

A THICK CLOUD OF FORGETTING: THE FUNCTIONS OF UNKNOWING IN *THE
CLOUD OF UNKNOWING*

by

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ABSTRACT

JONATHAN DANIEL STATON. A Thick Cloud of Forgetting: The Functions of Unknowing in
The Cloud of Unknowing.
(Under the direction of DR. JOANNE MAGUIRE)

The exercise of mystical unknowing is central to the contemplative process prescribed in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This thesis argues three distinct but interrelated claims about how unknowing works and what unknowing does in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. First, unknowing acts as the catalyst through which the process of apophasis begins. Unknowing also works as both a rhetorical device in the text and as apophasis in practice. Finally, unknowing functions as a preparation for the advancement of what *The Cloud* author calls the “blind stirring of love” which allows the contemplative potential access to oneness with God. This thesis is a rhetorical analysis of *The Cloud* that also engages discussions on epistemology and language to explain how and why knowing and knowledge are problematic for *The Cloud* author. This research is important because it may help expand the definition of knowledge, further the understanding of the implied category of non-discursive knowledge in contemplative literature, and broaden the understanding of what knowing means in both contemplative and non-contemplative contexts. This thesis also challenges the way we understand the human capacity to unknow and engage other forms of knowledge because *The Cloud* author works from an understanding that non-discursive knowledge exists and can be accessed by some humans.

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Genesis and Lucca.

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I bid you to put down any such clever, cunning thought, and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting—no matter how holy it is or how much it may promise to help you in your undertaking. Because love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge. And all the while that the soul dwells in this mortal body, always the cleverness of our understanding in considering all spiritual things—but most especially God—is muddled with a sort of illusion because of which our Work might well be contaminated and it would be a wonder if it did not lead us into great error.¹ Anonymous, *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Introduction

In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author understands knowledge, and knowing, as an impediment which prevents a contemplative from experiencing God directly. But, according to *The Cloud* author, a contemplative may work towards an opportunity to experience oneness with God through unknowing. In *The Cloud* author's contemplative process, unknowing functions as a form of apophysis while also operating as both a rhetorical device and a theological strategy to access an experience of oneness with God. As a rhetorical device, apophysis is often used in both literature and speech to speak of a subject by directly denying this intention. As a theological strategy, apophysis is the act of describing and understanding God through negative statements

1. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing: With the Letter of Privy Counsel*, translated by Father John-Julian, OJN. (Brewster: Paraclete Press, 2015), 35. This translation of *The Cloud* by Father John-Julian is used throughout this thesis unless otherwise noted. I chose to use this translation because of the care Father John-Julian takes with staying true to the original Middle English writing of *The Cloud*. For instance, he often chooses not to translate a Middle English word with no modern equivalent but uses the original word. Also, he provides transparent commentary on his reasons for leaving such words untranslated. These translation choices are also accompanied by the direct meaning in Middle English which makes it easier to understand for the reader. Father John-Julian also provides extensive commentary on *The Cloud* by explaining the meaning behind difficult theological statements and how these statements fit into *The Cloud* author's broader contemplative system. One potential drawback of using a translation by a clergy member who may align with this point of view is translator bias. Biases from the translator's own background may influence the understanding and commentary on the text. These biases could lead to a translation that misrepresents the original text. John-Julian's translation and commentary carefully address the nuances of the original Middle English text and *The Cloud* author's statements without making any truth claims or leading the reader in a particular direction to confirm specific theological claims.

about God. In this thesis I argue three distinct but interrelated claims about how unknowing works and what unknowing does in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. First, unknowing serves as the catalyst through which the process of apophysis begins. In *The Cloud*, unknowing also works as both a rhetorical device in the text and as apophysis in practice. Finally, unknowing acts as a preparation for the advancement of what *The Cloud* author calls the “blind stirring of love” which allows the contemplative potential access to oneness with God.² This thesis challenges the way we understand the human capacity to unknow and engage other forms of knowledge because *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process works from an understanding that non-discursive knowledge exists and can be accessed by some humans. This thesis expands the definition of what knowledge is and how it is valued both broadly and in this text. This thesis also provides further understanding of how knowing and unknowing function in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The goal here is to contribute to the larger conversations on *The Cloud of Unknowing* and mystical unknowing. I am not interested in making any existential or metaphysical claims based on the ideas in *The Cloud of Unknowing* nor am I creating a new epistemology here. Instead, I am engaging the concepts and practices around mystical unknowing as they pertain to *The Cloud*. I support these claims by explaining the process of unknowing, how it works, and what occurs along this contemplative path.

Unknowing plays an integral role in some apophatic Christian mystical texts from the medieval and early modern periods (roughly 500-1800 CE). According to mystics in apophatic Christian traditions, God is not accessible through traditional forms of knowledge such as prayer,

2. William Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000), 98. I will use inclusive language throughout this thesis except when directly quoting some primary and secondary sources. These sources may not use inclusive language.

devotion, and language. Mystics who engage in apophaticism often use statements of negation to describe God. Many of these apophatic texts also explain complex systems and practices that lead to, or jeopardize, a contemplative way of life. In these same texts, some mystics explain and describe accounts of unitive experiences with the divine as these experiences may occur along the contemplative path over a lifetime of transformation. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is no exception here because *The Cloud* author understands God to be unknowable, *The Cloud* (as a text) works with language of negation while discussing God, and *The Cloud* contains a complex system of practices while describing what a contemplative on this path may experience.

The Cloud author understands that all thoughts, actions, faculties of the mind, ideas, knowledge, symbols, etc., work against the contemplative and impede them from an experience with God. Anything in the contemplative's mind, other than God, puts them further from God by creating an illusion that the contemplative truly understands God. The contemplative cannot truly know of, or about, God through any traditional form of knowledge. *The Cloud* author insists "that everything that you think about is situated above you for that time, and lies between you and your God. And in that same degree, if anything is in your mind except God alone, you are that much further from God."³ There is no concession from *The Cloud* author. If anything, other than God's own essence, is in the contemplative's mind, the contemplative is that much further from God. The contemplative cannot directly experience God unless the essence of God is the only thing filling their mind. The essence of God meaning "God's own Self," or the "Godself,"

3. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 23. The cloud of unknowing as it exists in *The Cloud* author's contemplative process is between the contemplative and God. By completing the Work prescribed by *The Cloud* author (the process of unknowing), the contemplative prepares themselves for oneness with God. Anything, even a conception of God, which the contemplative thinks may aid in understanding, acts as an impediment to experiencing oneness with God.

not a thought or conception of what God is. In his translation of, and detailed commentary on, *The Cloud*, Fr. John-Julian clarifies one may assume that thinking about God will bring them closer to God when, according to *The Cloud* author's understanding, thinking about God only brings one close to the thought of God, not to the essence of God or the Godself.⁴ *The Cloud* author's response to this dilemma is the process of unknowing.

According to *The Cloud* author, one cannot know *what*, or *how*, God is through any means of discursive knowledge. This also includes language. One cannot use language to accurately describe God. Regarding the inability to think about and know God, *The Cloud* author writes, "about God Himself no person knows how to think...He [God] may well be loved, but never comprehended. By love He may be both embraced and held—but by thought, neither."⁵ One can know *that* God is through the salvific love which comes forth during the process of apophysis. Knowing *that* God is, in this manner, is not the same as propositional or discursive knowledge in that it is not affirmative knowledge. One does not know God is as a fact. One does not know God is in the same way one concretely knows the church at the center of the local town exists. One gains knowledge *that* God is through experience, specifically without using the will and intellect. For *The Cloud* author, knowing *that* God is, is knowledge gained through apophysis. This is knowledge gained through negation which is the absence of discursive knowledge.⁶ *The Cloud* author works from an understanding that this non-discursive knowledge is both attainable and knowable.⁷ This understanding is implied in his descriptions of the process

4. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 22.

5. Ibid., 23, 25.

6. Both salvific love and non-discursive knowledge are discussed extensively in this thesis.

7. It is necessary to highlight that non-discursive knowledge is purely subjective and cannot be objectively tested, nor verified, in any way. This is, of course, problematic in a variety of ways for scholarship on mysticism. There is a large body of work discussing the very issue of

of unknowing, the effects this process has on the self, and the pitfalls the contemplative may encounter. It is also implied that all these descriptions are based on knowledge from *The Cloud* author's own personal experience working through this contemplative process while both failing and encountering God at some point. Note that knowledge serves as both an impediment and as an enablement at different parts of this process. Knowledge of all things except the essence of God impede the contemplative from reaching the experience of oneness with God and the non-discursive knowledge gained from the experience itself enables the contemplative to know *that* God is through non-discursive means.

Much of the vast scholarship on *The Cloud of Unknowing* focuses on aspects of the text other than the theme of unknowing. Research such as Carmel Davis' *Mysticism and Space* investigates aspects of both physical and mystical spaces in works from *The Cloud* author, Richard Rolle, and Julian of Norwich.⁸ Also, Nike Pokorn's "The Language and Discourse of The Cloud of Unknowing" explores the similarities between the language of negation used in *The Cloud* and Jacques Derrida's deconstructive discourses.⁹ It is necessary to think about these

the inability to objectively test and verify negative knowledge gained through mystical experiences. Notable scholars who have worked on this issue are Steven Katz, Wayne Proudfoot, and Robert Sharf. One notable objection is Katz's constructivist argument. Katz argues all experiences are constructed by humans and are influenced by prior experiences, social, political, and historical contexts, among other things. Although this is an important and worthwhile discussion, this thesis does not directly address these concerns as the subject of research here is *The Cloud* and how unknowing works and what unknowing does in this text.

8. Carmel Bendon Davis, *Mysticism and Space: Space and Spatiality in the Works of Richard Rolle, The Cloud of Unknowing Author, and Julian of Norwich* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/18705>.

9. Nike Kocijanè Pokorn, "The Language and Discourse of The Cloud of Unknowing," *Literature and Theology* 11, no. 4, (December 1997): 413, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/11.4.408>. Other important works include Ira Progoff, James Walsh, and Evelyn Underhill's respective commentaries and translations of *The Cloud*, and Wolfgang Riehle's *The Secrets Within: Hermits, Recluses, and Spiritual Outsiders in Medieval England*. Also, other scholarship on *The Cloud* exists such as Glenn Young's article, "Forget Yourself and Your Deeds for God: Awareness and Transcendence of Self in *The Cloud of Unknowing*."

aspects of *The Cloud* such as language and spatiality, but it is also important to investigate other essential aspects of this text such as unknowing. *The Cloud* author states, “by heeding and continually doing this Work [unknowing] alone, without anything else, a person evermore rises higher and higher above sin and nearer and nearer to God.”¹⁰ According to *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process, to bring themselves closer to God, and experience oneness with the essence of God, the contemplative must first go through these actions and states of unknowing.¹¹ For *The Cloud* author, the work of unknowing is the path to oneness with God. As this thesis illustrates, the contemplative cannot experience oneness with God without first implementing, and enduring, this process of unknowing. Also, unknowing prepares for the advancement of love which allows the contemplative to pierce through the cloud of unknowing and, along with God’s grace, experience oneness with God.¹²

The two main questions driving this research on unknowing in *The Cloud* are: what does unknowing do and how does it work? Investigating what unknowing does in this text is essential to scholarship on *The Cloud* and Christian mysticism, in part because there is very little existing research on this topic. Although *The Cloud* is a well known and heavily researched medieval text, scholars have not often written about the theme of unknowing in this book.¹³ It is also important to note that this research not only furthers the conversation on mystical unknowing in

10. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 15.

