately silencing what has already been spoken. Even so, most of the time our negations and denials do not rise above mere contradiction and do not lead us to question our very confidence to communicate. It is in its *intransitive* mode that apophasis takes us beyond the mere logistics of erasing one string of words with another. Here negation and silence take the form of an involuntary deprivation of speech that urges the mind towards what Dionysius called "the darkness beyond understanding." It is dark not because it is sinister but because it tears us away from the pull of *logos* and into the unknown and uncontrollable.

The thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen exposes the logic of transitive apophasis when he states, "The mountain is not a mountain, therefore it is a mountain." The meaning is clear: what I call a "mountain" is not the actual mountain, which is what makes it a mountain and not what I have to say about it. But this is only a prelude to the intransitive state of appreciating the world, as he says, "without thinking." Here the distinction between the mountain and the one who perceives it is restored to a primordial unity in which mind becomes the mountain's way of thinking about itself and the mountain becomes the mind's way of disassociating the world from the data we gather from it.

Allowed to run its course, the transitive regulation of language through negation prevents the identification of the spoken with the world not to humiliate us but to restore the mystery of the world. The intransitive renunciation of speech enables us to revel in that incommunicable mystery. It is here that apophasis achieves what we may call enlightened awareness or revelation of the divine, away from the *logos* of the speakable and into the *pathos* of the unspeakable. Apophasis is not silence as an *askesis* of the self or an overwhelming of reason by sentiment, but rather the silence of a delicious *aesthesis* of the non-self in which the sensing, feeling, desiring, and thinking mind is reawakened by an elemental bond with the world tattered by too many words.

Compared to our daily struggles with expressing ourselves and the occasional insight into the limits of all human communication that these struggles open our eyes to, the unexpected and random interruptions of silence that overpower all of us from time to time seem incidental occurrence. These intransitive invasions of the apophatic may temporarily collapse communication into incommunicable *pathos*, but they are simply too fleeting and too muddled to take seriously. A child giggles, we breathe in the warmth and sweetness of the air after a thunderstorm,

something tastes odd, out of nowhere a melody makes us smile, we walk down the street and for the time it takes to bat an eye we know the happiness of everything being just as it should be and we ourselves being just where we should be. We take these little tears in our habitual patterns of perception for granted. We see something that isn't there, we hear something that has no voice, we sense the presence of something that is absent—and we let it pass. Our jaw drops and we pick it up again without even realizing that we have no way to communicate to anyone what has just happened. We take a step into that darkness beyond understanding and then retreat back to the light. The pause in the score that is meant to echo what went before and prepare for what comes after is squandered, swallowed up in the familiar rhythms of the workaday world.

Of course, all of us have also known more serious interruptions of the ordinary perception—flashes of wonder or awe or terror or ecstasy without any apparent source or explanation—that do not let us off so easily. At such times, we exorcise the feeling of discomfort by covering it with a plaster of abstractions to relieve the sting of their incommunicability, passing it off as fantasy or hallucination or the residue of some earlier event. But the opportunity is always there to hold on to that discomfort for as long as we can, until we can find a way to make room in mind for expressing the voice of the voiceless and the form of the formless. Unless we pay attention to these breaks in what we expect of the everyday, there is no superstition, and without superstition, no religion, no myth, no revelation, perhaps no real art.

Etymologically, *mysticism* suggests a seeing by “shutting out” what is seen. So, too, apophysis requires an *ob-audire* and an *ob-ligare*, an intensification of listening to and connecting to the world through the shutting out of language. The recovery of apophatic obedience and obligation towards the unexpected strangeness of the everyday loosens our hold on the reins on our lives and reconnects us, if only for a heartbeat, to the higher rhythms of the darkness out of which language was born and to which it must inevitably surrender.

All of this may seem to derail the term *apophysis* from its customary meaning, but keeping it on track is the whole point of insisting on its everydayness. My point is not to wrestle the term away from the rational discipline of a *theologia negativa* but to thaw the mystery of the divine with the warm breath of ordinary experience so that what has been frozen in the language of transcendence can flow freely again into our lives. At least that is what I understand to happen when the exercise of apophysis, transitive and intransitive, is allowed to run its course.

