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- ABSTRACT -

EPISTEMIC FOUNDATIONS OF APOPHATIC KNOWLEDGE

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The negative approach to knowledge is distinguished by its original method of investigating the Absolute, employing the transcending of the limits imposed by language and human concepts. In this work, I examine the epistemic foundations of negative knowledge, questioning the conditions and structures that differentiate it from other modes of accessing reality. The thesis explores the origin, foundations, and historical evolution of this perspective, highlighting its implications for the perception of ultimate reality and its relevance in contemporary debates within both analytic and speculative philosophy.

In the context of the problematics of knowledge, I emphasize an inherent duality: the aspiration to understand alongside the limitations that constrain this endeavor. The negative conception asserts that the fundamental truths of existence, especially those concerning totality, are ineffable and can be approached only through the elimination of appearances and conceptual forms. Unlike affirmative methodologies—which rely on positive assertions—the negative method underscores the importance of refusal and silence as means to discover transcendent reality.

I analyze the relationship between the negative method and the dominant epistemological paradigms of contemporary philosophy, illuminating the tensions and potential syntheses between the negative approach and analytical scientific models. From this perspective, I aim to demonstrate that the negative method is not a relic of earlier thought, but rather an essential component of the philosophical quest to access the fundamental truths of existence, thereby opening new horizons for interdisciplinary research.

Knowledge is both an ontological and epistemological process—not merely an accumulation of data, but a profound aspiration of the being toward totality. The act of knowing entails a direct and intentional relationship with the Absolute, one that transcends mere empirical clarifications. I propose a methodological distinction between affirmative knowledge and the negative approach; the latter is characterized by an acknowledgment of the inherent limitations of reason and an openness to that which cannot be defined.

Negation becomes an essential tool—not an act of nihilism or a delimitation of knowledge, but rather a means that, by eliminating limiting concepts, facilitates an approach toward totality. Thinkers such as Parmenides, Kant, and Heidegger have underscored the role of negativity in the philosophical enterprise, showing that to understand being and non-being, a method that transcends conventional discourse is necessary. The negative attitude in knowledge thus becomes a form of intellectual humility, recognizing the insufficiency of any attempt to grasp the essence of the Absolute through finite concepts.

The negative approach does not reject affirmative knowledge; rather, it complements it by demonstrating that although the attributes stated may be valid, they do not encompass the entire nature of totality. Negative knowledge is configured as a process of silence and renunciation of all conventional categories, thereby leading to a direct encounter with the mysterious. This process of negative knowing unfolds on several levels: initially, the intellectual limits are identified; this is followed by a purification of thought through the rejection of preconceived images, and culminates in a mystical union in which knowledge no longer takes on a discursive form but is instead manifested through lived experience.

Anthropology, when described through the prism of this method, focuses on the potential of the human being to transcend ontological limits. The human being is seen as a microcosm that reflects the entire totality and possesses the capacity to access reality through a profound transformation—a process of intellectual deification that involves the renunciation of the self and an openness to a transcendent experience. This perspective redefines human nature as dynamic, oriented toward a continuous evolution through the surpassing of finite boundaries.

Negative knowledge manifests itself both through affirmative statements and through the acknowledgment of the ineffable. Thus, apophaticism becomes not merely a source of information but a methodological guide for apprehending the mystery of existence. Historical examples in which figures have sought to “see” totality yet are confronted by its inaccessibility illustrate that true knowledge is achieved through a process of renunciation and openness to the unknown.

The interaction between two major cultural currents—the Mosaic tradition of knowledge and the influence of Greek thought—has revealed a dual perspective on reality. This synthesis was essential in the formulation of the concepts of negative knowledge, by which the Absolute is perceived as inaccessible yet revealed indirectly through its manifestations. The Jewish tradition of knowledge, with its emphasis on mystery and inaccessibility, lays the groundwork for a negative approach that rejects any attempt to circumscribe totality within finite concepts. Greek philosophy, through notions such as “the One” or “the Good,” promoted the idea that the supreme reality lies beyond any discursive form, accessible only by transcending sensory limitations. This interaction has given rise to intellectual syntheses in which eminent thinkers reinterpreted the foundation of knowledge, proposing an apophatic epistemology in which the essence of the Absolute is revealed solely through the elimination of all attributes.

The philosophers I evoke in this synthesis distinguish between manifestation and essence, emphasizing that what we can perceive represents only the effects of a process of revelation. From this perspective, knowledge becomes a transition from affirmation to renunciation, whereby the human being liberates itself from conceptual constraints in order to achieve a union with totality. I thus underscore that the negative method has its roots in the intellectual experience of antiquity, being reconfigured and reinterpreted by thinkers who sought to transcend perceptual materialism.

An analysis of the contributions of some of the great figures in the history of Western philosophy, whose works have redefined the relationship between affirmative and negative knowledge, shows that each contributed in their own unique way to express essentially the same concept: negative knowledge. I explore the epistemological systems of thinkers who have proposed that the progress of knowledge presupposes a transition from a discursive logic to an experience of inner illumination that transcends any conceptual framework. In this analysis, I discuss epistemic models that emphasize the importance of renouncing finite assumptions and of opening oneself to mystical knowledge, which is manifested through a direct communion with totality.

I present their epistemic models as progressive stages along a scale leading from the recognition of the limits of reason to a mystical union with the Absolute. In this dynamic, the act of knowing transforms into a process of intellectual purification, in which each level entails the renunciation of images and concepts, in order to reach a state of illumination that surpasses discursive representations. Emphasis is thus placed on the importance of inner experience and on an openness to a reality that perpetually remains beyond any definition.

