



# laetus in praesens

Alternative view of segmented documents via Kairos

3rd August 2008 | Draft

## Being What You Want

### problematic kataphatic identity vs. potential of apophatic identity?

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## Introduction

The terms apophasis and kataphasis were first used by Aristotle to describe categorical propositions as either affirmation or denial, saying or unsaying. Apophasis refers to the negation and kataphasis to the affirmation. In discussing the current significance of the apophatic and kataphatic traditions in the 20th century, David Henderson (2003) notes that the concept of apophasis was given its radical transcendence by the Neoplatonists, Plotinus and Proclus, and introduced into Christianity by Pseudo-Dionysius, the 5th century Syrian monk, who brought together Greek and Jewish concepts of the apophatic.

In reflecting on the nature of divinity, a distinction is commonly made in some traditions between [kataphatic theology](#) (also spelt [cataphatic theology](#)) and [apophatic theology](#) -- between two approaches to the essentially incomprehensible, even terrifying, nature of divinity. The former describes and defines the nature of divinity through explicit terminology. The latter highlights the inadequacies of such statements by stressing what deity is not. Hence the latter is also described as negative theology and the former as positive theology. In some traditions contemplation first focuses on the former before later focusing on the mysteries associated with the latter.

The current cognitive challenge considered here is essentially that of responding to complexity, uncertainty and unspeakable horror -- notably instigated and systematically sustained by those claiming to uphold the highest human values. Ironically it might be said to be well articulated in the words of the appropriately named [Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite](#) (*The Mystical Theology*) in his effort in the 5th century to distinguish between the apophatic and kataphatic:

The fact is that the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and unknowing.

Aside from this theological focus, the question explored here is whether understanding of human beings and human communities -- and the global problematique -- might be fruitfully explored through analogous contrasting modes. Are the conventional efforts to articulate the challenge of the 21st century inhibiting appropriate understanding and action?

**Are individuals more appropriately understood, if only by themselves, in terms of what they are not rather than how it is**

**convenient to define them by social convention?** What might be the implications -- especially where individuals currently identify with material products, thereby inhibiting the transition to more sustainable patterns of consumption.

The credibility of any such comparison in any faith-based context is notably reinforced in those traditions that recognize that individuals are made in the image of deity, or by those who promote a recognition of the divine within each person. Such understandings are held to be intimately associated with contemplation of the significance of the relationship of individuals with deity, of participation in the life of divinity and of divine participation in human life -- a focus of [theosis](#) and [theoria](#).

Whilst there is an extensive literature on the apophatic approach, **the obscure term is perhaps indicative of the manner in which the options it represents have been rendered obscure -- to the advantage of theologians and philosophers who use it -- rather than being presented as an opportunity for all, irrespective of their conventionally recognized expertise.**

## Kataphatic identity -- the "positive" approach

Descriptions of the nature and identity of divinity commonly use every possible positive attribute, whether expressed in words, in images or in music. In Islamic belief, for example, this takes special form in the [99 Perfect Names and Attributes of Allah](#) -- all of them names of praise.

In the case of individuals, many approaches are taken to expressing and defining identity. These may include:

- family and kinship relationships, blood lines, heritage, especially important in relationship to heraldry
- accreditation, notably recognized in [orders of precedence](#)
- feats of strength and accomplishment, notably in sport, given focus by sporting medals and records
- celebrity as recognized by "star systems" and celebrity lists
- academic achievements, degrees and awards, possibly supported by an array of significant publications
- inventions, notably those protected by patent
- relative wealth, and its recognition on lists such as those of *Fobes*
- cultural achievements, as notably recognized in music and other arts
- awards for contributions to human welfare, such as the Right Livelihood Award
- recognized personal qualities such as beauty (Miss Universe), or courage (as in military and rescue action)
- ownership:
  - property ("goods and chattels"), possibly including other individuals (through bonded labour and slavery)
  - high performance equipment (weapons, vehicles, computers)
- profession, expertise and career, whether certified by diplomas or experience
- personal display of symbols:
  - religious (cross, hijab, etc),
  - political (national flag, poster, etc)
  - team (colours, etc)
  - clothes, jewellery, and other status symbols

Whilst such devices may be given greatest visibility and significance at the global level (Olympic Games, etc), they of course have their analogues at the national and local levels. People may be encouraged by their context to aspire to some such recognition. Failure to do so may contribute to ensuring that a person is instantly forgettable -- even to be defined as a "nobody".

However the kataphatic approach is more egalitarian than this argument so far implies. Authorities are assiduous in ensuring a degree of recognition of individuals, defining them unambiguously in far more specific ways. These include:

- identity numbers and profiles, related to certificates of birth, marriage and death, increasingly focused on biometric profiles by which an individual's identity is defined and associated with a name
- tax numbers relating to income records through which identity as a tax payer is established
- social security numbers, notably where these substitute for other means of establishing identity as a citizen
- residence as required for government records in many countries
- registration on the electoral role through which identity as a voter is established
- official licenses for driving a vehicle, for radio/TV,
- property ownership records
- educational records
- medical records, including certification of physical and mental disability
- military records
- employment records
- security clearance
- criminal records, where appropriate, possibly even tattooed identification numbers if incarcerated
- DNA records, possibly as an extension of bionic measures, and irrespective of any criminal association

Market research necessarily devotes considerable resources to identifying people as distinct consumer types. For example the 10 identified by [Experian](#) in its *Mosaic Global* framework are: Rural Inheritance, Post Industrial Survivors, Low Income Elders, Metropolitan Strugglers, Hard Working Blue Collar, Routine Service Workers, Career and Family, Comfortable Retirement, Bourgeois Prosperity and Sophisticated Singles. Within this global group classification, each country contains its own unique typology and these have country-specific names such as High Rise in Paris (France), Local Shop Keepers (Greece), Busy Bush and Beach (Australia), Green Idealists (Denmark), Expats and Super Rich (Hong Kong), Celtic Roots (Ireland), Suits and Gumboots (New Zealand) and Southern

Blues (USA).

Membership societies may also be assiduous in maintaining profiles of their members and a mean of establishing their identity. This has in recent years been extended into the profiling in professional and social networking sites on the web.

At the personal level, individuals define each other in terms of sets of attributes, qualities such as "nice", "good", "helpful", etc that echo values attributed to divinity -- necessarily on a far larger scale. Definitions of identity may however be much simpler, offered in tangible physical terms: "tall", "short", "fat", "thin", "strong", "weak", etc. -- and in terms of associated behaviors and constraints. Gender and ethnicity are perhaps the most obvious.

The impersonality of many of these definitions of identity is partially compensated by the intimate personalization associated with various forms of personality typing. It is perhaps in this sense that the appeal of astrological signs and horoscopes should be understood. More conventional psychological approaches, on which employers may depend, include [Myers-Briggs Type Indicator](#), [enneagram types](#), [DISC assessment](#), [Five Factor Model](#), [Lüscher Colour Test](#). Static understandings of identity may be modified by the possibility of development through various degrees and levels as indicated by the [AQAL system](#), or various forms of initiation promoted by secret and esoteric societies (*Varieties of Rebirth: distinguishing ways of being "born again"*, 2004).

