XXIV

NEGATIVE THEOLOGY

THIS is an attempt to say something about the awareness of God, the Absolute, One or Good, characteristic of the Neoplatonic tradition, and the language used to express it. It is founded on a lifetime's study of Plotinus in the context of the thought of his Greek predecessors, and a good deal of reading and research in Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus, Damascius, the Pseudo-Dionysius, Maximus Confessor and Eriugena. It is historically based, that is on the works of authors who wrote from the third to the ninth century of the Christian era. But I have tried to present this Neoplatonic tradition of 'negative theology' as a living tradition, which I know that it is, and am much indebted to contemporaries and friends of my own (and to one in particular) who can speak from experience in this matter.[1] Because of this concern to present the 'negative theology' as something alive, I have dealt with it synthetically, and without too much obvious apparatus of scholarship. Apart from one historical digression, which I thought the subject-matter required, I have not adverted to the historical development or to the divergences between the different authors whom I have studied, nor attempted detailed exegeses of particular passages. In my exposition I have been concerned to stress the features of this 'negative theology' which seem to me to distinguish it from other ways of thinking and speaking about the Divine, the Absolute or God in the Greek and Christian European traditions, and possibly also in some ways from forms of Indian thought which appear to have much in common with it and to spring from basically the same experience. A great deal more study and reflection,

[1] It is only fair to people whom I venerate to say that they are generally much more orthodox than I have shown myself to be here, and would not be in sympathy with some aspects of my thinking. They would not be in sympathy with the application of the critical scepticism which is part of our tradition to Scripture and authoritative Church teaching which lies behind much of it; but I find this forced upon me by common honesty. And, though more sympathetic, they would not be prepared to go as far as I have been driven to go by my conviction that God is really incarnate from the beginning and revealing himself in the whole cosmos and to all men, and that all faiths, pieties and theologies are fundamentally equal in their inadequacy before him, and all true 'iconic' ways to him.

however, needs to be devoted to the comparison of Neoplatonic and Indian experience and thought. I must take some responsibility for the oddity of some of the language used. But the great Neoplatonists themselves often use very odd language to shock people into an awareness of what is being talked about, and much of the paper is little more than paraphrase.

The negative theology of the Neoplatonists is usually considered mainly from the point of view of the *epistrophē*, the return in which we discover both the otherness of all things from That which is beyond and the possibility of our union with It or Him. ('Personalist' and 'impersonalist' ways of speaking are both necessary and both inadequate in the negative theology. I shall generally, follow the normal Christian tradition of using personal language which is also very often used by Plotinus and the later pagan Neoplatonists). But it is important to consider this theology also from the point of view of *monē* and *proodos*, God's eternal abiding in himself and his outgoing in his *ekphanseis* or theophanies. Strictly speaking, in pagan Neoplatonic terms, this triad only occurs at the intelligible level, but it seems to depend on something, and only to be there because of something, on the level of the principle itself which we discover in our return, which we can never adequately express — it is always 'over the horizon': but the triadic Intellect (already triadic in Plotinus, though the technical terms are not found) is the first and clearest light which shines from it. In the Christian Neoplatonist (Dionysian) tradition a *proodos* and *epistrophē* of God are spoken of. It may seem strange to speak of something like an outgoing and return of God himself. But it perhaps becomes less strange when one realizes that one is only speaking 'iconically' (this term will be explained later) of his abiding; for he is beyond the oppositions of identity and difference and rest and motion, and one could only speak of his *monē*, his abiding, in anything like a literal and univocal sense if it was true that he was self-identical and at rest, and not true that he was the opposites; whereas both sides of both oppositions must be negated.

