

**Online Appendix A, Supplement 8**  
**Monotheist Negative Theology, and Why It Doesn't Help Much**

A sophisticated theist might well object to all this: “What a straw man you are attacking here! What an unfairly vulgar, unsympathetic and deflationary account of God! Everybody knows that the traditional theologies of all the Abrahamic traditions fight mightily against anthropomorphism and literalism! God is clearly understood by all educated Jews, Christians and Muslims to be a word for the infinite ground of being, something outside the ordinary order of things, something which is beyond our conception. The description of God’s wisdom, consciousness and even will are all just approximate metaphors to make this transcendent being somewhat more accessible to human beings—but no one is foolish enough to think these are meant literally!”

I will leave aside the empirical part of this claim—i.e., whether it is true that most educated theists understand God to be merely a metaphor for a mystery. Even if that were true, which I think is doubtful, we might still ask, Why *this* metaphor, of all possible metaphors? Could there be a worse metaphor for the mystery than that of a conscious purposive creator and controller, lawgiver and judge? Could there be a more misleading way of approaching our relationship to a transcendent mystery than to map it onto an interpersonal relationship between someone who is owner and master of all—a personality not forged in constant negotiation with an unescapable and recalcitrant body and world but rather a personality all the way down, an absolutized personality, with absolute conscious control of itself and everything it relates to and an absolutely unified purposive will—and someone else who is an actual *human being*?

However we may want to answer such questions, it is clear that many prominent theologians of all three traditions have certainly put forth some such view seeking to bracket the personality of God in favor of a metaphysical absolute that transcends all conceptualization—Being itself, or the Self-Caused Ground of Being, or the Supreme Being, or the Unimaginable

First Cause of all Being, or even something beyond any conception of Being or any conceivable relation to Being. In its most extreme reaches, this takes the form of “negative theology,” which takes a fully apophatic approach to the essence of God. Does this negative theology abrogate the focus of our critique here: the ontological and axiological ultimacy of purpose? Let us look at some of negative theology’s most prominent representatives.

*Beyond Being, Via Noûs Or Via Raw Infinity*

The two alternate approaches to omnipresence, through the indeterminate infinite as opposed to through formative *Noûs*, impact also what may seem at first glance to be the opposite topic, their respective handlings of ineffability. We might be inclined to think that here at least we would have a real convergence, in that both approaches, thought through to the end, have robust traditions of insistence on the ultimate “inconceivability” or “ineffability” or even “nothingness” of their supreme term, of that which is omnipresent in these various senses. We might think this would give us at the very least a sort of identity of indiscernibles between the two traditions, converging at last at their ultimate point. For indeed, both lead to statements that the Absolute is beyond description and even in some sense “beyond being,” free even of any determinate essence. On the *Noûs* side, we have “negative theology,” the denial of any positive attributes to God, as the clearest example. The argument behind most negative theologies is very simple, although it is developed with considerable sophistication and in many diverse directions by various theologians. The denial of the “existence” of God is here a result of a recognition of cognitive limits rooted in piety. The argument, bluntly put, is that it is impious to attribute creaturely, finite categories to God. Predicates like long, short, red, green, salty, bitter, and so on, are obviously finite categories, categories that apply to finite things qua finite: they are determinate only because they are limited, contrasted to what they are not, and since God is infinite and thus must include both these attributes and the opposites they exclude, he cannot be said to be long, short, red, green, salty or bitter. But what about saying God is good, or wise, or powerful? These, negative theologians say, are not to be taken literally: God has these qualities, but not in the “same sense” as a finite creature has them. God has them in a different sense, called the “eminent” or “supersensational” sense. This sometimes is explained to mean that these

terms are really only used to describe God's actions, rather than his essence, or his relation to us, God's creatures, rather than what he is in himself, to give us some way of relating to God, some way to think about him. They are not literally true descriptions of what he is. In fact, God is much much greater than "good"—"goodness" gives only a foggy intimation of what God is. But the term is used to suggest that God is, from our point of view at least, something like "good," but much more so: unimaginably more so, so much more so that he is no longer, literally speaking, "good" at all. Some such turn of thought is found not only in non-Abrahamic theism—the idea of Nirguna ("distinctionless") Brahman or the "neti, neti" ("not this, not that") of the *Upanishads*—but also in Judaism (in both Maimonides and the idea of Ein-sof in Lurianic Kabbalah), in Christianity (in Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Nicolas Cusanus, as well as in different ways Protestant theologians like Barth and Tillich) and Islam (Ibn-Arabi, Al-Farabi).

Now, the most consistent and radical negative theologians, echoing the reasoning we already noted in Plotinus, will extend this consideration also to the characterization that "God exists." "Existing," on this view, *pace* Kant, is also a predicate, and it is, like long, short, red and green, still a finite predicate, given meaning by contrast to what it excludes, applicable only to imperfect, finite creatures, but not to the infinite creator. (The same will have to go for the terms "infinite" and "creator.") Therefore, God cannot literally be said to exist. We say he exists only to give our limited finite creaturely minds some way of relating to what is, properly speaking, beyond all predication of any kind, which is beyond existence nor non-existence. God does not exist. This conclusion is reached here not in opposition to the traditional monotheistic notion of God, but by taking it to its logical conclusion, by accepting it and making explicit all its implications. Because of God's utter perfection, he cannot be saddled with anything as imperfect as merely "existing." It is piety itself that here asserts the non-existence of God. Anyone who says God exists, meaning it literally, is blaspheming God. The denial of God's "existence" is here also a kind of piety.

Thus does it stand with negative theology, which resides perhaps closer to the mainstream position of the monotheist theology than is usually acknowledged. Indeed, my view is that the many if not most of the great theologies of all of the three Abrahamic monotheisms

take especial pains to insist that God's mind is nothing like our conception of mind, God's will is nothing like our conception of will—and that neglect of this point leads us into a kind of conceptual “idolatry.”

We might well view this as a sustained and ingenious attempt to remove from the conception of God all the questionable aspects of *Noûs as Arché* that we have been pointing to in these pages: God's mind must not be thought of as conceiving objects from outside, or willing goals which are external to their means, or as requiring passage through a series of distinct steps. God's will thus starts to sound like will-lessness, God's efforts start to sound effortless, God's purposivity begins to sound like *wuwei* non-purposivity--God's teleology is not geared to an external goal like our teleologies, but is simply a redescription of his own essence, or Nonbeing in the sense of surpassing all essence. God's “simplicity” means that God's being, essence, will and knowledge are not different from each other, and indeed in a certain sense none of these are separate from, or perhaps even different from, the things God knows and the ends God wills. So says Maimonides (*Guide for the Perplexed*, 1.68), and Spinoza himself (E2p7cs) points out that here we can begin to glimpse the reversal of monotheism into a true pantheism, which ends up being what we call a mystical atheism. But is this really so, or is there a difference between the unspeakability of God, say, and the indetermination/superdetermination of Spinoza's infinity, or the unspeakability but all-pervasiveness of Dao? Some caution is called for here.

I make two claims about this situation. First, it is an obscure indication of an awareness, even within monotheism, of exactly what is objectionable about monotheism, and a valient attempt to address the problem. The yearning for Dao, for *wuwei*, for some subversion to the structure of purpose, for the non-ultimacy of *Noûs*, breaks through even here. Theology is largely the story of monotheism straining against the bars of its own prison cell. Negative theology is monotheism thinking itself through to the limit, just on the cusp of becoming true mystical atheism. But, second, this always fails, that last step is never taken, as long as we remain within a monotheism. The redefined purpose (i.e., some kind of superpurpose that is beyond what we normally mean by “purpose”), mind (ditto) and will (ditto) end up being relevant to human life only as the same old kind of single, exclusive, externally constructed purpose, mind and will. It

is still singular, it is still exclusive, it is still a cause that stands apart from at least some aspect of its effect, it is still structured as subordination to a specific set of goals and values that have non-negotiable claims over us. In the monotheist context, nonmind-beyond-mind is still meant to function, at least for us, exactly as Mind had. Godhead beyond the personhood of God still functions, for us, exactly as the person of God had: as assurance of a meaning, a purpose, a will, as something that must be submitted to or known or loved or united with—it still commits us in all our actions to the dominion of purpose, if not our own then God's, just as before: any relinquishment of our own purposes is done under the premises that in so doing we are surrendering to the higher purpose, the End of all things, God's purpose. In the human realm, there is still no role for purposelessness at all, except as a disordering of purpose, i.e., as evil. In the realm of what can be thought and known, mind and purpose and control in the old unreconstructed sense are still the most wonderful of all the things we know, and in spiritual life are still deployed as ultimate, even when they can no longer be named as such; everything else remains subordinated to them: even our own mystical unknowing is meant to be a greater surrender to an unknowable hyperknowing, only redescribed, rather deceptively, as Unknowing, for reasons we shall soon assess below. The moment this ceases to be the case, we have passed from a theology to an atheology. This inescapable subordination to purpose is, I claim, strictly synonymous with the claim that God exists, or hyperexists, at all—or even Nonexists when that is meant as a synonym for this hyperexistence. I think the history of monotheist theologies can easily be seen to confirm both of these claims.

