

Kataphasis, Apophasis and Mysticism in Pseudo-Denys and Wittgenstein

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The whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand. The morbid logician seeks to make everything lucid, and succeeds in making everything mysterious. The mystic allows one thing to be mysterious, and everything else becomes lucid.

G.K.Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*¹

While the resonances between classical Christian negative theology and the discourse of deconstruction have been explored for the last twenty years,² there has been scant attention paid to the resonances between negative theology and the philosophical writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein. To be sure, theologians have shown much interest in Wittgenstein, but that interest often links Wittgenstein's conception of forms of life to religious practice. Such writings have sought to view Wittgenstein in terms of philosophy of religion. In this essay, I am not concerned with Wittgenstein's philosophy of religion, but am interested in the connections between his writings on language and the view of language held in negative theology, specifically in the writings of the Pseudo-Denys. In the same way that Mark C.Taylor, John D.Caputo *et al.* see similar strategies at work in negative theology and in Jacques Derrida (specifically, the connection between apophasis and *différance*), I see similar strategies at work in Wittgenstein and Denys. I will argue that there are important points of intersection between the two, especially on the issues of the limits of reference in language, the necessity of communal understandings for meaning, and the view of the self within a community of shared practices and shared language.

One word of explanation before I continue. In making Denys and Wittgenstein interlocutors, I am not saying they were interested in the same things. Denys was concerned about liturgy and how liturgy does or does not praise God properly, and Wittgenstein was interested in how language works and how proper use of language frees us from philosophical problems. That said, the substance of their writings on liturgy and language exhibit similar strategies for the use of language — similarities, I will argue, that help us to use both to understand the other better. To draw out

this comparison, I will bring Denys and Wittgenstein into conversation under three headings: reference, community, and selfhood. Far from merely using Wittgenstein to advance our understanding of Denys, I want to argue that Denys's theory of language, reference, community and selfhood help our understanding of Wittgenstein.

These headings are inspired, in part, by the work of Thomas Carlson, who explains that there are three modes of language for Denys: kataphatic, apophatic, and mystical. These three modes of language correspond to the kataphatic 'procession of the divine out into the cosmos,' the apophatic 'return movement of created soul beyond itself toward the divine' and the mystical, which is the ineffable communion between God and creature.³ In discussing these three, it is important that I stress that the kataphatic, the apophatic and the mystical are *not* three different kinds of language. Instead each is language being used in a certain way. Moreover, one form cannot exist without the other two. In fact, the crucial point of intersection between Denys and Wittgenstein is that both realise this and make this realisation a major aspect of their writings. Wittgenstein's writings on language have a strong kataphatic element, especially in terms of his thoughts on reference, a strong apophatic element, especially in terms of forms of life and language games, and a strong mystical element, especially in terms of human connection with the community.

Practical Reference

Expanding on a theme found at the heart of Wittgenstein's writing, D.Z. Phillips has written, 'Our request for justifications in our talk about physical objects, persons, colours and physics, comes to an end. Our assurance is shown in the way we act with respect to these things.'⁴ Assurance, Phillips tells us, is not to be found in particular definitions but instead in common practice. Not only is this an important theme in Wittgenstein, as we will see, it is an important theme in Denys, especially in his writings on liturgy. In fact, I want to argue in this section, Denys's writings on liturgy found in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* enact Wittgenstein's discussion of certainty. And this theme, I will show, shares a common view of the role of kataphatic usage of language. Instead of seeing language as that which narrowly defines objects or makes meaningful or meaningless propositions, kataphatic language recognises that language flows from communal context. Because the basis of language is shared practice, and the meanings of words come from their use, both Denys and Wittgenstein see language as an outflow from practices. In Denys's case, language about God flows from common worship rooted in divine scripture. In Wittgenstein's case, language flows from the language-games and practices of communities.

For Wittgenstein, a bedrock conception of certainty is not available to

people. He writes 'It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual support*' (*On Certainty* §163)⁵ That is to say, for Wittgenstein, certainty, in the form of a single, definable proposition, is inaccessible to people. Certainty only arises from a system in which *consequences and premises* support each other. The liturgy, which Denys contemplates in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, is an example of such certainty. In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein writes as follows concerning judgment.

