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Chapter IX. Basil and Letter 38: the negative theology of the amateur

Raoul Mortley

Bond University, raoul_mortley@bond.edu.au

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IX. Basil and Letter 38: the negative theology of the amateur

The philosophy of the Cappadocians, Basil, Gregory Nazianzen and Gregory of Nyssa is intimately related to their debate with Arianism, specifically represented by the figure of Eunomius. It has to be abstracted from this debate, and this is not always easy. Much has been said on Basil in the preceding chapter, but here an attempt will be made to give a coherent picture of his views on language and its limits, isolated from the particular demands of the polemic with Eunomius.

We begin with what may be pseudo-Basil, namely the Letter 38, addressed to his brother Gregory. Cavallin has found this to be of dubious authenticity (Studien zu den Briefen des hl. Basilius, 71–81). And now Fedwick (A commentary . . .) has exhaustively studied the manuscripts, and confirmed Cavallin's opinion. Some have supposed it to be by Gregory of Nyssa, and Fedwick also entertains the possibility: the text is given by Migne under both headings, PG 32, col. 325/PG 46, col. 235. It does not seem inconsistent with Basil, and in particular is in perfect accord with Letter 8. However, I agree that it is unlikely to be by him, and it is unlikely to be by Gregory into the bargain, since it shows too good a knowledge of Aristotle, or the mediated Aristotelian tradition. The ignorance of both Basil and Gregory of this tradition has been stressed in the preceding chapter.

The words *ousia* and *hypostasis* had come to be of crucial importance, since the trinitarian debate had raised the question of the unity within diversity of the Trinity. Scholars tried to find two aspects, of which these two separate states, unity and diversity, could be predicated. These two aspects had to be fundamental, or somehow basic, because the unity and diversity of the Trinity could not be said to apply to categorially distinct qualities of an entity. They had to apply – and here was the difficulty – to the very being of the godhead. The offence to philosophy seemed all the greater since unity and diversity had long been held to be utterly dissimilar. To resolve this the Christian philosophers sought to distinguish different types of essential being, both equally fundamental, and both equally “essential”, but somehow different. The wealth of the Greek language in the matter of ontology provided the possibility: *ousia* and *hypostasis* were both words for being, and were capable of definitions which could nevertheless distinguish between them.

This is the subject chosen by Basil (?) in Letter 38, and the author wishes to demonstrate that these words contain the possibility of asserting “one, yet three” of the same thing. The author proceeds as follows: if we had to offer a

definition of the three men Paul, Silvanus and Timothy (38, 2), in general terms, we would not offer a separate definition of each of the three men by way of reply. We would offer a definition of their essence (*ousia*), or general categorial characteristics. If we were asked for the *hypostasis*, we would offer an individual statement involving the names and particular characteristics of these persons. Such is the *hypostasis*, the mode of being of that general essence, and the author makes much of the verb from which *hypostasis* is derived, ὑφίστημι. The *hypostasis* is that which “stands under” the general case of being. Essence (*ousia*) is a concept which is uncircumscribed, and it therefore needs some definition to limit it in some way: otherwise *ousia* remains *aperigraptos*. The author asserts the unity of the Trinity in the face of this bifurcated way of characterizing its being: the *ousia* and the *hypostaseis* are known in the same way.

For the account of the uncreated and the incomprehensible is one and the same in the case of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. One is no more incomprehensible or uncreated than another. (38, 3, 11)

This is the language of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* where the question is repeatedly asked about the science of being (*Met.* 1003^a21), and whether it is one, despite the variety of modes which might come under this heading. Aristotle concludes as follows:

Clearly then it belongs to one science (μιάς ἐπιστήμης) to study being (τὸ ὄν) as being, and the attributes within it as being... (1005^a13)

Aristotle is using the word τὸ ὄν for being, but at the beginning of the *Categories* he discusses the question of *ousia*, and the author of Letter 38 is working in a tradition which has conflated the *Categories* and the *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. The *Categories* deals with *ousia* from 1^a to 4^b, and in the course of this passage there is a use of language which is extraordinarily close to Letter 38. Aristotle says in *Categories* 3^b34 that essence (*ousia*) is complete in itself:

No essence, it seems, admits of a more or a less. Δοκεῖ δὲ ἡ οὐσία μὴ ἐπιδέχεσθαι τὸ μᾶλλον καὶ τὸ ἥττον.

