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Chapter I. The Middle Platonists, The Mathematicians, and the Gnostics

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I. The Middle Platonists, 
The Mathematicians, and The Gnostics

Silence, silence, silence, sign of 
the living and everlasting God.

These words must be pronounced while raising the right finger to the lips, 
according to the instructions to devotees given in the Magical Papyri (ed. 
Preisendanz/Henrichs I, IV 558–9). They constitute as eloquent a statement 
as any of the religious temper of the late Hellenistic period, in which the dis-
covery of silence as a symbol of the divine goes hand in hand with the devel-
opment of negative language about it.

At the same time comes the development of systematic negative theology, a 
critical history of which is given in this book. Two points should be made at 
the outset: firstly, the presence of theological language should not mislead 
the reader into thinking that this issue is of religious or theological signifi-
cance only. What is at stake across the range of Greek and Patristic philos-
ophy is the question of knowledge of the ultimate essence. This essence will 
sometimes be called God, or the One, or the Highest: such titles are multi-
plied, and it is clear that there is a bringing together of ontology and theolo-
gy. The philosophy of late antiquity sees both united in the sole pursuit of 
the ultimate essence, that being or “stuff” which is the cause of all subsequent 
beings, and which constitutes the final and unresolvable factor in existence. 
It is the search for that unresolvable which drives much of late Greek philos-
ophy, Greek and Christian; it is the changeless, the timeless, the whole, the 
purely one, and it constitutes the negation of that which we experience here 
and now. For this reason, the word theology must be understood in a very 
broad sense when used in the expression “negative theology”. It covers the 
whole question of how it is that thought jumps beyond itself to other levels 
of being and experience: like an electric current, thought can jump out from 
that which conducts it along its path, making connections which are beyond 
it. This image is, however, imperfect, since thought constitutes both the elec-
trical current and the conductor: its self-transcendence is the key issue for 
enquiry and the chief object of curiosity. The ability of thought to go beyond 
itself looks a little like self-destruction, hence the term negation. “Negative 
theology”, therefore, is that branch of epistemology which speculates on the 
value of negating the given as a means of grasping transcendent or hidden 
entities.

A second observation concerns the use of the alpha privative. A cursory 
reading of Plotinus, or of purely religious documents such as the Hermetic
corpus, the magical papyri or the Gnostic documents, will show an abundance of alpha privative adjectives in relation to God. Thus God is said to be aoratos (invisible), anonomastos (unnamable) and so on: there are many examples which could be given. The preponderance of this negative adjective marks a clear trend in the religious sensibility of the late Greek period, and it shows a growing belief that the deity was hidden, difficult to grasp, remote from human experience. This sense of transcendence naturally expressed itself in negative adjectives, as authors sought to play down human experience and personal models in order to leave the mind free of this worldly concepts, for the purity of the transcendent. Hence the negation of existing concepts through the alpha privative.

The popularity of the alpha privative in the late Hellenistic world is proof of a new transcendentalism in religious thinking: qualities of awe, reverence and yearning now characterize the religious life and the milieu which spawned Christianity. Yet this negating tendency is not quite the via negativa of late Greek philosophy, even though it may loosely be considered to be part of it. The negative theology of Proclus and Damascius, for example, consists of a series of exquisite logical manoeuvres which cause language to act against itself. Much attention is given to the logic of negation, to how it actually operates, and to how this might assist the mind to grasp transcendent concepts. With Proclus, for example, the ultimate linguistic act is the negation of negation, by which language ends its own usefulness. Against this rigorous philosophical understanding of the via negativa, the alpha privatives of the seers of late antiquity appear as mere poetry. Such expressions of transcendence could be labelled proto-negative theology, since they do no more than adumbrate the considerable technical achievement of the later Platonists. They give the flavour of the age, but not its essential intellectual features.

The relationship of negative theology and anthropomorphism should also be dealt with here. They are sometimes considered in the same category, as if the via negativa were nothing more than the refusal of anthropomorphism. There is some truth here, but more of an untruth. Anthropomorphism is a problem in religious thinking because it humanizes the divinity to too great an extent; the other-worldly is drawn down into a familiar human shape, feeling anger, love, jealousy, remorse and so on. Such imagery is unsatisfactory to the religious temperament, which seeks a deity beyond the range of normal experience. It is customary, then, to find corrections of anthropomorphic imagery in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. God is love, rather than the human combination of hate, love and lack of interest: there is no "shadow of turning" in God, who is thus seen to be outside the range of normal human experience. Nevertheless the Judaeo-Christian view retains the framework of the human being for its definition of godliness. The attacks on anthropomorphism constitute nothing more than slight adjustments to the per-
sonal model. The personalized deity is an integral part of the Judaeo-Christian religious vision.

The attack on anthropomorphism is clearly a negative thrust against the limits of available concepts, but it does not seek to go beyond them, or to annul them. It modifies them, so as to present them in slightly altered form. God is not human, but super-human, in that he is what a human would be if he were beyond himself to some extent. In this sense, one could consider the anti-anthropomorphic language of Judaeo-Christian orthodoxy to be elementary negative theology, but only in the most superficial sense. The *via negativa* eliminates all personal and human imagery from the description of the ontological essence, but not only this, it goes further in order to eliminate every familiar characteristic, so that not only the image of the personal is annulled, but also the entire language of the external world. All existential, positional, temporal, qualitative, and moral concepts are eliminated. Language itself is eliminated, and thought is redefined. The true negative theologian depreciates the whole of the human conceptual and linguistic apparatus. The anti-anthropomorphism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition is nothing more than fine tuning, and the history of Christian theology shows that the "word made flesh" is the crucial element in Christian doctrine at least. It is for Augustine the difference between himself and the Platonists, and this despite the fact that he had some sympathy with the way of not-knowing (see below). The model of human experience is fundamental in Christianity, since God is seen to endorse it through his intermediary, and the intermediary gives us clues as to the way in which the human model is to be adjusted in relation to the God the Father. Anti-anthropomorphism is composed of minor alterations to personal religious imagery, whereas negative theology consists in the annulment of all discourse.