What then do we mean when we speak in this inadequate way of his abiding (or his eternal unchanging reality, or many other ways of speaking which we can legitimately use as long as we realize that they *are* inadequate)? We mean that, however dimly, we are aware in all things which we apprehend of the presence of something or someone which exceeds them, and on which their total existence depends, so that there is nothing in them which is not there because of that presence, which not only makes them exist, but makes them valuable and lovable. (If one does not find some persons and things

valuable and lovable in themselves, that is, apart from their ability to satisfy our mundane needs and desires, one can hardly start on the negative or any other theology.) And we somehow become aware that this presence is one of infinite creativity, everywhere because it is nowhere, at every time because it contains time, always giving its gifts — and everything is pure gift of God, gift, as we shall see, of himself. Awareness of this abiding and exceeding presence is what we start from, and that must not be forgotten at any later stage; this to me is the only meaningful sense of 'transcendent' or 'other', or 'not being what he gives', or 'beyond being' applied to God, the One or Good.

We may now turn to consider, always inadequately, the outgoing of God in his manifestations, procession or creation as theophany. The reasons for the hopeless insufficiency of our langage, which will perhaps become particularly evident to many in this section, will be explained more fully when we come to try to indicate how one does the return. Everything written on the 'negative theology' in the true spirit of Neoplatonism must turn sooner or later into a confession and explanation of failure. The genuine Neoplatonist spends his time destroying his God-concepts and perhaps (if he is as radical as his principles require) undermining his whole system of thought till it falls in ruins. Then he picks himself up quite cheerfully and begins again. Why he feels impelled to do so I shall again try to indicate later when speaking of the return.

Throughout authentic Neoplatonist thought, Christian as well as pagan, there runs a striking ambiguity about the relationship to all beings of God — the First, or the One, or the Good, or That which cannot be spoken of, as Damascius, the last and most critical of the great pagan Neoplatonists, prefers to call him. This has given rise to frequent accusations of 'pantheism' by correct Christian theologians, some of which are excellent illustrations of the remark of the eminent Christian Platonist, Dean William Ralph Inge, that 'Any stigma is good enough to beat a dogma' (the original English proverb which the Dean was adapting was 'Any stick is good enough to beat a dog'). In so far as these accusations can be answered, or are worth answering, the answer can be discovered in what I have already said about God's abiding, the permanent and exceeding presence of an infinite creativity which cannot simply be identified with what he brings into being. What I shall now have to say about his outgoing will probably confirm the worst fears of those who derive their ideas of transcendence from the Bible or Aristotle or from both, and arouse the derision of those who like things logically cut-and-dried in the modern analytic manner and may lead both sets (like much else in this paper) to mutter

darkly that there is something 'Indian' about all this — definitely a term of abuse in such circles.

The ambiguity is stated very simply in the short second treatise of the Fifth *Ennead* of Plotinus (v. 2 [11]). I quote the first sentence of the first chapter and two others from near the end of the second chapter (lines 24-29) in my own translation.

> The One is all things, and not a single one of them.
>
> All these things are the One and not the One: they are he because they come from him; they are not he, because it is in abiding by himself that he gives them. It is like a long life stretched out at length: each part is different from that which comes next in order, but the whole is continuous with itself, but with one part differentiated from another, and the earlier does not perish in the later.

There is, I think, nothing in the *Enneads* or in later Neoplatonism which gets us much further than these bare statements. In Christian Neoplatonism the ambiguity, which pervades the Dionysian writings and does not altogether disappear in Maximus, is worked out to its clearest expression in the great dialectical exposition of Eriugena. He uses the Christian language of *creatio ex nihilo* (which he does not appear to think, any more than 'Dionysius' or Maximus, means anything profoundly different from the pagan Neoplatonic language of the procession of all things from the One). But he explicitly says that the *nihilum*, the 'nothing' out of which God creates is his own nature (*Periphyseon* III, 17, 678D2-679A5; III, 19, 681B14-C6) and that in creating all else he is creating himself (*Periphyseon* III, 23, 689A15-B2)[2] In this tradition there is nothing (not even 'nothing') ultimately external to God, nothing other than himself for his presences or theophanies to be present in, and it is only on, so to speak, his own infinity considered passively as a potentiality for creation that he can exercise what we seem compelled to call his infinite diversity of activities. The pagan Neoplatonists, from Plotinus onwards[3], as is well known, detested the anthropomorphic, artisan view of creation, in which God makes up his mind to create, and proceeds to design and bring into being a universe with all its diverse contents quite external to and other than himself, like a

[2] At this point I am much indebted to the deep understanding of Eriugena and the whole tradition to which he belongs of the late I. P. Sheldon-Williams, excellently summarized in his chs 30, 32 and 34 of the *Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Mediaeval Philosophy*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (Cambridge, 1967 reprinted 1970). A profound development and application of the same doctrine is to be found in Philip Sherrard *Christiantity and Eros* (London, 1976), ch. 3, pp. 71-74.

