CHAPTER 12

The Limits of Negative Theology

Presupposes: the zero-complexity constraint (Ch. 6); the exhibitive closure of the grid of diffs (Ch. 7, §4.1); the two infinities (Ch. 8); the ecumenical result, a ground without mind (Ch. 10, §6).

Establishes: that the closure argument catches every form of the negative-theological claim; that negative theology correctly identifies the structural limit of thought but misinterprets it as a theological resource.

In brief. Negative theology is the most structurally accurate theology available — and that is the problem. The tradition says the divine ground is without form, without attributes, without dimension, unpicturable by any mind. Read privatively — the reading the tradition's own descriptions favour — those are, point for point, the properties of the undifferentiated terminus, and this book agrees. The dispute begins at the interpretation. The tradition reads the limit as a mind too great for concepts; this chapter reads it as a state too simple for them — lacking the very distinctions that knowing, willing, and loving require. And the via negativa cannot walk to the limit: every negation ("not wise," "not finite," "not this, not that") draws a new contrast, so each act of stripping away generates content instead of shedding it. The strip-everything method, followed rigorously, does not reach an ineffable intelligence. It reaches the structural boundary of intelligence itself.

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1 Introduction

This is the final chapter of the theological sequence. If God cannot be positively described, perhaps God transcends description altogether — negative theology's last retreat, the claim that God lies beyond the reach of language, knowledge, and thought.

Pseudo-Dionysius argues that God transcends all affirmation and all negation (*Mystical Theology*, ch. 5). The chapter targets the privative form of the claim, on which God lies beyond contrast as such, and grants the eminent form to the theologians who hold it (§5; Perl, 2007).

Maimonides holds that no positive attribute can be predicated of God (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 1963, I.58), though the *Guide* also affirms attributes of action (I.52–54): positive descriptions of what God does rather than what God is, which places Maimonides partly within the disciplinary apophaticism §6.2 exempts. The tradition's own texts divide along the very line the chapter draws.

Turner (1995) defends apophatic theology as the authentic Christian tradition. Sells (1994) provides the standard scholarly treatment of apophatic language across traditions, on which mystical texts employ "unsaying", the immediate retraction of every positive claim about the divine, a performative dynamic that points beyond language without asserting. The question for the closure argument is whether that dynamic escapes the grid of diffs or merely generates additional diffs within it. Burrell (1973, 2004) argues that the grammar of divinity is irreducibly negative, while Alston's (1991) non-propositional experiential awareness and Marion's (2002) saturated phenomenon are engaged in full at §6.1.

The concession available to the unsaying tradition can be stated in advance, in the vocabulary Chapter 7 (§4.1) supplies, because stating it fixes what the dispute with Sells is and is not about. The mystic can be granted exhibitive closure without remainder: no utterance, retraction, or performative spiral exhibits a non-diff, and Sells's own analysis of unsaying, on which each negation generates the next, is a description of diffs proliferating, which the tradition's best readers have always half-known.

What the mystic cannot derive from that concession is ontic openness. The performative dynamic shows that language keeps moving; it does not show that the movement tracks, gestures at, or is caused by a condition beyond the partition. The battleground with Sells therefore lies past the rhetoric, whose analysis the chapter accepts, at the inference from rhetorical inexhaustibility to ontological exception — an inference §4.3's account of productive negation dismantles, since the negations produce new content, and new content is new diffs, all the way up.

This chapter applies the closure argument (Chapter 7, §4) to the apophatic tradition. Every cognitive act is a diff, no cognitive act escapes the grid, and the closure is structural rather than transcendental, since it holds for any possible mind, being grounded in the nature of meaning rather than in the limitations of human cognition.

The chapter's thesis: negative theology correctly identifies the structural limit of thought but incorrectly treats this limit as a theological resource. What lies at the limit is the boundary of meaning itself — a condition neither full nor empty, from which no resource can be drawn.

The chapter acknowledges what negative theology gets right (§2), applies the closure argument to theology (§3), examines six forms of the negative theological claim (§4), and draws the constructive consequence (§5).

One engagement conducted inside the objections (§6.1) functions as a finding and should be read as one. The analysis of Marion's saturated phenomenon concludes that what saturation exceeds is conceptual capture rather than determination itself, since the saturated phenomenon is this encounter rather than that, a diff of maximal richness. That is the chapter's most constructive verdict on mystical experience, and it belongs beside §5.

2 What Negative Theology Gets Right

Before applying the closure argument, the chapter must acknowledge the substantial insights of the apophatic tradition. Three are particularly important, and each is given its full due, because the apophatic tradition deserves more than dismissal. The third turns out to be the tradition's deepest contribution: one that the present analysis does not reject but incorporates.

2.1 Anti-idolatry

Negative theology correctly warns against treating any human concept, image, or description as an adequate representation of the ultimate ground of reality. The history of theology is, in part, a history

of conceptual idolatry: the elevation of particular, culturally conditioned images of God to the status of unconditioned truth. The apophatic tradition's insistence that every positive characterisation must be qualified, revised, or ultimately surpassed is a real contribution to intellectual integrity.