We thus need not worry about the great negative theologians like Pseudo-Dionysius or John Scotus Eriugena as counterexamples to our claims of what monotheism entails. Indeed, it is hard to resist seeing them as pantheists struggling to fit themselves into Christian clothing, as many Christian theologians themselves have disapprovingly judged to be the case, precisely on the grounds of their attempt to marginalize the personality of the deity and with it the uniqueness of the Incarnation (as opposed to the eternal unique Begetting) of the Son<sup>1</sup>—i.e., the exact things

---

<sup>1</sup> It should be stressed that marginalizing the uniqueness of the Incarnation is not the same thing as marginalizing the uniqueness of this begotten Son in the eternal Trinity. The historical incarnation is not the same as the eternal begetting. The Logos incarnated in the Incarnation can be unique and uniquely begotten even if it is regarded as incarnated in all things rather than in one particular historical person. The pantheistic flavor of these mystical theologians, as just noted, still sees one Logos through which the world is created and which is for them immanent

we claim to be the most objectionable aspects of monotheism from the atheist mystical perspective: precisely the key exemplars of the structure of exclusive oneness that make it monotheism. We might consider them candidates of atheist mystics seeking cleverly to disguised themselves as monotheists, relegating the positive dogmas of the church to the realm of what Buddhists would call *upāya*: skillful means that are not strictly true, but which are designed to serve as a stepping stone to truth, and to answer the demands of everyday religious needs of unsophisticated and spiritually hungry people. I grant this. But even so, the particular garment they were trying to squeeze their pantheism into had some baleful effects on limiting their mysticism in decisive ways—precisely monotheist ways. God still ruins everything, even when He is just window-dressing for atheism or pantheism or pure apophatic mysticism.

We still see the construal of the absolute beyond all predication as an exclusive oneness clearly, for example, in a flagship negative theologian like Pseudo-Dionysius. God is completely unknowable: we cannot say he is good, or a person, or a being, or an essence, or even a unity. Now we would clearly still be deep in the world of Compensatory Theism if we simply asserted that God is unknowable only *to us*, but perfectly knowable *to himself*. That would be the old story of putting all of whatever is defined as the best—in this case knowledge, *Noûs* again—in God, and defining piety as foregoing that best thing ourselves so as to leave it all to him. God’s knowledge is so awesome that we can know nothing of it. In this case, knowledge would still be the ultimate—just as the superficially non-judgmental advice to “Judge not, lest you be judged--leave all judgment to God” hardly undermines the ultimacy of judgment, rather enshrining it, absolutizing it, and as the seeming eschewal of will in “Not my will but Thine be done” is really a displaced apotheosis of willing per se, making it absolute. This is still likely the case for Dionysius’s recommendation of “divine darkness” and “ignorance” in the *Mystical Theology*: the seeker should unknow, the better to put himself at the disposal of the eternal knowing. In the final chapter of that work, Dionysius does get as far as saying that all things do not know God as he is and God does not know things as they are either. What he does not say is that God does not know himself—and commentators are quick to interpret the claim that God doesn’t know us as a

---

in the all things in the world in the typical Noûs way—still a single-ordered cosmos that functions teleologically according to what is to us humans still the same old “Will” of God.

way of saying that God knows only himself, and since we are present in him “superessentially,” so God’s perfect knowledge of us is actually just knowledge of himself. If that is correct, knowledge wins again, and God once again knows us, knows the real truth about us, even better than we can ever know ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

But for the sake of argument, let’s even grant that these thinkers have the consistency of seeing the ultimate not only as beyond *our* knowledge, but beyond *its own* knowledge—that knowledge and willing and purpose per se are not the ultimate grounds of existence, even of the existence of God—an Unknowing not as a condition to be overcome, or a redescription of God’s clear and correct eternal knowledge of his own superessentially, but as at the very least an eternal aspect of God, i.e., of whatever directing and controlling *Noûs* there might be anywhere. This would put us closer to a pre-monotheistic Plotinian Neo-Platonist position, where “the One” stands beyond the reach of *Noûs* in every sense, beyond even knowing itself. We are pleasantly surprised to see this, for example, in the final chapters, Chapters 4 and 5, of Dionysius’s *Mystical Theology*, where we are given an impressive list of just what-all is negated: it is not just not the “lack of understanding” that is negated in God, but also “understanding”; not just that God cannot be called “lifeless” but also that he cannot be called “alive.” But we note also, with some disappointment, that the hierarchy of “what is lower and what is higher” remains unaffected by all this negation: the negation of lifelessness and non-understanding is not put on even footing with the negation of life and understanding. In Chapter 3 he explains this procedure: some things are more “akin” to that which is beyond all predication than others: “Because, when affirming the existence of that which transcends all affirmation, we were obliged to start from that which is most akin to It, and then to make the affirmation on which the rest depended; but when pursuing the negative method, to reach that which is beyond all negation, we must start by applying our negations to those qualities which differ most from the ultimate goal. Surely it is truer to affirm that God is life and goodness than that He is air or stone, and truer to deny that drunkenness or fury can be attributed to Him than to deny that we may apply to Him the categories of human

---

<sup>2</sup> And when we get to the Lotus Sutra in online appendix B, we will see that even this idea—of a supermind that knows us better than we know ourselves—has entirely different implications depending on whether that mind is conceived theistically or atheistically—whether this mind is conceived on the *Noûs* as Arché model or not.

thought.”<sup>3</sup> But that is itself unequivocally a predication; it is the delineation of a specific definite being. If some things are nearer to it than others, if some things are more like it than others, it’s a definite being, a being among other beings. Negative theology within the context of monotheism says, in effect, “The Ultimate Cause of things is beyond all predication, even of Being or God or Mind or Purpose—but among finite determinate things, what is most like that which is beyond all predication is Being and God and Mind and Purpose and Person.” We hear echoes of Orwell here: all animals are equal—but some animals are more equal than others.

It is instructive here too to note the contrast with an atheist apophatic mystical orientation. For this privileging of some finite things over others is still evident in the beginnings of Daoist apophaticism too, as found in some parts of the *Daodejing*, which also bluntly states that some things are “close to Dao,” and others “oppose Dao, and end early.” But this apparent similarity should not lure us into a perennialist position that sees these as really trying to say the same thing. What is close to Dao is not mind or purpose or intention or personality, but exactly the opposite sort of thing: water. Not that which is most articulated and formed, which has its own definite direction, which controls other things, but water, the most formless, non-autonomous, yielding, non-controlling thing available among finite entities. As Hans-Georg Moeller has nicely put it, although both Dao and God are said to be beyond language and conception, the reasons for this are precisely opposed: Dao is too *empty* to be described, while God is too *full* to be described. Dao is before language and thought, while God is beyond language and thought. Just as in the case of God’s alleged Nonknowing, God’s Nonbeing is really a kind of hyperbeing—not less exclusive than ordinary being, but more so.