In the broader view, I have tried to make the rehearsal of ideas in everyday experience—the turning over of the soil of intellectual history to find its roots in the ordinary and the familiar—a general superintendent of my sanity these many years. Time and again, the effort to keep one foot planted in the world of my primary education in Europe and the Americas and the other in my secondary

education in Japan has made it hard to walk in any direction without falling on my face. Flight into the pure skies of philosophical speculation has often been the surer course, and one I have learned to navigate comfortably in my own way. Ironically enough, it has been the world of religion, with its rituals and stories, its teachings and superstitions, that has helped me see the everyday as the final frontier for making sense of life.

Religion, for me, has been a reminder that I know better than I let on. If I had to put in a few words what I expect from the varieties of religious tradition that I have crossed paths with, I would say I look for something to imitate rather than something to venerate. Once the temptation to analyze and compare the words of figures like Jesus and Gautama, the question that remains is this: “How can I find the place where they were standing when they said what they said, so that I might say the same thing?” Understanding by standing *under* the words instead of standing *over* them like a warrior with his foot on their neck or kneeling before them in silent adoration—this is the sort of rehearsal of religion in the familiar and everyday that has offered me an anecdote to the hazardous waste of religion’s shadier history.

Religion has also given me a better appreciation of the rich tradition of arcane, esoteric, apocryphal, and heterodox ideas flowing beneath the surface of the catechesis that formed the bedrock of my religious and moral education. I was not at all surprised to discover that the strongest impressions which Western religious ideas and imagery left on the thinkers of the Kyoto School, on whom I cut my philosophical teeth in Japan, were not drawn from established doctrine but from what they met in the backwaters of Neoplatonism and mysticism, not to mention the heretical philosophies that flourished alongside Christianity, often fed by the same springs.

Finally, religion has given me a way to describe the struggle to overcome the human condition—not in the sense of transcending it, or elevating it to a higher plane through an economy of salvation, but by *transcending* it, rising above it by burrowing into it. In the same way that scraping the words away apophatically can help uncover a mystery directly underfoot of our everyday lives, so, too, we honor the desire to have done with the trials and tragedies of our human condition not by gritting our teeth with forbearance or clinging to fantasies of a world beyond, but by finding for that desire a proper iconography to keep us from losing sight of the overriding mystery of it all—by seeing the nothingness writ small on the awakened mind as a reflection of a nothingness writ large on the pages of the universe.

I apologize for these rude generalizations, but I hope to have the chance to discuss some of this in more detail in our discussions today and tomorrow.

## THE POLITICAL CAPTIVITY OF THEOLOGY

In keeping with the topic and primary sources of today's discussion, I would like to pull on a loose thread at the end of Reiner Schürmann's masterful analysis in *Heidegger on Being and Acting* of the rise and fall of epoch-defining principles to consider what it might mean for the relation of theology to politics. But in so short a time, and so little of his knowledge at my disposal, I cannot hope to reproduce the subtlety and careful weave of his argument. My presentation will be closer in style to John Caputo's *The Weakness of God* and *Against Ethics*. Let me explain.

Those of you who have read their respective writings on anarchy and principle will have noticed a marked difference in their approaches. Schürmann sets up a question and orients himself toward its analysis with an orderly, almost obsessive fixation. This does not make for easy reading. Again and again I had to back up and reread a paragraph to understand how it fits in with what went before and how it opens up to what comes next. It's a slow slog across a spongy marsh. You can only plant yourself one step after the next and keep your eyes ahead. And when you finally close the book and return home, you find that you are traipsing mud all over the carpet. I am sure this is just as he would have wanted it.

Caputo's way of dealing with principles and anarchy, in contrast, is more of a performance whose steps have been orchestrated in advance. His arguments are convincing not so much for the progression of their logic as for the flourish with which his initial ideas are repeated and paraphrased. One has the sense of watching an ice-skater circling around the rink, twisting and jumping and posturing for the spectators, scoring patterns in the ice that disappear as soon as they are skated over. The beginning and the end are not controlled by any recognizable working hypothesis but by the melodic movement of the background music. When you finally close his books on ethics and anarchy, you may find yourself without an actual argument in hand, but you cannot help feeling exhilarated over the range of authors and quotable quotes he was able to bring to the discussion.

My reflections here today on Schürmann's work will be rather more Caputesque in style, a laying out of conclusions without properly defending them but also, I am afraid to admit, without the flair and finesse of his assault on principles. My apologies to both authors and to their admirers.