Davies (2004) develops the case for theological modesty with particular care. The concept of God does not pick out a member of a genus, and positive theological predication must be understood analogically rather than univocally; the stronger use of the same observation, that God stands outside the partition's domain altogether, is met in §4.4. The present analysis agrees and provides the explanation: every concept is a diff, and the divine, if it is what the apophatic tradition describes, is the structural boundary at which concepts terminate. The two converge on the same practical counsel: hold every positive characterisation lightly.

No concept captures reality whole, since every diff is a partial, contrastive determination, and on this point the analysis and the apophatic tradition are in full agreement.

2.2 Conceptual humility

The apophatic tradition correctly insists that human cognitive capacities are limited and that the reality behind our concepts may exceed what those concepts can capture. This is a sober epistemological observation, and the analysis agrees: the epistemological grid is a subset of the ontological grid (Chapter 7, §3), so there may always be real distinctions that no mind has registered. The three-grid architecture (Chapter 7, §3) makes this explicit, since the ontological grid always exceeds the epistemological grid, which always exceeds the linguistic grid. The apophatic intuition that reality is richer than our descriptions of it is therefore structurally correct.

2.3 The unpicturability of the ground

The third insight is the deepest; it is where the apophatic tradition comes closest to a discovery. Negative theology insists that the ultimate ground of reality is radically unlike anything we can picture: that it

exceeds not just our current concepts but the very capacity of the mind to form an image of it. Maimonides' insistence that God is beyond all positive characterisation, Pseudo-Dionysius's claim that God transcends both affirmation and negation, the Vedāntic teaching that Brahman is neti neti, "not this, not that" — each expresses the conviction that the ground is structurally unpicturable, beyond mere unknowability.

The analysis does not reject this insight. It explains it. A state of zero complexity, without any internal distinction, is indeed unpicturable, and the reason is structural: a mind constituted by distinctions cannot form a positive image of a state without them (Chapter 8, §3). Every attempt to picture zero complexity produces a picture, and a picture is a structured representation with internal distinctions — figure and ground, colour and contrast, spatial arrangement. The mind can think about zero complexity, characterising it structurally as this book does, while it cannot think in the terms of zero complexity, because thinking in those terms would require a thought without content, which is not a thought.

This is why the negative theologian's descriptions of God sound so much like descriptions of equality. When Maimonides says God has no positive attributes, when Pseudo-Dionysius says God is beyond affirmation and negation, when the Vedāntic tradition says Brahman is without qualities, nirguna, each, on the privative reading its words invite, is describing a state without internal distinction: undetectable, unimaginable, dimensionless, without identity, without limits. These are, point for point, the structural properties of equality as characterised in Chapters 4 and 5.

Negative theology is therefore, in this specific sense, the most structurally accurate theology available, since read privatively — and §5 weighs the two readings its language admits — its descriptions are, point for point, the properties of the grounding terminus. The analysis agrees with negative theology that the ground is unimaginable, undetectable, and without dimension, identity, space, time, or limits. It agrees that every positive image we project onto the ground — a face, a mind, a will, a plan — is a projection of diversity onto a state defined by its absence.

The disagreement begins at the next step. The apophatic tradition treats the unpicturability of the ground as evidence of transcendent intelligence: a mind so great that no concept can contain it. The present analysis treats the unpicturability as evidence of zero complexity: a state so simple that there is no content for concepts to contain. The same structural observation, that the ground is unlike anything we can picture, therefore receives opposite interpretations. The tradition says: unlike anything we can picture, therefore greater than thought. The analysis says: unlike anything we can picture, therefore simpler than thought — because the very conditions for thought, distinction, determination, and contrast, are what the ground lacks.

This interpretation is supported by the structural analysis of Chapters 4–6, and the choice it forces is developed as the chapter's central fork at §5. A state unpicturable because it exceeds all determination is infinite diversity, within the grid and thoroughly characterised by diffs, while a state unpicturable because it lacks all determination is zero complexity. On neither reading is the ground an ineffable intelligence.

3 The Closure Applied to Theology

The theological application of the closure argument turns on an observation. The negative theologian makes claims about God: that God is unknowable, beyond language, beyond logic, infinite, or beyond all categories. Each of these claims is a cognitive act. Each has content (it says something about God's relationship to knowledge, language, logic, or categories). Each content is a diff (it contrasts with alternatives: knowable vs. unknowable, within language vs. beyond it). Therefore each claim is a move within the grid of diffs. The negative theologian operates within the grid while claiming to point beyond it.

The apophatic dilemma. The negative theologian faces a dilemma. Either her claims about God have content — they say something, they carry meaning, they contrast with alternatives — in which case the claims are diffs and fall within the grid. Or her claims about God have no content — they say nothing, carry no meaning, draw no contrast —

in which case they are empty labels, words without diffs, and they fail to establish anything about God at all. On the first horn negative theology is self-defeating, since it uses the grid to point beyond the grid. On the second horn it is self-dissolving, since it says nothing.

