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Chapter VI. The Silence Beyond Names

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VI. The silence beyond names

Wherein lie the sources of the late Greek pessimism about the efficacy of language? We shall document it more fully in what follows, but it is clear that somewhere in the history of Greek thought there began to develop a deep suspicion of discourse, and the corresponding belief that lack of words, or silence, could convey the deepest meanings sought. Just as that which is absent in a painting can sometimes be more significant than that which is represented, so words came to be seen as directing attention to something which they themselves fail to capture. If one concedes that the non-verbal is that which words strive to communicate, that the absent is the object of the present linguistic artefacts, then the conclusion that words are injurious to the attempt to grasp it is not far away. We have seen in the Phaedrus that the written word can be seen as a drug which dulls the mind, causing it to lose its recollective insights. The trend in late antiquity is to stress that the word itself, whether spoken, written or thought, may distract the mind from its goal of conceiving transcendent realities. As classical antiquity lumbers on to its middle age, one becomes aware of an enormous increase in the language of silence, which expresses itself quite clearly in a statistical increase in the occurrence of the word sige (silence). There was a growing dissatisfaction with the use of words, which was matched by growing suspicions about the use of thought: the development of negative theology, to which we turn in the next chapter, marks an attempt to find a new mode of thought. This new mode was to signal the end of the dominance of language over thought, and the end of the tendency to see thought in the image and likeness of language. The root of the problem, which develops into a major preoccupation in late antiquity, and particularly the writings of Proclus, the apostle of negation, may be seen to lie in the difficulty perceived by Socrates in the Theaetetus. Socrates recalls a dream he once had (201E), in which he notes that the essence of reasoning lies in the combination of names. This is what logos is: the individual elements, however, cannot be known in isolation. We can name these “atoms”, but we cannot know them, since knowledge arises out of a plural structure, involving the subject and predicate combination for example. It follows that the individual cannot be known, since it lacks this structure, and we cannot add any other term to it without pluralising. We can name it only, therefore, and we must even refrain from attributing existence to it (205C). The difficulty we are now confronted with, is that we can name things which must remain unknowable to us. The “first things” remain “outside reason” (alogos) and “unknowable” (agnostos) to us. The concept of thought as involving a plural structure is very dominant in Greek philosophy: as Aristotle says, “truth and falsehood involve a combination (sympleke) of
The early suspicions about discourse (On the Soul 432a12). The difficulty of this view, to be drawn out by later readers of Plato, lies in the uselessness of names which do not in themselves provide knowledge. Reasoning and knowledge cannot be applied to an object which is to be known in and by itself: later Platonism will emphasize the failure of multiple-structure reasoning to apprehend the One, or God. The ineffectiveness of the name leads to silence about the One. The converse of the notion of multiplicity in reasoning is the view that one must proceed intellectually by a method of division (diairesis), as expounded in the Sophist (253D), and this part of the dialectic aims at separating entities according to the differences between them, with a view to reaching the primary ontological elements (Parmenides 129D). The method of division is the remedy for the groupings and collocations of notions which produce vagueness in thought, yet it ends up with unknowable entities. As the Stranger observes in The Sophist:

The separation of each thing from all the others is the ultimate destruction of all discourse. For discourse comes through the combination (sympleke) of ideas with each other (259E).

The seeds of the late Greek suspicion of discourse have already been sown, and what culminates with Damascius takes its starting-point with the problematic evoked in these passages. The paradigm for thought in the Greek tradition has already been perceived for what it is, and the assessment of it is already under way.

Is there a similar embryonic development of the theme of silence in classical antiquity? It is a matter worth pursuing, since we may be in danger of overstressing not only the rationality of the Greeks (as E. R. Dodds points out, in The Greeks and the Irrational), but also their devotion to speech. The net will be cast a little wider, to embrace the language of the mysteries and of Greek tragedy in order to determine to what extent silence is an early, as well as being a late, Greek concern.