The relevance of the negative method in the context of contemporary philosophy emerges from the way it reconfigures the dialogue between language, experience, and knowledge. In the present era, when new scientific and analytical paradigms provoke reinterpretations of the relationship between subject and object, the negative method provides a useful conceptual framework for acknowledging the intrinsic limits of human knowledge. I also discuss the implications of this approach for modern hermeneutics, where the meaning of language is reevaluated within the context of a continuous dialogue with existential mystery.

Contemporary philosophers such as Jean Luc Marion and Jean Yves Lacoste contribute to the renewal of the negative method by analyzing phenomena of “phenomenal saturation” and by distinguishing between restrictive representations and ontological openings. They emphasize that apophaticism cannot be reduced to mere objects of study, but manifests as a primary experience of openness toward totality, achieved by transcending conceptual limits. In this context, the relationship between reason and experience becomes a dialectical movement in which both complement each other, leading to an integrative and dynamic epistemology.

I have synthesized the foundations and the historical and contemporary perspectives of negative knowledge, highlighting that although reason provides the necessary structure for a preliminary understanding, only through renouncing predefined forms can one attain an authentic knowledge of totality. I present the negative method as an essential approach in the philosophical endeavor to understand reality, constantly acknowledging the paradox and mystery at the core of any attempt at knowledge.

In what follows, I briefly outline each chapter and what I intended to present.

In the first chapter, I have developed an extensive reflection on the concept of „knowledge,” starting from linguistic definitions. I emphasize that man, by virtue of his rationality, is fundamentally oriented toward knowledge – which is not merely a static process, but an act through which external reality becomes „reflected” in consciousness and, at the same time, an endeavor that leads to the inner development of the knower.

From the lexicographic approach, I move to the Christian and philosophical examination of knowledge. This chapter explores how ancient definitions of knowledge illuminate both the possibilities and the limits of man’s access to truth. In the Christian vision, God is known as a „personal reality” – although His Absolute transcends ordinary mental categories, man possesses the capacity to enter into communion with the divine.

I continue by highlighting the existence of cataphatic and apophatic knowledge and the major differences between positive and negative knowledge. The former describes what we can affirm about God and ultimate reality, relying on logically asserted attributes (“God is good, omnipotent, omniscient,” etc.). The latter, negative knowledge, asserts that although these qualities are real, they remain inadequate and limited when it comes to the divine, which infinitely transcends them. Both types of knowledge culminate in an experience of communion, aided by divine grace, through which man surpasses mere reason to discover a deeper level of understanding.

I present negation as an epistemic engine, because every form of progress – from technological evolution to ethical and spiritual maturation – involves “negating” previous stages. Negation (apophaticism) underscores the infinitely transcendent dimension of divine reality, keeping the sense of mystery alive.

It becomes clear that human reason is not ignored but rather reframed within a broader horizon that also presupposes mystical experience. I note that the terms of ancient philosophy have proven useful to the Church when it needed to articulate doctrinal faith, which provides the basis for a historical analysis of thought: the encounter between Christianity and the Hellenic realm, with modes of argumentation that lead from the sensible to the realm of Ideas, has contributed to structuring negative reflection.

Through such a structure, I present how affirmative knowledge about God is complemented—not nullified—by negative knowledge, bringing to light the essence of apophaticism: in order to keep the mystery alive, any concept about God must be negated, transcended, and subsumed into a deeper relational level in which the cognizing subject and the object known become two persons engaged in a dialogue of love. This perspective is further enriched by the idea that, when Christ Incarnates, knowledge no longer derives simply

from nature or philosophical deductions but directly from the communication between the Son of God and humanity. To truly speak of knowledge, we must accept that the knower is itself transformed by the object of knowledge. A man who seeks merely to obtain information stops at a superficial threshold. While the cataphatic approach, though indispensable, does not exhaust the infinite divine, the apophatic approach—though it recognizes the definitive limits of language—does not mean a renunciation of thought, but rather makes room for a higher-order experience. In this dynamic, knowledge interweaves with the becoming of the person, so that it cannot be reduced to simple formulas but must be existentially assumed as an ascent leading the human being to true fulfillment.

Far from being a mere enumeration of abstract notions, the chapter shows that knowing involves also knowing ourselves and recognizing the other. At the end of this journey, we live a paradox: what a man truly discovers about God makes him understand that there is always something deeper to be uncovered. That is why knowledge remains endless and luminous, enveloping the mind and heart in a new joy as well as in a humble consciousness of limits.

In the second chapter, I pursue the dynamics and consolidation of apophatic knowledge within the realms of philosophy and Christianity, having as main coordinates the synthesis between Mosaic and Hellenic thought, as well as the developments from the Patristic period to Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite. I highlight how the Hellenic heritage (Plato, Plotinus, Proclus) and the Jewish tradition intersected in the early Christian centuries, determining the foundation of apophaticism.

The central idea of this chapter is that an understanding “by negation” (apophaticism) offers the recognition of the ineffable character of the Absolute, yet it does not do so in a manner devoid of positive content. On the contrary, the initial contribution of positive thought (cataphatic) is highlighted, which in turn becomes a necessary step in the ascent of the intellect toward divine mystery. This tension is found in the dialogue between Hellenistic philosophical concepts and biblical revelation, culminating—for the Christian tradition—in the Dionysian mysticism.

