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Chapter XIII. Conclusion

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Conclusion

Reason was invented by the Greeks. The word "reason" tends to have different connotations in different cultures, and at different times. The Greeks themselves examined their own concept of reason, and laid out for scrutiny the various elements which constituted it. Eventually they rejected it, at least as a tool for the most important epistemological tasks. Thus, at the end of antiquity, the Greek Neoplatonist Damascius, and the possibly Christian Neoplatonist Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, declare the ultimate inefficacy of reason:

The Good Cause of all . . . is without logos. (Pseudo-Dionysius; PG 3, 1000C)

. . . if, in saying that it is unspeakable, . . . and incomprehensible, our logos collapses . . . (Damascius, 4, p. 7 1.4)

Yet a millenium earlier, Parmenides invites us to assess everything by logos. Clearly, the principle of reason discovered in the Presocratic period has been judged and found wanting. This process was immensely slow, unfolding over centuries: not that the decline of logos was a completely regular process. Like the decline of a currency, that of logos had its fits and starts, its temporary revivals, and its sudden crashes. Interestingly, the themes which contribute to the ultimate scepticism over logos are present virtually from the start, with Plato raising many of them. But we can most effectively contrast Parmenides and Damascius, since Parmenides did believe in a transcendent unifying reality, above the realm of perception, and out of the scope of commonsense: yet for this entire metaphysical vision, Parmenides advocated the use of logos, as opposed to common-sense opinion (*doxa*). By the time of Damascius, logos has been rejected as a way of grasping the truly transcendent.

It would be interesting to know what forms a society's concept of reason. It must be stressed that reason is a *culture-specific* concept, meaning different things in different contexts. It is probable that science, or certain assumptions about how science operates, forms our own view of what reason and the rational is. In the present day, the image of the scientist empirically testing hypotheses through controlled tests, is probably the primary contributing factor to the idea of the rational held by most educated people. In the case of developments in the classical world, it has seemed repeatedly that it was the methods of the mathematicians which formed the Greek notion of reasoning. This is particularly so in the case of reasoning about the ontologically ultimate. The actual practice of certain methods by the geometers stimulated a philosophical interest in the general use of these methods in the practice of metaphysics.

The word *logos* developed a bewildering variety of meanings, including "word", "argument", "reason", "saying", "account", and so on. These meanings find their richest profusion in the work of Philo, who plays constantly on the ambiguity of *logos*, in a way which introduces a whole host of Jewish concepts.

It was argued that *logos*/reason found its origin in the idea of collecting and listing. This seems borne out by the philosophy of reason which unfolds. One of the chief doubts about the value of reason is that it divides and fragments. In the case of Plotinus it was noted (see my *What is negative theology?* ... 11) that this author associates intellect with number: intellect generates number and imposes it across the field of its activities. This explains the multiple structure of the rational process. Any statement or syllogism contains a number of parts; even a short statement such as "the table is red" contains three elements: the table, being, and quality of redness. In the view of Plotinus such a statement is divisive, or fragmenting: whereas one might be inclined to see the grammar of the sentence as having a unifying, or synthesizing effect, Plotinus would rather have us emphasize its dividing effect. The vision of a whole is, by the grammar of *logos*, reduced into individual parts. The very structure of the subject, verb and predicate instantiates number, and introduces a dividing mechanism into the wholeness of being.

Differentiation is the fundamental technique of discourse: this is the crux of Neoplatonism. This is not the "différance" of Derrida, referred to below, but the creation of segments which can be reassembled in the form of a statement: several statements can be assembled into a syllogism. This divisive activity is seen as working to the disadvantage of the holistic vision of reality which is ultimately dictated by the underlying existence of the One itself. Knowledge is of the One, and it is therefore curious that discourse operates in a mode which disunites objects and facts, by differentiating them into their component parts.

Over the Hellenistic period, *logos* tended to become an hypostasis, an intermediary principle or being. Thus Stoicism has it as an organizing principle: Philo has it as an envoy, and St John has it as an envoy "made flesh". Once *logos* has been thus isolated and identified, it becomes an hypostasis, and once an hypostasis, it seems to be drawn towards the lower world of material life. It becomes a function of the material world, and this seems to contribute to its demise. It is probably this downward pressure on *logos* which renders it able to be assailed as a principle of ignorance in one of the Gnostic documents. Its associations have become too this-worldly, and it consequently incurs some of the disapproval with which the Gnostic regards the material world.

