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Appendix I.

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Appendix I

The meaning of privation: a reply to J. C. M. van Winden

The review of my *Gnosis* (I) (an article which appeared in the *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum*) offered by the above scholar in *Vigiliae Christianae*¹, deserves a reply. Van Winden makes certain mistakes about the language of privation and negation in Aristotle. These are important mistakes, and they require a response, since Aristotle's usage of the terms *στέρησις*, *ἀπόφασις*, and *ἀφαίρεσις* lays the foundation for the development of negative theology in both the Neoplatonist and the Christian Neoplatonist tradition. I will turn to this issue last.

In the first place, van Winden makes a criticism which raises an interesting issue. I had claimed (col. 473) that the Jewish scriptures were marked by a tension between an anthropomorphic conception of God, and one which sought to preserve a sense of transcendence, and to emphasise the difference between God and his creatures. It is argued that this is a matter of "holy scripture", and of apprehension by "faith" (p. 70), and that some recognition of these distinctions is necessary.

That may be so, but it is important to recognize that this tradition merged with the Greek philosophical tradition to form Patristic Philosophy. While the Greeks were seeking the *ἀρχή*, or first principle of reality, and pursuing the question of how it might be known, the Jews were worshiping Yahweh and either following or diverging from his will. On the face of it, the concerns of the Greeks and the Jews are incomparable, but the eye of history sees them come together in the Christian period. The *Reallexikon für Antike und Christentum* is precisely concerned with such unlikely syntheses, and so an understanding of Christian philosophy requires a preliminary statement of the philosophical Jewish background. (One might concede the influence of Greek philosophy on pre-Christian Judaism without overturning the general point being made here.) Thus, though the Greek concern with *episteme* contrasts with the Jewish desire for a filial relationship with Yahweh, it is nonetheless true that these two coalesce, firstly in the writings of Philo, and subsequently in the philosophy of the Fathers. One could put it this way: despite the fact there seem to be different ways of thought at stake, God was the ultimate object of concern for the Jews, and the *arche* the ultimate object of concern for the Greeks. The two approaches may seem incommensurate, but it was precisely because they deal with matters of ultimate concern that the fusion occurs. The juxtaposition of the living God with the rational principle of the Greeks finds its most successful expression in Augustine's Confes-

1 36 (1982) 70-75.

sions. The paradox is that Patristic philosophy can only be understood in the light of non-philosophical influences.

Van Winden continues to argue (74) that some error lies in the statement that epistemology is a matter of logic in Stoicism, and that it is in the end based on a materialist view of reality. This is the overall picture of Stoicism that should be retained. Van Winden raises the problem of the *lekton* as an obstacle to my generalization, referring to the incorporeal nature of these semantically significant entities. What is the *lekton*? The ancient sources show some disagreement about the meaning of this word: Simplicius says that the Stoics identified as *lekta* both things uttered, and thoughts². Other sources suggest that this understanding was incorrect, and A. A. Long points to a passage of Simplicius himself which distinguishes between utterances and *lekta*, and thoughts and *lekta*³. Sextus Empiricus⁴ provides a somewhat different interpretation, which sees the *lekton* as separate from thought, but coexistent (παρυφιστάμενον, possibly meaning "dependent on") with thought. Sextus notes that the sound of the utterance about the object is corporeal, and that the thing itself is corporeal, but the thing signified (σεμαινόμενον), or the *lekton*, is incorporeal.

There are grounds, therefore, for thinking that my claim that Stoicism is controlled by an overall materialism might be only partly true. One might imagine that the *lekta*, if incorporeal, might have had a life of their own, a *metaphysical* life, uninfluenced by the material conditions of other reality. Simplicius' and even Sextus' view, with their disjunction between the *lekta* and *thoughts*, might seem to permit this. I take this to be van Winden's concern when he claims⁵ inconsistency in the following words from my text, as translated by Kehl: "Die stoische Erkenntnistheorie gehörte in den Bereich der Logik u. gründete sich auf einer materialistischen Auffassung von der Wirklichkeit"⁶.