These things having been said, one is free to proceed into the history of the *via negativa* proper. It is the most remarkable feature of the philosophical life of late antiquity, Greek and Christian, and it is extraordinarily little known or understood in the world of contemporary scholarship. Why is this so? How can a major theme of six centuries of Greek philosophy disappear into limbo? Scholarship is subject to trends and fashions; it is capable of objectivity in respect of the minutiae, but not in the massive act of selection, which the historian carries out in order to have objects for his attention. For many years late antiquity was judged to be an unworthy object of attention within the Anglosaxon syndrome, and it is a clear fact that the major texts of late classical thought are edited in French or German collections. Why is there no book on the *via negativa* in English? A fashionable neglect has caused the texts to disappear, translations to fail to be carried out, and expertise in the area to wither away. The present writing is intended to fill a gap in English, but the deeper explanations of this neglect must be put off to another study. This is the question: why has the West lost its own tradition
of trans-linguistic mysticism, so that it turns to Buddhism for what it once possessed as its own?

The monumental work of A.-J. Festugière, La Révélation d'Hermès Trismégiste, constitutes a major French appraisal of the area. This author both isolates the new set of ideas, and attempts to offer a comprehensive interpretation of them. This collection of works, in particular the fourth volume, offers the view that there is more continuity within the Greek tradition than one might suspect; that the new emphasis on transcendence is part of a slowly emerging tendency from the days of Plato's Academy, and that it is idle to look for sudden infusions of oriental influences, which might explain what appears to be new. The Hellenistic breeding-ground does not, according to Festugière, foment the new idea of the mysterium tremendum et fascinans. This work was written against the background of the claims of oriental influence by E. Norden (Agnostos Theos), and Festugière's riposte is to write a chapter entitled La doctrine platonicienne, in which he shows that numerous writers of the early Roman Empire, who espoused the via negativa, also saw themselves as disciples and exponents of Plato. There is, ostensibly at any rate, a continuous Platonic tradition.

It is probably useless to go over all the evidence, so clearly expounded by Festugière in volume IV, 92–140, but some additional information, and some critical assessment may be of value. The most important of the philosophers dealt with by Festugière is Albinus, or Alcinous, as he is sometimes called. Writing in the second century A.D., Albinus gives us a compendium of Platonic doctrine entitled the Didascalicus, which resembles a school text-book. Albinus speaks of a first principle which is ineffable (ἀπαθής), and attributes this view to Plato (ed. Hermann, p.164, l. 6 ff.). God is identified with this first principle, and is said to be ineffable, eternal, complete in himself, without need: he is neither genus nor species, nor subject to accident (in the Aristotelian sense); he is neither good, nor evil, nor is he indifferent. He is without qualities, and is neither a part of something, nor a whole which is a complete set of parts. Albinus has a remark to make on human concept formation (Hermann p.164), claiming that when human beings wish to form an idea of the intelligible, they add size, shape and colour, and so fail to conceive of it in its pure form. “The gods”, he adds, “are separated form the sensible world, and they conceive of the intelligibles in a pure and unmixed way.”

Here is the Platonic equivalent of an anti-anthropomorphic statement: but the failure of ordinary thinking lies in the injection of the whole spatio-temporal dimension, not merely of the personal ingredient. The gods think differently, says, Albinus, in that they do not add volume, spatial extension or colour to the objects that they are trying to conceive, and it is this tendency which constitutes the Achilles' heel of human thought. Dwellers in the sensible world that we are, we blow up transcendent concepts into something readily perceptible by the mind's eye. The remote and the abstract is blown
up by the addition of size. This critique of overly-concrete thinking is much broader and more far-reaching than the Judaeo-Christian attack on anthropomorphism, which merely concerns itself with the personalization of the divine: the Greek complaint about concrete thinking is that it adds not only the familiar concept of the person to the transcendent entity, but that it further adds every characteristic of the material reality in which that person resides.

It follows for Albinus that God, or the One, is beyond thought and perception in the ordinary sense. Festugière collects other material from the Platonism of the second century A.D., which clearly shows this view to be an orthodox dogma in that period: his evidence is drawn from Albinus, Apuleius, Maximus of Tyre, Celsus, Numenius and the Chaldaic Oracles. He is concerned to show that this Platonic transcendentalism is established doctrine in the Middle-Platonic school, but also that it derives from Plato himself: in other words, it is traditional Greek philosophy, and there is no need to explain it by suggesting that an infusion of eastern mysticism took place. To demonstrate this continuity, he has only to adduce the passage of Plato cited by the Middle-Platonicists themselves, namely Republic 509B (6 ff.). Here Plato says that the God is beyond being, and this combined with the One of the Parmenides gave the Middle-Platonicists ample basis for their theories, since this dialogue combined speculation about the place of the One in the hierarchy of beings, and about the knowledge of the One. There seems to be a discrepancy between the purpose of the Parmenides, and the interpretation of it by the later Platonists. This theme will be dealt with repeatedly in the present book, but at this point it is sufficient to note that most scholars consider that there was a change in the understanding of the Parmenides, and that though it was conceived as a logical treatise, it came to be regarded as a mystical-theological document of higher metaphysics. This is not the point to take up the interpretation of the Parmenides, since it has earlier been argued that the alleged vast discrepancy between its real meaning, and that attributed to it by the Neoplatonists, is really a product of the contemporary Anglo-saxon view of the Parmenides (see vol. I, 127 ff.).

