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Chapter XII. Pseudo-Dionysius: a positive view of language and the via negativa

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XII. Pseudo-Dionysius: a positive view of language and the *via negativa*

With Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, the Christian tradition of negative theology reaches its culmination, and finds its most controlled expression. The question of who the Areopagite was need not detain us, since it seems impossible to make much headway. The early work of Koch (Proklus als Quelle . . .) has in fact been confirmed in a variety of ways, and the current view is that the Areopagite came from a milieu influenced by fifth or sixth century Neoplatonism. Hathaway lists twenty-two different possibilities (Hierarchy . . .), and we can only agree with Saffrey, who denounces with great ferocity the methodology behind such attempts, that over-confident identifications are bound to fail (Nouveaux liens objectifs . . .). Saffrey offers what he calls "objective links" between Proclus and the Areopagite, in the spirit of the comparisons of Koch: by "objective links", he means parallels between the Areopagite and Proclus which commend themselves, without requiring the backing of some overall interpretation, or of some hypothesis as to the authorship of the writings. As Saffrey also argues, we are not so confident of the prosopography of late antiquity as to be able to assume that we know of every likely candidate. The Areopagite may be an otherwise unknown writer. It is nevertheless true that the task of finding the author of these profoundly influential documents is one of the most enticing available in ancient studies: the whiff of a literary or ecclesiastical plot is enough to excite the curiosity of any self-respecting scholar. We shall have to content ourselves, however, with the procedure of analysing the documents in their literary context, and the task of discovering the identity behind it will be forgone. Some observations on the ideas of the author will be made from time to time, in case the use of the specific vantage-point we have chosen for this book does bring forward useful items of information. In general, the author seems to be working in a non-Arian, somewhat Gnostic, Christian, Athenian Neoplatonist tradition. We will return to these points later.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of pseudo-Dionysius for the history of European culture, particularly for the Latin segment of it. The French in particular look back to the Areopagite for the explanation of much that is in their culture, in respect of theology and philosophy, but also in respect of political institutions. The notion of hierarchy in the Areopagite was to play a role in establishing and ordering the social structure of the middle Ages. From the outset, the Areopagite was much read. Saffrey (op. cit) points to John of Scythopolis, the first commentator on his works, and the first to help perpetuate the pseudonymy of the author. John gives much in the way

of interpretation and commentary. Maximus the Confessor (C7th) read extensively, and quoted from the works of the Areopagite. John of Damascus in the eighth century derives a great deal from the ideas of Pseudo-Dionysius. Gregory Palamas (C14th) quotes him frequently, and praises his theology, though he himself continues more along Cappadocian lines, so far as his own theology is concerned. Bernard of Clairvaux, though not a Dionysian, reflects his language. In the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas quotes the Areopagite extensively, using him frequently as a starting-point for theological debate: the influence of the Areopagite on the medieval interpretation of Aristotle was considerable. The Dionysian system of thought is held to have contributed largely to the formation of the Thomist tradition, particularly in respect of the ontological framework within which the philosophy of Thomas is cast. The Dionysian account of privation, for example, takes on the clearly ontological function that it has in the theory of Thomas. Meister Eckhart (C14th) uses a good deal of Dionysian terminology, though his own mystical philosophy does a great deal to transform the Dionysian influence. In the fifteenth century, Nicolas of Cusa refers to him as *maximus theologus*, or as *divinus vir*, quoting from him extensively. Ficino (C15th) helped re-establish the Areopagite as a major influence by translating and annotating the *Divine Names*, as well as the *Mystical Theology*. However *all* his Platonist-style works are considered to bear the influence of Dionysian mystical theology. The negative theology of John of The Cross (C16th) bears the mark of the apophatic descriptions of Pseudo-Dionysius, and here the influence of the latter is most directly discernible. Less clear influences, particularly in the realm of apophatic theology, have been perceived in the work of Giordano Bruno (C16th). There have been few more influential authors in the history of both Eastern and Western Christianity, and it is not really possible to discern where the story ended, or when it will end. The Dionysian tradition has become a cultural undercurrent, emerging at times, but always maintaining the capacity to influence and redirect. The Dionysian corpus, by its own air of mystery, and by its mixture of traditional discipline with speculative imagination, has a magnetism which has proved very durable.

Returning now to the text itself, the very title of the work *The Divine Names* gives an immediate context for the Areopagite's thought. As we have already seen, the subject of *onomata* was much discussed in the fourth and fifth centuries. The nature and importance of names was seen to form the major issue in the triangular debate between the Cappadocians, Eunomius the Anomoean, and the Gnostics. The Cappadocian position is that names are conventional, and Gregory of Nyssa complains that his opponent speaks as if names and entities were identical. Names do not have existence (ὕποστασιν ἔχει), he argues against Eunomius (II, 589 Jaeger). "For God is not just a term (ῥῆμα), deriving his being from being spoken, or uttered", he says elsewhere (*Contra Eun.* II, 148 Jaeger). Gregory writes in a context in which

words have entered the realm of ontology, in which the semantic has been reified. The whole Cappadocian position is developed against this form of linguistic positivism, and in this era it is the Cappadocians who become the champions of the idea that names are conventional, and that they are attached *κἀτά θέσιν*, rather than *κἀτά φύσιν*. Language is drawn up after the constitution of reality, as a series of abstractions or distillations from what is, developed after the event. This is the meaning of the term *ἐπίνοια*, brought into prominence by this debate (see p. 151).

Two important articles help us situate this concern of the negative theologian *par excellence*, with names. We have already alluded to them, but taking firstly that of Trouillard (*L'activité onomastique . . .*), we have here quite simply a critical description of the teaching of Proclus on divine names. Much of it is drawn, of course, from the *Cratylus*, this being the dialogue of Plato which deals most with the problem of *onomata*. Some of Trouillard's remarks have already been quoted (p. 101), but they can be summarized here: in Proclus, language has its origin in the "unifying and creative power of the divinity" (p. 229). Names correspond to the ontological levels: there are divine names for divinities, dianoetic names for the dianoetic entities, and so on (p. 241, quoting Proclus in *Tim.* I, p. 273, 25–27). Language demonstrates the essence of things and it takes this power from its divine origins (cf. in *Crat.* 51, p. 20, 18–21). But the most important passage is that which (cf. in *Crat.* 71, pp. 29–35) makes the generation of names part of the divine procession: names are symbols and traces left across the realm of the cosmic by the gods, who wished to guarantee comprehension of truth and reality. Names are therefore things, which are also possessed of symbolic value.

