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METAPHOR AND APOPHATIC DISCOURSE: PUTTING SELLS IN DIALOGUE WITH LAKOFF AND JOHNSON

Thomas D. Carroll

*Division of Religious and Theological Studies
Boston University*

*In the book, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael A. Sells presents a performative theory of apophatic discourse. His idea is that apophatic discourse functions as a semantic analogue to mystical experience through “meaning events.” Although he acknowledges that an appreciation of the subtleties of metaphor is crucial to an understanding of mystical language, Sells does not discuss the extensive literature on metaphor theory from the last few decades. In this essay, the author explores how George Lakoff and Mark Johnson’s theory of metaphor may enrich Sells’ theory. Further, he addresses what Lakoff and Johnson may learn from Sells’ treatment. While there are no conflicts, strictly speaking, between the metaphysical pictures suggested by the two theories, Sells’ picture of the world allows for fissures of meaning at which Lakoff and Johnson’s theory at best hints. Ultimately, Lakoff and Johnson’s conception of metaphor requires that Sells’ theory of apophatic discourse be reexamined.*

Sells on apophatic discourse

In *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, Michael A. Sells presents a novel theory of mystical language. Sells’ view is that mystical language is used (by mystics) *performatively*, in some sense of the word.¹ The goal of the use of mystical language is, then, to produce a type of semantic event. Sells calls this a “meaning event.”²

Meaning event indicates that moment when the meaning has become identical or fused with the act of predication. In metaphysical terms, essence is identical with existence, but such identity is not only asserted, it is performed.... The meaning event is the semantic analogue to the experience of mystical union. It does not describe or refer to mystical union but effects a semantic union that re-creates or imitates the mystical union.³

To understand sentences as discrete propositions, abstracted from mystical texts or practices, is to misunderstand importantly such expressions. Rather than interpreting negating or apophatic utterances alone, one must understand them against some affirmative, or kataphatic, backdrop. In such a context,

apophatic expressions cause a semantic break. This fissure, then, is the emergence of the (real) meaning of the apophatic discourse. It is this meaning to which the apophatic and kataphatic expressions (working in concert) were directing the cognizer. Sells speaks of this as an anarchic use of language,⁴ and the political metaphor is quite apt. After all, one would not use the term anarchy to describe a chaotic social arrangement generally, but, rather more appropriately, an established social order that has broken down in some manner. It is against such a background that anarchy distinguishes itself (it also has another, against which to be defined). Similarly, with apophatic language, it is the backdrop of affirmative expressions that provides for negations having meaning (if not content, as such).⁵ This is what Sells means when he writes:

The meaning event occurs within a kataphatic theological context. The apophatic language itself contains a strongly mimetic aspect, that is, through particular stratagems (such as “withdrawing” the subject from a subject-predicate proposition), it aims to induce within the reader an event that will

emerge from the kataphatic context (such as the notion of awakening), but which in itself refuses subject-predicate dichotomy (an awakening without awakener). The moment of fusion of subject and predicate is ephemeral; the awakening without awakener soon reifies into just another object of experience. The writer must continually turn back to unsay the previous saying.⁵

A methodological point needs to be clarified before I can go further. I refer to Sells' theory of mystical language, but that may be misleading. Sells does not wish for his views on mystical language to be understood as a formula to be applied.⁶ Rather, he characterizes it as a "schematic and formal outline."⁷ It is difficult to understand what Sells means by this distinction, but I interpret it to mean that Sells is generating a fallible hypothesis about mystical language, a work-in-progress. With a rough idea of Sells' theory in mind, I move on to an exploration of how it accounts for a variety of mystical texts.

The mystical texts Sells explores vary in terms of their philosophical versus their devotional content. This is not to indicate that any of these texts are purely one or the other. Rather, some of the authors Sells discusses seem to have had a scholarly audience in mind, while others seem to have had a religious audience (insofar as these may be understood to be separate). I consider Plotinus and John the Scot Eriugena to belong to the former, while Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart belong to the latter. This distinction will be largely glossed over in what follows. However, a truly comprehensive study would need to observe this important distinction among apophatic writers. In order to illustrate how Sells draws on both types of writers, I focus my analysis of his theory upon his treatment of two of them: Eriugena and Porete.

