

CHAPTER ONE

BEYOND BEING AND INTELLIGIBILITY

In recent decades there has been a surge of interest in “negative theology,”¹ of which Dionysius is a leading exponent, and hence many studies of this feature of Dionysius’ thought.² Rarely, however, do such studies attempt to present the philosophical argumentation that underlies his teachings. The doctrine that God or the One, the first principle of reality, lies beyond being and beyond thought, for Dionysius and his Neoplatonic forebears, is not an ungrounded starting point or an article of faith but rather the conclusion of a rigorous sequence of philosophical reasoning, and only by following this argumentation can we truly understand the doctrine’s meaning. Neoplatonic and Dionysian “negative theology” and “mysticism” is an aspect of rational metaphysics, and must be interpreted and evaluated as such. The aim of the present chapter, therefore, is to expose the philosophical grounds and meaning of Dionysius’ negative theology by showing how the argument behind it is developed in the Greek philosophical tradition that Dionysius draws on and continues.

The foundational principle of Neoplatonic thought is the doctrine that to be is to be intelligible. The identification of being, τὸ ὄν, that which is, as that which can be apprehended by νόησις, intellection, is the basis not only for the Platonic and Neoplatonic identification of being as form or idea (εἶδος, ἰδέα), and the associated view that the sensible is less than completely real, but also for the Neoplatonic insistence that the One or Good, the source of reality, is itself “beyond being.” To arrive at a philosophical understanding of Dionysius’ doctrines of being and of God, therefore, we must begin by examining the meaning and grounds of this principle, and then see how its implications are unfolded in Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy.

The idea of being as intelligible is implicit in Greek philosophy from the very beginning. The philosophical enterprise, insofar as it is an endeavor to think reality as one whole, always already presupposes that being as such is able to be grasped by thought. This presupposition is first made explicit by

Parmenides: “For you could not know that which is not, for it is impossible, nor express it; for the same thing is for thinking and for being [οὔτε γὰρ ἀν γνοίης τό γε μὴ ἔόν (οὐ γὰρ ἀνυστόν)/οὔτε φράσαις. Τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἔστιν τε καὶ εἶναι].”³ Parmenides indicates here, first, that thought is always the apprehension of some being. For whatever is thought is necessarily thought as something, i.e. as some being. Τὸ μὴ ἔόν, that which is not, cannot be thought, for to think absolute non-being would be to have no object or content for thought, to be not thinking anything, and hence not to be thinking. We may recall here the Thomistic principle, derived at long remove from this Parmenidean insight: “Being falls first in the conception of intellect . . . Wherefore being is the proper object of intellect [*Primo autem in conceptione intellectus cadit ens . . . Unde ens est proprium objectum intellectus*].”⁴ Whatever is thought is thought most basically and generically as some being, which may then be specified by various determinations. Second, Parmenides in this passage affirms that being extends no further than that which can be apprehended by thought, that there cannot be anything beyond the reach of thought. It would be incoherent even to postulate an unintelligible being, a being that cannot be thought, for to do so would already be to think such a being. Parmenides’ fragment thus brings to light the obvious but vital point that to think being, that which is, at all, is already to presuppose its intelligibility. To think being is to think it *as thinkable*. Indeed, it follows not merely that being and intelligibility are coextensive, as Parmenides plainly asserts, but that intelligibility is the very meaning of being: by *being* we can only mean “what is there for thought,” for since thought cannot extend to anything else, “anything else” is mere empty noise—in short, nothing (τὸ μὴ ἔόν). If ‘being,’ “that which is” considered as one whole, has any meaning at all, then it necessarily means “that which is available for thinking,” i.e. that which is intelligible. That which is, then, is (wholly and solely) that which can be apprehended by intellection, and intellection is (wholly and solely) the apprehension of that which is.

