

# What Do I Love When I Love My Patient? Toward an Apophatic Derridean Psychotherapy

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*This essay examines the implications of Jacques Derrida's complex engagement with negative theology for the field of psychotherapy. Negative (or apophatic) theology is a long tradition which emphasizes God's absolute otherness. This essay explores Derrida's attempt in *The Gift of Death* to translate this theological language into the language of human intersubjectivity. John Caputo, the most renowned American interpreter of Derrida's writings on religion, calls for a "generalized apophatics," an application of apophatic thought to fields outside of religion. Caputo bases his exhortation on Derrida's assertion that "every other is wholly other." This essay is a preliminary attempt to sketch the outline of an apophatic psychotherapy, with an emphasis on Derridean themes such as the impossible, the secret, and translation.*

I know that by the act of praying in the desert, out of love (because I wouldn't pray otherwise), something might already be good in myself: a therapy might be taking place.

-- Jacques Derrida (2005, p. 31)

## *Introduction: Generalized Apophatics*

In *The Prayers and Tears* of Jacques Derrida, John Caputo makes the case for what he calls a "generalized apophatics":

The tout autre [wholly other], on Derrida's telling, is everybody's business, a matter of general interest which belongs to a generalized apophatics . . . . Negative theology is an old and venerable form of heterogeneity, an ancient and complex tradition – "a memory, an institution, a history, a discipline. It is a culture with its archives and its tradition" (Derrida, 1995, *On the name*, p.54). We must learn to "translate," negative theology (pp. 46-48), even if we are not Christian, even if we do not belong to the tradition or "community" of any of the great monotheistic filiations that owe everything to Abraham. Even if the constancy that the name of God supplies goes under other names for us, even then, especially then, we must learn to translate negative theology. For the very thing that localizes negative theology and assigns it to its proper place also dislocates it from that place and "engages it in a movement of universalizing translation" (p. 63). Who would trust

a discourse whose steel had not been tempered by negative theology, that has not learned a thing or two about the tout autre? (Caputo, 1997, pp. 41-42)

This paper is a preliminary attempt to take up Caputo's call, to explore what it would mean to translate the apophatic tradition into a new language, in this case, the language of psychotherapy.

Specifically, I will examine the significance of Jacques Derrida's engagement with negative theology for the field of psychotherapy. Indeed, Derrida's argument that every other is wholly other will serve as the fulcrum on which this entire project turns. Derrida paves the way for a generalized apophatics by emphasizing the absolute singularity of every human other and pointing to the ways in which apophatic discourses which have typically served to describe the human relationship to God can also be applied to relationships between human beings. For Derrida, the apophatic theological tradition's import extends far beyond its native Christian Neoplatonic context, and we can appropriate its discursive strategies without endorsing its traditional theological aims.

If, as Caputo reckons, apophatic thought is "everybody's business" (p. 41), then it is nobody's business more than the psychotherapist's. The intersubjective field forms the very condition for the possibility of psychotherapy; human relationships comprise both the content and the context of psychotherapy. If intersubjectivity is the very substance of psychotherapy, then the field of psychotherapy perhaps more than any other discipline should take note of Caputo's call for a generalized apophatics.

### *Background: The Apophatic Tradition*

Although the apophatic tradition is quite diverse, it is possible to isolate certain themes which recur throughout the tradition, and perhaps the quickest route to understanding these common threads is through the oft-cited quotation from Meister Eckhart: "So therefore let us pray to God that we may be free of 'God' (Eckhart, trans. 1981, p. 200). In other words, what is at stake in apophatic thought is a critique of representation as a form of idolatry. If we were able to know God, then God would not be God. It is precisely this human representation of God which Eckhart and negative theology in general want to problematize. To the extent that we have some idea of what God is, that notion must be stripped away or denied.

So, negative theology bases its position on the contention that God cannot be known with discursive reason. Thus, negative theology constitutes a protest against and alternative to the entire Western theological project of enumerating God's properties, which assumes its paradigmatic form in Thomistic thought. Thomas Aquinas was the principal exponent of this kataphatic, or positive, tradition; his project was an essentially rationalistic attempt to understand God's being.

Negative theology grounds its epistemological concerns in a critique of this onto-theology. God's being cannot be known discursively because human reason is finite, while God is infinite. Indeed, one of the most radical claims proffered by apophatic thinkers from Plotinus to Jean-Luc Marion is that God is beyond being itself (Marion's landmark work is titled *God Without Being* [1982/1991]). Negative theologians through the ages have insisted on this fundamental ontological difference between humans and God to justify their approach. If God is wholly other, beyond being itself, then God is never given as an object of consciousness. God "appears," then, through God's silence or absence.