Discussion of Trouillard's paper by those present at the *Entretiens* indicates that the question of how language "corresponded" to metaphysical reality was seen to be a crucial one, and this is indeed a puzzling issue to the modern mind. Words have their value insofar as they are *not* things: they signify things, but are separate from them, at least as we see it. If words are reified, and become part of the furniture of the real, then other words will be needed to describe them, and to bring them into discourse. This is the crux of the matter: to do this work, words have to be part of discourse. To place them in the world of being seems only to create a problem of infinite regress, since the reification of one word will require the existence of another, to play its role in discourse.

These problems seem to lie at the heart of the Cappadocian rejection of the ontological theory of names, but we do not of course have to solve them for the Cappadocians. Suffice it to say that there was a school of thought comprising certain Neoplatonists, certain Gnostics, and certain Arians, which saw names as divine beings, and accorded them virtually demoniacal power.

Saffrey's contribution (*Nouveaux liens objectifs . . .*) stresses a different side of the *onomata*. Saffrey uses John of Scythopolis, the Areopagite's first

commentator, as a means of testing the climate of thought: John's choice of problems for elucidation will show that an issue is of contemporary interest, or that it attests the existence of a problem. Saffrey takes as his starting-point the remark at the beginning of Book IX of the Divine Names (PG 3, 909B): "let us contemplate these statues (ἀγαλμάτων) which are the divine names". How can names be statues?

The scholia of John of Scythopolis are given in Migne (PG 4), and this phrase is selected for comment (368D–369A): the passage to which Saffrey refers is translated below:

Most wisely he speaks of statues which are the divine names, leading us from among the Greeks to the truth. For the Greeks made what resembled statues, with neither hands nor feet, which they called Hermes. They made them hollow, with doors like wardrobes. They placed these statues within them, of the gods which they worshipped, and closed the Hermes from the outside. The Hermes thus appeared valueless, but internally they contained the beauty of their gods. For thus you will understand that allusion as well: when names are used of the only true and existent God in the Scriptures, which are unworthy of God, like "small", or "being seated", and so on, if these names are explained and interpreted in a way which is worthy of God, they contain the statues within, and the divine imprints of the glory of God.

This extraordinary passage is not taken literally by Saffrey, who sees it as a reminiscence of Plato's Symposium, 215a–b: there seems to be no archaeological record of such armless and legless statue containers, which are themselves statues, called "Hermes" (however, see Pépin, *Linguistique* . . . 97). As Saffrey himself shows, the idea of divine names as *agalmata* is to be found in Proclus (In Crat. 18, 27; 19, 17, Pasquali; and In Parm IV, col. 851, 8–10, Cousin).

Hirschle discusses this fully in *Sprachphilosophie* . . . (17 ff.), but denies (6) the Neoplatonic background. He thinks that the scholiast would have pointed it out, if it had been relevant. But John of Scythopolis may not be the best guide: he may be blind to Neoplatonic influences in Pseudo-Dionysius, as were generations of Christian scholars over the centuries, or a deliberate accomplice in the literary hoax perpetrated by the author, "Dionysius", and therefore inclined to minimize traces of Neoplatonism.

There is a Platonic exemplarism at work in these passages, which makes the name into a copy of an immaterial reality, like the statue itself. Thus names are copies, and it is in this sense that they are statues. This view probably goes back to Plato's Parmenides and the view that the Forms were "eponymous", or name-giving (Parm. 130E–131A): it places on a more precise footing the idea of names as things, which we have seen emerge in Platonist circles of the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. Names, like all sorts of realities are part of the proliferation of beings which occurs in the procession away from unity. They bear the same derivative relationship as other entities;

like all beings they reflect the higher principle which is their source, and of which they bear the mark. It is therefore understandable that these divine names should both *be* and *signify* at the same time: in a sense, every being in the Platonist world of things has meaning. Insofar as things share in being, they tend to point to their source. Entities therefore can have a semantic value, because of the way they have come to be. We have already seen in Clement of Alexandria a tendency to find meaning not just in discourse, or in documents, but across the whole range of existents. For Clement, reality was like a map, all of which pointed somewhere, and in the Areopagite this same tendency is apparent. The world of meaning is not confined to discourse, but to a full range of symbols.

For the divine names then, the semantic value of the existent constitutes an explanation. We seem to have advanced beyond the stage of Eunomius and Gregory, where the debate seemed to be over whether God was actually a name, and a name only. Eunomius did not seem able to rebut this accusation, though this may reflect the paucity of our information on him. The Gnostics, however, certainly did speak as if God *was* his name, as we have shown in relation to the Gospel of Truth, or as Tardieu has shown in *Les Trois Stèles de Seth* . . . , p. 568 (119, l. 20–22). Proclus and the Areopagite seem to have made some progress with this notion, since it emerges more comprehensibly in their writings. It is probable that the Gnostics knew of this Neoplatonist belief in the real existence of certain names, and that they speculatively developed it in order to assimilate God and his name, or Christ and his name. For Proclus however, the real names are not substitutes for the transcendent realities, but reflections of them.

It is important to have this background clear, because the whole point of the Divine Names is that it reveals and discusses certain *onomata* which are held to have a special importance. Further, this provides the basis for understanding the entire kataphatic, or affirmative, aspect of Dionysius' philosophy. Dionysius is not dabbling in the speculative world of the Gnostics, where names are Gods, but in the more sober world of the Athenian Neoplatonists, in which *onomata* are significant existents, created in the procession from the transcendent. They carry with themselves the imprint of the intellectual beauty, as does any other being. The Areopagite's intention, then, is to offer us a series of these monuments as foundations for discourse. These are the real, and only, building-blocks for kataphatic discourse about God. These names are the poles around which other words move.