Schürmann closes his restructuring of Heidegger's critique of principles and praise of anarchy not with a full stop but with an ellipsis. Let me explain. Insofar as each new historical age begins with a shift in guiding principles and solidifies with a closure of those principles into a metaphysical worldview, it entails a hobbling of truth, an obscuring of our experience of reality in favor of an agenda of problems identified for solution within the context of principles embedded in law, social institutions, language, religious doctrine, and the philosophical imagination. The

imposition of principles, he says, obstructs the unveiling of being to an open mind. (In his later massive work, *Broken Hegemonies*, he takes up three such epochal shifts of principle, or *fantasms* as he calls them.)

To engage with problems whose very statement is controlled by a predetermined view of the world is to forsake the possibilities of critique based on an open view of the world and human being. If the world is made up of objects reimaged as part of a network of instruments with a purpose, the world cannot disclose itself to us as it is. A critique of principles is only possible by tracing a path back to the generation of the controlling principles in search of what it is that gave them the control. It is, we might say, a way of popping out the lenses from glasses with which we see the world and examining the prescription of their grind, and then trying to look at the world without corrective lenses, to accustom ourselves to the dizziness we feel at the unknown, uncontrollable, inexhaustibly intelligible mystery of it all—that that is to say, to its primal anarchy. To do this, Heidegger (or more accurately, Schürmann's Heidegger) argues, is to turn away from the violence that economies—the immutable norms that govern the household—justify by appealing to the overarching, unquestioned principles of the age.

Anarchy is the restoration of the world to its aboriginal state of a flowing river into which one cannot step a second time. This is called the “presencing” of being, which requires that everything, every idea, every norm that tends to place itself between us and the living reality of the world be let go of. In place of an overarching dome of eternal verities or a map on which we can pin any thing, any sentiment, any event as a destination for thought or action, the anarchic walk through life is a network of *Holzwege*, wooden paths that lead nowhere and end up in the untrodden. If reality is to open its mystery to us, we must first accept that it is contingency—all of it, start to finish.

It is in this praise of absolute detachment from principle that Schürmann sees Heidegger's thought landing us. But scattered references throughout his account to the writings of Hannah Arendt hint that this anarchic view is incomplete because it closes an eye to the fact that the everyday is broken, in pain, hungry, imprisoned, embattled, naked, and even the very least of those who suffer deserve more than an inspirational invitation to detach themselves from the principles that create and sustain their condition and its general anonymity to social conscience. The final *Gelassenheit* of “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do” must not be understood as a reason to prevent us from overturning the tables of the money lenders and driving them from the temple when the need arises. Enlightened equanimity without compassion, taste without distaste, resignation without disgust, only deepens the *avidyā*, the darkness of ignorance.

In other words, Schürmann shows us a philosopher whose concerted turn away from religion with its doctrinal and ethical principles ends up endorsing a

caricature of religion: a kind of mystical paralysis in which an enlightened, anarchic economy fits as well in a Walden Pond as in an *Animal House*. We need a better standard for goodness than a detached, disinterested philosophical critique of principles. If it is always *in loco* and *in tempore*, then goodness is a messier, closer-to-home experiment with truth in everyday life. Any philosophy that would prejudice my grandmother's piety, theologically naïve as it was, an inauthentic form of existence in a close metaphysical world is a philosophy I find it impossible to defend.

Arendt extends this skepticism to the political realm. She accepts Heidegger's critique of "political philosophy" as a form of submission to the rule of principle, but she also draws a line at how far this criticism can go in its deference to anarchy. In *The Promise of Politics* she draws attention to this ambiguity. On one hand, if politics is the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, then to be political requires defending the proximity of both sides to one another, keeping them in contact and mutual vigilance. The value of the individual here is defined in terms of this socially patterned freedom, subjecting it to epoch-specific principles of law and order with all their inherent biases. On the other, when politics involves global dominion (in the economic realm, for instance), then the gap between the ruler and the ruled is no longer primary, or even relevant. Human beings become agents of a system that cannot be overturned, only adjusted. The value of the individual is then defined primarily in terms of the benefits it gains from the ruling establishment. But if rulers hold in their hands devices capable of destroying or crippling not only the social order but the very life of the planet, we need to recover some measure of trust in our admittedly epoch-specific principles and close an eye to the political impotence and absolute skepticism regarding any and all control of the relationship between rulers and ruled. In such circumstances, she warns, total anarchical rejection of the political ends up in service to totalitarianism.