*Denials: Derrida's Engagement with Negative Theology*

And yet, negative theology is anything but silent. John Caputo (1997) argues that:

When Meister Eckhart says, "I pray God to rid me of God," he formulates with the most astonishing economy a double bind by which we are all bound: how to speak and not speak, how to pray and not pray, to and for the tout autre. (p. 4)

And it is precisely negative theology's insistence on speaking the unspeakable that fascinates Derrida; negative theology is a discourse that recognizes itself as impossible but nevertheless remains a discourse. According to Caputo:

For Derrida, negative theology is an event within language, something happening to language, a certain trembling or fluctuation of language. That is why the effect of negative theology is always so verbal and verbose – so grammatical – and why these lovers of wordlessness are so excessively wordy, why Meister Eckhart, for example, was one

of the greatest preachers of the day, and one of the founders of the German language, there at the creation of modern Deutsche. (pp. 11-12)

Thus, despite Derrida's self-described atheism (which is a complex and controversial self-identification in its own right), we can see why Derrida is "fascinated by the syntactics, pragmatics, and rhetoric of this discourse that is driven, sparked, and solicited by the impossible" (p. 11).

A full analysis of Derrida's complex relationship to negative theology is outside the scope of this essay and has been treated in detail in the Continental philosophy of religion literature. To briefly summarize, Derrida contends that despite their denial of God's presence, negative theologians believe that God still exists in a state of hyperessentiality beyond being. However, Derrida's critique of negative theology constitutes an attempt to radicalize rather than reject the tradition; in some sense, Derrida saves negative theology from itself. To the extent that negative theology can function as a backdoor attempt to prove God's existence by denying God's givenness, it has abandoned its most fundamental premise: the irreducible gap between the human and divine spheres. This gap must necessarily produce a radical uncertainty; indeed, apophatic faith must take seriously the possibility of atheism which always attends the denial of God's presence. Derrida (2005) argues that "if belief in God is not also a culture of atheism, if it does not go through a number of atheistic steps, one does not believe in God" (p. 46). Faith is always a decision that occurs at the limit of calculation and, therefore, always involves risk, even (and especially) the risk of damnation. Thus, Derrida in a certain sense keeps negative theology honest by emphasizing that the relationship with the *tout autre* is always marked by radical uncertainty, which is the condition for the possibility of authentic faith.

*Translating Negative Theology: Every Other is Wholly Other*

However, the main point of divergence between Derrida and negative theology is the meaning of the *tout autre*, the wholly other. Caputo (1997) concisely summarizes this distinction: "The difference is that in negative theology the *tout autre* always goes under the name of God, and that which calls forth speech is called 'God,' whereas for Derrida every other is wholly other (*tout autre est tout autre*)" (pp. 3-4). Derrida (1992/1995) argues persuasively in *The Gift of Death* that because of the absolute singularity

of every human being, relationships with other humans can be conceived in terms of radical alterity that have traditionally been reserved to describe the human relationship to the divine:

If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) is every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre . . .* . This implies that God, as wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent, nonmanifest, originarily nonpresent to my ego, then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every other (one) as every (bit) other, in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh. (pp. 77-78)

Derrida's celebrated aphorism, "*Tout autre est tout autre*" (pp. 77-78), does not represent a mere secularization and humanization of theological language; rather, it represents an elevation and sacralization of human relationships. This is why Caputo (1997) asserts that Derrida's idea that every other is wholly other is his way of "saving the name of God" (p. 52). For Caputo, God is not only "the exemplar of every 'other,'" but every other is "the exemplar of God" (p. 52). We do not have to choose between God as wholly other and neighbor as wholly other; indeed, Derrida's position could easily be reconciled with that of Simone Weil (1951/2001) who argued that "love of God" and "love of our neighbor" are "made of the same substance" (p. 64).<sup>1</sup>

Derrida (1992/1995) confirms this point when he says in *The Gift of Death* that "the trembling of the formula 'every other (one) is every (bit) other'" allows us alternatively to restate the formula as "Every other (one) is God, or God is every (bit) other" (p. 87). Derrida continues:

In one case God is defined as infinitely other, as wholly other, every bit other. In the other case it is declared that every other one, each of the others, is God inasmuch as he or she is, like God, wholly other. (p. 87)

Consequently, Derrida's translation of the language of the wholly other to the human terms of intersubjectivity is anything but reductionistic. Derrida does not necessarily deny God's existence; on the contrary, he simply affirms that the inaccessibility of the human other is as radical as the inaccessibility of God. If negative theology undercuts the assumptions of onto-theology, Derrida's singular appropriation of negative theology analogously undermines a certain ontology of the subject.

