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EXPRESSING THE TRANSCENDENCE**

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE NEGATIVE THEOLOGY
IN THE WRITINGS OF PLOTINUS

Abstract: Plotinus chooses to unveil the transcendent character of his principle and must find to this purpose an appropriate manner of speech. The *Enneads* contain various descriptions of this search; they both practice and justify the constant use of negations. The aim is to prevent diminishing the superiority of the One by fixing it in certain determinations. Nevertheless, the language is granted a certain space of manifestation, within which the Nameless can receive names or superlative descriptions. Such «intervals» of verbalization show the discursive oscillation of the soul striving for the last unity, even though it is only beyond the margins of such intervals that the wordless encounter with the One may occur. Besides fundamental ontological options, a novel reply to classical difficulties underlie the formulations of what we might call Plotinus' articulation of the *via negativa*. Formless and infinite, the principle must not contain the particularities it finds. A new logic of generation doubles the emphasis of the absolute otherness of the One. All along this inquiry, we shall see how the «negative» or «apophatic» approach of the Divine institutes its language and finds its legitimacy in the works of Plotinus. Thus the ineffable transcendence leaves echoes in the modulations of our language.

Keywords: Plotinus, Transcendence, the One, the Divine, Principle, Negative Theology, Apophaticism, Negation, Abstraction.

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When trying to speak about transcendence, any systematical thinking reaches the borders of the inexpressible. Our language must then experience its limits, but also discover its deepest potentialities, feel at the same its frailty and its latent powers, while involved in a subtle dynamics of negativity and positivity.

This paper is meant to be an investigation in the modalities of expressing the transcendence of the ultimate principle in the *Enneads* of Plotinus.

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The structure of Plotinus' discourse, in speaking about the principle, bears similarities to the Christian tradition of the *via negativa*. At first glance, the use of a terminology involving phrases as “negative theology” or “apophatic theology” may seem inappropriate (even an anachronism) with regard to the father of Neo-Platonism, since the Christian theological tradition of apophaticism is generally connected with Dionysius the Areopagite as its initiator¹. However, the language and negativity and beyondness tries to find its proper path already with Presocratic thinkers, and apophaticism is *in nuce* contained in Parmenides' theory of being and in the Pythagorean approach to the Monad (Frenkian, 1943)². Plato himself sets another founding stone of the negative approach to the divine with his statements on the Good in *Republic* 509b and on the One in the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*, which will become very influential for later Platonic thinkers³. Moreover, in a largely philosophical sense “apophatic theology” could mean the ascent to an always higher level of being with the help of a movement of abstraction (ἀφαίρεσις), during which all determinations, including the thought of the divine, the absolute, or the last principle, must be transcended⁴. According to Plotinus, it is precisely this type of ascent which is needed in order to arrive at the pure simplicity of the One. The method of taking away, only for letting the unspeakable perfection of God come into view, is expressed not only in Platonism, but also later on in Dionysius the Areopagite and Meister Eckhart through the metaphor of the sculptor⁵.

¹See the mentioning of “apophatic teachings” or “negative theologies” (in plural!) in the title of the third chapter of *De mystica theologia*. It is remarkable that the expression is “singular” (unique) in the *Dyonisian Corpus* and that it is uncertain that this undertitle is authored by Dionysius (Westerkamp, 2006: 11).

²For the Presocratic influence on Plotinus, including on his account of the One and on the apophaticism: Stamatellos, 2007.

³See the classical article of Dodds, 1928. Also: Rist, 1962; Jackson, 1967; and for new insights Gerson, 2016.

⁴Speaking about the transcendence in Middle Platonism brings about this connection between the process of negation (ἀφαίρεσις) and the movement of abstraction (ἀπόφασις). See the use of *aphairesis* in *Didaskalikos*, x, 5f, — a work attributed for a long time to Albinus, but considered in more recent research to be authored by Alcinous (Whittaker, 1974; Alcinous, Dillon, 1993). This will also have effects on the terminological choices of Plotinus. “The implication of all these statements is that both Albinus and Plotinus use the term *aphairesis* in the technical sense of Aristotle's *apophasis*” (Wolfson, 1952: 121). For a detailed discussion of the relationship of the two terms see Hochstaffl, 1976: 74–75.

⁵The metaphor also connects with the turn to interiority and with the process of perfecting the inner statue (Plot. Enn.: I, 6, 9; Greg. Naz. Or. 27, 7, 1–5). See commentaries on this platonic *topos* and its resignification in Gregory of Nazianzus in Vasiliu, 2017: 49–52. For the use of the metaphor of the sculpture in Dionysius (Pseudo-Dionysius), see Ps. Dion. De div. 2,

It can be also argued, with good philological, intellectual and religious contextualization, that “theology” stands for “theory of principles” in the philosophical context of Antiquity and especially after Aristotle⁶. Even earlier, Plato considers that the last ontological foundation of being has a divine nature⁷. It is by means of such observations that the use of the term “theology” can be legitimated with regard to Plotinus, whereas “negative theology” points to a programmatic attempt to delimit the absolute, the principle or the final source of being through the negation of all positive determinations (Halfwassen, 2004: 43).

Linked to the idea of the inaccessibility of the divine, the method of the negative theology leaves a remarkable imprint on variations of Platonism, pertaining to Hellenistic Judaism, and to “pagan” as well as Christian Platonism. It can, therefore, be found in various authors such as Philo of Alexandria — representing the Hellenistic Judaism, — Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius — standing for the philosophical or “pagan” Platonism, — or Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus and Dionysius the Areopagite — accounting for a Platonism “baptized” and transfigured in Christian framework⁸.

The role of language in the *Enneads* becomes decisive for the negative or apophatic approach. A classification of modes of negation can be linked with explanatory or discursive intentions or with the cathartic-mystical or anagogical dynamics of the soul (Jugrin, 2014)⁹. Apophatic strategies

1025a–b, and the study of Jones, 1996. For the shaping of the inner statue in Meister Eckhart, while turning it back towards its divine archetype, see the article Hedley, 2018.

⁶For this sense of negative theology in a relationship with the principle in Neoplatonic thinking, see for example Hochstaffl, 1976: 76 ff. (“Prinzipientheoretische Bedeutung des neuplatonischen Begriffs negativer Theologie”).

⁷Krämer observes that the One is already by Plato qualified as $\theta\epsilon\acute{o}\varsigma$ (Pl. Leg. 716c4) and $\theta\epsilon\acute{\iota}\omicron\nu$ (Pl. Theaet. 176e4). Considering the One, together with the “indefinite duality”, as principles of being, Krämer notes that we can already see in Plato the founder of the negative theology (Krämer, 1959). This conclusion may be also sustained, when one takes into consideration the negative dialectic practiced in the first hypothesis of Pl. Parm. 137c–142a and grant it with the ontological meaning of treating about the absolute principle. For a different analysis of Plato’s approaches to “God” and “the divine” in general, see the contributions in volume *Platon und das Göttliche* 2010.

⁸For an overarching comparison with examples in Philo of Alexandria, Plotinus, Origen of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa, see Ramelli, 2014. For a development of the negative theology, see: Armstrong, 1977; Carabine, 1995; *On What Cannot Be Said* 2007; Franke, 2014.

