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Chapter VII. Thinking Negatively: The Foundations Of The Via Negativa

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Neoplatonism produced a method for the apprehending of the One, a method constructed on the notion that language was inefficacious. The negative method endeavours to use language in a manner which will enable it to rise above itself, and is usually referred to as the *via negativa*, or the apophatic (negating) method. It is usually associated with mysticism, and it will be familiar to all students of the middle ages, and of eastern spirituality. It receives a clear formulation in Plotinus, and a great development in Proclus and Damascius: on the Christian side, it is used by Clement of Alexandria, to a small extent by Origen and Augustine, and to a large extent by the Cappadocian fathers, Gregory and Basil. The *via negativa* is of course central in Dionysius the Areopagite. It involves ridding the mind of its contents, so that it can pass into the "mystic night". Silence plays a great part in this, and it may appear that one is far from philosophical concerns, in this pursuit of the negative way.

Yet the negative method is intimately involved with the major epistemological themes of Greek philosophy, and can be said to stem from Parmenides, and the Academic treatment of his notion of the One. It involves a whole range of Greek ideas, including the notions of unity, being, reason, thought and the logic of predication. It is a matter not only of Greek logic, but also of ontology, since it involves the notion of the incremental generation of reality, by interrelated and interconnected stages. It will be the business of this chapter to bring together the epistemological and the ontological facets of the early material on negative knowledge.

Negative reasoning can be defined as a procedure which seeks to clarify concepts by the use of negative predicates, rather than positive ones. In the late classical world, it takes a theological twist, and becomes the view that God is rendered banal by the application of standard predicates, even quite lofty ones, such as goodness, justice, munificence and so on. Rather than diminish his transcendence by feeble attempts to reach for appropriate concepts, one should negate them, so that God becomes non-good, or non-just. The result will be an unsullied apprehension of his nature. The difficulty in this for theology lies in the indeterminate character of negation, since goodness is a discrete notion, but non-goodness leaves open a vast range of possibilities, from which only one notion is excluded. With such an approach God could turn out to be almost anything, and no doubt did: in the case of Basilides at least, He turned out to be "purely and unequivocally Nothing".

What controls were there over the negative method? What was its intellec-
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tual framework? These questions must be answered by looking closely at how negation was understood in Greek philosophy, and secondly how the presumed relation between thought and being shaped the understanding of negation as an epistemic/ontic process. Two distinct technical terms mark the Greek view of negation: ἀπόφασις is the basic word for negation, whereas ἀφαίρεσις (or “abstraction”) frequently comes close to it. Apophasis is peculiarly like apophasis morphologically speaking, but the latter, from apophaínō, means declaration, statement or predication. Apophasis comes close to being the opposite of the term under consideration, though kataphasis (assertion) is in fact its opposite. The notion of exclusion is strong in apophasis, which Aristotle defines as follows:

Assertion (kataphasis) is a statement affirming one thing of another: negation (apophasis) is a statement of something away from another. (On Interpretation 17a25)

Plato, in the Cratylus (426D), uses negation in this way, defining rest as the denying of motion. It is as if an attribute is removed from the entity in question, and for this reason the behaviour of the notion of abstraction (aphairesis) is similar. Deriving from aphaireo, it refers fundamentally to an act of taking away, or the removal of something. Both negation and abstraction come close to another notion in Aristotle, that of privation (steresis), and all three may refer to a process of intellectual removal of a characteristic. Negation seems, then, to amount to depriving an entity of a characteristic.

Presocratic philosophy has nothing to say on the logic of any of these terms, though Parmenides does perceive the difficulties for predication involved in the idea of not-Being. This undoubtedly lies behind Plato's remarks about the unspeakability of not-Being in the Sophist, since Being is thought to be that which sustains language, or that which is somehow its medium. Not-Being, on this model, fails to engender language. It is impossible that language should embrace not-Being, or spring from it. Parmenides says that that which is not, cannot be known or declared (Fragment 2). Thought, Being and language are all related to each other, and not-Being does not provide thought and language with the means of subsistence.

But this verdict has already been given, as it had to be, that one path should be left alone as unthinkable, unnamed, for it is no true path, and that the other exists and is real. (Fragment 8, 16; trans. W. K. C. Guthrie)

This, then, is the backdrop to Plato's view that not-Being is unspeakable and incomprehensible, and it forms the starting-point for the hypotheses of his dialogue entitled the Parmenides. In this work the concept of the One is drawn into the whole logic of predication, with Zeno and Parmenides participating as interlocutors. Critics have differed over how seriously the dialogue
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is to be taken, with Taylor (Plato 361) claiming that we would be making a mistake if we were to take the second part of the dialogue seriously, and Cornford (Plato and Parmenides 114) arguing that the second part is indeed seriously intended, and that it does throw light on the first part. Later Platonists were to take the dialogue very seriously indeed, and for this reason its content must be carefully expounded, whether or not it is a joke.

What has been clear to all commentators is that the ambiguity of the word "is" contributes to a number of the antinomies which the participants manage to erect. As Taylor says: "We get contradictory results according as 'is' is taken to be the symbol of predication (Peano's ε), or that of existence (Peano's Ε)" (369). This reference to Peano's distinction is revealing, since his view does bedazzle many Platonic commentators. The distinction between the "is" of predication and the "is" of existence is regarded by many as an acquisition of philosophy, an indication of progress in the discipline, and there are those who are unwilling to see Plato commit the fallacy of confusing the two functions of the word, and for Taylor the fact that the fallacy is present merely constitutes further evidence that Plato's intention was satirical. This view should be rejected. The distinction between the predicative and existential uses of "is" may not even be correct, and so our anxiety on Plato's behalf may not even be well-founded; and secondly, it is not good method to impose our own concerns on those of Plato. Owen's paper (Aristotle an the Snares of Ontology) shows that even the second generation was not "clear" on the matter, and it seems clear enough that in the Sophist, written later than the Parmenides, Plato was still in difficulties over the "problem". What he did not see clearly in the Sophist was the relation of being and predication, or more precisely, that of falsehood and not-Being. The force of the Peano distinction is undiminished in Anglosaxon philosophy: it is taken as something so obvious that it scarcely needs reiterating. This fact means that Anglosaxon exegesis of the Parmenides is fundamentally unsympathetic to it, and it tends to turn on the question of whether Plato knew he was making the mistake or not. We should consider the possibility that the mistake is not a mistake, and before forcing Plato to cohabit with Anglosaxons, search for an alternative focus for interpreting his philosophy of being. Heidegger, for example makes the "is" of the copula an ontological statement:

... then in the long run the phenomenon to which we allude by the term "copula" has nothing to do with a bond or binding. The interpretation of the "is", whether it be expressed in its own right in the language or indicated in the verbal ending, leads us therefore into the context of problems belonging to the existential analytic, if assertion and the understanding of Being are existential possibilities for the Being of Dasein itself. (Being and Time 202)

Heidegger treated the Parmenides as an important source, and he gives us a
perspective which allows Plato to express himself more clearly. The Parmenides is not intended to be a *reductio ad absurdum* of Parmenides' philosophy, but is rather an aporetic exploration of it. As is well-known, the dialogue begins with a discussion of the theory of forms, and its apparent refutation through the famous “third man” argument. The discussion of the forms terminates with a statement of the problems consequent on their abandonment:

... if one refuses to admit the existence of the forms of things, and does not allow that a definite form can be defined for each case, one will have nothing on which to rest one's thought, since one will have dismissed the view that things each have a perennially identical form. In this way one will utterly destroy the power of discourse. (135B)

This passage is a reminder that Plato is concerned at the epistemological consequences of the Heraclitean doctrine of flux, as was noted earlier in respect of the Timaeus (see p. 97), and the need for some solidly existing entities as the basis for discourse is here expressed. The present remark is in the same line of thinking as Parmenides' tendency to connect Being and Thought/Language, and it is clear that this problem is set up at this point in the dialogue for subsequent investigation. The fact is that the eight hypotheses which follow are not only about the ontological questions of unity and multiplicity, but also about the effect of these issues on discourse. In 165B, a conclusion is drawn that the application of thought, or discourse (*διάνοια*) to reality, breaks it into pieces: in 155D, the second hypothesis leads to the claim that the One in time can be named, spoken of, and be the subject of a logos; and the first hypothesis produces the result, in 142A, that no logos, name or science of the One can be. The notion of unity is therefore intimately bound up with the function and efficacy of discourse, and this issue is partly at stake in the eight hypotheses.

It is, however, difficult to discern what Plato himself advocates in this carefully established series of contradictions, since the method used is that of Zeno: Socrates asks him to do it for them (136D). Zeno's method, as is well-known, consisted in the use of paradoxes, directed at the refutation of some point of view. A widely accepted set of postulates was taken, and shown to be self-contradictory by the turning of one part of them against another. Accordingly, the proposition "the One exists" is taken up for examination, and given a variety of different interpretations. Zeno's method produces contradictory consequences for each case. In the first hypothesis (137D), "if the One exists" refers to a One which is a whole without parts, and such a One turns out to be unknowable and unspeakable. The argument runs as follows: if it has no parts, then the One has no beginning or end; if it has no shape, it can be nowhere; if it has no place, it cannot move. Nor can it be at rest. If it is not in time (141E), then it cannot be:
Can it then partake of being apart from in the present, past, or future? It cannot. Then the One has no share in being at all.

As a consequence, there can be no rational account (logos), science (epistemē), perception (aisthēsis), or opinion (doxa) of it (142A). Therefore it cannot be named, and in this way predicates are ruled out.

The second hypothesis seeks to reverse this result by taking the One as having being. The One both “is”, and “is one”. In this case, it is pluralised, since it now has two characteristics, and this leads to an infinite number of parts in the course of the argument. In this alternative, the One has shape, is in places, and is subject to time. The rather baffling argument concludes by stressing this point (155D): the One “partakes” of the past, present and future, and there is something in relation to it, and which belongs to it.