A further point connects the closure to the three-grid architecture (Chapter 7, §3). When the negative theologian uses the word "beyond," she deploys a label, and a label attaches to a diff (within the epistemological grid) or to a distinction (within the ontological grid). The word "beyond" does not take the theologian beyond the grid; it adds a new entry to it.

4 Six Applications

The closure argument applies to six forms of the negative theological claim. The first three (unknowability, beyond language, and beyond logic) exhibit the same structural pattern: each is a diff that operates within the grid it purports to transcend. They are treated together to establish the general pattern. The remaining three (infinity, negation of all predicates, and beyond the duality) each contribute something structurally distinct and receive individual development.

4.1 The general pattern: unknowable, beyond language, beyond logic

"God is unknowable." The claim has content: it says something about God's epistemic status. That content is a diff: it contrasts "unknowable" with "knowable" and attributes one to God rather than the other. The negative theologian claims to know something about God: namely, that God is unknowable. The claim is self-referentially within the grid it purports to transcend.

"God is beyond language." The claim is made in language. It attributes a property (being beyond language) to a subject (God). The attribution is a diff: it contrasts "beyond language" with "within language." The sentence operates within the linguistic grid while claiming to point beyond it.

"God is beyond logic." The claim has logical structure, since it attributes a property to a subject and asserts this attribution as true rather than false. The assertion is a diff, distinguishing "God is beyond logic" from "God is not beyond logic" and endorsing one over the other. If the theologian insists that God is truly beyond logical structure, then the claim lacks logical structure, and therefore lacks content, and therefore says nothing.

The three claims share a single pattern: each deploys a distinction — knowable against unknowable, within against beyond language, within against beyond logic — to assert that God is on one side of the distinction rather than the other. Each assertion is a diff, and each diff is within the grid. The grid catches the claim because the claim's content is constituted by the very contrastive structure the claim purports to transcend.

Turner (1995) argues that the apophatic tradition does not simply assert God's unknowability as a proposition but performs a progressive unsaying: a systematic stripping away of every assertion about God, including the assertion of unknowability itself. But the stance beyond both affirmation and denial is itself a cognitive stance: a determination, distinguishable from affirmation, from denial, and from indifference. Chapter 7 (§4.6) established that even Pyrrhonian suspension is a diff, and Turner's "unsaying" is structurally parallel, since it is a cognitive operation that produces a specific outcome, where the outcome is a diff.

4.2 "God is infinite"

This form contributes something the general pattern does not: the two-infinities distinction of Chapter 8. The claim "God is infinite" is ambiguous between infinite diversity and infinite equality (Chapter 8, §4). If God is infinitely diverse (endlessly structured, with an infinite number of internal distinctions), then God is within the grid, thoroughly characterised by diffs. If God is infinitely equal (without any internal distinction), then God is at zero complexity, and the zero-complexity constraint (Chapter 6, §2.3) applies: no cognitive property can characterise such a state.

On neither reading does the predicate "infinite" take God beyond the grid. The ambiguity of "infinite", which Chapter 8 showed persists because a mind constituted by distinctions cannot form a positive image of a state without them, is what allows the predicate to seem as though it points beyond the grid. Once the ambiguity is resolved, the appearance dissolves, and neither infinity supports the attribution of intelligence.

4.3 "God is the negation of all predicates"

Negation is productive. This is the strongest form of the apophatic claim, and it contributes an observation the general pattern does not: negation is itself a productive operation within the grid. To negate all predicates is to deny every determination — to say that God is not wise, not powerful, not good, not existent in any ordinary sense, not any particular thing.

C. Keller (2014) argues that negative theology plays a constructive role that purely logical analyses miss, since the via negativa is a disciplined practice of epistemic humility rather than merely a series of denials. Keller is right that the practice has value, as the anti-idolatry acknowledgment (§2.1) concedes, and her constructive reading is compatible with disciplinary apophaticism, negation as qualification, while not being compatible with hard apophaticism, negation as ontological escape, because negation is itself a cognitive operation. To deny that God is wise is to distinguish "God is wise" from "God is not wise" and endorse the latter. Each negation produces a diff, so the most comprehensively negated God is the God defined by the greatest number of negations, each a diff, each within the grid.

The negative theologian who strips away every positive predicate does not approach a realm beyond diffs; she generates a new diff with every act of stripping. The via negativa, far from escaping the grid, is one of its most productive operations. The tradition assumes that negation approaches the divine by successive approximation, while the closure argument shows that each negation brings us further into the grid rather than closer to its boundary.

The boundary is reached not by negating predicates, which multiplies diffs, but by the dissolution of the conditions for predication altogether, which is what zero complexity is. The via negativa and zero complexity are therefore structurally different: the former is an operation within the grid, the latter the grid's structural limit.

The Dionysian hyper. The tradition's most disciplined text makes the dilemma available in its own vocabulary, and one case is worth working at the level of the words. Pseudo-Dionysius closes the *Mystical Theology* (ch. 5) by denying of the divine cause both every affirmation and every denial: it is hyper, beyond, assertion and negation alike, beyond even the negations the treatise has just performed. The hyper prefix carries the whole apophatic hope, and the framework's question to it is direct: what operation does "beyond" perform?