Its hypostatization also leads to its being relegated to a lower epistemological status: once it has been identified as an intermediary principle, it is easier to say that the type of knowledge it provides, is knowledge of a lower kind. Its mechanism is seen to be appropriate to an inferior type of reality.

Further, with the thought of Clement of Alexandria we see a growing tendency to view the word as a kind of mask. Speech is a form of concealment, and Clement develops a play on words between Hermes and hermeneutics, and the implication is that language will require some form of decoding. There is therefore a failure of logos to communicate, which is like the failure of physical reality to be real, or the failure of truth to be manifest in the world of senses. In other words logos is again relegated to the level of lower reality, and like lower reality constitutes a kind of epistemic obstacle for those who would perceive higher things. This is an important step in the career of logos, and a particularly difficult one for a Christian thinker to take, since the word, the flesh, and the historical process are all pivotal concerns in orthodox Christian theology; but it does show how logos comes to be dismissed at the end of antiquity, by both Damascius and the Pseudo-Dionysius.

The same cloud hovers over the idea of thought: in Plotinus it appears to be a lower-level activity. It is an aid "given to beings . . . who would of themselves be sightless". Logos is imposed on matter by intellect, but as logos hastens into matter, it suffers a diminution. Thus Plotinus too shares in the tendency to draw logos down towards material reality, and consequently in the tendency to dismiss it as an epistemological tool.

With Proclus we find a new emphasis on the *odis* of the soul, that particularly human anguish caused by the desire to know and speak of the highest principle. We begin to catch a glimpse here of the psychologization of knowledge and language, which is strongly present in Damascius. This really is the final step in the marriage of logos with the material world. On this view knowledge and discourse are simply products of the pangs associated with a sense of emptiness: they have no intellectual value, or epistemological value, in themselves. They are merely signs of our psychological state. Taken to its extreme, this view makes of language nothing more than a gasp of pain. All the immensely complex structures of Greek metaphysics are reduced to mere effects of our state of lack. Discourse does not deal in knowledge or truth: it simply gives voice to our epistemological pain. Discourse is not about knowing, but is simply a sign of the *experience* of ignorance. A heavily sceptical note is sounded yet again in Greek philosophy.

The Cappadocians have gone down in history as the champions of negative theology, and of the mystical tradition in Christianity. Yet in this context they are positively optimistic about the power of language to capture important truths. Though quite prepared to say that God is beyond language, Basil and Gregory also place strong emphasis on the value of theological language as a propaedeutic. This is part of their discussion of the term *epinoia*, the term which denotes the imaginative capacity of the human mind; its ability to generate linguistic structures. It is the Cappadocians who are the champions of the view that language is convention, that its terms are used by common

consent, and are not there necessarily, or *kata physin*. For Gregory, every noun is a sign (*semeion*) symbolising something else, and the activity of using such signs he endorses. He also believes that God is ultimately nameless, but this does not conflict with his positive use of language in certain contexts.

He positively advocates the use of certain 'relations', and regards the development of language as a God-given human activity. The issue which really divides Gregory from his Arian opponents is that concerning the origin of language: for Eunomius, language has a certain mysterious power which results from its givenness. Names come from above, and therefore they possess a strength which is beyond themselves, and in particular which is greater than that of any human device. This view appears to be part of a revived Neoplatonist interest in names, which we have seen developing in Proclus. It is particularly associated with a renewed interest in Plato's dialogue, the *Cratylus*. It appears that both Neoplatonists and heterodox Christians were interested in this theory of the origin of language, and I have argued elsewhere that the Gnostic Gospel of Truth contains an interpolation which reflects this view of the givenness of names. It is a revival of the old debate over whether names are natural, or conventional. The new view says that names are certainly there, and this not by convention, but they are not exactly natural (*kata physin*). They are bestowed by that which is ontologically prior to them. The Cappadocian position is the reverse, namely that language is a human device, and that it originates from the minds of the ontologically subsequent to the entities being described.