Certainly, and there would be knowledge and opinion and perception of it . . . And it has a name and a rational account (logos), and is named and spoken of. (155D)

On this hypothesis, the One is in time, has being, and has relational characteristics: it is therefore knowable, and speakable.

Hypotheses five and six consider the possibility that the “One is not”, giving two different meanings to this proposition. On hypothesis five the statement “the One is not” is taken as having meaning (it must have meaning, since we can see what its opposite would mean). We know the meaning of this statement. The One may not exist, but it may partake of many relations, and it is in this respect that predication is possible. Using the breadth of the word “is”, a series of contradictory statements is produced. The “One is not”, but it must have “is-ness” for this statement to be true: it therefore both is, and is not. What follows is a similar set of contradictions, with the conclusion that everything can be simultaneously predicated and denied of the One which does not exist. The sixth hypothesis also treats of the non-existent One, but insists that in this case that being should be completely denied of the One: this is the purely and simply non-existent principle of the Gnostic Basilides (see p. 108). In this case the One does none of the things which the previous One both did, and did not do, such as move, alter, or be at rest. It has no relations. It has no name, logos, perception, or opinion formed of it.

The seventh hypothesis entertains the notion that the One does not exist at all, and the result is an infinite divisibility of what other entities there are.

But, as it seems, each mass of them is unlimited in number, and even if one takes what seems to be the smallest piece, it suddenly seems, just as in a dream, to be many, having seemed to be one . . . (164D)
Plato is prone to having dreams about the basic particles of reality, as we know from the Theaetetus, but in this case the particle explodes into a mass of infinitely dividing fragments. The absence of unity means that reality lacks a principle of cohesion, and a further point of interest is that this pluralisation is the result of discourse.

In my opinion all being conceived in discourse must be broken up into tiny segments. For it would always be apprehended as a mass devoid of one. (165B)

The hypotheses of the Parmenides are bewildering. There are those who find the dialogue a jolly piece of philosophy (Taylor, Plato 370), and there are those whose sense of humour is less acute (Cornford, Plato and Parmenides 114). It is certain however that it is a profound piece of analysis of the breadth of the word “is”, and is no less an examination of ontology than of epistemology. There was enormous interest in the dialogue in later antiquity – witness the massive commentary by Proclus – and it seems perverse to strip it of serious intention, on the basis of Peano’s dubious distinction between the existential and predicative uses of the word “is”. It must be kept in mind that unity and “being”, which is what we might call reality, are closely allied in the treatment of Plato, and of Parmenides himself. The question is not so much about mathematics, as about the nature of the fundamental stuff of things. Plato is asking, through this series of antinomies, about the character of essential being and its relation to discourse. It is the old Presocratic issue of whether the stuff of reality is one, or several. The Parmenides is about monism, and the questions asked are about monistic explanations of reality. Is the essence of things a single principle, or are there several such principles? If there is no unity, how can anything be? What is the relation of discourse to this unity in reality? Is it the kind of thing which lends itself to apprehension through discourse? These are the questions asked by Plato throughout the sometimes tortuous reasonings of the dialogue. Obviously there is no clear verdict given on the matters discussed, but the grounds for discussion are established: “is-ness” belongs to discourse as well as to the external world, and it seems to be necessary that they have it in common in order for both to exist. The principles thrown out for discussion are crucial to the development of negative thinking, since the conditions under which predication can apply to essential reality are spelt out: if the One does not have being, it cannot be the subject of discourse. If it does not exist in time, it cannot be the subject of discourse. Both these suggestions say as much about the limits of discourse as they do about the nature of reality. Further, the notion outlined immediately above, that discourse fragments reality, is particularly significant for the later Platonists. The antithesis is set up as follows: given the absence of unity in things, discourse can only break them in pieces. Unity would provide a kind of epistemological bulwark against the dividing tendency inher-
ent in discourse, and discourse therefore seems to confront and defeat the ontological monism which is at stake. It is confusing to ask what Plato thinks the One is, or whether he identifies it with Parmenides’ lofty principle: he is examining rather, whether reality is one or several. The issue is whether we are to decide for monism or pluralism, not what the principle or principles at stake are considered to be, and the interest for this study is how these alternatives affect the status of discourse. Unity appears necessary to guarantee discourse a foundation, and such unity needs to have the characteristic of being for predication to occur. Of great importance is the seventh hypothesis, since it sees discourse as fragmenting reality. Such an understanding of discourse is profoundly rooted in Plotinus’ thought, who sees lower intelligence (nous) as separative (μεριζων):

There is the separating intelligence, which is other than the intelligence which is indivisible and undividing of being and things. (Enn. V.9.8, 21)

Plotinus envisages another type of thinking, and another type of intelligence, which are identical with Being. The discursive intelligence however, divides: it constitutes an unfolding into component parts. This is the issue as stated in the seventh hypothesis, and it is clear that if discourse is allowed to make too much progress in this direction, then things will become unknowable. A holistic apprehension of reality is necessary if things are to be known in the relations in which they stand to each other, and this is what Plato is getting at with his concern over unity. The complete fragmentation envisaged in the seventh hypothesis, allowed by the absence of unity and fostered by the unhindered separation of discourse, will result in the dissolution of reality and the impossibility of language. Apprehending things as a whole is crucial for knowledge, since things must be seen in their relations with each other: a thing cannot be known in atomic isolation.

The other theme of historical significance which may be drawn from the dialogue concerns the notion that discourse takes place in time. The second hypothesis had envisaged the One as being in time, and as a consequence knowledge of it and language about it become possible. Trouillard (The Logic of Attribution in Plotinus 130) has emphasised the relationship between time and discursive thought in Plotinus, claiming that Plotinian thought is “oriented to the future” (132), and that it wants to traverse the difference between the present and the future in order to acquire the fragments for its “accumulative” way of thinking. One thinks also of Augustine’s Confessions (IV.10), where it is noted that the sentence unfolds sequentially:

For a sentence is not complete unless one word gives way, when it has sounded its syllables, in order to be succeeded by another.
Augustine’s philosophy of time, developed in the Confessions (XI) will reiterate the principle that discourse is time-bound. For these reasons it should be noted that the second hypothesis stakes out an area for discussion in subsequent philosophy, and Plato’s proposition seems to be this. If unity is in time, then predication about it is possible: the antimony involved lies in the consequence of the One’s being in time, since this *modus vivendi* is not satisfactory to it, and it loses its character as one. In later Platonism it will be established, then, that the separative character of discourse and the fact that it is time-bound are one and the same characteristic: the collecting of pieces involves a process like going shopping, and such a process is inevitably temporal. The result will be the drawing of a distinction between discursive thought and a higher form of intelligence.

It can be quite clearly seen how predication is assessed on this view: it involves putting together separate pieces, and has a multiple structure. This is quite obvious, since each part of a sentence refers to different items, and the sentence attempts to combine them. In this respect the sentence seeks to overcome the individuation which characterizes particular entities, and to approximate the wholeness which the real possesses: the sentence tends towards the holistic because it endeavours to surmount the isolation of the atoms, by spelling out their relations. Yet the defect in this is evident: what if there is a reality which is itself a whole, without differentiated parts. Such a being would have no pieces to be combined in a sentence, and this tool would be useless for the task of apprehending it. Further, it would be positively ruinous to the effort to apprehend a whole being: because of its habit of dealing with parts, the application of discourse to such a being would be rather like passing a document through a shredding machine before reading it. However, unlike the document in this analogy, such a being would be recalcitrant to the process, which would therefore function in vain.

When Plato concludes that where the One does not exist, it is unknowable and unspeakable, he is offering to the Neoplatonists a means of characterizing their highest being. The question will be, henceforth, whether the One, or God, has qualities such as being, and consequently whether he can be apprehended in discourse. The answer will be found to lie in negative discourse, and language will become the means of its own self-removal.

The philosophy of the One is therefore closely related to the issue of the efficacy of discourse, and will remain so throughout the history of later Platonism and Patristic philosophy. It was carried on in the Academy by the shadowy figure of Speusippus, whose importance as a bridge between Plato and Neoplatonism has been established by Merlan, Armstrong, Kramer and others. So far as we can piece the story together, Speusippus carried on Plato’s theorising about unity, and dispensed with the theory of forms. Aristotle refers (Metaphysics 1083a22) to “some who do not believe in the Ideas”. It is generally agreed that this refers to Speusippus, and Aristotle goes on to re-
port his view as being that numbers are "the first of existing things, and that their principle is unity itself". Aristotle goes on to deny that unity is an *arche*. Elsewhere (Metaphysics 1091b1) he refers to those who make unity the *arche*, and here again there appears to be reference to Speusippus. He and his school are held to have refrained from making the One identical with the Good, since they regarded the Good as coming into existence subsequently to the One. In this way the One would have been a genuine *arche*, or principle, emanating into successive stages of being, and producing increasingly the phenomena with which we are familiar. Aristotle again objects, complaining that the One must surely have possessed goodness, if it had all the other qualities, such as self-sufficiency, attributed to it. Goodness simply amounts to these qualities: it is not different from them. He then refers to a group who abandoned this notion, and made the One the principle of mathematical number, and this appears to be a point at which Speusippus and his school broke away from the Pythagoreans. (This view is reflected much later in Iamblichus, and has been very fully discussed by Merlan, From Plato to Neoplatonism 110.)