From a child up I learned to judge like this. *This is judging.*

(*OC* §128)

This is how I learned to judge; *this* I got to know as judgment.

(*OC* §129)

It is not that Wittgenstein thinks judgment does not take place or that a person cannot be certain of something. Instead it is that judgment is necessarily incomplete and never wholly definable outside the practices in which the judgments take place. In short, for both Denys and for Wittgenstein, reference is always connected to practice and practice is always connected to community. As Phillips writes, 'How language-games — certain ritualistic songs and dances, say, — are taken depends on their connections with other things. They do not have meaning in themselves, any more than pointing does. To think otherwise is to adopt what Wittgenstein would call a magical view of meaning.'⁶ In the third section of this essay, I will go on to show how for both thinkers the issues of practice and community are always connected to the issue of selfhood. (As I will draw out more specifically in the following sections, kataphasis is always connected to apophasis, and the two, rightly conceived, are connected to mysticism.)

If we turn to the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* we see an explanation of the liturgy — an event Wittgenstein might count among 'certain ritualistic songs and dances.' The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is nothing more, and nothing less, than an extended meditation on the symbolism of the liturgy. Paul Rorem, in his notes to the English translation of the work, writes that each chapter of the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* has the same structure: 'an introduction, a narrative account of the rite in question, and the interpretation or "contemplation" of that rite.'⁷ The structure is important because Denys addressed this work to the community of believers who were themselves participants in the liturgy. Denys writes, 'No one could understand, let alone put into practice, the truths received from God if we did not have a divine beginning' (*EH* 392B). Understanding of the liturgy follows from belief that the liturgy has a divine beginning. This belief can be deepened through understanding the symbols used in the liturgy, in much the way that Wittgenstein would urge us to understand the use of

certain words and phrases only within the context of a form of life.

In coming to better understand the symbols used in the liturgy, believers come to better understand God's revelation of Himself to His people. Rorem writes that for Denys, 'the divine procession is less metaphysical than revelatory: it is a manifestation of the unified and simple divine realm in the lower, human realm of perceptible plurality, namely the spatial and temporal symbols of the scriptures and the liturgy.'⁸ By revealing the unified divine realm within the mundane realm, the liturgy points to the connection between God and His people and, in so doing, points to the unity among people through God. As Denys writes, 'Every sacredly initiating operation draws our fragmented lives together into a one-like divinization' (*EH* 424C).

For Denys, then, the liturgy enacts both communion among people and a kataphatic mode of language for discussion about God. But the liturgy does not only use the kataphatic mode of language, it uses the apophatic mode as well. Let us consider the following passage where Denys contemplates the rite of anointing: 'The visible consecration of the ointment is not uncommunicated or unseen by those around the hierarch. Indeed, this sacrament is there for them to behold because they can contemplate something which is beyond the ken of the crowd' (*EH* 476B). Here Denys explains the symbolism of the anointing by showing the practice itself within its communal context but also by explaining that toward which the symbols point is beyond communal understanding. The kataphatic use of speech within the liturgy leads to the apophatic return of language to its source.

Communal Understanding

In his *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein writes, 'So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use — the meaning — of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear. ... One has already to know (or be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing's name' (*PI* §30).⁹ Denys would say that one has to be able to take part in the liturgy to be able to call on God's name correctly. There are particularly interesting overlaps between Wittgenstein's famous rejection of the possibility of a private language (in his *Philosophical Investigations*), and the centrality of the liturgy in Denys's thought, which is most thoroughly explored in the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*.¹⁰ Both works are similarly interested in the apophatic return of language to its source. If the referential quality of language denotes a kataphatic element, the realisation of the communal basis for that referential quality denotes the apophatic element.