⁹The role of abstraction is highlighted in its ascensional and dynamical dimension, not only as epistemological device: “Abstraction means the abandonment of one notion for a more subtle one: it marks an ascension, a step forward” (Jugrin, 2014: 89).

such as the apology, the apophatic marker (οἶον), the apophatic pact regarding an agreement on the incorrect use of names, are correlated with an infinite regress in the *aporia*, away from a reference that is continuously refused, because all terms that are stated about the One fail to accomplish a referential function (Sells, 1985). A philosophical evaluation of a negation or abstraction in Plotinus cannot be cut from considerations regarding ancient religious practices, such as the purification methods of the mysteries, where the soul is freed from anything alien to its true nature or the role of silence depicting a unifying potential in contrast to the multiplicity of language (Mortley, 1975). Negation can be also a sign of a more profound questioning of the assumptions of the Greek ontology, inviting a critical reflection on the unbridgeable character of the “gulf” which appears between the phenomenal world and its principle or ground (Franke, 2006). Epistemological questions, metaphysic claims and religious (contemplative or mystical) attitudes are therefore necessarily touched by any investigation of “the negative theology” in Plotinus.

1. DIFFERENT MIRRORS¹⁰ FOR THE TRANSCENDENT ONE

The consequent thinking of the uniqueness of the principle is systematically connected with the idea of its absolute transcendence. This is one of the main ontological options in the three-hypostases-system of Plotinus; it mobilizes a large repertoire of linguistic means to suspend the referential and reinforce the symbolic function of language¹¹. Undoubtedly the mirroring of transcendence in language cannot raise such claims as to exactness or precision, because language itself is unable to grasp the overwhelming superiority of the One. A multiplicity of linguistic subtleties will be required in the act of searching for better ways to suggest the transcendence. Human thinking and language strive to approximate the ineffable, to open perspectives and

¹⁰For the role of the mirrors and reflections in Plotinus, with reference to Plato’s understanding of mirrors or mirroring images, see Clark, 2016: 86–107. Cited “Enneads” in relationship to a mirroring or reflection effect include: Plot. Enn. v, 2, 1 (each of the three hypostases creates an image in the immediate inferior one); Plot. Enn. II, 3, 18, 17 (the phenomenal cosmos as an image); Plot. Enn. I, 1, 8, 17 (the “scattering of the soul” in the cosmos as “in a hall of mirrors”). By mirrors I consider here the linguistic patterns — although ultimately inadequate — used to reflect the transcendence — no mirror in Antiquity was perfectly polished so as to render a truthful image of the reflected object.

¹¹See Sells, 1985: 62–64. Sells explains that for Plotinus the symbol does not stay for a “pre-referential signification” (ibid.: 62). The movement is that of spiralling back away from reference, in what becomes ingression into a symbolic language that plays on *coincidentia oppositorum* and performs “the dynamics of disontology” (ibid.: 64).

insights into its most compact and simple fullness. Plotinus is in quest of that light of words to which the light of the One could be transparent, as a supreme brightness that stands over any form of being.

The most evident approach to the idea of transcendence is to be read in the descriptions of the One as simply “beyond everything”: ἐπέκεινα πάντων¹². This character of *being beyond* is made visible through other expressions: the One is “above” (ὑπέρ) or “before” (πρό) or “different from” (ἕτερον) that determination, which is to be denied of the principle. Such revealing of the transcendence is visible when the first one is considered to be “before and above everything” and “different from everything” (Plot. Enn. V, 4, 1, 5–13); or simply “above everything” (Plot. Enn. V, 5, 13, 33). The same ontological priority and superiority to any form of being are systematically textitized in Plot. Enn. III 8, 10, 28–31.

Moreover, the One is absolutely simple: παντή ἀπλοῦν (Plot. Enn. V, 3, 11, 27). It allows no form of multiplicity and no inner ontological structure. For any structure or configuration supposes a composition in which parts can be identified, which would contradict the simple nature of the One. The One is therefore primarily deprived of any determination because any determination entails a difference, and any difference indicates a plurality of (at least) conceptually separable features. For the same reason, it would be nonsensical to speak of relations in the One, for relating involves several elements, and their numerical differentiation.

Consequently, the One lacks determinations both from an epistemic and an ontological perspective: it is at the same time indeterminate *for us* and *in itself* beyond any determination. Hence the notion of the Absolute as “pure simplicity” does not mean another determination or the most appropriate attribute; it constitutes rather the absolute negation of all determinations. It symbolizes a way of overcoming the limits of language in order to point towards the unspeakable and unthinkable superiority of the One.

The transcendence or the pure simplicity of the One is unveiled by means of a negative dialectic, and for this purpose Plotinus recurs to Plato’s authority, finding his model in the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*. Accordingly, his “henology” becomes fundamentally negative in form and content. The One is not being, nor does it represent a form of being (ἀφελῶν τὸ εἶναι: Plot. Enn. III, 8, 10, 31; οὐδε τὸ εἶναι: Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 2, 46–47), it is

¹²Plot. Enn. V, 1, 6, 13; V, 3, 13, 2; V, 4, 2, 39. The passages in Greek are cited following Harder’s bilingual edition. I have also used the following Romanian editions: Plotin, Cornea, 2003–2009; Plotin, Baumgarten, 2003–2007.

not substance or essence (μὴ οὐσία: Plot. Enn. III, 8, 10, 30), not existence (πρὸ ὑποστάσεως: Plot. Enn. VI, 8, 10, 37), not *energeia*, not life, not thought, not self-consciousness, not intellect, neither knowledge nor knowable, even not unity (in “Parmenides” the attribute of being one is also denied of the One), because it is beyond everything (Halfwassen, 1992: 13). In Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 3, 41–45, the One is not something particular (οὔτε τι), not “qualified” (οὔτε ποιόν), not “quantitative” (οὔτε ποσόν), neither intellect nor soul (οὔτε νοῦν οὔτε ψυχήν), neither “in movement” nor “at rest” (οὐδέ κινούμενον οὐδέ ἐστώς), neither “in place” nor “in time” (οὐκ ἐν τόπῳ, οὐκ ἐν χρόνῳ), but prior to all form, movement and rest, as these concepts introduce multiplicity. The argument also states that the One “is in itself and by itself a single form” and indeed rather formless¹³. Exceeding everything, the One cannot be identified with particular instantiations of being.

The consequences of this negative dialectic can be analyzed on three levels. Ontologically the Absolute cannot be a certain thing; it cannot be something; it must be prior to any certain “something”, to any individuated and identifiable form of being: πρὸ τοῦ τι (Plot. Enn. V, 3, 12, 51). From an epistemic point of view, it is impossible to have a representation or a notion of the principle, because there isn’t any essence or nature, which could be approached through dialectical methods or suddenly achieved in an intuitive act. Consequently there is no thinking or knowledge of the One (Plot. Enn. V, 3, 13–14). Thirdly, as far as language is concerned, the One must remain unspeakable, ἄρητον¹⁴, since the twofold structure of predication is essentially inappropriate to disclose any pure simplicity. Naming is also unsuitable — on the one hand, because it tries to grasp the One in something determined and inferior to it, on the other hand, because the name could introduce a duality by assuming the role of an individualized counterpart of the named entity.