Thus Dionysius begins the Divine Names:

And now, o blessed one, after the Theological Outlines, I shall proceed as far as I am able to the unfolding of the divine names. (PG 3, 585B)

This information is to come, not through the wisdom of man but the inspira-

tion of the spirit (I Cor. 2.4), and it will lead to an ineffable union, a far stronger union than can be achieved through "rational or intellectual" power. The names have an extra-rational effect therefore; unlike discursive reasoning, they tend to unite the mind with the highest principles, by some ontological process. Section 2 enlarges upon this process, stressing that the intellect moves toward the good. All beings have some share in the Good, and they are drawn towards it to the limit of their capacity, not falling away in a further descent.

Dionysius uses the word "analogy" twice in this passage, and the meaning of the term here calls for some explanation:

... the divine is revealed according to the analogy (ἀναλογία) of each intellect ... (PG 3, 588A)

... the Good ... which alone and of itself is established beyond being, makes a ray of light fittingly appear for the analogical (ἀναλόγοις ἐλλάμψεσιν) illumination of each being ... (PG 3, 588C).

What is the meaning of analogy in such a context? It is clear that it is being used in an ontological sense, but that at the same time it has an epistemological value. It takes us back to the very origin of the concept, as established by Clement of Alexandria in Christian philosophy at least, for whom the analogy of being was the primary meaning (see my 'Αναλογία chez Clément d'Alexandrie ...). Analogy is originally a mode of being, a proportion of beings in relation to each other. The proportionality of beings makes possible the knowledge which is based on comparison, and leads to what is known as the *via analogiae*, an epistemological tool in Neoplatonism and Christian philosophy, and in scholastic thought subsequently. Dionysius here envisages that each being will have its own relationship to the Good, its own proportion, and a share of knowledge which is appropriate to that. The illumination received will be directly proportionate to the ratio of being to the Good. It is because Dionysius is not here stressing epistemology, or a form of knowledge which is intellectual and discursive, that the concept of analogy is given such an ontological bias: he wants to maintain that this kind of knowing is a form of being.

Reference must be made here to one of Lossky's articles, *La Notion des analogies* ..., and the discussion therein. Lossky notes the scholastic use of the term, but quite rightly stresses that God "is not an object, much less an object of knowledge, as he could be for St Thomas or any other scholastic Theologian" (op. cit. 280). He is beyond being, and unknowable. Lossky stresses (287) that for Dionysius God can only be known through his participations in mundane reality, and turns to an analysis of the concept of analogy from this starting point. Reviewing the mathematical usage of the term (288), in which analogy means "proportion", Lossky finds it impossible to suppose

that Dionysius meant that there was some sort of proportionality between creatures and God, since God is not an object. The difficulty that Lossky sets himself is that whilst Dionysius refuses to make God into an object, he frequently refers to the relationship of analogy that holds between believers and God. For such a relationship to exist, God must be objectified in order to preserve the symmetry of the analogy relationship. (We may observe in passing that we have seen Damascius refuse arguments from analogy on the ground of the symmetry implied.) The answer, based on a considerable collection of texts, lies in the notion of causality, and Lossky concludes that analogy is the means by which created beings participate in the virtues of God, that is, his self-expression through the various levels of reality. Lossky further makes the interesting point that analogy is not to be considered a passive quality, but is closely related to free will, and to the love that creatures have for the created. This last point provides a useful enlargement of the way in which analogy is ordinarily conceived, since a voluntarist account of it can be given.

Analogy, then, is a kind of posture in relation to transcendent principles, and ultimately God. If we add to the term "posture", the notion of a quasi-geometrical harmony between the posture of the lower being and that of the higher being, we come closer to Dionysius' idea. And if we further add the voluntarist element so ably adduced by Lossky, we might say that the posture involved is a tendency to "lean towards" the higher principle. There is an element of striving and of desire in this ontological positioning, and the fulfilment of one's being is the natural goal.

The divine names assist in this process. Dionysius insists that the names must be drawn from the sacred writings (τῶν θείων λόγων: PG 3, 589D); and his concern that this be so is repeatedly stressed. Section 4 of Book I begins:

We are initiated into these things by the sacred writings, and you will find that the theologians' sacred celebration (so to speak) of the good-bearing processions of the thearchy, prepares the way by revelation and celebration for the divine names. (PG 3, 589D)

There is a connection here between the procession, and the divine names, and we have already seen these two things linked by Proclus. The names appear to be the products of this procession, and celebration of this procession will lead to celebration of the names. There follows a list of *onomata*: monad, unity, trinity, cause of beings, wise and beautiful. Each of these could be found in Neoplatonic texts, and do not appear to have anything specifically Christian about them. The names given throughout the rest of the work are often recognizable from Plato's *Parmenides* and that tradition, but also include clearly biblical terms, such as the Holy of Holies, King of Kings and so

on (ch. 12). Von Ivanka observed the connection with the Parmenides in his *Der Aufbau . . .*, 386 ff.; Vanneste (*Le Mystère de Dieu*, 37 ff.) also discusses the issue.

A further matter to do with the Parmenides should retain our attention. The Areopagite invites us to contemplate a series of terms, namely great, small, the same, the other, like, unlike, rest and motion. In his precise words:

. . . let us now contemplate these statues which are the divine names insofar as they are manifest to us . . . (PG 3, 909A)

A list of traditional kataphatic descriptions is then given, some reflecting Biblical terminology ("God is the same"), and then section II takes up the analysis of naming:

God is named great according to the greatness proper to itself. (PG 3, 909C)

There follows a description of how this greatness floods and encompasses everything. In section III the origin of the name in question is again broached:

God is said to be small or fine, because he has left every mass and distance, and because he advances unhindered through all things. Indeed the small is constitutive of, and the cause of all things, for you will find that all has participated in the form of the small. (PG 3, 912A)

Further, Dionysius turns to justify the name "same" in section IV, and in the course of his explanation we find again the language of forms and participation (μετέχειν: PG 3, 912C).