Some of these approaches to defining identity are associated with fitting people into teams, or assessing their performance in teams, notably the [Belbin Team Role Inventory](#). This highlights the issue of [stereotyping](#) and the degree to which individuals may be miscast in roles for which others find them appropriate.

## Apophatic identity -- the "negative" approach

The challenge for some is whether they identify adequately with the array of attributes by which they are defined to the satisfaction of many in society. To some degree at least, there is a sense of "I am not that". Curiously this echoes the simplest statement of apophatic theology, the Vedic: *Neti Neti* (Not this, Not that). Or, in urban jargon, "None of the above". Or, perhaps "All of the above -- and more". The key question is the extent to which individuals identify with the identities through which others prefer to know them.

Apophysis was originally and more broadly a method of logical reasoning or argument by denial, a way of telling what something is by telling what it is not, a way of talking about something by talking about what it is not. This sense is frequently overlooked, other than in negative theology. But if it is appropriate through apophatic theology to understand divinity as ineffable and beyond description, is there not a case for recognizing the extent to which individual identity -- especially if held to be a reflection of the divine -- transcends the immanence implied by kataphatic description.

Denys Turner (*The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*, 1995) suggests that there is a difference between an apophysis that presupposes the inadequacy of language and one that discovers the failure of language, where language exhausts itself. Apophysis is not a "naïve pre-critical ignorance", but "a strategy and practice of unknowing".

Beyond the theological focus, Michael Sells (*Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 1994) highlights the manner in which apophatic discourse embraces the impossibility of naming something that is ineffable by continually turning back upon its own propositions and names. He reviews its use in Greek, Christian, Jewish and Islamic texts, providing a critical account of how apophatic language works, the conventions, logic, and paradoxes it employs, and the dilemmas encountered in any attempt to analyze it. The study establishes the relevance of classical apophysis to contemporary languages of the unsayable. It notably challenges characterizations of apophysis among deconstructionists.

Gentlemen - and the texts they live by -- are straightforward guides. They educate through *cataphasis*: positive statements about the Good and the True. Jesters, by contrast, educate through *apophysis*, literally *un-saying*. Instead of statements, riddles; instead of commandments, questions. The gentleman supplies positive content, exemplary behaviour, a stable landing place for the student's understanding, whereas the jester actively undermines the student's ability to stabilise herself, providing content that is framed by an explicit or implicit negation: a raised eyebrow, a snicker, a punchline. If the preferred rhetorical form of the gentleman is the example, the preferred rhetorical form of the jester is the mystery, or perhaps the practical joke. (Alan Jay Levinovitz, *Zhuang Zhi: a funhouse mirror for the soul*, *Aeon*)

## Definitions of identity and their unquestioning acceptance

The examples cited in the kataphatic case are reinforced at the most fundamental level by:

- common usage through which people are known and identified by name
- legal definitions of identity
- philosophical definitions of identity
- religious definitions of identity

Who or what is it that accepts and buys into these formulations?

More intriguing is whether there are any alternatives to the acceptance of such formulations and packaging -- to which one is expected to conform in order to interact appropriately in society. Much is made, for example, of the contrast between individualism (typical of the West) and communalism (typical of other cultures), whereby one may be primarily defined by one's relationship to a community.

Using the apophatic method however, **to what extent are people encouraged to explore the meaning that might be associated with not being defined by conventional means?**

This brings into focus the process and significance of [definition](#) itself. In classical philosophy this was held to a statement of the essence

of a thing and therefore, in the case, of an individual. Aristotle held that an object's essential attributes form its "essential nature", and that a definition of the object must include these essential attributes. For the individual, the question is whether they accept such external identification of attributes held, by some means, to be "essential". This preoccupation with essence is no longer popular in most modern philosophy -- held by Bertrand Russell to be "a hopelessly muddle-headed notion".

*Wikipedia* offers a useful summary of the [limitations of definition](#), noting those philosophers who have held that individuals cannot be defined.

It would seem that there are degrees of freedom that suggest that an individual might best be understood apophatically rather than kataphatically -- if only by those that do not have some instrumental, operational need for a simplistic definition -- but especially by the "individual".

## Misappropriation of the apophatic way

Although the term is obscure to most, arguments for an apophatic approach are variously recognized and cultivated:

- **theology, religion and mysticism:** there is a very extensive literature focusing on apophatic theology and stressing the importance of an apophatic approach to mystical experience. However, so extensive is this literature that it may readily be assumed that an apophatic approach has no other relevance than in the relationship to divinity. It might even be said that theology has appropriated apophatic reflection, possibly with the requirement that it only be considered following considerable training in an approved kataphatic approach. In this sense it is only open to those who receive the benediction of some tradition. Especially problematic is the extent to which particular religions may sanction individuals for either being "unbelievers", or "lacking faith", or - - worse still -- for "breaking faith" or "losing faith". Given the propensity to define and assess people in a kataphatic mode, any such dissociation is readily considered dangerously problematic -- especially since from a religious perspective it is necessarily difficult to distinguish such existential shifts in apophatic terms. Especially problematic categories, in kataphatic terms, arise from the extent to which an individual can be identified as "agnostic" or "atheist" -- given the difficulty in interpreting the associated existential worldview. One of the ironies of spiritual typing, as a kataphatic exercise, is its identification of an "apophatic type".
- **philosophy:** a further range of literature has extended insight into the apophatic approach, explicitly dissociating itself from immediate association with the theological variant. Most evident in this respect is the work of [Jacques Derrida](#) and his followers on [deconstruction](#). However the context within which this academic approach has developed has resulted in its being "identified" with a particular school of thought and marginalized to some degree for that reason. The subtlety of the complex, unusual argumentation necessarily implies the need for appropriate academic preparation before any understanding of apophatic thinking can be considered credible. Again, given the propensity to define and assess people in a kataphatic mode, any such dissociation is readily considered dangerously problematic.

Deconstruction, as promoted by Derrida, has been identified as [nihilistic](#), [lacking philosophical clarity](#), and [intentional obfuscation](#). Such accusations necessarily follow from any commitment to the kataphatic mode. In commenting on Derrida and apophaticism, Ivana Noble (*Apophatic Elements in Derrida's Deconstruction*) recognizes the extremes of Derrida's condemnation of that tradition as "rhetoric of negative determination" strengthening claims of for the possibility of grasping the divine essence, reinstating that which it questions -- a process he labels hyperessential theology. He argues that what is based in a negative determiner still attempts to give an identity (non-entity) to who we are and what we do and how we relate to one another and our world and to God. Thus, it remains a "negative" mirror image of the positive determination. The other extreme is to consider Derrida a proponent of apophaticism too readily -- despite the overlapping themes in Derrida's deconstruction and in the apophatic tradition.