In arguing against the possibility of a private language, Wittgenstein explains the inherently communal aspect of a language. Even in the most

'private' linguistic experience one could imagine, where a person makes a mark in a diary to denote a pain, for example, this language can only be understood by the person making the mark because of the communal aspect of language. As Wittgenstein writes, teasing his imagined interlocutor, 'It might be said: if you had given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly *undertake* to use the word in such-and-such a way. And how do you undertake this? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?' (*PI* §262) Wittgenstein recognises that our language is not something of our own invention, but something which (like the quotation on judgment above) is something with which we are brought up in a communal setting. In recognising this he makes the apophatic return of language to its source.¹¹

The idea of a person inventing a proper name for God is as incoherent for Denys as the idea of inventing a technique for using a word is for Wittgenstein. The faithful can worship God properly only through participation in liturgical practice. And the liturgical practice itself is based, Denys tells us, on the shared symbols of oil, baptism and eucharist. All of these symbols are that on which the language used in liturgy is based. The language used in liturgy, in turn, offers the partially descriptive names of God. For Denys, the law of prayer is the basis for the law of belief. The law of prayer always returns to the communal liturgy on which that prayer is based. The apophatic return of prayer returns to that same communal aspect to Wittgenstein's language games return.

Without question, there are important and pronounced differences between Denys and Wittgenstein on the issue of communal understandings. Perhaps the most important is Denys's insistence on hierarchies and Wittgenstein's seeming disavowal of hierarchies. This distinction points to a more fundamental issue between Denys and Wittgenstein: namely, Denys's inheritance of neo-Platonic metaphysics and the lack of such a vast metaphysical system supposedly at work in Wittgenstein's writings. In answer to these serious objections, I want to argue that far too much has been made of Denys's reliance on neo-Platonic metaphysics and far too little has been made of Wittgenstein's disavowal of metaphysics.

Anna Williams has argued that Denys's hierarchy is not a hierarchy in the neo-Platonic sense. The hierarchy is a community of those being saved. Denys's focus is not on climbing up the hierarchy or being promoted to a higher rank in the hierarchy.¹² In the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* Denys writes that 'every hierarchy ... has one and the same power throughout all its hierarchical endeavour.' (*EH* 372C) Furthermore, the hierarchy, for Denys is not aristocratic, but egalitarian, as it allows all people to share in the divine mysteries. Denys writes, 'We see our human hierarchy ... as our nature allows, pluralized in a great variety of perceptible symbols lifting us

upward hierarchically until we are brought as far as we can be into the unity of divinization' (EH 373A). This lifting upward occurs because of the liturgical symbols that the community shares.

Denys's hierarchy, then, is not a problem for the community of believers, but it is certainly an issue between the community of believers and nonbelievers. Denys straightforwardly says that the unbelievers would not understand sacred rites, and indeed that the unbelievers would 'laugh heartily and pity us for our misguidedness' (EH 557A). This should not bother the believers, however, because 'scripture says "if they do not have faith they will not understand"' (EH 557A). And whilst Wittgenstein's writings do not discuss hierarchies, they are replete with discussions of communities. To return to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes

Someone coming into a strange country will sometimes learn the language of the inhabitants from ostensive definitions that they give him; and he will often have to *guess* the meaning of these definitions; and he will guess sometimes right, sometimes wrong. (PI §32)

One might add that there might well be instances when a stranger to a country would pity the misguidedness of those he watches. Yet, for Wittgenstein, this pity would have no basis other than the form of life that the stranger was brought up in. In the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein imagines being asked whether he was not, at bottom, a behaviourist, believing that everything but human behaviour was a sort of fiction. To this he replies, 'If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a *grammatical* fiction' (PI §307)

It is here that we can start to think of metaphysics in conjunction with Wittgenstein. Conor Cunningham has argued that for Wittgenstein, "Grammar" enables a sort of legitimation which is apparently descriptive and not explanatory, because grammar offers itself as the inherent structure that makes description possible, a type of reality without having to posit reality.¹³ Grammar then becomes a sort of *a priori* not at all unlike the *a priori* of liturgical symbols one finds in the writings of Denys. And like Denys's liturgical symbols, grammar becomes the basis for meaningful interaction within the community. The caveat, of course, is that grammar is not universal and so communication between groups might not always be possible.