11. The action of unknowing is really a process of actions and states of consciousness the contemplative must experience, and complete, to prepare themselves for a potential experience of God.

12. Though the contemplative may do everything *The Cloud* author deems necessary to experience oneness with God, this does not mean the contemplative will necessarily experience oneness with God. God must allow the contemplative this experience through grace. An experience of God cannot occur without God’s grace.

13. William Johnston’s *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing* and Denys Turner’s *The Darkness of God* are both invaluable resources on the topic of mystical unknowing in the context of *The Cloud*.

The Cloud and other apophatic texts, this thesis also challenges the ways we understand some human capacities. *The Cloud* author wrote this text based on an understanding that some humans have the ability to unknow and experience different states of consciousness by working through, and completing, this process. This thesis helps expand the definition of what knowledge is and how it is valued. Contemplatives, such as *The Cloud* author, are pushing the limits of our ideas of human consciousness and what it means to be human. This research also makes us think about what we can and should know as humans. To aid in understanding, this thesis briefly engages information on the anonymous author of *The Cloud*, the historical context in which *The Cloud* was written, and the category of mysticism, as a foundation for analyzing what unknowing does and how unknowing works in *The Cloud*.

Authorship, Historical Context, and Mysticism

To better understand *The Cloud* and *The Cloud* author's contemplative process it helps to have an awareness of who the author is and the historical context in which *The Cloud* was written. *The Cloud of Unknowing* is a medieval Christian text written during the late 14th century by an anonymous English author. There are a variety of theories and ideas as to who the author is, but there is currently no evidence that directly attributes this text to a definitive person. Although scholars are unsure, various factors point to *The Cloud* author as a member the Carthusian tradition. The factors serving as evidence to support the claim that *The Cloud* author was likely a member of the Carthusian tradition are: the writing and publishing anonymously (which was a Carthusian tradition); the dedication to following the radical traditions of meditation and contemplation; and the fact that many of the surviving manuscripts of *The Cloud*

were found in Carthusian hands.¹⁴ At its core, *The Cloud* is a guidebook, a manual of contemplative prayer, written to guide its reader through the process of unknowing.¹⁵ *The Cloud* author addresses this manual to an anonymous twenty-four-year-old protégé who may have been preparing for ordination to the priesthood.¹⁶ Based on the detailed description of “the Work” in *The Cloud*, the warnings of potential spiritual pitfalls one may encounter, and the deep understanding of the apophatic tradition based on personal experience, *The Cloud* author was clearly an advanced spiritual director writing to a novice protégé.

Regarding the historical context in which *The Cloud* was written, the fourteenth century, in England, was a “century of turmoil.”¹⁷ During the fourteenth century England was fighting the Hundred Years’ War with France (1337-1453), the Black Death killed over a third of the country’s population (1348-1349), and social unrest over serfdom, feudalism, and poll taxes, plagued the country resulting in the Peasants’ revolt of 1381.¹⁸ Although these events are not specifically mentioned in *The Cloud*, *The Cloud* author was likely aware of these events that transpired during the fourteenth century and did not operate outside of the effects that followed these events.

14. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, xix.

15. To be clear, contemplative prayer is prayer guided by the practice of contemplation.

16. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, xx.

17. Tarjei Park, ed., and trans., *The English Mystics: An Anthology*, (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1998), 14.

18. Park, *The English Mystics*, 14. According to Tarjei Park, in the fourteenth century, church life was challenged and many people, both rich and the poor, chose dissent from the Church through a series of protests made by Parliament, due to papal taxation, among other issues. Then, during the latter half of the fourteenth century, the Western Church divided during the Great Schism of 1378. Rival popes were established during this time and this divide lasted until 1417. The fourteenth century also saw new theological controversies initiated by John Wycliffe, and his followers, the Lollards, such as calling into question the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist, the authoritative reach of the clergy, and the lack of access to Scripture since these texts were written only in Latin.

It is also necessary to briefly mention the category of mysticism in relation to *The Cloud*. Instead of attempting to define the category of mysticism there is more benefit in understanding how mysticism relates to *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Bernard McGinn notes that mysticism generally does not operate outside of its broader religious tradition and is not the “inner common denominator of all religions.”¹⁹ *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process works to prepare the contemplative for a direct experience with God while also operating within Christian mystical traditions and interacting with the broader traditions of Christianity. *The Cloud* does not claim to be the inner common denominator of Christianity or any other religion. *The Cloud* acts as a manual guiding the contemplative reader on a specific path in relation to how *The Cloud* author understands God. Before analyzing how knowledge, knowing, and unknowing work in *The Cloud* it is necessary to situate this thesis and its claims in the context of the broader discussions on mystical unknowing and *The Cloud of Unknowing*.

Literature Review

19. Bernard McGinn, ed., *The Essential Writings of Christian Mysticism* (New York: Random House, 2006), xiv. McGinn describes mysticism as “that part, or element, of Christian belief and practice that concerns the preparation for, the consciousness of, and the effect of what the mystics themselves describe as a direct and transformative presence of God.” Here, McGinn distills the important characteristics of Christian mysticism while also providing inclusivity for authors and their works that others may not consider part of the Christian mystical tradition. In the broader scholarship on Christian mysticism, some academics choose to exclude certain authors due to their lack of use of unitive language describing their contemplative systems and experiences. McGinn’s definition combats this special categorization by broadening the characteristics that constitute mysticism. Also, although the use of the term presence here adds an element of inclusivity it is also problematic as some mystics, such as those in the apophatic category, argue that God is found in absence and negation instead of presence. Also, the use of the term “contemplatives” is often used to refer to mystics. This term also allows for inclusivity in this category that is often restricted by strict definitions of who does and does not count as a mystic.

In this literature review I address only the most important sources pertaining directly to the claims in this thesis as there are too many sources to discuss in depth here. The sources cited in this thesis but left out of the literature review are used mainly to contextualize *The Cloud* and are not central to support the claims made in this research. There is a small, but impactful, body of scholarship directly related to mystical unknowing in other apophatic contemplative texts and in *The Cloud*. The broader scholarship on mystical unknowing is applicable to this research as much of this research focuses on authors with similar ideas to *The Cloud* author such as Meister Eckhart and John of the Cross.

One of the central sources on the conversation around mystical unknowing, unknowing in *The Cloud*, and the category of apophatic Christian mysticism is Denys Turner's *The Darkness of God*.²⁰ In *The Darkness of God*, Turner argues that "the distinctiveness and contemporary relevance of mediaeval mysticism lies precisely in its rejection of 'mystical experience', and locates the mystical firmly within the grasp of the ordinary and everyday."²¹ Turner supports this argument by examining the theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and Augustine, then moves to analyzing the works of Meister Eckhart, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Denys the Carthusian, and John of the Cross.²² Turner's chapter on *The Cloud* is most important to this research. In this chapter, Turner discusses *The Cloud* author's theological influences, specifically his influence and divergence from Pseudo-Dionysius' theology. Turner does not deny Pseudo-Dionysius' influence on *The Cloud* author but argues *The Cloud* author was influenced more by Thomas Gallus and his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius' texts rather than Pseudo-Dionysius' works

20. Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

21. Turner, *The Darkness of God*.

22. Ibid., VII.

directly. Turner also argues that *The Cloud* author critiques an attachment to interiority in *The Cloud*. *The Cloud* author's interiority is to be detached and freed from "the very dualism itself between interiority and exteriority...so that we do not any longer have to see ourselves as caught between their opposed polarities."²³

In this chapter on *The Cloud*, Turner acknowledges unknowing is not passive but active work. One must actively work to deny and unknow. For *The Cloud* author, unknowing is an active verb form.²⁴ Turner also explains *The Cloud* author requires one to deny the intellect through the process of unknowing. Turner does not discuss *The Cloud* author's emphasis that the contemplative must deal with both the intellect *and* the will. Turner does mention the intellect and desire (or imagination) must be denied but not negated. Negation of the intellect would allow only free reign of desire and both faculties must be controlled.²⁵ I agree with Turner's analysis of the intellect and imagination based on *The Cloud* author's contemplative system. The will and the accompanying faculty, sensuality, must also be denied along with the intellect and imagination.

Zwi Werblowsky's article "On the Mystical Rejection of Mystical Illuminations" discusses mystical unknowing and knowledge in John of the Cross' writings.²⁶ Werblowsky's article on unknowing is applicable to *The Cloud* because he sparks discussion on what unknowing is and how unknowing works among apophatic Christian mystics. This discussion also applies to works of other apophatic mystics where unknowing is central to their

23. Ibid., 209.

24. Ibid., 196-197.

25. Ibid., 203-204.

26. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Mystical Rejection of Mystical Illuminations: A note on St. John of the Cross," *Religious Studies* 1, no. 2 (April 1966): <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412500002456>.

contemplative processes, such as *The Cloud* author and Meister Eckhart. Werblowsky argues there are two types of mysticism. The first is “cognitive mysticism” which provides “detailed, and at times highly complex, theories [that] are put forward regarding the nature and evolution of the cosmos, the essence of man and his place and function in the scheme of things.”²⁷

Werblowsky calls the second type of mysticism “anticognitive mysticism,” which he argues rejects “all visions and illuminations” because they are seen as obstacles on the mystic’s path.²⁸

Werblowsky uses John of the Cross and his idea of unknowing as a case study to investigate how this anticognitive mysticism contrasts against his category of cognitive mysticism. What is important here, for this thesis, is Werblowsky’s discussion around John of the Cross’ notion of necessary detachment from all things, both physical and spiritual. Werblowsky discusses John’s mystical doctrine which requires the (contemplative) soul to strip “itself of all its faculties and empt[y] itself of all contents, knowledge and volitions mediated by these faculties.”²⁹ This idea of the soul stripping itself of all its faculties through the process of unknowing is a trope in the writings of many apophatic mystics. These ideas on unknowing present in John of the Cross’ writings are similar and applicable to, the understanding, idea, and action, of unknowing in *The Cloud*, among other apophatic texts.³⁰

Werblowsky asserts that the darkness in which John of the Cross requires “the soul [strip] itself of all its faculties and empt[y] itself of all contents” actually means “the annihilation of the light of reason.”³¹ Werblowsky is not directly addressing mystical unknowing in *The Cloud*, but

27. Werblowsky, “On the Mystical Rejection,” 177.

28. Ibid., 178.

29. Ibid., 179.

30. Other apophatic mystics may use different terminology to describe the process and action of unknowing, but the faculties of the soul Werblowsky discusses are the same faculties of the mind presented in *The Cloud*.

31. Werblowsky, “On the Mystical Rejection,” 179.

his argument creates important and necessary discussion around mystical unknowing among other apophatic Christian mystics. Werblowsky's persistent use of the language of annihilation insinuates both absolute destruction of these faculties and that they will never return to their prior state. There is one instance where Werblowsky softens his stance with the use of the word "abeyance" as applied to the faculty of reason and all other faculties then quickly reverts to the use of annihilation to support his argument.³² Regarding mystical unknowing in *The Cloud*, *The Cloud* author uses language centered around controlling and at times obliterating, meaning to remove all signs of something by either destroying it or by covering it so it cannot be seen. *The Cloud* author's persistent use of the language of controlling these faculties denotes a covering to no longer be seen, not destroying. *The Cloud* author does not use the language of annihilation regarding the faculties of the mind. In line with *The Cloud* author's language, it seems, in this text, unknowing is used in the sense of achieving a state of momentary purposeful suspension of the will and the intellect, not an annihilation of these faculties. These faculties must continue to exist and work after the process of unknowing is completed. The contemplative continues to live and be after undertaking this contemplative process and even after experience of the divine.