The One is no particular being to which a certain name would correspond: strictly speaking, it is absolutely nameless: “This marvel of the One, which is not existent, so that ‘one’ may not here also have to be predicated of something else, which is truth has no fitting name” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 5, 30–33; Plotinus, Armstrong, 1988: 321). A name can be accepted under the specification that it is no more than an approximation, a suggestion,

¹³Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 3; Plotinus, 1966–1990. 313–315. (Citations from English editions are indicated through mentioning the translator’s name.)

¹⁴Plot. Enn. V, 3, 13, 1s. Plato, *The seventh letter*, 341c (I do not enter here in debates about the authenticity of the seventh letter).

a shade that does not exhaust the light of the ultimate source. “The One” is only analogically spoken of the principle, not in the literal sense, not as an attribute: “But if we must give it a name, ‘one’ would be an appropriate ordinary way of speaking of it, not in the sense of something else and then one; this is difficult to know for this reason” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 5; *ibid.*).

To suggest the ineffability of the One, Plotinus uses also other terms in *alpha privativum* such as ἀμορφον, ἀνείδειον (formless), ἀνόητον (unthinkable), ἄπειρον (infinite) (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 6, 10–11), ἄοριστον (indefinite) (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 7). Let us focus here on the infinite or unlimited One: “And it must be understood as infinite not because its size and number cannot be measured or counted (οὐ τῷ ἀδιεξιτήτῳ ἢ τοῦ μεγέθους ἢ τοῦ ἀριθμοῦ) but because its power cannot be comprehended (ἀλλὰ τῷ ἀπεριλήπτῳ τῆς δυνάμεως). For when you think of him as Intellect or God, he is more; and when you unify him in your thought, here also the degree of unity by which he transcends your thought is more than you imagined it to be; for he is by himself without any incidental attributes” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 6; *ibid.*: 322–323). The arguments for the One’s infinity relate to its being intraversable (ἀδιεξιτήτῳ)¹⁵ and incomprehensible (ἀπεριλήπτῳ), but most particularly to its power (Sweeney, 1957)¹⁶.

We cannot attach infinity as a name or attribute to the transcendent One, as it is not in itself infinite; rather infinity emerges from his eternal δύναμις understood as power or activity. In this sense matter as ἄπειρον can be said to originate in the limitless (of the power) of the One: “For in the intelligible world, too, the matter is the unlimited, and it would be produced from the unlimitedness or the power or the everlastingness of the One; unlimitedness is not in the One, but the One produces it”¹⁷.

2. TRANSCENDING BEING

That the One transcends being seems to be the paradigmatic representation of the pure transcendence. Halfwassen considers that this is “the most precise and comprehensive expression for the pure transcendence of the Absolute” (Halfwassen, 2004: 46–47), because being is not only a determination among other determinations, which must be denied of the One. Being is first

¹⁵See Ar. Phys. III.204a1–7, 207–b29; Ar. Met. K.1066a35–b1. Cf. Plot. Enn. II, 4, 7, 15.

¹⁶This part of the investigation proves that infinity depends on the δύναμις of the One. Also: Armstrong, 1954–1955).

¹⁷Plot. Enn.: II, 4, 15; Plotinus, Armstrong, 1966: 144–145: Ἐπεὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς νοητοῖς ἡ ὕλη τὸ ἄπειρον καὶ εἶη ἂν γεννηθῆν ἐκ τῆς τοῦ ἐνός ἀπειρίας ἢ δυνάμεως ἢ τοῦ αἰεί, οὐκ οὕσης ἐν ἐκείνῳ ἀπειρίας ἀλλὰ ποιοῦντος. For the relationship between the infinity of matter and the infinity of the One, see Sweeney, 1957: 718.

of all the basis of all other determinations and secondly being illustrates the quintessence of all determinations. In the first case, something can be attributed to a specific nature, a certain constitution, if it is and as far as it is. For the second sense of being, we have to understand *ousia* as the fullness of the essence, as the totality of all determinations, above which nothing richer can be thought. *Ousia* is the last perfection of being, its completeness.

In this way, we are offered two keys to interpret the much discussed transcendence over being (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), inspired by Plato's *Republic* (509b), and repeated by Plotinus as a musical motif¹⁸. On the one hand, we speak about transcending every possible determination of being. This meaning is implied in the One's founding function. The One as principle of all determinations cannot be itself determined, limited by a certain determination. But something that possesses no determination and has no properties defining its own essence, is eventually not a being. This argument has the following presupposition: being determined is a necessary condition of possibility in order for something to be — a supposition which involves a certain understanding of being as determined being, characterized by a distinguishable and specifiable essence. Under this presupposition, it follows that the One, because of lacking any determination, cannot prove the character of being and cannot be referred to as being.

Similarly, the transcendent principle is necessarily formless (ἀνείδεον): as a principle it cannot be a certain thing, which could be identified or indicated among other beings. Plotinus explains that “beyond being” simply means “not this”¹⁹. The one is therefore elevated above the particularity, relativity, and finitude of already individuated beings.

On the other hand, ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας can mean “beyond totality”. Being (οὐσία) is that whole, where nothing is missing: no thinkable determination, no thinkable degree or variation of being. It contains the characteristics of all possible essences, of all individual beings. In fact, *ousia* may be here conceived as the richest and largest horizon of being, as the universal *essence* in its entirety. This whole is not identical with the One or “the First One”, as the tradition of the Academy used to call the first principle. Nevertheless, as the second after the First One, the whole can be considered the first unity

¹⁸Plot. Enn. V, 4, 1; V, 5, 6; IV, 8, 8, VI, 8, 19. It will be also mentioned by Procl. In Plat. Theol. II, 12, 114. See for commentary Hochstaffl, 1976: 76.

¹⁹τὸ γὰρ ἐπέκεινα ὄντος οὐ τόδε λέγει — οὐ γὰρ τίθησιν — οὐδὲ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ λέγει, ἀλλὰ φέρει μόνον τὸ οὐ τοῦτο (Plot. Enn. V, 5, 6, 11–12).

possessing being (“the being One”). Hence the Absolute must transcend *ousia* as being unity and quintessence of being.

The Absolute must also transcend the whole made up of the Principle and Being, this last and largest Totality, as well as the act of thinking together the Principle and Being in such an ultimate whole. The Absolute transcends essentially every horizon of totality, even the totalities which try to contain the principle itself (Halfwassen, 2004: 48). Such statements may seem at first glance paradoxical, but we should recall that the One is always more than what we may think of it or associate with it as a principle. Even if it cannot play the role of a trivial characteristic, being a principle does not exhaust the One. Ultimately, the One remains beyond our conception and representations of the principle. This nameless “it”, bringing everything to life and sustaining all things in being, remains beyond its own identification with “the Principle” as a second term or as a reified instance²⁰.