Eriugena's apophatic theology, found in his *Periphyseon*, embodies much of Sells' theory of apophatic discourse. For example, a central thesis in Sells' theory is that expressions of apophasis ought not be taken out of context in a discourse. This is what he means by Double Propositions.

No statement about X can rest as a valid statement but must be corrected by a further statement, which must itself be corrected in a discourse without closure.⁸

Eriugena writes the *Periphyseon* as a dialogue between a "nutritor" (an established philoso-

The "positive nothingness," which is Eriugena's view of deity, is one that enables reason itself to be pious. But as is seen in the dialogue between the nutritor and the alumnus, this rational piety is never achieved once and for all.

pher) and an "alumnus" (a novice).⁹ In the very structure of Eriugena's writing can be seen this dialectical mode of creating mystical meaning.

Sells observes that Eriugena relies significantly upon Pseudo-Dionysius' mystical theology and states that Pseudo-Dionysius privileges apophatic discourse.¹⁰ Can the alumnus be thought of as the voice of kataphatic theology? I believe it would be too simplistic to do so, but there would be a point to such a characterization. The nutritor is well aware of both kataphatic and apophatic moods in expressions about God. However, the alumnus states such kataphatic moods more emphatically (and exclusively). Sells writes of the tension that emerges in this dialogue:

A true drama is unfolding within the technical language and academic niceties. Not the least element in that drama is the sense that at this point in the dialogue the nutritor and alumnus have become equals in the discussion,

pushing it toward a conclusion it might not have reached had the nutritor merely propounded his own preconceived ideas.¹¹

It is this drama which a theory of mystical language seeks to take note of—what happens in virtue of the articulation of Double Propositions.

This is where the term *agnosia* is useful in studying apophatic language. Sells describes *agnosia* as “an unknowing that goes beyond rather than falling short of kataphatic affirmations.”¹²

This *agnosia* begins with the contemplation (*theōria*) of the “place” of the deity beyond all gaze or contemplation.¹³

Agnosia functions against the backdrop of what is known. It is awareness of a “positive nothing” rather than a “negative nothing,” about which Peter Hawkins and Anne Howland Schotter write:

If the ineffable is that about which nothing truly can be said, perhaps (to borrow a line from Wallace Stevens’s “Snowman”) we can differentiate between “the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is”—between what we may call a “negative” ineffable and a “positive” one.¹⁴

It is this “positive nothing” (or ineffable) to which apophatic discourse intends to draw attention. This is the awareness of a fullness, a transcendence—not a mere lack of presence. Sells writes:

In Dionysius and Gregory of Nyssa, Eriugena found an alternative to the substantialist view of deity propounded by the Church councils, which had consistently applied the term *ousia* (substance, being) to the nature(s) of Christ and to the trinity, and which through the writings of Augustine had become central to the Western Christian tradition. Within the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena integrated into his own apophatic discourse both Dionysius’ affirmation that the deity was “beyond-being” and Gregory’s suggestion that the “nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*) was the divine nothingness out of which all being proceeds.¹⁵

The “positive nothingness,” which is Eriugena’s view of deity, is itself to be pious. But as is seen in the dialogue between the

nutritor and the alumnus, this rational piety is never achieved once and for all. Rather, this sense of piety creates fissures in an otherwise reified, kataphatic view of deity and faith. The nutritor warns the alumnus that these fissures can be reified themselves and become obstacles to such piety. Indeed, the nutritor, seemingly anticipating some of the insights in contemporary metaphor theory, suggests to the alumnus that even the apparently innocuous use of prepositions can have unfortunate consequences. Sells writes:

It would be easy to dismiss such a concern with the minutiae of grammar and with what might seem an unduly literal reading of a preposition. For the nutritor, however, such a summary dismissal has serious consequences. The delimitations of language become invisible and consequently more powerful and destructive. At issue is the dependence of thought upon language. To claim that such language should not be taken spatially is to ignore the power of language. The spatial element in a preposition cannot be willed away as if it were not fundamental to the word. As the dialogue proceeds, the nutritor will insist that to believe such spatial connotations can be willed away is to become all the more vulnerable to what he will call the “monstrous and abominable idols” hidden within such language.¹⁶

It is here that Lakoff and Johnson have the most to offer Sells’ theory. However, their insights require some rethinking of Sells’ theory of mystical language.