- **psychoanalysis:** the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung explored the insights of apophatic thinking in theology as they applied to the individuation process -- the search for self in an alienating context of uncertainty about self-worth. For Jung (*Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*):

Individuation means becoming a single, homogenous being and, in so far as 'in-dividuality' embraces our innermost, last and incomparable uniqueness, it also implies becoming one's own self. We could therefore translate individuation as 'coming to selfhood' or 'self-realization.'

Jung equated his theory of individuation with gnosis and endeavoured to explain [Gnosticism](#) from a psychological standpoint. However in comparing Jung's work with the theology of Thomas Merton, David Henderson (*Carl Jung and Thomas Merton: apophatic and kataphatic traditions in the 20th Century. Studies in Spirituality*, 2003) considers the former as representing the kataphatic and the latter the apophatic tradition. The much admired synthesis of [Ken Wilber](#) (*Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology, Therapy*, 2000; *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 2006), might also be understood as exemplifying the kataphatic method.

Curiously the implication in these cases is that individuals need special qualifications, attributed in a kataphatic context, before legitimately engaging in apophatic reflection -- about their own identity.

Especially unfortunate in these contexts is the condemnation of thinking which is not distinguished by categories appropriately ordered, and approved, from a kataphatic perspective. Hence the reference by Bertrand Russell to essence as "a hopelessly muddle-headed notion" and the views of such as [Richard Dawkins](#) (*The God Delusion*, 2006) and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great: protesting too much*, 2007).

However the supposed clarity they recommend is also characterized by such "hopelessly muddled" disciplinary fragmentation and professional strife (as noted below), that it is not surprising that real people worldwide make extensive use of narcotics, alcohol and other substances -- or of religion as an opiate -- to engage in alternative relationships to the kataphatic reality on offer. Ironically Dawkins and Hitchens could be understood as highlighting what divinity is not, although -- whatever "its" nature -- it is certain that "it" is in no way dependent on any certification of authenticity by such authorities.

More intriguing in any approach to apophatic identity is however the implication of the classic Zen contrarian answer to the question "What is Buddha" -- the answer, famously given by Master Yun-men, being "Kanshiketsu" namely "Dried shitstick". Given the high degree of controversy aroused by such blasphemy in a kataphatic mode, perhaps the apophatic mode could be usefully understood methodologically as "scientific blasphemy". Although, since many now specifically identify those whom they do not appreciate by an abridged version of the Zen descriptor of the Buddha, whether it is to be considered as exemplifying widespread intuitive use of the apophatic mode calls for further reflection. Australian parliamentary use of "bastard" offers a different instance, especially given its use in self-description by the Australian Prime Minister -- a Mandarin speaker (Tom Bentley, *A pretty determined bastard*, *New Statesman*, 16 August 2007).

This is not to deny the value of the extensive literature on the apophatic way and the effort it represents at clarifying possibilities. Many subtle pointers have been proposed for consideration -- for those who care to explore them. But, ironically, that literature may also be usefully interpreted from an apophatic perspective. Indeed the distinctions affirmed there may themselves be considered as indicative of what the apophatic approach is not.

The challenge of that literature, and its complex distinctions, is that it is effectively used as a device by some to define (yet again) how individuals should approach options that are presumably a birth right (if not a God-given right). This then effectively deprives them of the right to make up their own minds -- which they are supposedly free to do (cf *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* as discussed below).

## Fruitful reframing: acceptance of doubt and alternatives

The technical abstruseness of articulated insights into the apophatic way, and associated assertions, obscures the significance of less assertive statements of which the following are examples:

**John Keats:** As a poet, [John Keats](#) articulated (in 1817) the concept of [negative capability](#): "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason". Robert French (*'Negative Capability', 'Dispersal' and the Containment of Emotion*) explains it in psychoanalytic terms as a quality of attention:

This state of mind depends on our 'Negative Capability', that is, on our capacity for thinking and feeling, for learning and containment, for abstention and indifference. Without the quality of attention made possible by this 'capability', any amount of insight 'from a psychoanalytic perspective' is in danger of remaining irritatingly indigestible or aridly intellectual.

**Sallie McFague:** As a theologian and feminist, Sallie McFague (*Models of God: theology for an ecological, nuclear age*, 1987; *Life Abundant: rethinking theology and economy for a planet in peril*, 2000) argues for a different way of knowing, exemplified in her case by its implications for knowing divinity. In particular she argues for the individual freedom to engage in metaphoric reframing of God according to different circumstances -- rather than being dependent on particular models (*Metaphorical Theology: models of God in religious language*, 1982). McFague that we can produce metaphors which by taking into account the nuclear ecological crisis are better than those which do not.

**Kenneth Boulding:** As an economist and mystic, [Kenneth Boulding](#) (*Ecodynamics; a new theory of societal evolution*, 1978) offers the following insight into the relevance of metaphor:

Our consciousness of the unity of self in the middle of a vast complexity of images or material structures is at least a suitable metaphor for the unity of group, organization, department, discipline or science. If personification is a metaphor, let us not despise metaphors -- we might be one ourselves.

Each of these authors responds creatively to doubt -- and the lack of the clarity that is such a definitional requisite of the kataphatic mode.

A conclusion, from a theological perspective, is highlighted by Janet Williams (*Judging Judgement: an apophatic approach*, *Theology Today*, Jan 2002) cites Carol Zaleski (*The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope*, 1996),

We should bear in mind that the archaism of symbols is part of their appeal, that some symbols may go into retirement only to return in full vigour at a future time, and that religious traditions are better served by a plurality of symbols than by forced consistency.

For Zaleski, where we cannot speak accurately but nevertheless need to speak, the best strategy is one of "imaginative proliferation" in which a multiplicity of images, including mutually sublating contradictories such as eternal damnation of sinners and universal salvation, both articulate and challenge our best efforts to make present the reign of God on earth -- "thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." As Williams notes, Zaleski's insight, that the simultaneous play of mutually incompatible and affirmed-and-denied images is the work of imagination rather than cognition, may prompt comparison with the theological interest in the phenomenon of Christian hope and its

special role with regard to faith.

Whether from a theological perspective or not, clearly individuals are freed from a degree of "kataphatic claustrophobia" by the use of a plurality of imaginative metaphors with which to reframe their experience. Such possibilities have been extensively explored by the philosopher [Paul Feyerabend](#) (*Conquest of Abundance: a tale of abstraction versus the richness of being*. 1999; *Against Method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge*. 1975). It is appropriate to note that both McFague and Feyerabend refer to the experience of abundance -- with Feyerabend specifically pointing to the manner in which it is "conquered" by categorical abstractions (characteristic of the kataphatic mode).

## Potential socio-political implications

**Jumble of categories:** It is curious that anyone interested in understanding who or what they are -- or might be -- is confronted by a vast array of religions, disciplines, philosophies, ideologies, worldviews and authoritative criteria asserting an answer or a royal route to obtaining one. These are all configured such that the "individual" is faced either with the confusion arising from their lack of coherence, the challenge of each to "buy into" the perspective offered, or the threat of possibly dire consequences should the individual fail to do so.

