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# Synthetic Logic as the Philosophical Underpinning for Apophatic Theology

Commentary on *A Philosophy of the ~~Unsayable~~*  
by Stephen Palmquist

What's in a name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet.

THESE WELL-WORN LINES from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* couldn't be more true—and more misleading, if William Franke's wide-ranging exposition on “the unsayable” is taken to heart. The book's six numbered chapters, divided into two parts consisting of three chapters each, are framed by short chapters fancifully entitled “Pre-face” and “Inconclusion”. These word-plays accurately reflect the author's tendency to stretch words beyond their ordinary meanings to make points that are often (*intentionally?*) only partially expressed. Thus, despite its unusual title, the opening Pre-face is strikingly similar to a standard preface; yet its title's unexplained hyphen bears silent witness to the book's apophatic premise (p.2), that “discourse” is always “necessarily preceded by and predicated on what cannot be said.” Likewise, the book's concluding chapter is refreshingly straightforward, offering a clear and succinct statement of the book's accomplishments and limitations, saying nothing about its non-standard title. The reader is thus again left wondering: is the provocative title meant to imply that, “in conclusion”, the cryptic style permeating the book (thanks to which the book aptly exemplifies the thesis it promulgates) is being set aside and replaced by a more straightforward use of language, or that this final statement of the book's purpose, despite its definitive appearance, remains ultimately “inconclusive”?

The three chapters of Part I address themes relating to the interface between philosophy and literature. Chapter One, elusively entitled “Invitatory”, boldly introduces the book's central claim (p.21): “Any language capable of making determinate statements pivots on an internal distinction between that in it which...remains unsayable versus that which it is able to articulate.” Although Franke has thereby *stated* that this distinction exists, he assumes the “mechanism” that keeps it in place “is itself below the threshold of the articulable” (p.21)—an ellipsis I shall

fill later in this essay by showing that language *about* “the unsayable” has a distinctive logical form that *can* be stated. Chapter Two (“In the Hollow of Pan’s Pipe”) adopts Hegel’s philosophy as a sounding board: guided by the (implied) metaphor that language is like music (for it conveys meaning more through the space hollowed out by the instrument of our words than by the words themselves), Franke portrays the philosopher of Absolute Spirit, who writes as if he can *say it all*, as in fact carving out a space for a silent *experience* of Truth and Totality that transcends any of his written words. Chapter Three juxtaposes two post-holocaust poets, Edmond Jabès and Paul Celan, in hopes of demonstrating (p.81) that “each in a different way lends language to silence in order to give voice to the unspeakable.” Taken together, these three chapters establish “the paradigm of apophasis as a mode of poetry and of discourse generally” (p.134). Given their unmistakably poetic style, they read more like works of art than philosophical essays per se. Like a good painting, one can dip in and out of their kaleidoscope of images, without needing to digest them systematically; the masterful achievement of their synthesis deserves appreciation, as long as the word “philosophy” is not interpreted too narrowly. Thus, when Franke writes of the “feigned and literally ‘fictive’ truths” that characterize all “discourse” (p.77), he must have *literary* discourse in mind; consigning *all* truth-claims to this fate would destroy science as we know it and render philosophy nothing but an art form. For philosophy and science assume a *logical* form that poetry and art may freely ignore.

Part II’s three chapters address themes relating to the interface between philosophy and theology. Chapter Four interprets various postmodern French philosophers as faithful participants in the Neoplatonic tradition of negative theology. The historical roots of the postmodern suspicion of all foundations, Franke maintains, stretch back to Parmenides, for whom all knowledge rests on a “One” that is not a foundation because it is ineffable (p.145): “nothing at all can be said of the One that must not also, at the same time, be *unsaid*. It cannot even be said unequivocally to be One.” From Parmenides to Damascius, these thinkers prefigure the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, whose path from an “aggressively anti-theological” nay-sayer (p.158) to an equally ardent *defender* of Christianity as an essentially de-constructive faith (pp.165f) exhibits the depth and passion of all apophatic reasoning. Chapter Five similarly unearths apophatic undercurrents in the work of theologian John Milbank and his Radical Orthodoxy movement, for whom Kant and Enlightenment “transcendentals” are to blame for whatever problems plague the modern world, and ingeniously shows that “the ancient theological hymn” shares much in common with such “postmodern philosophical theology” (p.257). Chapter Six concludes Part II with a daring synthesis

of Radical Orthodoxy and “postmodern secular theology” (p.270); it turns out that both contemporary theological currents share a “common basis in critical, apophatic insight into the generative source of reality, culture, and language”, calling us to a new path of “openness to the ‘radically Other.’”

A central claim, running like a thread through Franke’s work, is the ultimate contingency of all names—including (especially) the divine Name that is in fact no name because it is beyond naming. Given the significance of this claim to the book’s deep message, the author’s ironic habit of name-dropping can be disconcerting at times. One paragraph occupying merely 18 lines (p.56) mentions nine names with barely a hint as to which of their ideas are being cited. (Five lines near the top of p.178 similarly rattle off four names.) Admittedly, this tendency exhibits the truly impressive breadth of Franke’s knowledge of relevant literature; yet by merely *naming* so many interrelated thinkers he risks alienating his readers, for those who have digested the ideas defended by the scholars whose names so frequently season the text do not need to have the text salted with these names in order to taste of the relevance of their ideas, while those who are unaware of these scholars’ work are left hungry whenever the salt appears without the food of any substantive ideas for it to flavor. When Franke names a given author without offering a *word* of explanation as to which of that author’s ideas he is highlighting, his attempt to season the text may paradoxically result in the salt losing its savor.