Read as eminence — the cause exceeds each predicate by possessing more than the predicate can say — the prefix describes a being of surpassing determination: within the grid, richer than our concepts while not beyond concepts as such. That is disciplinary apophaticism, and it concedes the chapter's point.

Read as privation — the cause is beyond the predicates because it bears none — the prefix names the undifferentiated terminus, and the zero-complexity constraint applies to everything the treatise wishes to keep.

And read as a third operation, neither eminence nor privation, the prefix must still individuate its result, distinguishing what is hyper from what is affirmed and from what is denied, and that act of individuation is a diff — which is §4.4's closure arriving on schedule.

The Dionysian corpus is set in its tradition, and the two readings weighed against its own language, in Appendix B (§4.2). The present point is narrower: the most rigorous apophatic text available exhibits no operation that escapes the dilemma, and its final hyper is either a superlative within the grid or a name for the grid's boundary.

4.4 "God is beyond the duality of diversity and equality"

Beyond the duality. This is the most radical apophatic claim: that God is neither differentiated nor undifferentiated but beyond the distinction itself. Chapter 3 addressed this claim directly through two independent arguments, predicative priority and constitutive instantiation (§2.3), and tested it against six philosophical traditions (§3). The result: the diversity/equality partition is exhaustive, and no third option exists, since a state either has at least one internal distinction or it does not.

Nor can the "beyond" be a non-being lying outside the partition. A non-being that obtained would, by the analysis of Chapter 3 (§3.5), already be a state of equality, so the position "beyond the duality" has no occupant that is not, on inspection, one of the duality's two members. The supposed third is the empty slot of the being/non-being contrast, which cannot be filled without becoming equality.

The claim to be "beyond the duality" is itself a cognitive act: a diff that distinguishes "beyond" from "within" the partition. If the claim has content, it is within the grid; if it has no content, it says nothing. The exhaustiveness of the partition forecloses the third option, and the closure of the grid catches the claim. The convergence of the two results is structural, both being consequences of the constitutive instantiation of distinction by the operation of distinguishing (Chapter 3, §2.3): the claim "God is beyond the duality" is an act of distinguishing, and falls within the partition it purports to transcend by the very operation it uses to make itself.

The refusal has a more disciplined form; it is the standard one in the analytic literature this chapter draws on, made by authors it cites with approval. Davies (2004) and Burrell (2004) hold that God is not a being among beings, not a member of any genus, not an item, state, or entity at all. The partition quantifies over states — whatever obtains and is either internally differentiated or not — and ipsum esse subsistens, subsistent being itself, is not in that domain. On this view the partition does not misclassify God; it does not reach him, as "odd or even" does not reach a colour. Two analytic forms of the refusal belong with it.

Hick's (1989) Real an sich, of which neither unity nor plurality, neither personhood nor its absence, can be predicated, is the hard claim in the vocabulary of religious pluralism. Jacobs (2015) gives the refusal its most careful recent form: predications of God are true and non-fundamental, while the fundamental truths about the divine nature are inexpressible, so that no concept carves that nature at its joints.

Three results answer the refusal. First, the domain. The partition quantifies over whatever obtains, states natively and fact-idioms through the transfer principle (Chapter 4, §3), and subsistent being itself, if it obtains, bears at least one internal distinction or bears none, with the hard-edge corollary (Chapter 3, §4.1) guaranteeing that the question has a determinate answer and exhaustiveness guaranteeing that no third cell exists. Nor is the partition a genus from which God might be exempt, since it is the pre-generic division every genus presupposes — any category is a partition, and partitions presuppose structural difference (Chapter 2, §2.1) — so refusing genus-membership cannot exempt anything from it. The refusal operates above the level at which the partition already applies.

Second, the reflexive point. "Is not a member of any genus" is a predication that individuates God, and the act of refusing classification is an act of distinguishing. The refusal arrives gridded. One scruple keeps the point within its warrant, as Chapter 3 (§3.4) was careful to do: the observation classifies the refusal, not God — that refusing classification is itself a classifying act says where the theologian stands, and not yet where God does. The point bites only when the refusal is offered as information about its object, as the tradition's hard form offers it; offered as a discipline on speech and no more, it is untouched.

Third, the destination. Pressed for what it amounts to, the refusal lands where every apophatic claim lands: on eminence, whose plenitude either contains distinction or surrenders its content (Chapter 10, §3.2); on privation, which is the terminus; or on a refusal disowned of all content, which is theoretical vacancy. There is no fourth address. Jacobs's cut between fundamental and non-fundamental truth receives the same three results: the cut is a distinction drawn within God-talk, so gridded; the inexpressible nature either bears determinations no concept

carves, and is diversity, or bears none, and is the terminus; and the thesis itself, that no truth about God's intrinsic nature is fundamental, falls by that cut among the non-fundamental truths, stated within that talk and gridded with it. Hick's Real fares alike, since "neither one nor many" is either a description, so gridded, or the withdrawal of every description, and the second horn of the fork. The fictionalist route Scott and Citron (2016) canvass in answer to the self-defeat charge — God-talk as a fiction that guides without describing — takes the third address by design, a fiction being a determinate content that describes no feature of its object.