Plato’s understanding of being as form or idea (εἶδος, ἰδέα) is a direct consequence of this identification of being and intelligibility. Although in many ways critical of his awesome father figure Parmenides, Plato wholly adopts the doctrine of τὸ ὄν, that which is, as τὸ νοητόν, that which can be apprehended by intellect, and makes it the center of his metaphysics (e.g. *Phaedrus* 247c7–8; *Timaeus* 27d6–28a3). Consequently, what is real, for Plato, is the “looks” (εἶδη) that sensible things display to the mind, the universal natures or “whatnesses” that characterize them and can be definitively grasped in thought.⁵ The forms, and only the forms, are “really real,” precisely because they and only they are altogether intelligible. Form is “what is there for thought,” and therefore it is τὸ ὄν. Its complete reality consists in its perfect intelligibility. Conversely, sensible instances, on Plato’s view, are less than really real in that they are constituted as multiple appearances of the unitary forms, apprehended not by intellection but by sensation and opinion

(δόξα), the apprehension of appearance rather than reality (see esp. *Republic* 476a4–7). As appearances or images, sensibles are not mere illusion, or nothing (as Parmenides may have believed), but neither are they being itself, the reality which appears, the universal natures apprehended by intellect. They are rather, as Plato says, “in between” “that which altogether is,” i.e. intelligible reality, the forms, and “that which altogether is not,” i.e. nothing. The “in between” status of sensibles, *qua* appearances, and the perfect reality of the forms, are together correlated to the mode in which each is cognized. “That which altogether is [τὸ . . . παντελῶς ὄν] is altogether knowable, while that which in no way is is in no way knowable” (*Republic* 477a2–3), whereas “if something should appear such as at once to be and not to be, this will lie in between that which purely is and that which wholly is not, and neither knowledge nor ignorance will be about it, but again what appears between ignorance and knowledge,” i.e. opinion (*Republic* 478d5–11). Plato’s levels of being are correlated to levels of cognitive apprehension, and this is just because being is identified with intelligibility.

Contrary to Parmenides, however, Plato regards being, *qua* intelligible, not as simple but as complex, a multiplicity of interrelated forms. He argues, explicitly in opposition to Parmenides, that “relative non-being,” or difference, must be included in the altogether real. Each form is *not* any of the other forms, i.e. is different from them, and thus shares in Difference (*Sophist* 255e4–6, 258d7–e3). Difference, no less than identity, is necessary for and constitutive of being. But this doctrine of being as an internally differentiated multiplicity of forms is itself a consequence of the intelligibility of being. As Plato points out, the forms are intelligible only in relation to each other, by the method of “collection and division,” whereby the less universal forms are identified as differentiated specifications of the more universal, and the more universal forms are understood as unities overarching and pervading a multiplicity of less universal ones (*Phaedrus* 265c8–266c1; cf. *Sophist* 253b8–e2). The forms’ differences from and relations to one another are necessary conditions for their intelligibility. “For through the interweaving of the forms with each other discourse [λόγος] comes to be for us” (*Sophist* 259e5–6). Thus, it is precisely as intelligible that the altogether real must be a multiplicity of distinct, interwoven forms.

Plato’s doctrine of the Good as that which “provides” being is also grounded in the identification of being and intelligibility. In his well-known criticism of Anaxagoras in the *Phaedo*, Socrates says that when he first heard Anaxagoras’ claim that “intellect [νοῦς] is the orderer and cause of all things . . . it seemed to me in a certain way good that intellect be the cause of all things; and I thought, if it was so, that the ordering intellect orders all things and establishes each thing in whatever way would be best” (97c1–6). In other words, an explanation of things as conforming to the demands of intellect necessarily accounts for them in terms of goodness. Socrates goes on to say that in failing to give explanations of this kind, Anaxagoras “made no

use of intellect” (*Phaedo* 98b8–9). Plato here indicates, then, that goodness is the principle of intellectual understanding and of intelligibility itself. The intellect by nature demands to see goodness in its object in order to understand, to make sense of it. Any thing, event, action, or process can be intellectually understood only in terms of the good which is the ultimate “why” for it. And whatever can be so understood, whatever is intelligible, is so only because and insofar as it is ordered on the basis of goodness.⁶ Consequently, those “physicists” who give merely mechanical accounts of nature “think that, truly, the Good and the Right [τὸ ἀγαθὸν καὶ δέον] do not bind and hold anything together” (*Phaedo* 99c). The position presented here, then, is that it is indeed the Good that “binds and holds all things together,” precisely because only if this is so can “all things” be understood by the mind at all.