In Plato, knowledge is not merely an intellectual act but an effort to recollect the Ideas, culminating in an ecstasy in the presence of the Absolute Good. From Plotinus, we inherit a vision in which the soul, starting from the material world, gradually ascends to the contemplation of the intellect (nous) and desires union with the One. This perspective on an ultimate principle, uncommunicable and unattainable, decisively influences later thought, especially that of Proclus, who develops the idea of intermediary beings (henads) and an ontological hierarchy of entities. In all these models, supreme knowledge is attained by transcending any finite content, through an apophatic experience.

The context of synthesizing Mosaic and Hellenic culture marks another dimension in the evolution of apophatic knowledge. The city of Alexandria becomes a fertile ground for filtering and combining the Jewish traditions (strongly anchored in the transcendentalism of the Old Testament) with the methods of Greek philosophy. Philo of Alexandria practices an allegorical interpretation of biblical texts and sees in the Logos an Intermediary between God and creation. For Philo, knowing God presupposes a gradual elevation of the mind toward the divine plan, accompanied by ethical and intellectual preparation. This synthesis anticipates the way in which Christians will integrate terminology and some philosophical methods, without, however, confusing themselves with them.

The result of such a confluent process becomes evident in the development of Patristic thought. The Church Fathers of the early centuries faced, on the one hand, materialistic philosophy, and on the other, idolatrous forms of religiosity, which they rejected because they did not recognize a transcendent God, ontologically different from the world. In

this environment, the need arose to insist on the spiritual character of God and on overcoming empiricism through both reason and faith. Gradually, knowledge becomes both an intellectual and a mystical endeavor.

The intellect ascends from the created to the Creator, beginning with the signs of cosmic order (cataphatic knowledge), so that, ultimately, it transcends all concepts through a supreme negation, acknowledging its limits (apophatic knowledge).

Finally, Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite spectacularly synthesizes this path through works such as *On the Divine Names* and *On Mystical Theology*. He employs the language of late Neoplatonism (the categories of Plotinus and Proclus) to structure a Christian apophatic thought, in which God, although the cause of all, remains in a “supra luminous darkness.” In his vision, all of creation receives rays of knowledge (divine energies), yet not even the angelic beings exhaust the divine mystery. The human intellect is invited to liberate itself not only from bodily images but also from higher concepts, in order to enter an ecstatic union. Thus, from sensory knowledge to purely intellectual knowledge and finally to a mystical union, Dionysius shows that negation is not merely the rejection of concepts but the superior modality through which God is allowed to reveal Himself as “He Who Is,” beyond any human expression.

The influence of Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite has been profound, serving as a bridge between Christian traditions and Neoplatonic thought. His works have been read, commented upon, and reinterpreted by important theologians and mystics such as St. John of the Cross, who adopted and adapted some of the concepts presented by Dionysius in his own mystical treatises. Through his works, he has significantly contributed to articulating a vision of the divine that transcends mere discursive expression, proposing an indirect, symbolic, and experiential form of knowing. His intellectual legacy has deeply influenced and continues to be a subject of study and reflection, offering a unique perspective on how man can access the mystery of the Absolute through renunciation, silence, and profound contemplation.

From a biographical perspective, little concrete information exists regarding the life of Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite; almost all that is known derives from textual tradition and later interpretations of his works. It is clear, however, that he was a profoundly erudite thinker, well acquainted with both Christian sources and Greek philosophy, especially the ideas of Plato and Plotinus. This blending of theological and philosophical knowledge has led to his perception as a mediator between divine revelation and human reason.

Turning now to St. Augustine, he was born in AD 354 in Thagaste, a town in the Roman province of Numidia (present-day Algeria). Hailing from a middle-class family, he was raised in an environment where Christian influences intermingled with Roman pagan traditions. Educated in rhetoric and philosophy, young Augustine studied in Carthage and Rome. During this period, he was drawn to various philosophical currents; he even briefly embraced Manichaeism—a dualistic doctrine explaining the existence of evil and good as two opposing forces—before later being profoundly influenced by Neoplatonism, which helped interweave his spiritual quest with philosophical reason.

In his *Confessions*, Augustine traces a personal journey that begins with early intellectual turmoil and culminates in a transformative conversion experience. He insists that every step toward God necessarily begins with self-knowledge. In his childhood, Augustine observed that even then, God was working in his life through his parents and teachers, and as he grew older, he clarified that his intellectual gifts originated from that supreme source which he had yet to fully know. His curiosity led him through various doctrines—from Manichaeism to Neoplatonism—but it was his profound understanding of the scriptural texts, bolstered by the influence of Bishop Ambrose, that ultimately opened him decisively to

apophatic knowledge and the experience of grace. His meditations on memory, as a treasury of information and emotions, became the key through which he discovered both his limitations and his longing for the Absolute. Ultimately, the Confessions reveal an Augustine who, through prayer and self-analysis, transcends discursive knowledge to experience moments of contemplation, striving to express the ineffable in a language that remains, inevitably, only approximate.

St. Thomas Aquinas, known also as Saint Thomas of Aquino, is one of the most important figures in medieval philosophy and theology, whose ideas have profoundly influenced Western thought. Born around 1225 in Roccasecca, Italy, into a noble family, Thomas was drawn to religious life from an early age and joined the Dominican Order. His early education was marked by the study of classical languages and literature, and he later encountered Aristotelian philosophy, which would become the foundation for his integration of reason and faith. His theological and philosophical studies took place in important academic centers, such as the University of Naples, where he learned to rigorously question and synthesize traditional teachings with the new discoveries of classical philosophy. This synthesis represented an innovative endeavor through which Aquinas succeeded in creating a coherent theological system, based on the integration of Christian doctrines with Aristotelian philosophical principles.