That the theme of silence is by and large a late Greek issue, is clearly illustrated by the lack of attention to it in Presocratic philosophy. The index to Diels-Kranz (Fragmente der Vorsokratiker) shows some references to συγή, συγα, συγαν, σωπη, σωπαν or ἔννοια, but few of them are of any conceptual interest: there is no attempt to elaborate a notion whereby the absence of language might be said to be intellectually helpful, nor any hint of such a notion. This should be expected, of course, of that group of thinkers whose primary concern was the development of the new logos-style account of reality, and the enormous preponderance of material involving some use of that term gives clear notice that this is the era of the verbal. The explosion of confidence in the mind and its logos is characteristic of the earliest period of Greek philosophy. It is not at this moment that we should expect doubts to
be emerging, or to be entertained in any systematic form. The one exception to this general rule is Pythagoras, who we are told (Diogenes Laertius VIII.10), insisted that his pupils remain silent for five years, listening to his discourse, and without seeing him. Heraclitus maintained (according to Diogenes VIII.7) that Pythagoras was the author of a poem which began:

Young men, come and revere in silence all these things.

This did not fail to attract attention in late antiquity, when Pythagoras was revered as a prophet. Both Porphyry and Iamblichus, who were concerned to revitalise the popular and mythical bases of Greek religious feeling in opposition to Christianity, wrote lives of Pythagoras. He was regarded as a Greek sage, and Iamblichus’ Life (197) refers to the practice of silence. There is no clear evidence, however, that Pythagoras developed an anti-verbal philosophy.

The investigation of silence could lend itself to a literary treatment, and Greek tragedy knows of the difference between speaking and keeping silent. In fact it is a frequently employed theme, since silence is frequently enjoined as a means of forestalling or preventing the remorseless unfolding of the tragic fate which awaits the principal character. In Aeschylus’ Agamemnon (548), the chorus remarks that silence has long been its remedy (pharmakon) against harm, but in the events which follow it proves to be a useless one. Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex turns on the silence of the prophet Teiresias, and there is a continuous interplay between Oedipus and Teiresias, and the issue of speaking out, as against holding one’s peace. In line 216 Oedipus exhorts the chorus to hear and understand his words in the cause of discovering the author of the slaying of Laius: he continues by calling on them to speak. Ironically, he who does not maintain silence is promised a reward by Oedipus, whose tragedy is that only silence can save him, since he is unknowingly the parricide he seeks.

Throughout the play Oedipus encounters silence, and endeavours to penetrate it: in lines 328 ff., Teiresias twice asserts his desire to remain silent, since his prophet’s art will reveal truths which will be devastating to Oedipus. Oedipus upbraids Teiresias’ taciturnity, vaunting his own liberality of speech; “I speak my mind” (346). Teiresias yields: “Thou art the murderer of him whose murderer thou pursuest” (362). In this way Oedipus first breaches the wall of silence, and the prophet’s words convey the first stage of the knowledge he is to resist. His own verbal prolixity contrasted with the silence of his interlocutors takes on a cruel irony: Jocasta departs (1072) vowing not to utter any further word to him on his ancestry, and again Oedipus asserts his desire to discover it. The forces of silence and those of utterance again do battle (1140–1160), but eventually Oedipus learns the truth and engages in a great gesture of self-mutilation: he puts out his eyes, having wanted to see
The silence of the mysteries

The truth. Teiresias stands for revelation in language throughout Greek tragedy, and Euripides portrays him as he who must speak:

Creon: Be silent. Do not speak these words to the city.
Teiresias: Thou biddest me to injustice. I will not keep silent.
(The Phoenician Maidens 925)

Again language conveys knowledge of realities, which silence only served to mask.

However Euripides introduces a note of scepticism about speech which one does not find in Sophocles. In the Orestes, Menelaus sagely remarks to Orestes:

... Silence may be better than speech, but at times speech is superior to silence. (638)

Orestes impulsively replies that many words will lend clarity to understanding, and that it is therefore necessary to expound his case at length. Yet Menelaus responds that he is unable to help Orestes bear his burdens: Orestes turns on him, denouncing his lack of loyalty and impotence. Finally, in line 787, we find Orestes recommending silence about their difficulties. The inefficacy of his speech causes him to turn full circle, and the silence now advocated contrasts strikingly with the eagerness of his plea for language in the earlier passage. The confidence of the philosopher in the value of words, and their ability to produce clarity, is parodied by Orestes' reversal of his own position. Speaking, and remaining silent, are fundamental tools in the construction of Greek drama, which thus reflects the general Greek fascination with speech as the means of conveying knowledge, of enabling people to see. Euripides, standing at the close of the classical era, in many ways parodies the cultural values of his predecessors, and in the above passage of the Orestes, seems to parody the gift of speech itself.