It was noted earlier that the interest in names in late Greek philosophy was associated with the Cratylus, and perhaps with Philo's thought. It seems to me that in the above passages we have a clear allusion to the Parmenides, and the whole background of the theory of ideas and the participation in them of the sensible world. In the first part of that dialogue, a thesis about naming is advanced (130E ff.). The view is that particulars which partake of forms get their names from them, that the names are "eponymous":

Well, tell me: do you think, as you say, that there are forms and that these other things which participate in them (μεταλαμβάνοντα) take their names from them (ἐπωνυμίας αὐτῶν ἴσχειν), so that things participating in likeness become "like", and those that participate in greatness become "great" . . . ?

Socrates agrees with this and the debate follows its course. What Plato has done is to extend the theory of Forms into the world of semantics: the form of Good not only explains cases of goodness in the sensible world, but also

the proper name "goodness", which is named from the form itself. This is a theory about the origins of language. Names come from the forms; they are their "eponyms", or derived names. (There is also an element of this idea in the *Phaedo* 102C.)

The Areopagite is using a theory of names derived from the Parmenides to establish the existence of these names – not the validity of these names, but their *existence*. It is for this reason that he is able to refer to them as "statues": the names are present to the mind as realities. He has a further task to show how these eponyms for the Forms can be applied to God, and generally he chooses to do this by what might be called the way of positive negation. He establishes firstly the existence of the name "great", as derived from Greatness itself: he then proceeds to show that God is more than great, that his transcendence is not great in the sense that it is *more* great than greatness. God exceeds the chosen concept, but in the manner appropriate to it.

This manoeuvre resembles the positive *via negativa* of Proclus, in that the negation is implied only to allow for a positive statement of transcendence.

Clearly, then, the Dionysian theory of names provides a strong endorsement of theological language, with its ontic grounding as outlined. In this sense the Areopagite is very positive about language, in a way already found in Proclus. Perhaps this is a surprising conclusion to draw about the figure who is, after all, the archetypal Christian mystic and exponent of the *via negativa*. Nevertheless he is far from regarding the divine names as part of the flotsam and jetsam of the human imagination. They are real, and may be sourced to the Real itself. Pseudo-Dionysius' negative theology does not damage this basic confidence in language: as indicated above, it is of the Proclan type. According to Proclus a negation secretes a positive transcendent statement, and implies it.

Turning now to the negative theology proper of the Areopagite, we find in his work the result of the centuries of development which have been studied up till now. He writes in full knowledge of the discussions of the negative which took place in the Athenian School, which we have seen reflected in the work of Proclus and Damascius, and also in that of Aetius and Eunomius. He shows sensitivity to the issues discussed in all these authors: the nature of negation, the relevance of privation, and the positive character of negative statements. His work illustrates the apophatic way at its most highly developed, and constitutes the end of the long voyage from Parmenides through to the closure of the Athenian academy in the sixth century A.D.

It may also be observed that at the hands of the divine Denys the negative way also has an ecumenical function. More clearly than in any other thinker, the negative method of the Areopagite dissolves the differences between the dogmas of various schools. More clearly than elsewhere does the negative reduce that which is affirmed to a common denominator of nescience.

We may begin with the hymn of negatives which opens the fifth chapter of the Mystical theology.

Ascending still higher we say that it is
 not soul
 not intellect
 not imagination, opinion, reason and
 not intellection . . .
 not life
 not being
 not eternity, not time . . .
 not divinity
 not goodness . . .
 (PG 3, 1045D)

The long collection of negatives continues, systematically annulling any concept which could conceivably be used in relation to the ultimate essence. One notices particularly that He is neither Fatherhood nor Sonship (1048A): this is Dionysius' response to the dogmatic problem of the Trinity. The conflict of the various parties in the Arian dispute over the relation of Father and Son, is resolved by application of the negative to both concepts: thus an act of reductionism is performed on the Trinity. The ideas of Father and Son are put into the form of a negative diptych, exactly in the manner of the classic pairs of negations of Plato's *Parmenides*. The Father and the Son have by now become standard categories in philosophical theology, and are to be negated as much as any other set of "opposites".

Chapter I of the Mystical theology contains a broad poetic statement of the way of unknowing. Speaking of the mystical summits, the author continues:

"There the simple, resolved and unchanged mysteries of theology are veiled in the darkness beyond light of the mystical silence . . ." (PG 3, 998A)

The mystical silence is the logical conclusion of philosophy for both Damascius, and for the Areopagite. The "beyondness" of the divine takes it outside the realm of the linguistic; the long search of Greek philosophy for the absolute essence of things has finally led it to the view that this essence is inexpressible. One of the themes developed is that of unknowingness, or nescience:

God is known through knowledge, and through unknowing. (PG 3, 872A)

And a little later:

The most divine knowledge of God is one which knows through unknowing according to the unity beyond intellect . . . (PG 3, 872A)

This emphasis on unknowing (*agnosia*) echoes exactly Augustine's famous phrase *Deus scitur melius nesciendo*, and is part of the apophatic tradition. That the word "unknowing" should carry the alpha privative in Greek suggests that it was being treated as a standard negative, with the same logic as applies to any other "not-predicate". That is, unknowing is probably regarded as a not-knowing, in that it is a higher, and more original form of knowing: in short a negative concept masking a positive one. The unknowing of the initiate into the divine heights is in fact a higher form of knowing.

This is the hypernegation brought into currency by Proclus, who stressed the positive obverse side of the negative statement. That this is what the Areopagite had in mind is made quite clear by what follows:

. . . he was not man, not as non-man, but as from men and beyond men; beyond man he truly became man. (PG 3, 1072B–C)

The Areopagite is therefore able to say that Christ was not man. We must be careful to observe the nuances of this statement; it is not a mere restatement of the docetist position, nor an ordinary denial of Christ's manhood.

