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PURSUING *EUDAIMONIA*:

RE-APPROPRIATING THE GREEK PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS
OF THE CHRISTIAN APOPHATIC TRADITION

Author: Brendan Cook

Pursuing *Eudaimonia*:
Re-appropriating the Greek Philosophical
Foundations of the Christian Apophatic
Tradition

By

Brendan Cook

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P U B L I S H I N G

Pursuing *Eudaimonia*:
Re-appropriating the Greek Philosophical Foundations of the Christian Apophatic Tradition,
by Brendan Cook

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Fortitudo mentis

(Courage to see things as they are)

INTRODUCTION

PURSUING *EUDAIMONIA*: RE-APPROPRIATING THE GREEK PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN APOPHATIC TRADITION

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.
(Thomas Jefferson, *The Declaration of Independence*, 1776)

This most famous political declaration, representing the hopes and desires of both those who govern and those governed, carries profound philosophical and theological thinking stretching back into antiquity which is now lost to many. Thomas Jefferson did not coin the phrase the ‘pursuit of happiness’ but took it from his intellectual heroes who were mostly English; foremost of them was John Locke who used the phrase in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.¹ In turn, Locke’s understanding, says Hamilton, invoked ‘Greek and Roman ethics in which *eudaimonia* (perfect happiness) is linked to *arête*, the Greek word for ‘virtue’ or ‘excellence’.² This claimed that through the correct philosophical training of the soul in harmony with the natural order, excellence would be achieved, and thereby *eudaimonia* or the fullest human happiness or flourishing. However, this classical philosophical and theological pursuit of human development, central to that of the Graeco-Christian apophatic tradition, has largely given way to reason’s modern autonomous and instrumental form. Ironically, Locke’s *Essay* contributes to this thinking which has undoubtedly proved successful to human development, seen outwardly in scientific and technological progress, tied to greater material production and consumption. But this modern understanding and way of thinking, as my thesis will suggest, is proving

problematic for the cultivation of the inner human landscape. This contrasts with the ancient pursuit of *eudaimonia* through an internal ascetical movement of harmony with the natural order of the world. Of the experience of Socrates, Jaeger notes:

man cannot reach this harmony with Being through the cultivation and satisfaction of his own senses and his bodily nature . . . but only through complete mastery over himself in accordance with the law he finds by searching his own soul . . . the realm . . . most wholly his own . . . Socrates added to . . . Greek eudaemonism a new power to resist external nature and destiny in their increasingly dangerous threats against human liberty.³

Consequently, the promise of liberty in expressing the deeper currents of human passion and desire enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence is increasingly frustrated. The modern dichotomy between inner and outer human development resulting from this difference in thinking is further illustrated by Hadot's claim that 'ancients . . . at least hoped to accede to it in certain privileged moments, and wisdom was the transcendent norm which guided their action'.⁴

This thesis seeks to redress this problematic dichotomy by advancing the argument for the recovery of reason's ancient exercise as *philo-sophia* (the love of wisdom) as a spiritual way of life, drawing particularly from the work of the classical scholars Werner Jaeger,⁵ Pierre Hadot⁶ and Joseph Pieper.⁷ I argue further that such a recovery will be made more effective by retrieving the Greek philosophical foundations of the Christian apophatic tradition. Articulating this recovery of reason's ancient 'negative' exercise directed specifically towards the summit of apophatic ascent, offers a rich vision and sure path in the pursuit of the fullest inner human development. This requires understanding of this 'negative' intellectual trajectory as simultaneously the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. There was no complete separation of the two, as discussion will show. Greek philosophy was the way of life in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* which became fully realized at the summit of Christian apophatic ascent. It is impossible to fully appreciate the Christian apophatic tradition without thoroughly investigating the intricacies of its ancient philosophical heritage. The aim of this appreciation in the light of Christian revelation is the rediscovery of valuable insights from ancient elements of the universal experience of pursuing human development. These are contrasted with modern forms of reason. The re-emergence of the apophatic tradition is also discussed within the context of constructive postmodernity and in light of other solutions (for example, liberation and feminist theology), offered to the problematic identified. This clarifies key

voices of challenge and solutions to the issue of the Enlightenment legacy discussed in *Chapter One*. This pursuit of human development within a Christian ‘qualified dualism’⁸ is shown to be rooted in the convergence of reason’s ‘negative’ exercise (*logos*) with an embodied Biblical tradition (Word).

I have chosen throughout both historical and contemporary dialogue partners. These stretch from antiquity into the present along a continuous historical line of philosophical and theological thinking. I read these texts through the lens of *lectio divina* as my chosen methodology allied with an imaginative and literary reading of the Platonic corpus. Drawing on these methods of reading, I chart the broad historical scope of the thesis. My dialogue partners include the modern philosophers Zygmunt Bauman,⁹ Ernst Gellner,¹⁰ Charles Taylor,¹¹ Alasdair MacIntyre,¹² Joseph Pieper¹³ and the work of Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens Ten Kate.¹⁴ Their identification of problems in the development of modern thinking suggests that instrumental reason is increasingly frustrating the deeper currents of human passion and desire; hence, I make the case for offering a vibrant alternative. I then chart the ancient historical development of the ‘negative’ intellectual trajectory. This retrieval aims to encourage both reason’s ‘negative’ exercise and to suggest its suitability for the purpose. The scholars from which I draw are Raoul Mortley,¹⁵ Richard T. Wallis¹⁶ and Pauliina Remes,¹⁷ coupled with the works of Heraclitus, Parmenides, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and Proclus. In charting the assimilation of this Greek intellectual trajectory within the Christian tradition, I also draw from the work of theologians Andrew Louth,¹⁸ Janet P. Williams,¹⁹ Mary-Jane Rubenstein,²⁰ Vladimir Lossky,²¹ William Riordan,²² Jean Daniélou²³ and Norman Russell.²⁴ I also interrogate the writings of those who developed the Christian apophatic tradition itself: Clement of Alexandria,²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa²⁶ and Pseudo-Dionysius.²⁷

Finally, I demonstrate how this ‘negative’ movement culminates ‘suddenly’²⁸ in the self-transcending ‘ecstatic’ blooming of intelligence which accompanies the collapse of reason and language, witnessed most clearly in Pseudo-Dionysius’ *Mystical Theology*. In turn, the universal hopes, passions and desires expressed in the modern American Declaration of Independence are offered their ancient philosophical and theological foundations.