The mystery religions made much of the vow of secrecy, and the need to keep silence over the content and practices of the cult was widely known and observed. The terminology of the mysteries becomes, particularly in late Graeco-Christian philosophy, a kind of metaphor for the transcendence and remoteness of the deity. The goddess Sige (silence) does not make her appearance until the myths of Valentinian Gnosticism, but early Greek mystery religions are rich in material which could have inspired this theme. The word mysterion was held to have been derived from μυ&omicron;ν, to "close" (one's mouth), but the word μυ&omicron;ην was coined to mean "initiate". The supposed derivation shows what was held to be important about the mysteries, that is that certain central ritual acts and experiences were not to be spoken about. Similarly, the term τα ἄρρητα (the "unspeakable") much used in late philosophy, refers initially to the central core of the mystic rites. Pentheus' crime, in the Bacchae, was that he saw the unspeakable:
Pentheus: Of what nature be these rites?
Dionysus: They are unspeakable (arreta), not to be known by those uninitiated into the Bacchic rites. (Bacchae 471)

A similar term, ἀπόρρητα ("not to be spoken"), is also used of the content of the mysteries. This term is used by Plato of the secret doctrines of the Pythagoreans (Phaedo 62B), who had to take a vow of secrecy. Clement of Alexandria (Strom. V.9.57.3) records the story of Hippasus of Metapontum, who was said to have been assassinated by members of the brotherhood because of his divulgence of the discovery of irrational numbers, and this story indicates the seriousness with which the principle of secrecy was viewed. Again we may quote Euripides, who has the Muse claim:

the torches of the unspeakable mysteries (mysteria aporreta) did Orpheus teach . . . (Rhesus 943)

The use of lights was one of the central practices of the mysteries, used to induce an experience of ecstasy which was the focal point for many, and this element Euripides represents as having been taught by Orpheus. A nice phrase of Sophocles (Oedipus Rex 301) speaks of the things which are didakta (taught) together with those which are arreta (unspeakable): the distinction is between the sacred and the "profane", or that which can be divulged.

A logical point should be made here. Mystery religion terminology denoting the unspeakable refers to a kind of taboo about the revelation of central details: unspeakability refers to a prescription, a view that one ought not describe the crucial details of the cult. The silence of the initiate is therefore a cultic obligation, and it does not seem to be the case that the ecstatic experience at the heart of the mysteries is described as unspeakable: if this were the case, then logical inexpressibility would be involved in the notion of the "unspeakable". It seems, however, to be the case that the ancient authors are saying that the case of the mystery should not be spoken about, rather than that it cannot be spoken about. The mania experienced by the Dionysiac initiates, the women of the Bacchae (699) leaving their homes, dancing upon the mountains by the light of torches, to the music of flutes, seeing before them fountains of milk and honey, devouring the raw flesh of creatures they tear apart – all of this ecstasy might well be inexpressible, but it is not so described. The later Platonists, nevertheless, blur the above distinction deliberately by applying the word unspeakable to the knowledge of the One. The silence of the initiate is made over into an image conveying the indescribability of the knowledge of God.

The rich imagery of the mysteries does not, however, have a great effect on Plato. Plotinus' Enneads conclude with a reference to the Holy Mysteries as a metaphor for his own mystical philosophy, and as a framework for un-
Plato on the word

understanding the route to the One. Plato does however have a notion of the unspeakable (arretos), in a context which is particularly suggestive for the middle and later Platonists. In the Sophist the problem of falsehood is taken up, and there is an expression of perplexity over whether it really exists (236E); since true statements seem to refer to something existent, the difficulty of what false statements refer to requires resolution. The discussion leads to a quotation of Parmenides' statement, that there is no such thing as not-Being, and so the possibility of there being an entity which can act as a substratum for falsehood is ruled out. The idea of words referring to reality nevertheless persists in the discussion (237E), but then it is perceived that we can use the word ‘not-Being’. Since it refers to nothing, may we conclude that we are not speaking at all when we give vent to this utterance? Since speech and thought presuppose the attribution of being (on the view here used), it seems impossible to deal with ‘not-Being’:

Do you concede then that it is impossible to utter correctly, or to say, or to conceive of not-Being in itself, but it is inconceivable, unspeakable (arretos), inexpressible, and irrational. (alogos: 238C)

The difficulty is seen to be that using the term not-Being has ontological implications, so that if one speaks of ‘not-Beings’ (μη ὄντα), one is attributing plurality to the hypothetical entities; if, on the other hand, one speaks of ‘not-Being’ in the singular, then one attributes singularity to it. This addition of attributes to it is impossible, since it amounts to adding being to not-being (238C). Falsehood thus constitutes a great problem, since it appears to consist of attributing being to what does not exist, and the absurdity encountered in the dialogue lies in the fact that the speakers are actually speaking about the unspeakable. That of which we cannot speak is in fact being spoken of.