However there is a strange lack of coherence in Festugière's treatment of the issue. His conclusion is as follows:

Further, the *via negationis* is to be found in Albinus and Celsus, who are both declared Platonists and who undertake one to expound Platonism, and the other to defend Hellenism, that is the dogma of Plato and of Greek religion, against the "barbarian" innovators. And the *via negationis* is found in these authors precisely because it is already in Plato himself. Doubtless this "mystical" aspect of Platonism was relatively late in being brought to light, but it is to be expected that a system of thought as rich as that of Plato should display its resources only gradually. (Revelation ... IV, 140)

However, Festugière has quite failed to show what he claims to show,
though he has performed the considerable service of isolating the texts, and showing them to constitute a "school". What is lacking is a study of the *via negativa* in Plato: having attempted to carry this out in volume I, I have found it to be absent. There are three Greek terms associated with the *via negativa*: ἀπόφασις (negation), ἀφαίρεσις (abstraction), and στέρησις (privation); but none of these is developed by Plato in the direction of what we should consider to be negative theology. There is in fact almost no sign that Plato developed a theory of negation in an epistemological context (see I, 134 ff.). It is certainly true that he discussed the idea of a principle lying beyond discourse and being – the ineffable – but this is a very different matter from advocating negation as a positive epistemological step. The Parmenides, in particular, does speak of the One's lying beyond discourse, and falls to the use of the alpha privative, but it does not advocate the process of progressive subtraction which constitutes the main form of the negative method. The *via negativa* may be defined as the step by step removal of the concrete attributes of a thing, until its essential and transcendent character is revealed; the process whereby thought purifies itself of sensible images. This is nowhere understood to be a process, a systematic procedure, in Plato. It is true that he is on the edge of its development, but he does not go beyond recognizing that some knowledge may be wordless. For these reasons, it is clear that Festugière is finding in Plato more than is actually there, and that the *via negativa* is a product of later philosophy. The key agents in its development, I have argued elsewhere (I, 137), are Aristotle and Speusippus.

Other scholars have done much to search out the development of the *via negativa*, in particular John Whittaker. In a series of articles Whittaker has sought to clarify a number of points on the development of terminology. In Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology he seeks to take up certain statements by H. A. Wolfson who, in a number of articles published in the Harvard Theological Review, gave an early impetus to the discussion of these issues. Whittaker is concerned in the above article (121) to show that the term ἀφαίρεσις is not to be identified with negation in Albinus.

The three terms which are involved in the development of negative theology were mentioned above. They are all close to negation: privation (στέρησις), abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) and negation itself (ἀπόφασις). The first two have to do with the removal of attributes, whereas the last is the word for negation proper, though it is not a simple matter to determine what this is. It is this question which is left open by the research in the field, though the Whittaker articles go over the main passages on the Aristotelian sense of the word. Wolfson had claimed (Albinus and Plotinus... 121) that both Albinus and Plotinus use the term abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) in the sense of Aristotle's negation (ἀπόφασις). The effect of this is to broaden greatly the meaning of the *via negativa* terms, allowing them to absorb all the various tasks carried out in the act of negation. This could well include the notion of opposition,
Negation, abstraction, privation

which is not part of the *via negativa* as it was understood by the Middle Platonists and Plotinus: negation here is understood as a technique of abstraction, with the emphasis on the conceptual removal of attributes. It deconstructs the multiple and the composite in the interests of discovering the underlying unity. Whittaker is concerned to dissociate abstraction and negation, claiming that eventually ἀφαίρεσις did come to be treated as an equivalent of ἀπόφασις, though certainly not in the period of Aristotle and the Middle Platonists (Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology... 124–5).

My own view, as outlined in (I) 136–137 and 158, is that whilst there are some clear differences between abstraction and negation in this period, they dissolve under reflection. The prefix ἀπό gives us the flavour of Greek negation: it is to do with taking away, or removal. With this in the background it is easy to see how both privation and abstraction could become confused with negation, since both of them involve removal. Removing an attribute must be considered a type of negation under almost any formulation of it. It has been noted in volume I (loc. cit.) that the Sceptics observed little difference between abstraction and privation, and on at least one occasion Aristotle runs privation and negation together (Met. 1022b33; see my Fundamentals ...). The distinctions drawn between the three are there, but they exist within a general closeness of function.

What of the future of these terms, in later Platonism? The usage of Proclus may seem to confirm Whittaker’s claim (loc. cit. 124) that abstraction came to be identified with negation, but the situation is quite different. The term used by him as the vehicle for his negative theology is ἀπόφασις, and this marks a change from the terminology of the Middle Platonists, and of Plotinus (see Proclus, 106). For Proclus negation includes privation, though he repudiates the idea that they are identical (109): he merely uses abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις). What has happened is probably this: in Athenian Neoplatonism negative theology had always been constructed around the term ἀπόφασις, whereas in Rome, Plotinus understood it in terms of abstraction. These are not mere linguistic differences, since Plotinus’ own understanding of the *via negativa* is quite restricted. He does little more than abstract, or imaginatively remove concepts. The Athenian school on the other hand develops the *via negativa* within the full range of the logic of negation, and it has much broader ramifications. It is not that the terms have merged, so much as that they belong to different schools, and that within this limitation they convey a vastly different understanding of negative theology. Proclus’ view of it includes the removal of attributes, but also involves many logical refinements such as the litmus test of conditional statements by negation, or the crowning negation of negation, whereby language is silenced. Both aphairetic and apophatic negative theology have their roots in Aristotle’s Metaphysics, but they represent two different offshoots, which develop in
separate ways, and of these apophatic negative theology is more philosophically robust. Proclus, it should be noted, scarcely troubles to use the word ἀφαίρεσις; he includes the concept under ἀπόφασις. Even in his discussion on Euclid’s elements, discussed below (Proclus 103), the term ἀπόφασις is used. Euclid had defined the point negatively, as “that of which there is no part”, and Proclus responds to this as a form of ἀφαίρεσις. One imagines that Albinus would have classified it as a definition by abstraction, in that the concept “point” is yielded by the abstraction (or removal) of the concept “part”. Not so with Proclus, who repeatedly uses the term negation of Euclid’s approach in the definitions, and it is clear that for the former there is no problem about associating abstraction with negation: there is, however, a problem for Proclus over the precise nature of the disjunction between negation and privation.