This argumentation underlies Plato’s representation of the Good in the *Republic* under the image of the sun. Just as the sun, by providing light, makes it possible for sensible things to be seen and for the eye to see them, so the Good provides that which makes the forms able to be known and the intellect able to know them (*Republic* 508b12–c2). The Good, in other words, is the enabling source of intelligibility and intellection. “When [the soul] is fixed upon that which truth and being [ἀλήθειά τε καὶ τὸ ὄν] illuminates, it thinks [ἐνόησέν] and knows and appears to have intellect [νοῦν]; but when [it is fixed] upon that which is mixed with darkness, upon that which comes into being and passes away, it opines and is dimmed and changes its opinions up and down and seems then not to have intellect [νοῦν οὐκ ἔχοντι]” (*Republic* 508d4–9). The fundamental meaning of “truth” (ἀλήθεια), as Heidegger never tires of pointing out, is “unconcealedness.” The truth of the forms is their unconcealedness, their availability or accessibility to the mind—in short, their intelligibility. And this, Plato says, is provided by the Good. For in the absence of goodness, consciousness, attempting to understand reality, is like the eye in the absence of light: it is at a loss, it flounders, it cannot “see” its objects; it “does not have intellect.” Just as there can be neither visibility nor vision without light, so there can be neither intelligibility nor intellection without goodness. Consequently, as Plato goes on to say, “That which provides truth to the things known and gives power [i.e. the ability to know] to the knower is the form [ἰδέαν] of the Good” (*Republic* 508e1–3). In other words, any and all beings, i.e. the forms, are intelligible only in virtue of the “look of goodness” that they have and display.⁷

But Plato here says that the Good provides to the forms not only ἀλήθεια, or intelligibility, but also τὸ ὄν, the status of being beings.⁸ Later, he says that “to the things that are known, not only their being known is present by the Good, but also their being and reality is present to them by it” (*Republic* 508e1–3). This claim can be justified only on the basis of the identity between being and intelligibility: precisely because the status of being consists in availability to intellectual apprehension, the Good, in pro-

viding the latter, constitutes the forms as beings, as that which is. Since anything can be intellectually grasped only in virtue of its goodness, the Good is the only possible “why” for being *qua* intelligible, which is to say for being *qua* being.

Plato goes on to say, in what is for Neoplatonism perhaps the single most important passage in his works, that “the Good is not reality, but excels beyond reality [ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας] in seniority [πρεσβεῖα⁹] and power” (*Republic* 508e1–3). Since the Good provides being and intelligibility to the forms, which taken together constitute οὐσία, reality, the whole of what is, it is itself not merely one of them, a member of that complex whole, but lies “beyond” it. As that by which the forms are intelligible and are beings, the Good is ontologically prior to the forms, and in this sense “older” than being, and makes them to be, in this sense transcending them in power. The precise ontological status of the Good in relation to the forms and to intellect remains ambiguous, since Plato also calls it an “ἰδέα” and an object of intellection; but Plato at least recognizes here that being, as the multiplicity of the forms, cannot be ultimate, that it depends for its existence and intelligibility on a principle that transcends it, and identifies this principle as the Good.¹⁰

Plotinus adopts and develops Plato’s understanding of being. Following Plato, he identifies being as the unified multiplicity of purely intelligible, eternal forms, and he regards sensible things as not true beings but images or appearances of the forms. But Plotinus, far more explicitly than Plato, identifies being not only as the object but as the content of thought and therefore as Thought, or Intellect, itself.¹¹ For (to summarize and paraphrase his arguments) if being were external to thought, then the actual content of thought, what thought apprehends, would not be reality itself but some image or impression of it. Thought, therefore, on this view, could never reach reality (see e.g. V.5.1.20–27; V.5.2.1–9). Rather, as Plotinus argues in a Platonic adaptation of Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, intellection, in that what it apprehends is pure idea, contains its object in itself and hence is what it thinks (see e.g. V.9.5–8). Conversely, being, as form or idea, can be nothing but the content of thought, and is therefore not other than the intellect which thinks it. Intellect and the intelligible meet and are one as intellection. “All together are one, Intellect, intellection, the intelligible [νοῦς, νόησις, τὸ νοητόν]” (V.3.5.43–44), and “we have here, then, one nature, Intellect, all beings, truth” (V.5.3.1–2). Here Parmenides’ insight reaches its fulfilment: being and thought are not merely coextensive but identical, because being can be nothing but the content of thought and thought can be nothing but the apprehension of being.