In Fragment listed as 42d by Lang, it is clearly asserted that Speusippus distinguished between the formal One and the mathematical One. This is most important, since it is a distinction to be found in Plotinus, and is effectively one of the options open to a thinker working in the wake of Plato's Parmenides. The creation of two Ones, with different ontological functions, and differing degrees of proximity to physical reality, must have seemed a way of escaping the paradoxes of that dialogue: if unity was not in being, then discourse about it was impossible; if it was in being, then it lost its character as unity. The answer was here found to be the establishment of two Ones, with the lower bolstered by the higher. The problem of discourse was handled in the same way by Plotinus, as was noted earlier, since he established two modes of intelligence for the different epistemological tasks. The endemic infinite regress would work itself out later.

A further point that should be made is that Speusippus distinguished his One from the good and from intelligence. Fragment 356 (Lang) shows that he is refraining from identifying the One and the Good, since the consequence of making that which was not-one evil, was seen to be undesirable. Speusippus is said to have seen this consequence, and one presumes that the identification of the multiple with evil did not attract him. Another Fragment (38) distinguishes Intelligence from both the Good and the One, with the result that Speusippus must have been a clear advocate of the transcendence of the One. A recently recovered quotation of Speusippus (Klibansky/Labowsky, Procli Commentarium in Platonis Parmenidem 10,33–41) places the One above being, and this completes for us Speusippus' emphasis on the absolute transcendence of the One. Merlan's contention that Neoplatonism originated in the Academy itself must be correct, at least in this aspect (From Platonism...
... 128), though his suggestions on the origin of Platonic mysticism are confusing. The process of negative conceptualisation arises not so much from the source of not-Being standing above not-Being, but from the One's general transcendence. Speusippus says nothing about the negative method, and so speculation centres on what he may have said, given his philosophy of unity. The development of Speusippus appears to lie in a response to the paradoxes of the Parmenides, and given that these link discourse to the One's being within time, being and so on, it is clear that Speusippus' attempt to place the One outside the Good, Intellect, Being and the mathematical One must have resulted in a negative judgment on the capacity of discourse to apprehend it. (It is not strictly correct to speak of the transcendence of the One in either Plato's Parmenides or Speusippus. The Parmenides is concerned with the logic of unity, and whether or not it has logical priority, rather than its position on a ladder of being. The Parmenides habitually speaks of the One not being in time, or place, rather than of its being "above" them. Nevertheless the distinction between logic and metaphysics is not one we should insist on, for Plato's sake, since it would no doubt go unappreciated. Plato's logical realism means that logic, for him, is about the behaviour of beings, and the same is probably true of Speusippus. This point will be developed later, in discussion of Dodds' account of the Pythagoreanization of the Parmenides.) As Merlan guessed, then, Speusippus may well be the father of negative theology, since he apparently took the One out of the range of discourse.

The exclusion of the One, that is the basic substance of reality, from the realm of being means that discourse must resort to negation to capture it. As we have seen, the issue of the One is in fact about the issue of the limits of discourse, and we do well to remember that the discourse issues raised in the Parmenides are not only concerned with expressing the One in language, but also the extent to which unity is necessary for language. To distort a phrase of Chairman Mao, Being is the sea in which the words we speak swim; it is the stuff language is made of. Is this being to be characterized as unity, or should it be regarded as having a plural character? Further, should we disjoin being and unity altogether? These are the questions of the Parmenides, and one of the issues is whether unity provides language with its basic stuff, as does being. Language seems to have some holistic drive, which seeks to bring things together: it is an interweaving (sympleke: Plato, Theaetetus 202B; Aristotle, On the Soul 432a12) of notions. Predication combines, and expresses relations between things. Is the unity of being that after which language gropes: put differently, is the unity of being that on which language rests, that which language presupposes? Is it in fact unity which is the sea of language, in which the individual words swim? Apparently so, but if unity is logically distinguished from being, if it is said to be separate, above, or beyond it, then there must be consequences for language. If the hypothesis that the One is not in being is accepted, then it is possible that we may have to
change our idea of language, since it would not after all have that substratum of unity as the guarantor of its task. It is at this point that language is seen differently, and its separative, fragmenting aspect emerges as prominent. On this view, it militates against the understanding of unity, and it is this view which was predominant among the Middle Platonists and Neoplatonists. It is against this view of language that negation came to be seen as overcoming the deficiencies of language. How can negative predication be seen as a remedy in this situation? What does negation possess that assertion lacks? The question of the role of negation must now be answered, and a preliminary response lies in the word *aphairesis*, which means “separating” or “excluding” and denotes an intellectual approach which is the opposite of combination (*sympleke*).

The Sophist (227D) refers to the removal (*aphairesis*) of evil from the soul as a purification, and this identification of abstraction and purification could well be the starting point for our effort to understand the meaning of abstraction: similarly in Alcibiades 150D, Athena is said to remove (ὑφελεγί̈ν) the mist from the eyes of Diomede. Socrates says that the mist must similarly be *removed* from the soul in order to enable one to distinguish evil and good. Yet these usages are not subjected to any great probing by Plato. Occasionally he uses the word in relation to intellectual processes, as for example when it refers to a process of conceptual subtraction in the Parmenides (158C). Otherwise both noun and verb have the sense of “remove” or “take away from” in all kinds of context, but there is not a great deal of development of the term in relation to intellectual procedures. This is curious, since it is a key word in middle and later Platonism, and we must clearly look further afield than in Plato for the explanation of its origin. It is also a curious fact that in one dialogue in particular, *aphairesis* is used repeatedly in a systematic and logical way, and it is here that hints of the later usage appear. It is in fact an extraordinary stylistic imbalance between dialogues, in that this particular one gives so much of a work-out to the term, whilst none of the others do. It is used here of the intellectual process of dividing or separating, in order to arrive at definitions, and is most surprising that it is not to be found in any of the other dialogues in which these methods are employed, such as the Sophist or Theaetetus. Since the Statesman is supposed to be a kind of continuation of the Sophist, there is even more ground for surprise. Noun or verb occur at least seven times in the Statesman, as in the following:

> And it was clear to me then that you removed (αφαιρέτων) a part, thinking that the remainder was one class, because you were able to give them all the same name, calling them beasts. (263C)

Abstraction takes place when a characteristic is removed in order to establish a certain class, or species. (Other passages where this technique is used in-
clude 262B, 291C, 262D, 380D, 258C.) Perhaps the clearest adumbration of the later development is to be found in 268D:

There is a famous story which we must use to a large extent, and for the rest we will continue as before by eliminating (ἀφαιρούμένους) part after part, and in that way we shall arrive at the ultimate object of our search.

This is precisely the way in which the method of abstraction was used, since it involves the systematic removal of an object’s characteristics, until the essential aspect of it is found. The above passage is not used in a metaphysical sense, since the reality sought is not the transcendent One, or any other kind of transcendent being, but rather the portrait of the statesman. Abstraction is used as a tool for definition, whereby extraneous characteristics are removed one by one, until the thing itself is conceptually clear. Later Platonists use this technique for pursuit of knowledge of the One, and offer as an analogy a mathematical version of it, whereby the volume is abstracted from a geometrical shape, then surface, and line, and finally point. A hint of the association of apohaeresis with this mathematical model may be found in the Statesman, just prior to the above passage. In 268C there is concern over whether the definition of the king is what is required, and the stranger claims that they may well have managed to outline the “kingly shape” (σχῆμα βασιλικόν). The word schema is probably borrowed from a mathematical context, and refers to shape, or extension, in a geometrical sense. Plato may well be using a mathematical approach to definition in this dialogue, one current in or known to the Academy, and alerting us to this fact by the use of the above word. Diels’ Fragmente der Vorsokratiker reveals almost nothing to us about the logic of apohaeresis with the result that we can only speculate at Pythagorean methodology lying behind Plato’s sudden predilection for this mode of definition in the Statesman.

Whilst the term apohaeresis refers to the removal of attributes, the other main term for negation, apophasis, has a different range of meaning. Both terms are associated with negative theology in later Platonism and Patristic philosophy, but they do somewhat different jobs. There seems to be some suggestion in Plato that negation in this sense is a means of stating an opposite: thus, in the Cratylus (426D), rest is said to be the negation of motion. This example alone could be made to conform to the logic of abstraction, since rest could be described as a state resulting from the removal of motion. However the Sophist (257B) shows that there was a view that negation implied opposition:

So that, when it is said that negation signifies the opposite, we shall not concur, admitting only that the “not” when attached to a word indicates something other than the nouns following it...
On this view "not-motion" does not mean rest, but is indefinite, referring to anything else but motion. What is being referred to is left open by the negative, and leaves open an infinity of possibilities, minus one. The development of this view must be seen in the light of the preceding discussion of being. The question of the dialogue has been about the extent to which the forms of being, motion and rest (which seem to be greater, and more active than other forms) combine with, or differ from each other. The result is that one can predicate not-being of motion for example, since motion is clearly not identical with being. This characteristic of not-being, which things may possess, is to do with otherness and difference, and it is here that the analysis of negation plays its part. When we predicate not-being of a form, we are not attributing to it a characteristic which is opposite to that of being; if we were doing so, the entity in question would cease to be. We are attributing an existent characteristic of otherness, designated by the term not-being, and which forms may possess without disappearing.

The conclusion of this argument is significant for this discussion, in both its aspects (258E), for the existence of not-being is allowed, and negation is explicated as a statement of otherness. Both results are significant for later Platonism, but our specific concern here is the logic of negation. This form of negation is understood as making a statement of difference only, and there is no sense in which the negative contradicts or opposes. A negation is therefore very much an open statement: a non-specific affirmation. Not-Y means everything but Y.

And in speech we know there is ... affirmation and negation. (263E)

Speech is therefore composed of two manoeuvres only, and given the above analysis they are not dissimilar to each other, since negation becomes an indefinite form of assertion. Aphairesis and apophasis differ in the following way: the former negates a specific characteristic of an entity, effectively removing it and thereby creating the absence which apophasis fails to do. Apophasis is associated with the attribution of not-being: it does not create a conceptual hole, but rather attributes the characteristic of not-being, or otherness.