Little of this debate is reflected in the writings of Augustine. However, the same tendency to validate language is there in his writings, again juxtaposed with the claim that God is ultimately indescribable. In a sense it is Augustine who develops most strongly the Christian notion of the value of history; and with history comes language. His view of language is very much like his view of the unfolding historical process, since he sees language as a linear activity. Passages of the *Confessions* have been alluded to, in which Augustine pictures language as evolving in rows and rows of letters, syllables, and then words: he seems to perceive language as moving in a direct line towards some kind of end. This is his exact view of the progress of humanity: it is Augustine above all who asserts the linear movement through time of the human race towards a certain end. All this is part of Augustine's elevation of the principle of memory into a key faculty of the human race. Memory becomes the principle of continuity, that which connects the beginning to the centre, and the centre to the end. It is that which guarantees the coherence of the personality, and it is that which endows the historical process with its wholeness. Needless to say, it also makes language what it is: the word at the beginning of the sentence has to be linked through its grammatical structure with the word at the centre of the sentence and the word at the end of the sentence: it is memory which enables this linear structure to gather itself to-

gether into one process. The question of the energy which causes us to leap from word to word, from subject to verb to predicate, and therefore to complete our sentences, is also of interest to Augustine. Here he falls back on the Platonic notion of Eros, which he reinterprets in his own philosophy of desire: it is desire for knowledge which causes us to go ahead, to move forward in the pursuit of the end of our sentences. All this is illustrated in Augustine's description of the recital of a psalm: in beginning the recital one pronounces certain syllables which then become words, and these recede into the past. These words are retained in memory and eventually the whole of the psalm is deposited in the receptacle of the memory. As the future is consumed so the past, and the memory, is enlarged. Augustine extends the image of the recital of the psalm into a comment on the whole of history: just as individual syllables, through a linear movement, come to make up sentences, and then a whole psalm, so the individual events which constitute the lives of men, go eventually to make up the whole of human history. Language never quite disappears, but is deposited in the "innumerable palaces" of the memory (Conf. X.8). Discourse is part of the historical process.

Augustine further explores the nature of discourse in the *De Doctrina Christiana*, together with the whole notion of meaning. A sign is that which signifies something, and the work of the interpreter is to discover its meaning. Signifiers may be found everywhere, including, of course on the pages of Scripture. Many incidental things may contain meaning, and so exegetes may have to be aware of the possible symbolic significance of trees, footprints, and all kinds of events. At times it appears as if Augustine's pursuit of meaning in the pages of Scripture is somewhat like that of the modern literary critic, who by multiplying a series of references and subjective connections, finds a meaning which is far removed from the text itself and any possible authorial intention. Augustine's philosophy of meaning is based on the notion of an author who desires to communicate, and who sets down a certain kind of discourse for this purpose. Though a modern reader of Augustine's great hermeneutical work could gain the impression of some indiscipline in the mode of interpretation advocated, and might possibly see some comparison with the modern deconstructionist approach, in particular that espoused by Derrida with his idea of "différance", it is nevertheless true that the two views are quite dissimilar. Derrida's "différance", discussed in Appendix II, is the capacity to generate a series of connections independently of the text and the intentions of its author: it is the reader who has this capacity and indeed, this is part of his creative role. Augustine, however, assumes always that we are bound by the authorial intention of God himself, though the way in which meaning is conveyed to us may indeed explore the capacity to create an interlocking series of references by the use of certain words. Augustine thus seems to believe in the objective meaning of a text, but he envisages a very loose way of arriving at this meaning. At least, it appears loose, in com-

parison with the literalism of some modern forms of interpretation. Allegorical significances are rife, and it is assumed that one will explore the suggestions of all words and symbols. Like Origen, Augustine lays down certain rules governing allegorical interpretation, but one is nevertheless left with the impression of a deregulated approach to reading, which will allow the mind to roam far more widely than would a literal approach to interpretation. In this sense Augustine is close to Clement of Alexandria, who sees the whole of the universe as impregnated with meaning, and who sees the act of reading as almost synonymous with the process of living in reality. Meaning is everywhere, since the material instantiations of transcendent reality are everywhere. Thus with these two authors, reading *is* the process of generating a series of references, but within the overall control of the Author of meaning himself.