The mention of Euclid brings us to the question of the role of the mathematicians in the formulation of the via negativa. It was clearly very important, and has long been recognized to be so. Wolfson suggested this connection (Albinus and Plotinus ... 118), and thought that the passage of Albinus discussed above represented part of an actual discussion of Euclid himself. Festugière (La Révélation ... 314–5) follows this, and takes it that Albinus’ source was “almost certainly a commentary on Euclid”. And in another context (120–123), Festugière places a great deal of emphasis on the mathematical background of the via negativa.

I have dealt in detail with Euclid and Proclus’ view of him in chapter VI, but certain observations should be made here. A little later than Aristotle, Euclid defined the point as something which had no parts, and he used negative definitions repeatedly for other entities which had mass. Euclid’s method was probably already established, deriving from Eudoxus, and Aristotle knew of it. Aristotle also knew of discussions about this method, and how it was to be characterized. Was it a form of negation? He does not believe it to be so (see I, 143).

This is the import of Met. 1029a 17–26, where Aristotle mentions the abstraction process, in terms of removing breadth, depth and so on. But he concludes that the ultimate is neither a particular thing, nor a quantity.

Nor is it the negations (of these), for these will apply to it as accidents only. (25–26)

Aristotle here refers to the abstraction process, and rejects the notion of knowledge by negation. It is clear that the method of the geometers was known and discussed; Aristotle takes up a position on an established issue. He is rejecting an alternative which must have been known to him, namely that negation provides a means of conceptualizing abstract entities. His view is that abstraction is the appropriate process for this (Met. 1030a17). It seems probable that the method of the geometers was already an epistemological is-
sue by the time Aristotle was writing, and that attempts to analyze it were being made. It enjoyed a status much like hypotheses in modern science: they are employed, and seem to work, but their use and function is subject to analysis in the philosophy of science. The invention of hypotheses has a spin-off effect in philosophy, so that one asks about the nature of the creative process, the nature of the theory itself, and so on. In the same way the negative definitions of the geometers seemed to have some practical success in the limited area of geometry. It was left to philosophy to universalize these, to examine their logic, and to evaluate their usefulness in a variety of contexts.

For these reasons it is not prudent to overemphasize the mathematical background of the Middle Platonists’ formulation of the via negativa, through abstraction. For Wolfson to argue that Albinus’ remarks on ἄφατες ηγεῖοι were directly concerned with commenting on Euclid, is to overstate the case. The geometrical methods had long since been absorbed by philosophy, so that Albinus was probably scarcely interested in their origin. (Wolfson quotes a fragment of a lost commentary on Euclid’s elements by Simplicius, and since the method of abstraction is discussed in it, concludes that Albinus’ passage, which resembles that of Simplicius, must also be part of a commentary on Euclid: however one could talk this way without having Euclid in mind, and Wolfson narrows the source too much.)

Thus the idea of abstraction was common to both philosophical and geometrical writers, and had been since Aristotle at least. But there is a further point, and Whittaker provides ample evidence on this issue (Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology ... 110). The geometers’ idea was based on the incremental view of reality, according to which the physical world takes its beginning from insubstantial origins, and is subsequently added to. The material world with which we are familiar is composed of a number of layers, which have successively gathered on top of each other, until the full bulk of physical reality has been achieved. The point constitutes the beginning, that of which there are no parts, and what follows it is the gathering of parts until mass, volume and visual characteristics are brought together. There is a progressive incrustation of layers, and the point disappears from view.

Now it is important to note that this view of the generation of reality is not limited to the geometers only. The insistence on this source is a red herring. What I have called the “incremental” view is common to virtually the entire Greek intellectual community. Both Plato and the Pythagoreans share the view that reality comes in a series of additions to some starting-point (see I, 144), whether this be the point, or the one. The geometers’ view, as represented by Euclid, constitutes only a small segment of this general presupposition of Greek philosophy: it is not specifically “their” view. The idea that reality balloons out from a solitary and unitary entity lies behind Euclid’s approach, but it lies behind most other approaches in Greek philosophy generally. The method of abstraction is an obvious response to such a view: if
reality is held to be a collection of increments, then it follows that these
should be pared off in order to discover the basis to which these increments
have added themselves. Euclid exploits this in his definitions, but as we have
already seen (I, 135), the later Plato displayed a sudden predilection for the
way of abstraction, and it is plentifully used in Aristotle.

The generation of reality from point to solid figure has been detected by
Whittaker in Philo, Plutarch, Sextus Empiricus, Nicomachus of Gerasa,
Alexander Polyhistor, Hippolytus, Theo of Smyrna and Iamblichus. It was
therefore not uncommon in late antiquity, and it is probably true that it finds
more emphasis in late antiquity than in the classical period. It was a current
of Greek thought which came to be emphasized, and the suggestion has been
that the Pythagorean revival had an influence here. This was put forward by
Dodds (Proclus: The Elements of Theology 312), and has received attention
from Whittaker (op. cit.) and in his Neopythagoreanism and the Transcen-
dent Absolute.

One must however exercise some caution here. It is not enough simply to
suppose Neopythagorean influence, and the fact is that some things were
shared across a variety of schools. Much of what is attributed to
Neopythagoreanism seems to be a matter of assertion only. It may be true
that the “Neopythagoreans took the lead in refusing to assign to the first
principle any positive quality, even that of unity” (Whittaker, Neopythag./
Absolute 82), but this principle had equally well been canvassed as one pos-
sibility in Plato’s Parmenides, whose influence is known to all. The thesis of
the revival of Pythagoreanism and of its influence relies on the labelling of
certain ideas as exclusively Pythagorean, whereas some of the evidence leads
to the view that such ideas were more broadly disseminated than this.