Given this background one can see why Aristotle is able to treat "not-man" as an indefinite noun (δενόμα ἄνδρος), after denying that such a term is either a sentence, or a negation (On Interpretation 1631). The negation in this case leaves open the range of possible affirmations, and so could be described as a noun which lacks definition. In general, Aristotle gives a great deal of attention to defining the different forms of negative, and some effort should be made to clarify his views, since they have as much importance for Neoplatonism as do those of Plato. Aristotle gets over the problem of how to formulate the "oppositeness" of negation, by using the word contradictory
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(antiphatikos), noting that some contradictory statements contain contraries or "opposites", (enantiai: On Interp. 18a10). Not all negations involve contraries, or opposites: for example the statement of a thing that "it is good" has as its contrary "it is bad", but the negation "it is not good" does not produce the contrary (On Interp. 23b2). Further, Aristotle is capable of categorizing the statement "man is not-just" as an affirmative statement (op. cit. 19b25): the reasoning behind this is that the verb determines the negativity, or otherwise, of a statement. If the "not" is considered to be attached to the verb, then the statement is negative: if however the verb is positive, then the statement is affirmative. Aristotle distinguishes between "man is not-just" which is an affirmation, and "man is not just" which is a negation. In the first case, the verb is free of the negative, and the sentence is considered to be affirmative.

That the negation in this case must be attached to the verb is a principle also maintained in the Prior Analytics (51b6), where an extensive argument is mounted in favour of it. "To be not-X", and "not to be X" are said to be quite different; the negation of "to be white" is "not to be white", rather than "to be not-white". Aristotle explains this by reference to the expression "he is able to walk": the real negation of this statement is "he is not able to walk". If the negative were applied to walking, the result would be "he is able not to walk". The last statement, for Aristotle, implies an assertion about a person's walking ability, and is therefore not a genuine negation of the first statement. This point is developed at some length, and at times in a cryptic way, but the result of it for our enquiry is as follows. In terms of the negative theology of the later Platonists, the statement "the One, or God, is good", would have as its genuine negation "the One is not-good". The statement "the One is not-good" is in fact an assertion, with being attributed by the verb "is". Apparently negative statements turn out to be assertions, though Aristotle himself does not tell us what he considers to be attributed to the subject by the copula "is", in a statement where the predicate only is negated.

Late Greek and early Christian philosophy, together with Gnostic philosophy in particular, are characterized by their great use of the alpha privative, in adjectives applying to the highest deity. In this view God is said to be invisible (aoratos), unnamable (anonomastos), and many other negations are piled onto these in order to create a picture, or rather, non-picture, of the divine. The late period is the period of the theology of the alpha privative, and Aristotle gives his attention to this phenomenon of the Greek language. For in Greek there is a symmetry of form throughout a vast series of negative adjectives, because of this extensive use of the prefix alpha. Such a uniformity in negative adjectives is not present in English, and its presence in Greek naturally requires Aristotle to give some logical analysis.

The alpha privative makes words mean their opposites (On Xenophanes 978b23), and Aristotle makes this observation as he notes that a negative ad-
jective like “unmoved” (akineton) can attribute a certain positive quality. Perhaps one could legitimately infer that the alpha prefix could produce an adjective negative in form, but positive in meaning. The question is taken up in greater detail in the Metaphysics (1022b23) in a passage where privation itself is discussed, and its various forms defined. Aristotle observes:

Privation has as many senses as there are negations derived from the alpha privative. (1022b33)

He therefore considers this form of adjective to contain a considerable range of possible meanings. The alpha privative may “deprive” a thing of a quality which it could naturally possess; alternatively, it could deprive a thing of characteristics which it does not naturally possess. By “invisible” we may mean that an object is completely colourless, or perhaps only faintly colourless; by “footless” we may mean that something has no feet, or that it scarcely has feet. Aristotle appears to refer to the use of hyperbole through the alpha privative adjective: we may call a thing “uncuttable” to emphasise the difficulty encountered in cutting. In this case the alpha does not produce the strict opposite, or contrary. Aristotle concludes this section with the odd remark:

Thus not every man is good or evil, just or unjust, but there is also the intermediate state. (1023a6)

This apparently unconnected conclusion draws attention to the vast range of meanings of the alpha privative adjective, and the point seems to be that though the opposite is connoted by such an adjective, it is not necessarily meant. “Invisibility” may therefore suggest varying degrees of visibility, and the alpha privative should not be taken as inevitably suggesting the opposite of the positive form of the adjective. These remarks should sound a cautionary note over the use of such adjectives in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism and Patristic philosophy. In the first place, the range of meanings of an alpha privative adjective is considerable. In the second place opposites, or contraries, are not always implied by them; nor is the complete absence of the characteristic under consideration. All we can say about the alpha privative adjective is that it diminishes the degree to which a certain characteristic is present in an entity. Aristotle observes that the logic of the alpha privative is like that of privation itself (1022b33). Such an adjective, we may conclude, is intended to help the imagination to modify its view of a certain entity: it is not necessarily intended to help it think in opposites. Further, the distinction between negation (apophasis) and privation (steresis) is introduced to the discussion of unity and multiplicity in the Metaphysics (1004a10). The passage indicates that where negation is applied to unity, the result is the claim that unity is not
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present. This corresponds to the indefiniteness brought about by *apophasis*, which we have found elsewhere to be part of its characteristic. In privation however "there is a certain substrate of which the privation is predicated" (1004*16). Amongst the many ideas dealt with by Aristotle in this highly compressed passage, these two may be drawn out, in accordance with our previous analysis: privation removes a specific entity from a specific entity, whereas negation simply opens a range of possibilities from which one is excluded. Unity seems to be a special case, though how it is special is not indicated. In my opinion the explanation would go as follows: in the case of "not-white", all other colours are allowed by the expression, with the exception of white. In the case of "not-one", there is an asymmetry, since the indefiniteness is not thereby implied. The indefinite noun "not-one" can be identified as referring to plurality, whereas "not-white" does not refer to a similarly recognizable category. Privation, or the deletion of the specific from the specific, brings the same result: namely, plurality in "a certain substrate". This is one of the few cases where privation and negation bring the same result, which is not normally the situation (the negation and privation of otherness would provide an identical result, namely that of identity). The position is similar with the perception of number, which is obtained by "the negation of continuity" (On the Soul 425*19): such a negation can only result in pluralisation. In some cases the analysis does not work in this way, and Aristotle invents the notion of the "privative negation" (Metaphysics 1056*15), in particular to deal with the notion of the relation of the equal, to the greater and smaller.

Privation is clearly a major notion in Aristotle's account of negation, but we must turn to its close companion, abstraction. In On Indivisible Lines (972*13) Aristotle discusses the issue of whether the point can be detached from the line, using the word *aphaireo*, and in fact opposes both the notion that the line is made of points, and that it can be reduced in some way by the abstraction of the point from the line. A little later (972*25) he also opposes the notion that the point is indivisible, and he is clearly taking sides on an issue that must have dominated discussion in the Academy. Aristotle is also familiar with the idea of the incremental generation of geometrical forms, whereby "a solid is formed by a plane surface, and the plane surface by the line" (971*3). The context of the argument is dictated by the issue of whether there is such a thing as the indivisible line, and refers to Zeno's ideas on continuity (969*17). The problem arises in a similar way to that of the Theaetetus, about unknowable epistemological atoms: the Greek model for rational thought was the process of division, and the dividing technique encounters the same problem in geometry as it encounters in epistemological issues. Sooner or later some unsplittable entity stands in the way of the dividing process: if it does not, it is hard to see what exists in respect of which the division process can be operable. Some kind of uniting force must be in activity
Abstraction

to make things what they are, yet it is this very force which proves recalcitrant to the division process. In the Physics (206a18) Aristotle remarks that there is no difficulty in demonstrating that there is no such thing as an indivisible line, and so gives his view of the matter.

In a reference to induction (Posterior Analytics 81b2) he claims that even abstractions (τὰ ἐξ ἄφασσέως) can only be known by induction. Induction is literally examination of individual parts, whereas deduction deals with wholes, and abstractions are liable to be elucidated by the inductive method. Abstractions are still in the individual genus, and so may be dealt with by induction (this is an extremely difficult passage and it is difficult to say much more than this with any degree of certitude). On the other hand, abstractions (meaning literally, things stated by “removal” or “subtraction”) cannot be the subject of natural science. Aristotle gives as his reason (Parts of Animals 641b11) that things made by nature are made “for the sake of some purpose” (ἔνεκά τοῦ): unfortunately this is not developed, and it can only be surmised that he means that abstract thinking involves movement away from objects, whereas nature functions in a different way, accumulating “for the sake of some purpose”. Alternatively we can understand the phrase as saying: “Nature makes all as a consequence of something” (ἔνεκά τοῦ). The succeeding lines deal with the ultimate cause of reality, and so the interpretation might be plausible. On this view then, the remark would mean that natural science cannot deal with abstractions, since nature generates on the basis of some causal principle, whereas abstraction retracts from nature that which it accumulates. This interpretation is confirmed by On the Heavens 299b14:

... the method of mathematics makes statements by abstraction, whereas that of physics proceeds by addition (ἐκ προσθέσεως).

The study of abstractions carried out by the mathematician is distinguished by two things, according to Metaphysics 1061a18. In the first place it deals only with quantity (τὸ πόσον) and continuity (τὸ συνεχές), and secondly it does not consider them in relation to anything else. The mathematician abstracts everything sensible, such as hardness, lightness, heat or cold, leaving only the above characteristics. Mathematics isolates a part of its appropriate subject-matter, and studies it separately (1061b23). The study of being is similar, says Aristotle, in that it takes only one aspect of things to deal with: being. The object of philosophy is being: it does not deal with the attributes of things, but only with that which is. Aristotle does not identify the study of being with the study of mathematics, but he clearly sees them as similar in that they abstract their objects of enquiry from other entities.