Augustine is the greatest exponent of the value of language in ancient philosophy, whether Pagan or Christian. Because he integrates discourse into his philosophy of history, he is able to give a view of language which benefits from the same analysis as he has provided for the notion of human history. The notion of development in time, and its validation by the incarnation, can equally well be applied to a philosophy of language, and Augustine carries out this manoeuvre. But with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, we have the final word, as it were, and it is with this author's scepticism that we commence the conclusion. For the Areopagite there is no *logos* of God. This is the single most important fact of his philosophy of language: there is no attempt to make a place for human discourse, nor any attempt to validate it. There is no philosophy of human activity, nor of the future, such as we find in Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine. The Areopagite's positive use of language is confined to his descriptions of lower levels of reality to do with the souls, intellects, angels, and other derivative beings. Nevertheless, this author did give us a work entitled 'The Divine Names', and there is a certain amount of positive theology in this work. Like the Arians and Neoplatonists discussed above, Pseudo-Dionysius believes in the value of certain names as given from above. These names are virtually *kata physin*, and derive their meaning and their ontological strength from their transcendent sources. This view about the origins of language must have been peculiarly dominant in Platonist Christian circles, coming as it appears to do from a reinterpretation of the Cratylus. It ought to be emphasised that this philosophy of names indicates the presence of a very positive view of language indeed, since on this view meaning and being are coextensive. No relativism at all is possible in such an understanding, because meaning is part of the givenness of reality. It should also be emphasised that this very positive view of discourse comes from those considered to be the most extreme exponents of the *via negativa*: that is, from Proclus and his predecessors, from certain Gnostics, from the neo-Arians, and from the Areopagite himself.

But of course the validity of these words is restricted to a certain level of being. Typically, in the *Divine Names*, the Areopagite begins his fourth chapter with a lot of language about a lot of lower beings, drawing an elaborate analogy with the rays of the sun. He will talk greatly about the rays of the sun but when, at the end of the chapter, he comes to talk about the sun itself, in Section 7, he relapses into the usual collection of negatives: not coming to be, not passing out of being, not increasing or decreasing, not beautiful to some and ugly to others, and so on. It is interesting to note that at the end of Section 4 of the fourth Chapter, the Areopagite does not take the step which we might expect of a Platonist. Having talked of the rays of the sun which illuminate the world, which give life to plants, and which sustain all reality, the Areopagite does not take the step of claiming that the sun is the Good: he explicitly repudiates this Middle Platonist link between the Sun, the Good and God, in order to substitute a verse of Paul, namely Romans 1.20. To sum up, language for the Areopagite belongs to the lower stages of reality, and those which transcend the latter can only be the subject of negations.

This leads us to the question of the *via negativa* itself. In the first place, some remarks on the subject of silence are necessary. It has been observed throughout this book that interest in silence, as a virtue or an epistemologically useful posture, occurs mainly in the second half of the period covered, that is to say in the late classical period. The early classical period is remarkable for its confidence in the power of logos. It is not at the moment of greatest enthusiasm for the power of logos, the time of Plato, Aristotle, the Sophists, or the Stoics, that we should seek for an interest in the absence of logos or the value of silence. As in the period of the Renaissance, the period of classical Greece was remarkable for its belief in the power of discourse. Language cascaded over the heads of the average Athenian, whether it came from philosophers, from orators, or Sophists. The power of discourse to resolve the questions of political life, and the questions of morality and metaphysics, seemed paramount: naturally there was much discussion over the kinds of logos available and much mutual recrimination between the different types of exponent of this form of activity, but the overall truth remains that the classical period was a period of indulgence in logos. It is with the late Greek writers that we first begin to see an interest in silence.

Silence has a value in Philo, and thenceforth is found with increasing regularity in the later Greek philosophers. It is not simply a moral matter, but silence is recommended as being superior to discourse in the matter of knowledge and its pursuit. Silence is now advocated as an antidote to speech: it is often not clear whether the silence may include that inner form of speech which may take place without articulation. But most often the advocacy of silence is associated with the absence of discourse altogether. This heralds the arrival of a meditative frame of mind, and announces the monastic silence

which develops in late antiquity and the mediaeval period. The value of silence is a difficult thing for a Christian thinker to assert of course, and much less difficult for a Neoplatonist. Despite this, numerous Christian thinkers do assert the value of silence. Origen is one who confronts most clearly the dilemma involved in this new current in Greek philosophy, and its reconciliation with the notion of revelation which is inherent in Christianity. The New Testament story of the dumbness of Zacharias lodges permanently within Christianity the symbol of silence followed by speech, upon the birth of the child Jesus. Origen devotes an entire homily to this symbol, offering an allegorical interpretation according to which the silence of Zacharias symbolizes the state of the Jews prior to God's self-revelation. The silence is broken at the incarnation. For the purposes of the allegory, Origen goes further and argues that Zacharias was devoid of any rational capacity in his mute state. Origen is able to exploit the ambiguity of the Greek word *logos*, by claiming that Zacharias was devoid of both speech and reason: Jerome's translation makes this clear by the fact that he feels obliged to use two words *ratio* and *sermo* to express the Greek word being employed. But Origen goes on to claim that Christ has now made speech possible, and that silence is the lot of the Jews. This is more or less the orthodox position on the incarnation: it enables speech about God. It is after all clearly stated in the prologue to John's gospel, that the *logos* became flesh and entered into human history.