[3] Cp. e.g. v, 8 [31] 7.

potter making pots (or, perhaps, like a conjuror who first creates a sort of non-existent hat — prime matter — and then proceeds to produce from it all sorts of previously non-existent rabbits and other things). And Christian theologians consciously or unconsciously influenced by Neoplatonism, even if they are opposed to the way of thinking most clearly represented by Eriugena and approve of his condemnation by the Latin Church in the thirteenth century (more than three centuries after his death, and in a different theological climate), incline to do their best to exclude the 'artisan' way of looking at creation, as far as they find it compatible with orthodoxy to do so. Their ingenuity is sometimes great.

A point which should be made clear, as it is sometimes misunderstood, before we leave the subject of God's outgoing, is that all which comes from him, down to the lowest level of the sense-world, is real and permanent. No Neoplatonist ever maintains that the material universe is a mere illusion, still less that the soul or self and whatever higher spiritual realities are recognized are only inadequate ways of thinking about the One.[4] And even in the culmination of the return, when the self and all things are in perfect union with their Source, nothing at any level is done away with or disappears. (This is true, in different ways, of Neoplatonists, whether they are thinking in terms of the everlasting cyclic universe of the pagans or of a linear time-process leading from the creation to the last things, as do the Christians). Things become more, not less, real if they are seen as theophanies, the diverse divine activities springing from that unspeakably intense communicativeness of the Good which 'Dionysius', in a superb blending of Christian and pagan terminology, calls God's ecstatic love (*erōs*) which carries him out of himself into creation (*Divine Names*, ch. iv, 13 [712A-B]).

What has all this to do with the 'negative theology' in any usual sense of the term? It is true that the subject of the outgoing belongs, in Neoplatonic terms, to the affirmative or cataphatic rather than to the negative or apophatic theology. But the very oddity and ambiguity of the language used may have indicated that a negation lay behind every apparent affirmation, and may even have suggested that we may end by having to negate our negations. No Neoplatonist ever intends to describe, still less to define, God or what we have called his activities. What he is doing is 'running

[4] To justify this rather sweeping generalization, reference should be made to A. Smith's careful criticism of the views of A. C. Lloyd on Porphyry (ch. 18 of the *Cambridge History* referred to in n. 2, p. 179) in his *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition* (The Hague, 1974), pt I, ch. 1. If the Neoplatonists had thought like Professor Lloyd, they ought, no doubt, to have been strict monists in his sense. But I do not think they did, or were.

round and pointing' (cp. Plotinus *Enneads* VI, 9 [9] 3, 52-54), making signs in a queer oscillating way which may help his and others' awareness of a presence. Symbols and poetic ways of speaking (as long as they are agreed to be inadequate) may therefore perfectly properly play a part in his discourse, and his most desperate paradoxes are not contradictions; for there can only be contradiction between two allegedly adequate descriptions, under the same aspect, of something totally comprehensible.

In speaking of the return I shall be concentrating on the 'negative theology' strictly so called, that is on what appears to go on in our minds when we become aware that the Good (the best name the Neoplatonists can find for our origin as the goal of our return) is working in us to bring us back to himself. I shall, as usual, try to speak of this synthetically, not attempting any thorough account of the historical development or detailed scholarly exegesis of texts, and presenting the negative way as a matter of living tradition, with much implicit reliance on the experience of contemporaries and friends. But before I embark on this, a brief historical digression will be relevant to and may help to throw a little light on the obscurity of the main subject, though it will be superficial and must be very tentative (much more work needs to be done here). I have been struck in my reading of Plotinus and later Neoplatonists by a curious sort of double-sided tension between opposed attitudes which seems to appear differently in different authors. On one side it is a tension between a scepticism about language and discursive thought which Werner Beierwaltes rightly traces back to Plato,[5] and an almost untroubled confidence in the ability of reasoned philosophical discourse to give a perfectly satisfactory account of all realities below the First, which seems to derive rather from Aristotle (this makes the final inevitable switch to negative theology peculiarly violent and philosophically odd).[6] On the other side it is a tension between the tendency to represent the whole of derived reality as a precisely graded and logically ordered hierarchy descending in unbroken continuity from the First to the material world, and matter itself, and a decidedly anti-hierarchical tendency which has no great confidence in the possibility of discerning perfect logical order and precise discursively describable definition and derivation in the spiritual world, and lays stress rather