It is true that we cannot avoid describing the One as a principle: “The One must be an originating principle and, consequently, must exist before all things if they are to originate from it”²¹. The relationship between the One and the whole of Being is depicted in terms of a primordial causality, without which nothing could be brought to being out of nothingness: “What then, is the One? It is what makes all things possible. Without it nothing would exist, neither Being, nor the Intelligence, nor the highest life, nor anything else” (Plot. Enn. III, 8, 10, 1–2, trans. O’Brian). Plotinus conceives the One as offering the answer to the question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”²² and resorts to it to explain the bare possibility of being. Even the most elevated forms of being find their *raison d’être* in the One and not in themselves.

The distinctive character of Plotinian statements about transcendence consists of the close interdependence between their extraordinary semantic richness and their formal negativity. Following this reciprocal conditioning, one might suspect that the Absolute comes very close to nothingness²³. But

²⁰A consistent negative theology wouldn’t hesitate to name it “Over-principle”, suggesting the fact that it has this foundational function only as far as we conceive it in relation to our world.

²¹Plot. Enn. III, 8, 9, 50–51 (trans. O’Brian). Alongside with Armstrong’s version, I use alternatively the following English translation: Plotinus, O’Brian, 1964.

²²This is considered to be the fundamental question of metaphysics (Heidegger, Fried & Polt, 1959: 7–8).

²³In this sense, the rigorous and radical apophatic stance leaves the question of the existence of the One beyond all delimitations and predications open. The transcendent negativity “can never be propositionally distinguished from mere negativity or nothingness” (Sells, 1985: 62).

the principle requires such a total and radical negation precisely because it represents a fullness that overflows abundantly over any forms of being: “The principle is certainly none of the things of which it is the source. It is such that nothing can be predicated of it, not being, not substance, not life, because it is superior to all these things”²⁴. Our language can be “purified” from inappropriate assertions, but humans cannot say something positively about the One: “For we say what it is not, but we do not say what it is” (Plot. Enn. V, 3, 14; Plotinus, Armstrong, 1984: 121).

3. NOTHINGNESS AND BEYOND. THE CHALLENGE OF NAMING

In this way, Plotinus announces the understanding of the One as *nothing*—not as abstract emptiness (Beierwaltes, 1988: 53), not as a space void of any possibilities and perspectives, but as fullness, as surplus over every thinkable completeness, remaining free of all difference. Being nothing of all underlines the priority of the One, which by its status cannot be actualized in a concrete distinguishable being, identical with itself and different from others by the force of a certain essence. So this vigorous negation is used to outline the most intensive reality, the plenitude that exceeds even the totality of being, because it represents the cause, the spring of being. The categories of thought and speech are worthless in expressing this plenitude: it is not being, because it has no certain form, it is neither a certain quality nor a certain quantity, neither Intellect, nor Soul, it is not moved, neither does it stay still, it cannot be situated in space or time, and it has no configuration (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 3, 38–45). In this “negative” description, three of the μέγιστα τῶν γενῶν of Plato’s *Sophist* (being, movement, state) and many Aristotelian categories (such as quality, quantity, space and time) are denied of the One. Therefore, the last principle finds no adequate placement inside the systematical borderlines of ontological discourse.

The “nothing” of the Source is not the wasteland of uncreativity, the vain nothingness, not-being in a privative, depreciative sense. It is rather a sign of the powerlessness of any conceptual network or construction — no matter how close to the fundamentals it may be situated – to convey the excess that

²⁴Plot. Enn. III 8, 10, 28–31, trans. O’Brian: ἢ ἔστι μέω [τὸ] μηδὲν τούτων ὧν ἔστιν ἀρχή, τοιοῦτο μέντοι, οἷον, μηδενὸς αὐτοῦ κατηγορεῖσθαι δυναμένου, μὴ δῶτος, μὴ οὐσίας, μὴ ζωῆς, τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα ταῦτα εἶναι.

inhabits the One²⁵. Advancing towards the “formless” raises in the soul the fear of nothingness, as the soul cannot meet a delimited object to grasp²⁶.

Even the affirmative statements — for example, the identification of the ineffable *ἐκείνο* with the One, the Principle, the Origin, the Divinity, or the Good — are to be understood as approximate denominations (designations) of the all-transcending instance. They must be interpreted, in the light of the corrective function of negations, as no accurate or suitable names of the principle. Although we name it out of the necessity to point towards it or to underline its effects in relation to our world, no name is capable of transmitting its eminence. So the differently named is actually “nameless”, and here Plotinian writings meet once again the apophatic spirit in which Dionysius speaks about the divine names²⁷.

The paradox of naming the Nameless can be glanced in the fact that, as long as we think and speak of “that one” as of a principle, we have not yet transcended the tendency of anchoring our thinking, or more exactly, the object of our thought, in a certain determination. Every reference to it, unless realized through demonstratives, seems to imply an inadequate naming of the one beyond any name — no matter how general or how metaphorical this designation may be. In Plot. *Enn.* VI, 9, 3, Plotinus observes that when we call it principle, we don’t predicate anything at all that characterizes the One, but we say something about us. This idea is sustained by the observation of the self-sufficiency of the One, while it is us that receive something from it. Thus when we try to speak of it, we speak of what we apprehend of this gift. Strictly speaking, it should not even be called “this” or “that”. The soul should instead circle around it and try to interpret the way it is affected by the principle and not stay too much far from it²⁸.

²⁵This closeness between the ineffability of the One and the “nothing” that suspends our speech pointing to the complete “beyondness” is developed to its last consequences by Damascius: “But if the One is the cause of all things and the container of all things, in what manner can we ascend beyond it? The danger is that we shall simply be stepping into the void and aspiring to that which is nothing of all. For that which is not even One, in nothing in the strictest sense. Whence, after all, [do we know] that there is anything beyond the One?” (Damascius, *Ahbel-Rappe*, 2010: 69).

²⁶Plot. *Enn.* VI, 9, 3: “But in proportion as the soul goes towards the formless since it is utterly unable to comprehend it because it is not delimited and, so to speak, stamped by a richly varied stamp, it slides away and is afraid that it may have nothing at all” (Plotinus, *Armstrong*, 1988: 311).

²⁷Ps. *Dion. De div.*: I, 6–8, 4–9.

²⁸Plot. *Enn.* VI, 9, 3: “For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us, because we have something from it while that one is in Itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say ‘that’ or ‘is’; but we run round it outside, in a way, and we want

Still the words — faced with their failure — should not paralyze. They cannot grasp the absolute, but they are granted the “condition of the interval”, where there is always infinite space to come closer to the unspeakable one. And there are also privileged names, such as “the One” or “the Good”²⁹, which can be allowed with the awareness of their inaccuracy, of their incomplete semantic reach, although they approach the principle in the highest grade. Besides, Plotinus identifies a certain metaphoric language, certain images that illustrate better what it is to be said about the One (such as the metaphor of light, of the circle, of the spring etc). Symbolic language also plays an important role, as the interpretation of the name Apollo as denial of multiplicity (“not many”) in connection to the Pythagorean tradition³⁰.