The letter asserts that the Trinity is one in essence, with no member of it being either more or less in this respect:

One is no more incomprehensible or uncreated than another. (Letter 38, 3, 11)

Οὐ γὰρ τὸ μὲν μᾶλλον ἀκατάληπτόν τε καὶ ἄκτιστον, τὸ δὲ ἥττον.

The point being made by the authors is exactly the same. Aristotle does not

happen to be talking about the being of the Trinity, but about the autonomy and completeness of essence in general: the author of the Letter simply extrapolates the point in relation to the *ousia* of the Trinity. The point is the same, the language is the same, and clearly the author of the Letter is working within an Aristotle-influenced tradition.

Now of course it was observed in chapter V that Aristotle was carefully studied within the Neoplatonist schools, and it is clear that a mediated Aristotelian tradition would have been available to Basil, or Gregory, or whoever else the author of the Letter was. Did Basil or Gregory have such a detailed knowledge of Aristotelian works, whether in the original or through commentaries? It seems dubious that they had such detailed knowledge of Greek philosophy, given their tendency to misunderstand Eunomius. The author probably had some acquaintance with the *ipsissima verba* of the Aristotelian text, even if couched in some interpretative material deriving from a commentator. Dexippus may be a link here, though I can see nothing of real relevance in his commentary (CAG 4², 54–5). There may be a further mediating source in the form of a Patristic author with philosophical inclinations. What one needs to find here is a source which links the one account of the Metaphysics passage, with the uniformity of essence of the Categories. Syrianus may also lie in the background at some point, since he discusses the Metaphysics passage fully (CAG VI, p.62); and also dwells on the word ἀνόμοιος. This does come from Aristotle himself (Met. 1004^a19 et passim), but Neoplatonist discussion of it may well have been very important for the philosophy of the so-called Anomoeans. I can see no link in Syrianus' discussion of the Aristotle passage (Met. 1005^a13), however.

To return to the point. The author of the Letter asserts, using a principle of Aristotelian metaphysics, that no one member of the Trinity is more incomprehensible than any other. They all share the one *ousia*, and the same *logos* can be given of them all. The Letter proceeds to develop the theme of the particular characteristics of the Trinity, within their overall unity. What is held to be particular, and what general, is obviously crucial here: will incomprehensibility be a specific characteristic, or will it apply to all members of the Trinity? The author is of course interested in other questions as well, but there is an answer given to this one:

In respect of the infinite, the incomprehensible, the uncreated, the uncircumscribed, and all such attributes, there is no differentiation within the life-giving nature, in that, I mean, of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (38, 4, 17)

In other words the scope of negative theology is said to belong to all three members of the Trinity, and not just the Father. The Letter continues by asserting that not only are the members of the Trinity incomprehensible, but also the relationships between them. Thus both that which is common be-

tween them, and that which differentiates them as hypostases, remains mysterious (38, 4, 19). This is later said to be a matter of faith:

Thus faith is more powerful for teachings of a transcendent kind than apprehension through reasoning, and it teaches us both the separation of the hypostases and the conjunction in essence. (38, 5, 31)

In this way the author argues that certain things are incomprehensible; that we would not expect it to be otherwise with transcendent matters, and that accordingly we must not expect a rational demonstration of such ideas. The eye of faith can go further than the techniques of reason.

The Letter has difficulties with this doctrine, however, since Scripture seems to imply that the Son is more knowable than the Father. Certain texts describe him as the "brightness" of the Father's glory, and as the "image" of his person (Heb. 1.3). The author of the Letter is compelled to deal with this by arguing that these two terms do not imply dissociation. Considerable ingenuity is devoted to this point, which is developed firstly by the claim that the brightness of fire and the fire itself are one and the same thing, and secondly by the argument that the form of a body and the body itself are indissociable. On this ground the metaphors of "brightness" and "image", are said not to imply any drawing apart of the Son and the Father. This is a difficult argument to maintain, and the exponent of orthodoxy has here to resort to sophistry to do so: it is generally clear that the Son is revelatory, and that he is presented in a form which is clearer and more accessible than the being of the Father. He is therefore less unintelligible than the Father: indeed this clarification of the deity through an immanent exemplar presupposes just such a difference in intelligibility. The Arian position, and its later offshoot, the Anomoean position, explores this difficulty and develops it: it makes the difference in intelligibility between the Father and the Son the exact point of focus. The author of the Letter wants to maintain a strictly orthodox position: he could have evaded the problem by taking the docetist view that Christ was not in fact Jesus as he appeared in history, but that he only seemed to be. Thus the claim of any difference between the Father and the Son could have been avoided. However he takes the orthodox line that they are "one" (whatever this can mean) and is therefore obliged to attribute equal intelligibility to both.