Chapter Outline

Chapter One begins outlining the rationale for retrieving the Greek philosophical foundations of the Christian apophatic tradition. This aims to encourage a more effective pursuit of inner human development by re-appropriating reason's ancient 'negative' exercise as a spiritual way of life in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, culminating in the summit of the Christian apophatic ascent. The chapter therefore begins by elucidating this work's Christian context prior to its fuller treatment in Chapter Four. This requires a thorough investigation into the intricacies of the apophatic tradition's philosophical heritage whose highpoint was realized in the Christian Biblical tradition. The culmination of this trajectory is revealed to be that of a Christian 'qualified dualism'²⁹ characterized by epistemic and existential tension heightened to breaking point. My discussion of the Greek vision of *eudaimonia* shows how this was central to the development of the Graeco-Christian apophatic tradition and to notions of spiritual wholeness. Discussion of contemporary voices of challenge to the Enlightenment legacy of the problematic of autonomous and instrumental reason follows. Challenging thinking about human development today these voices are drawn from the areas of philosophy, theology, spirituality, psychology (transpersonal) and education. I next chart the development of the philosophical foundations of modern reason in contrast to its ancient apophatic form. In conclusion, I situate this work's apophatic solution to the problematic of modern reason within the context of a constructive postmodernism and in so doing discuss other alternative solutions, for example, liberation and feminist theology.

Chapter Two begins by outlining my approach to reading the Platonic Corpus and later Platonic philosophy. This is guided by the theologian and classics scholar David Brown. Complementing this approach, I also translate my methodology into a clear step-by-step mapping along the lines of the proposed *lectio divina* framework. I then begin this retrieval by examining Socrates' pursuit of wisdom characterized by *aporia* as the precursor to negative theology. Discussion of this aporatic pursuit is done in relation to the mythological understanding of the genealogy of Greek *Eros* as described in *The Symposium*. From this genealogy, I retrieve the example of the aporatic pursuit of inner human development of Penia, the mother of *Eros*, which illustrates the kind of emphasis this thesis aims to encourage. This is contrasted with the father *Poros*, which I argue, like much modern thinking, is characterized by *euporia*. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the veracity of Socrates' claims about the ignorance of wisdom

without which, the value of his aporatic pursuit (as a precursor to negative theology) is severely undermined.

Chapter Three begins by tracing the development of the Greek philosophical foundations of the Christian apophatic tradition from their genesis in the rise of *logos*. Allied with this I next consider Heraclitus' view of reality which maintained that the only constant in the cosmos was change itself contrasting that of Parmenides' idea of One unified unchanging reality. This begins establishing an inward aporatic trajectory of human development characterized by heightening epistemic and existential tension. Discussion follows of two signs intersecting with this pursuit of wisdom tied with growing doubts over the power of reason (*logos*) being set before One unified reality. These are of Parmenides' poetic account of the goddess Night's revelation of two ways of inquiry and of the *inspiratio* of Apollo's *theia mania*.³⁰ Next my discussion moves to Plato establishing this 'negative' contemplative trajectory within the Western philosophical tradition through his dialogue *The Parmenides*. I show how he does this by accepting, with modifications, Parmenides' idea of One unchanging reality over that of Heraclitus' view. Discussion of *The Parmenides* centres on its articulation of the doubts concerning the power of *logos* and language when attempting to comprehend the One. In contrast to this emerging Platonic contemplative trajectory, I briefly discuss Aristotle's practical priority (*phronesis*) and his theory of abstraction (*aphaeresis*) used by the early exponents of negative theology. This divergence from Plato's contemplative priority I offer as antecedent to the present-day marginalization of reason's broader conceptual vision of human development. I next discuss this philosophical heritage of the apophatic tradition reaching the zenith of its pursuit of *eudaimonia* in the ecstatic 'blooming' of intelligence in Plotinus and Proclus. I illustrate further this experiential zenith of heightening epistemic and existential tension and religious sensibility, with discussion of Hilary Armstrong's view of it as the apophatic 'genuine article'³¹ of Neoplatonism. I conclude the chapter by discussing the transit of this erotic Greek pursuit of *eudaimonia* rising to be met by the descent of Christian *agape*.³²

Chapter Four takes up discussion of this transit into the Christian apophatic tradition, and constituting the convergence of Greek 'negative' reason (*logos*) with Biblical faith (Word). Analysis of this assimilation of the pursuit of *eudaimonia* begins in Middle Platonism with Philo. This will show that, unlike his pagan counterparts, he is the first to transpose the Jewish Biblical God onto the heightening of religious reading of Plato's thought, particularly *The Parmenides*. Discussion of the develop-