Reflected here is Parmenides' disjunction between Being and not Being, and the logical problems entailed in linking Being to language are here explored. Yet the passage was to be seen differently by the later Platonists, who advocated the indescribability of the One. If the One was said to be beyond being, and in many cases it was, then its unspeakability and indescribability was thought to follow. Predication was still linked to the attribution of being, with the result that claiming the One to be beyond being effectively removed it from the reach of predication. It is often claimed that the Neoplatonists “theologized” Plato’s logic, but this is not the case. They in fact used it in precisely the Platonic way, but their changed ontology meant that it was applied in a different manner. The great change lies in the assertion that the highest principle, which we may call God, the Form of the Good, or the One, lay beyond being. The logical consequences for language followed naturally.

In other respects Plato does not reveal any serious doubts about the effica-
cy of language. Socrates, it appears, was quite incapable of remaining silent. Plato has him remark in the Apology:

Perhaps someone might say: "Socrates, can't you go away from us and live elsewhere, quietly and keeping quiet?". (37E)

To the hypothetical question, in which he laughs at himself a little, he responds seriously, claiming that he must speak out of respect for the god. The unexamined life is not worth living, and speech is the instrument of the examination to be conducted (38A): in another dialogue, Alcibiades remarks on the oddity of Socrates' following him around in silence (Alc. I. 106A). One of Athens' great talkers, and the author of the elenchus was not about to extol the virtues of silence over those of speech.

Thought occurs in silence, or it may do so, and in a most revealing passage in the Sophist, thought (dianoia) is defined:

Then thought (dianoia) and speech (logos) are the same, except that thought is a voiceless inner dialogue of the soul with itself, and we have given it that name. (263E)

It is clear that the model of spoken language dominates the understanding of thought: they are seen as identical, except that language emerges in voice. That speech is the paradigm for thought is of immense significance, since the characterization of each becomes inter-dependent on such a view: one cannot be dismissed without the other being similarly relegated, and the basic ambiguity of the word logos appears to dominate the Greek understanding of discourse. It will be seen that one distinct development from classical to late antiquity lies in the separation of thought and speech, and in the growing belief that the two behave differently. It is for this reason that writers such as Philo are able to cast adverse reflections on language, yet retain the high value of thought. However we are not yet at this stage: for both Plato and Aristotle speech is the loftiest instrument of the human mind. The Theaetetus (180E) defines thought (dianoetishai) as the "talk the soul has with itself", and this recalls the idea of thought as internalised dialogue, as given in the Sophist passage quoted above. Thought is seen as asking itself questions, answering them, affirming, denying and reaching decisions. One can thus appreciate more clearly the literary genre employed by Plato, since he must have seen the dialogue form as a replica of the thought process of the individual. The fact of writing down the words involved he saw as problematic, as was noted above (94): the written word is silent, like a painting:

Writing, Phaedrus, has this strange quality, and is very like painting: the creatures in painting stand like living beings, but if asked a question, they remain solemnly silent.
The written word is, paradoxically, silent; and this is its disadvantage. (One glimpses here another Platonic complaint about the visual arts, to be added to those listed in Book X of the Republic, and which is addressed to the failure of the work of art to be verbal, and its inability to engage in dialogue.) The dialogue, question and answer, and the debating character of Greek philosophizing all constitute the drive behind Plato’s concern over the written word. He sees speech as “living and animated” (Phaedrus 276A), and the written word as lacking this dynamic capacity, reposing as it does in its stolid silence. (The Gorgias in 450C has Socrates noticing that painters and sculptors carry out their work in silence, while other arts require speech in varying degrees. The classification of rhetoric is at stake, and there is a general distinction between “doing” arts, and “speaking” arts. Though this is not said, one suspects that “doing” is regarded as inferior, and that the verbal endows an activity with a higher order of sophistication.)