In an article of this kind one strives to say complicated things briefly, yet accurately: in the above lines it is simply being claimed, as it often⁷ is, that Stoicism is in the end a one-principle system; that its monism must be held to

2 In Cat. (CAG.VIII) p.10, 3ff. See B. Mates, *Stoic Logic*, p.13ff.

3 A. A. Long, *Language and Thought in Stoicism*, in Long (ed), *Problems in Stoicism* (London 1971), p.80. See Simplicius, in Cat. p.397, 8ff: Long points to a confusion in Simplicius on this point.

4 Adv. Math. VIII. 12.

5 P. 72.

6 Col. 466.

7 See the article *Stoïcisme* (by Egli) in *The Encyclopaedia Universalis* (p.395); or Bréhier, *The History of Philosophy* (Univ. of Chicago Press edition, 1965, i, p.37): "... for the Stoics it is in sensible things that Reason acquires the plenitude of its reality. This accounts for the necessary solidarity of the three parts of philosophy according to which, following the example of the Platonists, they segregated philosophical problems: logic, physics, and ethics ... [these] are for the Soics inseparably linked ...". See also F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, i, p.422-3 on Stoic monism.

be its identifying characteristic, and that materialism constitutes the overall determinant of the system. If this is so, then the apparent freedom of the *lekta* from the material process is a problem: it is indeed a classic problem of Stoic studies, and it seems set to remain so. The relation of the *lekta* to the material process has always been, and will remain an outstanding problem. Benson Mates⁸ has the following comment on the issue (quoted without footnotes):

“We cannot attribute the doctrine of *lekta* to the Stoics without certain reservations. There seems to have been a dispute within the school itself whether any such things existed. This, however, is hardly surprising, since, so far as we know, the prevailing Stoic metaphysical view was pansomatism, the view that only bodies exist. Sextus tells us that some have denied the existence of the *lekta* and that these are not only men of other schools – for example, the Epicureans – but also some of the Stoics themselves. For instance, Basileides and his followers held that nothing incorporeal exists. Later, Sextus mentions that the battle over the existence of the *lekta* is unending.”⁹

The real issue, as Long perceives¹⁰, is whether the *lekta* have existence, and if so, what the nature of this existence is. A further question is whether the existence of the *lekta* is dependent on, or controlled by, some other phenomenon. This could be suggested by the passages of Simplicius and Sextus quoted above. Long in fact concludes that “. . . no Stoic to our knowledge asserted their independent existence”¹¹. If one wanted to pursue the idea that the *lekta* are somehow connected to the material world, one would trace the inter-dependence of *lekta* and thoughts back to the dependence of thought on the *phantasia*, or “presentation”, that which imprints itself on the mind or the senses. In this way one could show that both thought and the *lekta* are stimulated by the presentation of an object to the mind – and therefore ultimately operated by external reality.

It would be very difficult to show this, however, and the reconciliation of Stoic pansomatism with the idea of a separate logic of discourse, or of a separate functioning of meaning, remains one of the main problems of Stoic studies. It is clear that the Stoics move away from Aristotle’s logical objectivism: for the latter the logic of things determines the logic of thought. Putting this in the context of mind, Aristotle believed in the identity of mind and its objects¹². The Stoics, in some way at least, severed mental processes from external processes. But in view of the fact that they also emphasized a material-

8 Stoic Logic (Univ. of California Press, 1961), p.15.

9 This difficulty is also felt by Pohlenz (Die Stoa I, p.39); in discussing the *lekta*, Pohlenz nevertheless recalls that “die Stoiker immer in konkreter Anschauung denken”, and stresses their corporealist approach.

10 Op. cit. p.90.

11 Loc. cit.

12 On the Soul 429^a 15ff.

ist account of reality, one must suspect that for them the logic of thought is *ultimately* founded in the material process. This is the safest conclusion, despite the difficulties involved, and for this reason my summary of the position in col. 466 stands. In the end, with Stoicism, one has to opt for the primacy of material reality, and the subjective character of logic must be subordinated to this.