The implication of all this is as follows. The Arian position is always thought of in terms of the problem of the Trinity. Yet within this framework of discussion there are other issues: the separation out of the members of the Trinity into higher and lower beings meant that the Father tended to assemble around himself the principal accoutrements of transcendence. The Arian position tends therefore to endorse the negative procedure, but in respect of the Father only. Most orthodox responses tend to avoid claims of extreme

transcendence and of the consequent value of negative concepts, but the Cappadocian orthodoxy is slightly different. The defence of the equality and homogeneity of the members of the Trinity is still there, but as part of this the *unknowability of the Father is extended to all three*. The Cappadocians are attracted by the essential mysteriousness of the transcendent, and as orthodox trinitarians, must make this pertain to all three persons of the Trinity. This at least is how the Letter 38, attributed to Basil and others, should be read: as crystallizing the Cappadocian view of incomprehensibility within the Trinity. (The Letter of course could be said to be unorthodox, since one of the anathemas of the Creed of 325 expressly outlaws the claim that God the Son was different from the Father in either *hypostasis* or *ousia*: see Denzinger/Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, no.126 p.53. But this is a matter of semantics: whilst Letter 38 does draw a distinction between the hypostases, it does not do so within the *ousia* of the Trinity. And its intention is to safeguard the unity of the Trinity: it may infringe this rule of language, but in fact it is restructuring the use of that same language in order to maintain the orthodox position which is being defended by the anathemas. It is for this reason that it is here placed in the orthodox category. One may note further that the Letter uses arguments drawn from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and *Categories* to defend the orthodox position. It does however introduce the word *hypostasis*, which Aristotle did not use in these passages. The tradition of Christian philosophy had by now a rich heritage in the use of this word, so prominently figuring in ontological and trinitarian discussions. Even an Aristotelian-style discussion had to use this word: since the Epistle to the Hebrews (1.3) had sanctified it, and since the Neoplatonists had developed it in their own terms, and since no thorough ontological discussion could now take place without it, the word *hypostasis* had to be introduced into any debate. But, despite its absence from the language of Aristotle, we note that Aristotle's concern at the beginning of the *Categories* is exactly that of the author of Letter 38: Aristotle seeks to distinguish general *ousia*, common to a variety of things, and particular *ousias*, referring to individuating characteristics. Aristotle uses *ousia* in the plural, where the author of Letter 38 chooses – and had to choose – the word *hypostasis*).

The Letter 38 therefore shows signs of an updated Aristotelianism. The question of negative theology is not central to the document, but it is clearly involved, in that the Arian position tended to concentrate negative descriptions on the Father alone. In this the Arian position is closer to Neoplatonism, in that it seeks a single and undivided principle at the apex of an ascending series of lower, and more complex principles: this tendency to ascend implies a progressive withdrawal from the plane of matter and discourse, and so the Arian God rises out of language. It seems natural, then, to have a lower deity who is accessible to language, and who is capable of speaking in human terms.

The Letter addresses itself to this when it lists a series of negatives: the infinite (ἄπειρον), the incomprehensible (ἀκατάληπτον), the uncreated (τὸ ἀκτίστως εἶναι), the uncircumscribable (μηδενὶ τόπῳ περιειληφθαι). These are said (Letter 38, 4, 17) to apply without variation to the “life giving nature, namely the Father, Son and Holy Spirit”. The author of the Letter does not therefore reject the negative descriptions, but insists that they apply equally to all members of the Trinity. This is a much weaker endorsement of negative theology than that provided by the unnamed Arian opponent, since the proliferation of positive descriptions of the Son must surely flow on to the Father, if their knowability is considered to be equal.

Turning now to Basil and his uncontested work, we have already seen part of his philosophy of discourse emerge through his attack on Eunomius. The findings of the previous chapter may be summed up as follows. Basil believes that there is nothing inherently wrong with the description “ingenerate”, but he prefers to use the term “Father”, since it is the Scriptural term. This is one front on which Eunomius is attacked, and Basil consistently advocates Biblical language against the allegedly autonomous findings of Greek philosophy. Basil was unconcerned by the issue of whether Eunomius’ ingeneracy was a privative negation or not: neither he nor Gregory understood the problem of privation at first, though Gregory came back to it later, in much greater detail. Basil contents himself with the view that many other descriptions of God have the same negative form, and that it is really immaterial whether they are privations or not. The crux of his concern is really directed towards the singling out of one specific negation for privileged treatment, and associated with this is the Trinitarian point that Eunomius has deliberately singled out an epithet which cannot apply to the other two members of the Trinity. This is the motivating force in Eunomius’ argument, for Basil, and all other points are intended to conceal this fundamental ploy (PG 29, 521A).