Another important mystic discussed by Sells is Marguerite Porete. All too often overlooked or neglected and negated,¹⁷ Porete’s mystical writings provide another field of complex metaphors and apophatic expressions with which a theory such as Sells’ may deal. That such a text could provoke such strong reactions would make it worth study on its own; however, insofar as it is an under-explored text in Western mysticism, it will provide a novel example for Sells’ theory to explain.

Any act done as a means (*movens, intermedium*) or as a use (*usage, usum*) is a “work,” which entails an enslavement to the will. What might seem an

unexceptional doctrine of salvation through faith rather than works is then pushed to the extreme: the soul that gives up all will and works is no longer concerned with poverty or riches, honor or dishonor, heaven or hell, with self, other, or deity. Such a state of utter selflessness, or annihilation of the will and reason—both of which are concerned with works—cannot be achieved through works or effort. It occurs when the soul is taken up or ravished (*ravie, rapta, ravissée*) by its divine lover.¹⁸

What impact do love and desire have upon one's encounter with the loved or desired other? This image of transforming love brings to mind Martin Buber's distinction between I-Thou versus I-It modes of experiencing the world. In the former, the subject is constituted in virtue of the relationship, whereas in the latter the subject is con-

Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor begins with a simple idea whose scope of application is quite large: metaphors make up some of the most basic and pervasive uses of language we have, including philosophical and theological uses of language.

stituted prior to the experience of the object (which is not considered here as an "other," but merely as an "it"). This similarity does not invite a rash accommodation of Porete's late medieval work to that of a twentieth-century philosopher-theologian. Porete's work lies in a long tradition of apophatic writers who were profoundly struck by the encounter with transcendence. This encounter effected a strong pious response with respect to the Other. However, while a thinker like Buber explored this relationality somewhat abstractly, Porete explored the encounter with the transcendent in erotic metaphors.

As does Eriugena's work, Porete's text, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, takes the form of a dialogue. Sells observes:

The Mirror of Simple Souls is a book of 122 chapters, most of it a dialogue of courtly love carried out among a group of personified characters. The principal participants are Lady Love (*Dame Amour*), also called Her Highness Amour, and the Enfranchised Soul (*l'ame enfranchie*), also called the Annihilated Soul, or simply, the Soul. [...] The central event of the drama is the death of Reason who, after continued questioning of Dame Amour over the paradoxes of love, finally dies (chap. 87), "mortally wounded by love." This theatrically constructed event marks a major transformation in the annihilated soul, who is now freed from reason and able to "reclaim her heritage."¹⁹

Note the similarities present here between Porete's dialogue and that of Eriugena in the *Periphyseon*. Note the similarities between the questioning roles of Reason and of the

alumnus. Both function as foils against which the apophatic view is contrasted. In both cases, the use of a dialogue emphasizes a dramatic element to the transcendent encounter. Also in both cases, the stakes of the dialogue are quite high. The narrator is aware of this

when the power dynamics between himself and the alumnus have been equaled. The stakes are much higher in Porete's dialogue (as Reason loses its life). Moreover, after the death of Reason, the soul is "free" to "reclaim her heritage."

Sells cautions against misunderstanding Porete's work as merely asserting the priority of faith over works in attaining salvation in the Christian mythos.

