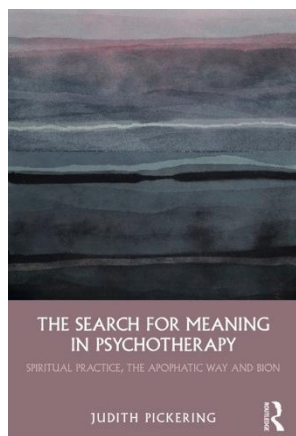


## Book review



### ***The Search for Meaning in Psychotherapy: Spiritual Practice, the Apophatic Way and Bion***

**Author:** Judith Pickering PhD

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**Reviewed By:** Timothy Keogh PhD

The usual approach to discovering meaning in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy is radically challenged by Judith Pickering in her 2020 American Board & Academy of Psychoanalysis (ABAPsa) award winning book *The Search for Meaning in Psychotherapy: Spiritual Practice, the Apophatic Way and Bion*. The reader of this book is not only struck by the rigorous research and scholarship which the author brings to her work but is also challenged to examine one's own conceptualisation of the psychotherapeutic process, especially its intersubjective nature and the extent to which one feels the need to engage in doubt and not knowing, that is, to engage in an apophatic approach. This is an approach that involves "unknowing" as a means of coming to understand our patients and help them find the true meaning of their life. As the author notes, this is highlighted in Bion's approach to psychoanalysis (himself influenced by apophatic mysticism), references to which are interwoven throughout the book. Linked to these ideas the author proposes that in psychotherapy finding meaning may need to involve more than engaging with patient's psyche, it may require engaging with their sense of spirituality. This in turn, implies a necessity for the therapist to be in tune with her own sense of the spiritual.

In the first part of the book, by introducing the reader in some detail to Buddhist teachings on meditation and Buddhist concepts such as *Śūnyatā* (emptiness), Judith Pickering draws our attention to the fact that there are a number of similarities between Buddhism and

psychotherapy and suggest that many Buddhist and other related spiritual practices can be helpful to clinicians who wish to develop ways of listening to their patients more deeply. She suggests that many important therapist qualities can be enhanced by spiritual practices that come from these traditions. She makes a particular case for the application of practices from *Dzogchen*, given that it is not sectarian nor dogmatic and fits in with a modern secular world. Moreover, she alludes to the fact that what is transformative process in psychotherapy is the ability of the therapist to achieve a type of altered state of consciousness, what Bion calls *reverie* or in a more spiritual terms, a contemplative state. She notes that ultimately though one can only ever *strive to know* the full truth of one's own or another's existence as this is always an approximation to knowing what Bion has referred to as "O" or "Ultimate reality". As Storolow and Attwood (1979) note:

*To discover and describe the ultimate preconditions of all conscious experience would require an observer who stands entirely outside of the human domain... it would require a transcendental consciousness of truly God-like proportions. (p. 38)*

In terms of the book's central thesis, psychoanalysis has historically held that the meaning of a patient's difficulties is to be found by focusing on the unconscious. This is because unconscious conflicts are seen to work against the integration of the self and in turn can limit the capacity for acknowledgement of the Other. As the unconscious itself can be seen to ultimately be unknowable, approaching it in more apophatic way, as the author suggests, seems intuitively very useful.

Traditionally though the means of uncovering meaning of the unconscious has been by the hermeneutical method, a method that can be seen to rely on interpretation of the unconscious which is perhaps more cataphatic in its orientation. By cataphatic I mean approaching understanding from a point of knowing, for example in cataphatic theology, approaching an understanding of God from a position of already knowing that God is "Good" and "Benevolent". Moreover, the basic tenet of hermeneutic phenomenology can be seen to be that is that our most basic experience of the world is already full of meaning. With the hermeneutical approach to psychoanalysis then there are usually assumptions made about the unconscious of the patient that may take one away from simply encountering it. If we were to focus on encountering the unconscious of another from what Bion would call a state of "reverie" and "without memory and desire", then the usual hermeneutic approach to the unconscious could become transformed onto a method that is more apophatic. Indeed the usual hermeneutical method as a non-science method in psychoanalysis has been regarded as circular and solipsistic, which is why some theorists have suggested that a dialectic that links hermeneutics and non-natural science frameworks might be more helpful. Nissim-Sabat (1991), for example, has proposed that another way of reconceiving psychoanalysis is as a philosophical science of subjectivity, a nonnatural science which places the psychic as the proper core of psychoanalytic investigations. By drawing our attention to the apophatic way, Judith Pickering expands the complexity of this task by suggesting that a spiritual dimension (the soul) as well as the psyche, needs to be the focus in psychotherapy.

To unpack her thesis, and in particular to make her case about the relevance of apophatic mysticism to psychoanalysis, as exemplified in the writings in Wilfred Bion, the author invites us to be part of an illuminating Odyssey visiting centuries of writings on apophatic mysticism, theology and philosophy. En route she considers the contributions of key figures including Dionysius, Lévinas (especially his views on alterity) Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross (especially the sources of his scholastic psychology which informs Bion's apophatic notions) all in a cascading sequence.

In tracing apophatic theology and philosophy back to its ancient Greek origins, one is reminded that the employment of the language of apophasis to the transcendent, brings about an aporia (i.e., an unresolvable dilemma) which links to the author's basic thesis: how can we *not* know something if we start from a position of knowing? Bion's solution, as she notes, has been that we should cultivate an ability to eschew memory and desire. As others have noted (e.g., Mils, 2011) we might need to allow for a dialectic between cataphasis and apophasis that encompasses an ephemeral experience of something between knowing and unknowing. This is because it is just at such a point that the mind knows nothing and can, for a moment, encounter that which is beyond knowing.

Grappling with all the ideas presented in the book I found myself engaged in such an encounter with not knowing. I ultimately discovered that it was this actual experience, rather than through a desired cognitive (cataphatic) approach to discovering the book's meaning, that helped me understand its thesis. By the end of the book the increasingly powerful argument about the utility of working with the spiritual dimension in psychotherapy and working in an apophatic way was for me, first experienced and then understood.

It also struck me that the application of the author's ideas was not limited to patients simply interested in spirituality or who were looking for meaning in their lives but was highly relevant with patients who presented in states of great distress and suffering.

I think one could say by the end of the book that I became persuaded by Dionysius's thought that:

*Into the dark beyond all light, we pray to come, through not seeing and not knowing, to see and know that beyond sight and knowledge - itself: neither seeing nor knowing.* (Dionysius, MT 2 In Jones, 2011 p. 25)

I can understand why this book was judged worthy of the prize it received, but more than that I realised how anyone practicing as a psychotherapist or interested in the field would be enriched from the experience of reading it. For me, it also ultimately conveyed the compassion and spiritual depth of the author.

## References

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