

APOPHATIC PRACTICE IS A POWERFUL POSITIVE TOOL



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Apophatic practice is subtraction. You find out what a thing is by removing what it is not. The old mystics used it to approach God: not this, not that, stripping away every image until the images run out. Most people who know the word know it as a religious technique for reaching the ineffable.

It is a better tool than that, and it is not only for mystics. Its power shows up when you stop treating it as a way to reach a destination and start treating it as a way to clear a workspace. Used that way it is one of the most practical instruments a thinking person owns.

Here is the trap it usually gets run into, and why the reframe matters.

Run It All the Way and You Reach Nothing

Take the tool to its limit and it dissolves everything. Every answer rests on a prior answer, so you ask what that one rests on, and you keep asking, and nothing you reach turns out to be the bottom. At its limit the tool delivers one finding: every floor you reach rests on another.

A mystic who reaches that terminal experiences it as a velvety black infinite light and calls it ineffable, beyond words. This is where I part company with the tradition, because the terminal is not beyond words at all. It is quite effable. What actually happened is that you ran a good tool past the point where it returns anything usable, dissolved every sayable thing, and had nothing left to say. The ineffability is an artifact of overuse rather than a property of reality.

And here is the part almost nobody says out loud: science reaches the same terminal by a different road.

Watch it go. Rutherford's atom is a dense nucleus with electrons around it, until Bohr's atom replaces it, until the nucleus turns out to be protons and neutrons, until those turn out to be quarks, until current work floats the possibility of structure beneath the quarks. Push into quantum mechanics and the particles become waves, and then physicists admit they do not fully understand what they are holding and call the theory incomplete. Suppose we finish it and marry quantum mechanics to gravity in a grand

unified theory. What if the whole apparatus runs inside a perfect simulation? Then break through the simulation to whatever is real underneath, and ask what that rests on.

It is the same regress. Physicalism is a promissory note in exactly the way the mystic's God is a promissory note. Both say the payoff is real and coming, at the end of the war, at the completion of the science, at the far side of the final negation. Run apophatic dissection on either one and it opens into the same regress, and no one has ever reached its end. The tool plays no favorites, and anyone who uses it to demolish the other side while stopping short of his own floor is not being rigorous; he quit pressing at a convenient depth.

The Rule: Do Not Use the Tool Until It Becomes Useless

The mistake in both traditions is the same. They run the negation to the terminal and then plant a flag on it, God for the mystic and a finished science for the physicalist, and both are worshipping a floor that neither of them has ever reached.

The fix is a single rule. Do not run the tool to the point where it eats itself. Run it partway, harvest the intermediate result, and stop while the result is still functional.

An intermediate result is a working understanding that holds for the job in front of you, held loosely, with no claim that it is final. It is the difference between an instrument you use and an idol you serve. That is the whole move, and once you have it you can run apophatic practice several times a day to real effect.

Here is what that looks like on the ground.

Four Uses

The self. Ask who you are and start subtracting. You are not your body, which changes while you go on being you; not your passing thoughts, which you watch arrive and leave; not your job, your reputation, or the story you keep telling about yourself. Run this all the way and you arrive at no-self, the velvety nothing, and if you plant your flag there you have deleted the person who has to grade the essay and keep the appointment. Stop one step short. The intermediate result is a self that is no longer

made of its own story, a specific person with a specific history, carried by something larger than the story and therefore not leveled when the story takes a hit. That intermediate is the usable thing; the terminal is a hole.

A painful belief. The thought arrives: *I am worthless*. Do not argue with it, which only feeds it more words. Dissect it instead. Is that a fact about the world, or a sentence someone once installed and you kept running? Subtract the frame that makes the sentence an object you have to defend. The result is immediate and physical: the sting drops, because you are no longer made of the sentence. Do not run this down to *there is no self to wound*, which is useless the moment your child needs dinner. Stop at *the hurt is real and I am not the sentence*, and get up.

Any hard definition. Ask what time is, or what free will is, or what a number is, and every definition you reach dissolves into the definitions under it. Chase it to the terminal and you have a paralyzed afternoon and no dinner. The working physicist and the working person do the same sane thing: take the intermediate definition that pays out for the task, use it, and leave the final question open on the shelf where it belongs. The openness is honest; the paralysis is only a misuse of a good tool.

God. State the religious claim in its strongest form: nothing exists except the ineffable God. Fine. Now run the apophatic path toward that God. You subtract appearance after appearance, *this is not God, that is not God*, and you pass through a long series of intermediate states of understanding on the way. But if the claim is true and only God exists, then every appearance you just dissolved was also God, which means you found God at every intermediate stop and never needed the terminal at all. The intermediate appearances were the whole of what was available and usable. And the terminal word itself has been so worked over by culture that it now carries almost nothing a person can use, except as the clearest example there is of what happens when you worship your own graven images. The graven image was never a statue; it was the word.

Honor the Appearances and Press On

The tool is for clearing false floors. Whether there is a true one beneath all of them is not something the tool can settle, because all it ever reports is that the floor you are standing on is not the last. What it hands back on the way is real structure, and that structure is the tool succeeding. Reality is a dataset of impossible size, and no finite

mind churns the whole of it and pins it under a flag in an afternoon. The intermediate patterns are miles of ground genuinely covered. You walked some of them today and may walk more tomorrow, and that the walk runs longer than a life is a fact about the size of the country, saying nothing about whether the country has an edge. A functional intermediate is enough to live on, to build on, and to love from.

So use apophatic practice the way you would use any sharp instrument. Cut away the frame that turned a workable understanding into an idol you have to defend, take the working understanding that is left, and get back to your day. The appearances you pass through on the way are not illusions to be gotten past. They have real effects, they are where your life actually happens, and they are completely discussable, which is the exact opposite of ineffable.

Hold things loosely and functionally, honor the appearances, which are real, and press on.

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