His work has come to be recognized as an absolute point of reference for Catholic theology and the entire medieval intellectual system. His monumental work, *Summa Theologiae*, constitutes an exhaustive synthesis of Christian doctrine, addressing topics ranging from the existence and nature of God to the relationship between creation and the Creator, as well as ethics and natural law, offering rigorous arguments that appeal both to reason and to spiritual intuition. This work was not conceived solely as an academic manual but as a guide for those seeking to understand the complexity of faith, demonstrating that every aspect of existence is subject to careful analysis and can, at the same time, be harmoniously integrated into the doctrinal whole. In addition to the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas wrote other significant works such as *Summa Contra Gentiles*, in which he responded to the arguments of those critical of Christian faith, as well as numerous commentaries on the works of Aristotle, highlighting how classical philosophy can be reinterpreted in the light of Christian revelation. Through his life, activity, and work, Thomas Aquinas has left an indelible mark on the history of Western thought by masterfully integrating classical philosophical concepts with Christian revelation. He demonstrated that dialogue between faith and reason can lead to a profound understanding of truth, emphasizing that the divine mystery cannot be reduced to dogmatic statements but must be explored through a continuous process of inquiry and reflection. His intellectual legacy remains essential for contemporary theological and philosophical studies, inspiring entire generations of thinkers engaged in the effort to reconcile the rational aspects of existence with the depth of spiritual experience.

Turning now to St. Teresa of Ávila, also known as Saint Teresa of Ávila, she was one of the most brilliant and influential mystical figures of the sixteenth century, renowned for her life dedicated to an intense quest for communion with the divine and for the profound reforms she brought to the Carmelite Order. Born in 1515 in Ávila, Spain, into a noble family, Teresa manifested at an early age a distinct religious sensitivity that would later transform into a profound impulse for both personal and institutional spiritual transformation. Her work remains one of the most important contributions to Christian spirituality and stands as a landmark in the study of mysticism. Among her essential works are *The Way of Perfection* and *The Interior Castle*. In *The Way of Perfection*, she provides a practical and theological guide for a life of prayer, emphasizing the need for soul discipline, humility, and continuous self-examination on the path to perfection. In *The Interior Castle*, Teresa employs a rich

architectural metaphor to describe the evolution of the human soul, portraying it as a structure composed of multiple rooms or levels. Each room represents a stage in spiritual progress, whereby the soul, through the release from attachments and the illusions of the material world, gradually approaches the divine light and presence. This work is celebrated not only for its conceptual clarity and depth but also for its lasting influence on subsequent mystical thought, both among Catholic theologians and scholars of spirituality.

The influence of Teresa of Ávila transcends her life as a mystic and reformer. She contributed to a reinterpretation of the relationship between faith and reason, demonstrating that the two can coexist in a profound and dynamic equilibrium. Her reforming spirit inspired not only members of the Carmelite Order but also the entire European mystical current, and her work has been studied and commented upon over the centuries, becoming a pillar of the Catholic spiritual tradition. In an era of significant religious and cultural transformations, Teresa of Ávila succeeded in offering an alternative vision based on a direct experience of God and inner transformation, thereby redefining the concept of spiritual knowledge.

In her writings, the discourse becomes much more intensely linked to the inner dynamics and the mystical journey of the soul that aspires to know God within the interior castle. Here, knowledge is described in terms of a journey through rooms and levels that correspond to the progression from coarser states—dominated by sensory needs and pitfalls—to the highest stages of prayer, marked by ecstasies or moments of “supernatural” tranquility. Teresa provides a spiritual “map” in which, at each step, the soul is purified and the human faculties (imagination, memory, will) gradually become more capable of being exposed to the radiant beams of divine light. This journey, beyond personal efforts of asceticism and prayer, is directed by God’s initiative, who, like a spring of water drawn directly from its source, fills the “basin” of the soul with knowledge and love, continuously increasing its capacity to receive. The final outcome is a profound union, compared first to an engagement and then to a mystical marriage, in which the soul fully harmonizes with the divine will.

St. John of the Cross emerged as a transformative force in Christian mysticism; his life was a model of total dedication and an inner quest that revealed the depth of the relationship between the soul and God. His work, characterized by complex ideas and symbolic imagery, continues to inspire and challenge modern thought, calling for a reconsideration of how divine knowledge may be attained through renunciation and inner illumination. Thus, through his mystic life and profound writings, St. John of the Cross left an invaluable intellectual and spiritual legacy that remains an essential reference in the study of theology, philosophy, and religious literature.

Biographically, St. John of the Cross joined the Carmelite Order in his youth, where he was deeply influenced by the mystical atmosphere of the community and the ideals of contemplative life promoted by the reform initiated by St. Teresa of Ávila. During his monastic years, he ardently sought a personal communion with the Divine, an endeavor that led him to experience, through suffering and inner illumination, the stages of a profound spiritual journey. His life was marked by periods of isolation and severe trials; some of the most notable moments of his existence occurred during times of imprisonment, when, far from the clamor of the world, he found in inner silence the source of his mystical revelations.

These experiences of purification and the darkening of the soul, often described through the metaphor of the “dark night,” constitute the central element of his work. Through his writings, St. John of the Cross articulated the idea that the path to union with God requires a passage through a process of disentanglement from all attachments and a renunciation of all that is transient and illusory. In this context, *The Dark Night of the Soul* remains one of his most profound and influential works, in which the author describes the stages of the soul’s

purification and the experience of transcending ordinary sensory limitations. Using poetic and symbolic language, St. John of the Cross provides the reader with a map of inner evolution, presenting the journey toward mystical union as one replete with paradoxes, where pain and silence transform into means of illumination.