There are of course ways to reinterpret both emptiness and fullness to make them entail one another or converge into a higher union of opposites, and by rights this is what both approaches should lead to. The unthinkable emptiness should come to non-exclude ultra-fullness, and the ultra-fullness should come to non-exclude ultimate emptiness. But our point here is that the “fullness” route forecloses precisely this development, while the “emptiness” approach fosters it, just as “purpose” forecloses purposelessness, but purposelessness does not foreclose,

---

<sup>3</sup>C.E. Rolt translation, *Dionysius the Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1920) p. 102.

but rather enables, the proliferation of purposes (as we discuss in “The Great Asymmetry” in Chapter 2). And this is just what we find when we examine the development of doctrines in these two different apophatic traditions, the atheist (Daoist) and the monotheist. For the tropes of “close to Dao” and “opposed to Dao” appear only at the beginning of Daoist atheist mysticism, in the oldest parts of the *Daodejing*, not its high-mark culmination, and precisely these remnants of definite-entity status for Dao are what are addressed and overcome in the very next steps of its development—already in parts of the *Daodejing* itself, and with full force in the *Zhuangzi* and with blistering thoroughgoingness finally by Guo Xiang. We can trace a reason for this, and it pertains to the very heart of our concern here. What is “closest to Dao,” even if Dao is beyond all predication, is not what we normally regard as highest according to our world of purposes and personalities—Mind and Purpose and Being and Will and Gods—but, as we said, precisely the opposite, what is most formless and non-purposive, what does nothing and takes on any shape without preference, e.g., water. It is the inherent structure of this move away from purpose that allows the completion of apophaticism into real atheist mysticism. A step onward from the nothingness which resembles the lowest brings us to full-on atheist mysticism. A step onward from the nothingness that resembles the highest bring us instead simply theism in mystic clothing, for it is the structure of “highest” as purpose and personality that in the final analysis constrains even the “beyond being” into a type of being. The “beyond being” of ultimate fullness, even when it includes all created essences in their oneness with the simplicity of God’s superevidence, is maximally *exclusive*. Its “neither/nor” excludes all finite things insofar as they are temporal and material existences. As we’ll see, it is this exclusivism that is typical of theism and especially monotheism. The neither/nor of “before being,” of ultimate emptiness and formlessness, is, on the contrary, maximally *inclusive*. It remains present in and as all finite particular things, as the allowing of all possible beings.

But let’s assume for the sake of argument that Dionysius does mean to suggest that knowledge is not ultimate in God, that He too does not know, is ultimately not a knower, is unknown to himself. This idea does seem to be unambiguous in at least one nominally theistic mystic, John Scotus Eriugena, who translated Dionysius into Latin and can be seen as picking up where he left off. Now this would certainly be an important step beyond the objectionable

aspects of monotheism (and it goes without saying that the Church ended up condemning him and attempting to destroy his writings). When we examine the explanation of this claim, however, we find the same old story: God does not know what he is, because he is superessential, beyond any whatness, and his *true understanding* (or strictly speaking “more than true” “more than understanding”) of being superessential—more of an essence than what we call essence—is called his ignorance of Himself. The “more than” (*plus-quam-*) here works the same way it did in Pseudo-Dionysius: it tells us which among created things are “closer to,” “more like,” that which is allegedly ineffable—thereby making it determinate after all.<sup>4</sup> In this case, what is more than knowing, superknowing, can also be called non-knowing—but surprise surprise, it still ends up function exactly like knowing did. What we end up with here bears some similarity to what we find in Plotinus: the One, the first hypostasis, certainly does not know itself, being beyond all *Noûs*, but the divine eternal *Noûs* itself, the second hypostasis, *does* know itself, but also knows that it does not know the One, has knowledge of the unknowability of the One. Combining these two into the definition of God, we might get something close to Eriugena’s idea here. But this shaves off the unknowingness of the One entirely, and thereby entirely eliminates the ontological ultimacy of non-knowing. In Eriugena it has become necessary to collapse this entirely into the *Noûs* level, redescribing even the non-knowing of the One as a kind of knowing, not as “not-knowing” but as merely “knowing the not”—bringing us back to Plotinus’ *Noûs* but now no longer with a One beyond it, no remaining dimension of actual non-knowing at the ultimate ontological level. God’s omniscience (aka more-than-knowing, aka non-knowing) means knowing correctly that He Himself belongs to no category and is describable by no possible answer to any query about what He is. God’s ignorance is just another name for God’s omniscience: Eriugena compares it to a man saying, “I do not know at all that I am an insensate stone deprived of all vital motion.”<sup>5</sup> God does not know himself in the sense that he knows that he is not any determinate essence: his knowing of that fact that he is beyond all essence, as opposed to the alternative, that he is *not* beyond all essence, is what is called Divine Ignorance here. The structure entirely preserves the bivalent structure of all

---

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed exploration of Eriugena’s use of both apophatic and kataphatic language, and their relation, see Willemien Otten, *The Anthropology of Johannes Scottus Eriugena* (Leiden: Brill, 1990), pp. 40-81.

<sup>5</sup> Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 594a, translated by John O’Meara (Montreal: Bellarmin, 1987), p. 201.

ordinary knowing. This “noneness” is just as exclusive as the monotheist “oneness,” and the knowledge of it, even if redescribed as non-knowledge, is really just as dichotomous—and thus ultimately determinate. Knowledge remains supreme even here, indeed extraordinarily dichotomous knowledge: accurate knowledge of what is so as opposed to what is not so. God is Unknowing only in the sense that he is hyperknowing. As Pseudo-Dionysius says, “For the lack of Mind and Sensation must be predicated of God by excess and not by defect. . . . And thus the Mind of God embraces all things in an utterly transcendent knowledge and, in Its causal relation to all things, anticipates within Itself the knowledge of them all—knowing and creating angels before the angels were, and knowing all other things inwardly and (if I may so put it) from the very beginning, and thus bringing them into existence.”<sup>6</sup> Since God’s knowledge and God’s will are one and the same, the Will-lessness of God’s superessential Will remains just as dichotomous as his Unknowing/omniscience: in spite of being putatively Nonbeing, it continues to function in the either/or mode of everyday willing. Eriugena is often regarded as dangerously heretical in his claims of universal restoration of all things, including the souls of sinners, to their divine Cause at the end of the world, standing at the very uppermost reaches of Christian attempts to finagle a form of universal salvation in spite of scriptural restrictions thereto. Yet even he cannot get around the need for some kind of eternal torment, for this Unknowing Nonbeing continues to serve as the wedge that cleanly divides the saved from the damned, albeit now in a spiritualized sense. Eriugena ends up having to claim that, although the divinely created human nature of both the good and the evil is forever “undamaged, unimpaired, uncontaminated, of an equally noble nature, from which all reproach has been removed” after the universal restoration accomplished by the redemption at the end of the world, there still has to be *something* eternally tormented: not their natures, but their illusory sinful wills themselves, eternally tortured by fantasies of the unreal insubstantial things they lusted after in life.<sup>7</sup> It is most eye-opening that even in this

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

<sup>7</sup> “From this we may understand that at the end of this sensible world there will in the nature of things abide no wickedness, no corrupting death, nor any of that suffering which in this life still afflicts our fragile matter; for all things visible and invisible shall rest in their Causes. Only the lawless will of wicked men and angels, smitten with the memory and conscience of its evil ways shall abide in torment, and of those things which in this life it had lusted after, and in the future life it had hoped to obtain, nothing will be found: “for in that day shall perish all their imaginations.” Their imaginations will perish, he says, not their substances. But what are those imaginations of which he speaks? Surely the vain phantasies of those sensible things which in this life they long for with insensate

author, for all he is accused of an all-consuming pantheistic oneness and a heretically over-generous view of the purity and divinization even of the damned, still needs to divide, to exclude, to torture something or other—for that is what his scriptures tell him must be so, and what must be good. The “substance” of the damned will remain unharmed, for that is the universal human nature redeemed by Christ, restored now to its original purity and subsumed into its divine Cause—and yet this insubstantial mind fantasizing about unreal (i.e., sensible) things, this sentient willful mind of the sinner which itself has become very like those fantasies of unreal things that obsess it, will suffer genuine torment and terror, even though, because of how unreal all this is, none of this suffering does any harm to the substance—just the unreal experiencer of the fantasies of unreal things, the sinful will which has no real being, feels the pain. This should tell us a lot of what kind of oneness this noneness (i.e., what is “more than Being”) of the monotheistic God really amounts to, even at its most ineffable and pantheistic: an exclusive oneness, a oneness that excludes.