Deirdre Green responds directly to Werblowsky's statements about unknowing and annihilation of the faculties of the soul in "St. John of the Cross and Mystical Unknowing."³³ While making important claims about the nature, and states, of mystical consciousness, Green argues that according to some mystics, and specifically John of the Cross, knowledge can be gained from the experience of unknowing and this does not involve annihilation of the soul's

32. Ibid., 179-180.

33. Deirdre Green, "St. John of the Cross and Mystical 'Unknowing'," *Religious Studies* 22, no. 1 (Mar., 1986): 29-40, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20006255>.

faculties as Werblowsky suggests.³⁴ Green provides insight on how mystical unknowing works and what mystical unknowing does. Green also takes a stance on the legitimacy of knowledge gained from mystical experiences. Green further argues that “the type of experience of which St. John speaks can be found in Kabbalah, which Zwi Werblowsky characterizes as ‘cognitive’ in contradistinction to what he calls St. John’s ‘anticognitive’ attitude.”³⁵ Green’s work relates to this thesis project because she responds directly to Werblowsky’s use of the term annihilation when referring to the action required to handle the faculties of the soul in John of the Cross’ work. Green disagrees with Werblowsky’s argument that St. John’s teachings imply and require the annihilation of reason (intellect), will, and the other faculties of the soul.³⁶ Green takes this stance, despite Werblowsky’s use of the term abeyance on one occasion. Although the discussion between Werblowsky and Green focuses on John of the Cross’ work, this conversation is also applicable to other authors and texts such as *The Cloud* and some works by Meister Eckhart. There seems to be some similarities in the language and ideas around mystical unknowing in works by John of the Cross, *The Cloud* author, and Meister Eckhart. As a general principle applied to Christian mystical texts where unknowing is central to the contemplative processes, I agree with Green that Werblowsky’s insistent use of the term annihilation of the faculties of the soul is incorrect. In this case, as applied to *The Cloud*, *The Cloud* author’s language revolves more around controlling, not annihilation.

William Johnston’s *The Mysticism of the Cloud of Unknowing* is an analysis of the theological history and concepts related to *The Cloud*.³⁷ Johnston discusses and analyzes the

34. Green, “St. John of the Cross and Mystical ‘Unknowing’,” 30.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 29.

37. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*.

major themes and ideas in *The Cloud* such as knowledge, love, purification, and union with the divine. Johnston explains the roles of unknowing, love, and the faculties of the mind. Johnston also makes comparisons to John of the Cross' works and ideas that are similar to *The Cloud* author's such as unknowing and the necessity to control the faculties of the soul. Johnston works to situate *The Cloud* in the Christian historical and theological contexts so the reader may better understand the theological moves *The Cloud* author makes in this text. Johnston also discusses themes that continue through other works attributed to *The Cloud* author such as *The Letter of Privy Counsel*.³⁸ I have one point of contention with Johnston's work regarding his use of the term ignorance. Johnston uses ignorance as a synonym for unknowing in Pseudo-Dionysius' writing, *Hid Divinity*. Johnston does not explicitly state *The Cloud* author's understanding of unknowing is the same as Pseudo-Dionysius', but Johnston's statements that *The Cloud* author is certainly influenced by this Dionysian text imply a similar understanding of mystical unknowing. Although Johnston's book is an invaluable resource helping one understanding the complex ideas of *The Cloud*, Johnston should have made a clearer distinction between ignorance and unknowing in *The Cloud* as this is essential to understanding unknowing in this text.³⁹ As this thesis shows, *The Cloud* author's understanding of unknowing does not mean ignorance.

My research fits into this overarching conversation on mystical unknowing in *The Cloud* by furthering the understanding of what unknowing does and how unknowing functions in this text. Turner's research helps explain how unknowing works in *The Cloud* author's contemplative process. Although Turner does not address all of the nuances in *The Cloud* author's

38. Although not considered in this research which focuses solely on *The Cloud of Unknowing*, it seems, through Johnston's work, *The Letter of Privy Counsel* continues some of the metaphysical ideas introduced in *The Cloud*.

39. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 34.

contemplative process regarding the will and the intellect, his understanding of unknowing helps decipher how unknowing works in *The Cloud*. As applied to *The Cloud* and mystical unknowing more broadly, I disagree with Werblowsky's statement that the faculties of the soul must be annihilated. This is not a theological disagreement. I disagree with Werblowsky in that *The Cloud* author does not necessarily understand the faculties of the soul to be annihilated in his contemplative process. Instead, I insist *The Cloud* author requires a suspension of these faculties which denotes this as a temporary state of consciousness, not a permanent state. Green's argument supports this claim by arguing Werblowsky misunderstands how contemplatives must deal with the faculties of the soul. William Johnston's work is an invaluable resource which helps address the nuances of *The Cloud* author's contemplative process. Although Johnston sometimes fails to make the distinction between ignorance and unknowing in *The Cloud*, Johnston's work is an accurate analysis and discussion on the mysticism in *The Cloud*. In this thesis, I help clarify *The Cloud* author's necessity to control the faculties of the soul through suspension, not annihilation. I also address *The Cloud* author's understanding of unknowing as a purposeful act instead of passive ignorance. Now, it is necessary to engage in an epistemological discussion regarding knowing, unknowing, and the faculties of the mind.

Knowing, Will, and Intellect

The three major categories of knowledge, or things that can be known, in epistemology are: 1) knowing *how* to do something or knowledge consisting of comprehension and understanding information; 2) knowing something or someone *by acquaintance*; 3) and knowing *that* something is or propositional knowledge.⁴⁰ Regarding the process of unknowing in *The*

40. Carlotta Pavese, "Knowledge How," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed January 10, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/knowledge-how/>.

Cloud, *The Cloud* author deals with all three of these categories of knowing as the contemplative must “do all that is in [them] to forget all the creatures that God ever made and all their works.”⁴¹ For example, one knows how to play the mandolin; one knows their partner or their child by acquaintance; and one knows the sun exists in our solar system. Knowing information does not necessarily mean that information is factual. One can also know information that is false.⁴² There is also a sense of power and ownership of information. For example, one knows how to solve a mathematical equation. With this example one has the power and ownership of knowledge which allows them to solve a mathematical equation. Knowing also denotes an awareness of something via observation or inquiry where one knows *that* something exists. Knowing *that* something exists is a type of propositional knowledge. Propositional knowledge is also known as discursive knowledge. Discursive knowledge is knowledge that is definable via language where one can know for certain whether this knowledge is true or false.⁴³

The Cloud author is part of the apophatic tradition which asserts God cannot be known or understood through any of these forms of knowledge. *The Cloud* author explains, “He [God] who is incomprehensible to all created powers of knowing, such as to the souls of angel and man. (I mean He is incomprehensible to their ‘knowing’ but not to their ‘loving’).”⁴⁴ One cannot know God through logical thought. One cannot know the nature of God and one cannot know God directly as one knows their partner or child because God is completely different from anything in

41. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11.

42. Knowing or believing something does not necessarily mean it is true. Not all knowledge and beliefs are based in fact. Sometimes what one knows or believes runs contrary to factually true information. One contemporary example of this: some Americans believe Joe Biden did not win the presidential election in 2020. Although there is no objective evidence to support this claim, some Americans believe and know this is true. Knowledge and belief are not always based in fact.

43. Discursive knowledge is knowledge based in logic and rationality.

44. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 15.

existence. But one can know *that* God is through love. Knowing is a constant and continual process that works in tandem with the intellect and will. *The Cloud* author writes, “reason [or intellect] is a power by means of which we separate the evil from the good, the bad from the worse, the good from the better, the worse from the worst, and the better from the best.”⁴⁵ The intellect is the faculty responsible for reasoning, understanding, and for the processing of knowledge, to be used in some way. *The Cloud* author understands the will as “a power through which we choose the good (after it has been determined to be good by reason) and through which we love the good, we desire the good, and finally rest with full gratification and accord in God.”⁴⁶ The will is the faculty responsible for deciding on, and initiating, an action. The will is also responsible for the constant assertion of one’s decision. This is where the choice of doing something lies. The will and intellect are active processes. The will works in tandem with the intellect by acting upon knowledge. For *The Cloud* author, the problem with knowing is complex, multifaceted, and is tied to the will and intellect.

The Cloud author’s problem with knowing follows the Augustinian understanding of good and evil and original sin. To briefly summarize the biblical text, God prohibited man from eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Implicitly, woman was also prohibited from eating the fruit from this tree.⁴⁷ They both disobeyed God and ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and were eventually banished from the garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15-3:22). According to the Augustinian understanding, the knowledge of good and evil is problematic for humanity because this knowledge is essentially the knowledge of all

45. Ibid., 161.

46. Ibid.

47. The usage of man and woman here reflect the direct language used in translation of this story in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with Apocrypha*. This translation uses man and woman in the text before they were referred to as Adam and Eve.

things.⁴⁸ This is known as original sin which now causes disorder and disunity in humanity.⁴⁹

Based on this Augustinian understanding, original sin in the garden of Eden caused humans to lose the direct knowledge of God. Now, for *The Cloud* author, humans must contend with four faculties of the mind which are: the will (where we choose action and inaction), the intellect (where we reason), imagination (where we picture the images of everything), and sensuality (the faculty where we feel bodily pleasure and displeasure via the senses).⁵⁰ *The Cloud* author refers to the faculty responsible for reasoning directly as both reason and as the intellect. These terms are used synonymously.⁵¹ The intellect is responsible for sorting and interpreting information.⁵² These faculties are now ever-present in one's day to day experiences of reality and get in the way of humanity's highest purpose of seeking God.⁵³

The Cloud author discusses a time before original sin when humans did not have to contend with their will and intellect impeding a direct experience with God. For *The Cloud* author, the goal of contemplation, and this process of unknowing, is "to be restored by grace to

48. Christian Tornau, "Saint Augustine," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, accessed January 14, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/augustine/#WillEvil>. Augustine's theory of good and evil follows the Neoplatonic understanding of good evil where evil does not exist as a separate substance created by God. God could not create evil because God (according to Augustine) is a God of goodness (only) and therefore only creates goodness. Instead, following Plotinus and Neoplatonism, Augustine argues evil is a corruption of goodness. Augustine understands goodness as hierarchical where some actions and things have more or less goodness than others. According to Augustine's concept of original sin, all of humanity stemming from Adam and Eve are plagued by the enslavement of sin. This sin was inherited by all of humanity since. Because man and woman (Adam and Eve) disobeyed God and ate fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, humanity is now open to the knowledge of all things and is affected by both good and evil (or lesser goodness) in the world. The only way for this to be repaired is through God's grace manifested in the sacrifice of Jesus.

49. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 149.

50. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 13, 21, 161, 163, 165.