The interaction is such that it is implied that only the foolish would question the authoritative insight of what is proposed -- irrespective of the fact that each proposal in all probability contradicts or questions that of its neighbour -- from whom it is claimed it would be even more foolhardy to seek a response. Curiously some of the products on offer come with ironclad guarantees, whether by a discipline or a religion. In the latter case the guarantee may not only be "life-long" but "for eternity".

The situation may be very appropriately compared to a bazaar. It does not even have the degree of order of a supermarket. However, in those cases the individual has some degree of freedom in interacting with the range of products on offer. With respect to the existential challenge for the individual of obtaining responses to who, why and what -- the interaction is far more invasive and manipulative in ways that would be highly questionable in any modern commercial relationship. Arguably all claims to provide a response could be questioned as "misrepresentation" under any "trading practices" legislation. Some claimants may engage in a degree of threat, some may deliberately engage in negative representation of their competitors, or offer contracts with obligations articulated in what is effectively illegible small print.

Curiously those that have bought into any given framework see it as what is best described metaphorically as a transcendent temple or cathedral -- appropriately separated from the mundanities of the bazaar in which so many products of dubious value are on offer. Such transcendent worldviews typically claim to be global and comprehensive to a significant degree, even it means treating as insignificant that which it is considered better to exclude from such understanding. Each may be fruitfully understood as a gated community (*Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities: emergent patterns of isolation within knowledge society*, 2004).

The contrast between the dynamics of the cathedral and those of the bazaar have been usefully analyzed in relation to the open source software movement by [Eric S Raymond](#) (*The Cathedral and the Bazaar*, 1997). The relation between allopathic and "alternative" approaches to health care provides a valuable metaphor of this. In the case of religions, rather than mortal danger to the body of unauthorized products, it is the danger to one's soul that is presented as a threat.

Whereas there may be no significant order to the array of products offered to the questing individual, the kataphatic mode offers another device emerging from the discipline of classification of the information sciences -- namely the catalog or, more recently, the web search engine. But such tools merely turn the question back on the questor -- "for what are you searching"? Typically multiple answers are available for any question, with each answer implicitly challenged from any other perspective so catalogued. The individual may feel fully justified in declaring "Not this, Not that".

Whilst the situation may be defined as analogous to that of a bazaar, of greater interest is the possibility that it is the pattern of relationships between proponents of worldviews that is a more fundamental pattern -- engendering and sustaining that which is so tangibly evident in a bazaar. Subtler forms of order have not become apparent in either case -- or are dependent on their exclusion of less subtle forms of order.

**DIY: Define It Yourself?** One common response on the part of individuals is to "pick and mix", namely to select approaches to identity from the range of frameworks and methods proposed by authorities of different kinds. This approach is strongly deprecated by most such authorities. Clearly it does both question and undermine the integrity and coherence of the particular framework or approach of which they are advocates.

Religious authorities are especially articulate in arguing against any form of "pick and mix". These arguments are notably to be found with regards to the condemnation of [syncretism](#).

This said, most authorities are totally challenged in addressing the fragmentation of worldviews and understandings of identity. It is a topic that is systematically avoided -- leaving it up to the individual to either adopt a particular framework or to take responsibility for defining identity for themselves in a DIY ("Define It Yourself") approach. Curiously it might be argued that the reasons DIY (as "Do It Yourself") has been adopted so successfully in home construction are quite analogous to those justifying such an approach with respect to understanding personal identity.

**Social construction of reality:** The theme of constructivism has been extensively studied (Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge*, 1967; Paul Watzlawick, *Invented Reality: How Do We Know What We Believe We Know?* 1984). The emphasis however is on how some degree of conventional consensus is reached -- sufficient to enable coherent functioning of social life. Where there is unfortunate fragmentation between worldviews the consensus may then be understood as operational within cognitively gated communities within a particular sense of reality is coherently constructed and sustained (*Dynamically Gated Conceptual Communities: emergent patterns of isolation within knowledge society*, 2004).

The challenge for the individual, once again, as with which such community to associate. Or, more interesting, how to travel from one such community to another -- developing the capacity to "translate" between their worldviews. Ironically it is then left to the individual to become a kind of [Rosetta Stone](#) maintaining coherence between communities unable to reconcile their worldviews in any meaningful manner (*Guidelines for Critical Dialogue between Worldviews*, 2006; *Avoiding Dialogue with Alternative Worldviews at any Cost*, 2005).

**In-the-box vs. Out-of-the-box thinking:** These terms are a recognition of the inherent limitations to envisaging creative strategic responses to perceived challenges. In this sense, for any individual, what one knows -- with which one identifies and by which one defines oneself -- is the fundamental constraint inhibiting more adequate response. In-the-box thinking exemplifies the kataphatic mode.

Collective expressions of in-the-box thinking focus attention -- affirming collective identity -- on strategies that are inherently comprehensible in the light of past thinking within the known operating framework. This leads to consequences that have been expressed through the much-cited quote: "*For every human problem there is a solution that is quick, simple, inexpensive -- and wrong*". This is evident in the advocated responses to most major social problems -- including current preoccupation with global warming. As noted by Simon Tisdall (*Weapon of choice in the fight for moral supremacy*, *The Guardian*, 7 August 2008) in commenting on a UK Foreign Office report (*Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, 2008):

Look at today's biggest global issues -- climate change, pandemics, energy security, terrorism and other 'shadow sides' of globalisation -- and it's striking that the challenges governments find it hardest to deal with are highly diffuse, involving the actions and beliefs of millions (if not billions) of people.

Hence the focus on high tech solutions, as a comfortable product of existing business models, whose problematic impact only becomes evident long after profits have been made and the responsible government has changed. Apophatic thinking, as the out-of-the-box mode that questions reliance on "the box", clearly merits attention.

**Denial:** Denial is now the preferred means by which discomfiting knowledge is rejected. In the case of the individual it has been extensively studied in psychoanalysis. It is the method by which relevance is typically clarified in the kataphatic mode. It is increasingly blatant at the collective level, as practiced by government:

- at the time of writing, the Chinese government and the International Olympic Committee have declared that the evident haze in Beijing was merely humidity rather than [particulate pollution](#) (measured at 250 units) -- far above the WHO standard of 50 units) that had been set as the target for the event.
- at the time of the "[mad cow](#)" disease in the UK, the chief veterinary officer of neighbouring Belgium stated publicly -- "we have that too, but we call it vitamin deficiency".
- any evidence of problematic actions by security forces is typically denied, at least initially

There is a paradox to the apophatic mode in that through questioning conventional knowledge, as reinforced by recognizable patterns of information, it employs a process that may be difficult to distinguish from what others reject as "being in denial". Hence the challenge for "believers" in divinity when dealing with "unbelievers" (as discussed below). Radical denial in the apophatic mode, especially in the case of theology, is the recognition that understanding of fundamentals cannot be constrained to any conventional views which may constitute merely an instance or facet of the complexity to which comprehension is called to respond.