In general, then, Plato’s concerns about discourse focus mainly on the written word and its immobility. He has full confidence in speech and rational debate, and spent much of his intellectual life defining the latter. Sophistic debate and rhetoric he viewed as distortions which had to be refuted: speech had to purify itself. The luminous brilliance of his attacks on sophistry and rhetoric in the Euthydemus and the Gorgias reflect Plato’s deep commitment to verbal exchange and the importance of its being rightly used. The difficulties are not glossed over: there are the unknowable entities of Socrates’ “dream”, and the unspeakable not-Being are held up as problems in an aporetic way, and they are left as puzzles within Plato’s system of thought. These minor knots in his logical framework were to become leading themes among the Neoplatonists, though they were not so for Plato, who saw thought and speech as basic intellectual tools, vital to the life of the city: Aristotle was to formalise this view, making man’s capacity for speech the cornerstone of his life as a city-dweller, with his famous definition of man as a “political animal”.

Whilst Plato advocated the spoken word, and doubted the written word, Aristotle showed no disquiet at all over either. The Peripatetic school was well-known for its advocacy of books, and it should not be forgotten that the vast Alexandrian library was said to have originated from the influence over Ptolemy exercised by Demetrius, a philosopher of the Aristotelian school. The utility of the written word was an issue which divided the Academy and the Lyceum.

Aristotle shows very little interest in the limits of discourse: he scarcely mentions silence, or the unspeakable. In the Problems (948b22) the phenomenon of the fearful remaining silent is discussed. Why is it, Aristotle asks, if fear is a form of pain, that those who are frightened remain silent? The answer is that the body is chilled, and wind is carried downwards and instead of finding an outlet through the mouth, it breaks out of another orifice. This
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is Aristotle at his most pedestrian. The charm of his empiricism is present here, of course – that lucid, clinical and unpretentious manner of merely describing what he observes, yet what is lacking is precisely the metaphysical sense which he reacted against in Plato. Aristotle is the supreme Greek rationalist and verbalist, and as he observes that speech is the corner-stone of political organisation, one senses again the failure to look beyond the reality he describes. What are the limits of this faculty of speech? Aristotle has no real sense of there being any limits, or any serious deficiency. His confidence in the power of the intellectual process is boundless. He has no “dreams” about unknowable atoms, or suspicions about the drug-like qualities of the written word: for him the world and mind is impregnated with logos, and the task is that of the demonstration of essences. He reduces silence to the idea of breaking wind.

There is a similar absence of attention to the images of silence in the Stoics, Epicureans and Sceptics. In the former cases, their character as dogmatic systems was incompatible with the entertaining of doubts over the means of forming them. Yet Scepticism is a case apart, and was devoted to showing that the established modes of reasoning were unable to function. Advocating suspension of judgment on most issues, if not all issues, and claiming that every argument could be countered by another equal in force (equipollence), Scepticism might well have advocated lapsing into silence. Indeed Cratylus was said to have refused to speak in later life, indicating his wishes by a simple wave of the finger (Aristotle, Metaphysics 1010a12): the belief that reality was entirely in flux meant that no names could be given. Terminology and any form of predication being therefore baseless, speaking became a futile exercise. The Sceptics did not seem to go so far as this, and this is a matter of interest. There is, it will be argued, an intimate link between Scepticism and Mysticism, since the former undermines all attempts at propositional systems: the Sceptics, however, did not perceive such a link, and it was others who developed it. The truth of the matter is that they were believers in reason, and they were engaged in a highly rational exercise: as Plato pitted dialogue against rhetoric, so they turned philosophy against itself. However, rather than draw the conclusion that some form of abdication was necessary, the Sceptics maintained a commitment to philosophical reasoning. Reason was not abandoned, and when asked how reason could demonstrate its own inadequacy, since it would have to be relied upon in order to achieve this, they replied that reason could exhaust itself, in the same manner as a plague. Thus, despite the fact that they were fundamental and extremely effective critics of much of Greek philosophy, they remained firmly within that camp.

With Philo and the Gnostics we are in different intellectual territory. Though Philo does not use the word στυγή at all, other terms convey its meaning. In certain cases, Philo stresses the importance of speech: Moses is
said, in Who is the Heir (16), to have spoken in a ceaseless stream of words to God, who is said to have answered him “with a silence clearer than speech, used the miraculous vision to herald, as it were, future events” (Moses I.66). There is in Philo a tendency to equalise silence and speech, as different instruments appropriate for different types of event. The old Greek emphasis on speech is still there, but there is also a tendency to value its absence.