Another defining element of St. John of the Cross's oeuvre is the emphasis he places on the dialectical relationship between "darkness" and "light." He contends that distancing oneself from sensory illusions and finite concepts paves the way to authentic knowledge, which cannot be expressed in words but must be experienced directly. In his *Spiritual Canticles*, for example, he employs symbolic language to capture the dynamic relationship between the soul and God, transforming each verse into a profound meditation on the human condition and the aspiration to attain divine unity.

St. John of the Cross develops another tableau of apophatic knowledge by employing the metaphor of the "dark nights" that purify both the senses and the spirit. In the dark night of the senses, man is called to detach from the pleasures and representations of the material, transitioning from a spirituality oriented toward rewards to an attitude of abandonment in which only the longing for God remains. This initial night prepares the soul for a subtler purification—the dark night of the spirit—in which, through divine grace, a true "disassembly" of intellectual faculties and attachments occurs, allowing the soul to be reshaped by the supra-rational light of God. Just as fire consumes wood until it becomes incandescent, the dark night transforms man at his very core, and the suffering encountered becomes the sign of the burning away of impurities and the preparation for direct contemplation of the Absolute.

The *Cloud of Unknowing* is a medieval mystical work of anonymous authorship, considered one of the most important texts in the Christian contemplative tradition. Dated approximately to the latter half of the fourteenth century and written in Middle English, the text holds profound significance both theologically and literally, serving as a practical guide for those who wish to approach God by renouncing intellectual knowledge and through a direct, intuitive, and loving experience.

Thematically, *The Cloud of Unknowing* addresses the idea that God cannot be known through rational means or by the accumulation of intellectual knowledge, for the divine surpasses any limitation of language and human concepts. Instead, the author argues that access to God's presence is achieved through a state of "unknowing"—a voluntary renunciation of the attempt to encompass the divine through analytical thought. This apophatic approach does not negate the possibility of knowing God; rather, it calls for a total opening of the heart and soul, transcending discursive logic to attain mystical communion.

The work is structured as a manual for contemplation, intended for those who desire to penetrate the mystery of God. The text exhorts readers to detach themselves from all preconceived notions and ideas, to relinquish the analytical power of the mind, and to engage in an experience of love and silence. This "silence" is not viewed as an absence of soul activity but as a means of moving beyond the limitations of conventional thought to reach a state of illumination in which God is revealed through the simple presence of love.

A central element of the text is the metaphor of the cloud—a poetic image that symbolizes the barrier separating the human mind from the divine mystery. The "cloud" represents the state of unknowing, a zone of ambiguity and mystery in which all concepts are suspended. In this state, the individual must set aside any attempt to define or analyze using reason, thereby allowing the soul to open completely to a direct encounter with God. Thus, the "cloud" is not a barrier in a negative sense but a space of potentiality in which true knowledge can manifest through love, beyond any dogmatic formulations.

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the contemplative path is described as a daring ascent through “the cloud of forgetting” (for all that is created) and “the cloud of unknowing” (which separates man from God). The essential tool here is a vigilant focus on God, whereby the seeker sets aside every thought—even those regarding oneself, virtue, sin, or sanctity. The author emphasizes that the soul truly called to the contemplative life must radically renounce the external world and ordinary mental analysis, casting aside a “cloud of forgetting” and aspiring toward an immediate contact, purely affective and intentional, with God. Ordinary words and theories fall away, and what predominates is the simple intention of the soul that “pierces” the ineffable darkness beyond which lies God’s true light.

From the five perspectives—those of Augustine, Thomas, Teresa, John of the Cross, and the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*—I have discovered a common conviction: that the human intellect reaches a point where, through mere argumentation, reason can go no further. Yet, each of them proclaims that, relying on faith, on love, and on an ascetic life (characterized by the cessation of any domination by disordered senses), man is capable of embracing a higher knowledge that is “unknowable” in logical terms yet profoundly transformative. This is apophatic knowledge, founded on the recognition of the secret nature of God and the limits of any speculative effort, while remaining open to an immediate and loving experience with the Divine—a gift freely given to the prepared and eager soul.

In the fourth chapter, I directed my attention to contemporary reinterpretations of apophatic thought, emphasizing how modernity and postmodernity reflect on the relationship between faith and science, between rationality and transcendence. In the past, religion and science often emerged as complementary forces or, at certain times, as opposing ones. The evolution of knowledge has passed through successive phases: first, people projected their hopes and fears onto various deities; then, as science expanded its domain of inquiry, questions arose about the legitimacy of these beliefs, even culminating in the “death of God” hypothesis. However, today, the thrust of scientific research coupled with the tempering of religious excesses has given rise to new platforms for dialogue, where the “God hypothesis” is discussed and the possibility is entertained that at the foundation of reality there exists something that cannot be exhausted strictly by empirical methods.

On a broader horizon, the relationship between religion and science has generated four major attitudes: opposition (the view that science and religion are at war to impose their visions), separation (the view that science and religion deal with completely different domains and should not be conflated), dialogue (the initiative to seek common ground, particularly on the theme of creation and the meaning of existence), and integration (the attempt to conceive science and religion as parts of a single, globally coherent vision, free of fundamental contradictions). The arguments put forward by both sides generally involve either the incorporation or the denial of the hypothesis that the world has a transcendent foundation.