This same ambiguity—a philosophical distrust in principles shaken by a practical need for them—carries over into theology's engagement with the political realm. Theologians must be critical of identifying with and enforcing the universal principles of the age, for many of the same reasons that brought Schürmann and Heidegger to the posture of detachment from principles. At the same time, those very principles—limited, contingent, culturally conditioned, even imperialistic as they are—can voice a warning against counter principles of greed, injustice, and irreversible violence to the planet. The challenge for theology is to find a way to administer this ambiguity without surrendering to political captivity. Finding that balance is always a precarious adventure and always subject to the same doubt and uncertainty as all theology's claims. To phrase it in the context of yesterday's discussion, it must seek a way to communicate the presence of evil that does not



erase the need for apophysis and awareness of the provisional character of its own reasoning.

Put as simply as I can, the fundamental task of theology—or any form of faith aiming at reasonableness—is the refinement of superstition. By superstition, I mean over-belief, the stretching of words to speak the unspeakable rather than simply lay a hand over one's mouth in silence. When superstitions are confused with claims to certitude—and this is nowhere more evident than in the political realm—they become idolatrous. Refining their reasonableness is a way of acknowledging their inexhaustible intelligibility, not a way of dispensing with their conventionality and epoch-specific stuffings. To align theology with apparently universal, perennial principles and reinstate her as the queen of politics is to sanctify the biases of those who seek to coronate her. To detach her from all principle is to sanctify the biases of those who seek to condemn her to servitude.

Religious superstition, whether in the theory or practice of a particular tradition, is a form of iconography. By that I mean that it is a *sym-bolein* or binding of our experience of the limits of the human condition on the one hand and the presence of dark forces in ordinary experience on the other. The frustrations and tragedies of life are clear and distinct to reason: the interruptions of dark forces in everyday life, in contrast, are dark and impenetrable to reason. Together they shape religious consciousness. Insofar as the shaping collapses the two into a rational certitude whose goal is to harness the dark forces to vanquish the human condition, in this life or in the expectation of some future life, the icon is idolatrous. Only if the two are kept in tension can one hope to live life to its fullest: attached to the reality of an everyday mind unable to deliver itself from its limits but conscious of a higher rhythm that transcends it.

Gianni Vattimo has argued, more or less approvingly, that secularization has taken over the role of religion and replaced its dated symbols with more acceptable and up-to-date ideals. This may be so, but if the attachment to contemporary causes is as unrepentant as the attachment to traditional religious ideals, little is gained in the transition. Here again, engagement in the political relies on the same mode of thought and is subject to the same temptation as the religious imagination is. The political captivity of theology not only severs theological reflection from its foundations; it risks absorbing its role in social consciousness into the pursuit of more reasonable and practical solutions that lose sight of their limited, human-all-too-human resources. Absent obedience—or attentive awareness—to the impulse to superstition, political engagement hobbles theology.

As a refinement of superstition, then, theology is a shift from idolatry to iconography. Idolatry flourishes in uncompromising veneration of religious certitudes; iconography, in contrast, flourishes in imitation and appropriation. Veneration suspends critical reason; imitation tests its limits. In philosophies that

do not draw a clear line between philosophical and religious reflection, which is more often the case in the Japanese thinkers with whom I am most familiar, religious figures from the past like Hakuin and Dōgen are cited in the same breath as Aristotle and Hegel, Kant and Heidegger—not for the careful logic of their theories but for their down-to-earth, everyday descriptions of the experiences from which philosophy and religion begin and to which they must finally return. Neither mode of reflection is complete, however, until it has awakened to its own limits and the forces that assault it from without, until it recognizes the difference between clarity it can achieve through discipline and the clarity that forever eludes it.

The threshold of political engagement beyond which theology ceases to exercise its original vocation and indeed begins to work against it is, for each generation, a moveable frontier. So, too, is the threshold of religious reflection beyond which political thought loses touch with its basic impulse to a goodness beyond its control. To ignore these thresholds is to reject the insight into what anarchy *can* do to temper principled action and what it *cannot*. To accept it is to open both theology and political thought to mutual transformation.

The principles inscribed in law and logically strung out in a linear, syllogistic progression of ideas help us identify evils and to aim for a goodness defined as the overcoming of those evils, much like the doctor whose expertise allow for the diagnosis of illness but who is powerless to define health except as the absence of symptoms. Goodness and health cannot be accessed through principles. They are both by nature dyslexic, and it is this dyslexia that protects theology from political captivity.

This, in a word, is the *agora* or marketplace within which political theology must frame its categories—κατά-ἀγορά—and grind us lenses for discovering our nobler impulses and babbling about them as best we can.