Silence is a power, “akin to the power of speech” in that it controls words and uses them when the right time approaches (The Confusion of Tongues 37). There is, of course, the silence of failure, as when one’s opponent has exhausted one’s capacity to reply. In this case one prays for the help of God, who has made speech his servitor (39), and who can silence the lips of the sophist, whose verbiage seems irresistible. One notices here the desire to promote silence which is new: there are some references to silence as part of polite behaviour, throughout the history of Greek culture, but this is more a matter of decorum than a matter of epistemological significance. These remarks occur in Philo as well, but alongside them there are frequent statements in praise of both silence and speech, as weapons of the mind.

Silence is the appropriate posture before the divine. Casel’s seminal work (De philosophorum Graecorum silentio mystico) indicates many cases of the mystery of the holy causing silence in those who are confronted with it. Philo (On Dreams II.262) expounds this theme: nature has given lips for two purposes.

One is to keep silence (ἡσυχία), since the lips form the most effective way of containing sound . . .

We should exercise them for both speaking and keeping silent. When we can usefully speak, we do so, and when it is better to refrain, we should learn to keep silence. The Egyptians, Exodus tells us (11.7), stand silent before God, fearful of his power. There is a time for silence, and a time for speech, but the spiritually unenlightened are unaware of the proper moment,

. . . for they zealously preserve a guilty silence, and a reprehensible form of speech. (On Dreams II.274)

These principles are reiterated in Who is the Heir (10). There is a silence of the soul, as well as that of the tongue, and here Philo is referring to tranquility, or peace of mind. Our thoughts tend to range over an infinite number of subjects, and these cause an “inward shouting”. The mind should still itself, in order to hear him who speaks: in this way it will be silent. Without silence, there will be no real listening to commands.

A balance is struck between speaking and remaining silent: again equal weight is given to the two states, each being a capacity which is learned, and
which requires judgment. In the Worse Attacks the Better (102) Philo argues that there is a single faculty of self-control which enables us either to speak, or remain silent. One must refrain from blurting out secrets, and there are times when there is strength in keeping silent (besuchazein). The same kind of moral capacity which directs speech to good ends may cause us to refrain from it entirely.

In a clear reminiscence of Scepticism, Philo notes that it is sometimes necessary for reason to hold its peace, to keep quiet and suspend judgment (ἐπέχειν: On Flight and Finding 136).

For the best offering is silence and suspense of judgment (ἐποχὴ), in matters which are not entirely worthy of credence. (loc. cit.)

There is some reassurance in the fact that God knows all, and so the Sceptical posture need not produce anxiety. One notes with interest this allusion to the central doctrine of Scepticism, according to which one must suspend judgment on issues not capable of absolutely certain demonstration. Other traces (see p. 88) have been found in Philo of such a use of Sceptical notions, and though they are metamorphosed in his writings, they emerge in a distinctly recognizable form. Unlike the Sceptics however, Philo does draw the conclusion that the epoche leads to silence: the role given to the divinity means that man can indeed relapse into such a supine posture. The genuine Sceptic did not go to the lengths suggested by the negative character of his arguments; the destructive character of Sceptical arguments did not lead to an abandonment of philosophy, or to any endorsement of silence. Philo’s deus ex machina played a similar role in the other Sceptical borrowing, as noted above, since the human failure to self-think is compensated by God’s self-knowledge, a capacity which belongs to him alone.

This combination of Sceptical suspension of judgment and silence is of crucial importance, since it is the first clear indication of the relationship between Scepticism in philosophy and Mysticism in theology. Philo here hints at a theme to be developed later, and the importance of the passage is as follows: The failure of reason is seen to lead to silence, and silence, through the procedure of negative theology, will come to be regarded as a positive epistemological step towards the knowledge of the transcendent.

The memory carries out its work in silence, and the keen learner goes over what he has learned in order to commit it all to memory (On Husbandry 131). Philo here anticipates Augustine’s attempt to explain memory by the analogy of the chewing of the cud (Confessions X.14), so that memory is seen as the ability to predigest food before it reaches the stomach of the mind. In Augustine the analogy is drawn because memory does seem to process the past in some way, presenting it in a recognizable form, yet stripping it of its essential characteristics: the memory of past sweetness is not itself
Philo and the value of silence

sweet. Philo's cud is that of the camel, and it is clear that Augustine has drawn on a longstanding tradition in the philosophy of memory, involving cud-chewing animals. Philo notes that the work of memory, and one recalls here the Socratic doctrine of Recollection, is carried out "in entire silence" (On Husbandry 132). Clearly it is thought that speaking and remembering are activities which cannot be carried out simultaneously.