The undiminished theistic implications of this kind of Divine Unknowing can perhaps be more fully brought to light by a comparison to the superficially almost identical claims made in a genuinely atheist mystical context. A careless reading of Eriugena’s claim that “God’s Unknowing is identical to God’s omniscience” might remind an unwary Buddhist reader of, say, Seng Zhao’s assertion that the sage’s omniscience is identical to his non-knowing. But the non-knowing of the best knower, for Seng Zhao, means that there are no knowables, which is to say: nothing is definitely true or false: the total absence of anything that could be definitely right means that nothing can be definitely wrong. As he puts it, where there is knowing, there are knowables, and thus there is non-knowing, but in the absence of knowables, there is nothing

---

desire, and which haunt the minds of those who through their wickedness have been blinded by irrational affections. And those who invent these phantasies shall themselves become very like them. For nowhere will they find the solidity of real truth, but will be tormented by empty dreams.... [T]he wicked shall weep from what they suffer from the insubstantial simulacra of sensible things. But in each case the substance will go unharmed and unpunished. For there are two kinds of passion : one whereby the deified are rapt into the most pure knowledge of their Creator: and the other whereby the wicked are submerged into the most profound ignorance of the Truth. And it is no wonder if that which the wicked suffer in their dreams while still imprisoned in this corruptible flesh and thereafter in phantasies suffer in hell, they shall suffer in torment even more keenly when they have received their spiritual bodies, awaking as it were out of a heavy slumber; so that, as Augustine says, they shall suffer true punishments, they shall have false image sin things not true, real sorrow, real lamentation and real terror, tardy repentance and the consuming fire of their thoughts.” Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, 944d-945c (O’Meara translation, pp. 622-3).

known, and therefore there is nothing unknown: that is the omniscience in question. Put another way, both the non-knowing and the omniscience are simply alternate ways of indicating “non-clinging,” which is precisely the non-dichotomous apprehension of whatever there is to apprehend, the eschewal of the either/or structure about what is so or not so, what is right or not right. Awareness here is not a property added to the existence of pre-existent facts; it is simply the non-exclusion of X (the putative object) from non-X (the putative knower) in the absence of the mutual exclusivity of X and non-X that would be imposed by knowing in the cognitive sense, i.e., of the dichotomous either-or structure of knowledge. Knowing is non-attachment itself, and the very same non-attachment is non-knowing (in the sense of freedom from bivalence). And this means not only that nothing is true, but also that nothing is false: because nothing is right, nothing is wrong. Nothing is right because ultimately nothing is unambiguously determinable: the Buddhist premise is that things themselves have no unambiguous identities. But the lack of identity is not the exclusion of identity; indeterminacy is not the exclusion of determinacy. Seng Zhao’s key move is to undermine the dichotomy between determinacy and indeterminacy, and with it the either-or structure falsely attributed to determinacy as such. His premise is that there are no simple knowables, because a knowable would have to be determinate in a way that excludes alternate determinations. But determinations are in fact just indeterminacy itself—not the total lack of anything appearing, but the ambiguity of whatever appears. For a total indeterminacy is impossible: the total absence of determinacy would simply be another determinacy 若以無相為無相, 無相即為相。 (T45, no.1858, p. 154, b9-18). This imaginary postiting of an abstractly blank indeterminacy, which would be the exclusion of all attributes and characteristics, is itself a by-product of the dichotomous either-or structure of putative “knowledge.” In reality, indetermination is coextensive with determination: it is simply the non-exclusion of alternatives of any determination, the copresence of alternative identities for every identified determination: ambiguity. And this must apply to knowledge and non-knowledge too, for the dichotomy between knowledge and non-knowledge would be another dichotomous structure. What we end up with instead is thus a reality that is equally describable as a (non-“knowing”) awareness, which treats each and every proposable determination as equally right. The sage’s knowing is his non-knowledge, which is just his non-clinging to any dualism,

including the dualism between having and not-having attributes, since definitively “not-having-attributes” would just be another attribute, another dichotomy.<sup>8</sup> Seng Zhao’s point is that the knowing of the sage is itself an unknowing, not because he knows only the truth that things have no attributes (and we should note that here this applies to all things, full stop, not merely to all things “as they are in their cause,” i.e., as they are qua contained in God and as known in God’s self-(un)knowing, as in Eriugena), but because this having of no attributes includes both having attributes and not having attributes: it is the allowing of both, since, again, “not-having-attributes” would simply be another attribute; in other words, Eriugena’s “being actually Superessential, in truth beyond all essence” would just be another essence, and knowing Oneself to be so would just be another bit of dichotomous knowledge, as would being a completely objectless mystical unknowing. The upshot for Seng Zhao is simply all possible being is nondichotomous with nondichotomous awareness, and, when stripped of the dichotomization falsely attributed to it by so-called “knowing,” all of it is the allowing of both every proposition and its contrary to be true. Reality is ambiguously ambiguous awareness. Ambiguous awareness is ambiguously all reality. All reality is the ambiguity of the sage’s non-knowing, which is his omniscience. As he says, “Because there are no knowables to the sage, there is nothing unknown to him”: there simply are no bivalent truths, no facts of the matter about things, no “judgments” are to be had about things. This not only doesn’t obstruct all judgments from appearing, it is also what allows any judgment to appear and also for its contrary to appear: this is the increased sensitivity of awareness that goes with perceiving all appearances simply as appearances, without any judgment about their truth or falsity: allowing all and any to appear just as they appear. This is what Seng Zhao means by the Buddha’s omniscience being identical to his non-knowing, which is just his non-clinging, conceived as an increased capacity of awareness. Hence in not regarding anything as right or true, there is nothing regarded as wrong or false. The Buddha, unlike God, makes no final “judgments,” either in the cognitive or in the moral sense (let alone the eschatological sense).

---

<sup>8</sup> See my “Seng Zhao’s ‘Prajna is Without Knowledge’: Collapsing the Two Truths from Critique to Affirmation,” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (2019) 47:831–849.

This is a perfect exemplification of “The Great Asymmetry”: though it may be unavoidable in either case that *something* be positioned as the ultimate, explicitly or implicitly, what it is that is positioned there makes all the difference. This may be said to be entailed by the structural requirements of making any statement; given the propositional form, the assertion of some claim can never be avoided (even by making no claim). So yes, even for Seng Zhao, some formal “exclusion” is arguably posited: the idea of a single exclusive truth or purpose is repudiated, excluded. This is exactly what has always been the post-Platonic tradition’s flippant response, taken as a refutation, of things like skepticism, nihilism, relativism, indeterminacy-ultimacy: the claim that nothing is universally true is itself a claim that something is universally true, and thus a contradiction, and thus not true. We are happy to go along with this, and even to go a step further and grant that even saying one doesn’t know, or that things are both true and not true, or saying nothing at all, are always necessarily *construable* as implicitly staking out some kind of dichotomous ultimate position—if *one chooses to view them that way*. No claim or position is impervious to this analysis, *if translated into the terms of a system that structures questions in that way*. We could go further: that way of structuring questions is likely inevitable and unexcludable sooner or later. So in any word, deed, statement or position, there must be something that *can and will be construed as* serving as an ultimate universal claim of truth, and therefore as exclusionary. We respond to this not by shaking our fist at this inevitable construal and warning against it; rather, we find a way to make it as harmless as possible even when it happens: what matters is *what* placeholder is chosen for that inevitable position of the exclusive final truth. By positing non-clinging as ultimate, both non-clinging and clinging are affirmed, and even clinging turns out to be another instance of non-clinging. By contrast, if any dichotomous content (God, will, *Noûs*, knowing, purpose, definite purposelessness, definite unknowing, definite willlessness, definite indeterminacy, etc.) is put in that structurally inevitable and formally dichotomous position at the top of the edifice, then dichotomy reigns everywhere with no possibility of escape, and indeterminacy is banished.

On the one hand, then, we may say that the development of negative theology illustrates the inevitability of the impulse to overcome the determinacy/indeterminacy dichotomy, the immanent need of any system of reach the paradox where they coincide, even within the tradition

most programmatically antithetical to it—the *Noûs as Arché* tradition. On the other hand, the structural necessity baked in to the form of any and every claim or position to posit some dichotomous ultimate term shows itself in the inescapability of exclusion even in the tradition most programmatically *opposed* to it—the atheist mystical tradition, which recognizes that “if indeterminacy were simply and purely indeterminacy, that would make it into just another determinacy,” and thus that there is no escape from positing determinacy, that even its indeterminacy must take the form of a determinacy. But the point here is that in the former case, because the inevitably-positing ultimate term is exclusive determinacy, the paradox that it (also inevitably) leads to is a false paradox, a merely apparent coinciding that conceals the same old dichotomy, for it construes even its ultimate indeterminacy--which it has now come to understand as synonymous with its ultimate determinacy—as itself just another determinacy, i.e., as an exclusion. In the latter case, because the inevitably positing ultimate term is straightaway this indeterminacy, when it is (also inevitably) realized that it is necessarily paradoxical, i.e., that it is also determinate, this thoroughly undermines the dichotomy and mutual exclusivity between determinacy and indeterminacy, not only in itself but in all things.

