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Chapter VIII. Conclusion

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Conclusion

The ideas outlined thus far establish the setting in which the *via negativa* of late Greek thought was able to flourish. Logos begins as a type of rational account, a canon of material about the world which exists, myth-like, independently of the individual thinker and philosopher. It was a touchstone, an instrument of checking and measuring the validity of the sense-data and notions generated in the human mind. It denoted the language of science, as against the language of common-sense, in much the same way as we might distinguish between the scientist's account of things, and that given in popular lore. Logos exercised a strong fascination over the Greek, in this early period of blooming confidence in the power of rational investigation, and within a short time it came to be seen as having an existence in itself. The Greek tendency is to objectify, to give reality to concepts, thereby creating the material of ontology and metaphysics. The word logos, once isolated as a concept, could not fail to fall prey to this reifying tendency, with the result that even as early as Aristotle, there are signs of logos becoming an originating principle, an *arche* like that sought by the Presocratic seekers after a single essential substance. The tendency issues most clearly in the creation of a new verb in late Greek, to "enreason" (*logoo*). This linguistic fact is a most important datum in the history of ideas, since it shows that a new aspect of the word logos was endeavouring to assert itself. Logos becomes a Force, or principle of rationality at work in reality. It becomes an existent.

The Hellenistic period saw a *mise en question* of the whole confidently erected edifice of the classical Greek rationalists. The iconoclasts, headed by Euripides, manifest doubts about the achievements of logos, and this mood is no more clearly attested than in the brilliant scrutiny of the Sceptics, who show the weakness of logos simply by their formulation of the idea of the equipollence of two equivalent *logoi*. Rational accounts can match each other in their ability to extract conviction. On the second generation Greek pursuit of a *kriterion*, the Sceptics have a further negative response: there is no criterion of truth. Discursive thought (*dianoia*) does not provide such a touchstone. In this way the Sceptics provide a riposte to the major claims of their predecessors, opening the way to a new and suprarational approach to the knowledge of existence. Scepticism negates the power of logos, the force of discursive thought, the principle of the self-knowledge of mind, and the notion of the possibility of abstract thought. In this case, both the possibility and the value of *aphairesis* are repudiated. The Sceptical attack does not, of course, conclude discussion on these typical themes of Greek metaphysics. The three notions of logos, thought's self-thought, and the abstract method persist and survive in the Neoplatonism of late antiquity, and they are not

caused to vanish simply in virtue of the Sceptics' attack. It is clear, though, that there is a link between Scepticism and mysticism, and the precise nature of this link will be explored in a subsequent volume. The Sceptics are not mystics, but they create the conditions for the development of mysticism by clearing the ground of rationalist structures. Sextus Empiricus continues to argue philosophically, and to devote himself to reasoning in the ordinary way which, paradoxically, involves engineering a barrage of critiques against the idea of philosophy and its pursuit. It is not in Sextus that one should look for the abandonment of reason, but in others sufficiently close to philosophical circles to be able to benefit from Sceptical arguments, and who have some motive for casting doubts on the activity of philosophy. Some suggestions have been made as to traces of Sceptical views in Philo and the Gnostics, but it is probable that a study of key Sceptical terms as used in the broader field of Neoplatonism and Patristic philosophy would prove very enlightening. Scepticism creates the conditions in which mysticism can flourish: it enhances the development of mysticism. It provides an intellectual climate in which rationalism can be seen as suspect, becoming the object of doubt and dissatisfaction, thus allowing the claim that real knowledge is to be had independently of the procedures of reason.

One of the strongest currents in the Geek tradition is the continuing interest in identifying mind and reality. This finds various expressions from Parmenides, through to Plato, Aristotle and the late Greek philosophers, but the general thrust of the notion is that mind is identical with the "essential", or most intelligible part of reality. Aristotle repeatedly makes this claim, though he experiences difficulties in justifying it, and it forms a cornerstone of later Platonism. It differs markedly from an empiricist-conditioned view of mind as standing outside reality, as the impartial observer and translator of raw physical data into things of meaning, namely propositions and pieces of knowledge. The Greek tradition has mind being in, with and part of the things it seeks to know. In a sense mind already has that which it seeks to enquire into. Aristotle adds the important notion that mind thinks itself: thought is of thought. This idea also proves to be very important for understanding later Platonism, and it was a view which was to be contested by the Sceptics. Later religious philosophers emphasised thought as perception of reality, and linked it to the ability to name things. Philo has Adam naming reality, but his inability to self-think prevents him from naming himself. Only God has the ability to self-think, and thus he is not given his name by another. Adam must be known by a higher power, and therefore receives his name from that power.

There is considerable interest in naming in Greek philosophy, stemming from the discussions in Plato's *Cratylus*. It is decided by Aristotle that names are given to objects by convention, though there is in Greek intellectual life a lingering suspicion that names have a natural connection with the realities

they designate. The revival of etymology in late antiquity, whereby one probes the meaning of a word by examining its etymology, indicates that Socrates' ridiculing of the practice in the *Cratylus* did not manage to extinguish it. Words were still thought to contain in themselves clues as to the nature of things.

The early confidence in language and thought gives way to a gradual interest in the virtues of silence. Keeping silence can be not only a moral improvement, but also an intellectual advance. In late classical religious philosophy, a new emphasis on silence emerges, and it seems to respond to the Sceptics' advocacy of *epoche*, or suspension of judgment. It is in this sense that the Sceptics create the conditions for, or perhaps participate in, the late Greek awareness of the limits of *logos*, and so the abundant quasi-philosophical literature of this period manifests a great interest in wordless comprehension of essential realities. The limits of discursive thought have now been clearly perceived, though of course they were adumbrated in Socrates' dream about the unknowability of ultimate elements, described in the *Theaetetus*. Perhaps he should have referred to it as a nightmare, since the great classical exponent of the power of the word is hinting at a difficulty which will prove the key problem of discourse, namely that it combines elements in order to construct meaning, and that it cannot endow the isolated individual element with meaning. Discourse cannot embrace the Alone.

The long tradition of negative theology, ancient, medieval and modern begins in this period with the efforts of the Greeks to develop a mode of thought capable of dealing with that which is essential in reality, yet beyond the senses. The method of abstraction (*aphairesis*) is the new tool, developed in Aristotle, attacked by the Sceptics, and adopted by the Middle Platonists. It is negative in that it involves the removal by negation of specific characteristics of objects, in the pursuit of the essential characteristic. Physical reality is seen as layered, with the role of abstraction being the conceptual removal of layers, in order to arrive at the essence. That abstract thought should be conceived as taking place through the negation of the various layers of reality is an important fact about the Greek understanding of thinking. Abstraction becomes an instrument of mysticism in late antiquity, but not because of a change in the way it was understood: the change lies in the new transcendentalism, whereby Platonism in particular placed the highest reality beyond the mind (*nous*) and essence (*ousia*). Abstraction develops into a tool for the understanding of the transcendent.

In the same period the first stirrings of dissatisfaction with *logos*, the rational account of things, were felt. The Gnostic parody of *logos*, portrayed in the Tripartite Tractate as the principle of ignorance, foreshadows the statements of Damascius, the last Greek philosopher about the inefficacy of *logos*. The relation of *logos* to discursive thought brings it into disrepute, in the era of the new transcendentalism. The multiple aspect of discursive

thought makes it inappropriate to the pursuit of unity: the deployment of subject, verb and predicate pluralises, and is therefore inapt for the understanding of the Alone. The progress of Greek thought is from logos to *sige*.