A work is any act carried out through one's own will. [...] The harder the soul attempts to transcend will, the more she becomes entrapped in it; the more she works to transcend works, the more she is enslaved to works. From such a dilemma, reason can find no way out.²⁰

This is where apophatic moves come in. By saying that reason cannot find a way out of this dilemma, what is being said is that fur-

ther information, or deductions performed on information already attained, will not solve the problem. This is why reason must “die.” This is not to say that reason has no helpful role to play. Following Sells’ suggestions, it is against the context of rationality (propositional truth and rational inquiry) that apophatic moves attain their dramatic performance. The tendency to view assertions exclusively individually, as discrete propositions, is the problem. Instead, it is through silencing reason (not once and for all, but as an admonishing) that the will shall be transcended. Sells writes,

Dame Amour conceives of grace as divine love, which is nothing other than deity itself. This love allows the soul to become “disencumbered” of its will and works, and thereby, of its own self. Only when the soul’s own being and will are annihilated can the deity work through and in it.²¹

There is a paradox here. The implication is that the soul’s being and will are obstacles in the way of the deity’s working in and through the soul. But, as Sells goes on to point out, only the deity itself can remove these obstacles. The soul cannot will to annihilate its own being and will. Such can only happen by the grace of divine love. Moreover, Sells writes that Porete’s view is “an understanding of the annihilated soul [that] cannot be found in scripture, that human sense (*sensus*) cannot apprehend it, nor human work merit it. It is a gift....”²² Given the context of the relationship between the annihilated soul and the deity as an erotic relationship, it seems appropriate to note that an important precondition for such a relationship is trust. What seems implied in this analogy is a manner of living where the pious adherent seeks after no longer seeking. Most importantly, this aporia of the will is embraced through Porete’s dissolution of the self as a discrete entity. In mystical union, the self is lost in the deity. The distinction between subject and object is now unsaid.

This “apophysis of desire” (in Sells’ language) leads to a sense of abandon with respect to engaging in life.

The soul’s abandonment of discretion reflects a paradox found within courtly love. The rules of courtly love or “courtesy” (*cortezia*) demand discretion, conforming to the conventions and norms of society, and *mezura*, avoiding of excesses of feeling and behavior. Yet the courtly lover (*fin aman*) continually violated these standards of *cortezia* and *mezura* and acted in a solitary, excessive manner. Porete has combined this language of *cortezia* with an apophatic language of mystical union. The union-with-and-in-love is *rapture*. Rapture is the act and work of love. The language of rapture includes a complex of interdependent terms and figures of speech (disrobing, nakedness, loss of discretion, loss of shame, abandon) that reinforce the basic sexual metaphor. As Dame Amour said, there is no “discretion” in love. The soul gives up her honor, her shame. She disrobes herself of will. Her union with the divine lover occurs in nakedness. She gives herself over to abandon. She “falls” (in an expression that will have many levels of meaning) into love.²³

Again, note the similarities between “abandon” and “rapture” in Porete’s idiom and anarchy in Eriugena. In both cases, there is a rupture or break from “rational” or factual, propositional uses of language. In fact, especially in the metaphor of a sexual relationship between the soul and the divine lover, one sees how anemic reason (propositional discourse) really is. The trust and rapture of the lover for its other are basic; the use of reason would be as a helper to such a relationship. I am reminded here of Nietzsche’s famous opening to *Beyond Good and Evil* (in that case, the cold reason of the philosopher is compared to the need for passionate pursuit of truth).

Porete’s apophatic treatment of desire relies upon a kataphatic tradition of faith and works. Again, mystical insights become possibilities when instantiated within the context of a structure of symbols. The rapture of mystical union (if such may be spoken of as a discrete referent) is possible only through the process of negation or abstraction from the reifying force of language. Here is where further exploration of these themes will benefit from a discussion of Lakoff and Johnson’s

contemporary theory of metaphor. Their conception of embodied reason will shed light upon why using these metaphors can be so useful at providing dramatic experiences of the divine. However, as I note in my conclusion, Lakoff and Johnson's findings require a rethinking of some of Sells' ideas about apophatic discourse.

Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theory of metaphor begins with a simple idea whose scope of application is quite large. The idea is this: metaphors are not parts of speech whose function is the exception to the rule of literal uses of language. Rather, metaphors make up some of the most basic and pervasive uses of language we have, including (and in the context of this essay, especially) philosophical and theological uses of language.