Is abstraction a form of negation? John Whittaker has denied it to be such (Neopythagoreanism and Negative Theology 123), at least in the case of Albinus, who leant heavily on earlier formulations. A good picture of the Aris-
The totelian view is given in On the Soul 431b13. Abstractions (literally “things being said by aphaireis”) separate the objects of their attention from the things in which they reside. Thinking of the quality of being snub-nosed in an abstract way would entail removing snub-nosedness from a particular fleshly case of it.

So when the mind thinks mathematical objects, it thinks of them as separated even though they are not so. In general the mind in activity is its objects. (431b16)

In this case abstract thought is conceived as a mode of focussing on things which distinguishes them from their environment, and so enables one to treat them to a specialized form of analysis. This concept of thinking by aphaireis does not seem to bear much relation to the theme of negation, even though it is the principle term used by middle-Platonists to refer to the negative theology principle. It looks, in fact, very much like our own common-sense understanding of abstract thinking, which involves dealing with concepts which have no concrete base.

The Posterior Analytics (7433) clearly shows that the abstracting method is necessary if one is to conceive universals. Are all triangles equilateral? If they were, then this piece of knowledge would be universal in character; to establish where the genuine universality lies, however, one must remove from the equilateral triangle all characteristics which are not true of every triangle. The triangle, for example, may be cast in bronze, and that characteristic together with its specific features, will have to be excluded from consideration. The excluding process is denoted by the verb aphaireo, and the excluding process produces abstractions. Thought thinking abstractly may not appear at first sight to resemble thinking negatively, there is clearly a close relation. Abstraction (aphairesis) is like privation (steresis) in its function, since it involves conceptual removal. Privation itself is seen as a form of negation by Aristotle, yet all three clearly amount to nothing more than a technique of conceptual removal. It is probable, though, that the term abstraction developed a positive connotation because it involved the intellectual pursuit of two quite clearly defined entities, the quantitativē (τὸ ποσὸν) and the continuōus (τὸ συνεχεῖς: see p. 141). That abstraction should devote itself to the pursuit of the continuous will be found to be remarkably helpful in understanding the negative theology of later Platonism, since that is arguably its purpose: the delineation of the continuous. This is a theme to be developed later, and it will highlight the positive contribution of the method of abstraction, which will be seen to negate only for the purpose of isolating that which is being sought.

Two passages of the Metaphysics remain for consideration, since they contain important hints about the debates which must have been taking place on negation and abstraction in the Academy, and which Aristotle sought to in-
volve himself in. In 1029a8 he claims to have stated "in outline" the nature of substance; that which underlies things, and to which predicates apply. Is matter identical with substance? If matter is not the hypokeimenon, it is difficult to say what else it is. When everything else is taken away, there is only matter left. All other things are characteristics of matter, such as length, breadth and potencies, but they are not matter itself.

But when length and breadth and depth are taken away, we can see nothing left, unless it is that which is bounded by them, so that on this view it must appear that matter is the only essence. (1029a19)

The notion is that matter is something which is formed by the characteristics of three dimensional figures, and the question is whether, on the removal of the three dimensions, anything else but matter remains. Aristotle continues by suggesting that the ultimate essence might be the negations of such things as quantity, or the thing in itself. The ultimate essence is not concluded to be the negations of these things, however, since even negations would only apply to it accidentally (κατὰ συμβεβηκός).

This last consideration is most revealing: it appears to be an effort to contradict the position that the essence of reality is the negation of material characteristics. (The idea that matter is the negation of spirit will be found to be crucial in later thought. In this way matter becomes a negating force, a kind of death for spiritual values and spiritual life.) Aristotle however debates a different issue, seminal though it may be: he is concerned with the issue of whether the ultimate essence can be conceived of in terms of negations, and he concludes that it cannot. It is plausible that he should be considered to be attacking an established position here, since he makes it rather emphatic. Apophatic negation must have been used by some as a means of defining the essence of reality, and if we take Plato's understanding of apophasis as normative, then this must mean that some used the negative as a means of attributing otherness. Aristotle, as was noted (p. 137), retained the notion of indefinite otherness in his understanding of apophasis, though he did believe that in certain cases a definite result was produced by negation. In this respect his understanding of apophasis as negation is quite close to that of Plato. There must, however, have been a school of thought which advocated the use of apophatic negation as a tool for conceptualising the substrate, or matter, or the ultimate essence: whatever the base reality was thought to be. Aristotle rejects this approach, and it is no doubt the indefiniteness which is part of apophatic negation, which leads him to see it as a pointless way of trying to conceptualise the basic essence. Definition (horismos) is a matter of saying what something is in itself, and a procedure which leaves us without a definition of this kind is clearly useless in an effort to comprehend the essence of things: apophatic negation does just this, since it produces the inde-
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finite (aoriston) noun (see p. 140). The issue of definition is intimately related to the question of negation, and Aristotle gives some views on the issue in the passage under consideration (1029b29; 1030a17).

There follows a most important observation:

For it must be homonymously that we say these things are existents, or by adding or abstracting, as the unknowable is known. (1030a33)

That two methods of knowing the unknowable were available for consideration is clear from the above passage, and Aristotle refers to abstraction and addition (prostheses, no doubt the forerunner of the late Greek synthesis, in which characteristics are compiled as far as possible). Aphairesis must also have been advocated as an appropriate means of grasping the difficult of comprehension, just as apophatic negation had been. Here however Aristotle does not make it clear how he regards the claim that aphairesis can be used for knowing the unknown: the Greek is too cryptic. This is not a debilitating fact, since it is clear enough that the developments of later philosophy were already present in the time of Aristotle. Two forms of negation, if we may call aphairesis a kind of negation, had been explored in order to find a route to the unknowable, or the epistemologically obscure, and Aristotle gives evidence of this. It has occasionally been thought that abstraction was limited to mathematical procedures in the time of Aristotle, and the question is therefore seen to be the issue of how and when the method of mathematics became associated with the pursuit of the ontological essence. The preceding analysis makes it pretty clear that both apophasis and aphairesis were broadly explored with a view to resolving the more acute problems of epistemology, and that they were not limited to particular disciplines: the Neoplatonic investigation of types of negation is already present with Aristotle. Abstraction was the geometrical method par excellence, but it already had a broader application to general problems of ontology.

A further most revealing section in this passage of the Metaphysics concerns the issue of how reality is generated. This must be briefly examined because the abstracting approach depends on a certain view of how reality is constructed. Taking away its most concrete elements, in order to arrive at its essence, may be held to work where reality is conceived as growing more and more in material presence, as it builds upon its own beginnings.

Generation is described as follows (Met. 1032a13): some generation takes place through nature. Matter is essential for this process, since all things which are generated have it. Nature is the source from which, and in accordance with, they are generated. Some things are generated not from nature, but from “art” (techne: 1032b1), and these originate from the soul, which possesses their form (eidos). There is, however, another category of things which are said to come from “privation” (steresis: 1033a10), and the explana-
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The idea of reality runs like this. Some things in matter we say are “made of bronze”, or “made of stone”, for example. In the case of a man who has been an invalid, and who becomes well, we do not say, however, that he is “made of health”. Rather, the present condition proceeds from the privation: “a man becomes healthy from being an invalid rather than from being a man”. In a case like this, Aristotle says, generation proceeds from privation. The lack of a quality is that which produces the state in which the quality is present, since there is an attempt to alter the preceding state. Throughout this passage Aristotle is discussing the conditions under which genesis, or coming-to-be, can take place, and so the lack of something is considered to be one cause of generation taking place. Another case he suggests to lie in the process of wood developing into a structure which we recognize as a house (1033a15): in its finished state, we call the structure “wooden,” rather than “wood”. This indicates that some change has been effected to the original material, which means that it is no longer mere wood. We sometimes mistakenly suppose that the cause of the generation of the house is the wood itself: in fact, however, it is the lack of form in the material which is the cause of the house’s coming into existence, and the change of description from “wood” to “wooden” is an indication that some other agency has played a part. In this case too, the cause of coming-to-be is privation.

The notion that the absence of something could be a cause is a curious exception to Aristotle’s general approach to the question of generation. He uses the notion of “production” (poiesis) to describe the way in which things come into existence. The physician endeavours to produce a certain state in an ill man (1032b8), and the process thus engendered is called “production”. Coming to be is regarded as a making process which adds to the state of the entity at the point of departure. Essence (ousia) is at the basis of the coming-to-be process; from it spring all kinds of beings, including those which have form and matter (1032b15). Essence is to do with the “whatness” of a thing, and so it is the starting-point for syllogistic reasoning: coming-to-be also springs from it (1043a31). Essence is thus the cause of this process of bringing into existence, of “making”, and Aristotle’s remarks about privation providing the first principle for certain realities seem out of step. Probably the privation envisaged occurs at a point along the way, after the essence stage, but before the object has attained its full complement of characteristics: the notion of privation as a cause of coming-to-be would not therefore stand in contradiction to the principle enunciated.

The combination of privation, a form of negation, and the generation process is interesting because it brings together two sets of issues. The knowledge of reality and the generation of reality are intimately connected problems, since the knowing process tends to imitate the generation process, but in reverse. The knowledge of first principles will depend on one’s ability to go back over the stages of generation, in order to find the starting point.
Knowledge is the reverse of generation, since it seeks to remove systematically the various elements that reality has built up around itself in the production process. In this way the abstracting mind will discover the seed which lies at the origin of the coming-to-be.