But there is a point to be made, and to this effect the following piece of
evidence may be adduced. A passage of the scholia on John Philoponus de-
scribes the thought of Aristocles, a little known second century writer of
about the level of Maximus of Tyre, and who argues that arithmetic provides
one of the most useful ways to reach the intelligible. This passage has so far
not been adduced in any discussions of the matter; the fragments of Aristo-
cles were collected in a dissertation by H. Heiland, and published in 1925,
under the title Aristoclis Messenii Reliquiae.

All sciences lead the way to the intelligibles, and this is especially true of arithmetic,
which is the starting-point for everything... And it is indeed prior to geometry, for
much geometrical demonstration depends on arithmetic. Overall this is true, since
shapes are constituted of one line, like the circle, or of many: this comes from num-
ber, the one and the many. The monad is the principle of all size, and the point is a
monad which exists, being without parts. The monad is indivisible, and is the prin-
ciple of number. (ed. Heiland, 25, 85 ff.)
The view thus outlined takes a stance on which of the mathematical sciences has priority in the general pursuit of knowledge. Logical priority will guarantee it epistemological priority. This thinker finds that geometry depends intellectually on arithmetic. An earlier reference to Pythagoras’ correct understanding of philosophy (Heiland 24, 1.60) indicates a pro-Pythagorean stance, and the preoccupation with numbers confirms it. The tendency to reduce all entities to their numerical characteristics is typical of Pythagorean and Neopythagorean thought. Here Aristocles, or whoever is being reported from this context, accords logical priority to numbers. In the circle he finds one single line, and in other shapes, several: he therefore finds the old principle of the one and the many at work, endowing the realm of space with characteristics prior to all else. It looks very much as if a position is being taken up in favour of Pythagoras and against Euclid here, and it is important to note this point. There are aspects of the above passage which might lead to the hypothesis of Pythagorean influence, like the association of the point with the monad, but the view reported lays down a clear order of preference, for numbers over geometry. We must suppose Neopythagoreanism to be anti-geometrical, or at least that it endeavours to contain and explain geometry in the light of higher principles. What I have termed the incremental view of the generation of physical reality was common to both Pythagoreans and geometers, and arguably to many others. What the Neopythagoreans now offered was an understanding of this process based on number, and it is this view which commended itself in late antiquity. As has been observed by Whittaker (Neop./Neg. ... 115), where we find a link between the monad and the point, we are justified in concluding that there was Neopythagorean influence.

Yet Whittaker is prepared to admit (loc. cit.) that this definition of the point as the monad-in-place may have been carried out by Plato, or at least been current in the old Academy. To revert to what has been argued above, it seems likely that the method of the geometers was practised, and that it had a certain amount of success within the discipline itself; that the practice gave rise to discussion and varying interpretations. That is, that negative definitions based on the idea that spatial entities grew by increments became a subject for discussion, just as quantum theory is a matter for analysis among philosophers, though it is at the same time put to use by physicists as a theoretical and explanatory tool. The revival of Pythagoreanism meant that another analysis of geometrical concepts came into vogue, after centuries of inactivity, and made numbers the key to the understanding of the methods of the geometers. The point became the monad given spatial existence, and this arithmetical analysis of the incremental process of generation began to hold sway.

The conclusion is this. The mere mention of removing geometrical attributes should not by itself be taken to be evidence of Neopythagorean influ-
ence. The use of this image to illustrate the principles of negative theology had long been absorbed by the other branches of philosophy, and its presence in Albinus has only the status of an illustration. It is the emphasis on numbers which constitutes the sign of Neopythagorean influence, and the arithmetical analysis of geometrical concepts as found in the doxographical passage of Aristocles mentioned earlier provides a good example of this.

One of the passages adduced by Festugière as evidence for the *via negativa* in Middle Platonism comes from Origen, the third century Christian philosopher and theologian. Origen quotes Celsus, apparently a second century Roman intellectual, and preserves thereby a fragment of his work "The True Discourse". This has been dealt with in detail in chapter IV since it is partly through Origen's comments that it is possible to interpret Celsus' material. However at this point it is necessary to note two things: firstly, that Celsus uses the word ἄνάλυσις in his account of the three ways of knowing the divine essence. We may obtain knowledge of the "unnameable and First", by "synthesis which is the combining of entities, by analysis which is the separation from entities, or by analogy" (see 78). This "analysis" is the equivalent of abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις) and constitutes an alternative for it, which is also to be found in Clement of Alexandria. The second point is that Origen's rejoinder associates Celsus' three ways with the methods of the geometers. Festugière (op. cit. 119) declares roundly that Origen's exegesis is false, but it seems more likely to be correct. Origen's training in school philosophy meant that he knew the origins of this Middle Platonist epistemology: he realized that general philosophy had appropriated these techniques from the methods of the geometers, making them into epistemological instruments. His knowledge of the tradition gave him an accurate insight into the context of Celsus' remarks. Festugière's case against Origen is based on his own attempt to reconstruct the inner workings of the methods mentioned, finding them to be incompatible with Origen's gloss; I have tried to show, however, that what we know from mathematical sources is quite compatible with Origen's interpretation (see 82).

Of the Middle Platonist writers, only Albinus and Celsus refer explicitly to the negative method; if we may include a Christian writer in this category, the name of Clement of Alexandria should be added. The thought of Clement will be dealt with below, but it should be noted that Festugière offers a much wider range of evidence. The data thus detailed is peripheral to the question of the method itself. The theme of this book is more closely tied to the workings of the negative method, but of course there is much in the way of supporting data. Apuleius, for example, is one who multiplies negative adjectives about the divine, tabulated by Festugière (IV.105). God is unnameable, invisible, unspeakable, unalterable (De Platone I.5). He is not contained in any place, or time (Apology 64.2). These are standard statements of transcendence from the period, and one may couple them with Numenius'
Gnostic statements of incommunicability

claim that God is ἐφημος (alone, or solitary). They negate, or tend to negate, ordinary and familiar concepts in an effort to designate the ultimate divinity.