51. See chapters 4 and 64.

52. Ibid., 161.

53. Ibid., 13.

the first state of man's soul as it was before sin [when the will and intellect were controlled], then we would always, by the help of that grace, control that impulse or those impulses [read: the will and intellect] so that none would go astray but all of them would aspire to the most desirable and highest that can be sought—which is God.”⁵⁴ Before original sin humans were not constantly troubled by these four faculties of the mind because the intellect guided each of these faculties, even the will.⁵⁵ *The Cloud* author explains that “before ever humans sinned, reason could do all this [sorting, selecting, and making value judgements] naturally. But now it is so blinded by original sin that it cannot know how to carry out this work unless it is illumined by grace.”⁵⁶ *The Cloud* author yearns for a time when reason (the intellect) once again governs each of these faculties, but this is only possible through the grace of God.⁵⁷ *The Cloud* author spends much of his time discussing both the will and intellect in this text as these two faculties are responsible for controlling imagination and sensuality.

The will and intellect now impede humans from a direct experience of God because these faculties are “blinded by original sin” and cannot function properly without the assistance of grace. The will and intellect are subject to impulses and are constantly being asserted throughout one's experiences of reality causing both imagination and sensuality to run out of control. *The Cloud* author understands the will and intellect as faculties that must be controlled and, eventually, temporarily suspended through the action of unknowing to achieve a direct experience with God. Regarding control of the will *The Cloud* author writes, “and so whoever would be thus reshaped by grace so as to continue in control of the impulses of one's will—since

54. Ibid.

55. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 150.

56. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 161.

57. In *The Cloud*, these four faculties are specifically addressed in chapters 64-66.

one cannot avoid natural impulses—would never in this life be without some taste of the eternal sweetness or in the bliss of heaven without the full banquet.”⁵⁸ The will must be controlled, and by the help of grace, the contemplative may overcome the impulses caused by sin. *The Cloud* author also writes frequently about the intellect. At one point, *The Cloud* author explains, “do not struggle in your intellect or in your imagination in any way. For I tell you truly, it cannot be attained by laboring in them, and, therefore, leave them and do not work with them.”⁵⁹ It seems that temporary suspension (or any form of control) of the will and intellect cause a temporary suspension in the faculties of imagination and sensuality, as the will and intellect are necessary for imagination and sensuality to operate. Controlling the will and intellect allows the contemplative to not think impulsively and does not require one to reason through every thought. Control of these faculties allows the contemplative access to more meaningful knowledge and to return to a state before original sin where humans had access to direct knowledge of God.⁶⁰ Unknowing offers the contemplative a way to control the faculties of the mind while also providing them with an opportunity to reach a state where these faculties do not obstruct a potential experience of oneness with God.

Unknowing Acts as the Catalyst for Apophasis

The Cloud author’s understanding of the Work is not as simple as stating one must unknow knowledge or cease to know. In *The Cloud*, unknowing acts as the starting point or catalyst that begins the process of apophasis. The contemplative begins the process of apophasis

58. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 15.

59. Ibid., 21.

60. I will concentrate primarily on discussion of the will and intellect since *The Cloud* author spends most of his time on these two faculties and by controlling (or suspending) these two faculties, imagination and sensuality are also controlled.

as they beat against the cloud of unknowing which stands between the contemplative and God.

The following quote from *The Cloud* illustrates what the author means by unknowing:

Lift up your heart to God with a humble impulse of love—and I mean to His very Self and not to any of His goods. And in this, see to it that you refuse to think on anything but Himself, so that nothing fills your mind or your will but only Himself. And do all that is in you to forget all the creatures that God ever made and all their works so that neither your thought nor your desire is directed or extended to any of them—neither in general nor in particular. But just let them be and take no heed of them.⁶¹

The Cloud author explains here that in order for the contemplative to prepare for the potential state of oneness with God, they must allow only God to fill their mind and will.⁶² *The Cloud* author provides directions for the contemplative reader to forget all creatures and anything associated with said creatures. *The Cloud* author advises the contemplative to not direct any attention nor desire to these things.⁶³ This abandoning and forgetting allows the contemplative to focus solely on the essence of God and nothing else. Initiating the abandonment and forgetting of all things begins the process of unknowing. The abandoning and forgetting of all things also include the will and intellect. *The Cloud* author explains, “such an arrogant, inquisitive wit ought always to be brought down and soundly trodden underfoot if this Work is truly to be undertaken in purity of spirit.”⁶⁴ *The Cloud* author refers to the controlling of the contemplative’s wit, or the mental faculties the contemplative uses in everyday activities, the will and intellect. It seems this controlling of the wit requires a postponement, or a suspension, of these faculties through the process of unknowing.

61. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11.

62. Throughout this text *The Cloud* author often uses forgetting and unknowing synonymously when referring to the Work. The Work of unknowing is an abandonment and a necessary forgetting of knowledge and the assertion of one’s higher faculties.

63. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11.

64. *Ibid.*, 19.

The forgetting of the will and intellect seems to create a temporary suspension of both faculties. The result of forgetting these faculties also implies a necessary suspension of the will to know. In this sense, unknowing acts as the starting point for the process of apophysis. This form of contemplative prayer requires the contemplative reader to work towards only allowing the essence of God fill their mind while simultaneously unknowing (an active form of negation) all things created, and anything related to those things. Literally, the contemplative must put all things out of their mind, abandon, and forget them. *The Cloud* author makes no exceptions here.⁶⁵ *The Cloud* author specifically calls for the contemplative to not only forget all creatures and beings that God has made, but also all their works, ideas, symbols, art, culture, religions, texts, etc.⁶⁶ Regarding all things that are forgotten, *The Cloud* author advises the contemplative to “just let them be and take no heed of them.”⁶⁷ *The Cloud* author does not necessarily understand these things to be bad or negative, but he adamantly argues anything besides God Himself in the contemplative’s mind acts as a barrier between the contemplative and God.⁶⁸

The Cloud author uses forgetting synonymously with the process of unknowing throughout this text. This shift in language is subtle but key to the reader understanding and performing the process of unknowing. In the third chapter *The Cloud* author states, “do all that is in you to forget all the creatures that God ever made and all their works so that neither your

65. Unknowing begins with the contemplative striving for oneness with God while paving the way for love which acts as the key to this experience of oneness. Along with the grace of God and love the contemplative may reach this state of oneness.

66. This theological move by *The Cloud* author may have been seen as subversive and therefore threatening to the Church since the Church relied on people to at least partially understand the catechism to function as practicing Catholics.

67. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11.

68. Other mystics make this argument in different ways. Essentially, God can be loved, but not thought. Even thoughts that one may think will bring them closer to God only get in the way of the contemplative and God.

thought nor your desire is directed or extended to any of them.”⁶⁹ The Work of forgetting is the Work of *The Cloud* author’s process of unknowing. The language of forgetting illustrates what occurs at the heart of unknowing.⁷⁰ The act of unknowing requires both abandoning and forgetting thoughts, desires, and eventually the faculties of the mind. While explaining and analyzing what occurs during the process of unknowing, I will continue the use of *The Cloud* author’s language of forgetting where it is fitting to assist in the understanding of what unknowing does and how it works.

In this contemplative process, *The Cloud* author advises, “you will find only a darkness, and, as it were, a cloud of unknowing, which you do not understand, except that you feel in your will a naked longing for God. No matter what you do, this darkness and this cloud is between you and your God.”⁷¹ This cloud of unknowing prevents the contemplative from both knowing and understanding God through reason and the mind.⁷² According to Denys Turner, *The Cloud* author understands the mind to be “the name of the collectivity of the human powers including three ‘principal’ powers, memory [consciousness or mind], reason [intellect or intelligence], and will and two ‘secondary’ powers, imagination and sensuality.”⁷³ *The Cloud* author explains, “mind contains and encompasses all these four powers and their works. And in no other way can

69. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11.

70. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 163.

71. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 11. The darkness of the cloud of unknowing likely represents the unknowability of God. This darkness and unknowability of God may be the same darkness John of the Cross writes of in *Dark Night of the Soul*.

72. *Ibid.*, 13.

73. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 205. Turner uses the term “memory” in this statement while Fr. John-Julian’s translation refers to the same faculty as “mind.” Turner and Fr. John-Julian are using different terminology to refer to the same faculty.

it be said that the mind works unless that inclusion itself is considered work.”⁷⁴ The mind encompasses the powers of memory, reason, will, imagination, and sensuality, and does not work separately from these faculties. *The Cloud* author lists the mind as a separate primary faculty, but it does not operate outside of these other faculties. The mind receives the information worked by the other faculties. It does not do work itself.⁷⁵ If the contemplative controls the will and intellect, it seems imagination and sensuality are also controlled along with the mind.

The contemplative must do the necessary work of forgetting to penetrate the cloud of unknowing and find the essence of God on the other side. This Work is necessary because the contemplative can no longer trust their senses which provide knowledge of the world.⁷⁶ The contemplative’s senses fail in providing ways to know God because, as Johnston explains, God cannot be understood through what he calls conceptual knowledge. At time, Johnston uses the term “conceptual knowledge” for both conceptual knowledge and discursive knowledge more broadly.⁷⁷ Also, any knowledge gained by these senses is then processed and worked through the will and intellect. God cannot be known through reason and logic; therefore, any knowledge gained via reason and logic cannot lead to knowledge of God. There is a distinction here between the roles of the body and the mind in this process. The body and all of its senses are negated and

74. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 158-159. Fr. John-Julian further explains that the terms “memory,” “mind,” and “consciousness” are all interchangeable regarding this faculty.

75. Ibid.

76. The contemplative must also abandon and forget their senses and all information gathered by these senses.

77. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 44. At times, Johnston uses the term “conceptual knowledge” in *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing* as an umbrella term for both conceptual knowledge and discursive knowledge. He discusses *The Cloud* author’s stance on the inability to understand or know God through logic and reason but uses conceptual knowledge in a way that covers the knowledge of concepts and propositional knowledge. Johnston does not clearly distinguish between the two types of knowledge.

the mind is relied upon both to negate these bodily experiences and to be the place where the path to oneness with God exists. The Work cannot be done physically. It must be completed in the mind. This is in contrast to other forms of contemplation where some physical means are used to bring one closer to God. Such physical acts include self-flagellation or walking on hard surfaces for long distances while on one's knees.⁷⁸

Although *The Cloud* author insists this Work is simplistic and “is the shortest work of all that a human may imagine,” it is not for everyone, nor can everyone complete the Work necessary to reach an experience of oneness with God.⁷⁹ According to *The Cloud* author, a contemplative should only attempt this specific process of contemplative prayer if they have a “true desire and a sound intent, [and] ha[ve] made [a] commitment to be a perfect follower of Christ—not only in active living, but in the highest achievement of contemplative life that is possible for a pure soul to attain by grace while still living in this mortal body.”⁸⁰ In other words, this Work is only for those who are spiritually dedicated with true desire and intent, while having already achieving a certain level of spiritual prowess.⁸¹ *The Cloud* author also warns that this

78. Other forms of mysticism use bodily acts to emulate the pain and bodily distress Jesus suffered to bring themselves closer to God. Other forms of mysticism, such as some forms of affective mysticism, use the mind to think upon images of Jesus and the Passion while participating in a form of contemplative prayer. These approaches are distinctly different from *The Cloud* author's unwavering necessity to unknow all images and acts because they serve as hindrances toward the goal of oneness with God.

79. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 13.

80. *Ibid.*, 3.