5 The Dissolution

Negative theology is structurally correct about something important. Zero complexity is beyond all categories, all meaning, and all thought, since at zero complexity all three grids terminate simultaneously (Chapter 7, §3), where the boundary is unlike anything we can picture, for the structural reason §2.3 acknowledged. But the negative theologian draws the wrong consequence. She treats the limit as a theological resource: as evidence that God is so transcendent that no positive description can capture him, with the transcendence of the limit taken as a sign of divine greatness. The two readings differ in what they ask of the terminus; the difference is the whole of the charge. The resource claim needs the terminus to have determinations — a greatness, a transcendence, something for the negations to be true of eminently — while the boundary claim needs none; the terminus has none (Chapter 6). What the negative theologian described needs no addition; what she went on to say needs what the description excludes.

The closure argument shows that the limit is a boundary rather than a sign of greatness: the point at which meaning dissolves. What follows about the ultimate itself follows on the fork of §4.4 rather than around it, and the conditionality is carried into what follows.

Take the apophatic description at its word, an ultimate beyond all predication, and what is described lacks the precondition for predication and is equality, to which the inventory below applies directly. Disown

the description, and what is retained is indistinguishable, for every theoretical purpose, from the condition the inventory describes. The fork is exhaustive, and neither horn leaves the tradition an ultimate the inventory misses.

What lies at the boundary is the absence of the conditions for anything to be God in any theologically recognisable sense. At zero complexity there is no knowledge, because knowledge requires determination; no will, because will requires the distinction between alternatives; no love, because love requires the distinction between lover and beloved; no creativity, because creativity requires the distinction between the created and the uncreated; and no awareness, because awareness requires that something be manifest rather than not. Every property the theological tradition attributes to God, whether positively or negatively, requires at least one distinction, and at zero complexity there are none.

The negative theologian secures transcendence at the cost of every positive theological claim. If God is truly beyond all diffs, then "God knows", "God loves", "God wills", and "God creates" are all empty — not because they fail to capture God's greatness but because at zero complexity there is no meaning for them to carry.

The dissolution is not the argument that God does not exist. It is the argument that a God at zero complexity, a God at the structural boundary of meaning, is a God about whom nothing theologically substantive can be said. Theology requires meaning. Meaning requires diffs. Diffs require distinction. Zero complexity has none.

The generous engagement of §2 makes the dissolution sharper, not softer. The more seriously the apophatic insight is taken, and the more rigorously every positive characterisation, every image, every conceptual projection is stripped away, the more clearly zero complexity comes into view. The apophatic tradition's own method, pursued to its structural conclusion, leads not to an ineffable intelligence but to the structural boundary of intelligence itself. The tradition's deepest insight and the present conclusion need not be opposed; on the

privative reading of the tradition's own language, they are the same observation, differently interpreted.

A note on what this does and does not establish. The closure argument and the exhaustiveness of the partition (§§4, 4.4) are probative, since any candidate for the divine, in whatever terms it is described, must fall within the diversity/equality partition, and a God said to be beyond all distinction is no exception. What is not thereby proved is that the apophatic theologian, in her own intention, refers to the undifferentiated terminus.

Her negations admit two readings, so the result is a dilemma rather than a single identification: the apophatic fork of Chapter 3 (§3.4), reached there from the occupancy test and here from the closure argument — two routes to one result through a shared foundation, since both trace to the constitutive instantiation thesis (Chapter 3, §2.3) and behind it to the dependence of content on contrast. That is corroboration of the derivation's stability rather than independent confirmation: if the foundation fails, both routes fail together, and the fork's security is the foundation's.

Read as eminence — God exceeds our categories through a fullness no concept can contain — the negations describe a being rich in determination, hence a being of diversity: within the grid, beyond us while not beyond description as such. That is the disciplinary apophaticism of §6.2 rather than the hard claim.

Read as the absence of determination — God truly bears no internal distinction — the negations describe the undifferentiated terminus, which has being while, lacking all distinction, hosting neither knowledge nor will nor love. The contrast is not that the undifferentiated is empty rather than full, since it is neither, being without internal contrast and yet not nothing (Chapter 4; Chapter 11, §4.3). The point is that the determinations the tradition means to preserve — knowing, willing, loving — are themselves distinctions, so they cannot survive at the limit where distinction is absent, wherever that limit's being places it.

That the tradition's own descriptions — without form, without attribute, without dimension — read more naturally as the second than the first is a reason to prefer the identification with equality rather than a proof of it. A theologian who insists her negations are meant by eminence is owed the first horn, at the cost that her God is then no longer beyond the grid but within it, and the hard apophatic claim is given up.