In this context, apophatic knowledge emerges as a space of balance: it neither denies science’s contribution to understanding phenomena nor reduces faith to a mere cultural or psychological option. However, unlike classical perspectives, apophaticism precisely proposes the recognition that there is a horizon that exceeds the analytical power of empirical science and the capacity of logic to define God. Rather than offering a simple contradiction, negative knowledge highlights how any concept of the divine becomes inadequate, demanding an attitude of reverence toward infinity and mystery.

In intellectual circles, apophatic knowledge has sparked diverse interpretations and criticisms, grouped into four directions. The metaphysical theory (rooted in Plato, Dionysius, and Thomas Aquinas) maintains that everything that exists originates from God (either as an emanation or as creation *ex nihilo*) and, consequently, nothing in the universe is equivalent to

the divine. Negation (apophaticism) thus becomes the only way to acknowledge the infinite superiority of the divine. The theory of desire emphasizes that deep within, man longs for the infinite and that this very thirst for the Absolute drives him to look, through negation, beyond what ordinary reason can apprehend. The theory of experience shifts the focus to mystical living—the phenomenon by which the divine “gives itself” directly to the soul in a manner that overwhelms words and categorizations. And the theory of renunciation questions the idea of a complete “emptying” of all we once knew about God, in order to avoid confusions and to keep us away from the “god” fabricated in our minds.

Within the horizon of recent French philosophy (Jacques Derrida, Jean Luc Marion, Jean Yves Lacoste, Rémi Brague, and others), there is a noticeable “return” to apophatic language. Some thinkers emphasize that negative language should not be confused with a mere suppression of words, but rather represents the way in which we recognize the radical otherness of God. Others, however, risk reducing apophaticism to a sterile semantic game, leaving it devoid of that living reference to mystery.

Furthermore, Jean Luc Marion, from a phenomenological perspective, addresses the problem of divine appearance as a paradox of presence and absence. For him, God cannot be the object of ordinary phenomenal experience, and man relates to the divine through a form of “presence by withdrawal.” Similarly, Jean Yves Lacoste speaks of the “liturgical” as an exemplary framework for experiencing the presence of an “unapproachable” God. Ineffability remains in these approaches as a constant that interweaves negative knowledge with the concrete experience of mystery.

Apophaticism also reveals the profound relationship between faith and reason. It is no longer a matter of subordinating one to the other, but of engaging in an intense dialogue. In a world where science seeks truth through empirical and falsifiable methods, and where faith insists on anchoring itself in a transcendent reality, apophaticism proclaims that any exhaustive approach to the divine is impossible. Modern sciences, acknowledging that they do not have access to absolute truths, can meet apophaticism in the mutual modesty of an unending quest. Marion emphasizes that, in the absence of a reason that recognizes its limits, neither can faith fully realize its horizons.

Ultimately, modernity is increasingly aware that while science offers us impressive mastery over the material world and comfort through its explanations, it does not answer the questions regarding the meaning of existence or ultimate foundations. When science crosses its methodological threshold and pronounces on the absence of divinity, it ultimately ends up in philosophical conjectures. Likewise, a religion that refuses to engage in dialogue with reason risks becoming rigid and ignoring the complexity of the surrounding world. Apophaticism, as a way of understanding both science and philosophy, advocates an attitude that acknowledges the primacy of Mystery and the fact that no formula or theorem can exhaust it.

At a practical level, this message emerges from several perspectives. The believer is invited not to abandon reason when interpreting dogmas. The theologian, in turn, is obliged to avoid literal fundamentalism and to engage with major scientific discoveries, considering rationality as an intrinsic part of the human being. Religious-minded scientists remind us that we cannot explain why comprehensible natural laws exist or why the human intellect can decipher so many of the cosmos’s mysteries. At this level, however, the question arises: does man’s infinite thirst for knowledge not signal a structural openness toward a transcendent horizon?

Atheism, agnosticism, and nihilism each view the possibility of divine knowledge from different angles. Atheism aprioristically rejects the divine reality as illusory. Agnosticism claims the impossibility of resolving the existence of God through reason, while nihilism

sometimes dissolves any transcendent sense. Apophaticism, in contrast, acknowledges the existence and presence of an infinite God, yet emphasizes the inexhaustible distance between the Creator and the universe. It does not nullify the quest but deepens it, performing a genuine call to spiritual transfiguration.

Thus, the relationship between faith and reason should not be seen as a clash of two forces vying for supremacy, but rather as a fertile tension—a dialogue that recognizes that reality is not exhausted by either scientific reason or apophatic thought, but extends into a shared plane. Modern and postmodern apophaticism reconfigures this relationship, acknowledging the value of science while also embracing the paradoxes of human thought when it comes to understanding God.

Recent reinterpretations of apophatic thought revolve around several fundamental themes: ineffability, the impossibility of any exhaustive definition of the Divine, the importance of experience (whether sacramental or mystical), and the recognition of the limits of reason. Apophatic knowledge is not an escape from reality; rather, apophaticism reminds us of the inexplicable richness of the human being and of its unquenchable desire to know that which transcends any empirical analysis. Here, faith and reason find a space for cooperation, where statements about the divine become forms pointing to the infinite—even when based on negation. Thus, the path remains open even today for a negative theology that neither reduces religion to superstition nor dismisses science as superficial, but seeks instead to understand the mystery of existence as a continuum of questions, answers, and, above all, a respectful silence before the Mystery.

The philosophers and theologians who have contributed to the development of apophaticism—from Plato and Plotinus to Dionysius Pseudo-Areopagite and Thomas Aquinas—have built a methodology that recognizes and accepts the limits of human knowledge in the face of an infinite reality. This methodology is complemented by Western mystical traditions, which add an experiential and subjective dimension, demonstrating that divine knowledge cannot be confined to mere theoretical descriptions but requires a spiritual transformation of the knowing subject.