81. In the first chapter, *The Cloud* author insists that contemplation (including contemplative prayer) is necessary for one to attain the highest forms of spiritual life in this world and beyond. According to *The Cloud* author there are four degrees of spiritual life within Christianity which are (in order of achievement): Common, Special, Singular, and Perfect. Three of these forms may be started and finished in one's physical life and the fourth may begin in this life but will not end in this life nor in heaven. Each of these forms may be attained through preparation and the grace of God. The common, special, and singular, degrees of Christian life range from living a spiritual life among others in the world, to becoming a lay brother or servant to the cloistered monks, to becoming a cloistered monk living separately from others as a solitary

work can be dangerous to some. If a contemplative tries to do the Work described in *The Cloud* and is not at an advanced level of spirituality they risk “fall[ing] either into frenzies or else into other great misfortunes of both spiritual sins and diabolical deceits through which he may easily be lost both soul and body for all eternity.”⁸² *The Cloud* author gives this warning to protect others from inaccurately practicing the Work of this book while thinking they are doing it correctly. William Johnston explains *The Cloud* author insists this book should not be given to everyone because “some naïve young person, filled with good will, on hearing of mystical things may imagine that he is called to the contemplative life and end up in a condition that is of ‘madness and no wisdom.’”⁸³ Warnings similar to these given by *The Cloud* author are not uncommon in other Medieval and Early Modern Christian mystical texts. According to the authors of these mystical texts, the improper use or misunderstanding of the ideas presented in the texts could lead to mental and spiritual dangers.

To accomplish the work of unknowing, *The Cloud* author explains to the contemplative, “just as this cloud of unknowing is above you (between you and your God) just so you ought to put a cloud of forgetting behind you (between you and all creatures that have ever been made).”⁸⁴ As the contemplative strikes against the cloud of unknowing above, by working through the process of unknowing, a necessary cloud of forgetting must be situated below the

hermit, respectively. Once one has achieved the singular way of contemplative life one must work towards the final, perfect, degree of spiritual life which is a life of contemplation. The process prescribed by *The Cloud* author is the necessary work for the contemplative to move towards this final degree of spiritual life and the potential for oneness with God.

82. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 19.

83. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 41. The non-inclusive language of “he” was used here as this is a direct quote from Johnston.

84. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 21.

contemplative.⁸⁵ During the process of unknowing the contemplative “puts” all things out of their mind and into the cloud of forgetting. *The Cloud* author clarifies this stating, “whenever I say ‘all created things that have ever been made’ I mean not only the creatures themselves, but also all the works and ways of life of the same creatures...in short I say that all should be hidden under the cloud of forgetting in this instance.”⁸⁶ This step is necessary for the contemplative to do the work of unknowing because one must put all things out of their mind and into the cloud of forgetting.

Unknowing as a Rhetorical Device and Apophasis in Practice

Within the realm of scholarship on Christian mysticism, *The Cloud* is most often categorized as an example of apophatic mysticism. Apophatic mysticism is the category of mystical thought and writings that uses specific language, most often, to describe God and direct experiences with the divine. The language used in this category of mysticism is, as described by Michael Sells, a language of negation or a language of unsaying.⁸⁷ This language—apophatic language—is used to counter kataphatic language. Kataphatic language is the use of language in the affirmative.⁸⁸ Apophasis, as a rhetorical device often used in both literature and speech, is the

85. Ibid., 20. According to Fr. John-Julian, *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process works from a specific cosmological understanding where: 1) at the bottom, is the world and all of the creatures of the world; 2) above this is the cloud of forgetting; 3) above this is “the contemplative soul;” 4) above this is the cloud of unknowing; 5) and above this is “the Perfect Presence of God” (the Beatific Vision).

86. Ibid., 21.

87. Michael A. Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

88. Sells, “*Mystical Languages of Unsaying*,” 3. Within apophatic Christian mysticism, language is viewed as incapable of describing God. Once one describes God, the words “it,” or “God,” do not accurately capture what God truly is. Even by using the proper noun “God” to describe God, it is impossible to accurately describe God. Once the word God is used to name “it,” “it” is no longer God. The way around this dilemma, which, in *Mystical Languages of Unsaying*, Michael Sells calls “aporia—the unresolvable dilemma—of transcendence,” is to

use of apophatic language. Apophasis works as a way of bringing up a subject or saying something by denying the very thing being mentioned. Apophasis is not only used to describe God and experiences of the divine. Apophasis in literature is also the use of negation in the text to convey meaning and to persuade the reader. For example, in a dialogue in literature regarding the deeds of an individual, one may write “I will not mention they are an unscrupulous character who lies, steals, and cheats everyone only to benefit themselves. I should forget they even exist.”⁸⁹ This statement calls attention to this fictional person not having any moral principles, who lies, steals, and cheats, by denying outright they will not mention those very things being mentioned and expressing the need to forget their very existence.

Another use of apophasis is to arrive at a conclusion through the process of negation in speech. This is where some recognize negative knowledge exists. One contemporary example of this is a quote from former U.S. secretary of defense Donald Rumsfeld in 2002 when asked about the lack of evidence for intelligence regarding Saddam Hussein trying to supply weapons of mass destruction to terrorist groups.⁹⁰ “There are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things

describe God via the negative. This means one must describe God by what God is not or the characteristics God does not have. For instance, take the following statement: God is not temporal. This statement means God is not bound by time, but furthermore, it means God is eternal. Although the idea that God is eternal is conveyed through negation, once this statement is said, the statement becomes kataphatic, and the process continues, as the previous statement must then be unsaid. Sells explains this cycle continues infinitely unless it is dealt with one of three ways: this dilemma may be dealt with by silence, by using apophatic language, or by explaining there are limitations to human language and one cannot use this language to describe God. To deal with the infinite cycle of saying and unsaying, *The Cloud of Unknowing* uses apophatic language, but only up to a certain point. Then this dilemma is met with silence.

89. This example came to mind to help illustrate the use of apophasis in literature. This was not taken from any specific source.

90. Intelligence that was ultimately used to justify the United States’ involvement in what became the war in Iraq.

we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know.”⁹¹ Regarding this intelligence, Rumsfeld concludes there are “unknown unknowns” or things we do not know that we do not know. This category of knowledge consists of negative knowledge or knowledge that exists through the process of negation (in the absence of affirmation). Rumsfeld arrives at this category of negative knowledge by expressing there are things we know and things we do not know, then denying both of these categories as the only categories of knowledge in existence. The conclusion of this denial of accepted categories of knowledge is a recognition of a third category of “unknown unknowns.” Although Rumsfeld affirms the category of “unknown unknowns,” what is important here is Rumsfeld's use of apophasis in rhetoric to negate the accepted categories of knowledge and to bring up the category of “unknown unknowns.”⁹²

In *The Cloud*, apophasis works both as a rhetorical device of negation in the text and as the process of apophatic negation in practice.⁹³ The forthcoming examples of how apophasis is

91. *Oxford Essential Quotations*, ed. Susan Ratcliffe, s.v. “Donald Rumsfeld,” accessed January 23, 2022, <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00008992>.

92. This infinite process of negating and affirming is similar to the process Michael Sells discusses in *The Mystical Languages of Unsayings* regarding the use of apophatic language to describe God. Statements of affirmation lead to statements of negation as the previous statement must be unsaid. The cycle continues in this manner indefinitely unless it is dealt with in silence, the continued use of negative language, or by acknowledging there are limitations to language and it fails in describing God.

93. The language used in the literature itself also works as a form of apophatic negation. For instance, *The Cloud* author is practicing a form of apophatic negation when, in *The Cloud*, he writes one must unknow and abandon knowledge by pushing down thoughts and desires as they arise and trod them underfoot. The text itself is being used as a form of negation here. *The Cloud* author is negating knowledge and the necessity to know through the act of writing of this text. This thesis does not focus on this aspect of the text as this topic requires additional theoretical research and certainly the use of Michael Sells' *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. This is one idea I have for a future research project.

used in *The Cloud* are not distinctly separate from one another as examples of apophasis. These examples work, simultaneously, as apophasis in the form of a rhetorical device and as apophasis in practice. *The Cloud* is written to explain the necessity of unknowing and forgetting to the protégé if he continues to follow the contemplative path and to serve as a guide so this process can be put into practice.⁹⁴ *The Cloud* author writes passages throughout this text insisting the contemplative reader must negate and abandon the knowledge of all things and knowing through this process. One example of this is where *The Cloud* author declares any contemplative who tries to meditate on God through the Passion, the goodness of God, or anything other than the essence of God itself, must “abandon them [these meditations] completely and put them aside and press them far down under the cloud of forgetting, if he shall ever pierce the cloud of unknowing between him and his God.”⁹⁵ Here, *The Cloud* author conveys necessity and urgency through his unwavering stance that even meditations on the goodness of God work against the contemplative and act as barriers between the contemplative and God. This passage is used to convey the necessity of unknowing in this contemplative process to the reader. This passage also works as a form of rhetorical apophasis by bringing up the path to the experience of oneness with God through the negation of thoughts and even the abandonment of meditations on the goodness

94. Although *The Cloud* author uses apophasis as a rhetorical device in the sense that he is conveying the meaning and necessity of unknowing to the protégé, *The Cloud* author does not try to convince the reader to become a contemplative, nor does he try to convince the reader to follow any particular theological stance. *The Cloud* was written by a spiritually advanced contemplative, directly to a protégé, under the assumption the protégé is a contemplative at an advanced stage allowing him to begin following this specific contemplative process. *The Cloud* author does try to persuade the protégé that there are dangers and pitfalls that occur while following this process, but there is no push to convince the reader to follow a specific Christian tradition. It is assumed the protégé already agrees with *The Cloud* author’s theological ideas. The author’s tone and approach to explanation and description are evidence of this.

95. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 27. The non-inclusive use of “man” and “his” was taken directly as a quote from *The Cloud*.

of God. *The Cloud* author makes echoing statements throughout this text, continuously returning to, and asserting, the importance and necessity of unknowing as the path to oneness with God.

Although *The Cloud* author does not necessarily make one point and develop that point in detail at the time, *The Cloud* author often makes a statement and offers an explanation, then returns to this point repeatedly throughout the text. If one were to choose a single quote to represent the thesis of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the following passage serves this purpose well. The following quote also serves as another example of *The Cloud* author's use of apophysis as a rhetorical device. This is the same excerpt from *The Cloud* that was introduced at the beginning of this thesis. Consider the following:

I bid you to put down any such clever, cunning thought, and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting—no matter how holy it is or how much it may promise to help you in your undertaking. Because love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge. And all the while that the soul dwells in this mortal body, always the cleverness of our understanding [read: the will and intellect] in considering all spiritual things—but most especially God—is muddled with a sort of illusion because of which our Work might well be contaminated and it would be a wonder if it did not lead us into great error.⁹⁶

Again, *The Cloud* author adamantly instructs the contemplative to negate all thoughts and cover them with the cloud of forgetting. Regardless of how helpful a thought may seem, all thoughts impede the contemplative from reaching God. *The Cloud* author advises the contemplative that God is only accessible through love and the path to this love exists in the absence of knowing. *The Cloud* author explains that the contemplative may only reach the space where there is an absence of knowing through the process of unknowing. This example of rhetorical apophysis is used to persuade the contemplative of the primacy of love and the necessity of unknowing to reach a state where there is an absence of knowing. *The Cloud* author also uses apophysis here to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 35. Notice, *The Cloud* author quickly returns to the root of the assertive will and reminds the reader they are human and, as such, are innately corrupted due to original sin.

convey meaning to the contemplative of the importance of love and unknowing to someone who is practicing this contemplative process. Rhetorical apophasis can be used in a variety of ways. *The Cloud* author uses this technique to convey meaning and to persuade the contemplative reader of the importance of love and unknowing in this process.

