

COMPANIONS OF THE STONE  
Supplementary Papers and Instructions  
Affirmation, Negation, and The Way Up and the Way Down:  
Ways and Paths in Our Tradition

There is a well-known and now widely-retold story about someone who goes to see a sage of one variety or another to ask for instruction. The sage picks up a teapot and begins pouring tea into the already full cup of his visitor. The amazed visitor objects (while the sage continues to pour, and the cup continues to overflow) that the cup is quite full, and that there's no sense in trying to pour more into it. It's at this point in the story that the teller stops for a beat or two to allow us to get the point that the visitor should also have gotten by now.

The contrast -- the polarity, the interaction, the dialectical play -- between "empty" and "full" is the clue which I intend to follow through a thematic maze that exists on the road to the heart of our tradition, but certainly in other traditions as well.

We might begin with the Lurianic idea of Tzimtzum, "contraction" -- the idea that in order to create other beings, God had to "withdraw" to provide a space for them to exist -- a space that was not already jam-packed with Absolute Being. This withdrawal occurred under the aegis of the principle of Severity -- and it had a couple consequences: it made God subject to severity and constriction (even though this was self-imposed), and it made Severity or Harshness a characterizing energy of trait of separate or individualized existence.

I have phrased this to underline the parallels with the thought of Jakob Boehme -- parallels that are probably based in actual contacts between Boehme and Kabbalists, as Weeks points out.

This idea in turn is linked with a much older complex of ideas, one which thinks of Jesus as "the lamb slain from the foundation of the world" -- which is to say, the creation of the cosmos was held to be founded on this primordial sacrifice, this primordial self-limitation. The Fullness of Being withdraws, limits itself, and creates existence (and existences) from its own self-negation. There is of course a link with a much older, supposedly proto-Indoeuropean mythological configuration -- that of the Primordial Man who

dies and whose body becomes the Universe. (This idea, it would seem, appeared in China as a result of contact with the Indian culture area, perhaps not much before the earliest recorded contacts with Buddhism.)

This primal sacrifice is, in Christian lore, echoed by a second sacrifice -- that of the "kenosis" or self-emptying by which the second person of the Trinity empties himself of the fullness of Being into the limitation of human individual human existence. This self-limitation occurs twice: once when Being is abandoned for existence, and once when the bitter-sweetness of individual existence is surrendered into a death, a loss without hope (this theme reverberates throughout Western literature; cf *The Little Mermaid*). It is in this second self-emptying, without any hope of consolation, that the path of return was indicated (or, ex hypothesi, established).

In other words, self-emptying is characteristic of both the Path of Manifestation and of the Path of Return -- the Way out and the Way back. In one, the sweetfullness of Being negates itself into the harsh bitterness of separate Existence; in the other, the precarious preciousness of individual selfhood lets go of itself to realize that its life is rooted in that Other which is Being.

This "harsh bitterness" of selfhood is what the Swedenborgians call "proprium" (cf "property" and "amour propre" or "self-regard") -- not quite as simple or superficial as "selfishness" or as useful for spiritual bullies as "self-will". It is the common root of concupiscence and irritability (the paired root weaknesses or vices against which the discipline of the fourfold virtues strengthens us) -- the greed and anger based in defensive fear of not getting and not keeping, in turn based in the fear that one has something to lose. (Cf especially spite, malice, envy and jealousy.) "Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose" is a country lament or a philosopher's (or Buddhist's) cry of victory.

Thus the pattern of (Lesser) Purgation, Illumination, (Greater) Purgation and Union -- in the Lesser Purgation one achieves the balance and discipline of the "natural virtues"; in Illumination one experiences the reality of the autonomous inner energies that spring from Being -- the "consolations" of traditional mystical theology. In the Greater Purgation one is purged of desire for precisely these spiritual experiences, wanting only the Absolute itself, for its own sake, and not for the sake of anything one could grasp from it for oneself.

But in our traditoon, as one should expect, things are not quite so simple, or one-sided.

The tradition as I've just laid it out is in a sense dericed from our tradition, but in a somewhat one-sided way. It takes seriously the ideas of ascent and descent, and their root in the self-complementaion of what descends or what ascends.

The part that's missing is one of the keys to the process, a key that is nicely laid out in Plotinus and in other aspects of our tradition. And that key is Eros. Plotinus insists that motion is inherently circular: energies long for their origin, and the energies of existences long for their root. This longing manifests in ordinary existence as ordinary desires -- which are at their root (as we have seen in Plotinus essay on Beauty) longings for the Fons Vitae, the Source.

For Plotinus, then, ascent, the Path of Return, is an ascent of Desire, of Eros, beginning in shifting from crude of refined desire, and thence to recognition of the root of desire and the entry into that root. (It is the structures of desire that lead to the possibility of Correspondences, and their theurgic applications for those whose desire and insight are not strong enough to enable them to vault unaided into and beyond their Ground into the Unground, the Void that in emptying itself becomes the Pleroma of Being.)