The worthless man is one who devotes himself to loitering around market places, theatres, law-courts, assemblies: his tongue is constantly at work, bringing confusion into all matters, mingling all kinds of things. Such a person has not been trained to silence, which is an excellent thing at the right time (On Abraham 20). The misuse of speech is a thing Philo is constantly aware of, and his cautionary remarks on the subject recall the fierce Platonic denunciation of the Sophists. The critique is very similar, but the conclusion is different: Philo advocates the practice of silence in due season.

Voice may be the agent of disturbance and disruption:

Our beings are sometimes at rest, at other times subject to starts and untimely shouts, as we may call them. When these are silent, we have deep peace; otherwise we have truceless war. (On Drunkenness 97)

Philo refers to shouting because it occurs in an Exodus verse (32.17), of which he wishes to offer an allegorical interpretation. The divine life of peace is found away from these shoutings in the soul, which induce a disturbing kind of self-division. Philo refers to the "outcries of pleasure", the "voice of desire", the "loud shout" of the passions, and their "myriad voices and tongues" (102–3).

When he who experiences these things says that in the camp of the body the voices are the voices of war, and that the silence (hesuchia) dear to peace has been driven away, the holy word is in accord. (104)

The principle of silence, Sige, achieves considerable importance in the various Gnostic writings, and particularly those of the Valentinian school. It was noted in chapter one that Marcus made the breaking of silence and the generation of discourse the axis of his system: in the beginning was the word beginning, arche. The origin of reality is identified with the origin of language, since both begin with the Father's desire to utter what had been unspeakable, and to give form to the invisible. The letters of the word first pronounced proliferate in an emanation, and lead eventually to the vowels, the voiced letters, or the most overt form of utterance, closest to our own physical world. The basic preoccupation of this whole cosmogony is the transition from silence to speech, and it is of course the case that this transition is a degeneration, in the same way as the emanation from the Neoplatonic One degenerates into multiplicity.
The Valentinians are the philosophers of discourse par excellence of the ancient world, and Marcus is the clearest example of this. Pursuing his speculation (and his promiscuous sexual relationships) in the Rhône valley, Marcus led many astray, Irenaeus tells us (Adv. Haer. I.13.6). Though a numerical significance may also be given to his speculation, since the letters of the alphabet also designate the numerals in Greek, the essential significance of his cosmic fancy is epistemological. His own Sige revealed all to him, including the name of the Father: in Marcus’ system, the Father knew that he was incomprehensible, and so bestowed on the elements (called aeons) the power of self-enunciation. The elements are letters of the alphabet, and each is given the capacity to self-pronounce. The origin of discourse is at stake in this scheme. Truth is composed of alpha and omega, beta and psi and so on throughout the whole Greek alphabet. Truth is associated with man:

... this is the shape of the element, this the character of the letter. And this element he calls “Man”, saying that it is the source of all speech, the beginning of every sound, the articulation of all that is unspeakable, and the mouth of the silent Sige. (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I.14.3)

Man is the mouth of Silence. Ontology here is reduced to discourse: reality is a series of words, representing a degenerate form of transcendent reality, which can be reduced to silence. Marcus has taken a Pythagorean scheme for the generation of reality from numbers, and profiting from the ambiguity of the Greek letter, which designated a number as well as being a letter of the alphabet, made the Pythagorean number cosmology into a discourse cosmology. The view that physical reality is discourse-based naturally entails the view that the transcendent Father is situated in silence, out of language. The system of reality, the great chain of being, in which human realities occupy a very low position, is therefore a continuous departure from the real essence, which is silence. God, in Marcus’ system, might be defined as the absence of language.