The more general challenge in a faith-based context is handling the distinctions between denial by fundamentalists, denial of fundamentalist beliefs, and radical denial of the cognitive rigidity associated with both. These challenges call for exploration -- to a far greater extent than responding militarily to the violence and "terrorism" that they engender in the "battle for hearts and minds", as discussed elsewhere (*Thinking in Terror: Refocusing the interreligious challenge from "Thinking after Terror"*, 2005).

**Classifying and shredding history:** Recent decades have made evident the extent to which information, supposedly vital to the future of humanity, is "classified" by authorities -- namely treated as secret, possibly with its very existence denied. With the simultaneous development of news management ("spin") beyond earlier forms of propaganda, it could be argued that, unsuspected by most, apophatic strategies are already being deployed in the "unsaying of reality" by authorities. The most concrete manifestation of this is the extent to which official archives are "lost" or systematically shredded.

This unmaking of the past -- of the unknown dimensions of secret history -- is accompanied by a reformulation of the historical context of reality, as noted by Gary Younge (*Never mind the truth*. *The Guardian*, 31 May 2004):

Politics has, to an extent, always been about the triumph of symbols over substance and assertion over actuality. But in the case of Iraq this trend seems to have reached its apogee, as though statements by themselves can fashion reality by the force of their own will and judgment. Declaration and proclamation have become everything. The question of whether they bear any relation to the world we actually live in seems like an unpleasant and occasionally embarrassing intrusion. The motto of the day both in Downing Street and the White House seems to be: "To say it is so is to make it so." These people are rewriting history before the ink on the first draft is even dry.

If such is indeed the case, then all are presumably free to reframe history -- as they find it convenient to understand it as a context for their own identity.

**Problematic:** Much has been made of the complex of world problems, named by the Club of Rome as the world problematique. It is the crisis of crises as foreseen by John Platt (*What We Must Do*, Science, 166, November 1969). As a network of over 50,000 world problems, it has been articulated in the *Encyclopedia of World Problems and Human Potential* (1976-2000). In reviewing there how

problems were defined, emphasis was placed on their nebulous nature as subjective, fuzzily defined, boundary phenomena, in which solutions might be understood as problems (*World Problems Project: Definitions*).

However it is clear that society is much challenged to come cognitively to grips with this "reality" as "socially constructed" with all its unspeakable horrors (as noted above). Many assertions are made about its nature and as many denials are made in response. Climate change denial is but a current example. More intriguing is the manner in which features of that reality are cognitively "shunned" (*Institutionalized Shunning of Overpopulation Challenge: incommunicability of fundamentally inconvenient truth*, 2008) in preference for more convenient conventional explanations.

Understood as the most complex and intimate subtlety into which humanity claims some form of insight, the challenge of understanding divinity might be considered analogous to that of comprehending appropriately the significance to humanity of the complexity of the problematique. The most popular approach to deeper understanding of divinity -- the *kataphatic way* -- is through appreciative imagery, symbols, words and other symbolic forms of experience. It may usefully be compared with positive thinking. But given the complexity of that problematique, and the cognitive and strategic challenge it implies, consideration of an alternative approach would seem to merit attention. [The widely acclaimed merits of "positive thinking" have been usefully challenged by *Barbara Ehrenreich*, whose book (*Bright-Sided: how the relentless promotion of positive thinking has undermined America*, 2009) is *reviewed* by Emily Wilson (see also Carole Cadwalladr, *Welcome to the Bright New World of Positive Living*, *The Observer*, 11 October 2009)].

Is there a case therefore for recognizing that more appropriate understanding of what the problematique implies for humanity -- and especially for individuals -- can only be understood in some apophatic manner. Is there a case for some form of "negative problemology" by analogy to *negative theology*? This approach would give refreshing legitimacy to "not knowing" the nature of the problematique, rather than asserting particular understandings from particular worldviews -- and denying other understandings of it from other worldviews.

**Resolutique:** The Club of Rome has also postulated the need for a "resolutique" through which to respond strategically to the problematique. Again many assertions are made with regard to the need for "global action plans" articulated authoritatively by particular frameworks. However it is quite evident that the coherence of such global initiatives is severely undermined by the unresolved challenges between them and by their remarkable track record in failing to deliver on commitments made. Most are significant primarily as exercises in tokenism and wishful thinking -- although such assessments would necessarily be contested from particular framework, as well as being affirmed from others.

The question raised by the apophatic approach is the possibility that appropriate humility might be a necessary cognitive precursor for more appropriate creativity -- if the much acclaimed human ingenuity is expected to respond appropriately to the problematique. Recognition of not knowing is a first step in more fruitful approaches to social organization in response to crisis. Is there a case for *Structuring around unknowing in a learning society*?

Given the embarrassment of people who claim to know collectively and authoritatively, how should the individual then understand any personal engagement with that dynamic in what may, or may not, be appropriately understood as crises?

**Futures:** In considering both the problematique and the resolutique, much is made of the human capacity for creatively envisaging the future of human civilization -- and responding to its challenges. Indeed, with nature now declared to be "dead", it has now been formally announced that humans have "taken charge" in a new "*anthropocene era*".

Curiously again, there is almost no humility, or confession of ignorance, in articulating future human potential (*In Quest of Optimism Beyond the Edge -- through avoidance of the answering process*, 2007). This is in marked contrast to the personal experience of many -- including the increasing numbers suffering from some form of depression. Utopian visions systematically ignore dystopian possibilities (whether or not articulated by authorities) and the challenge for the individual in engaging with any personal understanding of the future. Also curious is the failure to take account of analyses of the longer-term possibilities of collapse (Jared M. Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*, 2005) and the requirements for adaptation and resilience if there is to be any renewal (Thomas Homer-Dixon, *The Upside of Down: catastrophe, creativity, and the renewal of civilization*, 2006).

Given its apparent inaccessibility, surely there is a case for an apophatic approach to the future to compensate for the plethora of kataphatic assertions through which the future is systematically colonised -- possibly as a desperate unconscious attempt to ward off its inevitable emergence and the degree of impact of its surprises (Nassim Nicholas Taleb, *The Black Swan: the impact of the highly improbable*, 2007). These may even be agreeable -- as foretold by authorities on "end times" scenarios. In terms of any precautionary principle, as apophatic approach might well be assumed to be the most healthy approach for the individual.

This possibility is partially explored in contrasting the essentially kataphatic approach of the AQAL-based "integral futures," inspired by the work of Ken Wilber, with the potential of more open approaches (*Self-reflexive Challenges of Integrative Futures*, 2008).

**Terrorism:** As what has been framed as the most fundamental crisis to civilization, what does an apophatic approach suggest with respect to events since 9/11 and recognition of the extent of "terrorism"? (*Varieties of Terrorism: extended to the experience of the terrorized*, 2004).