*Translations: Derrida and Psychology*

Perhaps no field has relied more on this traditional ontology of the subject than modern scientific psychology, which regards the individual as a unitary whole, a closed system which is in principle orderly, predictable, and intelligible. In contrast, Derrida's whole project from his early critique of self-presence in Husserl to his late work on the secret has insisted on the opacity of the self to itself and to others. Derrida's (1992/1995) appropriation of negative theology in *The Gift of Death* is part and parcel of this project: if the alterity of the individual human being is as radical as the wholly other God of negative theology, then all the epistemological and methodological assumptions of modern psychology are called into question. More specifically, Derrida's engagement with negative theology problematizes many of the basic assumptions of psychotherapy. The entire diagnostic system which attempts to categorize the patient's symptoms depends upon the guiding assumption that the therapist can know the patient determinately.

However, this model is impossible. The patient is incapable of revealing himself fully to the therapist, meaning she cannot follow the "fundamental rule" to disclose everything. This insufficiency is not merely quantitative; it is not simply a matter of the patient revealing parts of herself and concealing other parts of herself. Rather, like the God of negative theology, the patient is in principle hidden from herself and the therapist alike. Derrida (1992/1995) draws a helpful distinction in this regard between the "visible in-visible" and "absolute invisibility" (p. 90). The visible in-visible "is a matter of concealing one surface beneath another; whatever one conceals in this way becomes invisible but remains within the order of visibility; it remains constitutively visible" (p. 90). In contrast, Derrida defines absolute invisibility as "the absolutely non-visible that refers to whatever falls outside of the register of sight, namely, the sonorous, the musical, the vocal or phonic" (p. 90). Psychotherapy has traditionally concerned itself with the visible invisible,

assuming that the patient's attitude toward the therapist covers over (and to that very extent reveals!) the patient's unconscious attitudes toward her significant others. What, then, is at stake in Derrida's distinction between the visible invisible and the absolute invisible for psychotherapy?

For the field of psychotherapy to take Derrida's distinction seriously, it would have to acknowledge the absolute invisible. What is at stake, in turn, in this acknowledgement is the radical alterity of the patient. Derrida (1992/1995) asserts that "if the other were to share his reasons with us by explaining them to us, if he were to speak to us all the time without any secrets, he wouldn't be other, we would share a type of homogeneity" (p. 57). In this way, we are led back to Derrida's argument that every other is wholly other, which forms the very basis for our translation of negative theology into the language of psychotherapy. The psychotherapist could easily object, "Of course, the patient keeps secrets from himself, of course the patient is unaware of the ultimate rhyme and reason of his words; that is what I am here to decipher." However, if we take seriously what Derrida says about absolute invisibility, which is the essence of the assertion that every other is wholly other, then we have to admit the irreducibility of the patient's otherness. The patient speaks in an altogether different register: the language of God, which is to say, the language of the other.

But should we take Derrida seriously? If we think of the patient as wholly other, and therefore, as radically nonmanifest, how do we proceed as psychotherapists? If we take seriously Derrida's assertions about absolute invisibility, how is psychotherapy possible at all? Psychotherapy is indeed impossible, but the idea of impossibility carries a specific meaning in Derrida's work. Caputo describes the impossible in a passage that is worth quoting in full:

It is only when you give yourself to, surrender to, and set out for the wholly other, for the impossible, only when you go where you cannot go, that you are really on the move. Anything less is staying stuck in place, with the same. Going where you cannot go, going somewhere impossible, constitutes true movement, genuine coming and going, since going where it is possible to go is only a pseudo-motion, the 'paralysis' of a 'non-event' (Derrida, 1995, *On the name*, p. 75). When you go to the possible nothing much happens. The only event, the only e-venting, or in-venting, is to go to the impossible. If the possible spells paralysis, the impossible is an impassioned impetus. If

the possible means the paralysis of the programmable, the impossible is the passion of decision. (Caputo, 1997, p. 50)

Thus, impossibility is not tantamount to a dead end for Derrida; in fact, the opposite is true. Possibility, which is to say predictability, sameness, continuity, etc, is a dead end; the impossible is the unexpected which interrupts the order of sameness – but which never arrives. The moment the impossible arrives, it would be assimilated into the order of the same. For the impossible to live up to its impossibility, for the other to remain wholly other, it can never strictly speaking arrive.

