CHAPTER 12

The Limits of Negative Theology

Try saying what God is using only denials. God is not wise. God is not finite. The hope is that stripping away every description leaves you facing something past all description. Chapter 12 argues that the stripping does the opposite. Every denial draws a fresh contrast, so each act of stripping away makes content instead of shedding it.

The target is negative theology, also called apophatic theology: the practice of speaking of God by denial. Its last retreat puts God beyond language, knowledge and thought altogether. The chapter brings one tool to that retreat, borrowed from Chapter 7. Every act of thinking is a diff, a content fixed by its contrast with at least one alternative. The whole web of such contrasts is the grid, and no act of thinking gets outside it. This holds for any possible mind, because it follows from what meaning is.

The thesis comes in two halves. Negative theology finds the real limit of thought. It then misreads that limit as something to draw on.

What the tradition gets right

The chapter credits the tradition with three insights first, and gives each its full due. No human concept is adequate to the ultimate ground of things. The book agrees, since every concept is a contrast and so is partial. Reality may also be richer than the concepts anyone has. The book agrees again, for a different reason drawn from Chapter 7. What minds register is a subset of what is real, so there may be real distinctions no mind has registered.

The third insight is the deepest, and here the tradition comes closest to a discovery. The ground is unpicturable, unlike anything a mind could form an image of. Moses Maimonides, who held that no positive attribute can be said of God, meant this. He did allow positive claims about what God does, so he stands partly outside the target. Pseudo-Dionysius, who held that God is beyond affirmation and beyond denial, meant it too. At his most radical he is inside the target. Read as speaking of an overflowing fullness, he stands outside it.

The chapter explains the insight instead of rejecting it. Picture anything at all and you have figure and ground, colour, arrangement. A state with no distinctions in it cannot be pictured by a mind that is itself built out of them. You can think about such a state by describing its structure. You cannot think in its terms, since that would take a thought with no content.

Read as naming an absence, the tradition’s words — without form, without attribute, without dimension — match the properties of the state the book calls equality, which has no internal distinction at all. Chapters 4 and 5 set those properties out. The tradition says the ground cannot be pictured because it is

greater than thought. The chapter says it cannot be pictured because it is simpler than thought, lacking the distinctions thought needs.

A dilemma for anything you say about God

The dilemma applies to claims that purport to point past the grid. Any such claim is an act of thinking. Either it has content, in which case it is a diff and sits inside the grid, or it has no content, in which case it says nothing. On the first horn negative theology defeats itself, using the grid to point past the grid. On the second it dissolves. The word “beyond” offers no exit, since using it only adds an entry to the grid.

Six forms of the claim go through this test, and three of them go the same way. To call God unknowable is to claim knowledge of God.

The fourth form, that God is infinite, is ambiguous. Chapter 8 separated two infinities. An endlessly structured God has countless internal distinctions, and so lies inside the grid. A God infinite in the other sense has none, and then a constraint from Chapter 6 bites: no thinking property can characterise such a state.

The fifth form, which strips God of every predicate, is the strongest. To deny that God is wise is to tell “God is wise” apart from “God is not wise” and endorse the second. Each denial therefore makes a new diff. The God stripped of the most predicates is the God defined by the most denials. The boundary is reached only when the conditions for saying anything dissolve.

The sixth form puts God beyond the division between diversity and equality: between having at least one internal distinction and having none. Chapter 3 argued that this division leaves no third place, so the claim has nowhere to stand. The chapter adds a scruple here. Offered as a rule for how to speak and no more, the claim is untouched.

A boundary, or a resource?

The chapter grants that at a state of no distinction every kind of description ends. What it denies is the next step, where the tradition treats that limit as a sign of divine greatness. To be a resource it needs some feature: a greatness, a transcendence, something for the denials to be eminently true of. To be a boundary it needs none, and the earlier chapters showed that it has none.

At a state with no distinction there is no knowledge, since knowing needs a determination. There is no will, since willing needs alternatives. There is no love, since love needs a lover and a beloved. Even so, this state has being. It is not nothing, though it holds no contrast inside it.

So transcendence is bought at the price of everything else. If God is truly past all contrast, then “God knows” and “God loves” carry no meaning. This is no argument that God does not exist. It is an argument that of a God at the limit nothing theologically substantive can be said.

The chapter also marks what it has not shown. It does not prove that the theologian, in her own intention, means that limit, since her denials admit two readings. So the result is a fork. Read as excess, they describe a being rich in determinations, inside the grid, which is the structured ground Chapter 10 left standing. Read as absence, they describe the limit, which hosts no knowledge or will or love. The tradition's own wording reads more naturally the second way. The chapter calls that a reason to prefer the second reading, and no proof of it.

The strongest reply available to the tradition is the doctrine of participation, from Thomas Aquinas. A source holds eminently whatever it lends, so "beyond words" means more than any description. A superabundance of what, the chapter asks. Of determinations, and it is endless structure, inside the grid. Of nothing, and "fullness" is only the mind's image of a state with no distinctions. "Full" and "empty" each need a dimension along which there could be more or less, and this state has none.

The objections the chapter answers

The objection the chapter rates strongest comes from Ludwig Wittgenstein's distinction between saying and showing. What cannot be said may still make itself manifest, so the mystic's silence is an awareness made of no statements. Jean-Luc Marion, who held that some phenomena are too rich for any concept to contain, presses the same point. The reply is that the argument is about meaning, and does not depend on awareness being made of statements. Any awareness has a character: it is this experience, where the alternative was no experience at all. That character is already a diff. On Marion the chapter lodges a finding. Saturation overflows what concepts can capture, and never determination itself, so mystical experience is real and sits among states that have distinctions.

The second objection concerns scope. Many theologians use denial as a discipline, qualifying positive claims without replacing them, as Aquinas does in holding that the theologian knows what God is not. The chapter answers that the objection is correct. To say God is wise, though not as creatures are, keeps the predicate and qualifies it, and the qualification is itself a diff. Only the hard form is the target: that no positive predicate, however qualified, applies at all. The chapter calls this its most important limit of scope.

What the chapter claims

Both results are graded *established*, the rung below the book's top mark. That grade means the result follows validly from premises the book defends, so a challenger has to reject one of them. It does not mean those premises are past dispute.

The first result is that the closure argument catches every form of the negative-theological claim. All six forms examined are either self-defeating, being diffs

inside the grid they claim to escape, or self-dissolving, emptying every positive predicate.

The second is that negative theology identifies the limit of thought correctly and misreads it as a resource. The chapter files this as a corollary of Chapter 10, which separated the ground from mind. What the result says about the ultimate itself depends on the fork between the two readings. The Premise Register adds conditions the results inherit from the rows beneath them. The second holds only on the branch where the chain of grounds ends. It also carries an open question forward: whether a state with no distinction is possible at all.

One admission is made in the open. The fork between the two readings is reached by two routes, one in Chapter 3 and one here, yet both run back to one thesis: the act of distinguishing instantiates distinction. So their agreement shows one derivation to be stable, and is no independent confirmation.

Chapter 13 turns from theology to minds, and asks what raises one mind above another.