But, despite this background, there is still a role for silence in the development of Christian epistemology. Paul's mystical experience as described in II Corinthians chapter 12 includes the inability to communicate what he had seen: if not his inability, at least his unwillingness. Whatever the situation, Origen returns to this frequently and emphasises that Paul's travel through silence is an archetypal spiritual experience. It is the Spirit which teaches truths which cannot be uttered in words. Setting aside the peripheral issue of whether the call to silence was a kind of vow, like the discipline of the mystery religions, a voluntary act required of the believer, it is clear that silence was regarded as a part of the spiritual experience of the Christian, and a part of the highest form of that experience. Thus in the exposition of Christianity given by Origen at least, the assertion of a new communication in language stands side by side with the assertion of the necessity of an experience of silence. Prayer, for example, should be an exercise in silence rather than the delivery of a series of speeches.

Obviously enough, there is a tension building up here between the influence of Neoplatonism and that of orthodox Christian doctrine. Origen appears to be endeavouring to reconcile two contradictory streams. This may be true, but at the same time it is difficult to envisage any religion maintaining that its fundamental truths can be totally apprehended within language. Where the transcendent is at stake, some doubts over the power of language must subsist, since it is clear enough that language is part of every day experi-

ence, and can only do tasks related to that experience. The discovery of silence, which is common to both Christian philosophy and Neoplatonism in late antiquity, is a recognition of the fact that language, though intended to reveal, may in fact conceal. The very instrument of enlightenment is seen as constituting the obstacle to enlightenment. A similar problem applies to the idea of the divine epiphany, or the incarnation, for although Christ is heralded as the revelation, he is also seen as a barrier to a true perception of the divine. This is reflected in some of the discussion of Christ as the face (*prosopon*) of God: the full ambiguity of the Greek word for person is used in such discussion, since this word can refer to both the mask of the Greek actor as well as the notion of the persona. Thus the 'person' of Christ comes to be seen in its externality and the desire for the knowledge of what lies behind is the more urgently present. The very act of revelation in these terms, that is the provision of the person of God in the form of a human face, raises the question of what God would have been like in his own nature. It is the very act of revelation which calls up further questions in the person desperate for knowledge – and this was the temper of the late Greek period. The idea of a revelation in this form must have seemed tantalisingly incomplete. The presentation of the face of Christ simply enhanced the suggestion of the mystery which lay behind such a mask. Thus revelation is ultimately self-defeating.

Oddly enough, the Christian and the Neoplatonist solution to this dilemma were roughly the same. Language and all its works were regarded as constituting a propaedeutic, that is an initial form of teaching or an instruction which could guide the spirit along what might ultimately be the right direction, but which could not assure the certainty of reaching the destination. In Proclus for example, it is silence which actually concludes the majestic commentary on Plato's *Parmenides*. After all negations have been completed, then negation in general is negated: this last act is followed by ultimate silence. Similarly in Christian thought the advocacy of silence comes after the teaching acquired through Christology, springing from the idea of the divine incarnation, and after the propositional-style theology which develops around this.

Silence is the absence of speech. The mind still functions, but in a non-verbal way. It assumes a mental activity which is not speech-like. The deficiencies of speech have now been well recognized, and these include the notion that speech fragments and diminishes, whereas the meditative act of silence can produce a form of knowledge which transcends these limitations. Refraining from speech allows this kind of exploration to occur, and silence is therefore a kind of gap, which is not an emptiness: it is a positive absence. It has no structure and it will therefore be intractable in the face of any intellectual or institutional discipline which might be applied to it: it cannot be changed in any way.

It remains to ask what the relationship of silence is with the *via negativa*.