Traditional understandings of metaphysics tend to have connotations of certainty; that is, if we could simply get our metaphysical picture correct, then our philosophical and theological problems would come into their proper focus. My contention in this section, however, is that for Denys and for Wittgenstein thinking in such terms turns out to be unhelpful. Instead, if we think of both writers as working within a tradition of negative theology (although neither, especially Wittgenstein, would

think of himself as doing that) we see that kataphasis, apophasis and mysticism better describe what each is up to. Negative theology is not primarily concerned with metaphysical questions, but instead with how our common practice both tells us all we can know about God, all the while knowing that this knowledge falls infinitely short of fully knowing God. In the same way, Wittgenstein's discussion of language does provide room for a seemingly infinite number of descriptions, but the apophatic element of a lack of one particular, all-encompassing description remains. For both thinkers, then, our human finitude is a key component of our understanding of both liturgy and language.

Thus far, I have tried to sketch an account whereby the similarities between Denys and Wittgenstein on the issues of kataphasis and apophasis have come to the fore. The last note of human finitude provides an *entrée* into a discussion of mysticism. I now turn to the mystical element in both thinkers, a mystical element borne of the interaction between the kataphatic and the apophatic. Far from being a private experience, the mystical is properly understood in terms of human union with the divine within a communal setting. In the same way, Wittgenstein's writings invite us to see ourselves not as atomized individuals set over and against the communities in which we live, but instead as being formed by and helping to form those communities.

Social Self

If we are not atomized individuals, we need at least to account for why such a picture of selfhood is widely held, in philosophical as well as religious circles. The mystical element in both Denys and Wittgenstein firmly resists such atomist tendencies. If we look to Wittgenstein's remarks as collected in *Culture and Value*¹⁴ and Denys's *Mystical Theology*¹⁵, we can see how for both writers, there is indeed an ineffable, and that the individual's connection to the ineffable is both intrinsic and understood through praxis.

Fergus Kerr, in explaining Wittgenstein's view of the self in the community, quotes the following passage from *Culture and Value*, 'Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning' (CV p. 17). Kerr notes, 'The background, which is, so to speak, the swarming carpet of human activity, cannot be captured in any representation. The ineffable is the whole hurly-burly; the whole hurly-burly is the ineffable.'¹⁶ In describing the ineffability of the given, Kerr writes, 'the given cannot be discovered except by showing how it makes possible all that we do and suffer.'¹⁷

Denys is also concerned about human interaction in the face of 'the given.' The given, of course, for Denys is given by God. In the *Mystical Theology* Denys notes that Moses does not contemplate God, but

contemplates where God dwells. He finds this intriguing and writes, 'This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One.' (*MT* p. 137) This quotation bears a striking resemblance to Wittgenstein's words about the inexpressible. And the focus on contemplation of where God dwells, as opposed to contemplating God himself, points to a similar point of convergence between Denys and Wittgenstein: both are focused on the *practical doing* of people in light of the mysterious.

If Denys and Wittgenstein are focused on human action, the question then arises: what prompts and directs this human action. I want to point to another place of convergence between Denys and Wittgenstein here, namely the focus of each on beauty. For at the heart of Denys's and Wittgenstein's understanding of wonder is their understanding of beauty. Near the end of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein writes, 'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' (6.44)¹⁸ and then 'The feeling of the world as a limited whole is the mystical feeling' (6.45). And if there is the mystical for Wittgenstein, then another name for the inexpressible mystery is ethics or aesthetics, as he famously wrote: 'It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one)' (*TLP* 6.421). His concern for the aesthetic seems to have occupied Wittgenstein throughout his life, not only when he wrote the *Tractatus* but as late as 1949, when he wrote, 'I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only *conceptual* and *aesthetic* questions do that' (*CV* p. 79). For someone so ostensibly interested in the way language works, the issue of transcendence plays an important role for Wittgenstein. What cannot be spoken of is that which has a hold on us, and that which, in a sense, undergirds our language. Our recognition of this, for Wittgenstein, constitutes the type of mysticism that Carlson described Denys as being interested in. Yet we must note that Wittgenstein's 'mysticism' must be put in inverted commas because unlike Denys, Wittgenstein's 'mysticism' does not include communion with the divine. Stanley Cavell offers a helpful explanation of what it might look like. Cavell writes, 'For Wittgenstein, philosophy comes to grief not in denying what we all know to be true, but in its effort to escape those human forms of life which alone provide the coherence of our expression. He wishes an acknowledgment of human limitation which does not leave us chafed by our own skin, by a sense of powerlessness to penetrate beyond the human conditions of knowledge.'¹⁹ The mystical feeling arises when individuals recognise themselves as limited parts of a limited whole. Our language properly understood in its kataphatic mode and its apophatic mode helps to situate us properly in the world.