It could be argued that the cognitive response to these events, as they have informed military strategy and democratic nation building, is above all characterized by conceptual closure. This may be described as tunnel vision, silo thinking or groupthink -- by the best and the brightest that money could buy (*Cui Bono: Groupthink vs Thinking the Unthinkable? Reframing the suffocating consensus in response to 7/7*, 2005; *Transforming the Encounter with Terrorism*, 2002).

The evident and costly failures of that thinking -- perhaps to be recognized by the future as historically unprecedented -- have been repeatedly characterized by the ready assumption of the relevance of conventional expertise and technology. It is only after nearly a decade of such failure that a degree of recognition has been accorded to the possibility that other neglected and deprecated insights might

be relevant to understanding how groups of tribes people, in one of the most backward areas of the world, could successfully defy use of the most sophisticated military technology produced by human civilization. Hence the announcement by the Pentagon of a [Minerva Research Initiative \(MRI\)](#) -- a US Department of Defense sponsored, university based, social science research program initiated in 2008.

Curiously this recognition is framed by two complementary understandings:

- the much-quoted remark of an aide to President Bush (Ron Suskind, *Without a Doubt*, *The New York Times*, 17 October 2004):

We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too....

- the cognitive challenge is perhaps forcefully made by the capacity of military intelligence to assess the nature of terrorist organization against which unprecedented resources have recently been allocated. As noted by Peter Preston (*A Nation as yet Unbuilt*, *The Guardian*, 23 June 2008) regarding Afghanistan:

But because we persisted in thinking of al-Qaida as some disciplined "terrorist army" pitted against our armies, because we talked in conventional terms that seemed to turn this wreck of a non-state into a nation like any other, we thought that conventional tactics could work. They won't. They have no foundations.

The point has been reinforced by Jason Burke (*The not-so-winnable war against terrorism*, *The Guardian*, 19 July 2008).

Ironically it might be argued that these both reflect the emergence of an apophatic strategic approach. This might be understood as framing psycho-social organization for the coming century -- as was the ambition of the [Project for the New American Century](#). But its implications are highly dependent on how "we" is defined, or defines itself -- and on how "we" decides who "you" is as exemplifying uncreative stasis. It effectively indicates the radical freedom which any "we" has to create its own reality -- a freedom which has been an appeal of American articulations of democracy.

It frames a dynamic situation in which reality can be recreated continuously -- rather than the very static framing it has been given in the past. In this respect it also highlights the disempowering disengagement characteristic of conventional approaches to reality -- notably the manner in which it is "judiciously" studied and accredited by academic, administrative and religious authorities. Of course the challenge is that this radical possibility has been fully grasped by unconventional groups like Al-Qaida -- seemingly unrecognized by those who have so judiciously studied them in their war against terrorism.

More curious, and perhaps to be considered the strategic triumph of "Al-Qaida", is the extent to which the response by security counter-measures has severely inhibited human freedom in democratic countries. This has notably implied invasive challenges to the validity of individual identity, notably the requirement for considerably enhanced biometric descriptors so that the security services know "who" you are. Ironically, following the cognitive failure of military strategy, these measures have been accompanied by what is described as much "heart searching" at the failure to win the "battle for hearts and minds" amongst those in remote tribal areas (or urban slums) whose identity has not been established.

**Believers vs Unbelievers:** The vital importance from any fundamentalist perspective of the distinction between "believers" and "unbelievers" is directly related to the kataphatic mode. Divinity as understood in particular, authoritatively specified, ways is held to be a mark of belief. Failure to understand divinity in this way is held to be a characteristic of an "unbeliever" to which specified actions are enjoined by "believers".

The question is whether the apophatic mode is acceptable to fundamentalists, notably those with a mystical tradition in their religion. If so then the characteristic of a "believer" is open to a variety of understandings consequent open both mystical insights and what is distinguished as divinity -- for example, in the light of reflections such as those of Sallie McFague mentioned above.

Given the manner in which violence against unbelievers is driven by kataphatic understandings of believers, the apophatic mode offers a way of reframing such considerations.

**Inter-ethnic relations:** As with the relations between "believers" and "unbelievers", similar considerations apply to the stereotyping of people of different ethnicity -- and the consequences arising from definitive kataphatic judgements.

The apophatic mode is especially interesting in considering the alternative knowledge systems of indigenous peoples as extensively documented by Darrell A. Posey (*Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity*, 1999).

**Extraterrestrials and their UFOs:** By extension of the arguments applicable to inter-ethnic relationships, the approach to any understanding of extraterrestrial life and culture could considerably benefit from an apophatic mode of reflection as argued elsewhere (*Self-reflective Embodiment of Transdisciplinary Integration (SETI): the universal criterion of species maturity?* 2008; *Communicating with Aliens: the psychological dimension of dialogue*. 2000). This necessarily applies to any understanding of the technology that may be represented by UFOs -- notably in the light of the "third law" of [Arthur C. Clarke](#) (*Profiles of The Future*, 1961): *Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic*.

**Interpersonal relations:** More generally, and more specifically, whereas the apophatic mode offers the possibility of many questions and alternative ways of wondering about who one is (*Am I Question or Answer? -- problem or (re)solution?* 2006), it is especially relevant to the understanding of any "other", notably [Goethe's "Elective Affinities"](#) (1809). This has been remarkably explored by [Martin Buber](#) (*I and Thou*, 1923). One speculative example relates to the notion of extraterrestrials (*People as Stargates: an alternative perspective on human relationships in space-time*, 1996).

The challenge of the "other", as recognized by philosophy and psychoanalysis, is now evoking increasing attention -- as discussed

elsewhere (*Existential challenge of "The Other"*, 2007; *"Human Intercourse" "Intercourse with Nature" and "Intercourse with the Other"*, 2007).

**Human equality:** It is curious that so much emphasis has been placed on kataphatic assertions of human "equality" in the face of every variety of difference in form, competence and disposition. Such simplistic assertions continue to be made in the face of the tragically evident disparities in quality of life and access to resources. David Rothkopf identifies one extreme as a "superclass", numbering 6,000 on a planet of 6 billion (*Superclass: the global power elite and the world they are making*, 2008). Who is kidding who?

It is the kataphatic mode, *par excellence*, which affirms with such certitude the distinctions and commonalities between species -- despite considerable technical challenges to such categorization and attribution. To what extent is it appropriate to understand "human equality" as a product of kataphatic thinking -- a form of fig leaf to obscure other dimensions of reality that social convention prefers not to face?

The apophatic mode might make it more fruitful to explore "human speciation" from a psycho-social perspective -- avoiding the traps of **social darwinism** -- in order to frame the range of senses of identity in a richer context. Different possibilities are, for example, suggested by David Abram (*The Spell of the Sensuous: perception and language in a more-than-human world*, 1997) and Ron Atkin (*Multi-Dimensional Man: can man live in 3 dimensional space?* 1981). Such freedom to explore the many dimensions, unrecognized in the dominant kataphatic mode, might give credibility to new modes of identity to which people may anyway be obliged to have recourse in order to avoid fatal exposure to those who might be fruitfully identified as dinosaurs. The latter may perhaps be caricatured as the dominant "species" in the Jurassic economic and financial system artificially currently sustained for their benefit and for that of other "species" dependent on their leavings.