The generation of reality is therefore an issue of considerable importance. The Greeks regarded physical reality as emerging in a cumulative process, from some infinitesimal or insubstantial beginning, but developing into a kind of massive accumulation embodying all the sensible characteristics with which we are familiar, both quantitative and qualitative. This view, that reality's bulk emanates from an insubstantial first principle, can be discerned throughout Greek thought, although it is best known in relation to the Pythagorean view that reality was generated from numbers, which in turn sprang from the One. That number underlay the world was a view that did not commend itself to all with equal success, and Aristotle in particular saw it in a jaundiced manner: how could white, sweet or hot be numbers, he asked (Met. 1092b15). However elsewhere he displayed more sympathy for the Pythagorean view:

Thus the many and the earlier thinkers thought that essence and being were "body" (soma), and other things affections of body ... whereas later and wiser thinkers considered (essence and being) to be numbers. (Met. 1002a9)

Numbers comprise the universe, we are told (986a22); number is derived from unity, which combines both the odd and the even in itself. Number is said to be the principle (arche) and matter (hyle) of things (986a18). Perhaps the clearest statement of the Pythagorean position is to be found in Diogenes Laertius, who reports Alexander Polyhistor:

The principle of all things is the monad. From the monad emerges the indefinite dyad, which serves as material substrate to the monad, which is cause. From the monad and the indefinite dyad emerge numbers; from numbers points; from points, lines; from lines, plane figures; from these, solid figures; from solid figures, sensible bodies; the elements of which are four, five, water, earth and air ... these elements produce an animate universe. (D.L. VIII.24)

This picture of emerging reality presents it as accumulating on the basis of the unit, which stands at the origin of the whole process. The unit leads to number, and the rest results from this. It is clear, then, that body, or man, is the product of a much more refined essence of being, and this is considered by the Pythagoreans to lie in number. Exactly how number yields body is never clearly stated in the Aristotelian reports of their position, and one must be satisfied with the simple notion that reality arises out of number itself. Material reality is an accumulation of characteristics, attached like to barnacles to the hull of essential reality. Layer upon layer goes to make up the phy-
The idea of reality

The classical world we know and perceive, each being laid upon the other so that addition (prosthesis) could be said to be the origin of reality. What causes the addition, or accumulation? It is not clear, but the notions of production (poi-

esis) and process are important, so that reality balloons out of unobtrusive beginnings, as if drawn out by a creative hand.

This view of genesis, or the generation of reality, could be described as “incremental” and is familiar from Plato as well. In the Laws (893C) there is an attempt to classify and identify various types of motion, and generation is understood as one form of motion.

What is the state of affairs when generation takes place? Clearly when a starting-point (arche) receives addition, and comes to the second state, and from this to the next, and on arriving at the third becomes perceptible to the perceiver.

Reality comes to be through the addition of increments to successive stages, and the accumulation of stages produces the physical reality which is sense-perceptible. Some kind of bulkiness seems to have to be acquired through the accumulation process in order for perception to become possible. One notes also that Plato envisages three stages, and this is an extremely important element in the passage. Unfortunately Plato does not explain the three stage view of the generation of reality, and without the mention of the figure one might well have imagined that there were a vast number of stages in the accumulative process. Almost certainly he is alluding to the geometrical notion of the generation of volume, whereby the objects of mathematics are produced in three stages, each of which depends on the prior stage. Volume comes from the plane figure, which in turn generated from the line; three stages are represented here, and each of them is implicit in the finished accumulation. We perceive volume, or depth, and one stage of abstraction leads us to the plane figure, whilst the next takes us to the line. The last step, which reaches the point, belongs to a different category, since the point is disputed in its significance. If Aristotle’s comments on the indivisible line are a guide, there must have been those who advocated the line as the basic stage, granted the notion of a species of indivisible line. It is therefore probable that Plato is referring to the mathematical notion of the generation of volume, since that could well have been presented as a three-stage theory of the generation of reality. In this way Plato’s reference to three stages provides us with a further fragment of evidence that the mathematical model for the generation of geometrical schema has been applied to ontology in general at a very early stage, and in the Academy itself. Plato must have understood coming-to-be in general on the model of the progression from the linear, to the plane figure and ultimately to the figure with depth and volume. Reality accumulates three dimensions on the basis of the line as starting-point.

Clearly this has great epistemological significance, since the knowing pro-
cess will have to match the construction of reality. A hint of this is contained in the Laws passage (893E), where Plato says that “things increase when combined and decrease when separated”. Or as Aristotle notes (Met. 1033b12): “that which is generated will always have to be divisible, and to be both this and that”. The accumulation theory of reality means that it is composed of discernable stages and parts. Far from being an impregnable whole, its elements naturally separate out into their discrete characteristics when the intellectual tool of division is applied. This at least is common to Plato and Aristotle; the divisibility of physical reality implies that the conceptual tool of division will bring results. It is in this context that the use of negation as an epistemological instrument must be understood. Where division is seen as the appropriate model for the investigator, it is inevitable that negation will come under consideration as a kind of ally of the division process. This explains the considerable emphasis on the logic of privation in Aristotle: it was a form of negation which placed specific emphasis on the removal of attributes.

The issue of privation as a possible cause of coming-to-be was referred to earlier (p. 145), since in the Metaphysics (1033a10) Aristotle allowed for the absence of characteristics to be the cause of those characteristics accruing to the object involved. In some sense then, reality comes from privation: steresis is defined in the Metaphysics (1011b20) as “the negation of a characteristic from a defined genus”. (This definition occurs in a formulation of the excluded middle principle, with Aristotle denying that contraries can apply to the same object at the same time, since one of the contraries would be a privation in form.) One must now take into account a passage of the Physics which reinforces the above claim that privation is a cause of generation: the hints of this notion in the Metaphysics are given a full and combative statement in the Physics, and give some crucial insights into the relationship between ontology and epistemology discussed above. Aristotle claims (Physics 191a28) that previous thinkers had an overly rigid dichotomy, by claiming that generation must spring from being or not-being only. Scrutinising the concept of the non-existent, Aristotle concludes that not all cases are identical, with some cases of non-existence being incidental, rather than being cases of non-existence qua non-existence. He concedes (191b14) that nothing can come-to-be out of non-existence proper, but argues that things can emerge out of incidental non-existence, which occurs because of privation (steresis). This corresponds to the example of illness and health given in the Metaphysics, where health is said to emerge not from illness, but its own absence: here (Physics 191b17), Aristotle reflects on the oddity of this conclusion, which is nevertheless seen as mandatory. Privation is a cause of coming-to-be, and it is the failure to recognize this special category of the non-existent which caused Parmenides to conclude that coming-to-be was an impossibility, since something could not emerge from nothing (192a1). Aristotle concedes that steresis could be seen as a principle of evil, or attenuation, in
opposition to the good, or to being (192a14): he seems to insist, however, in this extremely cryptic passage that privation is in no way a yearning for destruction, or a force in opposition to the good. Who is being discussed here? The allusion is difficult to pin down, but it foreshadows remarkably some developments of later Platonism. The conclusion is simply that privation is a form of non-existence which yields reality.

In this way privation, a form of negation, is thought of as a state of affairs. In this context it is seen not as a feature of language, but as a condition of coming-to-be. This fact is yet another illustration of how the Greek philosophers observe no radical distinction between subject and object, or the observer and reality, and of how the conceptual and the real can merge on such a view. A form of negative lies at the origins of emerging reality. Aristotle does not propose *stereisis* to us as an epistemological tool however, and the notion of *apbairesis* occupies this role. Whilst abstraction may not be a form of negative, its logic certainly resembles that of privation, since its function is the conceptual removal of characteristics. The "abstractions" of the mathematicians are the results of progressive removals of characteristics, and "abstract" thought proceeds therefore in the absence of the lower grade characteristics of material bulk. Abstractions and privations are not the same thing, but they are close. They differ more in their purpose than in their technique, since they both proceed by removal of specific characteristics, but only abstraction aims at an exercise of discursive thought with the result.

A little speculative reflection on Aristotle's position yields the following results. Abstraction, when thoroughly deployed, will reach privation, since privation is the absence in virtue of which coming-to-be results. Alternatively, one could say that abstraction will apprehend non-existence as a cause of physical reality, but non-existence in a certain limited sense, as outlined above. Abstraction, then, leads towards a negative state, and so grasps non-existence, but it grasps it as a cause. It will therefore reach an apprehension of non-existence, which it can place in a causal context, of generating the superstructure of physical reality. Abstraction is the science of removing the layers with a view to finding the first principle, and so it is directed towards the discovery of causes. The layering of reality secretes a causal connection, as well as an originating principle, and abstraction follows this trail: ironically, it may pursue it to the point where the mere absence of reality is left as the cause. Abstraction is the epistemological tool which mirrors the ontological work of privation.

It is Aristotle who lays the foundation of the later Greek understanding of being and knowledge. He provides the distinctions and the vocabulary, around which certain insights of Plato were to be reconstructed, taking on a new meaning and a new idiom. The passage of ideas is difficult to specify, but one of the theses of the present work is that Scepticism provides a link of the utmost importance between Aristotle and the ideas of late antiquity. It is
necessary therefore to turn to Scepticism in order to examine the development of the themes of negation, abstraction, and the accumulative account of reality.

The Sceptics dismiss abstraction as a method of grasping incorporeal reality. Sextus Empiricus provides ample evidence of the level of discussion on the issue and of the views which obtained in the period, it being one of the advantages of the Sceptical documents that they reveal to us what was being said by attacking it all. For example, Plato's last work On the Soul is quoted on apophatic negation, with reference to the idea that a negative sentence is simply one which exceeds the positive by the negative word "not". An argument against this approach is referred to, though it is difficult to deduce either the force of the argument, or the force of the argument against it. The Stoics used the notion of "exceeding by the negative" to explain the idea of contraries (Against the Logicians II.91, 88): the Stoics must have tried to resuscitate the notion that negatives implied opposites, though it had been rejected by Plato in the Sophist (257B). The evidence of Sextus encourages us to believe that Plato considered the argument that the negative statement is greater than (pleonazein) the statement which is affirmative in force.