The tradition has an answer to the fork; it should be met where it is strongest. On the doctrine of participation, everything that exists has its being from a source that contains eminently whatever it lends (Aquinas, ST I, q. 44, a. 1; q. 13, a. 2), so "beyond words" means not less than any description but more; and on the doctrine of the image, the creature bears a likeness of the source that lets it reach, in negation, toward what it cannot state. The *hyper-* vocabulary of Pseudo-Dionysius — *hyperousios*, beyond being — is the grammar of this reading, and Perl (2007) has shown it is meant as superabundance rather than privation. The reply is not to choose privation against it. It is to ask what the superabundance is a superabundance of. If it is a fullness of determinations — every perfection held together, more than any concept can span — then it is infinite diversity, which is within the grid and describable in principle (Chapter 8, §4), and the God so described is the structured ground Chapter 10 (§5.1) leaves standing; the eminent reading has been granted, at the cost the first horn states. If it is a fullness with no determinations, then "fullness" is the mind's image of the undifferentiated, an image with a twin.

For the undifferentiated is neither full nor empty; it is dimensionless, and "full" and "empty" are both contrast words, each needing a dimension along which there could be more or less. A mind constituted by distinctions cannot picture a condition that has none, and pictures it instead through one of two surrogates — the plenum, everything held in latency, or the void, everything withdrawn (Chapter 8, §3.4). The tradition's own oscillation between the language of superabundance and the language of darkness — Dionysius's *hyper-* beside his own divine darkness — is the oscillation between those two surrogates, and neither describes the terminus; each describes its own

grid's failure. The dissolution therefore takes neither side. The limit is not a resource, not because there is nothing there — that is the privative surrogate, and the fork of §4.4 has already declined it — but because a resource is drawn on, drawing requires a distinction to draw, and the dimensionless has none to give.

Participation, so read, is true in the framework and inverted in the tradition. Everything below the boundary rests on the terminus in the order Chapter 4 draws, and to that extent everything participates in it. But the tradition places the source at the top of an order of worth, the simplest as the highest, while the containment order (Chapter 4, Appendix) places the undifferentiated at the bottom of an order of what carries distinctions; and the two are not the same order. The error the fork locates is the reading of "carrying no distinction" as "surpassing every distinction", which is the fullness surrogate once more, and Chapter 10 has shown that what carries no distinction can neither know nor act, so that "highest" in the tradition's sense names a place the terminus cannot occupy. The image doctrine follows the same line: what a creature would carry as a trace of the source is its diversity — registration, distinction — which the terminus lacks, so the likeness relates the creature to the structured ground, not to the featureless (Appendix B).

One strand of the tradition already runs on the reading given here. Gregory of Nyssa's *epektasis* — the soul's endless ascent into a God who has no end, never arriving, always further (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978; Daniélou, 1944) — is a picture of infinite diversity rather than of featurelessness, since an ascent needs distinctions to ascend through and an endless one needs them without limit. The tradition's lived apophaticism presupposed the infinity the framework affirms; it was the theory of the limit that mistook the surrogate for the condition.

What the dissolution establishes is accordingly a corollary of Chapter 10 rather than a result beside it. The apophatic God, correctly read, is the structured ground the separation of ground from mind leaves standing; what negative theology contributes in its own right is the diagnosis — the two surrogates named, and the surrogate told apart from the condition.

Where the argument stands: what negative theology gets right has been credited — anti-idolatry, conceptual humility, the unpicturability of the ground (§2); the closure has been applied to theology (§3) and to six of its applications (§4); and the dissolution has been stated as a corollary of Chapter 10 (§5). What follows meets the objections.

6 Objections and Replies

6.1 The Wittgensteinian silence and mystical encounter objection

Objection — and this is arguably the strongest objection the chapter faces. Wittgenstein distinguishes saying and showing, so what cannot be said can nevertheless make itself manifest. The mystic's silence is not the absence of cognition but a non-propositional mode of awareness that the closure argument does not reach. Franke (2007) argues that the apophatic tradition's philosophical contribution is its performative dimension: the progressive unsaying that generates a distinctive experiential state.

The analysis accommodates the insight. That state is a real experience — heightened attention, cognitive openness, evaluative sensitivity to what exceeds ordinary categories — and it occurs within diversity. What the analysis denies is that the experience characterises the state it purports to approach, since the experience of approaching zero complexity is an experience within diversity, while zero complexity itself is not an experience at all.

Relatedly, apophatic theology is not an attempt to make claims about God but a spiritual practice: a progressive stripping away of concepts that culminates in union with the divine through unknowing. Alston (1991) argues that experiential awareness of God is non-propositional, a direct perceptual encounter that does not decompose into beliefs or judgements. Marion (2002) argues that certain phenomena saturate the categories of the understanding, exceeding rather than failing to meet the conditions for conceptual determination.

The practitioner does not claim to think about God; she claims to encounter God just where thought fails.

Reply. The closure argument targets meaning rather than propositionality. This distinction is essential; it is what separates the present argument from a narrow propositionalism that Alston and Marion could rightly resist. Even non-propositional awareness is a determination, since if the mystic is aware of something, even something ineffable, the awareness has character: it is this experience rather than no experience. That character is a diff. If the awareness has no character at all, it is the absence of awareness, misreported after the fact. Manifestation requires determination, since something manifests itself as this rather than that, and determination requires contrast. At zero complexity, nothing can manifest itself.