ment of this Biblical trajectory continues through Christian philosophers and theologians beginning with Clement of Alexandria. Allied with wrestling the radical heightening epistemic and existential tension of these developments, I argue that Clement also begins to illustrate this accommodation of pagan philosophy in Christian tradition. I make this evident in his use of Aristotle's theory of *aphaeresis* to produce his *dues philosophorum* (conception of simple unity), freeing his conception of God from anthropomorphic accretions. I show that while maintaining the crucial epistemic and existential trajectory of Greek apophysis, Clement also reveals the radically unbridgeable limitations *logos* and language face before Christian revelation. This, I maintain, marked the beginning of the Christian radicalization of the Platonic contemplative ideal, whose beating heart in both the Greek and Christian disciple remained the deepest human desire for the True, Good and Beautiful, witnessed in the theology of the Christian 'Father'.³³ Discussion next moves to Gregory of Nyssa, who illustrates starkly the limitations of *logos* and language by confronting them with the idea of their total collapse within the darkness of divine infinity. This I discuss through his idea of *epektasis*, which consisted of the soul's perpetual progress within divine infinity, radically modifying the Platonic view that perfection in union with the One was incompatible with change. More importantly, this view is shown providing new theoretical foundations for the idea and psychology of self-transcendence with profound existential ramifications, therefore introducing a whole new synthesis of negative theology influencing the later Pseudo-Dionysius. I argue that Gregory's new thinking about human development as 'standing still and moving' offers the stability of 'negative' thinking affecting eternal moral change for the better. This leads to discussion of this developing 'negative' Christian intellectual trajectory and new theoretical thinking about self-transcendence, in the 'hypernegation' of the *Mystical Theology* of Pseudo-Dionysius. This entails Gregory's idea of the soul developed further by going outside itself in a genuine ecstasy of self-transcendence involving the total collapse of reason and language. Upon 'suddenly' reaching this breaking point of radically heightened epistemic and existential tension and religious sensibility, the reader has been made aware of the whole enterprise and scope of this work. Modern minds can rediscover valuable 'insights' from ancient elements of the universal experience of pursuing human development drawn from this appreciation of the apophatic tradition's ancient philosophical heritage.

Methodology: *Lectio Divina*

The choice of my methodology for this thesis is primarily *lectio divina* (divine reading). This also complements my imaginative and literary approach to reading the Platonic corpus and later Platonic philosophy. Discussion of this precedes that of mapping the *lectio divina* framework across each chapter along the lines proposed by Funk at the beginning of Chapter Two. *Lectio divina* is one of Christianity's most ancient practices in its approach to contemplation, whereby the art of prayerful and meditative repetition of a Biblical text becomes an experience of union with God. This method of reading aims to realize the fullest human development by drawing wisdom from its textual wells which ultimately lies beyond the grasp of reason and language. In this work, historical wisdom literature includes Greek philosophical and theological texts. Funk's own experience of using *lectio divina* says much about my choice of it as my methodology:

Lectio divina is a sustained immersion into a revelatory text. While scripture is the classic revelation of encounter with God, the text could be from other sources like a personal event from the book of life, or an experience from the book of nature . . .

- We listen to the literal voice of the text and study with our logical minds.
- We meditate on the symbolic voice of the text with our intuitive senses (aesthetical).
- We heed the moral voice . . . We comply with this inner voice – through our daily decisions and through the discipline of discernment.
- We receive the mystical voice with our spiritual senses.

Each of these voices is distinct and is mediated through the revelatory text. Our part in this encounter is to listen, meditate, heed with discrimination and receive.³⁴

These points reveal this method's suitability for this work. The reader is likewise encouraged to listen and heed the voice of this text with a discriminating 'negative' reasoning, thereby being receptive to the gift of alternative wisdom to that produced by modern thinking.

The origins of *lectio divina* lie in the characteristic practice of the time of the veneration of the Torah described by Philo of Alexandria and practised by Jewish monastics in Egypt and Palestine. Leaders of the early Church,

such as Jerome, likewise strongly recommended the practice of *lectio divina*, suggesting that ‘ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’ (*Commentary on Isaiah, Prol.*: PL 24, 17). Cyprian of Carthage writes: ‘Be constant as well in Prayer as in Reading; now speak with God, now let God speak with you, let Him instruct you in His precepts, let Him direct you’ (*Letter to Donatus* (1) 14–15). As part of the developing apophysis of the Alexandrian and Cappadocian Christian tradition, *lectio divina* became fully developed within its monastic expression beginning in the Egyptian desert. Dysinger writes:

But it was in early Christian monasticism that the practice of *lectio divina* reached its full flower. Faithful to the traditions of St. Basil and the Egyptian monastics of the desert (seen in the writings of Evagros Pontikos, then transmitted through his disciple John Cassian to Benedict in the west), St. Benedict encouraged his monks to reserve the best hours of each day for *lectio divina*, a form of prayer that he, unlike some of his predecessors, regarded as a contemplative joy rather than an ascetical burden.³⁵

In the Middle Ages, the monastic art of *lectio divina* became systematized most notably in the *Ladder of Monks* by Guigo II, Prior of the Grande Chartreuse.³⁶ As a scheme, this was a useful pedagogical tool for learning. Importantly, this was not only concerned with the truths of one’s relationship with God revealed in the scriptures. Inextricably tied with learning these truths, this process also maintained the Delphic injunction to ‘know thyself’ in the pursuit of wisdom which I discuss in Chapters Two and Three. This type of holistic learning process is encouraged in the four stages traditionally associated with *lectio divina* which I map across the work at the beginning of Chapters Two, Three and Four. The first two are of particular relevance to my retrieval of this ancient pedagogical method. Foster writes:

The pattern implied a process by which the person took the words of scripture from his ears or eyes into his mind (reading or *lectio*), repeated them to himself and chewed them over (*meditatio*), and as they began to be digested, he responded to them in prayer (*oratio*), which initiated a movement of prayer beyond the words to God himself who had spoken with these words, a freer spontaneous moment of adoration (*contemplatio*).³⁷

Lectio divina was also chosen as a methodology to facilitate the primary aim of this thesis of encouraging inward change and regeneration through ‘negative’ reasoning and offering a radical alternative to that of its modern autonomous and instrumental forms. *Lectio divina* also represents a

historical and intellectual trajectory of unparalleled achievement rooted in Greek spiritual exercise or philosophical therapeutics evident in Plato's contemplative ideal central to the development of the Graeco-Christian apophatic tradition itself. Practised by the major schools of antiquity in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* which I discuss in Chapter One, this therapeutic philosophical process consisted of reading (*anagnosis*), the other name for reading and meditations (*meletai*), central to which was listening (*akroasis*) and attention (*prosoche*). While Platonic reading material remained profoundly influential, it became secondary to scripture in the Christian tradition. However, tellingly, Dysinger observes that *lectio* is 'a method of reading that is radically different from what is taught in modern schools'.³⁸ Its goal is 'taking a text in, allowing it to literally become part of the self . . . not to master a text, to mine it for information, but rather to be touched, to be formed by it . . . an ability to read gently and attentively, inwardly listening "with the ear of the heart"'.³⁹