Sextus continues in satirical vein on the astounding qualities of the negative.

Thus the negative itself has a miraculous quality, in that it makes existents non-existent, and non-existents existent. (op. cit. II.104)

The argument is directed at the notion that statements imply existence, and negative statements non-existence, and these are held to be the views of the "dialecticians", whose logic is being attacked. Sextus does not outline a view of negation, but contents himself with a reductio ad absurdum of earlier academic views, and the general aim is to reach a state of aphasia (non-assertion). The Sceptics aimed to refrain from making either negative or positive statements, and this state of non-assertion was held to be the desirable intellectual and emotional goal.

On the issues of abstraction and privation, the general remark should be made that Sextus treats them as if they were synonymous. On the basis of his treatment of privation, it is very difficult to assert that any clear differentiation should be made between the two terms in the philosophy of late antiquity, even though there is a clear enough difference between the logic of the two terms in Aristotle. As observed above (142), they do coalesce in certain ways, and it is obvious that Sextus and the Sceptics thought so too.

The Against the Professors (III.37, 51) attacks the geometrical method of conceiving the line as length without breadth, and so the entire method of abstraction is questioned:
The Sceptics on the value of aphis tresis

... but when we keep the same length unvaryingly, and mentally divide its breadth, doing this up to a certain point, we shall conceive the breadth as growing less and less: but when once we have finally deprived the length of breadth, we will no longer be imagining even length, but the notion of the length will be destroyed. (III.39)

The term used here and later (53) is steresis, though it is clear that the classic method of abstraction (aphairesis) is being dealt with. The argument is that such progressive refinement of concepts is impossible, and the removal of one element in an object will simply lead to the loss of others in the mind's eye. Contemporary mathematicians must have been aware of such criticisms of their method of progressive abstraction, because Sextus refers to a riposte (III.51): they claimed that one conceived length without breadth by epitasis, a word derived from epiteinein (to stretch), which normally bears the meaning of "stretching", "intensity" or "exaggeration". The intensification of conceptual effort must have been advocated as a psychological mode for achieving the various steps involved in abstraction. The greater the degree of removal achieved, the greater the intensification (epitasis) of the conceiving mind. Sextus rules this out on the basis of a similar argument to the one previously directed against abstraction.

A similar use of privation in respect of what had been previously called abstraction may be found in Against the Physicists (I.407), and here Sextus advances a different argument against the method. Privatives do not exist in the substrate (an Aristotelian position), and privation therefore endows non-existence on the entity to which it is applied:

Thus horse is a thing which exists in reality (i.e. the substrate), but "not-horse" does not exist; and man exists, but "not-man" does not exist. (I.407)

Sextus continues with the argument that any attempt to develop abstract thought by this means will simply end in failure: the technique just does not work. When we try to conceive the line by subtracting from breadth, all we end up with is "minimal breadth" (op. cit. I.409), and the goal of removing breadth altogether is not fulfilled. In the first case, the Sceptical argument produces a contradiction by pitting one of the accounts of negation from Plato's Sophist, with negation being understood as the attribution of not-Being, against the logic of privative negation, as recognized by Aristotle.

There are therefore two types of Sceptical argument directed at this mode of developing abstract thought: one claims that it simply does not work in the manner intended, and the other type seeks to find weaknesses of a logical character. Of the latter kind, there is an example in the Outlines of Pyrrhonism (III.49). It is argued here that matter (or "body") is inapprehensible, on the grounds of a number of arguments concerning the fallibility of the senses, and it is said to follow that the incorporeal is also inapprehensible. A
privation, it is argued, cannot be apprehended unless the corporeal is apprehended, since we cannot arrive at the notion of blindness without first grasping the state of being sighted: but this we cannot do. In this way the incorporeal turns out to be inapprehensible, since grasping it presupposes the ability to grasp the corporeal, which is then operated on by the method of privation. With reference to abstraction proper (aphairesis), another argument is advanced to show that it is in fact impossible (Outlines of Pyrrhonism III.85): if one is to abstract X then the object under consideration must contain X. If this is the case, then the equal cannot be abstracted (six from six, for example) since the object cannot be said to include that which is equal to it. Similar arguments apply to subtracting the greater, and the less, and so it is concluded that the manoeuvre of abstraction is logically impossible to perform. The method of addition (prosthesi s), another conceptual tool used by the mathematicians, is similarly found to be fraught with difficulties, leading to the conclusion (op. cit. III.97):

With addition, abstraction and local motion, transposition is also annulled, since this is abstraction and addition by transition.

All these things are alleged to be logically impossible to perform, and all involve modes and techniques of thought. The Against the Physicists (I.277) broadens it to a statement about reality itself claiming that abstraction, addition, change and alteration “do not exist”, since things do not undergo any such movements. The same passage returns to the logical impossibility of abstraction, arguing that it is impossible to remove the incorporeal from the corporeal, and subsequently that it is also impossible to remove the corporeal from the incorporeal (295–302). The discussion turns to the conceiving of numbers since the notions of the greater and the less are being discussed, and these take a numerical expression. The impossibility of conceiving number by abstraction is also argued in the Against the Professors (IV.30):

Now by these considerations it has been shown that it is impossible to conceive any number by abstraction (aphairesis).

In both of the above passages, it is clear that the method of abstraction by removal of characteristics is an established mode of dealing with a range of epistemological problems, and that is not simply a matter of mathematical method. Abstraction can be used to deal with geometrical figures, numbers, but also any kind of object or entity. The passage quoted above deals with the subtraction of the unit from ten conceived as a whole, that is as a decad. Sextus observes that:

... number is conceived by addition or abstraction of the monad.
The Sceptics on the value of aphairesis

In the Against the Physicists passage (I.278) Sextus takes his refutation of the method of abstraction to the issue of subtracting letters from words. When the first syllable is taken from the word *kobios*, we are left with the word *bios* (life). This example of what may happen to language is taken as a guide to what may happen to bodies, and the refutation follows on this basis. Clearly then, abstraction has a variety of applications, and the linking of the mathematical method to general epistemological procedures has been well established by the time of Sextus. Of course Sextus is reporting Sceptical doctrine, and the collection of arguments he marshalls must come from a number of sources and periods of time. Some of his material undoubtedly dates back to Pyrrho of Elis, a younger contemporary of Aristotle, and to the sporadic revivals of Scepticism in the Athenian academy, though it must also reflect discussions of his own day (circa 200 A.D.). In other words Sceptical arguments must have been current, available for use or inviting refutation, during the entire period in which the revival of Platonism was forming into a recognizable school. Though Scepticism is an iconoclastic movement, and makes a contribution in a negative direction, the possibility that it fertilised contemporary schools in various positive ways should not be overlooked. In respect of the specific issue of abstraction, we learn from Sextus' arsenal of critical weaponry that by his time abstract thought was held to be an option for all epistemologically awkward concepts. Anything approaching the incorporeal was held to be the appropriate subject matter for abstract thought, and it was to this that Sextus made his reply. We learn also, as noted already, that the proponents of abstraction had put forward further justifications of their position, apparently as a response to criticism: hence the idea of “intensification” (*epitasis*) as the mode by which the mind carries out the removal process, when reaching the last stages of corporeity. We learn that privation (*steresis*) and abstraction (*aphairesis*) had practically merged, and generalising on the basis of the evidence contained in the passages outlined above, one may infer that privation, in Sextus' mind, referred primarily to what we have seen in Aristotle to be the mathematicians' abstraction. On the other hand, abstraction in Sextus seems to be broader than this, though it does include, and so is not divorced from, its old mathematical formulation. For Sextus, the two processes merge, but abstraction is the broader term, including all types of noetic subtraction carried out in the interests of forming concepts. Privation is more narrowly limited to the method of the mathematicians.

To return to the theme of this chapter, “thinking negatively”, some observations can now be made. The *via negativa* of the mystics takes its origin from the foregoing theorizing about the nature of negation. If it is found surprising that metaphysics, which appears to be a propositional skill, should resort to negative statements in order to make its claims, then one's attention must be drawn to the connection between negation and abstract thinking. In contemporary parlance, abstraction refers loosely to a mode of thought
VII. Thinking negatively: the foundations of the via negativa

which deals with the more than merely physical, or empirical: abstract art is that which departs from recognizable forms, and substitutes another form of visual communication, for the representation of the physiognomically familiar. In Greek philosophy however, abstract thinking was specifically linked to a negating procedure. The same drive, that of developing a way of thinking which goes beyond the mere cataloguing of observed data, is there, but the specifically Greek view of abstraction is that it negates. The negative aspect of abstract thought has quite a specific definition, it involves the removal of attributes. One important consequence of this is that the procedure is tied to already acquired epistemological experience: since, on this view, abstract thought takes as its starting-point a known entity and begins to pare it away with a view to arriving at some "essence", then abstract thought will involve the notion of progress from the known to the unknown. Abstract thinking is in fact identical with this move from the concrete to the incorporeal. It is in this sense, then, that metaphysics is thought to be founded on negation: it would be truer to say that the via negativa takes its origin from the Greek notion of abstract thinking. The late Greek development of the latter turns it into an instrument of mysticism, but this is a matter of where the stopping-point is held to be. Since abstraction involves the progressive removal of characteristics, the issue of where this process stops is clearly of crucial significance. Discussion of the method by Aristotle and Sextus Empiricus shows that the end of the process lay with the discovery of the monad, or the unit, at least as far as the mathematical formulation of it was concerned. Discussion turns on the nature of this point, but no further abstraction is envisaged: in the third century A.D. however, Clement of Alexandria will speak of removing the point, and being precipitated into the "greatness of Christ" (see Strom. V.11.71.2). Here there is an attempt to take abstraction beyond its range of application, and this is the chief differentiation to be made between traditional Academic abstraction and that of the later Platonists. It is this change in the deployment of the method which must be annotated, since it goes hand in hand with the development of mysticism and transcendentalism. It is of course clear that abstraction was not conceived for such tasks, since it can only function in relation to the familiar world of the known. Its negating function is parasitic on there being a known entity available. Abstraction works by positing, of a tree for example, not-green, not-wooden, not-plant life and so on. Later philosophy speculates on that which lies beyond the last stage, when the last epistemologically familiar entity has been negated, and there is nothing left for the method to apply itself to. The mystics ask, in effect: what lies beyond abstraction?