As intelligible and intelligent, Plotinus argues, being or Intellect is necessarily complex, internally differentiated, and indeed is constituted as being and as Intellect by the differentiation of the forms from one another within it. For any being can be intelligible, and hence can be a being, only if it is determinate, a distinct “this:” “A substance [οὐσίαν, reality] must be

some one particular thing [τόδε . . . τι], something, that is, defined and limited" (V.5.6.6–7). But since a being can be determinate or defined only by distinction, by being "marked off" from other beings, intelligibility, and therefore being, depends on the differentiation of the beings, or forms, from one another. "The objects of thought . . . must have otherness in relation to each other" (V.1.4.39–40), and "the thinker must apprehend one thing different from another and the object of thought in being thought must contain variety" (V.3.10.40–42; see also V.3.10.30f). Being as a whole, therefore, is intelligible, and so is, only in virtue of the internal differentiation of the forms from one another, and this differentiation is constitutive of being itself. The differentiation of one being from another is what makes all things to be intelligible and so to be.

Each form, or being, then, is constituted as a being by its proper determination. "This is why they [the contents of Intellect] are substances; for they are already defined and each has a kind of shape. Being must not fluctuate, so to speak, in the indefinite, but must be fixed by limit and stability; and stability among intelligible things is definition and shape, and it is by these that it receives existence" (V.1.7.23–27). In the absence of differentiation, distinction, and determination, and hence in the absence of multiplicity, there is no intelligibility and therefore no being. The doctrine that being is constituted by determination or differentiation, and that it is therefore necessarily multiple, is a direct consequence of the principle that to be is to be intelligible.

Plotinus' doctrine that being or Intellect is not the first principle but derives from the One or Good, which itself lies "beyond being," is a further consequence of the same line of thought. Since every being is intelligible, and hence is, only in virtue of the determination whereby it is what it is, every being depends for its existence on that determination. Again, every being must have unity, must be some one being, in order to be; but being as a whole and each being within it involves multiplicity of content, without which it would not be intelligible. Therefore, each being can be only in virtue of the unity by which it is this one being: "It is by the One that all beings are beings, both those which are primarily beings and those which are in any sense said to be among beings. For what could anything be if it was not one?" (VI.9.1.1–3). In short, for any being, to be is to be finite and unitary, and hence to be dependent on the unifying definition by which it is the one being that it is. Having discovered that being as such must be dependent, Plotinus therefore turns to the One as the ground or source on which being depends, that by which all beings are beings. All beings depend on, and in that sense derive or proceed from, the One or Good, as the "definer" (V.1.5.8–9)¹² or "measure of all things" (VI.8.18.3), which makes all things to be in that it provides the unifying determination whereby each being is itself and so is.¹³

This reasoning offers a very clear and precise explanation of what Plotinus means by describing the One as "beyond being." Whatever Plato

may have intended by this phrase, Plotinus' interpretation of it is unambiguous. Since to be is to be intelligible and therefore finite, any being whatsoever is dependent on its determination and is thus derivative. Hence, to be is to be derivative. No being, therefore, can be the first principle, and the first principle cannot be any being; for if it were any being it would be finite and hence not first but dependent on its determination. Further, it would be one member within the complex totality of all beings, rather than the source of that totality. This would mean that it would have various attributes, such as being, intelligibility, unity, and so on, in common with the other beings; and for Platonic thought, whenever different things share (or "participate in") a common attribute, that attribute itself, as the one nature by which all the participants are such as they are, is ontologically prior to the participants. If, therefore, the first principle were a member of the totality of beings, it would not be first. The One, therefore, "is not equal to the other units so as to be one of their company; otherwise, there will be something in common between it and those which are included in the count with it, and that something in common will be before the One itself" (V.5.4.14–17). Again, if the One were a member of the totality of beings, i.e. were a being, it would be differentiated from the other beings within that totality (see V.5.13.20–24), and so would be determinate, finite, and dependent. In short, no common term whatsoever, including 'being,' can embrace both the One and its products, for the One would then be included within the totality and differentiated from others within it. Plotinus thus interprets "beyond being" in a purely negative sense, as meaning, only, that the One is not any being. "This phrase 'beyond being' does not mean that it is a particular thing—for it makes no positive statement about it—and it does not say its name, but all it implies is that it is 'not this'" (V.5.6.11–14). And this presupposes the understanding of being as that which is intelligible and, as intelligible, necessarily determinate:

Since the substance which is generated [from the One] is form . . . the One must be without form. But if it is without form it is not a substance; for a substance must be some one particular thing, something, that is, defined and limited; but it is impossible to apprehend the One as a particular thing: for then it would not be the principle, but only that particular thing which you said it was. But if all things are in that which is generated [from the One], which of the things in it are you going to say that the One is? Since it is none of them, it can only be said to be beyond them. But these things are beings, and being: so it is 'beyond being.' (V.5.6.2–11)

Here Plotinus summarizes with exceptional clarity the reasoning behind, and meaning of, his doctrine that the One is "beyond being."¹⁴

Plotinus has sometimes been interpreted to mean by "beyond being" merely "infinite being," a phrase which he himself could not use because in

his inherited philosophical lexicon 'being' (ὄν) comports finitude.¹⁵ But such a reading misses the point. Not because of an accidental restriction on the usage of the term 'being,' but because of the philosophically grounded principle that to be is to be intelligible, being necessarily entails finitude, so that 'finite being' is a redundancy and 'infinite being' a contradiction in terms. To be is to be something, and to be something is to be finite. We must therefore take Plotinus at his word when he insists that the One is nothing (οὐδέν), not any being, not any thing at all (e.g. VI.9.3.41).¹⁶ "That [i.e., the One] is not anything [οὐ τι], but before each and every thing, and is not a being [οὐδέ ὄν]; for being has a kind of shape of being, but that has no shape, not even intelligible shape. For since the nature of the One is generative of all things it is none of them [οὐδέν . . . αὐτῶν]" (VI.9.3.38–41; cf. III.8.9.55). If Plotinus, very occasionally, uses expressions which suggest that the One in some sense is, this is simply an inevitable impropriety, in that thought and language necessarily treat whatever they treat as a being. In the light of Plotinus' more careful and frequent philosophical precisions, such passages merely serve to lend support to his position that it is not possible or appropriate to speak or think the One at all.

Thus we come to Plotinus' apophaticism or "negative theology." To think or refer to the One at all, even as "cause," as "it," as "that," is, inevitably, to treat it as a being, for thought and language can deal only with beings. Hence Plotinus says, "Even to say 'cause' is not to predicate something accidental of it, but of us, that we have something from it, while that is in itself; but neither ought one who speaks precisely say 'that' or 'is'" (VI.9.3.49–52). This crucial passage makes clear that when he speaks of the One as the cause of all things, Plotinus is not attributing being and causality to the One, but is merely indicating the secondary, derivative status of being. Initially, therefore, all language about the One, like the phrase "beyond being," must be purely negative in meaning. Even the term "One," Plotinus suggests, "contains only a denial of multiplicity" (V.5.6.26–27). The One, then, is not one in any positive sense, i.e. having the attribute of unity; nor is it simple, i.e. having the attribute of simplicity.¹⁷

But Plotinus' apophaticism does not consist merely in negative language, for even such language still represents conceptual definition and intellectual apprehension: to say that the One is "not this" is, inescapably, to think it as something else; to say that it is not multiple or complex is to think it as unitary or simple. In the end, Plotinus says, we must negate even such negative definitions, including the name *One* itself: "But if the One—name and reality expressed—were to be taken positively it would be less clear than if we did not give it a name at all; for perhaps this name [One] was given it in order that the seeker, beginning from this which is completely indicative of simplicity, may finally negate this as well" (V.5.6.31–34).¹⁸ Genuine apophasis, then, consists not in negations but in the silence of the mind, rising above thought altogether: "Now if you want to grasp the