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature.²⁴

Interestingly, many of the ideas found in their work is reminiscent of the insights of several of the mystics Sells studies. Both these mystics and Lakoff and Johnson are aware of the non-triviality of metaphor in everyday language. Both develop sophisticated systems for appreciating how metaphors reveal worldviews. Lakoff and Johnson's system turns on the idea of metaphorical mapping.

Since their seminal work two decades ago, *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson's metaphorical theory has undergone some development. Advances in the cognitive sciences have warranted some adjustments in the theory. These adjustments generally have to do with

developments regarding how best to think about so-called mental content (i.e., as being basically propositional in content or as being activation patterns across neural networks). I refer to the conceptual version of the theory as the "old" theory, and the neural network version of the theory as the "new" one. For their part, Lakoff and Johnson seem willing to embrace the advances in neural science via their new theory. However, the basic insight of the theory remains the same: cross-domain conceptual mappings are pervasive in human thought. But just what is a cross-domain conceptual mapping? Lakoff and Johnson write:

Primary metaphors, from a neural perspective, are neural connections learned by coactivation. They extend across parts of the brain between areas dedicated to sensorimotor experience and areas dedicated to subjective experience. The greater inferential complexity of the sensory and motor domains gives the metaphors an asymmetric character, with inferences flowing in one direction only.

From a conceptual point of view, primary metaphors are cross-domain mappings, from a *source domain* (the sensorimotor domain) to a *target domain* (the domain of subjective experience), preserving inference and sometimes preserving lexical representation. Indeed, the preservation of inference is the most salient property of conceptual metaphors.²⁵

The parallels between the old and new theories can be seen here. At this juncture in the cognitive sciences and in the philosophy of mind, it is probably best to develop parallel expressions of a theory (along the lines seen in Lakoff and Johnson's theory) that involve rationality. The entailments of one expression may not precisely match up with the other—and in many cases this will be very useful. The old expression of the theory allows for greater integration into other conceptual theories. Likewise, the new expression of the theory allows for greater connections with the neural sciences. I will use the old, conceptual, expression of the theory, given that the integration taking place in this paper is between metaphor theory and an appraisal of a theory of mystical language.

The basic idea in Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor is that concepts from the sensorimotor domain of experience are often used to understand conceptual domains involving subjective experience. But what do Lakoff and Johnson mean by "subjective" here? It may be helpful to think of such domains as more or less removed from the sensorimotor domain of experience. That is, target domains are conceptual domains which are comparatively abstract. The idea is that one may use the structure of sensorimotor conceptual domains to understand something of the structure of more abstract concepts. An example of such a mapping is their much-used

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"Life Is A Journey" metaphorical mapping.²⁶ Recognizing the contingency of this mapping, they now refer to it as "A Purposeful Life Is A Journey" metaphor. Not everyone thinks of life as a journey. However, making this aspect of the metaphor explicit was not truly necessary. The central point of Lakoff and Johnson's theory is to reveal just how pervasive (and optional, even when pervasive) cross-domain conceptual mappings really are. Some of the constituent metaphors that play a role in the "A Purposeful Life Is A Journey" metaphor are as follows:

"A Person Living A Life Is A Traveler"

"Life Goals Are Destinations"

"A Life Plan Is An Itinerary"²⁷

These constituent metaphors work together in concert, providing an array of concepts with which to conceptualize what a purposeful life is. This particular cross-domain mapping has become quite pervasive in American culture. It is somewhat surprising to learn that it is an optional mode of understanding life. However, cross-domain conceptual mappings are

important for an additional reason, as Lakoff and Johnson write:

Perhaps the most important thing to understand about conceptual metaphors is that they are used to reason with. The Love Is A Journey mapping does not just permit the use of travel words to speak of love. That mapping allows forms of reasoning about travel to be used in reasoning about love. It functions so as to map inferences about travel into inferences about love, enriching the concept of love and extending it to love-as-journey.²⁸

What this suggests is that a person does not merely conceptualize subjective conceptual domains by means of sensorimotor domains; rather, what a person learns about such sub-

jective domains may depend critically upon what source conceptual domain was used in order to structure the target domain. Given that these mappings are contingent, what a person learns will be structured contingently as well. Lakoff has stated that this theory may be thought

of primarily as one of cross-domain conceptual mappings, and secondarily as a theory of metaphor (insofar as metaphors are instantiations of the mappings).²⁹ However, since the mappings consist in understanding one class of terms by means of another class of terms, referring to it as a theory of metaphor is not entirely misleading.