Marion's saturated phenomenon. This deserves fuller engagement than a summary dismissal, because Marion's phenomenology of givenness is the most sophisticated contemporary attempt to articulate a mode of awareness exceeding conceptual determination. In *Being Given* (2002), the saturated phenomenon is an intuition so rich that it exceeds the capacity of any concept to contain it, overflowing the intentional structure by which consciousness ordinarily constitutes its objects. The paradigm cases are the face of the other, which exceeds my capacity to objectify; the aesthetic sublime, which overwhelms the categories of judgement; and the revelation, which gives more than any finite mind can receive.

Marion's account of saturation admits two readings, and everything turns on which is meant. On the phenomenological reading, saturation is an extreme case of ordinary givenness, differing in degree rather than in kind from everyday perception. On the theological reading, saturation is a mode of givenness that breaks the structure of intentionality altogether. The theological reading requires an intuition without intentional structure, which is no intuition at all.

The critical literature presses in the same direction without going this far. Gschwandtner (2014) argues, from within the phenomenology of givenness, that saturated phenomena do not always appear in the

excessive mode Marion describes, and that saturation is better understood as admitting of degrees — and a saturation that comes in degrees is a saturation within the structure the theological reading has it break. Marion's own concession that saturation is often banal, coexisting with common-law and poor phenomena, grants half of this.

The diagnosis of the two readings, and the explanation of why the theological one fails, are the present analysis's own. A phenomenon that exceeds all conceptual determination is still a phenomenon, since it has intuitive content that overflows concepts. That overflow is itself a determination, because even excess is a determination: the experience of overwhelm differs from the experience of conceptual adequacy, and the saturated intuition differs from the absence of intuition. Marion's analysis, on the phenomenological reading, therefore places the saturated phenomenon firmly within diversity: a state of such extreme richness that no finite set of concepts can contain it. This is infinite diversity (Chapter 8, §4.1) rather than zero complexity.

On the theological reading, where saturation breaks intentional structure altogether, the result is not a richer-than-conceptual awareness but the structural boundary of awareness: the point at which determination ceases and experience ends. A phenomenon of zero complexity would not overwhelm concepts by exceeding them, since it would have no intuitive content for concepts to fail to capture. Marion's saturated phenomenon and zero complexity are therefore structurally opposite: one has too much content for concepts, the other none. The verdict is that only the phenomenological reading of saturation is coherent, and on that reading the saturated phenomenon is within diversity — a limiting case of experiential richness rather than an escape from the grid of diffs.

Alston's non-propositional experiential awareness faces the same dilemma developed in Chapter 6 (§4.1) for the pure consciousness event. If the encounter has character, so that the practitioner is aware of something however dimly, the encounter is a determination and therefore a diff, and the practitioner is within the grid, experiencing a state of extreme simplicity that approaches the boundary without reaching it. If the encounter has no character — no awareness, no

phenomenal experience, no way the encounter is rather than another — then the practitioner was not encountering anything; she was at the structural boundary of consciousness. Either the experience retains at least one distinction and is within the grid, or it has none and is not an experience.

And where the encounter is offered as evidence through episodic report — it happened in that prayer, it began, it ended — the lemma of Chapter 6 (§4.1) applies: any rememberable state is minimally diverse, so the report either shows structure or is withdrawn from tracking, and with it from evidence.

The argument does not deny that mystics have powerful, transformative experiences. It denies that those experiences can characterise a state of zero complexity. The experiences are real; their location is within diversity — in the richly differentiated interior of human consciousness — not at the boundary where distinction is absent.

6.2 The scope objection

Objection. The chapter targets hard apophaticism, the claim that God is truly beyond all categories. But many theologians use negative theology as a discipline, a way of qualifying positive claims without replacing them. Aquinas denies that we can know what God is while affirming that we can know that God is and what God is not. The chapter's target may be narrower than the tradition it claims to address.

Reply. The objection is correct, and the chapter is explicit about its scope. Disciplinary apophaticism — negation as intellectual humility, as a reminder that our concepts of God are always inadequate — is compatible with the present analysis. A theologian who says "God is wise, but not in the way creatures are wise" is qualifying a positive predicate while leaving its content in place. The qualification is a diff, since it distinguishes divine wisdom from creaturely wisdom, so the qualified predicate retains meaning. The analysis has no quarrel with this use of negation, and §2.1 acknowledged that the apophatic tradition's anti-idolatry and conceptual humility are contributions the analysis shares.

The chapter targets the hard form: that God is truly beyond all categories, all meaning, and all thought, with no positive predicate, however qualified, applying. This is the form defended by Pseudo-Dionysius at his most radical, by the nirguna strand of Advaita Vedānta — the tradition's texts are read against the fork at Appendix B (§2.4) — and by contemporary philosophers who treat the tradition as showing that God is beyond the reach of the grid. Scott and Citron (2016) sort the varieties of apophaticism by how much predication each retains, and the chapter's target is the strong end of their taxonomy. Theologians who use negation as qualification rather than ontological escape are not in the chapter's line of fire, where the disciplinary/hard distinction is its most important scope limitation.