The Areopagite denies Christ's manhood with a hypernegation, which does not rob him of manhood (that would be the thrust of a privative negation), but which denies manhood in the sense that the real condition of Christ is thought to be manhood in superabundance. This is the ascending negation of Proclus, which relies on the continuity of the real to guarantee that there will be no rupture when the negation is pronounced. This view of the negative is reiterated elsewhere: the Divine Dark explains that assertions (*καταφάσεις*) and negations (*ἀποφάσεις*) are not opposed. The passage does not explain how this comes to be the case, except to say that the divine exists "long before" these assertions, and their subsequent negations.

The word *ἀφαίρεσις* (abstraction) enjoys a degree of currency with this author which is unusual: it has not been seen with any regularity in the context of negative theology since the Middle Platonists and Plotinus. In this same passage of The Divine Darkness (PG 3, 1000B), it is linked with *θέσις* (statement, or the "laying down" of something). The two terms are frequently contrasted, with *θέσις* constituting the act of postulating, or laying down an idea, and *ἀφαίρεσις* the act of abstracting, or removing an idea. In the present passage the divine is said to be beyond both activities, just as it is beyond assertion and negation. The passage treats them as two couplets, *θέσις* / *ἀφαίρεσις*, and *κατάφασις* / *ἀπόφασις*.

Postulation and abstraction are linked in other passages: for example in 641A of the Divine Names, a series of contradictions are brought forward as

descriptions of the divine, and included is the claim that he is both the "postulation of all, and the abstraction of all". Elsewhere, the highest principle is said to be subject neither to postulation, nor to abstraction; but there are θέσεις and ἀφαιρέσεις of "the things which come after it" (PG 3, 1048A–B). A more developed contrast between the two terms is found at the beginning of the second chapter of *The Mystical Theology*. As it is a classic of negative theology, it will be quoted at length:

In this dark beyond light, we pray to be, to see through unseeing and unknowing, to know the beyond contemplation and knowledge, which does not itself see or know. For this is really seeing and knowing, and lauding hyper-really the hyper-real through the abstraction (ἀφαιρέσεως) of all beings, just as those making a natural statue remove all impediments in the way of the pure contemplation of the hidden, and manifest the hidden beauty itself in the presence of itself, by abstraction alone (ἀφαιρέσει μόνη). We must, I think, celebrate abstractions (ἀφαιρέσεις) in an opposite way to postulations. For we postulate beginning from the very first things, moving to the last things through the middle. Then we abstract all things, making an ascent from the last things to the first things themselves, in order that we may openly know that unknowingness which is veiled by all the knowables in all beings, and in order that we may see that hyper-real darkness, which is hidden away by all the light in beings. (PG 3, 1025AB)

The interplay of light and darkness reverses the common-sense understanding of these two states, just as the negative way reverses the usual understanding of how statements are made. Light is considered to hide things on this view: the real object of perception is the darkness which lies behind, or which is "hidden away" by the light. Light does not illuminate: it conceals.

There is a new note struck here. Since Plato's allegory of the cave, light had been the symbol of intellectual enlightenment, so to speak. The language of John's gospel endorses the image within the Christian tradition: Christ is the light of the world. In Middle Platonism, the sun, source of light, is taken as an image for the ultimate essence, and in Plotinus the metaphor of light exercises a certain dominance as an intellectual model. Yet here, the symbolism of light is reversed: it no longer suggests clarification and understanding, but it is the light itself which veils the true object of the search, namely the darkness which lies beyond. Pseudo-Dionysius has decisively reversed the traditional imagery, in a manner not unlike the Gnostic attacks on previous tradition, a mode we have described as "negative dependency". Light is now a symbol of obscurity.

Further, the understanding of *aphairesis* here put forward, reminds us of that suggested by Pappus, and followed by Origen, and discussed on p. 79. The Areopagite takes *aphairesis* as the removal of all things, starting from below and moving upwards to the first principles. What he calls postulation (*thesis*), involves moving from above to below, and these appear to corre-

spond to the *synthesis* and *analysis* of Pappus the mathematician. In other words we have here a classic school formulation of the negative way, which has been familiar since the Middle Platonists, even though the terminology might be different. The lower levels of reality are clouded with beings of a more massive kind: these constitute the objects of knowledge and reason, but they must be got through if one is to "know" the essence which lies behind them, though this will no longer be an act of knowing, of course.

The Areopagite reiterates this distinction between *thesis* and *aphairesis* a little later, in chapter III of the Mystical theology:

But why, you say, in sum do we make the divine postulates from the very first entity, when we begin the divine abstraction from the last? Because it is necessary that those who postulate that which is beyond all postulation should make their hypothetical assertions from that which is most akin to it; whereas those who abstract from that which is beyond all abstraction, should make their abstraction from things which are particularly removed from it. (PG 3, 1033C)

This statement recapitulates the idea of abstraction enunciated earlier, and which we have seen to be mathematical in origin: abstraction begins with the lowest ontological entities, and progressively removes, ascending towards the more refined.

Vanneste (Le mystère de Dieu . . . 67–8) points out a fine image used by the Areopagite to illustrate *aphairesis*, and notes also that the same image is found in Plotinus (I.6.9). One cannot help wondering whether some Plotinian line leads straight to the Areopagite, given both the revival of the term *aphairesis*, and the use of this image. However the image explains knowledge gained by abstraction, or "removal", on the analogy of a sculpture. The removal of pieces of stone from a block, gradually reveal the form of the sculpture which lies beneath, already there (αὐτοφύεζ) in a sense. Thus the "hidden beauty" is revealed, by "abstraction alone" (PG 3, 1025B–C). Thus it is that progressive removal can clarify and reveal.