**Assumptions of consensus:** Despite issues highlighted in the previous paragraphs, there is a prevailing assumption that agreement can be reached on the basis of appropriate argument amongst reasonable people -- with respect to appropriate collective action for the future. This assumption is increasingly questionable in the light of past difficulties in reaching consensus on non-trivial matters or other than in the ineffectual form of tokenism and lipservice. It might be argued that the expectation of consensus is the fantasy cultivated in the kataphatic mode. It empowers campaigns of persuasion and is a feature of the justification for forceful persuasion by some.

The apophatic mode requires an appreciation of the mystery of inexplicable and incommensurable difference -- as experienced in any clash of civilizations or cultures. In the light of astrophysical speculation, it is the recognition of the probable existence of parallel universes. Such a metaphor highlights the merit of reflection on the possibility of "extraterrestrials" -- given that in a society characterized by alienation it is indeed with "aliens" that it will be necessary to come to terms. The apophatic mode enables radical differences in worldview but also enables radically different possibilities of association between seeming incompatible worldviews. It will enable more creative and fruitful approaches to disagreement -- avoiding vain expectations of agreement and the procrastination they justify.

## Expectation of resolution?

In the current chaotic confusion -- simply to be defined as a mess -- it would be foolish for the "individual" to expect any meaningful resolution from collective "others" in the present time.

In the case of insight offered by philosophy, this is evident from the inquiry of Nicholas Rescher (*The Strife of Systems: an essay on the grounds and implications of philosophical diversity*, 1985) into the disagreement inherent in the relationships between schools of philosophy precluding any prospect of agreement (from his perspective). Given the manner in which philosophy and epistemology underpin the methodology of scientific inquiry, this would suggest the need for more radical explorations of the possibility of structures built on incommensurability (*Beyond Method: engaging opposition in psycho-social organization*, 1981; *Using Disagreements for Superordinate Frame Configuration*, 1992). Given the conflicts to which they give rise, the pathetic incapacity of religions to process their disagreements confirms the inadequacy of approaches dependent on "coalescence". A similar point might be made with regard to the natural and social sciences and the manner in which various "sciences" are marginalized, as noted above in the exploration of Paul Feyerabend (*Against Method: outline of an anarchistic theory of knowledge*, 1975).

Most striking, with respect to enabling the individual to act "radically" regarding personal identity, is the concluding comment of Nicholas Rescher:

For centuries, most philosophers who have reflected on the matter have been intimidated by the strife of systems. But the time has come to put this behind us -- not the strife, that is, which is ineliminable, but the felt need to somehow end it rather than simply accept it and take it in stride. To reemphasize the salient point: it would be bizarre to think that philosophy is not of value because philosophical positions are bound to reflect the particular values we hold.

This said however, Rescher's argument does not necessarily preclude the possibility of new ways to take the strife "in stride". Indeed it has been argued elsewhere that new forms of transdisciplinarity may effectively emerge from "striding" (*Transcending Duality as the Conceptual Equivalent of Learning to Walk*, 1994; *Walking Elven Pathways: enactivating the pattern that connects*, 2007).

## Recovering a fundamental right and freedom

The points above make it clear that the "individual" -- however such is understood by the person in question -- is confronted by a range of frameworks. Many of these are effectively both aggressive and invasive -- when they are not seductive -- in furtherance of unknown agendas.

Those responsible for individual frameworks take no responsibility for their relationship -- or lack of relationship -- to other frameworks.

They freely deprecate any frameworks other than their own. This leaves the "individual" in deep quandary in endeavouring to arrive at some degree of coherence in comprehending who or what it is possible to be.

The individual might then legitimately ask to what extent any understanding of identity is "misappropriated" -- a form of "identity theft" in modern parlance.

In conventional terms, it is therefore instructive to note the basic affirmation of freedom of belief in the preamble of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), and specifically in Article 18:

*Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance;*

However, given the unresolved challenges to the nature of individuality, it is unclear how anyone is to understand who "everyone" is in those terms. Further possibilities are highlighted through an experimental extension of the format of that declaration to the rights of disciplines and other collective modes of thought and activity, as well as to personal rights, namely the rights a person should permit their own roles and all their own modes of thought and activity ([Universal Declaration of the Rights of Human Organization an experimental extension of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), 1971).

Especially intriguing in the case of Declaration (and of its experimental extension) is Article 30:

*Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.*

It might be inferred that the "individual" is free to engage in any form of reframing of identity or sense of reality provided this does not impact on "others".

In the reality of a world characterized by a high degree of disaffection, alienation and unrest, "individuals" are already reframing themselves and their world in unusual ways beyond any collective understanding. People "reinvent" themselves and their public persona. This may be done temporarily with the assistance of drugs. Whilst their right to do so is implied by the Declaration, it is a right that "individuals" have to seize for themselves -- *carpe diem*. It is not something that can be given.

Curiously, however, the rapid increase in invasive biometric identification (in parallel with the "battle for hearts and minds" to protect democracy), is accompanied by a rapid decrease in the "availability" of those identified -- "I am not available". This may be exacerbated by the degree of media violence by which children are now deliberately nourished (Anthony Horowitz, [The Dark Knight tells us more about adults than it does about children](#), *The Guardian*, 9 August 2008).

With respect to framing individual identity, there is a curious parallel to the historical territorial phenomenon of the [enclosure of the commons](#) whereby a piece of land owned by one person, but over which other people could exercise certain traditional rights (such as allowing their livestock to graze upon it), was fenced (enclosed) and deeded or entitled to one or more private owners, who would then enjoy the possession and fruits of the land to the exclusion of all others. In this sense aspects of a person's identity have been kataphatically "fenced off" by right of certain authorities, restricting or forbidding any other understanding of it.

Such considerations relate to the [tragedy of the commons](#), to be understood as a psychosocial trap associated with conflict over finite resources between the interests of the "individual" and those of the conventionally defined common good. To what extent does the capacity of the "individual" to reframe social reality (as suggested above) structurally doom the collective resource through over-exploitation?

## Existentially paradoxical strategy of "being what one wants"

By being what one "wants", as suggested in the title of this exploration -- and knowing what one wants -- the possibility of being otherwise is seriously inhibited. Potential options are closed off -- "fenced off" as suggested above. Identity is constrained to what can be articulated in terms of tangibles -- with all that implies for patterns of consumption. The strategic need to "change patterns of consumption" must then be understood in terms of the challenge of changing identity.

These seemingly obscure issues are brought sharply into focus as a consequence of the kataphatic tendency of individuals and groups to identify with tangibles that they have been induced to "want". Marketing necessarily promotes such identification -- with a house, an automobile, clothing, accessories or other products that are held to define the identity of the person. This is effectively an exercise in misplaced concreteness. One is encouraged by convention to recognize one's identity, and that of others, through such possessions -- through [conspicuous consumption](#). Patterns of consumption, and the challenge they constitute in any transition to sustainability, are then more fruitfully understood in terms of sustaining and "consuming" identity (Anup Shah, [Behind Consumption and Consumerism](#), 2001). By contrast, an apophatic approach is consistent with [dematerialization](#) and the association of identity with subtler and more dynamic patterns -- through refining and complexifying the nature of what is "wanted" ([Emergence of Cyclical Psycho-social Identity Sustainability as "psychically" defined](#), 2007).