Turning now to a more important point, van Winden seeks to define certain key concepts of the negative method of thinking. It is necessary to respond to this and to set right any confusion that may result from his misrepresentation of Aristotelian terminology. It is all the more important to do so since an interest in negative thinking and deconstructionist criticism pervades the contemporary literary scene (see Appendix II), and flourishes in a kind of limbo so far as tradition is concerned. It is important that those of us who are interested in the past should clarify the origins and meaning of the *via negativa*: though of considerable importance in the philosophy of late antiquity, and clearly related to the contemporary literary concern, the ancient concept of negative thinking has never been properly discussed. In particular, its terminology should be isolated, and clearly explained. Van Winden has not helped here.

Stated briefly, the *via negativa* proceeds to refine and transcendentalize thought by removing and negating concepts which are properly part of the sensible world. This purgative process leaves thought in a purer state, and more capable of grasping transcendent entities, whether or not they be divine. Several Aristotelian terms crop up in this context: privation (στέρησις), abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις), and negation (ἀπόφασις). Van Winden wants us to believe that for Aristotle privation is an ontological category¹³, negation is a logical category; and abstraction is an epistemological category. Now these definitions do have a kind of clarity about them, and it is unfortunate that they are not also correct. Aristotle seems to have been oversimplified, and probably interpreted through the insights of a sub-Aristotelian tradition.

Anyone claiming a clear separation of logic and ontology for Aristotle is bound to run into trouble very quickly, since the mental world and the real world are inextricably connected. The Stoics did, as we have seen, take logic a step further when they posited the existence of the *lekton*, or "meaning" which was separate from both words and things. With Aristotle however thought did not have its own logic: his account of logic was a realist one, and the dynamics of thought were completely enmeshed with the dynamics of things. This unity between reality and mental processes was something the Stoics seemed to want to attack, in developing their view of the separate world of meaning. With Aristotle, however, logic, epistemology and ontology all interpenetrate each other, and these neat divisions between negation,

13 He surely doesn't mean an Aristotelian "category", since Aristotle had no such category.

abstraction and privation simply will not work. But even if this general point is not conceded, we have to look at the text of Aristotle itself, and an examination of his language bears out the more limited point to be made about the meaning of privation.

Van Winden is perhaps unaware of an important article¹⁴ which, in its time, acted as a corrective for medieval readings of Aristotle. Whittaker, attacking Wolfson¹⁵, and in part Ross¹⁶, showed that privation was on occasion treated as a form of negation by Aristotle. If he is right, then van Winden's neat distinction between logical negation and ontological privation will be misleading: and there is no doubt that Whittaker is right, as the following sentence from Aristotle shows with complete clarity.

ἡ δὲ στέρησις ἀπόφασις ἐστὶν ἀπὸ τινος ὀρισμένου γένους.¹⁷
(Privation is negation from some defined genus.)

Aristotle means here that privation is a type of negation, which has as its characteristic the removal of an attribute from something. One can say therefore that privation has a logical sense, but it would be unwise to insist on this, since logic and ontology are systematically run together by Aristotle. This passage is not alone: elsewhere Aristotle refers to privative negation (ἀπόφασις στέρητική)¹⁸, and this phrase alone, without commentary, stands as a two-word refutation of van Winden's position. In the same passage Aristotle speaks of negation being "privatively predicated of something". Aristotle happily amalgamates logic and ontology here; the same passage speaks of the equal being opposed to the great and the small as a "privative negation". He is not really interested in the distinction between logic and ontology, though many subsequent interpreters might have wished him to be. And in particular, he shows no desire to separate categorially privation and negation. The fact is that privation is sometimes used by Aristotle of propositions¹⁹.

Some passages of Aristotle have στέρησις used simultaneously in an ontological and logical sense. An example may be found in *Met.* 1022^b 22ff.: here an object in a state of lack is described, and this lack is said to constitute privation (for example, an eyeless vegetable). Such privation is a matter of states of affairs in "external"²⁰ reality, and so confirms what van Winden is talking

14 J. Whittaker, *Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology*, in *Symbolae Osloenses* 44 (1969) 109–125.

15 H. A. Wolfson, *Albinus and Plotinus on divine attributes*, in *Harvard Theological Review* 45 (1952) 155ff.

16 Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (Oxford 1924), on *Metaph.* 1022^b 22.

17 *Metaph.* 1011^b 19–20.

18 *Metaph.* 1056^a 24.