There is a certain looseness in all of Festugière’s treatment of these issues, in that such statements and religious sentiments do not shed much light on the systematic procedure designated by the term “abstraction”. Festugière assimilates (IV.13) Albinus’ method of ἀφαίρεσις with such statements as that of Numenius, but this is far too hasty. The proliferation of such negative adjectives does not necessarily imply the acceptance of a conceptual method. Vague statements of transcendence may testify to a sense of the remoteness of the ultimate essence, or deity, but they do not necessarily come with a clear analysis of the limits of language and thought. The negative method is described as a “way”, the via negativa, because it does imply a systematic attempt to disestablish ordinary thought. Proclus provides the clearest example of a technique for the transcending of language: in the end the statements of such as Numenius, Apuleius and Maximus of Tyre do not contribute greatly to an understanding of the status of discourse in later Greek philosophy.

Gnostic speculation is both philosophical and mythical in character, and some reference should be made to its evidence here. Valentinian Gnosticism is the most important for our purposes, and the discovery of the Tripartite Tractate among the Nag Hammadi documents has immeasurably increased our understanding of that segment of Gnosticism. The Tripartite Tractate shows considerable interest in the function of language. Though it has little of technical significance, it provides a good example of philosophical piety – a piety which is informed by the tradition of Greek thought, and which shows considerable scepticism about the value of language. It is of interest because it has now to be added to Festugière’s dossier: it is mentioned here for this reason, despite its lack of technical contribution to the study of the via negativa. It is a philosophical fantasy.

The Tripartite Tractate abounds in statements of incommunicability:

nor can any work express him,
nor can any eye see him,
nor can any body grasp him,
because of his inscrutable greatness,
and his incomprehensible depth,
and his immeasurable height,
and his illimitable will.

(Tri. Trac. 54, trans. Attridge and Mueller)

The treatise contents itself with reiterating this principle a number of times, but in general it consists of the saga of the One and its relations with the lower entities with all their vain ambitions, empty plans, and their chivalric progress through the spheres. The loftier realms are those characterized by silence, and the baser are those filled with speech.
For there is a boundary to speech set in the Pleroma, so that they are silent about the incomprehensibility of the Father, but they speak about the one who wishes to comprehend him. (Tri. Trac. 75: op. cit.)

One of the aeons, or higher principles, endeavoured to know the Father, and though this was beyond his power, he had a measure of success. But one notes the silence in the Pleroma: there is a double negative implied in the fantasy, since God is not capable of being spoken of, but further, this unspeakability itself is not spoken of. The aeons which inhabit the Pleroma may even be acting out the hypernegation of the philosophy of the later Proclus, since their silence over unspeakability is tantamount to a negation of negation.

The highest principle is the only being who knows himself, who sees himself, who comprehends himself; he is his own mind, his own eye, his own mouth, and his own form. He conceives himself, he sees himself, and speaks of himself (Tri. Trac. 55). There is a negation implicit in all this, which is the negation of the ordinary human self-relation. Ordinary human experience differentiates between each of the bodily functions, or epistemological functions: the human *persona* knows a difference between itself and its eyes, ears and mouth. It likewise knows a difference between itself and its conceiving, thinking and speaking abilities, since these are all object-directed. They are not capable of reflexive action, since one cannot self-think, self-conceive, or self-speak: such activity is possible only for the highest being. Similarly with the parts of the body, since each of these direct a flow from the outward to the inward, or vice versa: they are not capable of acting on themselves. The eyes cannot see themselves. The author of the Tripartite Tractate has chosen to negate a fundamental aspect of human experience, namely that thought is object-directed. That intelligence thinks itself is a major principle of Platonism (see Proclus, Elements . . . Propn. 167), and the Tripartite Tractate offers a mythicised account of this capacity in its various gradations.

It will be argued in chapter III that negative theology is often concerned with highlighting the contingent in human experience, and the Tripartite Tractate does this as well: the human being is perceived as object-bound, as a process from the inner to the outer. This aspect of human experience will become a crucial issue in the philosophy of the West, from Kant to Marx. What is negated here is the bridge between the inner and the outer which, in the ordinary human being, is constituted by the knowing and perceiving apparatus.

The Tripartite Tractate shows acute scepticism over the value of naming the highest principle. None of the names applied to the Father really capture him, no matter how glorious or glorifying they are (Tri. Trac. 54). Yet we may utter such names "for his glory and honour, in accordance with the capacity of each of those who give him glory" (54). In other words the use of such language is offered as an honorific gesture: clearly this is a departure
from its purpose, since the adjectives involved would be intended to convey something, namely meaning. Language is thus reduced to a series of semantically meaningless actions, like physical obeisance. This is an intriguing observation, which is cited here because of its relation to negative theology; but it prompts the thought that much of ordinary language may well be assimilable to physical gestures. Sounds, after all, are merely tongue-actions.

In the end, however, none of this material comes close to the way of negation developed by the Platonists. There is no real negative theology in the Tripartite Tractate, despite the presence of implicit and explicit negations. Language is relegated to certain levels, but there is no systematic conceptual deconstruction, which is the characteristic of the negative method proper. What is found in the Tractate might be better described as “transcendentalism”: it is part of a wide movement which provides the context for the *via negatīva*, but is not itself the way of serial negation. (It should be noted that this could apply to Plotinus as well: whilst there are negative adjectives, and implied negative concepts, there is no systematic stage-by-stage deconstruction of entities – and this despite the fact that he himself acknowledges the *via negatīva* in this sense.)