Language is given a realm of positive exercise, of affirmative expression, but this is only under the title of approximation, in the context of a total impossibility of ultimate and unique grasping of the transcendence. And such attempts lose their legitimacy when they do not constitute themselves inside the frontiers set by the negative theology when they grow under the illusion of being able to come to the end of the interval, to that first one — always escaping them. Even after choosing one of the most appropriate names to the One, Plotinus sets the discursive flow under the interdiction of adding something else: “After one has pronounced this word ‘Good’, one should ascribe nothing further to it because any addition, of whatever sort, will make it less than it really is. Not even thought should be attributed to it. To do that will be to introduce a difference and thus make a duality of intellection and goodness” (Plot. Enn. III, 8, 11, trans. O’Brian). No other determination, except the name, should further contribute to the specification of the principle, because it would contribute to the diminishing of its superiority too. Here the role of negativity is again at work. We can conclude that *via negativa* is fundamental firstly because it demarcates the domain of validity of the positive approach, and secondly because it alternates with it.

The most precise statement about the One concerns its absolute difference to the realm of the speakable, of being. In this sense the One can be said to be Non-Being in the sense of Over-Being, nothing of all, beyond being,

to explain our experiences of it, sometimes near and sometimes falling away in our perplexities about it” (Plotinus, Armstrong, 1988: 315). The circular movement around the One confesses the limits of human intellection and the impossibility of cognitive grasp: Plot. Enn. V, 3, 13–14 and Ramelli, 2014: 174.

²⁹The same in Procl. In Plat. Theol. II, 6.

³⁰Plot. Enn. V, 5, 32, 6. See also commentaries in Sells, 1985: 50 and Mortley, 1975: 372.

thought, language. Superlative particles like ὑπέρ are signs of this absolute distinction and therefore become seals of the transcendence. Sometimes Plotinus proceeds to other positive designations of the One, that speak in superlative of its perfection and power: “the most complete of all” (Plot. Enn. V, 4, 1, 24), “the most powerful of all things” (Plot. Enn. V, 4, 1, 25), “the most complete, the first Good” (Plot. Enn. V, 4, 1, 34–36). Such expressions of eminence appear in the paradigm of the good: the “Over-good” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 6, 40), “the Good above all Goods” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 6, 58), “the cause of the goods” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 9, 2). Under the caution imposed by negations, these qualifications are to be taken as an attempt to make the superiority of the One conceivable for us. They mean not to ignore the absolute tautological existence of the One, but to give analogical indications of the overwhelming transcendence and its beneficial effects.

The abstraction, when operated with mathematical concepts, shows that the One is sizeless and partless but also underlines the abundance of power that lies in the One: the One is the greatest of all things because it has the power to generate all. “One must be understood in a larger sense than that in which a unity and a point are unified. For there the soul takes away size and multiplicity of a number and comes to a stop at the smallest and rests in thought on something which is partless but was in something divisible and is in something else; but what is not in something else or in the divisible is not partless (ἀμερές) either in the same way as the smallest; for it is the greatest (μέγιστον) of all things, not in size but in power, so that its sizelessness (ἀμέγεθες) also is a matter of power (δυνάμει)” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 6; Plotinus, Armstrong, 1988: 323).

4. BEYOND WORDS: SILENCE AND INTERPRETATION

The search for an adequate mode of speech is a problem inherent to the *Enneads*, either explicitly treated or implicitly exemplified in the way Plotinus himself structures his message. Such a search leads to the conclusion that words are helpful only within certain limits, which introduces the great theme of silence. The refusal to speak about the highest principle is not the result of temporary fallibility of the language, or of the provisional lack of adequate concepts, which are to be later found or created. Neither does it stay for an esoteric option, not to communicate the central thoughts of teaching — as in the case of the Pythagoreans or even of Plato, who has supposedly only orally transmitted the core of his doctrine about the

principles³¹. The negative attitude towards expressing something precise about the principle speaks in the *Enneads* about an essential incapacity of language.

Along with the echoes of negative theology, Plotinus is remarkable for the subsequent appreciation of silence³². Silence is not a theoretical choice, not a prohibition imposed by a certain school of thinking, its initiation code or teaching practices³³, but the manifestation of the awareness that the principle in itself eludes language. The *Enneads* mention the “departure in silence” (Plot. Enn. VI, 8, 39, 11) and the “contemplation” in silence (Plot. Enn. III, 8, 3, 3–14; IV, 3, 18, 9–24; V, 1, 4, 38 ff.; VI, 7, 34, 28–32). Silence can also be a sort of “theophany” of the Divine—the One is not transmissible in words³⁴. Only the personal experience, when the soul retreats in its interiority, constitutes the way in which we could reach the transcendence. Having built the consciousness of the limited role of language, the negative theology invites the human being to that silence in which he / she can find the mystical way to the One and live the illuminating instant of the union between the self and the One. Furthermore, negative theology finds another justification in this proposal of abandoning the strict cognitive research and looking for access to another kind of experience³⁵.

However, this search for an adequate form of speech can have other implications too. One can read here not a tendency to embrace silence as a consequence of the failure of language to touch the eminent transcendence, but the sign of a different task-setting. Plotinus would give here the guidelines of a hermeneutical process, in which we become aware both of the limits of our understanding and of the necessity of an endless interpretation, in order to approximate the sense of the One, the sense emerging from the

³¹The theory of Plato’s “unwritten doctrines” (ἀγραφα δόγματα) is sustained by the Tübingen School of Plato studies, who tries to reconstruct Plato’s esoteric teaching about the principles: the One and the Indefinite Dyad. Important representatives of this paradigm of Plato’s interpretation are: Hans Joachim Krämer, Konrad Gaiser, and Thomas Alexander Szlezák.

³²See the recent publication of Nicholas Banner (Banner, 2018). He touches, among other topics, the development of the idea of transcendence in Middle Platonist writers (ibid.: 147–174), but also the “poetics of transcendence in Plotinus” (ibid.: 211–240).

³³See the practice of silence in the traditional religion and mysteries rituals (Mortley, 1975: 366).

³⁴For σιγή as religious attitude and the ascent to the One, see Trouillard, 1961. I. Ramelli identifies the One with silence: the one itself is “silence... after removing all difference” (Ramelli, 2014: 178).

³⁵Plotinus recommends to express our longing for the One in soundless prayers or to wait still for it, preparing the meeting with it, and then to worship it silently (Plot. Enn. v, 1, 6; v, 5, 8; vi, 8, 11). Cf. Müller, 1918: 67.

One in all beings. The controversial and much discussed phrase “the One is beyond being” could subsequently mean more than simply establishing a place for the last hypostasis. The sentence concerns not so much the ontological organization of the system. It regards a plenitude of meaning, a surplus of sense which is constitutive of the postulation of the One. Such a line of interpretation proposes Schroeder in “The hermeneutics of Unity in Plotinus”. He pleads for approaching the question of the One’s transcendence from “a more broadly hermeneutical perspective” instead of the traditional viewpoint, which he classifies as a “narrow ontological perspective” (Schroeder, 2004: 108).

Of course, the classical way of understanding the sentence remains valid. We may take into consideration the historical context and the sources that inspired Plotinus: Plato’s *Republic*, especially the passage 509b, where the Good is distinguished as ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας, the first hypothesis of *Parmenides*, supposedly Plato’s unwritten doctrine (as it was preserved among the members of the Academy and is attested by Speusippus and Aristotle), Neo-Pythagorean teaching. Certainly, their importance is anything but negligible; they deserve in themselves special attention and deeper analysis and are indispensable in the study of any Neoplatonic author. But identifying the historical sources which made it possible for Plotinus to insist on the idea of transcendence doesn’t already mean that the message of the Plotinus’ original thought has been deciphered. We gain a contextual situation, the “genetic” conditions of possibility, but not necessarily also the last key to the new layer of meaning which Plotinus conferred to the One’s transcendence.