Proceeding now to the idea of privation (*steresis*), it will be noted that certain developments have taken place with the work of this author. It has been observed in relation to both Neoplatonism and Neo-Arianism, that privation posed a problem for the *via negativa*: was the negation carried out thereby a form of privation? If so, the act of negation would seem to imply a diminution. The Areopagite implicitly responds to this problem by declaring that God is "beyond privation" (PG 3, 1000B), as well as being beyond *thesis* and *aphairesis*. In linking these three ideas, he seems to include privation as an epistemological mode (see Appendix I), with the intention of asserting that none of the three (postulation, abstraction, privation) can be used of God.

Yet we also find in Pseudo-Dionysius the clear beginnings of the medieval tendency to limit privation to ontology. The key passage here comes from

the fourth chapter of the Mystical theology. The Cause of all neither is nor has

alteration, destruction, division, privation, flux, or anything else which is of the sensible world. (PG 3, 1040D)

Privation is here clearly designated to be of the sensible world, and associated with various change-of-state concepts. The answer to the question about privation is being put in such a way as to permanently limit the meaning of the word: henceforth privation will be of states only. It will be confined to ontology, and will become synonymous with the idea of lack-in-being. The fact that its logical expression, through the ordinary negative or the alpha privative, made it resemble the ordinary form of negation, caused it to be linked with ordinary negation from Aristotle onwards. The Areopagite, more than any other figure in classical antiquity, tends to sever the links of privation with logic and epistemology, and to renounce the impression created by the operation of privation within language.

It is here that the notion of privation as a deficient ontological state begins to form, and from here that the medieval notion of privation as evil takes root.

The Good gives being to the privation of itself, with a view to the whole participation of itself. (PG 3, 721A)

The word οὐσιοῦ (translated as “gives being”) is a late Greek verb, no doubt invented to accommodate the Neoplatonist emphasis on the Good as source and nourisher of being: Syrianus’ remarks on how being “brings succour” to all things from itself (see p. 89) constitute an example of this trend of thought. In this passage the Areopagite lays the foundation for the Thomist idea of evil as privation of good: evil is understood as an incomplete state, damaged by its lack of goodness. Evil is a “non-complete good” (ἄτελές . . . ἀγαθόν). Privation is established here as a form of deficiency, and it becomes the explanation of how good can be diminished without contradicting itself, and of how it can exist in and with evil. This will become a classic part of the Thomist analysis of evil (see Appendix I). Thus the Divine Names:

Evil is not in bodies. For ugliness and disease are a lack of form and a privation of order. This is not wholly evil, but less beautiful. (PG 3, 728C–D)

This same passage continues to assert the idea of evil as defect, but stresses that privation is not a force warring against the good. A privation does not have power (*dynamis*): any power that might subsist in the defective being must come from the being itself, and its source (PG 3, 729C). In this way pri-

vation explains evil, but it is not reified. It is not identified as a cosmic power: the Manichaean dualism is avoided.

Evil has no being (732D). We have been told that it has no "power", but we are now told that it is "contrary" (παρά) to nature, contrary to the "way" and so on.

Thus evil is a privation, lack, weakness, asymmetry, failure, non-intention, non-beauty . . . itself in no way being in any way at all. (PG 3, 732D)

The non-existence of evil is again asserted, and the privative negation is again called in to explain it. Evil is the absence of that which endows form and substance: it is a defect in a thing's way of being. One may conclude as follows: privation is now definitively excluded from the epistemology of the *via negativa* and is held to represent deficiency on the ontological level only.

This conclusion is completely at variance with the treatment of privation given by Vanneste (*Le mystère de Dieu* . . . 101–120). Vanneste uses the term "privative" of virtually every type of negation which occurs in the Areopagite's exposition of the negative way. If the foregoing analysis is correct, then this is a confusion: it is true that any adjective or noun prefaced by the alpha privative may look like a privation, but the fact is that negation and privation were clearly distinguished in late Greek philosophy. It is surely incorrect, as does Vanneste, to speak as follows:

He has therefore introduced by this third term (ἐν ὑπεροχῇ) a rapid allusion to the exegesis of the privative names of God along the lines of the way of *eminentia* . . . (113)

It is confusing to use the word "privative" in this context: it is negations which are at stake. It is, of course, quite true that Pseudo-Dionysius' negations are to be interpreted as transcendental negations, like Proclus' hypernegations. But he explicitly excludes privation from this technique, when he speaks of ignorance (non-knowledge) of God:

. . . we understand this in a transcendent manner (ὑπεροχικῶς) and not in the privative sense (κατὰ στέρησιν) . . . (PG 3, 1065A)

This is an explicit response to the problem of privation as identified in the neo-Arian and later Platonist writings. Another attempt to respond to the problem is made by the Areopagite in the Divine Names:

. . . for non-intelligence and non-perception are attributed to God by transcendence (καθ' ὑπεροχήν), and not as defects (κατ' ἔλλειψιν). (PG 3, 869A)

Here he explains in other words the problem of privation, and lodges exactly

the same caveat about it as Aetius and Eunomius. Since this was a problem whose significance completely escaped Gregory of Nyssa, whilst it was clear to the Arians and the Neoplatonists, we may assume that the Areopagite did not derive his ideas from the Cappadocian camp; he may have belonged to the Neo-Arian or Neoplatonist tradition.

Thus Vanneste's treatment of the Areopagite's negative way as being virtually a privative way, seems to obscure an important development, namely that in response to the problem posed by privation for the *via negativa*, Pseudo-Dionysius limits its meaning to the ontological, and makes it the centre-piece of a vigorous new philosophy of evil.

The excellent work by Hathaway (*Hierarchy . . .*) provides us with a very carefully considered commentary on the "letters" of the Areopagite, and there is the strong suggestion throughout this work that there is little Christianity in his writings, that most of the content is traceable to Athenian Neoplatonism, and that the author may even have been one of Damascius' circle. This hypothesis influences the interpretation at most points. We will take some examples, however, which show non-Platonic elements. Firstly, letter III:

The sudden is that which is drawn out, unhopd for, into the visible from its former invisibility. Theology says this symbolically, I believe, concerning the love of Christ for man, that that which is beyond being has come forth from concealment, taking human substance and becoming visible to us. He is hidden even after his appearance, or to speak more divinely, even in his appearance. This much of Jesus is concealed, and the mystery is reached neither by reason or intelligence in respect of itself, but what is spoken remains unsaid, and what is known, unknown.