It is true that the implications of this move remain incompletely realized in Seng Zhao himself, for though both clinging and non-clinging are enabled by ultimate non-clinging, the non-clinging that is ultimate remains, for him, definitively non-clinging rather than clinging. The subjective attitude toward this ambiguity, the call for full realization and embrace of the inescapable ambiguity of every determinacy, remains unambiguous. It remained for Tiantai to take the next logical step, overcoming the subjective-objective divide by recognizing these categories too as ambiguous, each inevitably bleeding into the other. The result was to extend this ambiguity of the absolute to the subjective position itself, construing it as much as clinging as non-clinging, dwelling as non-dwelling, determinacy as indeterminacy. Nevertheless, this self-overcoming of the ultimacy of non-clinging is possible only on the (ultimately self-undermining and self-surpassing) premise established by Seng Zhao: the ultimacy of non-clinging, non-dwelling, indeterminacy. The other approach, the monotheistic approach, which starts and ends with the ultimacy of determinacy, on the other hand, blocks this overcoming, landing in an ultimate dichotomy. And not only ultimate dichotomy: we must ask ourselves whether the

ultimate unknowability of things in God, or God's own unknowing of himself and of things, makes any *other* fact unknowable for Eriugena: does it mean neither God nor ourselves can know whether the true Logos was Jesus or Apollonius of Tyana? Does it mean neither God nor ourselves can know whether the Catholic or the Pythagorean faith is true? Does it mean that neither God nor ourselves can know whether it is better to practice the non-knowing ritual practices and devotions of Christianity or of Hinduism? Does it mean that God doesn't know who is saved and who is damned, or if you prefer, what true union with God is and isn't, and who has and doesn't have it? Not at all: all remains as it was for everything else: it is all one way rather than the other, full stop. Such is the so-called "divine unknowing" of the monotheist negative mystical theologian: somehow it works just like knowing in what counts, namely, the dichotomous either-or structure of reality. A fine unknowing, that! In contrast, the both-and structure in Seng Zhao's atheist unknowing is ultimate, allowing the either-or structure as well as the neither-nor structure to appear and to disappear, to coexist and to conflict, to rise and to fall together and apart. Eriugena's neither-nor can be described as a both-and, but it ends up functioning just as an ultimate either-or would. The difference is glaring.

It may still appear to some readers that this neither/nor exclusion is contradicted by direct statements of monotheist apophatic mystics; for that reason, it is important to see that this is not the case. Giving theistic ways of thinking the benefit of the doubt, let's assume these theistic apophaticists really do mean what they say when they assert that their God is beyond "God," and take them as claiming that even "Transcendent Cause" can be stricken down as just another name, a remnant of the affirmative cataphatic way, which must be transcended in the full-on negative theology of apophaticism, which does indeed yield its own version of immanence and its own version of inclusion of all finite things in the divine. Dionysius does after all tell us that God is nameless, but also that God enfolds all names. He is beyond all being, but he is also the very life and being of all beings. Eriugena develops this motif, and goes so far as to say that all things are both creator and created, both temporal and eternal. But by this he means just what Dionysius meant: only that what all things *really* are is their eternal essences, and these essences qua eternal aspects of God are non-different from God's own superessentiality, which is indivisible. He does not mean that each finite temporal thing, qua

temporal and material, creates all other things: they “are” the creator only because their essences are unilaterally subsumed in, and thus identical to, the one Creator. Read in isolation, these claims sound like the kind of claim found routinely in atheist mystical texts, for example, the neat formulation given in the Mahāyāna *Sutra of Infinite Meanings* (*Wuliangyijing* 無量義經): “Infinite meanings are generated by one dharma, namely, the dharma of the absence of all characteristics. The absence of all characteristics is characterized by all characteristics, but is neither a characterized by nor devoid of those characteristics. Thus it is called the Real Characteristic.”<sup>9</sup> Is Dionysius’s or Eriugena’s God another name for this Real Characteristic, both possessing and negating all possible characteristics, and thereby generating and sustaining them all, and in turn being sustained and generated by them all? Do we not have here too a perfectly realized inclusive oneness/noneness/allness? It sounds like it, but again we must beware of superficial similarities, for here we find this is not really the case. For God contains all things in the way that a specific kind of cause contains its effects, as the superabundant power has more, not less, than what it produces. What specific kind of cause? It is indeed utterly beyond our conception. But we are told that the *closest approximation* to the manner of causality involved here is still *final causality*, i.e., the way a *purpose* serves to cause an effect, precisely because this is the privileged (and indeed exclusively sanctioned) form of description is that found in scriptures that describe God as a *purposive being*, and in the theoretical underpinnings of this theology, which privilege *Noûs as Arché*. Indeed, this—purpose as cause--is made into the only permissible positive heuristic to point the way, for us finite creatures, toward this ineffable mystery.

As such, God still enjoys a particular kind of asymmetrical relation to all other entities, in spite of his alleged nothingness--to be contrasted to the opposite form of asymmetry typically found in atheist mysticisms, most directly in Daoism. Here again we have a case of the “Great Asymmetry”: the privileging of purpose excludes purposelessness, but the privileging of purposelessness includes purpose. When the first model (ultimacy of purpose) tries to overcome its bias for one side over the other (purpose over purposelessness) and the incompleteness this

---

<sup>9</sup>無量義者。從一法生。其一法者。即無相也。如是無相。無相不相。不相無相。名為實相。

entails, it does so via unidirectional subsumption: purpose endeavors to make the purposeless or even purposelessness itself its tool, a means to an end (the end in this case is to have ends at all, to be purposeful as such)—thereby not only preserving but in an important sense exacerbating the privileging of purpose: it becomes inescapable, absolute, and real purposelessness is banished from the cosmos. When the second model (ultimacy of purposelessness) tries to overcome its bias toward one side over the other (purposelessness over purpose)—in this case not the exclusion of either side but merely the prioritizing of one side—it results in intersubsumption of the two sides: purposelessness enfolds purpose, in the sense that purpose is an actual instantiation of purposelessness, from top to bottom: the very having of purposes is just another purposeless fact, one more way in which purposeless raw infinity is seen in its blind overabundance and overspilling of any proposed limit, and it is intrinsic to the nature of purposeless infinity as such that it cannot be stopped from doing so. Raw purposeless infinity as such necessarily entails the arising of infinite purpose; if any were excluded, infinity would not be infinite. *Every* purpose at the same time necessarily entails infinite purposelessness, of which it is entirely composed, with which it is entirely coextensive. From there, even individual purposes are seen to be enfolders as well as enfolding, as in Zhuangzi and Tiantai, where even the “evils” of specific finite purposes are fully embraced as entailing all alternate forms of purpose and purposelessness. In contrast, the post-theist apophaticisms see all reality deriving from the “purpose” side, with its structure of exclusiveness. As such, even when, as in Eriugena, the claim is made that God can be said to be both Creator and created, when we examine what he means by this, we find that even on the “created” side He is still the active and not the passive, the purposive and not the random, the cause and not the effect. For as in Plotinus, the formlessness of matter, to which is attributed all the passivity and disorder, and the formlessness of the superessential God, though indiscernible, are sharply distinguished (simply by fiat, or wishful thinking, it seems). He makes clear that he is applying a calculated equivocation with terms like “Nothingness” and “formlessness”—God is Nothing and formless, but in a clearly specified different sense than *matter* is Nothing and formless. When all is said and done, God still ends up being the enfolder and not the enfolded, superessential but not superaccidental, good beyond all good but not evil beyond all evil, not merely God because he is hyperGod, but failing

to be not merely devil because he is hyperDevil. He is so good that he can no longer be called anything as non-good as “good.” He is so universal he can no longer be called anything so non-universal as a particular name like “universal.” He is such an absolute creator that he is beyond something even as created as the idea “creator”—for as Eriugena says, anything opposed to an opposite cannot be the real infinite source, and universal is opposed to particular, essence to non-being, creator to created. Such is the new asymmetry we end up with here: God is always “more than good” but not also “less than good” or “worse than bad.” God is more good than good because He is the cause of good, but somehow he is not at the same time “more bad than bad”—because he’s not, so they say, the cause of bad. He is not merely universal because he is more universal than universal, but somehow he is not “more particular than the particular” or “more limited than the limited.” He is not merely creator because he is more than creator, but somehow he is not “more created than the created” or “more dependent than the dependent.” This sort of asymmetry gives him a very specific kind of content, and one that locks it in place, resisting all reversal. When we say, “God is beyond all names, but superessentially contains all names, beyond all beings but superessentially containing all beings, including this cup” we should also be able to say the kind of thing we find Zhuangzi saying (Ch. 22), “The most useless and formless and purposeless possible thing—not just water, but the epitome of uselessness, i.e., piss and shit.” We should be willing to say that *this useless bad limited dependent finite thing per se* is beyond all names yet superessentially contains all names including “God,” being all beings but containing all beings, including God. This will apply not only to useless things, but also to ordinary purposeful things like cutting up an ox (Zhuangzi 3) or political involvement (Zhuangzi 4) or feeding the monkeys (Zhuangzi 2) or the pigs (Zhuangzi 7), or all aspects of all the 10 realms from hell to intensely purposive vow-making altruism (Tiantai). Eriugena might indeed be able to say that “that pile of shit is the creator of the cosmos” (though it is noteworthy that he never does so)—but he has made it clear that what he would mean by this would really be something like: “Insofar as there is anything real in that pile of shit, it is a Good; their negative characteristics are just the disordering or deficiencies of this original Goodness. That Goodness derives from the cause of all Goodness, God. More, the essence of that Goodness is eternally in God. More, since God is simple, that essence is God himself. More, since God is superessential,