[5] See his paper 'Das Problem der Erkenntnis bei Proklos' in *Entretiens Hardt XXI* (*De Jamblique à Proclus*), (Vandoeuvres-Genève, 1975), 4 b, p. 165, where it is pointed out that Proclus does not share this scepticism (see below p. 182).

[6] The thesis of Dr J. Lowry, of Dalhousie University, on Proclus brings out this philosophical oddity particularly vividly.

on the indescribable presence and activity of the First at every level. The hierarchical tendency in its strongest form depends upon the extreme logical realism of the later pagan Neoplatonists, their conviction that the structures of their logic and of reality correspond exactly, that there is a distinct spiritual reality corresponding to every logical distinction which their subtly rigid and precise minds can make. It was this which first led me to see the tension as a single double-sided one rather than two separate tensions, to think that, within the limits of the tradition we are considering, confidence in the theological reach and adequacy of discursive reason goes inseparably with the conviction that spiritual reality is a great structure of exactly ranked, sharply distinguished and precisely related entities, and that the less confidence a thinker has in discursive reason, the less sharply structured, ranked and divided the spiritual realities will be in his thought. This seems clear when one contrasts Plotinus with Proclus. Plotinus can argue discursively with great power, and thought it his duty as a Hellenic philosopher to spend a great deal of time doing so, and he has an acute critical sense in matters of logic. But he shares Plato's scepticism about our incurably discursive prosaic language and thinking, and perhaps even carries it a little further. And, though he has a very simple hierarchy (the One, Intellect and Soul), he is not too concerned with precise lines of demarcation between its members (especially the lower two) or perfect consistency in his accounts from varying points of view of the relations between them, and there are distinctly anti-hierarchical elements in his thinking, which his disciple Porphyry probably developed. Proclus has generally (not quite always) an absolute confidence in the ability of discursive thinking to describe adequately even levels of derived or manifested hyper-reality above the realm of Intellect or intuitive thought. He inherits extreme logical realism from Iamblichus, and as he does not take Iamblichus's drastic precaution of separating the absolutely ineffable First from the One which is the logical first principle of the system, the One, the unknowable God, sometimes seems in danger of turning into just such a first principle for Proclus. But he is too good a Neoplatonist to let this actually happen, and both tradition and personal experience force him in the end to make a violent and agonizing transition from a sometimes over-confident and rather Aristotelian style of theologizing to the full negative theology, which he often expresses magnificently. Nor is his system simply 'hierarchical' in the sense of a great ladder of precisely graded steps extending down from God to us which we have to climb step by step to find him. Things are a great deal more complicated than that, and God is a great deal closer to us at the bottom of the

ladder, as Jean Trouillard, above all, has excellently shown.[7] The last great pagan Neoplatonist, Damascius, returns to the position of Iamblichus on the ineffable First beyond the One, and the first section of his greatest surviving work[8] is the most alarmingly forcible application of Platonic scepticism about discursive language and thought to all our talk about That which should not be spoken of which is to be found in Neoplatonic literature. It is a demonstration repeatedly hammered home from every point of view that the distinctions and definitions without which we cannot talk or think are simply not applicable here. The First is shown to be unthinkable and extra-hierarchical in a way which really destroys the hierarchy, even if Damascius himself did not quite see this.