This brings me to a part of Lakoff and Johnson's theory with which I have some problems: their theory of truth. Because of the culturally and bodily dependent nature of cross-domain mappings, Lakoff and Johnson argue that truth ought to be characterized in this way:

A person takes a statement as "true" of a situation if what he or she understands the sentence as expressing accords with what he or she understands the situation to be.³⁰

This is supplied as an alternative to correspondence theories of truth, but what do Lakoff and Johnson mean by the word "accords"? I am unsure of how this word is any better than

(other than being different from) the word “corresponds.” Moreover, Lakoff and Johnson refer to what a sentence expresses. It is this that accords with what is understood about a situation when a sentence is taken to be true of that situation. Perhaps “is consistent” would be a suitable substitute expression for “accords.” However, if so, then Lakoff and Johnson would be left with a nonrealist account of truth (i.e., truth depends solely upon one’s background beliefs). Also, it is often the case that what is most important in an inquiry is what one does not know or understand about a situation or state of affairs. This observation needs to be addressed. Surely, an adequate theory of representation (of which a theory of truth will be a part) needs to account both for the reality of a cognizer-independent world as well as the manner in which our concepts (especially cross-domain mappings) grasp and frame the world we encounter. However, this is not that theory. It satisfies the second requirement while neglecting the first. Lakoff and Johnson assert that they wish to have an embodied realist pic-

The insight of apophatic discourse, as well as of contemporary metaphor theory, is that how a person understands these abstract conceptual domains is optional. To view any conceptual mapping as necessary or essential is at best an exaggeration, and at worst an important mistake.

ture of the world: one steeped in the cognitive and natural sciences. This shows the reader something of a promissory note—that for which Lakoff and Johnson need to provide a theory of truth to explain. So long as their theory of truth does not appreciate this aspect of the meaning of truth—namely, that the world outruns our conceptualizations of it—it will be inadequate. Putting aside these qualms about their theory of truth, there is

much I can accept about Lakoff and Johnson’s theory of metaphor. In particular, I am inclined to adopt their theory of cross-domain mappings as quite illuminating of the nature of reason.

While Lakoff and Johnson seem to think that their theory of metaphor (and of reason in general) will upset the dominant Western paradigms—perhaps an over-expectation—their theory does provide a picture of embodied reason which is worth attention. What their theory reveals is that many philosophical and logical analyses of abstract concepts (such as time, causation, and meaning in life) have incorporated cross-domain metaphorical mappings. Thus, the chapter title, “The Cognitive Science of Philosophy,” is rather provocative. If the point of philosophical inquiry is to gain perspective on a given subject matter, to understand the subject from the greatest point of generality, then an appreciation of metaphor theory will be crucial. However, such inquiry should not be undertaken too naively. Cognitive science is not a ready-made conceptual domain; it,

too, has its rifts and areas of disagreement. An appreciative, but critical, stance toward the cognitive sciences is warranted. With that in mind, it is best to think of Lakoff and Johnson’s theory as a good and powerful explanation of cross-domain mappings. However, the very disciplines of philosophy that they would dismantle

have helped define and create the tools they would use for the dismantling. Insofar as their approach instills a certain humility in the philosopher with respect to the question of getting to the “essence” of a subject matter, their view is helpful. However, forming opinions about the nature of these subjects may be likewise unavoidable. It may be that that which they critique is, in one important sense, *not optional*.