My retrieval and application of this holistic method of reading, rooted in ancient philosophical and theological tradition, finds support from the educationalist John Sullivan's work with university students:

I seek to retrieve valuable insights about reading drawn from some earlier theological and spiritual traditions, suggesting that these valuable insights have applicability beyond their original settings and beyond the reading of religious texts. I hope, by contrasting a more . . . holistic approach to reading, one that engages the reader more comprehensively and makes greater demands . . . to show the limitations of a consumerist and instrumental approach . . . that encourages students to interrogate a text for useful data they can deploy without being changed in the process.⁴⁰

Clearly, the heart of this method, which made great demands on the writer of this thesis, is learning to listen 'inwardly' to the texts in a different way than is normally encouraged by other methodologies which seek the objectivity of empirical sense-datum. Supporting this approach, Williams comments: 'one must investigate a "foreign" tradition, not by applying the somewhat discredited model of a detached critical consideration'.⁴¹ Pseudo-Dionysius repeatedly illustrates the point that progress along the *via negativa* would be lost to 'those who seek it from the outside only'.⁴² *Lectio divina* facilitated both a critical and existential approach in the reading for and writing of this thesis, as it fully accords with the historical 'negative' intellectual trajectory that is retrieved. Importantly, then, likewise concerning my method of reading this ancient convergence of faith and reason in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* Riordan writes: 'For Pseudo-Dionysius: "being"

determines method, and not the reverse'.⁴³ This approach also finds support in the shared conviction of Jean-Luc Marion and Hans Urs von Balthasar, which according to Jones is 'that one can (and should) "listen" to these historically distant sources. Marion's purpose is not to "explicate" Dionysius, but to allow him "to instruct us"''.⁴⁴ Foster comments about *lectio divina* facilitating listening 'with the ear of the heart' to the 'instruction' from the chosen texts: 'To listen we have to open ourselves to someone else and let the speaker set the tone and agenda. Listening puts us in a relationship with the speaker, and learning to listen . . . rather than just to read . . . is the best way to learn . . . It means learning to tune in to a different level of meaning'.⁴⁵ In turn, irrespective of the setting and texts read, it is beyond dispute that the encouragement of *lectio divina* to tune into a 'different level of their meaning' stirred the deeper currents of inner human development. Echoing this, the Jesuit priest Stanley writes of *The Rule of St. Benedict*:

Among the principal Lenten observances listed in chapter XLIX we find *oratio cum fletibus, lectio et compunction cordis* (prayer with tears, *lectio*, and compunction of heart). The stress upon affectivity is instructive; in particular, St. Benedict's use of the ancient Latin medical term compunction in conjunction with *lectio* . . . would appear to presuppose as an essential component of this exercise that *affectus inspirationis divinae gratiae* (deep feeling inspired by divine grace).⁴⁶

Thus, this method facilitates the stirring of deep feelings, which becomes evident in this work's empowerment of a 'feminine consciousness' (later discussed), and which are necessary for a change in thinking that impacts on the way a person lives their life. Accordingly, by employing the pedagogical method of *lectio divina*, Benedict in his *Rule* 'offered to everyone who cares to hear . . . the invitation . . . to undertake a radical change of direction in our lives, and a new way of living them'.⁴⁷ Illustrating this point further, Agnew writes of what is described as transformative reading:

Perseverance with this art allows new valuable insights to emerge, shifts of consciousness to occur . . . a 'wisdom moment' when the reader is spoken to and experiences being personally addressed. Words now become bearers-of-wisdom as they sweep us up into a kind of sea-change, adjusting attitudes, expanding awareness and readjusting certain landmarks on the landscape of our lives.⁴⁸

Pike makes an important observation about affectivity which in turn shifts consciousness and changes thinking which *lectio divina* facilitates in this

work: ‘Reading is an essentially “religious” activity, not necessarily in the sense that it is related to an established religion, but because it is value-laden and cannot be separated from the beliefs and values of readers and writers.’⁴⁹ Furthermore, this means that the methodology becomes a form of philosophical, theological and intellectual autobiography. The choice of methodology, therefore, expresses the intellectual and personal integrity of the whole enterprise of this work in rediscovering valuable insights from ancient elements of the universal experience of pursuing human development.

Discussion will also show that this method, like the work it produced, is rooted in a historical ‘negative’ intellectual trajectory of impeccable pedigree, resulting in a ‘blooming of intelligence’ much modern thinking cannot achieve. Stanley notes that while

lectio divina is not ‘scientific study,’ it most assuredly was never intended to be cultivated in any spirit of anti-intellectualism. To be specific, it cannot be expected to flourish in a mind-set dominated by biblical fundamentalism, that misguided refusal to employ man’s God-given spirit of inquiry . . . The long and imposing intellectual tradition which is an integral part of the Benedictine heritage must surely derive its inspiration from the man who was author of The Holy Rule.⁵⁰

The historian Henry Chadwick also, speaking of Benedict prescribing substantial hours of the day devoted to work, confirms that an imposing intellectual tradition is strongly associated with *lectio divina*. It was aimed at preserving his monks from idleness that would frustrate their primary goal of living in God’s presence and getting to heaven. He argues that Benedict ‘did not foresee the astonishing achievements of medieval and modern Benedictine scholars in the field of education and research’.⁵¹ Zeller’s artistic observations draw the same conclusion:

If the painter Spinello Aretino six times shows St. Benedict either holding or reading a book, it is not because the artist’s imagination failed to find anything better to put instead. Since Aretino is to the *Dialogues* what Giotto is to the life of St. Francis, we can assume that he has caught, in his Florentine murals, the authentic spirit of St. Benedict. The wonder-worker, the father, the judge, the man of prayer – he is there as each – and, as suggested, the reader and student.⁵²

Schneiders can be further seen supporting my choice of methodology:

the patristic-monastic theory of scriptural exegesis, allied with modern scholarly sophistication, offers a way to practice the study . . . by extension, of other theological or spiritual texts – in terms of the ultimate purpose of application and transformation.⁵³

I include here philosophical texts central to the development of the Graeco-Christian apophatic tradition and those supporting reason's autonomous and instrumental form. Therefore, *lectio divina* allied with modern scholarly sophistication was a suitable methodology for my work. This amounted to facilitating the retrieval of a historical 'negative' intellectual trajectory expressing the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, and becomes fully realized in the contemplative surrender of all discursive reasoning and analysis. I chose it then to resist the underlying urge of modern thinking to comprehensively 'explain' apophatic language. This choice of *lectio divina* as an appropriate methodology is succinctly summarized by the theologian Martin Laird:

There is a tendency among scholars to reduce apophatic theology to literary strategies. While these literary aspects have been ably demonstrated to characterize the apophatic genre . . . this trend in scholarship overlooks the fact that the apophatic tradition also presumes a way of life. It is a simple life that leads to the experience of silence, to 'the experience of non-experience' and not merely to an apophatic style of theological thinking.⁵⁴

Complementing my literary and imaginative reading of the Platonic corpus, I discuss my mapping of the *lectio* framework using Funk's four categories or stages at the beginning of Chapters Two, Three and Four. This will correspond with tracing the development of the apophatic traditions' ancient philosophical heritage aligned with that of the Greek pursuit of *eudaimonia*. Appreciating this in the light of Christian revelation offers the rediscovery of valuable insights from ancient elements of the universal experience of pursuing human development. Applying this method across each chapter therefore offers to take the reader on an inward journey of 'negative' discourse and reflection in the pursuit of the fullest inner human development. Therefore, such reading through the lens of *lectio divina* reflects that of the Graeco-Christian apophatic ascent itself. Moreover, the culmination of tracing the development of this ancient philosophical heritage will confront the reader with the prospect of an ecstatic and paradoxical climax in the total collapse of reason and language made possible by the embodied revelation of the divine *Logos*.

CHAPTER ONE

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT TODAY: WHY THINK DIFFERENTLY?

Well, then, isn't it obvious too that when it's a matter of justice or value many people prefer the appearance to the reality, whether it's a matter of possession and action or of reputation; but that no one is satisfied to have something that only appears to be good, but wants something that is, and has no use here for appearance? (Plato, *The Republic* 5. 505, d)

Man does not possess wisdom; he only tends towards it and can feel love for it. Yet this is already sufficiently meritorious. (Immanuel Kant)

Rationale and Christian Context

The rationale for this thesis is that of encouraging a more effective pursuit of inner human development. It does this by re-appropriating reason's ancient 'negative' exercise as a spiritual way of life in the pursuit of *eu-daimonia* culminating at the summit of the Christian apophatic ascent. This makes an original contribution to knowledge by articulating my own and moving forward other voices of challenge and their solutions to the Enlightenment legacy. I suggest it is impossible to fully appreciate the Christian apophatic tradition without thoroughly investigating the intricacies of its ancient philosophical heritage. This is to retrieve and rediscover valuable insights from ancient philosophical elements in the universal pursuit of human development. This locates my argument within a Christian 'qualified dualism' rooted in the convergence of reason's ancient 'negative' exercise (*logos*) and embodied Biblical tradition (Word). I focus on the notion of *eu-daimonia* and conclude with a discussion of its Christian culmination with the total collapse of reason and language at the summit of the apophatic ascent. This accords with the Patristic tradition which insisted on the radical distinction made between God's uncreated divine nature and that of creation *ex nihilo*. It is the central distinction at the heart of the Christian 'qualified dualism' I argue for and corresponds to the theoretically irresolvable belief that God works in history as both radically transcendent and immanent in the incarnation of Christ.

This work draws substantially from the Greek philosophical exercise of reason which flowered during its early Christian re-appropriation. This produced a rich and universal sense of *logos* seen in the opening verses of St. John's Gospel which is translated in the Hebrew Scriptures as *dabhar*, meaning wisdom as a creative, divine energy. The ancient philosophical heritage of this sense of *logos* will prove central to the development of the Christian apophatic tradition. Thorough investigation will reveal that it amounts to the Greek philosophical pursuit of wisdom or *eudaimonia* converging with the mystery of the embodied divine *Logos*. It is a perennial task echoed in much contemporary theology which Diarmuid O'Murchu describes as

an exploration of that wisdom which awakens and sustains the creative impulse of life. Central to this inquiry is the ability to listen, to be open and receptive to the life-giving energy of the divine *logos* . . . Increasingly in the cathedral of the environment . . . our contemporaries are rediscovering a way into the realm of the transcendent; they are discovering the sacred presence that stands behind the natural world.⁵⁵

I aim to provide a full appreciation of the Christian apophatic tradition which is impossible without a thorough investigation of reason's ancient 'negative' exercise and with it 'awaken . . . the ability to listen, to be open and receptive to the life-giving energy of the divine *logos*'. Moreover, this trajectory will become fully realized in converging with the embodied revelation of the divine *logos* in Christian tradition. Correspondingly, the relevance of the renaissance of *apophysis* to contemporary forms of Christian spirituality concerns those, as Janet Williams argues,

which reintegrate the psychic and the corporeal, intellection and activity . . . The apophatic tradition is not marginal to the Christian faith . . . the logic of negation of negation is non-different from the logic of crucifixion and resurrection, of spiritual discipleship in encounter with Scripture, liturgy, sacraments and the traditions of asceticism, and the Chalcedonian definition of the nature of the incarnate Lord.⁵⁶