This remarkable set of statements is intriguing in many ways: the first sentence is very difficult to interpret, and in particular the idea of the "suddenness" of the divine epiphany (ἐξαίφνης). This term seems to be drawn from Plato's *Parmenides* 156d, where the "sudden", or the "instantaneous", is said to be the moment between motion and rest. Plato reflects on the "strange nature" of this moment which lies in the interval between mobility and immobility, which is "out of all time": it is both the point of arrival and the point of departure, and Plato's concern is with how the One passes into the state of motion. The One changes in the "instantaneous moment" (μεταβάλλον δ' ἐξαίφνης, 156e; cf. Aristotle *Physics* 222^b15 ff.).

There is a possible allusion to Malachi 3.1 ("suddenly he entered my sanctuary"): Brons (*Gott und die Seienden . . .* 247) also refers to Isaiah 29.5 ("and suddenly, in an instant, you will be visited by Jehovah Sabaoth"), and comments that the thrust of the Areopagite's remarks here are contrary to the traditional Christian understanding of the incarnation, since he emphasizes the timelessness of the moment of epiphany. This is certainly true, and

one might add that the fact that it is said to occur "unhoped for", or "against hope" (παρ' ἐλπίδα) also runs counter to the usual understanding of the incarnation. Roques refers to several texts which develop Plato's usage of the term ἐξαίφνης, in particular Plotinus Enn. V.7.36; V.3.17; V.5.7 (he also refers to Philo, *On the Migration of Abraham* 7; see also Beierwaltes, *Proklos* 199).

Clearly Dionysius is attempting to reconcile the Christian incarnation with the Neoplatonic moment of transformation. In a sense, the problem of transformation from one state into another was no less of a problem for the Neoplatonists than was the incarnation for the Christians. There seemed, to the Neoplatonists, to be a moment in a process of transformation, at which the old state had ceased, and at which the new state had not yet begun. This moment was the "sudden", or the "instantaneous", seemingly outside both processes. The process of change between incompatible states, such as unity and multiplicity, or in the case of Plotinus between separation and union, could be accomplished through this independent medium, the "instantaneous": a stage both in the process, and outside it. Dionysius sees this as a solution to the problem of the incarnation in his own terms. The Biblical allusions do not help our understanding of this passage, since it is not the speed of appearance, but the problem of transformation which is at stake. Dionysius is talking in general terms when he mentions "theology", and he means to offer a demythologised account of Christ's epiphany: it really means (he argues) that there is a moment of transformation from the hidden to the manifest, at which the hidden is both hidden and revealed, and both spoken of and inexpressible.

In this way we find an explanation of the contradictions just referred to. The use of contradiction (hidden and manifest; spoken of and unspeakable) strikes a new note in the philosophy of classical antiquity, and its importance must be stressed. The cornerstone of Western philosophy has been the famous principle of non-contradiction, or the excluded middle.

Edward Conze, in many of his works, has argued that Buddhist philosophy does not respect this principle of contradiction, and therein finds a major difference between its methodology, and that of the Aristotelian tradition. This pattern in the logic of the Indian philosophers may have been observed quite early, and perhaps the sophists travelling with Alexander, through their contact with the Indian sages, were able to contribute some knowledge of this important difference to the body of Greek scholarship. Perhaps also Pyrrho's contact with the Indians informed him similarly (*Diogenes Laertius* IX, 61).

It has frequently been observed that the use of contradiction is characteristic of mysticism, which often tries to deploy ideas in uncharacteristic ways. The shock of the unfamiliar may serve to take the mind onto a different plane of understanding, and a voluntary contradiction may be able to pro-

duce such a shock. It is well known that many of the Zen Koans contain contradictory ideas. The best known example is the famous response to the question: what is the sound of one hand clapping? The response: a soundless sound. The Zen Koans carry many such puzzles which aim to tease the mind out of ordinary rational patterns of thought – and which infringe the law of the excluded middle. It has become common-place to contrast this use of contradiction in Buddhist philosophy with its refusal in Western philosophy. The difference is profoundly important, but we can of course add the rider that the West does move towards this use of contradiction in its tradition of philosophical mysticism, and the sources of this may go as far back as Heraclitus, though he combines what are often merely contraries to create the appearance of contradiction. But we have in this passage of the Areopagite an example of the tendency to use real contradictions and there are a number of others which may be singled out. In chapter 4 of the Divine Names, for example, God is said to be both ineffable and “many-named”, both the “assertion of all things and the negation of all things”, “both ignorance and all-known” (PG 3, 641A). He is “united in the Trinity, origin of unity” (ἡνωμένον μὲν ἔστι τῇ ἐναρχικῇ Τριάδι, loc. cit). This entire passage consists of a list of contradictions, or positive negations, such as the introductory “hyper-real reality”, “hyper-divine divinity”, and “hyper-good goodness”. (It should be noted that some of these contradictions get lost in Jones’ translation, the Divine names . . . , p. 120.)

Dionysius continues with a justification of these contradictions, in itself most important since it shows that he is aware of his method. It is the analogy of light which comes to his aid, and it will be recalled that Beierwaltes has pointed to the way in which light symbolism becomes more than just an image in Neoplatonism: the image of light becomes a model which actually creates and directs the terms of the analysis. Thus Dionysius seems to be casting his view of contradiction in terms made available, and perhaps even suggested to him by the image of light, so beloved of the Neoplatonist tradition.

The lights of lamps . . . which are in one room are whole and in each other wholly, but they have an intact and precise distinction which separates them specifically from each other, united in their difference, and differentiated in their unity. (PG 3, 641B)

In this way Dionysius provides a justification for his juxtaposition of contradictions.