For all of his supposed interest in the transcendence of God, Denys returns again and again to the quotidian beauty around us which enables humanity to be able to contemplate God's grandeur. Commenting on Denys, Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

The more deeply our wonder experiences the unmanifest God, and does not simply know him, the more the aesthetic relationship is transcended, the more it is possible to discern in the manifestation *what* is really manifest, the more the truth of the aesthetic emerges.²⁰

It is worth noting that for Balthasar the truth of the aesthetic *emerges*, and does not, for example, descend. The truth of the aesthetic emerges for Denys and for Wittgenstein through the individual's sense of wonder at being part of what Wittgenstein called above 'the limited whole.' This wonder that arises is beyond description. About this, Denys would say (in a manner totally befitting Wittgenstein),

When we assert what is beyond every assertion, we must then proceed from what is most akin to it, and as we do so we make the affirmation on which everything else depends. But when we deny that which is beyond every denial, we have to start by denying those qualities which differ most from the goal we hope to attain. (MT 1033C)

Far from being left with the inability to do anything in light of the wonder we sense as part of a fragile whole, we express our wonder through our practices. As Wittgenstein writes in *Culture and Value* (in a manner totally befitting Denys)

A theology which insists on the use of *certain particular* words and phrases, and outlaws others, does not make anything clearer (Karl Barth). It gesticulates with words, as one might say, because it wants to say something and does not know how to express it. *Practice* gives the words their sense. (CV p. 85)

For both Denys and Wittgenstein, then, we can and must use language kataphatically to offer descriptions, but we must realise that language so used leads us to use language apophatically and recognise that our language depends on the everyday prelinguistic practices we perform in a communal setting. By paying attention to our kataphatic and apophatic use of language, our ineffable, mystical union with God (for Denys) or with the community (for Wittgenstein) comes about. And once we allow this union to come about, everything else, as Chesterton would say, can (start to) become lucid.

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1 G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996), p. 31.

2 This work has been done largely in an American context, where Mark C. 228

- Taylor and John Caputo have sought to link Jacques Derrida's writings with religion. Derrida has seen the connections himself. See especially Mark C. Taylor, *Erring a postmodern atheology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), and *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also John Caputo, *The prayers and tears of Jacques Derrida: religion without religion*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997) and *Radical hermeneutics: repetition, deconstruction, and the hermeneutic project*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987). As for Derrida, see the collection of three of his essays in Jacques Derrida, *On the Name*, edited by Thomas Dutoit (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995) and Harold Coward and Toby Foshay, editors, *Derrida and Negative Theology*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).
- 3 Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 159.
 - 4 D.Z. Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, (London: Macmillan, 1986), p. 18.
 - 5 Ludwig Wittgenstein; G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, editors, *On Certainty*, trans. by Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969).
 - 6 Phillips (as in n. 4), p. 28.
 - 7 Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. by Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), pp. 200, n.17.
 - 8 Paul Rorem, *Biblical and Liturgical Symbols with the Pseudo-Dionysian Synthesis*, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1984), p. 117. I will be returning to the 'less metaphysical' reading of Denys in the section 'Communal Understanding' below.
 - 9 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967).
 - 10 Found in Pseudo-Dionysius (as in a. 7)
 - 11 I will be explaining this return in further detail in the section 'Social Self.'
 - 12 I came to understand these points during a lecture Anna Williams gave in the Cambridge University Divinity Faculty on 27 January 2003. See especially *EH 373C*.
 - 13 Conor Cunningham, 'Wittgenstein After Theology', in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, editors, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 73.
 - 14 Ludwig Wittgenstein; G.H. von Wright, editor, *Culture and Value*, trans. by Peter Winch (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980).
 - 15 Found in Pseudo-Dionysius (as in n. 7)
 - 16 Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 2nd edition. (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 65.
 - 17 *Ibid.*, p.69.
 - 18 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).
 - 19 Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1969), p.61.
 - 20 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Volume 2, trans. by A. Louth, F. McDonagh, B. McNeil (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1984), p. 165.