On the Christian side, it may seem rather odd to suggest that the author of the *Celestial* and *Ecclesiastical Hierarchies* is not really a hierarchical thinker in the sense in which the term has been used here, though less odd to suggest that he was not an extreme logical realist, and indeed perhaps not intensely interested in always being wholly logical. But one of his very rare criticisms of other people's views, clearly directed at his Athenian Neoplatonist teachers, and repeated twice in closely similar terms (*Divine Names*, ch. v, 1. [816C-D] and ch. xi, 6. [953 C-D], that Being, Life, Wisdom, etc., are not distinct metaphysical entities but names for the gifts or activities of the one ineffable God, really, so to speak, knocks the philosophical stuffing out of the pagan Neoplatonist hierarchy whose terminology 'Dionysius' so freely uses (and there does seem to be very little philosophical content in his own hierarchies). All his great floods of superlative and by no means unthoughtful rhetoric are concerned with the inconceivable self-abiding and ecstatic activity of the one unknowable Godhead, the Thearchy. I am inclined to think that the angelic and clerical hierarchies are important to 'Dionysius' not so much because he is a late Neoplatonist hierarchical thinker but because he is a good churchman, who likes to think of God's gifts being distributed decently and in order in heaven and on earth, so that superiors will have their proper function of loving care for their inferiors and transmitting the gifts which they have received to them, and

[7] Of his many writings on Proclus, his little book *L'Un et l'Âme selon Proclos* (Paris, 1972), perhaps explains this best. He is also the originator of the idea of the critical value of mysticism developed later in this paper. His basic article here is 'Valeur Critique de la Mystique Plotinienne' in *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 59 (August, 1961), pp. 431-44. See also his 'Raison et Mystique chez Plotin' in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 20 (1974), pp. 3-14. For a full acknowledgement of my debt to him at this point see my 'Escape of the One' in *Studia Patristica XIII* (Berlin, 1975), pp. 77-89. Trouillard's latest and best discussion of the subject is 'Théologie négative et autoconstitution psychique chez les néoplatoniciens' in *Savoir, faire, espérer: les limites de la raison* (Publications des Facultés Universitaires Saint-Louis, Brussels, 1976).

[8] *Dubitationes et Solutiones de Primis Principiis in Platonis Parmenidem.*

inferiors will have the proper attitude of receptive humility towards their superiors (cp. especially *Letter VIII* [1083 A ff.]). Again, the great dialectic of Eriugena, though there is order and hierarchy in it, is really a dialectic of the one unknowable God in his abiding, outgoing and return — and Eriugena knows very well that God exceeds his dialectic.

This very cursory and in intention tentative account of a deep tension in Neoplatonic thought has served to delay the painful business of talking about the negative theology and may also have helped to explain why for a Neoplatonist it is painful. If one does not find doing negative theology a fairly agonizing business, one is not really doing negative theology at all. (One cannot of course do it really well unless one is living, and ready to die, like a philosopher in the ancient sense, or in other words like a saint, in complete detachment from the mundane cravings and fears of one's empirical ego and in union in practical goodness with the self-giving of the Good. If one cannot do this, one should not claim the title of philosopher, but at most, as I do, that of historian of philosophy, and should rely mostly on the communicated experience of the true philosophers, or saints.) Doing negative theology is painful because, for anyone brought up in the Hellenic tradition of dogmatic philosophy, it involves an uprooting of one's whole thought, a radical criticism of the assumptions on which all our philosophical talk and thinking are based. In Plotinus, at least, this criticism extends downwards considerably below the level of talk about the One. He holds that what can properly be called knowledge, and the only worth-while knowledge, our awareness of the Platonic world of Forms, the One-Being or Intellect, does not translate at all well into defining, deductive, ordinary philosophical discourse, and especially not into the most finished form of this known to him, the discursive philosophy of Aristotle.[9] If one pushed