“The One is beyond being”—the limited human nature, the individual soul are warned against the predisposition to reify the One. Plotinus means here no direct qualification of the One, but describes what the One is not, implicitly preparing the mystical union with it. This anticipation of the mystical path does not deprive the statement of any ontological content; nevertheless, it opens a new horizon, where the human relation with the One plays the central role.

Thus it seems plausible to argue that the “negative theology” of Plotinus is not confined to underlining the superiority of the principle to the second hypostasis, the Intellect, which stands for the whole realm of genuine being. The *Enneads* speak also of a fundamental “incommensurability of the One and the Intellect” (ibid.: 109), which immediately leads to and sustains the incommensurability of the One with all the levels of being. The One maintains itself in such a state, that it is never exhausted in the levels that result from it, and this maintenance shows that the relation of

similitude One-Being is not symmetrical. The One preserves always a “rest” (in a superlative sense), an excess which is no more transmissible to being and which makes the fundamental *difference* between the One and other forms of Being. This non-reciprocal relationship of “communication”, in the sense that the One does not communicate itself totally and unaltered in being, is another aspect of the One’s inaccessible status, of its transcendence. The “rest” or “excess” is not to be understood in terms of subject or substrate functioning as a “remainder” behind an activity but as a source of power (δύναμις) nourishing an overflowing and everlasting activity fused with its subject (Sells, 1985: 57).

If already “the Plotinian Form is not a stable ontological point of reference, but a self-emptying and cathartic abyss” (Schroeder, 2004: 110), the One must bear in an even higher grade these characteristics, and must at once transcend them in its superiority. The understanding of the One as elevated over the realm of Forms, which constitute the Being, can lead to the hermeneutical meaning of its transcendence.

The interpretation of ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας as superiority to the Forms drives us back to the concept of Form. If we understand Plotinus in a strict platonic continuity than we might think of the Form as a perfectly determined, definable and knowable model. Εἶδος would be a well-outlined παράδειγμα, bringing order to the sensible things in which it is *present*, accessible in dialectic. The Form is then to be conceived as a “fixed [...], stable entity and guarantor of epistemic security, ontic perdurance and ethical continuity” (ibid.: 120). That the One is beyond being avowed the fact that the One transcends such Forms. Between these well individualized entities and the principle (as abyss, both as attracting fullness and frightening emptiness) one must acknowledge the opening of an “ontic abyss”. This deep gap, this separation cannot be bridged through language. The limitation of speech, as well as the limitation of thinking, allows not even a faded glimpse in the second term of the separation. We only have the negative determinations as precautions and the analogies as suggestions³⁶.

However, Plotinus’s understanding of the Form is different from Plato’s. His notion of εἶδος ἀνειδέον, formless Form, opens a spectrum of potentiality

³⁶Such ways are mentioned in Plot. Enn. VI, 7, 36, 6–7. Supposedly the medieval triad: negation, analogy and eminence are derived from this description of the possible approaches to the One. About the similarities and the possible derivation, see Aubenque, 1981: 71 apud. Schroeder, 2004: 110. The methods of the *via negationis*, *via analogiae* and *via eminentiae* are identified in Plato, as well as in Middle- and Neo-Platonic authors in Hochstaffl, 1976: 189.

which acquires concreteness at the touch of the visible universe which needs to be formed; it overflows in a variety of beings as it in-forms them. Schroeder explains it as a “see of unfathomed possibility, realized in shifting and variegated hues in the prism of sensible reality, rather than a fixed paradigm repeatedly realized in predictable patterns of reification” (Schroeder, 2004: 120). This flexibility of the Form which comes to light during the bare activity involved in the process of the self-giving of the Form — which is more than the platonic presence of the same Form in a series of sensible objects — changes in the first place the ontological configuration of the Form: it is now formless. In addition, the status of the Form in relation to the human soul will be also modified. Thus the Form is rather an object of heuristic knowledge than one of fixed knowledge, as Schroeder points out.

The soul’s relationship with εἶδος ἀνείδεον oscillates between longing for union and stepping back in prudent distance. Human beings are bound to remain in such an interval which never admits of fixation in certain points; the human constitution imposes such an endless movement, but also facilitates progress within this movement. So the endless oscillation is not a monotonous experience since it should be integrated in the larger movement of ascent, lead to spiritual development, bring us nearer to the transcendent pole. To fulfill this noble vocation, the soul may choose from a multiplicity of ways, there is no given oneness of the favorable way. And the so instituted multitude of possible ways, the variety of courses of interpretation, “will debouch into that final surplus of meaning never exhausted by acts of interpretation. Interpretation seeks the elusive unity of its object. The final, mysterious and irreducible unity of the One that will always drive us back again to the concept of meaning” (ibid.).

Interesting as it may seem, the new hermeneutical perspective cannot but make explicit some aspects of the One’s transcendence. First of all, speaking in terms of interpretation, trajectories and courses of interpretation, we are constrained to speak of an object of interpretation. In this context, it is not at all evident how the distinction subject — object can be transcended, which would be an essential step in order to guarantee for the incomprehensibility (“beyondness”) of the principle as such.

Secondly, the process of interpretation, and consequently “the spiritual and intellectual growth” (ibid.) which characterizes the human relationship with the Forms remain strictly related to the discursive level. It is true that the human soul can prepare the encounter with the transcendence of the principle taking as a starting point its “negative experiencing” of the One on this level. As we have already seen, we can become aware that the One transcends our

language, our linguistically mediated understanding, our discursive thinking. Moreover, we might also note that our interpretations require a higher unity that is never *contained* in them as individual attempts. Thus it is right to say that the One's transcendence represents also this semantic plenitude or overabundance, being a fundament and a condition of possibility for the multiplicity of possible interpretations. The metaphysical process of emanation from the One is considered to be an overflow producing in the first instance the *other* capable of contemplating the One, more precisely the *Noûs*. This emanation can be understood as "overflow of meaning" (Sells, 1985: 60–62) and is connected with the generative *dunamis*³⁷.

However, to reduce this transcendence only to an indefinite "surplus of meaning" or to this nodal point of all interpretations (although immanent to none of them, and not even to their collection) seems rather a hazardous, limitative step. From this hermeneutical approach, we may gain a new understanding of the One's transcendence, but there is no reason to believe that this meaning exclusively constitutes the last, most comprehensive word about the so meaningful ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας. The One stays beyond the pure setting of an ideal and infinite source for the realm of interpretation during our striving to reach the Forms. It must be more than something stated out of methodological necessity; its reality is not to be made dependable on our attempts of interpretation, in search of a last indescribable unity.