Moving now to develop more of Basil’s arguments, he dwells particularly on the question of the meaning of Eunomius’ “ingeneracy”:

For he says that abstract conception (ἐπίνοια) indicates nothing, or that it is false. But he says that the name is completely meaningless, and that it has its existence in pronunciation alone. But this name is so far from the “empty dwellings and the insubstantial appearances” as to be predicated of the conception. So that after the first thought comes to us from the perception, the more subtle and accurate development of the thought is called “conception”. Whence we habitually call this “reasoning”, even if improperly. For example, the simple idea of seed exists in us all, as we know its appearance. In an accurate exposition of it, consideration of more things takes place, and different nouns indicate the things thought of. At one moment we call seed fruit, at another sperm, and again nourishment. . . . Every one of these things is considered through conception, and does not vanish with the sound of the tongue. But thoughts are established in the soul of the thinker. (PG 29, 524B)

Basil's response to Eunomius consists, at this point, in demanding an account of human rational thought. This seems to be a weakness in Eunomius, namely that he allows only for preexistent names in his epistemology, and tends to dismiss others. Thus he believes that these subsequently developed names will vanish as soon as they are articulated, "with the sound of the tongue". Basil's view is the not unreasonable one that thought has some validity, and this really is a question for Eunomius: how does he explain human noetic experience, and what value does he attribute to it? He refers to the tendency of language to dissipate, as we have seen in the previous chapter, but to what extent does he recognize its contribution? Basil offers a view of thought which removes it from perception: a degree of deliberation follows the perception, and this is somehow solidly rooted in the soul. Thoughts are "established" (ἐνίδρυται) in the soul, and this verb suggests a settled disposition. He wants to convey an idea of stability because it is precisely the instability of such thoughts that Eunomius complained of. In other words, he attributes value to the human cognitive process, where Eunomius did not.

It would be interesting to know how Eunomius dealt with this problem of how to evaluate human cognitive processes. He believes that certain words and ideas are given, and are part of that which necessarily is: but how are these communicated to men, and how do they accommodate themselves to other human thoughts? In short, what is the value of Eunomius' own ratiocinations?

It is important to note another point in Basil's philosophy of language: we may take one entity (seed) and give it a variety of names, depending on context. For example, at harvest time we would refer to it as "produce": before a meal as "nourishment". It is our rational capacity which develops these different names, and they are permanent acquisitions of the soul. Whilst Basil is according value to the human noetic process, he is specifically answering Eunomius' complaint about the profusion of names applied to the deity in orthodox theology. Basil's point is that we develop a variety of names for the same thing on rational grounds, and these each have a function. The multiplicity of names for God can therefore have a rational value. Further on Basil continues the point, discussing the many different epithets attributed to Jesus, such as "bread", "way", "gate" and so on.

But being one in substance, and one simple and uncomposed essence, he calls himself a variety of things, fitting the various nouns to the conceptions. For different names are attributed to him according to the difference in operations (ἐνέργειαι), and the mode of good works assumed. For he says that he is "the light of the world", referring by this name to the inaccessible glory of his divinity, and as lightening with the brilliance of knowledge those who are purified in the eye of their souls... And thus, proceeding through each of the names, one discovers the various conceptions of one and the same underlying substrate, in respect of the essence for them all. Who then could spur his tongue to such blasphemy as to dare to say that "these conceptions dissipate with the sound of the voice"? (PG 29, 525AB)

Basil continues by willingly accepting the adjective “ingenerate” as designating one such aspect of his divinity. The important technical term in the above passage is that for the divine “operations” (ἐνέργειαι), a familiar term from Neoplatonism as well as Patristic philosophy. Basil argues that though the deity consists of one pure unity, the many valid conceptions that we have of him are the result of his various “operations”. We see these as different and various, though they emanate from the one unitary source. It is natural, then, that they are many, since the acts of God are many and take place in many contexts. There is no reason to assume, as Eunomius does, that this variety of names is as short-lived as the voices which utter them. These conceptions are “established” in the soul, and respond to that objective plurality of acts, or manifestations. Basil replies to Eunomius, therefore, that the many operations of God on earth require many “conceptions”, and many matching words.