that essence as known within God is itself superessential, and God's true knowledge of it is thus an Unknowing, and that thing is an Unknown, a nothingness, which also enfolds all things." The "essence" of the pile of shit on this account will not turn out to anything we would recognize as its shittiness. That goes for our shittiness too. The structure of immanence in theistic apophaticism remains restricted only to part of experience, impudently asserted to be all that "really" exists: the essence, the kernel, the true, the real. The Parmenidean dichotomy of Being and Nonbeing still stands, combined with the structure of Plotinian privation theory that identifies Goodness with Being, such that all evil as in some way Non-being—the *bad* kind of Non-being, the less-than-being, which is thereby distinguished from the *good* kind of Non-being, which is God itself, i.e., the more-than-being. Some aspect—the evil aspect or in this case evil-smelling aspect, of course—is first identified and then dismissed as "not really there." In the theistic form, this standard always has something to do with purpose, meaning, some idea of the Good. God is immanent in all that is real, just as he is above it—but not everything we might imagine is really real: most of it is "less than real," not "more than real" like God. The everyday adjudication of true and false, right and wrong, far from being transcended or complexified, is absolutized. In the very attempt to break free from all finite representations, the innermost structure of finitude, the disjunctive dichotomous structure of exclusivity and judgment, is apotheosized.

What is it that stops a negative theologian from simply saying he is an atheist? That reveals where he is still attached to some specific being, some entity alongside and excluding other entities (or aspects, or meanings, or something) which is being identified as God—to the exclusion of whatever is not that. If he really affirms nothing he becomes indistinguishable from a skeptic, which is what he should be. Where we atheist mystics think this should go is to the position finally enunciated in the *Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvana Sutra* on the question of whether the Eternal Self exists: to say exists and to say not-exists are equally wrong, unless by exist you mean a synonym for non-existing, and by non-existing you mean a synonym for existing. These two are symmetrical here. It is not just the excluding of both opposites, but the affirmation of both opposites *seen as synonymous with one another*. Nor is it a one-way reduction of one to the other, as in the Plotinian and monotheist cases, where so-called "non-existing" really just reduces

to more-than-Being, i.e., even-more-Being, even-more-exclusivity, which is now stipulated to be all that *really* is. That is the test for how seriously you mean it: whether you have a definition that answers to this criterion of synonymity between Being and Non-Being that allows for full symmetrical reversibility between them, no-hold-barred in both directions. If so (as we shall see in Spinoza in Part Two and in our Buddhist writers in online appendix B), you should be able to say, “There is nothing to affirm or deny here: to say God exists or to say he doesn’t exist are equally good ways of talking about it, in either case you’re saying the same thing. God does not exist—so much so that he exists. God exists—so much so that he doesn’t exist.” Not only because God’s non-existence really means God superexists (he is so existent that he is beyond mere existing), but also because God’s existence really means God supernonexists (there is really much less God, much less being and purpose and meaning in the world, than even the most skeptical and cynical atheist suspects). These two must then also be synonymous. That is, we can now say, “Each is more the other than the other itself is,” but by this we don’t just mean “A is more B than B is because B is in reality nothing but B, and B is more A than A is because A is more than A, and so not A.” That really just means everything is A or superA. We must mean each instead in their original sense: the non-existence of God which is God’s truest existence must be the same nonexistence that the atheist experiences and the monotheist fears, but more so. That is atheist mysticism.

But that also means you should be perfectly willing to identify yourself as an atheist, and fight just as hard against the claim that God exists as against the claim that he doesn’t exist. God must be something the existence or non-existence of which *cannot be told apart*; it has to *not matter* whether God exists or not. God’s existence must be literally incapable of being doubted, as in Spinoza—so much so that a denial of his existence is another way of affirming his existence, and affirmation of his existence another way of denying his existence. This fails to be the case as long as God, even when the names “Unity” and “Cause” and “Good” are denied him as insufficient, still functions entirely like a single good cause in his relation to creatures. This can be detected in the status of creatures, of finitude, after all the negation of definite predicates of God is finished: if there is *anything* that stays just as finite and just as created as before, just as “far from” divinity, if the finitude of every creature is not changed by this negative notion of the

infinite, it is a false dawn. This goes for anything *determinable* at all, anything that can be named, anything that can be pointed out, including those things that are relegated to the status of illusions or privations and not-really-real evils: if *any* of these are not entirely transformed by the non-Being and indeterminability and nonknowing of God, we know that we remain right where we started. The indeterminability of God in that case remains a point of contrast, of exclusion, stressing its difference from all created things except insofar as they are restored to their unity with their *final* cause, their purpose. The finite beings are then seen as merely determinate, as having definite essences, and thus (again) as being as unlike the indeterminate divinity as possible. (It is in Spinoza that we find this motif pushed to the point of its self-overcoming, precisely by eliminating teleology from God: there too, the infinity of caused finite things is seen to reside in their inseparability from their infinite cause, but this cause is no longer a final cause, no longer the Good, no longer an inheritor of *Noûs as Arché*; liberated from those constraints, it is now genuine indetermination as infinite superdetermination, and this makes all the difference, as we explore in detail in Chapter 5 of this book.)

For atheist mysticism, it is not enough to say God is the cause of all finite creatures and that all finite creatures are in God, so that in that sense they are all, kind of, also God. The contrast between finite and infinite, between being and non-being, must fall away—not just with respect to God, but with respect to all possible entities, and with respect to all aspects of all possible entities. The first of these (“with respect to all possible entities”) is perhaps aimed at in mystical theologies such as Eckhart’s, where the birth of the Son in the soul overcomes the initial opposition between God and world.<sup>10</sup> But the failure of the second of these (“with respect to all

---

<sup>10</sup> I am guided here by Michael Sells’ excellent account of Eckhart in his *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. By “oppositional” relation between God and world, I mean what Eckhart calls the “equivocal” relation, as explained by Sells: “By equivocal, Eckhart means a relationship of inequality and opposition. If the deity is characterized by life, for example, then the world is dead. If the world is characterized by life, the deity is beyond life.” This equivocal relation is overcome in the “univocal” relation among the persons of the trinity, characterized by identity and equality, as between the Father and the Son. With the birth of the Son in the human soul, the equivocal relation takes on the univocity of the Trinitarian relation. “It is through this ‘birth-of-the-son-in-the-soul’ that attributes such as life and justice take on meaning in both human and divine spheres. Any just work, insofar as it is just, is nothing other than the birth of the divine son within the soul, the one and only birth of the son of God that always has occurred and always is occurring. Any living, insofar as it is genuinely life, is nothing other than this same birth. Insofar as the soul participates in this birth, it is taken up (assumptum) into the univocal realm of divine self-birth where what gives birth is equal to and identical with what is given birth. In the divine (in divinis) what proceeds or is begotten or is born is equal to and the same as its principle.” (Sells, p, 149.)

possible aspects of all possible entities”) is only accentuated by this move as long as this birth is some specific event—a religious experience, a Just as opposed to an Unjust deed, an instance of non-attachment as opposed to attachment. The opposition between God and world has simply been shifted into the opposition between the Godly aspects of the world (the virgin-birthed soul) and everything else in the world. This negative God, even if made present in certain privileged virtues, deeds or mystical states of soul, still stands in the relation of a creator to a creation: above it, prior to it, beyond it, definitively not it, excluding it. This gives God a positive content: God is not the world, or is not some portion of the experienced world. Simply by adding, “And he is not God either, or anything else you can conceive or name” and even “and all things in the world are in him” and even “and he is the innermost core, the very being, of all things in the world” just accentuates all the more God’s transcendence and difference from creatures; it still doesn’t change this relation of transcendence to the world as long as the relations do not thereby become reversible. Irreversibility means there is still an ontological chasm between the two, in spite of the claim of immanence. Straightforward immanence of the kind we find in Eckhart, for example, though phrased as reversibility, really amounts to something quite different, still very much beholden to the *Noûs as Arché* premises of the tradition. We may say, for example, that the Just person “is” Justice itself insofar as he is Just, and in that sense the Just person is and is not the cause of God as much as God is the cause of himself, and of the Just man. But this cannot be said of the Unjust man, or of the Just man insofar as he is not Just, or whatever may be negatively valued according to the standards of *Noûs*, perhaps chaos or matter or evil. The model here is the relation of a thinker to his thought: as Eckhart says, the Son, the Word, is begotten by the father just as a thought is begotten in a mind, for example, the idea of a cabinet in the mind of a cabinet maker: the idea in the mind remains of one substance with the very mind that thinks it. It is the very art of the craftsman himself.<sup>11</sup> *Insofar* as this same idea is instantiated in a further creation of a real cabinet, that same oneness pertains to the existing cabinet. We reach Eckhart’s famous “without why” here, but as in Aristotle, as in Plotinus, it remains firmly within the realm