Indisputable remains though that this intangible transcendence guarantees the meaningfulness and coherence of different trajectories of interpretation, that the human efforts on this discursive level converge to unveil the existence of a higher unity. But the transcendence of the principle surpasses what one might deduce about it taking as starting point the human experience, and even more specifically, the human experience on a discursive level. Getting to the deeper senses of the One sometimes requires a silent return to the interiority, which can bring about a qualitative leap in the mystical experience. Besides, the language of the negative theology, which reaches its climax in the emphasis of transcending being, articulates at the same time fundamental ontological aspects. The rejection of all determinations is underpinned by considerations regarding the whole Plotinian system,

³⁷Plot. Enn. v, 1, 7: "The One is the productive power of all things" (Plotinus, Armstrong, 1984: 35).

and result from a constant endeavor to avoid, solve or at least mild the ontological difficulties of the prominent predecessors.

5. TWO MODELS OF FOUNDATION AND THE LEGITIMACY OF NEGATION

Sometimes the structures of the negative discourse are hard to distinguish from the pure negative ontological qualifications. Denying a determination of the One in negative sentences and refusing to attribute it a certain feature by the use of α *privativum* are kindred strategies. They both meet in the intention of obtaining true statements that would get closer to the superiority of the One. So it is not an accidental interference between the two modalities, but a superposition of two ways that endow negativity with an eminent value. In this way, the negative theology is intimately related to the search for a new language and logic that would allow solving some ontological difficulties in thinking the principle.

For instance, the relation of the principle with the Forms, its generating the multiplicity of individual forms of being, its universal founding role can be set under the magnifying glass of analysis. We are led to the conclusion that negative theology is factually required in order to formulate an answer to these problems. In addition, the recourse to apophatic structures is systematically grounded in the actual response to ontological *aporiai*, in the new conception of some aspects concerning the principle. In his efforts to re-conceptualize the principle, Plotinus comes to exercise *de facto* the *via negativa* while unfolding his theme. But also the content of his unfolded conception proves the necessity of consistent negations and invites to a *de jure* use of the negative theology. The Plotinian discourse becomes in so far paradigmatic, as it unites both the actual performance and the argumentation for the normative recommendation of the negative theology.

An example for the practice of negativity in thinking about the principle is the qualification of the One as “without form” (Plot. Enn. VI, 7, 32, 8–10) or of the Good — which is an alternative name for the principle — as “without the figure (configuration) and form” (Plot. Enn. VI, 7, 17, 39–41). In order to avoid the problem of the infinite regress in search of the Form of Forms, Plotinus must find a way to deny the possibility of the conceivability of a higher instance responsible for the configuration of the principle itself. And he does so by thinking the principle as “deprived of all eidetic content” (D’Anaconda Costa, 1992: 70), as formless ($\alpha\nu\epsilon\iota\delta\epsilon\iota\omicron\nu$). Thus is stopped the eventual search of a principle of the principle, which would grant the similarity between the principle and the multitude of Forms. This new conception of the Principle offers a solution to the controversial

platonic difficulty known as “the third man argument”, sketched also in the first part of *Parmenides*.

The negative theology is also employed and sustained as methodical procedure when Plotinus treats the question of the generation and ontological foundation of particulars. How is it possible that the originating principle of all things³⁸ does not possess what it will give, generate, found? The relation of foundation — as giving — between the principle and the other things shouldn't be considered according to the pattern of an act of giving between two things belonging to the visible universe. This relation falls probably under a “logic of the incorporeal”, which offers other horizons of possibility and conceivability, other areas of ontological manifestation than the “logic of the corporeal”³⁹.

The logic of generation admits of such a contra-intuitive process: the principle gives what it doesn't have. Plotinus stresses that the donor must be thought as superior, and what is given as inferior (Plot. Enn. VI, 7, 17, 3–6). So it is not necessary to say that the giver possesses what it is about to give, since the donor and the gift are situated on different ontological levels⁴⁰. On the other hand, the One is a universal principle, as far as all existing things receive their unity from the One. Every individuality, every cohesion of whole repeats in a reduced form the original compactness and simplicity of the One.

In this way, the possibility of an ontological foundation is explained using two different models of causation: causation through generation of something inferior, which cannot be possessed by the principle itself, and causation through the participation of a resemblance⁴¹. The last model applies only in as much as the One is conceived as founding the unity of all things: the

³⁸Since “It is by the One that all beings are beings” (Plot. Enn. VI, 9, 1, 1; Plotinus, Armstrong, 1988: 303).

³⁹See Cornea, 2003: 85. The two logics are presented as mutually contradicting themselves. The logic of the incorporeal stays in evident contrast with the logic of the corporeal. It is mentioned the paradox of giving something without losing it, but not the paradox of giving something without previously owning it.

⁴⁰The same topic tackled in Plot. Enn. V, 3, 15: “But how does he give them? By having them, or by not having them? But he did he give what he doesn't have? But if he has them, he is not simple; if he does not have them, how does the multiplicity come from him? [...] Now what comes from him could not be the same as himself” (Plotinus, Armstrong, 1984: 123). This links to the problem of the asymmetrical relations between the One and the phenomenal world: the world is like the one because generated from it, but the One is not like the phenomenal world. For the analysis of asymmetrical relation see Kordig, 1982.

⁴¹Cf. D'Anaconda Costa, 1992: 108.

principle operates in this case like a Form. The process of founding succeeds with the transmission of an essential feature— thanks to this given feature, a similarity is preserved between the principle and the formed entities.

But if we think of the principle as generating multiple, determined, various and complex things, we have no alternative than to recur to the first model. The One cannot possess multiplicity, complexity, various determinations, configuration, or constitution as such. Otherwise, it would contradict its own way of existence⁴², it would diminish the superiority of its foundational role, it couldn't continue to be what it actually is. In this way, the entire variety of formal determinations, the whole spectrum of specificity which can be encountered in our world need no more jeopardize the simplicity of the One. The plurality of particularities may come *from* the principle, without finding themselves *in* it. The first principle remains free of all form, *ἄμορφον* and *ἀνειδέον*⁴³.

Once again, we observe that this model of foundation (which is at once a model of causality) resolves not only some classical problems of the Platonic theory⁴⁴, but opens the way to negative theology. The One— and not the dynamics of becoming, neither the intervention of matter— can be the genuine source of a multiplicity of determinations which it doesn't, in turn, possess. All these determinations can and must be denied of the One. Plotinus formulates here not only an ingenious response to ontological problems but makes a deciding point concerning the evaluation and choice of the discursive structures which refer to the One. Although they originate in the One, the determinations do not maculate the indeterminacy of the Principle, because they are not in it. Conceiving the principle as formless, Plotinus reconciles its transcendence with its founding function, without compromising the transcendence as transcendence and without definitively

⁴²I consider very valuable the remark of Andrei Cornea that Plotinus distinguishes between related existence (reality) and unrelated existence (pure existence): see Cornea, 2003: 103. The One has no being in the sense that it is not real, but it has existence as pure, unrelated existence.

⁴³Cristina D'Anaconda Costa notes that the two models of causality do not oppose to one another. "The two schemes do not refer in fact to the same generating action, but respectively to the production of the multiplicity as far as it participates to the unity and as far as it remains different from the unity. And the One of Plotinus accomplishes the two tasks at once" (D'Anaconda Costa, 1992: 109). She also explains further that the principle can be conceived as producing the determinations it doesn't possess because it is thought as the causal *δύναμις* of these determinations. To this prime *δύναμις*, as to the Platonic principle *ἀνυπόθετον*, ends any regression in the chain of founding instances, of principles (ibid.: 111–113).