The importance of the Greek mind in understanding Christian *apophysis* is particularly evident in the work of Pope Benedict XVI:

In the beginning was the *logos*, and the *logos* is God, says the Evangelist. The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance . . . A profound encounter of faith and reason is taking place here, an encounter between genuine enlightenment and religion . . . The New Testament was written in Greek and bears the imprint of the Greek

spirit . . . the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself; they are developments consonant with the nature of faith itself.⁵⁷

In a lecture entitled *On Europe's Crisis of Culture* the then Cardinal Ratzinger indicated:

From the beginning, Christianity has understood itself as the religion of the “Logos,” as the religion according to reason. In the first place, it has not identified its precursors in the other religions, but in that philosophical enlightenment which has cleared the path of traditions to turn to the search of the truth and towards the good, toward the one God, who is above all gods.⁵⁸

The significance of this decisive encounter and convergence of faith and reason for the birth and spread of Christianity understood as constituting the fundamental character of the apophatic tradition is also reflected by the Patristic scholar Endre von Ivánka: ‘The phenomenon which characterizes the whole of the first millennium of Christian theological thought . . . is the use of Platonism as the form for . . . philosophical expression and the framework of the world-picture in terms of which the proclamation of revealed truths was made – in other words, Christian Platonism.’⁵⁹ The eminent classical scholar Père Festugière echoes this thinking: ‘When the Fathers “think” their mysticism, they Platonise. There is nothing original in the edifice.’⁶⁰ I follow this reasoning in support of my view. Indeed, this is why I spend considerable time investigating this ‘imprint of the Greek spirit’ in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* which will culminate in the profound convergence of reason and faith ‘consonant with the nature of faith itself.’ However, this endeavour to reconnect the pursuit of human development today with the roots of its ancient ‘negative’ philosophical and theological understanding, does not mean a call to living in the past. Importantly, therefore, as Casey argues:

If I seek answers from ancient wisdom it is only because my own experience and that of my contemporaries has raised questions that indicate a need to transcend the barriers of time and culture and to search more broadly. It is to embrace the past as a resource toward more effective living in the present. I am not advocating a return to the ways of antiquity. I am simply asserting that there are elements of universal human experience that are overlooked in our culture that can be rediscovered by paying attention to the valuable insights of another time and situation.⁶¹

Thus, I use the apophatic tradition and its ancient philosophical heritage as

a 'resource toward more effective living in the present'. This contemporary priority is also reflected in my choice of methodology which emerged from this ancient philosophical heritage. My view, therefore, is that this work specifically meets a spiritual, cultural and political crisis afflicting Western civilization and democratic culture at the present time. This is partly caused by abandoning its ancient foundational 'negative' philosophical and theological thinking which continues to offer 'valuable insights' concerning the needs of inner human development. It is a view seen supported by the philosopher and former President of the Italian Senate Marcello Pera and the then Cardinal Ratzinger writing of the 'current crisis of European civilization'⁶² due to its abandonment of its spiritual roots. Echoing the scope and aim of this work Marcello Pera faces the challenges of our particular historical moment by stressing the historical and conceptual link between Christianity and free society. He writes:

Gone are the days of the *agora*, where our Greek forefathers invoked the gods. Today our public spaces must be as aseptic as hospital operating rooms, uncontaminated by the germs of any 'conception of the Good'. States must be independent of religious creeds; politics must be a neutral stance on religious values; societies must hold together without any reference to religious or ethical ties.⁶³

This Christian context of my resistance against human development conceived in the West as holding 'together without any reference to' its ancient 'religious or ethical ties' is also reflected in the contemporary theological thinking of Radical Orthodoxy of John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward.⁶⁴ I also include other like minded theologians who reflect the thinking of this movement. Like Radical Orthodoxy, this work too sees theology expressing the inseparable relationship between faith and reason rooted firmly in Christianity's creedal statements, stepping back into the public domain through consideration of its relation to the whole of human thought and action. This occupies the paradoxical theological domain which Balthasar called the 'suspended middle' of the 'natural desire for the supernatural', that between grace-imbued faith and natural understanding. If this desire, acknowledged or otherwise, is central to every pursuit of human development, then this work is in accord with Radical Orthodoxy in subjecting all knowledge to theological and philosophical qualification and modification. Illustrating this accord Smith writes:

Our knowledge of things of this world can always be qualified by knowledge of God as he is in himself (given by revelation), but equally, our knowledge

of God, since it is analogically mediated, is always and only given through a shift in our understanding of the things of this world. Such an approach implies a synthesis – but always an uneasy and possibly aporetic synthesis – between theology and philosophy.⁶⁵

As an aporetic synthesis of theology and philosophy whose epistemic and existential heart maintains that all real knowledge involves some revelation of the ‘no-thing’ of divine nature within the finite, this work largely reflects Radical Orthodoxy’s position. Importantly, both understand that revelation is not over or against reason/*logos*. I also show how revelation intensifies human understanding which results in the intellect’s full blossoming or illumination, bringing about inner transformation and regeneration. The ‘radical’ return to this vision (which I advance by the example of Pseudo-Dionysius rather than St Augustine) that all real knowledge is divine illumination is central to my argument. Such insights, focused upon the ethical and lived aspects of Christian doctrines, revive the idea of *epektasis* which I discuss in Chapter Four accommodating ‘an infinitely dynamic God who gives ecstatically within the continuing project of Christianity to remain faithful to its *logos*’.⁶⁶ It is beyond the scope of this work except to point out this synergy with Radical Orthodoxy. Milbank, Pickstock and Ward suggest that

one is led to articulate a more incarnate, more participatory, more aesthetic, more erotic, more socialized, even ‘more Platonic’ Christianity. The central theological framework of radical orthodoxy is ‘participation’ as developed by Plato and reworked by Christianity, because any alternative configuration perforce reserves a territory independent of God.⁶⁷