To conclude, some investigation of the survival and mutations of this tradition of thought among Philo and the Gnostics should be undertaken, since taken together they provide some clues as to the climate out of which late Greek thought sprang. Philo has no remarks of interest on the subject of ne-
Philo and the Gnostics on negative language

gation (apophasis) in general, nor does he use the term privation (steresis) in any philosophically interesting sense. There are, however, one or two interesting observations on abstraction, which is frequently linked with addition (prosthesis) in Philo’s exposition. The process of addition seems to imply that of abstraction:

the addition of one thing constitutes the removal of another, as in the case of arithmetical quantities, or the reasonings of our souls. If we must say that Abel was added, it must be considered that Cain was taken away. (On the Sacrifices of Abel & Cain 1)

The removal (aphairesis) of vainglory is the addition of truth (On Flight and Finding 128): the two notions are frequently associated in the discussions of Sextus Empiricus, though without the reciprocity of effect envisaged by Philo. All of reality is subject to this kind of change, he seems to think, except for the unit. The unit, or monad, is not capable of addition or abstraction (Who is the Heir 187): Philo does not quite explain why this is so, but clearly it has to do with the fact that the monad has no parts, and cannot remain itself if either exercise is operated upon it. Its indivisibility excludes the possibility of the use of either abstraction or addition. Philo’s example in this passage is the drachma, but he goes on to claim that the unit is “the image of God, who is alone and complete”. This is an interesting observation; in view of the fact that the monad was apparently considered to be the stopping-point of the abstraction process: it was noted earlier that Clement took it beyond the monad, in order to achieve a kind of knowledge of God. Philo does not do so, but regards the twin techniques of abstraction and addition as belonging to the physical world, and as yielding knowledge appropriate to that level. He in fact recognizes four types of change (The Eternity of the World 113), namely addition, abstraction, transposition (metathesis) and mutation (alloiosis), and in this passage advances another case where abstraction is held to be impossible. Dealing with the enduring character of the world, Philo claims that abstraction cannot be applied to a whole such as the world. In an argument which again could have Sceptical roots, Philo claims that “it is impossible that any body should be detached from its fellow substance and dispersed outside the whole” (op. cit. 114). It is clear then that Philo sees abstraction as a technique which is limited (i) to that which has parts, and (ii) to that which is itself a part of a wider whole. It has no applicability beyond the world of the multiple.

Philo does not however suggest the method as a means of gaining knowledge of the transcendent, or the divine. He says nothing of the allied methods, negation and privation, which together with abstraction, were to become the principal instruments of Neoplatonic and Patristic metaphysics. Nor is he a great devotee of the alpha privative, and the negative adjectives he applies to God are only aimed at getting rid of standard anthropomor-
phisms. We do not find in Philo the famous account of Apollo as representing the negation of multiple attributes, by the supposed derivation of the name from *a-pollon*, or “not-many-things”. Apollo became the patron saint of the *via negativa* because of the unfortunate morphology of his name, but Philo nowhere alludes to this, despite the presence of a fairly long passage on the attributes of Apollo (Embassy to Gaius 106). These facts must be weighed against the influential claim by Wolfson that Philo established a notion of the transcendence of God which was to exercise a heavy influence over the Fathers (Philo II.110). It is true that Philo pushed God beyond the monad, and Being in general (see J. Whittaker, Neopythagoreanism ... 79), but it is also true that he advocates no systematic negative theology.

The same remark is generally true of the Gnostics, who are devotees of the negative adjective, but not advocates of the method of abstraction. They are thoroughgoing transcendentalists, and combine this emphasis with a great variety of negations:

Not one of the names which are conceived, spoken, seen, or grasped, not one of them, applied to him, even if they are exceedingly glorious, great, and honoured ... It is impossible for mind to conceive him,

    nor can any work express him,
    nor can any eye see him,
    nor can anybody grasp him

because of his inscrutable greatness,
and his incomprehensible depth,
and his immeasurable height,
and his illimitable will.

(Trüpartite Tractate 54, trans. Attridge, Mueller)

The Father of all resides in silence and inscrutability, and when he breaks forth, he does so into language and knowledge, which are properly speaking incapable of grasping him. But he does so through a series of intermediaries, and though the result is that language forms around him, in reality no name applies to him, as the above passage observes. The first Man created is the accessible being: he is the “face of the invisible”: the “form of the formless”, the “body of the bodiless”, “the word of the unutterable” (op. cit. 66). In this way language and thinking receives an object capable of being processed by them, whilst the ultimate being remains shrouded in silence:

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. (op. cit. 75)

Thought and language are applicable to a certain level, but they are stultified by the Being who lies beyond the Son. In this system, therefore, it is not sur-
prising that negative language should abound, and that lists of "not" adjectives be compiled in order for language about the Father to be usable. How are the negatives meant? As Aristotle observed (see p. 139), but which is already obvious, there is an ambiguity about an alpha privative negation, which does not exist with its corresponding statement. All kinds of degrees of privation could be attached to such adjectives, and the Gnostics do not tell us whether by the alpha privative they mean to make indefinite statements, or to refer to opposites, or merely to remove a concept. Nor is there any statement of a method; there is no philosophy of the via negativa. The use of negative adjectives has a wide range of possible interpretations, and does not by itself constitute evidence of a fully-fledged negative method.

Possibly Basilides is most interesting in this respect, since his transcendence statements seem to reflect some knowledge of the Parmenides. Basilides reflects the general Gnostic concern with the breaking of the silence. Hippolytus tells us that he was hostile to the idea of emanation (Ref. VII.22.2), and this sounds like an objection to Middle-Platonism. He favoured the idea that reality came into existence because God spoke. But this God, he insists, was non-existent. Hippolytus reports as follows (Ref. VII.20.2):

There was a time, says he, when there was nothing; not even the nothing of existents was there, but simply, clearly, and without any sophistry there was absolutely nothing at all. When I say "there was", he says, I do not mean that there was something, but in order to signify what I want to express, I say, he says, that there was absolutely nothing.

This ontological gap is what Basilides means by God, and the first stages of generation are achieved by the non-existent God manufacturing non-existence. This God is beyond any names: he is ineffable, more, he is non-ineffable (op. cit. 20.3). Basilides is alert to the fact that such a negative adjective can be the vehicle for a statement. Perhaps he feels that by attributing a privation, he is positing some other form of existence on which privation may operate: whatever the nature of his doubt, he sees a problem with the privative adjective, given the pure-and-simple non-existence of God which he wishes to assert. The reason for Basilides' insistence on what kind of non-existence God has, must lie in the difference between the fifth and sixth hypotheses of Plato's Parmenides, where two different meanings for "the One is not" are explored. The following words from the sixth hypothesis (163C) sound like the metaphysical primer Basilides might have been using:

And when we say that a thing is not, do we mean that it is in a way, and not in a way? Or does the expression "this is not" simply mean that the non-existent is not in any way, or in any shape, and does not in any way share in being?
The sixth hypothesis gives the radical interpretation of non-existence, and it is this which Basilides takes up in order to show that God is unspeakable. There can, according to Plato, be no name, no rational account, nor even any opinion of it established.

Basilides' radical theology reminds us that Plato's Parmenides had become a text-book for metaphysical method in late antiquity, and it takes us back to the original issues of this chapter. Plato's Parmenides seems to provide dicta about the use of language in relation to (i) unity, and (ii) transcendence. All the themes of later Greek philosophy pass through the Parmenides: existence, being, the nature of "is-ness", negation, discourse and time. The conditions of the validity of discourse are established by this dialogue, and the existence and nature of unity are constantly at stake. It is as if oneness is the basis of reality, and the conditions of oneness are being investigated, in respect of how they cast light on the nature of discourse.

The negative is crucial in the issue of how to express the reality thus dominated by unity. Negation has a specific form, privation, which can be used for the discovery of abstract realities. Abstraction (aphairesis) is the source of the via negativa, and simply refers to a method for getting at the originating essence of material reality. "Abstract" thought is thought which distils the fundamental. It is not continuous, or discursive, but it focusses on the essential aspect of the object which it considers. It proceeds by subtracting characteristics, and this manoeuvre matches the generation of reality itself, which emerges by a layering process until it becomes perceptible. The accumulation theory of reality produces an appropriate mode of thought, one which dissects the stages. The classical use of abstraction limits it to the investigation of the basic stuff of reality (though the Sceptics opposed it on logical and psychological grounds), and it can only deal with plural entities: there must be something to remove, and a remainder for further attention. It has not yet become an instrument for mysticism, but stops short at the monad, as Philo tells us. Nevertheless the alpha privative is coming into its own, as the Gnostic documents show. Reality emerges out of non-existence and silence. In the Nag Hammadi document Allogenes (53), the second power emerges from the silence and manages to utter only unformed sound, far removed from the lower verbal reality:

... the power appeared by means of an energy that is at rest and silent, although having uttered a sound thus:

Zza Zza Zza.