⁴⁴Such as the relationship of causality Form-thing examined in Pl. Parm. 132a–e.

isolating the principle from the intelligible and visible worlds, whose being it exceedingly grants.

Hence there is no further ontological problem in refusing to ascribe to the One the determinations, the universal essences or the particular features it so paradoxically produces. On the one hand, negations are therefore necessary to preserve the absolute difference between the One and the things it founds, difference visible in the inconceivability and inexpressibility of the One. On the other hand, negations are as well allowed when the relation of a foundation, or generation between the One and the other beings is at issue. While the *discontinuity* between the One and the rest of the system demands of the discursive negativity, the *continuity* between them also permits it. From both perspectives, negative theology is legitimate in its own role and in its patterns of speech.

6. BEYOND THE PLOTINIAN TRANSCENDENCE

The way opened by Plotinus with his negative theology will have great influence on the coming thinkers. Proclus and Dionysius the Areopagite — to take but two names — develop and refine the *via negativa*, alternating it with *via eminentiae*⁴⁵. These two ways are most of the times indistinct in Plotinus or in any case, he draws no programmatic distinction between them. The accumulation of negations speaks about the priority, the superiority, the surplus, the excess of being and the elusive unity of meaning. The One is not being because it transcends being: being as a determined “something” and being as a totality of possible determinations, being as individuality and as universality, being as a particular distinct “this” and being as the substratum of possible attributes or ontological qualifications.

Since there is nothing to limit, to determine, to imprint a form, a certain nature or constitution, the One is infinite, indeterminate, formless, and indefinable. Plotinus stresses the infinity and indeterminacy which are related to the highest reality, to its unspeakable perfection, which constitutes a novelty for the Greek thought. The tradition used to confine itself to thinking endlessness and indetermination in their deficient sense and ignored their eminent potential. Truly inexpressible and nameless, the One can irradiate its power, its founding role, and its beneficial effects in language. For this reason, we can establish a hierarchy of names or discuss their

⁴⁵For instance, Procl. In Parm. 1108, 16–25. Hochstaffl notes: “the negations are not to be understood as privative, but in the sense of the eminence of the Original One (*Ur-Einen*)” (Hochstaffl, 1976: 77).

appropriateness, or even try to approach the One through analogical or figurative thinking. On the other hand, not even the adjectives with negative connotation cannot be considered appropriate for the One, as long as they can be taken for predicates. The One is just itself, un-related and un-relatable, and except this tautology nothing more detailed (not even in a negative form) could be said about it⁴⁶.

In relation to the Plotinian re-evaluation of the role of language can be raised the question, whether Plotinus makes himself responsible of repudiating the *logos*⁴⁷, of becoming *misologos*⁴⁸, in spite of the Platonic critical standpoint toward such a position. Shestov considers Plotinus to have betrayed the essential idea of his master, to have lost his trust in the glorified reason and intelligence (Shestov, 1996: 13, 15; Chestov, 1956: 178–216), in their capacity to attain the science of the highest principles and to transmit them to the others. He also considers that Plotinus despises the reason, that he realizes the uselessness of science and intellectual intuition in order to understand the last unity, and that he is in possession of some revealed truths. Certainly, Plotinus limits the applicability of language, which cannot properly convey the last reality, but he also invites us to infinite interpretation beside mystical silence, knowing that the dynamic of human souls allows no lasting communion with the One. Reason and language can and should asymptotically approach the infinite principle, they constitute the “intervals” in which we experience our oscillation towards the principle. In this context, it would be rather unilateral and exaggerated to speak of Plotinus as disdaining the *logos* and engaging himself in an irrational metaphysics — out of an unrestrained enthusiasm for “revealed truths”.

The negative theology and the metaphors of eminence accompany the sinuous cathartic ascent of the soul. But the role of negations is also to forbid all determinations, to prevent any limitation and to let the transcendence of the One light up in its purity. This transcendence must shine not only in surpassing being, but also in remaining formless or in founding individual determinations without possessing them. As far as the ways to reach this transcendence are concerned, inter-subjectivity is counterbalanced by successive excursions in the inner self. The transcendence itself has a paradox

⁴⁶See Cornea, 2003: 109.

⁴⁷Trouillard, 1961 also questions the radical distancing form classical intellectualism, but highlights the role of philosophy in the approach to the One. Kenney underlines a broader impact in systematic theology, stating that “negative theology can be an integral part of definitional dogmatism” (Kenney, 1993: 450).

⁴⁸*Misologos*: Driven by hatred of rational arguments, an attitude criticised in Pl. Phaed. 89d.

manifestation; therefore, the absolute difference of the unspeakable one is doubled by its generous diffusion in the All, without reducing its own richness. Both the inaccessible and the self-giving light enjoy the paths of negativity⁴⁹. There can be no direct sight of the intangible brightness; but the human soul gains the richest experience in continuously approaching it.

ABBREVIATIONS

- Ar. Met. Aristotle. 1924. *Aristotle's Metaphysics* [in Ancient Greek and English]. Ed. by W. D. Ross. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ar. Phys. Aristoteles. 1950. *Aristotelis Physica* [in Latin and Ancient Greek]. Ed. by W. D. Ross. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Greg. Naz. Or. Gregorius Nazianzenus. 1992. *Funebris oratio* [in Greek and French]. In *Discours 42-43*, trans. from the Greek by J. Bernardi. Sources chrétiennes 384. Paris: Les éditions du Cerf.
- Pl. Leg. Plato. 1907. *Leges* [in Latin and Ancient Greek]. In vol. 5 of *Platonis opera*, ed. by J. Burnet. 5 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
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ВЫРАЖАЯ ТРАНСЦЕНДЕНТНОЕ

НАЧАЛА НЕГАТИВНОЙ ТЕОЛОГИИ В СОЧИНЕНИЯХ ПЛОТИНА

Аннотация: Трансцендентный характер начала у Плотина требует особого языкового выражения. Поиск подходящего языка отражен в «Эннеадах», где не только постоянно употребляются отрицания, но и обосновывается их использование. Задача таких отрицаний — оградить превосходство Единого от умаления в конкретных определениях. Тем не менее, язык предполагает некоторую степень фиксации, в силу которой Безымянное может быть названо или описано. Такие «зазоры» вербализации свидетельствуют о дискурсивном колебании души, стремящейся к предельному единству, хотя молчаливая встреча с Единым происходит лишь вне этих «зазоров». За осмыслением *via negativa* у Плотина скрывается его новаторское решение классических проблем онтологии платонизма. Лишенные формы и предела, начало не должно содержать ничего из того, что оно порождает. Новая логика порождения усиливает акцент на абсолютной инаковости Единого. Мы видим, что «негативный», или «апофатический» подход к Божеству определяет язык «Эннеад» и находит там свое обоснование. Невыразимая трансцендентность отзывается в вариациях человеческой речи.

Ключевые слова: Плотин, трансцендентность, Единое, Божество, начало, апофатическое богословие, отрицание, абстракция.

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