My work also strongly reflects Hadot’s position that ‘philosophy’ is a virtuous way of life in pursuit of *eudaimonia*. I advance his recovery of this ancient Greek notion by retrieving the Greek philosophical foundations of the Christian apophatic tradition, to which Plato’s contemplative ideal was central. Therefore, to understand this ancient Platonic philosophical trajectory is to understand simultaneously the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. There was no distinction between the two as discussion will show. Philosophy is the way of life in the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. The pursuit of truth and self-fulfilment for Greek thought and thinking generally cannot be divorced from the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, or spiritual wholeness itself. This unified characteristic of Greek philosophy indelibly imprinted itself upon the *via negativa*, and with it the realization of new ecstatic heights of inner human development. It is only the modern period which gave a category to the study of philosophy and wrenched it from its moorings in actual human daily living.

Redressing this, I chart the development of an historical 'negative' intellectual trajectory within a spiritual and religious framework whose highpoint became realized in the Christian Biblical tradition.

It is an apophatic solution I offer, therefore, to the (post)modern malaise about human flourishing which rests both within a Platonic/Neoplatonic and Christian paradigm. It is crucial, however, to point out from the outset that any claim or indication of dualism is not oppositional as in Gnostic sects. The central distinction made between uncreated divine nature and that which it creates *ex nihilo* is a relation of communion, not opposition. Discussion of Pseudo-Dionysius' cosmic programme will reveal this whereby the embodied Christ becomes an extension of the Father's ecstasy into creation, which is then ecstatically drawn back through Christ into the darkness of the divine abyss. This Christian 'qualified dualism' rooted in the distinction made between God's nature and that of creation created *ex nihilo* is guarded by the *via negativa*. Leroy Rouner writes:

From its biblical beginnings onwards . . . Christian thought reflects a qualified dualism between God and creation, whereby an irreducible difference is related through an indissoluble bond . . . A qualified dualism is philosophically required by the Christian affirmation that God works in history as both transcendent (i.e. *sui generis*) and immanent (i.e. related to humankind in a non-accidental way) in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.⁶⁸

The point is that the Christian apophatic culmination of the pursuit of *eudaimonia* escapes the problematic of a rigid Platonic and metaphysical dualism whereby the relation between the material and intelligible becomes oppositional. Importantly, reflecting the thinking of the Fathers and the Scholastics, it also avoids a facile retreat into what is a theoretically insurmountable faith in both the simple unity of one God and creator. Quickening the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, it does this by acknowledging and sharpening attempts to clarify philosophically the relationship between duality and unity. St Augustine similarly based his thinking on Plato and the distinction between 'sensible' and 'supersensible', while Aquinas interpreted the *nous* of Aristotle as transcendence orientated to the God beyond the world and principle of all reality. The point is that the constant tension of wrestling with the heightening of these epistemological and existential difficulties within the pursuit of *eudaimonia* was foundational in directing it to the summit of apophatic experience. Crucially, then, for inner human development, *apophasis* clearly displays the credentials of its Biblical faith in the One Lord of all creation.

The tension of constantly wrestling with this irresolvable epistemic and existential condition will be revealed as being central in quickening the

pursuit of *eudaimonia* along its apophatic way. It is a 'negative' intellectual and existential trajectory of human development which finds expression in what Simons describes as

a contradiction between what is and what ought to be . . . which plagues all human existence throughout its history . . . This existentially dualistic situation, tragic because combining salvation and doom, cannot be resolved by any theoretical reflections. The believer can only hold out under it, in a hope inspired by the initial experience of salvation, till the unimaginable mode of salvation is realized definitively in actual truth.⁶⁹

The existential 'dualistic situation' of 'holding out under' the theoretically irresolvable contradiction between the happiness hoped for and that which until 'the unimaginable mode of salvation is realized definitively in actual truth,' perfectly expresses the trajectory of this work. Similarly, this existential 'dualistic situation' is evident in the 'believer' in modern thinking about human development, but it is belief which 'holds out' without any real hope of realizing its fullest satisfaction. This work's encouragement of an apophatic turn aims to shatter this instrumental way of thinking locked within the external world and blind to any 'unimaginable mode of salvation'. Yet the culmination of such a postmodern turn in the pursuit of human development along the *via negativa* remains possible only through the embodied revelation of the divine *logos* proclaimed in the Gospels. This 'transcendent humanism'⁷⁰ ensures that what is revealed to reason as True, Good and Beautiful never becomes divorced from its embodied and loving expression while also remaining radically Other to it. Evident in the *via negativa*, the need to facilitate this understanding of human development which reaches beyond the limits of doctrine and the consciousness of present life is reflected in the concerns of Bede Griffith. Shirley Du Boulay writes that he was concerned for the need of a monastic ideal to be lived communally outside the cloister:

Most important of all was that the members of these communities should recognize a transcendent reality, which he regarded as the greatest need in the world today: 'Unless human life is centred on the awareness of a transcendent reality which embraces all humanity and the whole universe and at the same time transcends our present level of life and consciousness, there is no hope for humanity as a whole . . . The aim of every community should be to enable its members to realize this transcendent mystery in their lives and communicate their experience to others.'⁷¹

My detailed investigation of the convergence of Greek 'negative'

philosophical thinking with Biblical understandings of the revealed *Logos* aims to assist others to ‘realize this transcendent mystery’ and ‘communicate their experience to others’. The necessity of this goal of the *via negativa* in the authentic pursuit of human development, which ‘is at the same time the truth of faith and of reason, both in the distinction and also in the convergence of those two cognitive fields’,⁷² is clearly illustrated in Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas In Veritate* (Charity in Truth). I now move to discussion of the ‘negative’ philosophical heritage of this view of ‘integral human development’ within the Greek mind’s reasoning and understanding of its pursuit of *eudaimonia*.