6.3 The generosity objection

Objection. Section 2 is too generous. By acknowledging that the apophatic tradition has correctly identified the structural limit — that the ground is indeed unpicturable — the chapter concedes the tradition's central insight and then merely reinterprets it. The "dissolution" is a relabelling, not a refutation. The tradition says "ineffable God"; the analysis says "zero complexity." Both agree the ground is beyond thought. The difference is terminological.

Reply. The difference is substantive. One reading holds that the ground is beyond thought because it exceeds what thought can capture; the other holds that the ground is beyond thought because it falls below what thought requires. The tradition's interpretation, ineffable intelligence, attributes cognitive properties to the ground and then declares those properties beyond description. The present interpretation, zero complexity, holds that cognitive properties are absent from the ground entirely, and explains the unpicturability as a consequence of the absence of the distinctions that both pictures and cognitive properties require.

The two interpretations have entirely different consequences. If the ground is an ineffable intelligence, theology is possible in principle, since we can relate to a God who knows, loves, and wills even if we cannot fully describe him. If the ground is zero complexity, theology at

the level of the ground is not possible — not because we lack the conceptual resources but because the ground lacks the structural conditions for knowledge, love, and will.

The generous engagement of §2 makes the disagreement sharp rather than dissolving it. Both sides agree on the observation and disagree on the explanation, where the fork of §5 states the reason to prefer the present one: the tradition's own descriptions, without attributes, form, dimension, or identity, match zero complexity rather than infinite diversity.

7 Conclusion

The chapter yields two results.

The closure of the apophatic retreat. The closure argument catches every form of the negative-theological claim. Six were examined — unknowability, beyond language, beyond logic, infinity, negation of all predicates, and beyond the diversity/equality duality — and each is either self-defeating, since the claim is a diff within the grid, or self-dissolving, since if God is truly beyond all diffs every positive predicate is empty.

The structural limit misread. Negative theology correctly identifies the structural limit of thought: at zero complexity, meaning dissolves. The tradition's deepest insight, that the ground is unlike anything we can picture, is structurally correct, which the closure argument explains, since a mind constituted by distinctions cannot form a positive image of a state without them.

But the tradition treats this limit as a theological resource, as evidence of divine transcendence, when what lies at the limit is not an ineffable God but the structural boundary of meaning itself, neither full nor empty, pictured as either only by a mind that has no third image (§5). Pursued to its structural conclusion on the privative reading of its own language, the apophatic tradition arrives at zero complexity, the grounding terminus of Chapter 4; on the alternative, eminent reading it describes a determinate being within the grid. Either way the hard

apophatic claim — a God beyond all distinction yet knowing, willing, and loving — does not survive (§5). The result is a corollary of Chapter 10: the apophatic God, correctly read, is the structured ground that chapter leaves standing.

With this, the foundational, epistemological, and theological sequences are complete.

The spine of Chapters 1–12 runs: self-vindication of difference (Ch. 1) → structural dependence of content on contrast (Ch. 2) → exhaustiveness of diversity/equality (Ch. 3) → equality the foreclosing grounding terminus (Ch. 4) → temporal terminus convergence (Ch. 5) → zero-complexity constraint on cognition (Ch. 6) → structural floor beneath scepticism and closure of the grid of diffs (Ch. 7) → two-infinities ambiguity (Ch. 8) → dissolution of creation ex nihilo (Ch. 9) → separation of ground from mind and limits of divine simplicity (Ch. 10) → failure of the kalām (Ch. 11) → structural foreclosure of negative theology (Ch. 12). Each result was derived from the same foundational commitment: that content requires contrast, and that the presence or absence of contrast exhausts the space of metaphysical possibility.

Grades and Dependencies

1. **Grades.** Both results are graded *established*. Their convergence deserves an audit remark: the apophatic fork is reached by two routes — the occupancy test (Chapter 3, §3.4) and the closure argument (here) — but both trace to the constitutive instantiation thesis (Chapter 3, §2.3) and behind it to the dependence of content on contrast, so the convergence is corroboration of one derivation's stability, not independent confirmation; if the foundation fails, both routes fail together (§5 states this in the text, where a hostile critic needs it). The Premise Register records the chain.

2. **Instruments received, and one finding lodged.** This chapter uses instruments forged elsewhere: the closure argument (Chapter 7, §4) and its exhibitive/ontic vocabulary (§4.1 — the Sells concession of §1 grants exhibitive closure and denies that ontic openness follows, consistent with Chapter 7's finding that the superstructure runs on the exhibitive form alone); the two infinities (Chapter 8) at §4.2; the pure-consciousness-event

dilemma and rememberable-state lemma (Chapter 6, §4.1) at §6.1; and the eminence fork (Chapter 10, §3.2) at §4.4's third result. One constructive finding is lodged here for later use: the Marion verdict (§6.1) — saturation exceeds conceptual capture, never determination; mystical experience is real and located within diversity — is the framework's positive account of mystical experience, and Appendix B (§§2.4, 4.2) reads the Advaita and Dionysian texts against the same fork, unchanged.

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