'isolated and alone' you will not think [οὐ νοήσεις]" (V.3.13.32–33). Thus we return once more to the correlation between being and thinking, such that all being is the object of some thinking, and hence does not include the One, and all thinking is the apprehension of some being, and hence does not attain the One.¹⁹

Dionysius adopts his doctrine of God as "nameless," "unknowable," and "beyond being" from the Neoplatonic tradition established by Plotinus, and his thought can be understood only in that context.²⁰ His "negative theology" is not fundamentally a theory of theological language but a philosophical position taken over directly from Neoplatonism, although, as in Plotinus, it has implications for language in that words are discursive expressions of intellection and hence cannot apply to God. Dionysius expressly adopts the Parmenidean and Platonic account of being and thought as coterminous, and therefore locates God beyond both together: "For if all knowledges are of beings and have their limit in beings, that which is beyond all being also transcends all knowledge" (DN I.4, 593A). Dionysius' God, like the One of Plotinus, is transcendent, not in a vague, unspecified sense, but in the very precise metaphysical sense that he is not at all included within the whole of reality, of things that are, as any member of it. If he has no "name," this is because he is not anything at all. God is not merely beyond "human thought" or "finite thought," as if there were some "other" sort of thought that could reach him, or as if his incomprehensibility were simply due to a limitation on our part, but is beyond thought as such, because thought is always directed to beings, and hence to that which is finite and derivative.²¹ When we hear that God is beyond being, we inevitably imagine some thing, a "superessentiality," lying above or outside of being. But this fails to realize the meaning of "beyond being," because it still thinks of God as something, some being.²² Rather, we must recognize that for Dionysius, as for Plotinus, God is simply not anything, not "there" at all. If our thought cannot attain to God, this is not because of our weakness but because there is no "there" there, no being, no thing that is God. Understanding Dionysius within the Neoplatonic tradition to which he belongs, we must take him at his word and not seek to mitigate the force of his negations by interpreting his thought in the light of later theories which attempt to allow for "infinite being" and thus break with the fundamental Neoplatonic principle that to be is to be intelligible and therefore to be finite.²³

Consequently, Dionysius' so-called negative theology, like that of Plotinus, is not merely negative, if by that we mean, as is commonly said, that "we cannot say what God is but only what he is not."²⁴ For negation, no less than affirmation, is still an intellectual activity and as such necessarily identifies its object in conceptual terms and so treats it as finite. To say "God is not such-and-such" is to regard God as something, some being, distinguished from other beings by the lack of some feature that they possess, and thus to circumscribe God in thought. To deny any attribute of God is

still to treat him as a conceptual object, defined by the possession or privation of various attributes. Hence Dionysius carefully explains, near the beginning of the *Mystical Theology*, that although in ascending to “the cause of all things” we must, at one stage, deny all attributes of all things to him, nonetheless we must “not think that the negations are opposed to the affirmations, but much rather that that which is beyond the privations is beyond every affirmation and negation” (MT I.2, 1000B). Later, having denied of God all attributes, whether sensible or intelligible, he concludes, “Nor is there any affirmation or negation whatever of it . . . since the all-perfect and single cause of all things is above every affirmation, and the transcendence of that which is simply freed from all things and beyond the wholes is above every negation” (MT V, 1048B). In the end, then, we cannot say what God is not any more than we can say what he is, because God neither is nor is not anything at all—and this, of course, is still to say too much.

Similarly, Dionysius is not content to say simply that God is ineffable, unknowable, or incomprehensible. To say “God is ineffable” is to describe him, to ascribe the attribute of ineffability to him, and thus to contradict oneself.²⁵ When we say that God is unknowable or incomprehensible, we inevitably imagine some being that cannot be known, something as it were “out there” beyond the reach of thought. This is inevitable because thought always, necessarily, intends some being. But here again we contradict ourselves, for we are thus thinking that which we are claiming to be beyond the reach of thought. Hence Dionysius uses terms such as *ὑπεράγνωστον* (DN I.4, 592D; MT I.1, 997A) and *ὑπεραῤῥήτως* (DN I.4, 592D): God is not merely unknowable but beyond unknowing, not merely ineffable but beyond ineffability. And of course, even these are still words, names, conceptual definitions, and must be transcended.