19 Whittaker (*op. cit.* p.120), following Wolfson (*op. cit.* p.120), adduces a passage of Alexander of Aphrodisias, a later commentator on Aristotle. This passage also treats privation as a form of negation.

20 Aristotle would be dubious about our common-sense idea of external reality.

about: it seems here to be treated ontologically. Yet in the very same passage Aristotle moves to a logical use of στέρησις, when he says²¹ that privation *means* as much as the negative alpha *means* (λέγονται in both cases). In this sentence Aristotle makes privation the equivalent of a certain form of negation, and Zeller in fact concluded that privation here was synonymous with negation²². I should prefer to say that Aristotle here shows that privation can have both an ontological and a matching logical sense, and that in the latter form it is a sub-class of negation in general. On the other hand, the passage, cited by van Winden²³, does show privation contrasted with ἔξις (state), and does limit it to a state of affairs. The point is that this is not the whole story: privation also has a logical sense, as shown above.

That negation is a logical notion in Aristotle's philosophy, we can of course accept, though maintaining reservations about these so called logical, epistemological and ontological "categories" in the development of his views. There is much to be said about Aristotle's view of negation, and its fundamental importance for the development of Platonist negative theology. I have touched on some of this in a recent article²⁴, but much more needs to be said on the difference between privative negation and other forms of it. This should be the subject of another study.

That abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) is an epistemological "category" we may also accept, again with reservations about the artificiality of the distinctions. But it should be stressed that privation comes very close to abstraction, the difference being that abstraction has no ontological use. It was known as a method for conceptualizing abstract truth, and came to philosophy from the activities of the geometers. But it also envisages the removal of qualities or aspects: the mind separates things from their concrete base, and so comes to know them in their purest form²⁵. It is this term which is used in the development of negative theology by the Middle Platonists and by Plotinus, though it was not used in this context by the Athenian Neoplatonists: they preferred negation. (Pseudo-Dionysius alone in late antiquity is a strong user of the term "abstraction".) Abstraction has a special development in Aristotle, then, which is related to the mathematical sciences. My presentation of privation makes it close to abstraction, though the two are deployed differently. That they were closely related is indirectly confirmed by the usage of the Sceptics, who seem to observe no real distinction between them²⁶. They were apparently so close that they could become interchangeable.

21 1022^b 33.

22 Philos. d. Gr. II. 2^a. 216 n.7: this interpretation was denied by Ross, Commentary II, p.37, but supported by Whittaker (op. cit. p.121).

23 Cat. X, 11^b 19.

24 Fundamentals of the Via Negativa, American Journal of Philology 103 (1982) 429–439.

25 On the Soul 431^b 13; Posterior Analytics 74^a 33.

26 See Adv. Math. III. 37, 51, and Adv. Math. IX. 407. The method Aristotle called ἀφαίρεσις is here referred to as στέρησις.

This information should be sufficient to warn against the oversimplification of the group of terms which provide the basis of the *via negativa*. Where does the idea that privation is a purely ontological term in Aristotle come from? This would be an interesting study in itself, as would the extent to which this view has come to be held: it is widespread, and one suspects that it springs from the influence of Thomas Aquinas. Thomist readings of Aristotle will produce the kind of overschematic interpretation that we have seen here, since this medieval interpreter sought not only to explain Aristotle, but to render his system useable. For this reason more clarity was imported into the explanation of Aristotelian terms than was actually there. It is probably the Physics which dominates Thomas' account of *privatio*²⁷. In the Physics Aristotle concentrates on privation as a state of affairs, or rather the absence of one: here he is concerned to explain it in relation to other states of being, such as coming-to-be (γένεσις). Matter and privation are contrasted and the latter is examined: is it the source of evil? Is it the source of non-existence²⁸?

These become classic problems in the long Aristotelian tradition, and by the time of Thomas privation has come to be associated with this problematic only, and στέρησις/*privatio* becomes much clearer. In this way European tradition loses sight of the real complexity of Aristotle's own terminology.

Whilst I have by no means offered an exhaustive study of privation, certain developments have become clear. In Proclus (see p. 108) there is evidence of debate over privation, and there were clearly people who claimed that the negations of the *via negativa* were merely privations, and therefore unsatisfactory for discourse about the transcendent. This shows the capacity to treat negation and privation as being at least in the same logical category, and that there was at least the possibility of identifying the two.