[9] A fuller understanding of this aspect of the thought of Plotinus, much helped by Klaus Wurm's valuable book, *Substanz und Qualität* (Berlin-New York, 1973), has led me to revise somewhat what I said in my earlier paper, 'The Escape of the One' (see n. 7, p. 183), about the way in which negative theology, if pursued to its end must lead to 'the abolition of the *kosmos noetos*, the World of Ideas' (p. 84). It might be possible after all to recognize a World of Ideas, Divine Intellect, or Logos, a first outgoing of God in eternal creative Forms or energies timelessly and universally present always and everywhere, as long as one did not make eternal and absolute the concepts one forms of them in philosophical or theological discourse, which are always inadequate, criticizable, changeable, and external to the Forms themselves. Platonic Forms are not, and do not give rise to, hypostatized, static, abstract universal definitions, propositions, or moral and aesthetic rules. Each of us in his own time and place will have to conceptualize them as best he can by their light, continually criticizing his concepts and knowing them to be tentative and changeable. But, by this intelligible light of God which is the creative Forms, if we are open to it, we may be able to recognize people and things for what they are and ought to be, and recognize, and even tentatively measure, the degree of beauty and goodness in them.

the critical mysticism of Plotinus rather further than he would be willing to go himself, it might come to consort very well with another kind of Platonism of which the Neoplatonists and their immediate predecessors strongly disapproved, the ultra-Socratic Platonism of the Sceptical Academy. It is possible that under the influence of Cicero and Porphyry, something like this convergence of the two Platonisms may have taken place in the minds of some of the last pagans of Rome in the fourth century A.D. It seems to inspire that great last word of Roman paganism. 'Not by one path only can one reach so great a mystery.'[10] It may even be, if we look closely, that the combination of scepticism and mysticism has been a rather more pervasive force in our Western tradition than we always realize. Neoplatonism is in any case a very subversive philosophy, and it is dangerous to the stability of philosophical and ecclesiastical establishments to let any form of the genuine article get in.

The negative theology, as is well known and has been already suggested in this paper, consists, on the intellectual side which is alone being considered here, in a critical negation of all affirmations which one can make about God, followed by an equally critical negation of our negations. Three rough-and-ready tests for determining whether we are doing it at all properly or not occur to me. If we are doing it in anything like the genuine Neoplatonic manner, then, first, we should be continually afraid that we are talking nonsense. This is a fear which our faith in the unknowable God can ride on, but can never do away with. On the discursive level, the only answer which a Neoplatonist can make if he himself or anyone else brings this charge is 'It all depends what you mean by "nonsense". We never said we were being *clear* about anything, or *defining* or *describing* anything, and this is not what we intend. We are simply forced to talk like this by the presence, of which we are dimly aware, which drives us on.'. Second, we are likely to find ourselves liable to, but, hopefully, resisting, the temptation to what I call 'black mysticism', the feeling that in the circumstances one might as well say anything as anything else about God: that any fantasy, personal or ecclesiastical, however mad or hideous, may be allowed to occupy and even obsess our minds. Neoplatonists are only enabled to resist this temptation by their obstinate conviction, in spite of all their negations, that the God who is driving them on towards himself is only not the Good because he is better than the Good, the source and cause of all

[10] Symmachus, *Relatio III.* 10 (=Ep. 61). PL 18, 391 C. See P. Hadot *Marius Victorinus* (Paris, 1971), ch. iii. The reason why Academic (though not Pyrrhonian) scepticism can consort with anything as passionate as Neoplatonic negative theology is well given by Sextus Empiricus (*Outlines of Pyrrhonism* 229-30). The Academic is capable of enthusiasm. The Pyrrhonian is not.

good. The name 'Good' is for them a kind of direction-finder, like the *mihrab* in the wall of a mosque. Their sense of direction is something given in the original awareness which propels or invites them to engage in negative theology. It is kept very much alive and functioning by the endless critical activity of which we shall speak next. This tends to come into action with particular vigour when they encounter Western theologians, from Augustine onwards, who represent God in his dealings with the great majority of mankind as a giver of evil rather than good, in fact a being rather like a super-Devil. The sort of Christian Neoplatonists from whom much of the doctrine of this paper is derived are very definitely not in this sense Augustinians.