Of course, the patient does speak and reveal himself to the psychotherapist, and it is possible to know the patient. And yet, at the same time, it is absolutely impossible to know the patient. This is the aporia which constitutes the passion of psychotherapy. However, as Derrida (2005) says, “The aporia for me doesn’t mean simply paralysis. No way. On the contrary, it’s the condition of proceeding, of making a decision, of going forward. The aporia is not simply a negative stop” (p. 43). It is possible to know the patient, and yet, it is impossible to know the patient – this aporia constitutes the apophysis of psychotherapy. The other remains wholly other, even in giving himself. The gift of the other’s presence never exhausts the other’s infinite singularity. The word apophysis comes from the Greek word *apophanai*, which means “to say no.” An apophatic psychotherapy would accept the absolute reserve which the patient always retains, a reserve which she holds even from herself. Furthermore, an apophatic psychotherapy would nevertheless say “yes” to this “saying no,” because this “no” is the very condition of psychotherapy. As Caputo (1997) says, the impossibility of translating the other is “the impassioned impetus” (p. 50), and as Derrida (2001) says in a somewhat different context, “A work that appears to defy translation is at the same time an appeal for translation” (p. 16).

Thus, to translate Derrida’s words into the language of psychotherapy: the impossibility of translating the patient is at the same time an appeal for translation. This is why psychotherapy must say “yes, yes” in every moment to the other’s “no.” If the other were indeed fully present to himself or fully present to the therapist, then psychotherapy would not exist. By no means should we abandon reason, embracing a dangerous irrationalism; by all means, we should continue in our attempts to understand our patients and formulate their cases. However, Derrida would simply remind us that the patient’s absolute invisibility is precisely what constitutes our entire system of diagnoses, categorizations, and conceptualizations and cannot, therefore, be completely appropriated by that system.



*Conclusion: What Do I Love When I Love My Patient?*

Derrida (1989/1992) says: “Every title has the import of a promise” (p. 86). We are finally in a position to examine the title which I promised for this essay, which paraphrases Augustine’s (trans. 1991) famously unanswerable question, “What then do I love when I love my God?” (p.185). Augustine’s question points to the problem that arises when we deny the objective presence of God’s attributes. In other words, if I admit that God is wholly other and, therefore, that I can never know God’s predicates, then in what sense can I know God at all? The psychotherapist could make an analogous objection: If my patient is wholly other, if I can never know him at all, then isn’t the whole enterprise of psychotherapy irrelevant? We have already shown the way in which Derrida’s work circumvents this sort of irrationalism – the patient’s radical alterity is precisely what motivates understanding; the patient’s complete presence would amount to the closure of psychotherapy.

However, what is at stake in Augustine’s question is not knowledge, but love. Caputo (1997) writes about the relation between love and the impossible in another passage that is worth quoting in full:

To surrender to the other, to love the other, means to go over to the other without passing the threshold of the other, without trespassing on the other’s threshold. To love is to respect the invisibility of the other, to keep the other safe, to surrender one’s arms to the other but without defeat, to put the crossed swords or arrows over the name of the other. To love is to give oneself to the other in such a way that this would really be giving and not taking, a gift, a way of letting the other remain other, that is, be loved, rather than a stratagem, a ruse of jealousy, a way of winning, eine vergiftete Gift. Then it would turn out that the passion for the impossible would be love. (p. 49)

Loving the other means letting the other remain other. This love is the very opposite of knowledge which as Levinas (1947/1987) says, always reduces that which is other to sameness (pp. 64-65).

It is precisely because the wholly other never arrives that we must prepare a place for him. This is the sense in which we can properly speak of the gift of psychotherapy:<sup>3</sup> psychotherapy is the gift of letting the other remain other, of accepting the other’s non-arrival – but, nevertheless, preparing a

place for the other. This essay opened with a quote from Derrida in which he referred to the act of prayer as a therapy. For Derrida (2005), the other to whom we address our prayers must necessarily remain absent; the “suspension of certainty is part of prayer . . . if I knew or were simply expecting an answer, that would be the end of prayer. That would be an order – just as though I were ordering a pizza!” (p. 31). Essential to the act of praying to the other is letting the other remain other; to demand the presence of the other is to neutralize the very act of prayer. My prayer is that the practice of psychotherapy may come closer to assuming the form of a prayer that expects no answer; this is the very definition of love, and as Derrida says, when we pray out of love, a therapy is already taking place.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Weil, like Derrida, argues forcefully for the singularity of the other, which Weil discusses according to her theory of affliction:

The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: ‘What are you going through?’ It is a recognition that the sufferer exists, not as a unit in a collection, or a specimen from the social category labeled ‘unfortunate,’ but as a man, exactly like us, who was one day stamped with a special mark by affliction [*italics added*]. (p. 64)

<sup>2</sup> Caputo is referring to Jean-Luc Marion’s practice of crossing out the letter “o” in the word “God.” According to Marion (1982/1991):

The unthinkable forces us to substitute the idolatrous quotation marks around “God” with the very God that no mark of knowledge can demarcate, and, in order to say it, let us cross out G-d, with a cross, provisionally of St. Andrew, which demonstrates the limit of the temptation, conscious or naïve, to blaspheme the unthinkable in an idol. (p. 46)

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Irvin Yalom’s (2002) *The Gift of Therapy*.

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