Human Development: The Greek Vision of *Eudaimonia*

Retrieving and rediscovering valuable insights into human development from the ancient philosophical heritage of the Christian apophatic tradition requires investigating what happiness (*eudaimonia*) originally meant in ancient Greek philosophy. This means that to understand the ‘negative’ intellectual trajectory traced by this work is to understand simultaneously the pursuit of *eudaimonia*. There was no complete separation of the two. Greek philosophy was the way of life in the pursuit of *eudaimonia* which became fully realized at the summit of Christian apophatic ascent. The pursuit of truth and self-fulfilment for Greek thought and thinking cannot be divorced from the pursuit of *eudaimonia*, or spiritual wholeness itself. This explains why I take as a key text Pierre Hadot’s work *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*.

I draw my understanding of *eudaimonia* from the four best documented versions⁷³ of the major Schools in antiquity: Platonism, Aristotelianism, Stoicism and Epicureanism. Encompassing philosophy as a spiritual way of life, these versions of *eudaimonia* did not seek its definitive conceptual definition and do not lend themselves easily to any. They did, however, understand *eudaimonia* to be the widely agreed goal (*telos*) of human life. A term that was inextricably associated with *eudaimonia* was that of *arête* (virtue or excellence of character).⁷⁴ Consequently, these Schools of philosophy associated happiness not so much with feeling a certain way about how one’s life was going, but rather with the behaviour resulting from one’s cultivation of an excellent or virtuous character. This crucial linkage by these Schools of happiness with virtue is called eudaimonism,⁷⁵ and is based on the principal Greek word for happiness, *eudaimonia*. Binding the pursuit of happiness with the cultivation of an excellent or virtuous character

framed within an overarching philosophical view of reality was central to the development of the Graeco-Christian apophatic tradition. Contrasting the two major historical approaches in the field of ethics, one ancient and the other modern, Shear writes:

The first emphasizes the development of individual character, focusing on what is involved, in theory and practice, in becoming a good and virtuous person. The second emphasizes development of definitions, principles, and criteria, and focuses on defining right and/or good actions, intentions, and states of affairs . . . The first approach dominated in classical times, as exemplified in the works of Plato and Aristotle. The second . . . has dominated modern Western philosophical discussion of ethics for . . . several centuries.⁷⁶

The first approach which dominated in antiquity and exemplified in the works of Plato and Aristotle is increasingly being recognized as still retaining relevance in the pursuit of happiness. Rowe writes that these texts, which constitute the apophatic traditions' ancient philosophical heritage I draw insights from, are recognized as having

an immediate relevance and vivacity which belies their age . . . on the one hand, modern valuable insights repeatedly give an extra dimension to our understanding of Greek thought; on the other, Greek ideas retain the power directly to shape, or at any rate to sharpen, contemporary reflections – and not least in the sphere of ethics.⁷⁷

The Schools of antiquity understood *eudaimonia* to be synonymous with living well and required an excellent (*arête*) character which was developed through practising the moral virtues. Therefore, the desire of everyone to be truly happy required the development of an excellent (*arête*) character through living virtuously. Representing the development of the apophatic tradition's ancient philosophical heritage, Striker writes: 'Greek ethical theories are . . . about the good life; their starting point is Socrates' question in the *Gorgias* (472C-D) – how should we live to be happy? Greek philosophers after Socrates assume that happiness or living well is an object of desire for everyone.'⁷⁸ Moreover, this ancient pursuit of *eudaimonia* regarded 'human excellence a good of the soul – not a material or bodily good such as wealth or political power . . . happiness is not something external, like wealth or political power, but an internal, psychological good.'⁷⁹ The moral theory of these ancient Schools is, therefore, agent centred. Its focus is on the moral agent whereas its modern representation is action centred.⁸⁰ For example, these Schools were interested in what constituted a just person, which was a notion that was not exhausted by any account of the consequences of just actions or any principles for

determining if they are just or not. The person was compared to a craftsman or physician whose actions within any given circumstance are not reducible to a perfectly determining collection. Or, the just person's way of thinking and understanding of their pursuit of *eudaimonia* was not reducible to their actions alone. In this pursuit it was the person's character from which their judgement and motivations came which was the unquantifiable focus. Thus, the Schools were

interested in what constitutes, e.g. a just person. They are concerned about the state of mind and character, the set of values, the attitudes to oneself and to others, and the conception of one's own place in the common life of a community that belongs to just person's simply insofar as they are just.⁸¹

Importantly, this concern represents the 'state of being'⁸² ethical approach of Plato's contemplative ideal that becomes fully realized at the summit of apophatic ascent.

The sharp distinction in focus and concern between the two major historical approaches in ethics and the impact of this on human development is now evident. My argument therefore, concerns itself with the person's mind and character, their values and attitudes to oneself and to others and how these encourage or frustrate *eudaimonia*. While the modern approach emphasizes the development of definitions and principles which focus upon right or good actions, both aim to encourage human development and cannot be viewed in isolation from each other. However, as Shear writes, though these 'two approaches are . . . often intimately interrelated . . . they are readily distinguishable in their overall emphasis'.⁸³ One pursues happiness focusing upon inward change and regeneration, the other focuses externally upon making the correct decisions. These central ideas relating to the pursuit of *eudaimonia* were put forward by Plato, and so constitute key aspects of the apophatic tradition's ancient philosophical heritage.

Subsequent chapters will reveal this Platonic understanding of *eudaimonia* as an encouragement to turn inwards towards a pure spiritual realm of ideas against which the world is viewed as being a mere copy. Its accommodation to Christian revelation is evident in discussion of the Christian intellectuals who developed the apophatic tradition for their own purposes. Illustrating the point is the Christian affirmation that God works in history as simultaneously transcendent and immanent in a non-accidental way in the incarnation of Christ making a 'qualified dualism' essential. As Hooft suggests: 'This worldview comes down to us through our religious