This firm belief that the name 'Good' is a pointer to God seems to go best with the conviction of the later pagan and the Christian Neoplatonists that evil is not a positive opposite of good — for then God would have to transcend that opposition — but a *parhypostasis*, having only a sort of parasitic quasi-existence, not in the derived beings or theophanies themselves, but in their mysterious defections and deflections from their source. This does not, of course, solve the 'problem of evil', but who, in any system or tradition, has? Many claims have been made to have done so, but none of them satisfy me. My resignation to being unable to find a completely satisfactory solution to the problem, of course, implies a strong faith that this universe of our daily experience is, on balance and as a whole, good rather than evil, and how one gets that faith if one does not have it by looking at the universe, I do not know. It should be made clear at this point, as is not always done, that at least that form of the doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* held by the later Neoplatonists is not necessarily opposed to all forms of the doctrines that evil is a necessary part of the universal harmony and that God is 'beyond good and evil'. In particular, it does not seem to me to be necessarily opposed to the insistence of Jung, especially in his later life, on the necessity of integrating the 'shadow', in spite of his violent hostility to the doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* as he understood it.[11] I think that the Neoplatonists might have seen all that came within the sphere of the 'shadow' or the 'Devil' for Jung not as evil but as a strange and generally unrecognized part of good. What would be really evil for them would be the failures to integrate the 'shadow', with all their devastating individual and social consequences, which Jung so clearly saw.[12] In general, when someone says

[11] This hostility is well illustrated and discussed by Laurens van der Post in his *Jung* (London, 1976).

[12] On Jung and Plotinus see H-R. Schwyzer, 'The Intellect in Plotinus and the Archetypes of C. G. Jung' in *Kephalaion* (Assen, The Netherlands, 1975), pp. 214-21. Schwyzer makes clear that Jung knew little about Plotinus, and does not discuss the question raised here, which is not relevant in his context.

that 'evil is necessary to the completion of the whole', or that 'God is beyond good and evil', it is important to discover what exactly they mean by 'evil'. This may be particularly essential when Westerners, who tend to have a hypertrophied ethical sense and an instinctive tendency to conflict-dualism, are trying to understand Indian or Chinese thought. And, of course, if any Indian or Chinese thinker, or Jung (a man of the highest, most sensitive and austere ethical principles and behaviour) believes that there is anything that he can do which would be really wrong, really a sin for him, then he has the problem of moral evil on his hands. On physical evil I will only add this. Not everyone has the right to say everything. If someone is suffering gravely from some natural cause, it is disgusting and futile for anyone who is not enduring at that time that same suffering to say to them that their suffering is 'the will of God' or 'part of the universal harmony' or to offer any other such flatulent and impertinent 'consolation'. But if sufferers discover something like this for themselves (and I have known this happen), I am inclined to believe them, and I would only speculate tentatively in a general way on this subject on this sort of authority.

Finally, we discover that the intellectual labour of the negative theology is never-ending. We cannot negate an affirmation until we have understood it properly and criticized it properly on the basis of the best approximation available to us to full understanding, and the same critical understanding must be applied to our negations of our negations, and we must be always re-examining our understanding and critical processes. There are a great many affirmations about God, or 'divine names', and we cannot be satisfied that any one of them, or its negation, is inadequate until we have perfectly examined it and its negation, and there is no stopping-place, no point where we can settle down and be content. We are not looking for Absolute Truth which we can contemplate in static repose, but for the Cause of all truth of whom all truths are untrue. And the Neoplatonists have discovered that if you cease to be active at any level at which God is present and pressing us to let him return in us, and he is present at all levels, including those of creative imagination and discursive reason, you fall out of the great cycle of procession and return as far as you can (never completely) into formless and sterile fantasy in which you are extremely liable to the temptation to 'black mysticism'. The ultimate silence generates ever-new critical discourse. The watchword of Neoplatonic negative theology, and of all true Platonic philosophy, is 'We must begin again'. And this is where the Neoplatonists remain most deeply and truly Hellenic.