This book’s poetic style and theological undertones give rise to a key question: Is this kind of writing properly named *philosophy*? Franke repeatedly refers to the apophatic tradition as primarily a form of (“negative”) *theology*, and both the form and content of the book frequently exhibit a literary flair that is uncharacteristic of standard philosophical prose. In keeping with the book’s apophatic theme, however, let me clarify what a negative answer to this question would imply. If we respect Franke’s own terms, then stating that the book is *not* a work of philosophy would not necessarily imply that it is *unphilosophical*. Rather, it might merely indicate that the book attempts to adumbrate the philosophy of negating the philosophical. Indeed, this is implied on the very cover of the book, where the word “UNSAYABLE” is overlaid with a thin-lined “X”. Obviously, in order to philosophize, one must be able to *say* what one is thinking about. So writing a book about “the unsayable” paradoxically *requires* negating the very thing one is attempting to exhibit.

Ironies and paradoxes, such as those that permeate this book, are inevitable whenever one uses words in an attempt to describe what is essentially mysterious. Nevertheless,

Franke's exposition could have been rendered considerably clearer, and its core (philosophical!) message significantly strengthened, had he adopted an explicit position on the nature of *apophatic logic*. Franke repeatedly hints that he thinks such a logic is possible, as when he praises "Nancy's anti-logic of sense" for being "exactly what I have been calling 'apophatic'" (p.183). Yet he never fleshes out what this possible "mechanism" of the unsayable, this "anti-logic of discourse" (p.60; cf. p.132), would entail—perhaps because, even though we must always "assume terms and apply rules", these "can never be completely articulated or explained" (p.22; cf. p.151). As a result, his whole book might appear to some readers to suffer the same fate as the playwrights discussed in Chapter Two, whose work is ultimately "senseless—except inasmuch as they expose a radical senselessness at the root of speaking per se" (pp.77-78). Poets might accept this fate—as might Franke himself, insofar as his writing aims to be poetic; but should the *philosopher* settle for nothing more than using ultimately "senseless" words to evoke an experience of "senselessness"?

Saving this masterful book from such a disconcerting predicament is not as difficult as Franke's silence on the matter might suggest. In various publications (see e.g., *The Tree of Philosophy*, Chapter 5) I have distinguished between "analytic logic" (which bases propositional truth on the application of Aristotle's laws of identity, noncontradiction, and excluded middle) and its negation, called "synthetic logic" (based on the *negation* of Aristotle's three key logical laws—which I call the laws of *nonidentity*, contradiction, and *included middle*). A conscious awareness of how synthetic logic operates in the use and interpretation of apophatic language would go a long way in removing the impression some readers may have that Franke's use of language is intentionally mystifying and even obscurantist rather than being genuinely philosophical. That is, when synthetic logic is clearly in view, words can be used in a way that *makes sense* even though, according to their literal meaning (i.e., according to the standards of analytic logic), they remain senseless. This does not *resolve* the paradox of the unsayable; it still requires the word "unsayable" in the book's title to be crossed out. But it explains *why* crossing out this crucial name is more than just word-play, why apophatic language *must* be paradoxical. Indeed, one of the main themes running through Franke's book is that apophatic language is the *negation of language*; it is but a small step from this insight to the awareness that apophatic language attains the status of philosophy through its grounding in synthetic logic.

A few brief examples will illustrate how synthetic logic makes sense out of language that might otherwise appear to be but a literary game, revealing it to be a genuinely

philosophical mode of exposition. The law of nonidentity ( $A \neq A$ ) grounds many of Franke's truth-claims: it explains how Franke can *truly* say, for example, that Shakespeare's Bottom "says [A]... what cannot [ $\neq$ ] be said [A]" (pp.13-14) and that apophatic "language... negates itself as language" (p.61) through "discourse undoing its own identity" (p.65). Likewise, the law of contradiction ( $A = -A$ ) grounds claims such as that the "pregnant pauses" (A) created between apophatic words nonetheless "point to an ultimate impotence [ $-A$ ] of the word" (p.18; cf. p.68), and that the goal in apophatism is "that language [A] must annihilate itself [i.e., be  $-A$ ]" (p.120). And the law of included middle ( $A = A + -A$  or  $1 = 0$ ) is the logical basis for Franke's claim that "[w]e understand only on the basis of what we do not understand" (p.28), so that "everything that is" (1) is "deriv[ed] from Nothing" (0). At one point Franke himself inadvertently expresses all three laws in one sentence (p.57): "The unsayable [0] must be expressed in contradictory forms [i.e.,  $A = -A$ ] because it can have no proper identity of its own [ $A \neq A$ ] but exerts absolute, decisive influence in all directions [ $A = A + -A$ ] on everything else [ $1 = 0$ ]."

That Franke does not explicitly acknowledge anything like synthetic logic as the linguistic foundation for apophatic discourse should not detract from the impressive achievement his book makes. Indeed, I know of no other work that manages to evoke the depths of the Nothing that *is* Everything in so many profound and interesting ways. Naming is the ultimate human act of creativity. It distinguishes us from all other animal beings while uniting us with the unspeakable One that religions call God, Kant calls "the supersensible", and postmodern nihilists call "the Other". What Franke's book shows, without ever saying so, is that *nothing* is more important than names.