In the current context, marked by a complex relationship between science and religion, negative knowledge maintains its relevance by offering a mode of knowing that respects and incorporates the rational limitations of science. Thus, apophatic knowledge proves not merely to be a relic of past thought, but a viable epistemological approach adapted to contemporary challenges, confirming that apophaticism has solid epistemic foundations and an essential role in understanding the Divine.

In light of the analysis presented in this thesis, a profound reexamination of the apophatic epistemological endeavor becomes imperative—a path that is essential for accessing the mystery of the Absolute and transcending the inherent limits of language and conceptual categories. The negative method of knowledge, through its rejection of affirmative statements that attempt to encapsulate totality, does not represent a simple denial of the possibility of knowledge, but a profound means of opening a window toward a mystical and transformative experience of reality. What particularly distinguishes the apophatic approach is the recognition that any human discursive system, however elaborate, proves insufficient in the face of the complexity and infinitude of the Absolute, and that through the act of negation the way is opened to a direct experience that is not reducible to simple formulations or definitions.

Thus, knowledge is no longer viewed as a static object of study but as a dynamic process, an ontological act of becoming in which the knowing subject is transformed by its approach to the ineffable mystery. In this endeavor, the rejection of assertions—which, although useful in the early stages of constructing knowledge, become limiting when applied

to the divine totality—is not interpreted as an act of nihilism, but as an affirmation of the profound depth of truth. This deliberate renunciation of finite concepts functions as a tool for intellectual and spiritual purification, providing the individual with the possibility to free themselves from the constraints imposed by discursive language and to open toward a reality that gradually reveals itself through layers of silence and deep introspection.

In my study, I have emphasized that the apophatic method does not oppose reason but complements it, inviting a dialectical dialogue between the affirmation and the negation of knowledge. This dual movement—first, the affirmation of the initial existence of a transcendent principle, and then the subsequent rejection of all definitive statements about it—proves to be an authentic means of penetrating the mystery of the Absolute, enabling an experience of profound communion that cannot be reduced to a mere accumulation of information or dogmatic assertions. In an era where science and technology dominate everyday discourse and reductionist paradigms threaten to transform the act of knowing into a mechanical exercise in interpreting material phenomena, the apophatic approach reminds us of the importance of a fundamental intellectual humility, one that recognizes that the essential truths of existence cannot be exhausted by formulas and definitions but can only be suggested through a constant openness to the unknown.

This integrative perspective—which weaves together elements of ancient philosophy, Christianity, and contemporary reinterpretations—opens up a vital interdisciplinary dialogue among science, faith, and mystical experience. Each act of negation, each moment of silence, transforms into an essential step on the path toward inner illumination, where personal experience becomes the means by which a reality far broader than that captured by mere reason is accessed. It is not a matter of rejecting the effort to know, but rather of reorienting the way knowledge is constructed so that the inherent limits of language are recognized and transformed into a source of inspiration for a continual quest for truth.

The apophatic endeavor thus proves to be an antidote to the dogmatic certainties of modernity and the tendencies that, although offering sophisticated models for understanding the material world, fail to encompass the transcendent dimension of existence. The negative method emerges as a call for a constant reevaluation of the relationship between subject and object, between that which can be affirmed and that which remains tacit, transforming the act of knowing into an experience of self-surpassing. In a world marked by ideological polarizations and epistemic fragmentation, acknowledging the limits of knowledge is an act of intellectual courage that opens the way to an integrated understanding of the universe—one in which both science and faith find their place in an honest and open dialogue.

By adopting an apophatic attitude, the individual is invited to open up to a direct experience of the divine, in which every moment of silence and every refusal of a definitive assertion transforms into an act of self-transformation and an approach toward totality. This call to openness is not an invitation to passivity but to active engagement in the process of self-discovery and reintegration of the being, wherein every experience, no matter how elusive it may seem, contributes to shaping a broader vision of reality. In this process, apophatic knowledge becomes a way of life, a mode by which the human being relates to existence not solely through the lens of reason but also through a constant openness to mystery and to that which transcends any attempt at complete definition.

Moreover, this epistemological synthesis proves to be an inexhaustible source of inspiration for future academic endeavors, inviting an interdisciplinary collaboration in which contributions from philosophy, theology, and science intertwine harmoniously to offer a comprehensive interpretation of reality. In a modern research context where the boundaries between disciplines become increasingly fluid, the apophatic method presents itself as a bridge among diverse approaches, facilitating a constructive dialogue that successfully

leverages both the analytical rigor of science and the profound depth of subjective mystical experiences. Thus, knowledge is reconfigured as an integrative process, in which every cognitive act is seen as part of an eternal journey of discovery, where negation and silence serve simultaneously as means of self-purification and intellectual enrichment.

A new vision of knowledge emerges, in which every step of affirmation is followed by a deliberate act of renunciation, and every attempt to define is complemented by the recognition of the ineffable. This dialectical dynamic reflects the complexity of the cognitive act and opens up new horizons for understanding a universe that, although seemingly perpetually elusive, gradually reveals itself through moments of mystical clarity. Every refusal of a final definition, every moment of contemplative silence, thus transforms into a symbol of the ongoing quest for a truth that can never be fully exhausted but only suggested through deep layers of experience and reflection, imposing a call for the continual reexamination of epistemic paradigms and a constant openness to the fundamental questions of existence that cannot be reduced to simple empirical answers.