The *via negativa* appears to be a form of non-language, of the absence of language. At first sight the two ideas seem intimately related, since that to say that God is unknowable, incomprehensible, unspeakable, seems to constitute an approach which will perfectly well accommodate the call to silence. But in fact the negative way and the silence of the mystic are not closely related. The use of negatives is over and over regarded as a linguistic technique, that is to say, part of the armoury itself. This is particularly true in the case of Proclus, who is perhaps the foremost exponent of the *via negativa* in antiquity. Proclus asserts over and over again that the negative method produces positive notions, that it is the 'mother of affirmation'. The approach to negation of the modern philosopher will no doubt be different from that of the ancient philosopher, since in modern logic it is often considered that negation is a dispensable form of discourse, in that a negative can be replaced by another type of positive in most circumstances. In late Greek philosophy the way of developing this same problem is located in the specific context of epistemology and transcendental ontology. It is the capacity of the negative statement to *produce knowledge* which is explored in this context. But the negative way is always a part of language: it is a linguistic manoeuvre. Thus, what is negated is almost as important as the negative itself. It is important to note that words to be negated are not just chosen at random: if one were to compile a list of all negative statements made about God in late antiquity, one would find the same characteristics negated over and over by different authors. Festugière has done this for the writings of the middle Platonists, and a similar task could be carried out for the later Platonist and Christian philosophers, though this would not be a particularly revealing activity. It is immediately obvious that the same things are negated over and over again and the net effect of this is the question. Clearly the positive value of the words negated have some importance: otherwise they would not have been selected. A list of negatives attached to a series of positives somehow fix thought in a certain position, or more accurately a certain posture: they point it in a certain direction. Now the fact that these positives are negated does not dismiss them from the mind, or annul them completely. The negative is not like some sort of science fiction machine which causes things to cease to be, to evaporate completely. The negative and the positive are interdependent. Augustine says in the *Confessions* that God is like a perfume, but which is not borne away by the wind, or like a taste which does not fade in the mouth: he has negated his two images but the aura of the positive concept remains through the negative. It is this interdependence of the negative and the positive which was most fully explored by Proclus and it is this which led him to develop his view of hypernegations, that is the type of negation which is in fact the assertion of something higher and fuller than the positive at first envisaged. On this view then, the positive statement is negated in order to point to a higher and fuller form of existence: if God is said to be unintelligible,

then this means that he is of a higher order intelligibility. The negative, for Proclus, points in a direction of transcendence. There is no negative without a positive: we can have no negative theology without firstly the enunciation of certain statements of positions, and certain images. Negative theology is parasitic on positive theology, and will not be able to function until the assertion of positive statements has been carried out. It will then attach itself to these positive statements and effect its own modification. The question is, what exactly is the modification thus effected? It is Proclus on the Greek side, and Pseudo-Dionysius on the Christian side, who give the clearest answer to this question about the role of the negative: both point to the positive, transcendent significance of negating the traditional epithets about God. The *via negativa* is a second-phase activity, which depends on positive theology for its value.

The negative is virtually a trick. It appears to dismiss or annul a concept while allowing it to remain visible in the linguistic presentation. To say that God is unintelligible is different from saying nothing at all: the negation of intelligibility is different from the absence of any statement. Though one might have negated it, the notion "intelligibility" remains as part of the formula and exercises some influence over the concept formed. The negative does not evacuate the concept of its meaning: it constitutes some form of modification which is not equivalent to complete annulment of the concept. It is for this reason that I stress the difference between the negative way, and the way of silence. For the way of silence is just this total absence of concepts: it is the way of silence which constitutes the complete annulment, which the negative fails to achieve. In this sense the way of silence is a far more radical renunciation of language, than is the *via negativa*: it envisages no props whatsoever, whereas the negated assertion allows a prop to remain. If this were not the case, the same negatives would not continually reappear in the works of the later Platonists and Christian philosophers. It is somehow important that certain specific concepts be negated, not just any concepts, and the negation of these constitutes a linguistic act of a certain kind. If the authors concerned had not wished to retain some aura of the positive concepts which they negate, they would not have asserted these negations: they would simply have refrained from any statement whether negative or positive. It is this ability to communicate despite itself, which constitutes the negative way as explored in late Greek and early Christian philosophy. It is not by accident that the negative way is coupled in its initial formulations, with the way of analogy. The way of analogy first appears among the Middle Platonists, and constitutes a resounding statement of faith in the techniques of language: the *via negativa* is coupled with this as one of the ways to knowledge of the ultimate. It is clearly conceived as a way of working within language.