Going backwards, in chapter five Syrianus was shown to use the two terms interchangeably, but then to draw a sharp distinction between them (p. 87). The *apophasis* is true of everything except the thing negated, "not-horse" being appropriate to everything except "horse"; but privation implies a certain state of affairs, as when deafness implies the ability or hear under normal circumstances, that is, the logical ability to hear. The question is thus whether there is any logical difference between privation and negation; this question arises out of Aristotle's tendency to run them together, and it is Aristotle's usage which determines the later Platonist view. Thus Proclus speaks of a

27 See Thomas' discussion in his Commentary on the Physics 190^b 23ff. Privation is defined as the absence of form in the subject. See also Summa 1a, 66, 2, where privation is said to be lack of form in something capable of having it. In Thomism the principle of *privatio* becomes the failure of a thing to be fully what it should be. On this see Gilson, *Le Thomisme* (Paris 1948) p.268: "... l'âme est en état de privation, parce qu'elle sent qu'elle devrait être ce qu'elle n'est pas". Privation is now a state of affairs only.

28 Physics 191^b 35–192^b 6. See also 193^b 20, where privation is described as a kind of "form" (εἶδος).

category of negations which are in fact privations (Platonic Theology I.12), and proceeds to define the latter, which appear to be a sub-class of negations, as they are in Aristotle.

It has been shown that privation was of crucial importance for the Neo-Arians, Aetius and Eunomius. Their prime term for the deity, the "unengendered", is not to be taken as a privation, they argue. They reject this form of negation, presumably in the light of Neoplatonist discussions such as those of Syrianus, mentioned above: privation has a kataphatic effect, in that it implies a prior state of affairs which must pre-exist the diminution entailed by the privation. It is not so much the diminution which creates the problem, as the assertion of a prior state which the privation carries with it. A passage of Plotinus (not previously cited) makes clear this necessary link between the privation and its logically prior state: "if things of which they are privations are qualities, then the privations are also qualities" (Enn. VI.3 [44].19,15). Plotinus does not here focus on the positive implications of the *steresis*, but he does make it clear that the *steresis* does have the same status as that in which the privation occurs: the same consequence is present, namely that privation logically entails the existence of a non-deprived state.

Van Winden's distinctions between logic and ontology are not really of any use throughout these discussions, since the writers concerned do not seem to observe them. However, there is one writer who does show a marked advance towards the Thomist position, according to which privation is nothing more or less than a defect in being. Pseudo-Dionysius does at times seem to treat privation as a logical/epistemological notion (p. 233), but also begins to treat it as a characteristic of the material world. As noted in chapter twelve, the Areopagite makes privation the centre of a more or less new philosophy of evil, which we also find in Thomas Aquinas. Privation is lack, diminution, or asymmetry in the material world: it is what happens to the Good as it enters our world. It is not itself a being, or a power for evil: it is simply an absence of certain characteristics, which are the characteristics of pure essence.

It is this development of the use of the word which takes it outside the scope of logic and epistemology, and makes it more rigidly into a matter of ontology. This process probably began quite early, since even Plotinus displays a marked tendency to limit privation to states of affairs²⁹. Plotinus discusses privation in clearly Aristotelian terms in Enn. I.8[51].11, as being opposed to form, as lacking existence in itself, and as being a possible source of evil. This is, however, the Aristotle of the Physics, and Plotinus rarely presents privation as a form of negation, or as a conceptual tool: arguably he does so in Enn. II.4[12].14, 19–21, however. In other words, already with

²⁹ See Enn. II.4[12].13, 12, where privation is discussed in relation to qualities, and the classic Aristotelian example of blindness is given.

Plotinus, privation tends to be limited to the terms provided by Aristotle's *Physics* only: the privation of the *Metaphysics* has begun to disappear from view. The dominance of the *Physics* discussion of privation is further enhanced and ensconced by the Areopagite, who develops earlier hints into a fully-fledged philosophy of privation as evil.

However, Aristotle and Aristotelianism are two different things.