Enriching Sells' theory of apophatic discourse with Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory

What does Lakoff and Johnson's theory have to offer Sells' theory of mystical language? As mentioned above, Sells takes note of the novel metaphors and unique uses of prepositions found in mystical texts. What pictures are presupposed by such cross-domain mappings? Sells explores Eriugena's treatment of *creatio ex nihilo*. There are common readings of this idea:

The temporal meaning implies that the creator exists prior to this creation, and that "nothing" was there prior to its becoming the creation into which it was made. [...] The spatial meaning and the material meaning are closely related. The word "from" relates a creator or maker to something outside of itself, to some kind of material or place out of which he fashions his creation.³¹

Eriugena appropriates Pseudo-Dionysius' view of emanation as overflow. Sells writes of this:

Thus the *logos* flows into all things (the spatial metaphor is exposed), it flows them into being (the metaphor of diffusion), and it overflows them, i.e., it transcends the things it has flowed into being, or it transcends the self it has flowed into being.

One final step is needed before Eriugena can complete his exploration of the metaphor of overflowing. This final step was foreshadowed by the *alumnus*'s questions cited above: "But when I hear or say that the divine good created all from nothing, I do not understand what is signified by that name, 'nothing,' whether the privation of all essence or substance or accident, or the excellence of the divine beyond-essence." All understandings of nothing as privation—be they based upon temporal, spatial, or material paradigms—have been discredited. The alternative, hinted at by the *alumnus* in his mention of the "beyond-being," is the nonsubstantialist view of deity.³²

The appropriation of novel cross-domain mappings reveals that conventional (kataphatic) readings of the divine are optional and over-emphasize certain characteristics (e.g. the temporal priority of the deity in *creatio ex nihilo*).

In the metaphor of overflow, Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena use the source domain of how liquids flow to structure the highly abstract concept of divine emanation (as that concept is understood in Neoplatonic philosophy). The insight of apophatic discourse, as well as of contemporary metaphor theory, is that how a person understands these abstract conceptual domains is optional. To view any conceptual mapping as necessary or essential is at best an exaggeration, and at worst an important mistake.

As for Sells' treatment of the mystical writings of Porete, Lakoff and Johnson's theory would provide helpful tools. Porete's guiding metaphor of mystical-union-as-erotic-relationship matches up well with Lakoff and Johnson's theory of cross-domain mapping. In this case, the relatively basic conceptual domain of erotic relationships is used to structure the relatively abstract conceptual domain of mystical union. Moreover, this metaphorical engagement with the divine reveals the contingency of and the problems with traditional reified conceptions of will, desire, self, subject and object, and God. The familiar mysteriousness of the lover is mapped onto the distant mysteriousness of the deity.

Conclusion

Where Lakoff and Johnson's theory of cross-domain conceptual mapping goes further than Sells' theory of mystical language is in terms of the continual reemergence of everyday factual discourse. For Lakoff and Johnson, reason is built up out of many cross-domain mappings of concepts or neural activation patterns. Sells writes of how paradoxical expressions or metaphors may destabilize a discourse (opening it up for an apophatic meaning event).³³

However, the word "destabilize" suggests a cross-domain mapping itself—one in which the relatively basic conceptual domain of stability (perhaps of architecture) is mapped onto the relatively abstract domain of discourse. Sells' theory depends crucially on not reifying the object of mystical contemplation. He does not wish to reinterpret apophatic language as anything other than being apophatic. How-

ever, insofar as metaphors project a structure upon the target domain, the other will be reified in mystical discourses that use metaphorical mapping. Take, for example, the Dionysian expression that divinity is beyond being. This suggests a way of thinking about divinity that implies both a spatial orientation (upon which all referents are fixed, as if on a grid) and a sense of relative distance. While such a manner of thinking of divinity may function apophatically to the extent that it reveals reified aspects of kataphatic descriptions of divinity, this Dionysian expression also projects its own kataphatic meaning (namely, a certain spatial orientation). This is clearly revealed in Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory. Awareness of this kataphatic "residue" or remainder in apophatic discourse is consistent with Sells' theory (insofar as Sells understands his theory to have schematic or provisional status). By and large, I agree with Sells' findings. Despite a less than perfectly rigorous apophatic sensibility, his characterization of mystical language is illuminating. However, Lakoff and Johnson's theory of metaphor reveals that even Sells' characterizations are contingent and optional (despite their utility).