Ultimately, then, for Dionysius as for Plotinus, negative theology consists not in any words or thoughts whatsoever, however negative or superlative, but in the absolute silence of the mind. We must “honor the hidden of the divinity, beyond intellect and reality, with unsearchable and sacred reverence of mind, and ineffable things with a sober silence” (DN I.4, 592D). More precisely, Dionysius says that the union of minds with the “superdivine light” takes place “in the cessation of every intellectual activity [*πάσης νοεράς ἐνεργείας ἀπόπαυσιν*]” (DN I.5, 593C) and that “ceasing from our intellectual activities we throw ourselves into the ray beyond being as far as possible” (DN I.4, 592CD). Likewise, in the *Mystical Theology*, he explains that we are united with the altogether unknown “in the inactivity of every knowledge [*πάσης γνώσεως ἀνενεργησίᾳ*]” (MT I.3, 1001A), and that “entering into the darkness above intellect we find not little speech [*βραχυλογία*] but complete non-speech [*ἀλογία*] and non-intellection [*ἀνοησίαν*]” (MT III.1, 1033C). As the repeated references to the cessation or absence of *νόησις* indicate, this is not mere mystical hyperbole or an attempt to articulate some sublime experience, but rather the strictly philo-

sophical consequence of the identification of being and intelligibility: as long as any speaking or thinking is taking place, we are necessarily in the realm of beings, of things that are, and hence are not attaining to God. A “God” who either is or is not anything at all, who could be grasped by thought whether positively or negatively, would not be God but a being, and as such finite and created.²⁶ “And if anyone, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see [God] himself, but something of those things of his which are and are known [τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινώσκομένων]” (Ep. 5, 1065A). Only this Neoplatonic argumentation enables us to grasp the meaning and philosophical justification of Dionysius’ extreme “mystical” formulations.

We may be inclined to ask whether such a radical treatment of divine transcendence means that God simply disappears from view altogether, in such a way that, as has been remarked, “the truth of negative theology is atheism.” But Dionysius’ Neoplatonic negative theology transcends atheism no less than it does theism. To be sure, Dionysius is not a theist, since theism, as ordinarily understood, involves the claim that God exists (whatever qualifications may then be added concerning the “mode” of his existence); and many misunderstandings have arisen from attempts to interpret Dionysius and other Neoplatonists theistically and thus not to take with full seriousness their insistence that the One or God is beyond being and is not anything at all, that no common term whatever can embrace both God and his products. But neither is Dionysius an atheist, for on his principles it is no more correct to say “God is not” than to say “God is” (i.e. is a being). Simply to deny that God exists, to say “God is not” or “There is no God” is still to consider God as some (putative) being, and then to deny that there is such a being, as when we say “There is no tenth planet” or “There are no unicorns.” This still treats God as some distinct conceptual object and so fails truly to intend God at all. Neoplatonic and Dionysian negative theology, on the other hand, refuses to consider God as anything at all, whether to affirm or to deny the existence of such a thing. Indeed, both “theism” and “atheism” are distinctively modern phenomena which cannot properly be read into Neoplatonism. In the words of Jean-Luc Marion,

The distinctive feature of modernity does not at all consist in a negation of God . . . Modernity is characterized in the first place by the annulling of God as a question . . . What then is found set in play in a negation or an affirmation of God? Not God as such, but the compatibility or incompatibility of an idol called ‘God’ with the totality of a conceptual system where the being in its being marks the age . . . Theism or atheism bear equally on an idol. They remain enemies, but brother enemies in a common and insurpassable idolatry.²⁷

Theism and atheism are brethren born of modernity, where God is reduced to “the supreme being” and true transcendence is lost. Since, for Dionysius,

it is as inadequate to deny that God is anything as to affirm that he is anything, we must now turn to Dionysius' metaphysics of creation in order to see how God is not merely no thing but "all beings and none of beings" (DN I.6, 596C), "all things in all things and nothing in any" (DN VII.3, 872A), how namelessness coincides with all names and silence with the word.