A word more must be said about the negation of negation, in which the whole process of negative theology culminates (it does *not*

lead straight into mystical union; that depends on something else). If we do not work our way through this last stage, but stop at simple negation, we shall find ourselves in the unsatisfactory position of having a blank little pseudo-concept of God which signifies nothing. We must not be content to say that God is not anything. We must not only say, but experience and be aware, that he is not not anything either. If we go the whole way like this, we may experience a great liberation of mind, a freedom from language and concepts which will enable us to use them properly, in the endlessly critical way which I have indicated. We become, however dimly, aware, beyond our distinctions and definitions, positive and negative, not of an abstract, contentless monadic simplicity — which the pagan Neoplatonists are often mistakenly thought to believe in — but of an unspeakably rich and vivifying reality. It is not easy to say more than this, and the best Neoplatonic authorities recommend silence at this point. I certainly shall not dare to speak of what those who have really lived the negative theology discover. My attempts at reporting here come out as second-hand, presumptuous and unconvincing rhetoric. But I feel compelled to conclude by saying something which may be permitted to a mere intellectual exegete of low moral and spiritual status, about what may happen to our God-concepts when we have negated them and negated their negations. It seems that those concepts and symbols which we have destroyed as idols may return to us as icons. I am here making a strange distinction, which can only be made in Christian, not in pagan, Greek, but which I think may help to throw light on something in the whole Neoplatonic tradition. An idol, in this context, is a God-concept or symbol which we take for God and worship as God, as we so often do. When we are told that God is really Being, or a Mind, or a Monad, or a Person, or a Tri-Personal Unity with the relations between the Persons very precisely defined, and all these words are being asserted to be used in an intelligible sense as descriptions or definitions which we are bound by reason or authority to accept, we are being invited, in my opinion, to idolatry. An icon, on the other hand, is, in the first place, recognized as not being God, and in the second place does not even claim to be like God, of whom no image or likeness can be made. Likeness is not the point of an icon. It is a vehicle of God's presence and power, a means by which he comes to us and acts on us. A great deal of Judaeo-Christian talk about man as 'in the image and likeness' of God seems inappropriate, in the Neoplatonist view, because it seems to suggest that we have a sort of Renaissance portrait, or at least a lifelike sketch, of God in us somehow. This seems to apply particularly to Augustine's Trinitarian

image of God in man. (It may help the inadequate symbolism I am using at this point if we remember that many of the holiest material icons in churches are only dimly visible, perfectly black with age, and mostly covered with gold or silver, so that they are not really very like anyone at all.) The conceptual icon, then, is not presented as a true description or definition of God, but as a sign in which he makes himself present to us that we may be helped to return in him to himself. We human beings all need such signs, in great variety because of our splendid and irreducible diversity, which leads some to one and some to another of the innumerable theophanies of the world, according to the kind of theophany we ourselves are — signs, as has already been suggested, cannot contradict each other, however sharply diverse they are, as descriptions and definitions can. It is the old Hellenic faith that the diversity of signs which we need has been provided for us.[13] As Plotinus said, 'The Good is gentle and kindly and gracious and present to anyone when he wishes' (*Enneads* v. 5 [32], 12, 33-34). And there is every reason for us to venerate them, each according to our tradition and personal devotion, in the time and place where they help us, while passing beyond them critically because of their inevitable inadequacy. The true Neoplatonist is an idoloclast but an iconodule.

[I am happy to offer this essay in honour of Dom Illtyd Trethowan, to whom I owe very much. He will by no means approve of all that it contains. But, as one of the most clear-sighted of Catholic theologians, he will be able to see how deep my traditional difficulties with orthodoxy lie, and may be able to offer some satisfying suggestions for dealing with them.]

[13] There is a way for Christians to arrive at this same faith directly from at least one side of the original proclamation of the Gospel in the New Testament, as Professor Wilfred Cantwell Smith has frequently and clearly pointed out. There is, of course, another side to it, the belief in the unique holy people, the elect chosen by God to receive his revelation and grace, which makes it much more difficult, if not impossible, to do so. But if one really seriously believes that God is the loving Father of all mankind (and this can reasonably be taken as the very heart of the Gospel) it becomes natural to think that he treats all his children with equal love, whether they are Christians or not, and gives them all in equally generous measure all they need to come to him.