That said, there is nothing in Lakoff and Johnson's theory of cross-domain conceptual mapping that so much as hints at the semantic fissures in kataphatic discourse that apophasis creates. Certainly, Lakoff and Johnson are aware of the rich diversity of metaphorical mappings available across cultures. However, this dynamic of mystical language is overlooked in their theory. Moreover, I believe that a greater appreciation for religious symbolism and metaphor would give Lakoff and Johnson a better appreciation of what is at stake in differences among cultures, with respect to their paradigmatic conceptual mappings. While these are not problems for Lakoff and Johnson's account, I believe it is an oversight that these instances of conceptual mapping have been neglected.

In this essay, I have explored some implications an appreciation of Lakoff and Johnson's metaphor theory might have for

Sells' theory of apophatic discourse. I believe that, for the most part, Sells would receive the greater benefit from putting the two theories into dialogue. Out of my own intellectual concerns, I would like to see Lakoff and Johnson explore the use of metaphor in mystical discourses. Dialogue with theories of mystical language might not advance Lakoff and Johnson's cognitive work on metaphor, however an awareness of cross-domain conceptual mappings in mystical discourses would provide an interesting application for the theory. Moreover, insofar as the new theory of cross-domain mappings is framed in terms of neural activation patterns, one can imagine entailments of Lakoff's theory having to do with cognitive analyses of mystical experiences. If Sells' theory is right, and if mystical "meaning events"³⁵ can be identified, and if these can be represented in terms of activation patterns across neural networks, then mystical events may be studied with the resources of the cognitive sciences. I find this a truly exciting possibility.

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Endnotes:

1. Unfortunately, Sells leaves this notion underdeveloped. Admittedly, his theory is schematic, so it need not be comprehensive. However, if this theory is to be filled out, then some account of performance will be necessary.

2. Sells, p. 9.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p. 209.

5. Ibid., p. 215.

6. Ibid., p. 207.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Ibid., p. 37.

10. Ibid., p. 35.

11. Ibid., p. 55.

12. Ibid., p. 35.

13. Ibid.

14. Hawkins and Schotter, p. 1.

15. Sells, p. 36.

16. Ibid., p. 40.

17. Sells' book works well both as a philosophy of religion text as well as an historical text. In his treatment of Porete, he includes her tragic life story along side his account of her apophatic writing. The reader gets a sense of the vitality her work must have had for her. Observing a tragic irony of history, Sells writes, "it was discovered that a classic of Christian piety, which had even been published

in 1911 by the Downside Benedictines in a modern English translation with the formal Church approvals of nihil obstat and imprimatur, was identical with the infamous work of the condemned heretic Marguerite Porete, a work burned in her presence in 1306, and burned along with her in 1310" (p. 118).

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 119.

20. Ibid., p. 120.

21. Ibid., pp. 120-21.

22. Ibid., p. 123.

23. Ibid., pp. 124-25.

24. Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, p. 3.

25. Lakoff and Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, pp. 57-58.

26. This convention of referring to metaphorical mappings by way of capitalizing sentential expressions of such metaphors comes from Lakoff and Johnson. The concept (or conceptual expression) on the left of the copula is the target domain, while the concept on the right of the copula ("is" and "are") is the source domain.

27. Lakoff and Johnson, op. cit., p. 61.

28. Ibid., p. 65.

29. For more on this, see Lakoff, p. 203.

30. Lakoff and Johnson, op. cit., p. 106.

31. Sells, p. 45.

32. Ibid., pp. 47-48.

33. Ibid., p. 207.

Thomas Carroll was born in San Francisco and grew up in Burlingame, a Bay Area suburb. He earned his B.A. in Philosophy at Occidental College in Los Angeles and his M.A. in Philosophy at San Francisco State University. The year 2000-01 was his second in the Ph.D. program in the Division of Religious and Theological Studies at Boston University, where he is concentrating in Philosophy of Religion. After receiving his degree, he plans to continue exploring philosophical issues surrounding the meaning of religious expressions, especially within the contexts of interreligious and science-and-religion dialogues. He is a member of the Presbyterian Church (USA).

<tdc@bu.edu>