Another Gnostic philosophical fantasy, that of Marcus, confirms the idea of silence being appropriate to the higher realms, whilst voice is appropriate to the lower. Marcus has general Silence obtaining, dwelling with the Father himself; with the act of creation, the silence is broken (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I, 14, 1 ff.). Sound comes about together with perceptibility and corporeality: the Father desires to make himself utterable, and to give form to the invisible. There is a descent into corporeality by stages, this idea being the familiar one discussed earlier in this chapter, but the Father chooses to activate this process by a specific creative act: he breaks the silence. The strange and colourful Marcus, who did much to lead astray the women of the Rhône area, as Irenaeus tells us, invents here a new interpretation of the Greek idea of the descent into matter. The beginning of it all was semantic, not material: the inconceivable Father utters the word “Beginning” (*ὁ* *πηγή*), and this word both means “beginning”, and is the Beginning. Marcus sees the word as composed of four *stoicheia* (the Greek word for primary particles), and each of these letters has a seminal effect, for it generates another word. The letter α has the word alpha to designate it, and so on. There is a proliferation of words into infinity.

There is a deliberate piece of ingenuity in making the first sound the word “beginning”, since it means what it is. The semantic and the ontological are coextensive, and this is the particular brilliance of Marcus’ fantasy. The descent from the sublime to the material is now cast in terms of the descent from the realm of silence to the realm of meaning. Meaning comes from sound, and there are degrees of sound:
The nine consonants belong to the Father and Truth because they are voiceless, that is, inexpressible and unutterable. The eight semi-vowels belong to Logos and Life, since they occupy the middle position so to speak, between the unvoiced and the voiced; and they receive the outflowing of those above them and elevate those which are beneath them. (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I. 14.5)

The vowel sounds are the most full-bodied, and so represent the most material sounds of the alphabet, and the most material stage in the silence-breaking descent.

Such philosophical fantasy demonstrates the fascination with the idea of silence current at that time. Speech emerges as a low-grade activity, characteristic of a low-grade area of being. The descriptions of Marcus' views by Irenaeus do not show us a developed negative theology, but there is a clear implication that the ascent of the spirit will take it out of the realm of all language, to an upper realm of complete silence.

The case of Basilides is also interesting. He claimed to know certain secret teachings of Jesus, passed on by Matthias who had been actually present when they were uttered. These teachings bear a strange resemblance to Plato's Parmenides, and they are reported by Hippolytus (Ref. VII.20, 1-3).

There was a time, he says, when there was nothing; but the nothing was not one of the beings, but it was purely and simply and without any sophistry at all nothing (οὐδὲ ἄν). (Ref. VII.20, 1)

The last word gives us the key to what Basilides is saying. It is indeed striking that he posits "nothing" as the original state from which reality grew. This is entirely original, and there is nothing like it in the philosophical texts of the time, nor in an earlier period. The Presocratic philosophers all pursued the question of what was the arche, or originating-principle, and this ranged from the material to the abstract. There were those who advocated moisture, or air, and there were those who advocated the infinite, or the one. Now we have Basilides, who proposes that nothing itself was the original first stage, which yielded the levels of reality with which we are familiar.

His view is the fruit of reflection on Plato's Parmenides. This is not immediately obvious, since the question of nothingness is not broached in the dialogue; this is not surprising since the concept is not normally part of Greek philosophical preoccupations, though it may well be an issue of twentieth century French philosophy. Basilides the Gnostic anticipates Jean-Paul Sartre by inventing this concept, but we must note that the Greek word for nothing comprises two others: οὐδὲ and ἄν. This derivation of οὐδέν is used to advantage by Basilides, who wishes to highlight the fact that "no-thing" in Greek is in fact separated out as "not-one". It is at this point that the Parmenides surfaces, since Basilides' statement is closely related to the sixth hypo-
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thesis of that dialogue. Beginning in approximately 163B of the Parmenides, the sixth hypothesis entertains the notion that the One does not exist. The proposal is that "the One is not".

... does the expression "is not" simply mean that it is not in any shape or form, and that it does not participate in being in any way? Very simply that. So the non-existent cannot be, nor in any way partake of existence? No. (163C)

Plato goes on to say that on this view, the One would be absolutely devoid of any state whatever, and it is this concept which Basilides chooses to call God. This God is unspeakable; yet not unspeakable. We may tend to call him that, says Basilides, but in fact he is "non-unspeakable" (Hippolytus, Ref. VII.20.3). He is beyond every name that can be pronounced. This corresponds to the claim in Parmenides 164B, that the non-existent One will have neither name nor rational account (logos) applied to it. Basilides chooses to regard even the claim of ineffability as a statement to be negated: he does not wish to entertain the possibility that unspeakability might refer to a state of the not-one God. In a sense he is offering a negation of negation. The non-speakable is said to be non-non-speakable, and Basilides too anticipates Proclus in this way.

This Nothing-principle decides to make a world, and does so by bringing forth a seed which contains all in its potential form. One suspects that Basilides makes use of the Aristotelian distinction between the potential and the actual, as does Proclus in Proposition 3 (Elements of Theology), in order not to vitiate the statelessness of the ultimate Nothing. Growing out of this potentiality is the whole transcendent world of this Gnostic's vision: the threefold sonship, the Ogdoad, or the seat of the Great Ruler, the Hebdomad, and all the worlds, creations and authorities. In typical Gnostic fashion there is a descent from the principle of Nothingness to the lower forms, and it is not until the Hebdomad (or "realm of the seven") is reached that language is applicable. The Hebdomad lies within the sphere of discourse. As with the system of Marcus, the silence is eventually broken by the advent of the material. This "realm of the seven" is the first that can be spoken of, and within this realm Basilides’ myth has the Gospel being announced, so that it is completely illuminated. We are now in the realm of discourse, and knowledge.