---

<sup>11</sup> Comm. Jn . 10; LW 3:10: Area in mente et in arte ipsa nee area est nee facta est, sed est ars ipsa, vita est, conceptus vitalis artificis est. Et hoc est quod sequitur: "quod factum est in ipso vita erat."

of the autotelic, rather than the authentically atelic or the omnitelic or the intertelic.<sup>12</sup> We are clearly still here in the *Noûs* paradigm for conceiving oneness and consubstantiality, and we remain as firmly committed to teleology, to purpose and with it absolute moral dualism, just as in the more cataphatic expressions of the same ontological premises. Though God should technically be as above Willing as above Being or Essence or Goodness or Intellect, in fact the dichotomization of purpose and purposelessness that characterizes Willing continues to define the field here. Although all words are inadequate to God, among all the Neo-Platonists and all the more so among the Neo-Platonist monotheists, these terms, and among them especially Willing, are the closest approximations available for human beings for approaching what is technically neither Willing nor Not-Willing (but is really even more like Will than Willing, but not more like Will-lessness than Will-lessness). The cash value of this structural sticking point is most evident in the resultant doctrines concerning the terms maximally distant, or sometimes even excluded, from this alleged infinity: Matter and Evil.

And we see the same pattern even in one of the most recent attempts to wedge open some space for God in a region that is “otherwise than being,” wherein we can in some sense come to a similar conclusion through a completely different set of theistic strategies, notable the Levinasian attempt to reassert the respectability of God in the face of modern philosophy, perhaps the strongest tactic currently available to staunch theists. It is significant that here it is precisely the special status of the idea of infinity that is invoked to make space for God, in this case not at all what Pascal called “the God of the philosophers”—which is what we are dealing with, arguably, in the abstruse reflections of the negative theologians--but instead “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” This begins with figures like Buber and Rosenzweig, but surely reaches its high water mark in Levinas. God, on this reading, is precisely something that is not a “being”—because the true subjectivity of any “other” is never a being, never simply an objective

---

<sup>12</sup> Bret W. Davis has tried to argue that, at least in his most radical moments, Eckhart manages to go beyond the Compensatory Theist position (where human willlessness is to be understood as a surrender to the Will of God), to a position more in keeping with what we call Emulative Atheism, where God himself not only has no Being but also has no Will. But Davis’ argument here is not entirely convincing, forced as it is to make a lot of concessions to the “less radical” Compensatory Theism that we find in the vast majority of Eckhart’s proclamations, where “Will” remains the last hold-out for the Divine even when all other predicates have fallen away, singling out the very few instances which might be read as pointing beyond that paradigm. See Bret W. Davis, *Heidegger and the Will* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), pp. 122-145.

existence with a certain finite set of properties and attributes. The presence of God as, to borrow Buber's lovely image, the virtual point of convergence of the trajectories of every I-Thou relation—in Levinas' terms, every face-to-face relation—is “otherwise than being,” an undermining precisely of the philosophical notion of being as a set of facts arrayed out in the world to be known, explored, learned about, adapted to and mastered by the subject. God is precisely what does not “exist” in this sense. Staring into the face of another person we encounter an inexhaustible and unconquerable otherness, resistant to all mastery or completion, the true infinity of another face. Of course, another sense of God's presence is asserted all the more powerfully through this denial of God's being. Though Levinas struggles mightily and impressively to provide a new account of what those alternatives to objective being amount to, it seems that in the end, here as in the case of the negative theologians, we are still in the same cul-de-sac where the only alternative to the first three forms of the Principle of Sufficient Reason—all the forms of deterministic causality—is the fourth, the teleological PSR of an intentional subject, moved not by mechanical causality or substantial properties but by interpersonal motives and externally unpredictable but necessarily interested agency. As such, we have only another form of bondage to the PSR here, rather than a true overcoming of it. And thus we fall short also of a true overcoming of a domineering autonomy, i.e., the autonomy of God, the reverse reflection of the PSR in the form of a self-sufficient or autotelic exception to the PSR, a cause which is not an effect, a First Mover or Totalizing Being which serves as the ground of all that is subject to the PSR or even of the PSR itself. But this should not blind us to the radicality of the undermining of accustomed notions of God's brute “existence” entailed in this vision. We see a straining at the limits here, a vague sense that something is grievously obstructive in the claim that “God exists.” For here again, to assert that God exists in anything like the ordinary sense in which we use this term is the most lamentable blasphemy (although here it is equally unacceptable to assert, say, that my neighbor “exists” or that I “exist”).

Levinas is an especially interesting case, however, in that in *Totality and Infinity*, he actually starts with a promising engagement with precisely the idea of infinity. But from our present perspective, it would seem that certain telltale premises of his inquiry bedevil the results. Levinas claims that infinity is an idea which, uniquely, is always inadequate to its ideatum,

which is a way of indicating the necessary excess of the ideatum to the idea—and thereby a unique disclosure of a radical encounter with exteriority, with what lies outside any possible ideation or totalization. So far so good. But there is another characteristic of the concept of infinity, equally unique to it, that is neglected here: in addition to being the idea of something necessarily in excess of that idea's content, it is uniquely the one idea of something that necessarily includes the very act of thinking of it: the idea of infinity is the idea of something which must include everything, even that inadequate idea of itself. Infinity can neither exclude anything nor be contained in anything—and to exclude is precisely to be contained. Infinity is not exterior to “the idea of infinity”; it includes and exceeds it. Both the excess and the inclusion are equally intrinsic to the idea of infinity, and it is the precise and manifest convergence of these two contrary necessities that makes this idea so distinctively powerful. “Infinity” is an idea that necessarily and inescapably distorts and misrepresents its ideatum (partially), but also always equally necessarily and inescapably includes and expresses it (partially). Exactly how this “inclusion” and “expression” and this “partially” are to be understood, of course, admit of many possible approaches; but it is certainly worth noting that the neglect of this aspect of the nature of infinity once again undermines the attempt to think about a beyond of being that does not end up steering toward another version of the exclusive oneness, even if it is the self rather than the other that is excluded. The eschewal of totality, evidently an attempt to avoid precisely the kind of unity characteristic of the exclusive oneness, ends up having just the same effect as that eschewed totality—and once again the beyond of being therefore transcends only the first three of Schopenhauer's forms of the PSR, submitting entirely to the fourth: the transcendent again falls into the hands of the personal, the purposive, “the Good.” It can be argued that the later Levinas of *Otherwise than Being* begins to address this, presenting the proximity of the neighbor less in terms of an impossible exteriority and more in terms of an immanent experience of continual interruption, a hospitality embodying the anarchy of the infinite rather than a subservience to a fully constituted alien will. The question is whether this anarchic interruption of the self is not itself the real presence of the infinite, rather than being transposed onto an allegedly uninterrupted Other. Infinity as an interrupting but itself uninterrupted Other would be God; if selfhood per se, whether our own or any other's, is immanently a self-interruption, our

own interruption discloses to us not “the Other” but “infinite others”—each of whom must be another non-God like ourselves. The program should be fulfilled, then, in a ringing advocacy for thoroughgoing atheism or polytheism. But is it? The hypostases of these infinite othernesses of infinite anarchy into “the Other,” singular, is precisely an inverted form of the totality which the infinite was meant to subvert.