As noted above, from the theological perspective highlighted by Janet Williams ([Judging Judgement: an apophatic approach](#), *Theology Today*, Jan 2002), in citing Carol Zaleski ([The Life of the World to Come: Near-Death Experience and Christian Hope](#), 1996), the best strategy is one of "imaginative proliferation" in which a multiplicity of images, including mutually subverting contradictories such as eternal damnation of sinners and universal salvation, both articulate and challenge the best efforts at coherence. It is this simultaneous play of

mutually incompatible and affirmed-and-denied images that is the work of imagination rather than cognition. This implies an essentially self-reflexive process as Williams argues:

It would seem that Christian speech on judgment will have to be an apophatic speech, an uroboric talking about judgment that both posits and displaces itself, mediating new life to the extent that it is crucified with the Logos whose judgment it proclaims.

An interesting example of collective use of imagination is offered by intentional communities (*Renaissance Zones: experimenting with the intentional significance of the Damanhur community*, 2003; *Imaginal Education: game playing, science fiction, language, art and world-making*, 2003; *Consciously Self-reflexive Global Initiatives: Renaissance zones, complex adaptive systems, and third order organizations*, 2007). Arguably the identity of collectivities may be fruitfully reframed in an analogous manner (*Experimental Articulation of Collective Identity through a dynamic system of metaphors*, 1991) -- notably in the case of Europe, the Middle East and the United Nations.

Valuable philosophical explorations of the implications of such imaginative possibilities, notably hypoessentialism and hyperessentialism, have been made by Saul Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*, 1980) -- as discussed in relation to identity by Christopher Hughes (*Kripke: Names, Necessity, and Identity*, 2004).

Faced with these possibilities of the neglected "abundance" highlighted by Feyerabend and McFague, the challenge lies in the strategic dilemmas of "being what you want". If the individual is in some way free imaginatively to elaborate both a sense of identity and the nature of contextual reality, what are the implications of any "want" in relation to any emergent sense of "being" and identity -- of who is doing the wanting? Operationally the "want" can be expressed kataphatically by defining, more or less rigidly, identity and the sense of being. Alternatively the "want" may be expressed apophatically by withholding such definition (as unwanted premature closure), or "dancing" between alternative definitions, doffing and donning various identities.

Perhaps more intriguing is the extent to which neither extreme is felt to be satisfactory and instead a form of "middle way" is sought. In this sense it is worth noting the work of Kinhide Mushakoji (*Scientific revolution and interparadigmatic dialogue*, 1978; *Global Issues and Interparadigmatic Dialogue*, 1988) who distinguishes from Eastern traditions four modalities through which the human mind grasps reality:

- **Affirmation:** Leading to affirmative action in the form of support, commitment, initiative, proposition, cooperation, consensus formation, empowering, "opening".
- **Negation:** Leading to negative action in the form of sanction, withdrawal (of support), denial, disassociation, delimitation, criticism, opposition, promotion of dissent, disempowering, "closing".
- **Affirmation and negation:** Leading to ambiguous action, non-violent resistance, "dumb insolence", "giving with one hand and taking with the other", "double dealing", "stick and carrot tactics", the "yes but no" response of the frustrated cross-examinee.
- **Non-affirmation and Non-negation:** Leading to action in the form of indifference, indecision, non-action (in the oriental sense), "neither confirm nor deny", "opening and closing".

The first two correspond to the kataphatic and apophatic modes. It is the sense in which individuals may dance between all four modes - in response to different circumstances -- that is a challenge to further reflection. Although seemingly abstract, the familiarity of many with all four modes is evident in the challenge of interpersonal relations, especially those associated with the mysteries, dynamics and uncertainties of being in love.

## Emergence of a wisdom society?

Much is now made of the emergence of an information-based global "knowledge society" as characteristic of the 21st century. However in the 220 pages of the UNESCO World Report *Towards Knowledge Societies: UNESCO World Report* (2005) only a single reference is made to wisdom, despite its apparent significance for the future:

Young people are bound to play a major role because they are often among the first to use new technologies and to help establish them as familiar features of everyday life. But older people also have an important part to play. They possess the experience required to offset the relative superficiality of 'real-time' communication and remind us that knowledge is but a road to wisdom.

In the light of the above arguments, however, it might be asked whether a "knowledge society" will only become a "wisdom society" when it develops the "negative capability" described by the poet John Keats -- to become a "society of unknowing", capable of acting from a space of unknowing. Unfortunately the UNESCO World Report, in all its references to "negative", as contrasted with "positive", completely fails to draw attention to the significance traditionally attached to apophatic thinking by thinkers of the highest quality in many cultures across the centuries -- confirming the trap of the kataphatic mode in this period.

As noted above, there is a difference to be recognized between an apophasis that presupposes the inadequacy of language and one that discovers the failure of language, where language exhausts itself. Apophasis is not a "naïve pre-critical ignorance", but "a strategy and practice of unknowing".

Despite the seeming obscurity of "apophasis", it is fortunate that poets of every culture continue implicitly to give credibility to its significance. It is not surprising that poetry is an inspiration to the creative strategic thinking vital to the resilience, emphasized by Homer-Dixon (2006), that is required for the survival of human civilization (*Ensuring Strategic Resilience through Haiku Patterns: reframing the scope of the "martial arts" in response to strategic threats*, 2006). Is the relationship between apophatic thinking and kataphatic thinking then to be fruitfully compared to that of "Beauty" and the "Beast" (*Poetry making and Policy making: arranging a marriage between*

Human life is driven forward by its dim apprehension of notions too general for its existing language.

[Alfred North Whitehead](#)

Naming engenders ten thousand things....Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub. It is the centre hole that makes it useful...Therefore profit comes from what is there; usefulness from what is not there. [Lao Tzu](#)

In contrast with what is commonly assumed, a description, when carefully inspected, reveals the properties of the observer. We, observers, distinguish ourselves precisely by distinguishing what we apparently are not, the world. [Francisco Varela](#)

Behind the misty wall of words, the diverse, even contradictory, interpretations, motivations and utilisations are an indication of fundamental divisions concerning values. In particular, the most basic human rights are more frequently invoked as a weapon of attack or defence against some party, rather than recognized as the royal road to a positive relationship between individuals and groups in an objective form of fraternity. [René Maheu](#), Director-General, UNESCO

When men understand only one of a pair of opposites, or concentrate only on a partial aspect of being, then clear expression also becomes muddled by mere word play, affirming this one aspect and denying all the rest....The wise man therefore sees that on both sides of every argument there is both right and wrong. [Chuang Tzu](#)

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