Ptolemaeus has an hypostasis, Silence, dwelling with the Father, and also called Thought, or Grace (Irenaeus, Adv. Haer. I.1.1). According to the myth, Mind (nous) only was able to comprehend the Father, and such was his pleasure at the spectacle, that he desired to communicate it to the rest of the aeons. However Mind was restrained in this project by Silence (I.2.1). As far as one can understand the account, Silence may have feared that Mind might implant in the aeons (lower beings) an unquenchable desire for the Father, by the limited glimpse he was to give to them. This may explain the tragedy of Sophia, a female principle and one of the aeons, who conceived a passionate desire for the Father. She was unable to comprehend Him, and so lived in deep distress: the Father being unknowable, she suffered the pangs of unrequited love. In this account, Silence is a highly placed principle who en-
deavours to prevent the attempt to render knowable the unknowable. Silence acted according to the will of the Father in trying to restrain Mind (I.2.1), and clearly the role of Silence was to prevent the kind of unsatisfiable titillation which ensued. Subsequently the Father sought to release Sophia from her passion, and ensured that other beings were aware of his own incomprehensibility. Christ was responsible for teaching them that they were incapable of knowledge of the Father (I.2.5).

What may we conclude about the meaning of Silence in this fable? It is uncertain how far one should stray in the direction of Jonas’ demythologising hermeneutic, yet the story does seem to allude to some general propositions. Silence is the force which would have prevented incomplete and unsatisfactory revelation of the character of the Father, but did not do so. In other terms: the essential reality is unspeakable, though some glimpses of it are captured by lower beings. This induces in them an insatiable thirst for the higher being, and it could be thought that they would have been better off without the fragmentary apprehension they had gained. Silence is the withdrawing characteristic of essential reality; that which is both reticent before the mind avid for knowledge, and which enshrouds that reality. Receding before the mind in quest of linguistic data, silence presents language with a stalemate.

Basilides must also be mentioned, since he believed in the unspeakability of the Father: however, as Hippolytus indicates (Ref. VII.20.2–3), he struggled to say something different. It was not that He was ineffable; it was that He was not. Basilides, aware of the ambiguity contained in the Greek word for being, and apparently, aware of the Greek amalgamation of the predicative use of “is” and its use as a copula, claims that when he says, “There was nothing”, he does not indicate some being by the use of “was”. He means that there was simply nothing at all, and does not wish to claim that a mysterious entity, Nothing, was there in the beginning. This absence, he says, we call unspeakable: but it is not even that.

We call it unspeakable (*arretos*), but it is not even unspeakable. The non-unspeakable is called “not speakable”, and is . . . “beyond every name that is named”. (Hippolytus, Ref. VII.20.3)

There are not even sufficient names for the created world, such is its variety, and Basilides concludes that the inadequacy of names is justification for endeavouring to apprehend things without language (*arretos*). Language induces confusion. The God of Basilides is authentic Nothingness, and is even beyond unspeakability. Its silence is beyond silence.

The Gnostics clearly have a great deal to say about silence, and the transition from silence to language is every bit as crucial as the transition from nothing to matter, in the Gnostic chain of being. Just as matter has to be transcended in the pursuit of one’s spiritual source, so has speech to give way to
VI. The silence beyond names

silence. And in the case of Marcus, the two processes are one: to transcend material reality is to transcend speech.

The basis has now been laid for the understanding of discourse in late Greek philosophy. The tragedian Aeschylus had claimed (Prometheus Bound 460) that the written word was the agent of memory: Plato reversed this in the Phaedrus (274D), by making it a drug. The written word becomes “the elixir of forgetfulness”. Yet Plato’s revisionism does not call into question the value of word itself, and he is more concerned to stress the value of the spoken logos, and of verbal interaction. Words, on his view, must be kept alive through the dialectic, and he believes that the written word is ossified.

In the classical period, language is not questioned, nor is silence advocated. The discovery of logos was too recent an achievement, and too successful a tool for it to be challenged in such a way. Euripides displays iconoclastic tendencies over the utility of logos, but this is not to be taken up until well into the Hellenistic period. Plato does anticipate Basilides with his suggestion that if not-Being exists, then it will be unutterable, inconceivable, and irrational (alogos), but this is not a systematically maintained argument on the limits of language. The Greeks do not advocate the abandonment of language, and even the Sceptics do not do so, though they lay the basis for it. With Philo, however, a new era begins. He advocates silence consequent on Sceptical suspension of judgment, and brings into play an antithesis between speech and silence which is new: both are praised as virtues. There is a time for silence, and a time when silence will be not only appropriate but inevitable. Gnosticism widens this process, and makes silence the epistemologically impregnable character of essential reality. God, or the Father, is unspeakable, and Silence is now a cosmic principle which preserves that characteristic. Plato’s remarks about the unspeakability of not-Being in the Sophist, and the incomprehensibility of the indivisible in the Theaetetus, have borne their fruit.