An important Gnostic text for the via negativa comes from the Apocryphon of John, now translated and comprehensively annotated by Tardieu (Ecrits Gnostiques). Tardieu gives a French translation of both the Berlin and the Cairo (II) texts. The following passage takes the deity out of the realm of ordinary discourse by the negation of a series of couplets. There follows a literal English translation of Tardieu's French version of the Berlin text:
Being light without measure, without mixture, holy and pure, he is inexpressible, (not) because he is perfect, imperishable (and divine) in the fashion of perfection, of blessedness or divinity, but because he is a reality beyond realities, not more infinite than finite, but a reality superior to realities, neither corporeal nor incorporeal, neither large nor small, without quantity (or quality), not a creature, nor capable of being embraced by anyone, nor is he of being, but a reality superior to realities, not only in that he is superior, but inasmuch as he is coextensive with himself...

Apocryphon of John B24, 6 ff, in Tardieu, Ecrits Gnostiques, 88.

Tardieu's commentary (250) refers to Plato's Parmenides (137C4 ff.), the source of these negations, since it had become an exercise in logic within the Middle Platonic schools. This is probably correct, but it is also true that this turn of phrase is present throughout the Parmenides. The one is "neither x nor y" type of statement is particularly characteristic of the sixth hypothesis (163B–164A), and in fact almost all the "neither/nor" of the Gnostic text are to be found here. God is systematically removed from all the categories by this neither/nor manoeuvre: he is neither great, nor small; thus he is removed from the idea of size altogether.

The Apocryphon of John text reiterates that God is superior to the category denoted by either side of the couplet. This of course reflects the Middle Platonic interest in the idea that God is "beyond being and intelligence" (see Whittaker, ἙΠΕΚΕΙΝΑ ...). A passage which has a similar sentiment may be found in Plotinus V. 5. 6, 9:

Since he is none of these things (i.e. created beings), one can only say that he is beyond them (ἐπέκεινα τούτων).

Is there a difference between saying that God is beyond being, and that he is superior to being? The Gnostic text insists on superiority, and this could possibly be significant.

The term "beyond" (ἐπέκεινα) suggests separateness and possibly even complete unrelatedness. On the other hand, the term "superior" places less emphasis on the disjunction between God and reality, and more on the suggestion of continuity. Superiority implies a relationship, even though the relationship might be one of some distance.

Negative theology which emphasises the superiority of the deity is slightly different from that which emphasises his "beyondness". Now it is characteristic of the Middle Platonists and Plotinus that they stress the "beyondness" of God, by using Plato's term ἐπέκεινα, and as Whittaker and others have pointed out, this formula from the Republic is liberally scattered across the Middle Platonist texts.

But it is Proclus who dwells on the notion of the "superiority" (ὑπεροχὴ) of God, distinguishing between negations which imply a defect (Ἑλλειψις) and those which imply superiority (ὑπεροχὴ). Those of the fifth hypothesis
of the Parmenides, he says, imply a lack in the One (see p. 107, and see Proclus, Platonic Theology I.12). By stressing the superiority of the One, Proclus hopes to provide a foundation for its role as transcendent cause of all.

The emphasis on the superiority of the deity in the Apocryphon of John seems then to strike a note which may reflect the Platonism of a later stage than the Middle Platonist period. That the *via negativa* should be so firmly combined with a statement of positive transcendence reminds us more of the positive negation of Proclus' negative theology. This passage may reflect the fifth century climate of thought, rather than that of the second. The notion of the positive *via negativa* we will develop in our chapter on Proclus.

The name "Gnostic" may seem to take these thinkers out of the scope of this enquiry, in that they apparently proclaim a set of esoteric teachings which have the character of dogma. The Gnostics constitute the knowledge faction of early Christianity, as against the faith faction, constituted by orthodoxy. They were indeed purveyors of teachings on the secrets of the upper realms, and their name suggests a confidence in the products of human discourse. Hermes Trismegistus rails against the drunkenness of ignorance, and exhorts one to follow the road "up to the gates of knowledge". He speaks of salvation from ἁγνοσία by the brilliant light of γνῶσις (I.7.1–2), and this seems to contrast with the advocacy of hyperignorance by a later Platonist, Damascius. Neoplatonists in general are reluctant to commit themselves to a body of dogma, and their interest in negative theology militates against this. The Gnostics are confident teachers, while Neoplatonists such as Plotinus are more explorers on the edge of the unknowable.

Yet the difference is more apparent than real. The structure of Valentinian Gnosticism is exactly that of Neoplatonism: the realm of the pure transcendent is followed in descending order by a progression of material stages, each more corporeal than the next. At one point in this descent, language comes into being: from then on down, it is applicable and useful. The realm of silence, to be reached through serial negation, lies beyond it. There is in both Gnosticism and Neoplatonism a plateau, where language and the higher intelligible principles freely mingle, but beyond this plateau lie heights which are to be scaled in quite a different way. The production of henads in Proclus' system is structurally similar to the production of the ogdoad and hebdomad in Basilides' system, and these constitute the plateau in the system of both Neoplatonist and Gnostic. The teaching so confidently purveyed by the Gnostics belongs to that region, but not beyond it, and in fact the knowledge they offer is of a different variety. The word *gnosis* is redefined, so that it becomes a matter of seeing a being which is there, but which is beyond thought and language. This again is compatible with Neoplatonism, though the terminology may be different.

The transcendentalism of this pre-Neoplatonism is clear enough. What we
have seen in the foregoing evidence is the sign of a new emphasis on the idea that the ultimate principle is far beyond the power of discourse, and the material world. There is ample evidence of a declining confidence in the power of language, as the essence of things recedes into the far distance. Yet there is only a small amount of evidence on the development of the *via negativa* proper. Interest in this method can be traced back to Aristotle and Euclid, and it is minimally present in the Middle Platonists. Yet the negative method had been understood and debated since Aristotle. It is not until the Neoplatonists proper that we find the full flowering of negation as an instrument of metaphysics. The deployment of negation in a continuous and systematic way is the hallmark of the Neoplatonist *via negativa*. It is foreshadowed in Gnostic, Middle Platonic and Neopythagorean documents, but in a very limited way, since these sources offer little more than a view about the limits of language. They do not explore the possibility of a negative method.