Basil later returns to the issue of Eunomius having given a privileged position to this one word, “ingenerate”. We have examined in the previous chapter the reasons which probably led Eunomius to believe that he had discovered, by compelling arguments, that one single characteristic, and single noun which was applicable to God. But further than this, Basil examines the conundrum of the relationship between the word and the essence in Eunomius’ philosophy. This is, in effect, one of Eunomius’ most important ideas, and it is an odd one to our post-Wittgenstein frame of mind. As indicated earlier, there are parallels in Neoplatonism for this name/essence relationship. Certain words have practically the same status as *daimones*, and are part of being. There was a kind of linguistic positivism abroad, in which Eunomius shared, and it covered quite a wide spectrum of opinion from theurgy to philosophy; it probably also touches the Gnostic Gospel of Truth as I have argued elsewhere. The debate between Eunomius and Basil on this point runs as follows:

Eunomius: It is impossible to conceive of essence as something else the other in question being beyond it, but it itself is the existence (ὕπόστασις), which the name indicates, the noun being truly applicable to the essence.

Basil: They are truly worthy of the judges whom you have imagined, your doctrines. For it is in the market place of dreams, or in the assembly of drunkards that you legislate with such license, with no-one hearing or comprehending what is said, thinking that you yourself having said it, is sufficient to replace every argument. For who is unaware that names which are brought forward for subjects absolutely and in themselves, are indicative of things for them, but these which are uttered in respect of other things show only the relation which is referred to? For example, “man”, “horse”, “ox” – each one of the things named presents something. But “Son”, “slave”, and “friend” show only connections with the name which is linked with them. He who hears the word “creation” (γέννημα) is not carried mentally to some essence, but he has in mind a relationship with another thing, for a creation is said to be the crea-

tion of Somebody. He however who forms a concept not of some being, but indicates only a relation to something else, and proclaims this to be essence, must surely be in the last stages of lunacy. And a moment ago we demonstrated that absolute names, even if they do seem to display some subject, do not present the essence itself, but define specific characteristics of it. (PG 29, 588B–589A)

In my view this is one of the most important of Basil's arguments against Eunomius, in that Basil does appear to be grappling philosophically with Eunomius' point of view. Basil uses the logical distinction between absolute and relational terms, and his point is simply that Eunomius has chosen a relational term to designate the Son, who is said to be a *gennema*, or "creation". The point is that to make such a statement implies a relation, and nothing about the essential being of the Son, which remains undefined. It is somewhat difficult to see what Eunomius is getting at, but his view appears to be formulated in order to forestall the kind of objection made by Basil: he wants to avoid the claim that comparisons are being made between the Father and the Son which tend to diminish the status of the Son. What Basil does is to show beyond any doubt that he has done this. Interestingly, the term "ingenerate", Eunomius' description of God himself, is not a relational term. Its negative form indicates rather an absence of relations, of either a prior or a subsequent kind, that is to say that he envisages God not as created, obviously enough, but not even as creator. But Eunomius somehow seems to want to evade this on the level of the Son as well. Presumably the word "creation" (*gennema*) has the same necessary status as "ingenerate", and that is the point of the remark attributed to Eunomius by Basil above. In other words, Eunomius is claiming for this term the same kind of necessary relationship with the essence to which it refers: it is a claim that certain words are special, and their relationship to reality is real. Basil's criticism is philosophically effective, given that he does not recognize this category of privileged words.

Where does this distinction, which Basil deploys, come from? It is an important question, in view of the way in which Basil's philosophical literacy has become a focus of scholarly enquiry (see the discussions of Rist in the previous chapter). The distinction is between relational (*κατὰ σχέσιν*) terms, and absolute (*τὰ ἀπολελυμένα*) terms. The latter is to be found in Sextus Empiricus (Math. 8.162), but it is infrequent. The use of *σχέσις* is of course known since Aristotle, and it is difficult to pick the source of Basil's argument. It sounds like Greek philosophy, but whether it comes from a Neoplatonist source, or a Christian philosophical tradition is difficult to say. I should be inclined to favour the latter view.