Things are rather different with the non-*Noûs* versions of ineffability, the *wuwei* of raw infinity. There, when the crude mutual externality of parts coming from the initial whole/part model is overcome, we have an exceptionless reversibility, deriving from a oneness that includes rather than excludes. Put simply, as long as I cannot say “I am God,” or “precisely this broken cup is God” or “the brokenness of this cup is God”—not a part of God, not in God because God is its final cause, not sustained by God, not having God as its innermost being, not insofar as the divine idea of a cup, which is itself one with God, is the real being of the cup, but rather the cupness qua cupness in its precise brokenness here and now as the real cause of the universe, the real ground of all existence, the real substratum of all other existences, so that God and God’s idea of the cup are themselves also merely a part of this cup, such that it is this cup that sustains God, this cup is the very being of God—as long as we can’t say that, the exclusive oneness of monotheism remains in force. We will examine versions of this full convergence of infinity and finitude in Part Two and online appendix B. In contrast, the noneness of God, like the oneness of God, is exclusive of all other claimants, rather than inclusive of all claimants. The nothingness of theistic negative theologies remains an exclusive noneness, rather than an inclusive noneness, describable either as a definitive blank that excludes all finitude or as an omnipresent plenum of unitary formal reality, but in both cases it definitively excludes something—creaturely sin and rebellion and neglect of God to be sure, and more generally all illusion and matter and multiplicity, all particular instances of contingency, senselessness, purposelessness, raw undirected particular presence of whatever might be going on. For the latter, we need the very different conception of nothingness found among the mystical atheists who are the focus of this book—a shape-shifting mirror that itself never lands unilaterally on any one side—infinite and/or/as finite, unitary/formal/real universal and/or/as illusory/material/multiple/particular.

*Postscript*

It should be clear now that the mystical adaptations of Plotinian apophaticism undertaken within monotheism, far from overcoming the difficulties inherent in the Plotinian version, in fact inherit the same structure of exclusion, and its same basic problems. Indeed, the attempted theological ameliorations do not resolve these problems but rather grievously exacerbate them, due to the recalcitrance of the basic metaphysical premises intrinsic to the *Noûs as Arché* structure. To clarify this, I'll address just three commonly cited examples of theological doctrines that allegedly remedy Platonic limitations, and indicate how each backfires, making the problem worse:

- 1)           The Incarnation: The inclusion of one instance of particularity, the Incarnation, is sometimes suggested as an overcoming of the exclusion of finitude, particularity and contingency in the Absolute. But it does nothing to change the key problem; like everything else that happens in this theistic cosmos, it remains entirely under the control and direction of the universal divine will; no actual particularity in the radical sense of true separation from the universal is possible in this cosmic "planned community." Particulars are pre-integrated into the purposivity of the universal by the final causality that stands at the root of every molecule of their being. But even if this single instance were admitted as truly included in the universal divine in its very contingency and particularity, it would only make matters worse: the mutual exclusivity of raw particulars would then be imported into the Absolute. The inclusion of this one particular would all the more exacerbate the exclusion of all others.
- 2)           The eternity of the individual: It is sometimes claimed that the focus on individual souls, and God's adoption or even inclusion into himself of (some form) of the immortal soul of each and every human being is a big improvement over abstract eternity of the universal Platonic forms, which certainly embrace the universal "Man" but which may or may not include the specific eternal presence of the unique individual Socrates, et al. Leaving aside the fact that this attention to individual humans is often (though admittedly not always, as we've seen above) bought at the very high cost of two further

exclusions (the exclusion from this divine eternity of all non-human beings, and also the exclusion of the damned), a further much more crucial price is paid for this move. In Plotinus, as we've discussed in the main body of this work, all the universals are interpenetrating; the entire range of them is present in each. The soul too has this default omniscient structure: the entirety of the psyche that moves all the world is present in each individual motion of soul going on in every entity in the temporal world. This dimension of interpenetration of all spiritual things, existing as a fluid medium of ever-changing temporary boundaries, ever creating and ever destroying and ever combining and ever separating new combinations and intersubsumptions, is by necessity entirely occluded with the either/or focus of salvation and damnation of souls, vying to qualify for the privilege of inclusion in the divine nature. In the Plotinian vision, any intelligible anywhere includes all others in a transformed virtual form, each participating in all the others, and any motion of soul anywhere carries with it all soul, multilocal and instantaneously shape-shifting into every cognized object, and it is precisely this mobility and interchange and mutual virtual copresence that makes soul soul. In theism, only God is permitted to contain all others in a transformed virtual form: the individual souls must remain separate and distinct from one another forever! This is of course necessitated by the requirement that different eternal souls have different eternal fates: it would not do if the souls of the damned carried the souls of the blessed with them into hell—or vice versa, apparently. The kind of individuality to which the spiritual life is thus necessarily whittled down is a soul that has all the earmarks of precisely what, for Plotinus, makes matter matter: absolute separation of distinct, unilocal, untransforming entities. Even sensation, thought and aspiration are now, if not mere qualities belonging to this unchanging subject as to an object, themselves simply distinct “actions,” each as separate and distinct from every other as one stone from another—which is also due to the requirement that every spiritual act is supposed to have a single moral valence, ultimately to be judged dichotomously. Here again it is the premise of God, as purposive, therefore as judge, therefore as the demander of ultimate dichotomies, that breaks everything into atomized inert pieces, even souls and the actions of souls. The kind of individual that is

thus prized and preserved in the theistic adaptations of the Plotinian idea is itself already an impoverished individuality; the actual spiritual life, what it actually is to be a living individual, a spiritual ensouled cognizing being (namely, to be participating in, incorporating, presencing oneself in every other available identity, to virtually bear all identities in oneself and to constantly transcend and reshape oneself thereby and thereto and therefrom) is precisely what is excluded.

3) The creation ex nihilo of matter and the resurrection of the body: In the Plotinian system, matter is blamed for precisely the kind of limitation and mutual externality that Christian souls end up being saddled with. In Plotinus, this leaves the soul and the intelligible realm of *Noûs* untouched by this fragmentation, but at the cost of leaving to matter all the inertness, limitation, externality found in our ordinary existence, and then excluding all of that, precisely qua fragmentation, from the unity and transcendence of the One, the intersubsumption of *Noûs*, the omniscient motility of soul. Matter, though it is not a being, or precisely *because* it is not a being, is entirely independent of the One. Some apologists will say that one of the great boons of the Biblical creation ex nihilo is that matter too comes into the bailiwick of the Divine. Similarly, as opposed to the Platonic salvation and eternity that pertain only to non-material entities like souls and minds, leaving the body entirely to destruction, the eschatological Jewish, Christian and Muslim belief in bodily resurrection of the dead for the first time gives proper respect to the material body, and even incorporates it into the divine plan, into salvation, into eternity. These are taken to be advances in the inclusion of matter into mystical experience, over against the dualistic disdain to which Plotinus had consigned it. But here too, because what counts as “the divine” has been degraded into a mere purposive God, this elevation of matter into it is really a further degradation of matter. In Plotinus matter was the only thing that escaped the clutches of purpose and the tool-toward-the-Good determinacy that was imposed upon all real entities—and for that very reason became, we claim, against Plotinus’s own intentions, indistinguishable from the Good, the One, that stands above all purpose (though as we’ve seen, thereby also unfortunately imposing purpose on everything else, and also, at certain moments of

weakness, described by Plotinus figuratively as having a will in a way that is never applied to matter, as we saw in Chapter 4). Its fragmentation, its lack of discernible unity, was thus at the same time its greatest resistance to the One and its greatest resemblance to it. And it was here that we could locate the true glory and divinity of matter in the Plotinian system, the implicit dignity of its resistance to the One, inasmuch as this was precisely wherein it most exemplified the One, i.e., in its resistance to any definite determination. This is the true way to honor both separation and unity, individuality and commonality—by seeing their necessary convergence at both ends of any spectrum of being. Precisely the opposite is what happens when matter is created by God and even our bodies are subjected to the selection process imposed by his will, such that some are transfigured and maintained eternally in glory while others are destroyed or tortured for eternity. In that case, the very last bastion of resistance to the all-consuming universality of the divine purpose has been usurped, monopolized, commandeered into the plan. The bad unity of purposivity and the bad individuality of tools with the single function of serving the one purpose in various ways has now become the inescapable universal law, without even the exception of matter or body to escape its clutches. All loopholes have now been closed; there is no longer any place of convergence, of double-identity, of the most individualized which is at once the most indistinct, the most particular which also the most universal: for that was what matter always was for Plotinus, the One and the anti-One, the different and the same, and what is closer to us than our own hands and eyes. Now that this is gone, due to the creation ex nihilo of the purposive God, its loss is sorely felt. And cunningly, a surrogate for what used to be spread out everywhere upon the earth is provided: a single case of convergence of the low and the high, the Incarnation—upon which, since it is no longer available everywhere like the air, a monopoly is declared. This new proprietary blend now comes with a steep cost. See Item 1!