There is the Path of Negation, which demands that we leave that which seems and strike straight for the core of things: this is the Path of the Middle Pillar, the direct ascent. There is also the Path of Affirmation, which moves from instatntiation to instantiation, relying on the scraments, the theurgic correspondences, to conform Existence to Being.

These are paths of Emptying and Filling, of Denial of Images and Affirmation of Images. Both however are paths of Desire. The technical terms in mystical theology are "apophatic" and "cataphatic". Williams' *The Place of the Lion* contains fictional representations of both.

Think here about Magic and Mysticism: Magic is the art of the Channels; Mysticism the art of the Source.

This pattern of complementation is (as our tradition from Plotinus through Boehme points out) rooted in the Nature (Natura Naturata) itself: Being is rooted in the Nothing, in the AIN (the Negation: Ayin is like the logical "not"). The Source is beyond Sic and Non, Ein and Yesh, and of course

Good and Evil. As Nicholas of Cusa demonstrates, there is a kind of event horizon in which the dualities collapse into the inarticulate. Duality is the horizon beyond which the gaze of ordinary existence cannot pass.

But the root here of all progress along these paths, upward or downward, magical or mystical, apophatic or cataphatic, is self-emptying, and the root act there is the one of attention to what is, the attention that relativizes and depolarizes the tension between subject and object, between the I and that which I have (or don't have), that characterizes, when it is all we know, the fullness of our being arrival Here, and our forgetting of our source There.

Author: Weeks, Andrew.

Title: Boehme : an intellectual biography of the seventeenth-century philosopher and mystic / Andrew Weeks.

Pub. Info.: Albany : State University of New York Press, c1991.

Phy Descript: xii, 268 p. : ill. ; 24 cm.

Notes: Includes bibliographical references (p. [247]-256) and index.

LC Subject: Bohme-Jakob-1575-1624.

Mystics -- Germany -- Gorlitz -- Biography.

Mysticism -- Germany -- History -- 17th-century.

APOPHATIC a. Theol. negative (see G. W. H. Lampe Patristic Greek Lexicon s.v.). Applied to knowledge of God obtained by way of negation. Hence apo'phaticism, an apophatic approach to knowledge of God.

1869 D. W. SIMON tr. Dorner's Doctrine of Person of Christ Div. II. vol. I. 427 The distinction between the communicable and the incommunicable in God (in which, probably, we may trace the influence of the cataphatic and apophatic theology). 1938 G. REAVEY tr. Berdyaev's Solitude & Society I. ii. 33 Apophatic knowledge..knowledge in the process of discarding all notions and determinations. 1956 V. WHITE God the Unknown I. ii. 19 The Greeks called it apophatic theology-'denying' theology. St. Thomas calls it the via remotionis or the via negativa: the negative way of removing from our statements about God all that he is not. 1957 tr. V. Lossky's Myst. Theol. ii. 38 Apophaticism..is, above all, an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God. 1961 H. ARMSTRONG in I. T. Ramsey Prosp. Metaphys. vi. 104 Negative or apophatic theology..certainly does not lead to complete ignorance.

CATAPHATIC, a. Theol. [Gr. - affirmative (kappa-alpha-tau-alpha-phi-eta-nu-alpha-iota- to assent).] Defining God positively or by positive statements, opp. APOPHATIC a.

1869 [see APOPHATIC a.]. 1937 WALL & ADAMSON tr. Maritain's Degrees Knowl. iv. 291 It is clear..that apophatic theology, which knows God by the mode of negation or ignorance, knows him better than cataphatic theology, which proceeds by that of affirmation and science. 1951 Theology LIV. 29 In an end age he [sc. Berdyaev] turned..from a cataphatic to an apophatic theology.

Hence cata'phatically adv.

1937 WALL & ADAMSON tr. Maritain's Degrees Knowl. iv. 297 Theological faith..must first advance cataphatically, making known the mysteries of the Godhead to us in communicable enunciations.

KENOSIS Theol. [a. Gr to empty, with ref. to Phil. ii. 7 - 'emptied himself'.] The self-renunciation of the divine nature, at least in part, by Christ in the incarnation. 1844 W. H. MILL Serm. Tempt. Christ v. 113 Here especially we behold that kappa-epsilon-nu-omega-sigma-iota-sigma-, that voluntary emptying Himself of Divinity of which St. Paul speaks. 1873 WATSON & EVANS tr. Oostersee's Christ. Dogmatics (1881) 549 The idea of the Kenosis in its legitimate application. 1882 CAVE & BANKS tr. Dorner's Syst. Chr. Doctr. III. 393 We cannot accept a self-emptying of the Logos in the sense of the modern Kenosis. 1884 L. A. TOLLEMACHE Stones of Stumbling 115 My article..is designed to show that the kenosis involved in the Incarnation may be a complete one. 1891 Ch. Q. Rev. Oct. 9 By the doctrine of Kenosis it is not held that the Divine Being in Christ is really limited.