The use of philosophy against philosophy is not wholly characteristic of Basil. He also attacks on the level of authority. Just prior to this passage (Col. 584 B) he demands how Eunomius found this idea that Jesus was a "creation": "from what teaching? From which prophet?" None of the apos-

bles used this label for Jesus, he declares. Eunomius has claimed that the son is a *gennema*, "according to the teaching of the Scriptures". Basil replies that he has found this word nowhere in the Scriptures (*loc. cit.*). This is an interesting case of the conflict between philosophy and religion, since Eunomius claims to be distilling the essence of the Scriptures, but in another language. Basil simply refuses to recognize that language.

One final passage of the *Against Eunomius* should be referred to. It has been noted that Eunomius was an exponent of the *via negativa*, in that he adopted a negative description of God, and affirmed that the negation involved was not a privative negation. Basil, however, is able to outstrip him on this point. Quoting Exodus 6.2-3 ("And I did not reveal my name to them"), Basil continues:

To Eunomius, apparently, did God reveal not only his name, but his very essence. And such an unspeakable thing, which was revealed to none of the elect, he writing in his own books makes public and proclaims carelessly to all men. And those matters held forth to us in promises are beyond human understanding, and the peace of God surpasses every human intellect. For he does not admit that the very essence of God is beyond all human intelligence and beyond all human knowledge. (PG 29, 544A)

This must have been a difficult criticism for Eunomius. Basil is in effect stating the transcendence of God and the incomprehensibility of God; he is therefore advocating negative theology, at least in its weak form, that is the simple assertion of the mysteriousness of the deity. He complains that Eunomius is actually an opponent of such mystery, a pretentious revealer of what are in fact unrevealable truths. Clearly the linguistic realism of Eunomius enables him to do so, since Eunomius clearly states that certain words capture the deity completely and essentially. Basil vaunts himself with being able to emphasise transcendence to a greater degree.

He appears in fact to be right. In committing himself to this view of language, or at least of certain language, Eunomius is far more accepting of the power of language than any Neoplatonist. Of course his ultimate term was a negation, but we recall that Proclus advocated even the abandonment of negation in the end. Eunomius is more attached to language than that, and it looks as if he has combined the *via negativa* with the linguistic realism of the later Platonists. But Basil is able to ride above him with a clear statement of the view for which the Cappadocians are known, namely the transcendence and mystery of the Father.

This is not the place for a full-scale examination of Basil's Platonism, though the subject has recently been given a complete shake-up by Rist (Basil's "Neoplatonism" ...), who has examined in fundamental detail the alleged influences on Basil. Rist takes passages demonstrating Plotinian influence, and then those claimed to stem from Porphyry and Iamblichus: he re-

duces remarkably the number that can be considered to fall within these categories. He remarks in relation to Letter 2 (Rist p.213) that it provides an excellent example of how "platonically" or even "neoplatonically" a Christian can talk, without specific textual dependence on a Neoplatonist occurring.

The interest of the present work is focussed on negative theology and the limits of discourse, but from this narrow standpoint some observations can be made which bear on the dispute. Firstly, we can say, in relation to the abovementioned remark of Rist, that there seemed to be a climate of the time which was broader than certain texts and their direct literary dependents. This seems particularly to be the case with Basil's negative theology, which is quite untechnical. It looks as if Eunomius was much closer to the technical logical developments in the *via negativa* which were characteristic of Proclus, and his predecessors. Basil's sense of the transcendent is not characterized by any technical exploration of negation or privation: he merely states the inaccessibility of the divine along with an endorsement of a great deal of discourse aimed at capturing it, with the vague proviso that language is not always adequate. Exactly how language helps, or fails to help, in the acquisition of knowledge about the divine, is not really dealt with in great detail. His negative theology merely consists of a vague emphasis on the transcendent. Proclus, on the other hand exhaustively considers these questions, and the *via negativa* acquires a degree of logical precision with him. Basil's negative theology is little more than an enhanced sense of the transcendent, or a form of piety.

His statements of transcendence are really closer to Middle Platonism, though I do not suggest a literary link. The idea is too simple and too traditional to make it necessary: it is a sense of the loftiness of the divine which has been in the air since the Middle Platonists, including Clement on the Christian side, and which finds conventional endorsement in Ambrose and Augustine as well. This very loose and elementary form of the *via negativa* does not explore in any detail the extent to which the usefulness of discourse is cut back, or to which the negative can be an epistemological instrument. The negative theology of Plotinus is also quite undeveloped, but there are no grounds for postulating a link here.

It is probably the ultimate irony that Basil has posed as a negative theologian against Eunomius.