In an era in which science prides itself on its ability to measure and explain material phenomena, apophatic knowledge reminds us that essential truths are not confined within the limits of quantification but are revealed through a process of self-transcendence and an openness to a mystery that transcends any possible discursive formulation. This integrative approach, which elegantly combines the rigor of science with the depth of mystical-existential experience, proves to be a pillar of reference in the reconstruction of a modern epistemology capable of responding to the challenges of an ever-changing world.

Apophatic knowledge, by inviting a sincere openness to mystery and by acknowledging the inherent limitations of language, constitutes a call to self-transformation and to a continuous dialogue between faith and reason, between the affirmative and the negative. Each act of negation thus becomes an important step on the path toward inner illumination—a closeness to totality that cannot be reached through definitive statements but only through a process of perpetual becoming.

Therefore, the apophatic approach presents itself as a true key to accessing the fundamental truths of existence, a method which, by renouncing limiting concepts, permits an authentic opening toward a reality that remains, by its very nature, ineffable and paradoxical. Within the context of interdisciplinary dialogue, this perspective opens the way for an integrative epistemology in which every contribution—be it philosophical, theological, or scientific—is woven harmoniously together to offer as complete a vision of the universe as possible, inviting a continual reevaluation of the way we live and understand reality.

In light of the foregoing, it becomes evident that the apophatic endeavor is not an end in itself but an eternal journey of self-discovery and reintegration of the being—a process that transforms every cognitive act into an experience of self-transcendence. This call to openness, to intellectual humility, and to the recognition of the limits of human knowledge represents not only the foundation of a viable epistemology but also the basis of an ethics of responsibility, by which the individual commits to a sincere search for truth without settling for superficial answers or dogmatic certainties.

By adopting an apophatic approach, not only is the importance of mystical experience and self-transformation affirmed, but a pathway is also opened to a sincere and open dialogue among the various modes of knowledge, thereby promoting an epistemology of uncertainty which, paradoxically, becomes a source of inspiration and intellectual creativity.

In conclusion, the apophatic method does not represent a renunciation of the effort to understand reality, but rather a profound reconfiguration of the act of knowing—a call to a truly authentic and integrated way of living, in which every moment of silence and every act of negation transforms into an essential step on the path to discovering a truth that transcends

any attempt at complete expression. This perspective, which harmoniously combines the rational and the mystical dimensions of existence, constitutes an appeal for the continual reexamination of epistemic paradigms and for the cultivation of a permanent openness to the Mystery of the Absolute, thus inviting an authentic evolution of the human being on intellectual, spiritual, and existential levels.

Accordingly, the contribution of this thesis is measured not only in highlighting the importance of apophatic knowledge in the contemporary context but also in opening new horizons for future research within an interdisciplinary dialogue that harmoniously unites the rigor of science, the depth of theology, and the sensitivity of philosophy. This epistemic synthesis—which recognizes that truth cannot be reduced to a fixed set of statements but is revealed through a continuous process of self-transcendence—constitutes the foundation of a modern epistemology capable of inspiring and transforming the way we perceive and live reality.

The apophatic method, by reintegrating knowledge as an act of becoming and openness, proves essential for understanding a universe that, despite its complexity and ineffability, remains accessible only through a sincere and unbounded openness toward the Mystery of the Absolute. This approach, which transcends the limits of traditional discourse, provides a reference framework for future academic endeavors and for the ongoing dialogue between faith, science, and philosophy, thereby calling for a profound reconfiguration of the way we live the act of knowing. Thus, the call to apophatic knowledge becomes a call to live an integrated existence in which every act of negation transforms into an opportunity for self-reflection and for drawing closer to totality, marking the beginning of an eternal journey in the quest for truth—a truth that, although it can never be entirely encompassed in words, can be lived with authentic and profoundly transformative intensity.

This work opens several potential directions for future research. One suggested aspect is the exploration of how apophaticism can be applied in other religious and philosophical traditions to build a deeper and more comprehensive interreligious dialogue. Additionally, future research could analyze the implications of apophaticism in the context of new scientific discoveries and technological developments, investigating how negative theology might offer perspectives on the limits of scientific knowledge and on the relationship between man and technology.

In conclusion, this work underscores the ongoing importance of apophaticism in theology and philosophy. Apophatic knowledge is particularly current, having connections both with philosophy and Christianity, and represents a way to transcend one's own self toward the divine mystery. In my view, apophaticism today becomes what can situate us above technological advances—a force that can give meaning to the everyday and that demonstrates the true value of humanity in relation to the world in which it lives.

My motivation for choosing this topic is not merely academic but also deeply personal, stemming from a desire to clarify and argue for the place of apophatic knowledge within epistemology. I have felt the need to demonstrate that apophaticism is not merely an escape from the realm of rational thought but rather a way of understanding reality by transcending limiting concepts. In a world where knowledge is often reduced to the accumulation of information and strictly empirical validation, I believe that revaluing negative knowledge is essential—not only because it challenges the limits of human understanding but also because it provides a method for accessing truths that, though ineffable, are both authentic and relevant.

In conclusion, the study of the epistemic foundations of apophatic knowledge is necessary both from a philosophical standpoint and in terms of its impact on how we conceptualize knowledge in general. The choice of this topic reflects an intellectual journey

that has evolved naturally—a constant concern for understanding the limits of thought and for articulating an epistemology that does not exclude the ineffable dimension of reality. Through this work, I aim to demonstrate that apophaticism is not merely a linguistic strategy but an authentic way of relating to truth, with profound implications for philosophy as well as for any endeavor seeking to understand the nature of knowledge. Furthermore, I argue that it has solid epistemic foundations.