The way of silence is therefore non-linguistic, but the *via negativa* is a

function of language. It is nevertheless true that the *via negativa* uses language in a way which is unexpected and could almost be said to be anti-linguistic. For the positive concept encloses, but the negative expands the field of understanding. If God is "good" then certain limitations are placed on our picture of him: if he is said to be "non-good", then we have our minds opened up to an infinite number of possibilities. The negation frees thought in such a way as to allow it to envisage a greater range of concepts – all concepts, in fact, except the one negated. This delimiting activity of the negative must surely be part of the attraction of it in the epistemology of late antiquity. The negative de-specifies, so that thought is holistic, rather than fragmented. In this way the negative liberates human thought and opens it up to the vastness of the positive and transcendent concepts envisaged by the later Platonists. The *via negativa* thus has a twofold mode of operating: in the first place the positive concepts selected fix the thought in a certain approach, and in the second place the negative opens it up to the vastness of that same concept in a fuller and more perfect mode. This "opening up to vastness" is an essential part of the function of the *via negativa*, but even in this phase, it is still parasitic on prior affirmations being made.

It is probably for this reason that Damascius, the most sceptical of all the most ancient writers, rejects the *via negativa*. It is too thoroughly a linguistic ploy. Damascius' objection is that after negating a positive concept, we are simply left with the unknown. He advances several arguments against the *via negativa*, and appears to be at odds with Proclus in this: in the end for Damascius we are left with intractable silence, that is to say silence which cannot be made over in any way. Language for him may be of some use but only in the sense that it indicates the way: language is thus reduced to little more than a gesture of pointing. The One "abides in the inner sanctuary of that silence". Damascius, even more than Pseudo-Dionysius emphasises that in the end language terminates in silence. There is in fact a comparative lack of emphasis on silence in the works of the Areopagite, and this is probably because he is closer in spirit to the positive *via negativa* of Proclus. The Areopagite is full of negations but is very intent on framing them: he is not about to suggest that they be abandoned as useless, or that we give up speaking in favour of pure silence. This is probably because he has in view a positive contribution from the *via negativa* and this faith in linguistic activity is like that of Proclus, and in the end rejected by Damascius.

Damascius really represents the turning of the full circle from the period of Parmenides. The discovery of logos by Parmenides has led to its own rejection. Parmenides had thought logos to be suitable for the higher metaphysical tasks, and it is precisely for these tasks that Damascius rules it out. Parmenides wrote with the consciousness of being part of the advance guard, giving expression to the victory of philosophy over common sense and *mythos*. Damascius writes with the benefit of centuries of enquiry into logos,

and makes a sceptical contribution to the last stages of classical Platonism. But there is no new stage offered. Unlike Parmenides, he fails to recommend a new epistemological tool.

As far as the Christians are concerned, the *via negativa* is in fact of little prominence overall. The Areopagite constitutes the exception to this generalization, since with him the *via negativa* attains a kind of climax, but he is atypical, and one may indeed wonder whether he was a Christian thinker at all. As for the general Christian position, even those writers who are normally considered to be the most prone to the emphasis on mystery and on the negative way, the Cappadocians, have been seen to give a thoroughgoing endorsement to language. The Christian thinkers are quite able to reconcile an assertion of the unknowability of God with the general endorsement of language. Ecclesiology must play a part here, since language and ecclesiastical authority go hand in hand. Without the endorsement of doctrine and without the ability to clarify positions, the Church would have failed to maintain its social structure. In the end, the *via negativa* is anti-institutional, and the more radical assertion of silence, much more so. The institutionalisation of Christianity required doctrine, expressed in propositional form, and the *via negativa* is inimical to such a tendency. The *via negativa* opens, rather than closes, options, and it is for this reason that it could not become part of mainstream Christianity. Thus it has been argued that Christianity in the Patristic period has almost no *via negativa*, in comparison with the fullness of its development within Neoplatonism. Augustine was able to assert that God is best known by not knowing, but at the same time he provided the most resounding statement of faith in discourse to be found in antiquity since the classical period of Parmenides and Plato. It is in fact the Christian tradition which maintains and preserves logos, following its discovery by the Greeks. The Greeks become sceptical about it, but Augustine offers, in the Confessions and the *De Doctrina Christiana*, the most complete statement of the value of discourse and of the function of discourse that we have in antiquity: these statements parallel, and are intimately involved with, his great statement of the value and progress of history in the City of God. Augustine most fully recognises the principle of the word becoming flesh, and logos is caught up with the new Christian validation of history. In a way which could never have been foreseen by Parmenides, logos is preserved by a barbarian religion which has logos disclose itself in the immanent.