While unknowing works as a rhetorical device in the text, unknowing also acts as apophasis in practice. One example of this is a subjunctive dialogue where *The Cloud* author responds to a hypothetical question from the protégé.

For of all other creatures and their works—yea, and of the works of God as well—a person through grace can have complete knowledge and can easily ruminate about them, but about God Himself no person knows how to think. And therefore I want to forfeit everything that I can rationalize and choose for my love that one Thing [God] that I cannot comprehend. Because He may well be loved, but never comprehended. By love He may be both embraced and held—but by thought, neither...Nevertheless in this Work it [even the thought of kindness and majesty of God] should be cast down and covered over with a cloud of forgetting.⁹⁷

The Cloud author explains the Work of unknowing is required to move beyond these thoughts about God. The contemplative can engage in contemplation and even know of all worldly things, but they cannot truly think about God or what God is because God is “wholly other” or entirely different from anything humans experience in ordinary life.⁹⁸ Although the contemplative cannot know *of* God or know *what* God is through the higher faculties of humanity (the will and intellect), the contemplative can only know *that* God is, through love. *The Cloud* suggests the contemplative can acquire non-discursive knowledge *that* God is, through a direct experience with God. This suggestion also implies that non-discursive knowledge exists and can be attained. In this excerpt, *The Cloud* author continues to staunchly assert that the contemplative must

97. Ibid., 23, 25.

98. The phrase “wholly other” was coined by Rudolph Otto in reference to one of the three elements that make up the “numinous.”

negate the knowledge of all things and knowing. This quote, and other statements written in *The Cloud*, are directly addressing the reader to perform and practice these steps as they encounter different scenarios along their contemplative path. The steps prescribed in *The Cloud* are meant to be both read and practiced. *The Cloud* author writes this text in a way where he discusses difficult theological ideas and pitfalls the contemplative may encounter while also explaining, to the best of his ability with language, how to perform the steps of this process and what may happen along the way.⁹⁹ *The Cloud* author explains these steps in extensive detail to provide a guideline for the reader to actually perform this process. In this sense, unknowing, in *The Cloud*, is the active process of apophasis or apophatic negation. In *The Darkness of God*, Denys Turner explains the work of negating all cognition requires an active work of denial and unknowing.¹⁰⁰ Turner states, “to ‘unknow’ is, for *The Cloud* author, an active verb-form.”¹⁰¹ Turner’s explanations offer additional support for the claim that *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process is meant to be put into practice and performed. By definition, unknowing as an active verb-form means one cannot be a passive recipient in the process of unknowing. The contemplative must put the process into practice and perform *The Cloud* author’s exercise of forgetting.

Through the abandoning and forgetting of the knowledge of all things, the contemplative reader negates each thought in their mind as it arises while focusing only on their love of God. For example, if the contemplative thinks about snow on the ground and the cold wind blowing

99. *The Cloud* author does not explicitly say he has had a mystical experience himself by following this process. One may infer his knowledge of the process of unknowing, the transformation of the self, and the pitfalls he warns the reader about, come from his own personal experience. *The Cloud* author is certainly influenced by previous contemplatives such as Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Pseudo-Dionysius, but this text is also written in a style which denotes a sense of intimacy with the process, pitfalls, and experiences he describes.

100. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 196.

101. *Ibid.*, 197.

against their face while practicing this form of contemplative prayer, these thoughts must be abandoned, and no attention given to them. The thoughts of snow on the ground and cold wind blowing against one's face must be negated and let go. The contemplative must not think about the snow and the cold wind. The contemplative must negate the thoughts about the snow and the cold wind and any other knowledge they have about both snow and wind. As thoughts of snow and cold wind enter the contemplative's mind, each of these thoughts must be negated by *not* snow and *not* wind. Once negated, these thoughts must be forgotten. *The Cloud* author illustrates this in the following passage where he instructs the contemplative to use, and concentrate on, a one syllable word such as "God" or "Love" while meditating to unknow thoughts as they arise.¹⁰² "With this word you shall strike down all manner of thoughts beneath the cloud of forgetting to such a degree that if any thought presses upon you to ask you what you would like to have, answer it with no more words than with this one word."¹⁰³ Eventually, even this one word mantra must be forgotten. Each of these thoughts act as distractions and hindrances to the contemplative whose goal is to reach a space where there is an absence of knowing. This is a space where no-thing exists in the mind to deter the contemplative from the path of oneness. As the contemplative forgets each thought and desire by putting them into the cloud of forgetting, the contemplative is performing the action of apophasis itself.

Unknowing and the need to put all things into the cloud of forgetting does not simply mean one must reverse the process of knowing.¹⁰⁴ Instead, unknowing works as the active process of negation through which all knowledge is purged, abandoned, forgotten, and the

102. Ibid., 27.

103. Ibid., 29.

104. At times, *The Cloud* author uses unknowing and forgetting synonymously. This terminology is distinctly separate from the cloud of forgetting which is located below the contemplative in *The Cloud* author's cosmology.

faculties of the mind are temporarily suspended. The entire purpose of the cloud of forgetting is “the abandonment of all images and concepts to allow the soul to love mystically.”¹⁰⁵ The cloud of forgetting provides the contemplative a space to clear themselves of knowledge as they work through the process of negation. Knowledge is underpinned by the will and knowing is sustained by the will to know. Through the help of one’s physical senses, knowledge sets up a particular understanding of reality which must be undone through the process of unknowing. The contemplative must work to not only forget all things both physical and non-physical, but go even further and, more importantly, suspend the will to know, at least momentarily. But before this suspension of the will, intellect, and the will to know, the key to this entire contemplative process occurs. The contemplative must surrender themselves entirely to love.

Unknowing Paves the Way for the Primacy of Love

Just as *The Cloud* author asserts God is not accessible through knowing, the contemplative also cannot know God through any means associated with the will and intellect. The experience of oneness with God is only possible through love. Unknowing acts as a preparation for the advancement of what *The Cloud* author calls the “blind stirring of love” which allows the contemplative potential access to oneness with the essence of God.¹⁰⁶ For this to occur, the will and intellect must be forgotten and temporarily suspended because both faculties are ever present in relation to knowledge. *The Cloud* author explains a contemplative who is predisposed to this Work may often be stirred or overcome through the work of unknowing. “Yet, in one stirring out of all these, the soul may suddenly and wholly forget about all created things. But immediately after each stirring (because of the depravity of the flesh) the

105. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 36.

106. Ibid., 98.

soul drops down again to some thought or to something done or left undone.”¹⁰⁷ Johnston explains this stirring as “motion” within the contemplative’s soul that acts as the basis for the blind stirring of love. This stirring governs the contemplative’s actions and instills a constant desire for loving God which moves the contemplative to work towards a state of oneness with God.¹⁰⁸ In this case, working towards a state of oneness with God occurs through the process of unknowing. This “depravity of the flesh” refers to original sin and to the faculties of the mind which now run rampant in the lives of humans. Just as quickly as the contemplative succeeds at forgetting, the uncontrolled will works to displace the process of unknowing. The will and intellect are constantly deciding on action (or inaction) and reasoning (and sorting) through knowledge, which are always in the contemplative’s way. This is why, according to *The Cloud* author, knowledge and its associated faculties only serve as impediments to the contemplative and their experience of oneness with God.¹⁰⁹

The suspension of the will and the intellect allows for the primacy of the love to come forth. *The Cloud* author writes:

Our soul, by virtue of His restoring grace, is made fully capable of comprehending Him completely by means of love—He who is incomprehensible to all created powers of knowing, such as to the souls of angel and man. (I mean He is incomprehensible to their ‘knowing’ but not to their ‘loving,’ and therefore I refer in this case to the ‘powers of knowing’).¹¹⁰

The Cloud author is not referring to any ordinary type of love that is directed towards what one knows and as one experiences through the senses. Instead, as William Johnston explains, this is a different kind of love that “stretch[es] out toward God whom the contemplative scarcely seems

107. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 19.

108. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 99-100.

109. Ibid., 15.

110. Ibid.

to know—or, more correctly, he knows *that* He is but not *what* He is; for God is surrounded by a cloud of unknowing. This love is not founded upon anything one can think, but on naked faith.”¹¹¹ This type of love corresponds with the division of discursive and non-discursive knowledge because it exists, but it cannot be fully described even by *The Cloud* author. *The Cloud* author understands the central element of this feeling to be love which also includes negative knowledge and some form of consciousness since it can be known non-discursively. *The Cloud* author refers to this love as the “sharp dart of longing love,” the “naked intent of the will,” and as a “blind stirring of love,” among other names for the same action and feeling.¹¹²

This specific type of love requires the contemplative to surrender themselves to God. As previously quoted regarding the incomprehensibility of God: “He [God] who is incomprehensible to all created powers of knowing, such as to the souls of angel and man. (I mean He is incomprehensible to their ‘knowing’ but not to their ‘loving’).”¹¹³ *The Cloud* author explains both humans and angels have the ability to reason through the intellect, but a direct experience with God cannot be accessed through reason or any knowledge gained from reasoning. Instead, the only way to directly access a full experience with God is through love. Fr. John-Julian explains in his commentary on *The Cloud* that “this salvific love is an action of the will, not of the emotions.”¹¹⁴ I agree with Fr. John-Julian’s analysis here that *The Cloud* author understands this specific type of love resides and works within the will. In the fourth chapter, *The Cloud* author briefly describes this love: “one can quickly understand the pattern of this

111. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 97. This non-discursive love also consists of Humility and Charity which are necessary qualities the contemplative must possess for a potential experience of oneness with God.

112. Ibid., 98.

113. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 15.

114. Ibid., 14.

process [the process of unknowing and the will's ability to continuously displace unknowing] and be convinced that it is far from any fantasy...(which had been brought about not by such a devout and humble blind stirring of love, but by an arrogant, inquisitive, and an imaginative wit)."¹¹⁵ *The Cloud* author also writes about the will as the "power through which we choose the good (after it has been determined to be good by reason) and through which we love the good, we desire the good, and finally rest with full gratification and accord in God."¹¹⁶ This understanding of love as directly associated with the will allows love to work as an action of the will. The contemplative must make the choice with, and within, their will to love God. Although this love and the will are directly associated with one another, there is still an element of the will which allows this faculty to operate uncontrolled and disrupt the contemplative's ability to unknow, all because of original sin.

At first glance, love as an action of the will appears to be problematic and seemingly contradictory to *The Cloud* author's unequivocal stance on the necessity to unknow while also suspending the use of the will, the intellect, and eventually, the will to know. But this salvific love is not necessarily contradictory to the necessity to unknow while suspending the faculties of the mind. *The Cloud* author does not clearly explain the exact steps or the order in which the contemplative must complete the steps of unknowing, loving God entirely, and suspending the faculties of the mind and the will to know. This process likely follows William Johnston's understanding of *The Cloud* author's contemplative process where knowing and loving God "cannot be achieved without a twofold unity: union in oneself in such wise that all the faculties are in harmony, and union with God in such wise that they [all human faculties] are all directed

115. Ibid., 19.

116. Ibid., 161.

toward Him.”¹¹⁷ To follow Johnston’s understanding of a necessary “twofold unity,” and *The Cloud* author’s logic of the process of unknowing, this salvific love likely works as a two-step process. First, it seems the contemplative must choose, via the will, to surrender themselves to love. The contemplative must choose this action because the salvific love of God is located within the will. Then, the assertion of the will must be suspended once the contemplative’s commitment to the process of completely surrendering themselves to love is completed. Essentially, the contemplative must surrender themselves over to God entirely (through love) while also suspending the will to know. Based on *The Cloud* author’s logic in other parts of his contemplative process, the contemplative cannot suspend their will first or they would not be able to surrender themselves to love since love is an action of the will. To be clear, the order and specifics of this part of the process is not described by *The Cloud* author, but this explanation follows *The Cloud* author’s logic in his process of unknowing and is supported by Johnston’s understanding of *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process requiring a twofold unity between the contemplative’s self and God to achieve this state of oneness with God. This complete surrendering by the contemplative is the “sharp dart of longing love” or “the blind stirring of love” *The Cloud* author refers to. *The Cloud* author does state explicitly, “I want to forfeit everything that I can rationalize and choose for my love that one Thing that I cannot comprehend. Because He may well be loved, but never comprehended.”¹¹⁸ To reach to, and love, God (who is incomprehensible,) the contemplative must forfeit their ability to rationalize. The contemplative must also ground themselves entirely in a love based on faith. This longing love is

117. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 156.

118. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 23.

an action of the will, but it is not an exertion of the will. Instead, it the choice of love through faith and a surrendering of the will.

To further illustrate this concept of love working as an action of the will, while also aligning with *The Cloud* author's theology, it may be helpful to use a contemporary, American, pop culture example. During one of the final scenes in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) must cross an expansive chasm to pass one final test before entering the location where the holy grail is guarded. Above this chasm is an open space without any sign of a bridge and the distance is too great for Jones to simply jump across. With the clues written in a diary, and the encouragement of his dying father (from a distance) to "believe," Jones determines he must have "faith" to make it across. As an act of his own will Indiana Jones decides to step off the ledge and out into the chasm. As Jones acts and steps out into what seems to be a bottomless pit, he temporarily suspends his will and intellect, while also surrendering himself to whatever this action leads to, either life or death. In this film, because Jones has "faith," and "believes," he steps onto an invisible bridge which allows him to safely cross the bottomless pit.¹¹⁹

Although *The Cloud* author is not speaking about faith and belief in the exact same manner as the characters do in the film, there is an element of faith that the contemplative must have to fully surrender themselves to love and suspend the faculties of the mind. Jones' experience in this scene illustrates, similarly, how the suspension of the will and intellect, while also surrendering oneself to love, works in this contemplative process. Just as Indiana Jones decides to step out into the abyss above a bottomless pit without a bridge, while surrendering

119. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Paramount Pictures, 1989), DVD.

himself to the fate of that decision, the contemplative must commit to the action of completely surrendering themselves to salvific love, and thus to God. The contemplative, by the act of their will, chooses to surrender themselves to love while also suspending the will once the action is decided upon. This is akin to Indiana Jones choosing to step off the ledge and into the bottomless pit while putting his life in the hands of something he cannot see or sense. Jones gave himself over entirely to the fate of his decision while suspending his intellect and his will to know the outcome. Jones stepped out onto an invisible bridge which allowed him safe passage from one side of the chasm to the other.

The Work of Forgetting, No-thing-ness, and the Peak

As previously mentioned, suspension of the will and intellect are of utmost importance at this point in the contemplative process. *The Cloud* author continuously warns the reader of the necessity of controlling these faculties, throughout this text. *The Cloud* author advises, “the soul may suddenly and wholly forget about all created things. But immediately after each stirring (because of the depravity of the flesh) the soul drops down again to some thought or to something done or left undone. But, so what? Because immediately afterward it surges up again just as abruptly as it did before.”¹²⁰ The problem is that the work of forgetting is displaced by the will. As quickly as the contemplative unknowns, the will upsets the process of forgetting and the contemplative’s will brings another thought to mind. Although the soul—which is the striving force of the contemplative—can refocus and return to the work of forgetting, there is still a problem. If the contemplative only negates their thoughts and desires as they arise but cannot simultaneously suspend the faculties of the mind and the will to know, they become stuck in a

120. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 19.

continuous process of working to forget without fully controlling the will and intellect. As previously quoted, *The Cloud* author explains frankly, “do not struggle in your intellect or in your imagination in any way. For I tell you truly, it cannot be attained by laboring in them, and, therefore, leave them and do not work with them.”¹²¹

One main issue here is that the constant assertion of the will and the intellect is habitual and the contemplative continuously assumes they know. Unknowing and forgetting frustrate these assumptions momentarily. In this context, unknowing also works as the deliberate action of suspending the will to know.¹²² According to Denys Turner, unknowing is not ignorance. Unknowing is a deliberate apophatic strategy.¹²³ The contemplative must give up all thoughts, desires, faculties of the mind, and even their own understand of self, entirely, while also ceasing to think of or consider these things. The thoughts and desires are abandoned and forgotten first; then the will and intellect, along with imagination and sensuality which are both controlled by the first two primary faculties, must be abandoned and put out of the contemplative’s mind. This ceases the process of thinking about, and considering, these faculties. The contemplative must also forget their awareness and understanding of self. *The Cloud* author adamantly states, “and therefore break down all knowledge and awareness of every kind of created thing—but most

121. Ibid., 21.

122. Though *The Cloud* author does not explicitly state this, the action of unknowing here is not to be confused with ignorance. This action of unknowing is a purposeful, active, suspension of the will to know. For unknowing to occur one must already have knowledge and possess the will to know. Ignorance, which is often passive, occurs when one does not have knowledge. One does not necessarily have to act to be ignorant of knowledge. This point is made contrary to the implicit understanding William Johnston has regarding unknowing and ignorance. Johnston uses ignorance as a synonym for unknowing in Pseudo-Dionysius’ writing *Hid Divinity*. Johnston does not explicitly state *The Cloud* author’s understanding of unknowing is the same as Pseudo-Dionysius’, but that *The Cloud* author is certainly influenced by this Dionysian text. I firmly disagree that ignorance is synonymous with unknowing in *The Cloud*. These are two distinctly different things.

123. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 196.

especially yourself. For on the knowledge and awareness of yourself depends knowledge and awareness of all other creatures; for compared to the self, all other creatures are easily forgotten.”¹²⁴ *The Cloud* author insists the self must also be forgotten in the process of abandoning the knowledge of all created things. When the contemplative forgets their self and all conceptions and ideas attached to this notion, “there shall remain afterward between you and your God a naked knowledge and consciousness of your own being. This knowledge and consciousness must necessarily be obliterated before the time comes when you can truthfully sense the perfection of this Work.”¹²⁵ Forgetting all conceptions of the self creates an awareness of the contemplative’s own being without any attachments to anything related to the world. Fr. John-Julian clarifies this is an “unadorned knowledge and awareness of one’s own essence.”¹²⁶ This knowledge and consciousness of the contemplative’s own self must also be forgotten for them to reach a direct experience with God.

In the following quote (which was also presented in the previous paragraph,) *The Cloud* author’s language is subtle but precise when referring to the consciousness of the contemplative’s own being. “There shall remain afterward between you and your God a naked knowledge and consciousness of your own being. This knowledge and consciousness must necessarily be obliterated before the time comes when you can truthfully sense the perfection of this Work.”¹²⁷ In this passage of the text the translator uses the past tense of the verb obliterate, “obliterated.” The translator notes the Middle English has the word *distroied* which is literally the equivalent to the contemporary meaning of “destroyed,” but he chose the synonym

124. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 109.

125. Ibid.

126. Ibid., 108.

127. Ibid., 109.

“obliterated” since “destroyed” is closely related to physicality and this is a distinct spiritual action.¹²⁸ I agree with the translator’s use of the word “obliterated” here which allows for a non-physical action, but it is necessary to note that the use of obliteration here may not necessarily mean a complete removal from existence. Instead, in this context, it seems *The Cloud* author leans closer to meaning one’s consciousness of their own essence being removed from memory, at least temporarily.¹²⁹ *The Cloud* author does not indicate anywhere that the self must be annihilated and cease to exist.¹³⁰ On the contrary, *The Cloud* author even warns the contemplative reader against a misunderstanding of what he means by an obliteration of the self. *The Cloud* author clarifies, “and yet in all this sorrow [sorrow that one’s consciousness is filled with oneself and not God] one does not wish to un-be...but one desires strongly to exist, and intends very great gratitude to God for the honor and gift of existence.”¹³¹ John-Julian clarifies that this is an “obliteration of one’s ‘self-consciousness’—one’s continuing awareness of ‘who I am.’ This is what some have called the ‘destruction of the ego.’”¹³² This obliteration of the contemplative’s self-consciousness, or ego, leaves behind their true self, unencumbered by any conceptions of the self or any physical or non-physical attachments. Removing the notion of “who I am” eliminates the individuality of the contemplative and all conceptions attached to their understanding of “I.” Removing the notion of “who I am” separates humans from how they

128. Ibid., 108.

129. *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “Obliterate,” accessed January 26, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/obliterate>. In *The Mysticism of The Cloud of Unknowing*, Johnston agrees with this line of thought. It is the knowledge and consciousness of oneself which much be obliterated or destroyed. The true self is not destroyed or annihilation here.

130. Annihilation in the sense of Marguerite Porete where one must annihilate the self and could potentially be self—less for a period of time.

131. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 113.

132. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 111.

normally operate in the world as understanding themselves as distinct beings and selves existing separately from other beings and their own selves.¹³³

Through the process of unknowing the contemplative deliberately sets themselves up for forgetting, which leads to a specific moment where the mind is clear of all things—including conceptions of the self—and the will and intellect are temporarily suspended. This is the precise moment when the will to know is also temporarily suspended. To be clear, *The Cloud* author does not discuss this moment in great detail. This is near this moment when apophatic language is met with silence in *The Cloud*. Instead, *The Cloud* author provides some context of this moment while also explaining how this state of consciousness may be attained. *The Cloud* author does this by describing why the contemplative must follow the process of unknowing and clarifying the steps the contemplative must take along the way. Here is one passage by *The Cloud* author that may help contextualize this moment.

Whenever you are aware of your mind being occupied with the subtle aspects of the powers of your soul and their working in spiritual things...then you are within yourself and equal with yourself. But whenever you are aware of your mind being occupied with nothing that is either bodily or spiritual, but only with the essence of Godself—as the mind is and can be in exhibiting the Work of this book, then you are above yourself and beneath your God.¹³⁴

133. In other works, and in entirely different contexts, both George Bataille and Sigmund Freud worked on theories related to the loss of the notion of the self through experience. In *Erotism*, Bataille understands eroticism as a specific type of experience which may lead to an experience of continuity in a discontinuous world. This experience of continuity may provide a temporary loss of self where the self comes undone and is no longer distinguishable as an individual. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud writes of infant thumb sucking as the infant's attempt to recreate the stimulating experience of passivity which previously occurred during breast feeding. This is an attempt to recreate the experience of the loss of one's agency through the pleasure of nourishment. Examining mystical texts as transformative and analyzing the journey of the self in these texts is another idea I have for a future research project.

134. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 165, 167.

An acute awareness of the contemplative's own mind being occupied with the will and intellect brings them to a level of spirituality and a state of consciousness where there is no longer concern with the physical world nor the thoughts and desires attached to this world, but rather a focus on the spiritual and what occurs in their mind.¹³⁵ By forgetting their faculties, the self, and the will to know, the contemplative stops the process of knowing and can fully surrender themselves to God through love. At this moment in *The Cloud* author's process the contemplative realizes everything else has been forgotten and they are only concerned with a desire for the Godself. At this moment, the contemplative can reach out to God through the blind stirring of love.¹³⁶ This is the point where unknowing becomes secondary to love in this contemplative process. One of the main functions of unknowing is to pave the way for love. It is only at this moment, and in this state, when the contemplative may experience the essence of God. The final key is God allowing the contemplative this experience through grace. In this moment, the will and intellect are no longer active. The intellect is not individualizing and sorting anything and the will is not acting on anything. This is an absence of knowledge or a moment, a state, of no-thing-ness.