This is a decisive step. The problem of the Trinity being both one and three was a problem for orthodox Christianity only insofar as the terms of the discussion were based on the principle of non-contradiction. A religious notion was being spelt out in the terms provided by the philosophy of the day, and this was dominated by certain logical principles, of which the prin-

ciple of non-contradiction was one. Though it never rose to the surface (the most important axioms and presuppositions never do), this principle underlay all attempts to give a rational account (*logos*) of the Trinity. The step of simply assuming the contradiction unity/triad was not taken, as the labour of theology, both Orthodox and Arian, was carried out on the basis of Greek axioms.

Dionysius takes this step. Along with other contradictions, he advances the hitherto impossible "unity/trinity". Not for him complicated arguments about *hypostasis* and *ousia*: he simply asserts both propositions simultaneously, *p* and not *p*.

Where does the use of contradictions come from? It is not a familiar part of Neoplatonism, though there are hints of it. Plotinus' *On the Intelligible Beauty*, for example, comes close to the juxtaposition of contradictories which we have seen above. But there is not the systematic implementation of the method that we see in Dionysius. Again, my own argument about the origins of the contradictions in Letter III, suggests that they developed naturally from the Platonist interpretation of the *ἐξάίφνης*, the instantaneous moment. This would suggest an evolution in the tradition towards the method espoused by Dionysius.

But it is the Gnostics who most of all exploit the contradiction. Professor Tardieu has indicated to me that the visible/invisible juxtaposition, found in Letter III of the *Areopagite*, may be anticipated in the *Book of the Secrets of John*, and his own translation (*Ecrits Gnostiques* ... 86) indicates that it occurs in both manuscript traditions. It is not absolutely clear that the Gnostic author intended a deliberate contradiction however, since different entities may be envisaged for either epithet. Nevertheless there is an association with the figure of Christ, as in the Letter of Dionysius.

The Gospel of Truth has the contradictory juxtaposition of the invisible and the visible, the manifest and the hidden (38; see my "The Name of the Father ..."). And the *Tripartite Tractate* lists a series of contradictions:

He it is whom I call the form of the formless,

The body of the bodiless,

The face of the invisible,

The word of the unutterable,

The mind of the inconceivable ...

(Tri. Trac. 66, trans. Peel, ed. Robinson)

It is this type of writing which brings us closest to the *Areopagite*, who chooses to solve problems by the simple assumption of a contradiction.

The contradiction arises out of a desire to supersede language, just as the *via negativa* does. Both manoeuvres are examples of speculative philosophy trying to cause language to rise above itself, to move out of its own limits.

When once it has been postulated that the normal rules of discourse place artificial limits on the capacity of the intelligence, then some experiments in the use of language will follow: abnormal forms of discourse will be deployed. Thus the *via negativa*, which seeks to make statements by negations, contrary to the normal way of making a statement; and thus the contradiction, which infringes another fundamental characteristic of making statements, namely that when we assert a thing, we necessarily imply the exclusion of its opposite. Both of these techniques are attempts to interfere with the usual structure of language, in order to cause it to produce different results, to get it to play another tune, as it were.

Contradiction says that the tendency to exclude, which characterizes ordinary statement, is a conceptually dangerous tendency. Contradiction encourages us to retain ideas, where we might abandon them. Contradiction is one more means of overcoming the separative, divisive character of discourse, which always wants to say that a thing is one thing rather than another. Contradiction is holistic in character, forcing us to embrace incompatibilities, rather than to choose between them.

It is also possible to see Scepticism at the heart of this use of contradiction. Its use in Buddhist thought has sometimes been said to illustrate a certain agnosticism about the available answers to the perennial questions; thus Flin-toff, in *Pyrrho and India*, p. 91. In other words, one accepts two contradictory answers in order to declare one's dissatisfaction with either of the available answers taken by itself. And we know that the Greek Sceptics opposed arguments to each other so that they were equally balanced, thereby preventing the possibility of a conclusion. Thus the "equipollence" of arguments, as it was called, paved the way for the suspension of judgment for which Scepticism is famous. And thus we have the possibility of drawing comparisons between Indian and Greek philosophy.

Yet there is more in the art of contradiction than a mere expression of scepticism. Assuming a contradiction cannot be reduced to a simple statement of agnosticism. Contradiction is an attempt to use language: it is more than a rhetorical flourish, a decorative way of advertising one's scepticism; it is a linguistic manoeuvre designed force language to work against itself. It is designed to force language to include, rather than exclude. Language, the only available instrument, is induced to play a new tune, a tune for which it was not designed.

In this sense the *via negativa* and the method of contradiction are similar: both are attempts to swim upstream, to use the medium of language, but against the grain. The Areopagite has, in the end, a profound confidence in the use of language which resembles that of Proclus. His assertion of the existence of divine names, and their implied ontic basis, suggests a strong degree of commitment to language. Linguistic manoeuvres, whether they involve negation or contradiction, are part and parcel of the route to the ulti-

mate essence. Not that these linguistic manoeuvres are part of the customary deployment of language: they are not; they are attempts to force language to act uncharacteristically, against the grain. Nevertheless the epistemology of these techniques is still based on language and its capacities.

Pseudo-Dionysius may well be familiar with the Neoplatonist/Arian debate over privation; as we have seen, one passage links *thesis*, *aphairesis*, and *steresis*. More than any other figure, he forces privation into a purely ontological framework, and this is probably a reply to the problem which had arisen over whether privation was part of the *via negativa*.

In some respects he appears more radical, and less involved with the orthodox philosophical issues of the Platonists. His use of contradiction takes him closer to the Gnostics. Further, his reversal of the usual light imagery is reminiscent of Gnostic revisionism, that phenomenon of negative dependence on tradition which we have noted elsewhere, whereby the Tripartite Tractate can make logos the principle of ignorance, for example. For the Areopagite light is characteristic of lower beings, and stands in the way of vision. The symbol of real knowledge becomes darkness, and darkness transcends light. This is a decisive change in the tradition of Greek philosophy: it represents a conscious correction of the Greek imagery of light, and its "Lichtmetaphysik". A new current in the language of western mysticism has been created: the concept of the divine dark will henceforth become part of this tradition.