The Cloud author cleverly, and carefully, explains this moment of no-thing-ness to the best of his ability through a subjunctive dialogue between himself and the protégé. *The Cloud* author writes, "see to it that you are no way 'within yourself'—nor yet above, nor behind, nor on

135. For *The Cloud* author the will is the faculty by which a person decides on and initiates action. The intellect is the faculty responsible for reasoning. Reasoning is thinking about knowledge and create judgements about this knowledge based on logic and experience. The will, intellect, and reason all take place in one's mind. These are not external physical processes. In this contemplative process the mind is not a tangible physical substance. The mind is where these faculties and reasoning operate.

136. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 166.

one side, nor on the other.”¹³⁷ According to *The Cloud* author, in this moment, the contemplative reader cannot be in any of these spaces, within, nor above, behind, or on either side of themselves. The protégé responds to *The Cloud* author’s question saying, “‘where then,’ say you, ‘shall I be? Nowhere, by your reckoning!’”¹³⁸ This is precisely the space where the contemplative finds themselves. *The Cloud* author continues, “that is where I would have you be. Because ‘nowhere’ physically is ‘everywhere’ spiritually...And although all your bodily wits can find nothing there to feed on—because they think you are doing nothing—yea, go on then doing this ‘nothing’”¹³⁹ Due to the lack of assertion of the will, intellect, and the will to know, in this moment of no-thing-ness it seems there can be no individual existence of anything, no separation of anything. Everything is everything. There is an absence of knowledge. There is no-thing-ness. *The Cloud* author expounds here, “leave aside this ‘everywhere’ and this ‘something’ in favor of ‘nowhere’ and ‘nothing.’ Do not care at all if your wits cannot discern any of this ‘nothing.’”¹⁴⁰ To be clear, this is not the experience of the essence of God. This moment is the farthest the contemplative may go on their own. Only in this very moment of no-thing-ness can God’s grace allow the contemplative to experience the Godself. It is possible, without grace, the contemplative may make it to this point and never experience oneness with God.

Although according to *The Cloud* author, God, and therefore a direct experience of God, cannot be described with language and remains ineffable, the author briefly describes the context of this moment to the best of his ability. Contextually, one is above oneself in the sense of having

137. Ibid., 169.

138. Ibid.

139. Ibid.

140. Ibid.

forgotten the physical world and all its attachments through apophatic contemplative prayer. And one is beneath God in that

God and you are not two but one in spirit to such a degree that you (or anyone else who because of such oneness feels the perfection of this Work) may truly, by witness of Scripture, be called a god—nevertheless you are still beneath Him, because He is God by nature without beginning, and you that once were nothing in essence and after that when you were made something by His power and His love...you are made a God by grace, one-ed with Him in spirit without any separation both here and in the bliss of heaven without end. So that though you are all one with Him in grace, yet you are very far beneath Him in your human nature.¹⁴¹

This oneness in spirit shared between the contemplative and God provides the contemplative with a moment of likeness to God. Fr. John-Julian clarifies the theological approach to this statement which is in reference to Psalms 82:6 (also quoted in John 10:34), “I say, ‘You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you.’” Fr. John-Julian also points to a significant distinction in the Middle English here regarding the capitalization of the word “God” and this capitalization as being influenced by Augustine’s theological interpretation from *On the Psalms* 1.2 stating “if we have been made sons of God, we have also been made gods; but this is the effect of Grace adopting, not of nature penetrating.”¹⁴² Based on this explanation, it seems *The Cloud* author understands the contemplative to be godlike, momentarily, through grace and not by the nature of being human. Tactfully, *The Cloud* author clarifies this ambiguous explanation in his final sentence by explaining the contemplative can be one with God through grace, but still beneath God in the theological hierarchy. Being one with God while “maintain[ing] one’s individual personhood within that union with the Divine” is the peak of the contemplative experience.¹⁴³ Although, based on *The Cloud* and *The Cloud* author’s understanding of God, the actual

141. Ibid., 167.

142. Ibid., 166.

143. Ibid.

experience of oneness with the essence of God is ineffable, this experience directly affects the contemplative leaving them with a “very real type of ‘knowledge.’” This is the negative knowledge based on the experience of this mystical state of consciousness.¹⁴⁴

Why Unknowing and Why Does It Matter?

In *The Cloud* author’s contemplative process, unknowing takes center stage among other important topics such as knowledge, the will, intellect, and divine love. The centrality of unknowing in this contemplative process begs the following question: Why is unknowing of utmost importance here instead of knowing? In chapter 8, *The Cloud* author explains the necessity for unknowing in this contemplative process and the roles love and knowledge play in terms of aiding, and impeding, the contemplative on their quest for oneness with God. *The Cloud* author explains “love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge” and to reach God through love the contemplative must “cover it [all thought and all aspects of knowing] with a thick cloud of forgetting.”¹⁴⁵ One cannot access God through reason and discursive knowledge. God is only accessible through love. This is also the primary reason unknowing is necessary for the contemplative to reach an experience of oneness with God. Unknowing acts as a preparation for the advancement of this blind stirring of love which is the most important element in the contemplative’s life.¹⁴⁶ Unknowing is necessary because this action clears the contemplative path of the impediments of knowledge and paves the way for the primacy of love. Through unknowing one works to suspend the faculties of the mind that create the illusion of knowing God and other spiritual things. These faculties and illusions which are set up by the senses must

144. Green, “St. John of the Cross and Mystical ‘Unknowing’,” 30.

145. Ibid., 35. Notice, *The Cloud* author quickly returns to the root of the assertive will and reminds the reader they are human and, as such, are innately corrupted due to original sin.

146. Johnston, *The Mysticism of the Cloud*, 98.

be negated, forgotten, and temporarily suspended, in order for sharp dart of longing love to prevail and pierce through the cloud of unknowing.

This research adds to existing scholarship on *The Cloud*, mystical unknowing, and beyond, because it shows how *The Cloud* author understands knowledge and how knowing and unknowing function in this contemplative process. It is often understood that knowledge can be acquired only through discursive means and only exists in binary categories: things we know and things we do not know. *The Cloud* suggests a third category of non-discursive knowledge exists. For *The Cloud* author, one can acquire non-discursive knowledge *that* God is, through a direct experience with God. With this claim arises a host of questions and potential problems regarding the lack of objectivity that can be applied to this category of knowledge as this knowledge can only be known through experience and is subjective. Even the suggestion that this category of knowledge exists challenges our current understanding of knowledge. But, as Deirdre Green explains, there are many types of knowledge, meaning, and intelligibility, which are all equally valid.¹⁴⁷ The examination of mystics and their experiences “suggests to us that our universe contains within itself realms of being or consciousness, ‘other realities’, from which most of us are usually blinded.”¹⁴⁸ The ways most humans experience the “everyday” do not necessarily mean these experiences are the limits of human consciousness. Suggesting the category of non-discursive knowledge exists may help expand scholars’ understanding of how knowledge and knowing are valued in certain strains of contemplative literature and thought. This research on *The Cloud* may also help expand the definition of knowledge, further the understanding of the implied category of non-discursive knowledge in contemplative literature, and broaden the

147. Green, “St. John of the Cross and Mystical ‘Unknowing’,” 29.

148. Ibid.

understanding of what knowing means in both contemplative and non-contemplative contexts.

The experiences of mystics also suggest our everyday rational consciousness to be only one type of consciousness as there may be other dimensions to life, other kinds of truth, and knowledge.¹⁴⁹

Contemplatives, such as *The Cloud* author, are pushing the limits of our ideas on human consciousness and what it means to be, and experience, as humans. *The Cloud* author's contemplative process is also an exploration of potential alternate states of human consciousness. These states of consciousness range from a full engagement with the physical world through bodily senses to a momentary non-physical state where there is an absence of knowledge or a state of no-thing-ness. At the very least, the experiences of contemplatives should be further investigated to explore and better understand the potential for alternate states of consciousness, alternate truths, and alternate categories of knowledge.

Conclusion

This thesis argues three distinct but interrelated claims about how unknowing works, and what unknowing does, in *The Cloud*. First, unknowing serves as the catalyst through which the process of apophysis begins. Referring back to the opening quote at the beginning of this thesis, *The Cloud* author continuously instructs the contemplative to “put down any such clever, cunning thought, and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting—no matter how holy it is or how much it may promise to help you in your undertaking. Because love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge.”¹⁵⁰ As the contemplative initiates the process of unknowing by negating their thoughts, they begin the process of apophysis. Apophysis works as both a rhetorical device in the text and as apophysis in practice in the sense that the actions prescribed in *The Cloud*

149. Ibid.

150. Anonymous, *The Complete Cloud of Unknowing*, 23.

author's contemplative process work as apophatic negation in practice. *The Cloud* author uses rhetorical apophasis to persuade the contemplative of the primacy of love and the necessity of unknowing in his contemplative process. Also, statements such as "put down any such clever, cunning thought, and cover it with a thick cloud of forgetting" are examples of apophasis in practice.¹⁵¹ *The Cloud* author writes these instructions for the contemplative reader to actually perform this process. Finally, unknowing acts as a preparation for the advancement of what *The Cloud* author calls the blind stirring of love which allows the contemplative potential access to oneness with God. Unknowing is necessary here because "love may reach to God in this life, but not knowledge."¹⁵² Unknowing provides the contemplative with an opportunity to control the faculties of their mind and suspend the will to know. This state of consciousness allows the blind stirring of love to come forth which is the contemplative's key to the experience of oneness with God.

Broadly speaking, mysticism is concerned with the preparation for and the potential experience of the presence of God, but mysticism also concerns the transformative nature of these ways of being in the world. The contemplative does not cease to exist after their preparation for, or even the experience of, the divine. The contemplative must continue living and being in the world. This often includes gaining new forms of knowledge, changing and developing a different understanding of the self, and sharing their experiences and newfound knowledge with others.¹⁵³ *The Cloud of Unknowing* serves as a direct example of this. Through

151. Ibid.

152. Ibid.

153. William James argues the understanding of new forms of knowledge as the noetic quality of mystical experiences. As this thesis explores, the new forms of knowledge gained from mystical experiences are often described as negative knowledge or non-discursive knowledge. Also, self-transformation is central to many forms of mysticism. The journey of the mystic, both physically and non-physically, is of great importance to different forms of mysticism.

The Cloud author's contemplative process, the contemplative's understanding of self changes. This transformative experience is profound which led to a contemplative practitioner (*The Cloud* author) sharing this knowledge in *The Cloud of Unknowing*. This research contributes to our understanding of apophatic Christian texts and the conversation on mystical unknowing in contemplative literature. It also illuminates the ways *The Cloud* author understands knowledge and his suggestions regarding the experience of non-discursive knowledge. This research also provides further understanding of how knowing and unknowing function in *The Cloud of Unknowing* while also exploring the human capacity to experience different states of consciousness. Continued research on mystical unknowing and apophysis in *The Cloud*, and other mystical texts, may yield additional knowledge on human consciousness and ways of being in the world.

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