Hegel on Being and Nothing: Some Contemporary Neoplatonic and Sceptical Responses[1]

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"All is One." What is meant by this famous principle of Parmenides has been a matter of debate between thinkers of every epoch of philosophy. The differences between Plato and Aristotle, the pagan Neoplatonists and the Christians, Schelling[2] and Hegel all centre on how the unity of reality is to be conceived. In the Hegelian interpretation, any beginning with absolute Unity is indeterminate, and always implicitly contains its opposite determination. Unity must include multiplicity within it. As a result, Hegel views the Neoplatonic One as implicitly determined subjectivity, which can thus lead into Christianity's Trinitarian formulation of the Divine Principle. Recent scholarship on Neoplatonism has called into question the subjectivity of the One, and much of this interpretation has emerged through positioning Neoplatonism in relation to the great thinker of ontological difference in this century, Martin Heidegger.

In what follows, I examine the Hegelian critique of the Eleatic beginning, and suggest that this beginning from absolute self-identity shares many characteristics with the Neoplatonic tradition which are obscured in Hegel's treatment of Neoplatonism as more Aristotelian than Platonic. Approaching Neoplatonic thought from Heidegger's perspective brings out how the Neoplatonic conception of the First Principle from Plotinus to Damascius emerges not as a determinate subjectivity, but as radical unity, beyond all determination, difference and thought. Without criticizing the Hegelian logic

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2. Hegel's critique of Schelling's beginning from the unity of Substance is essentially the same as his critique of Plotinus. He writes of Schelling that "the point of indifference of subject and object is absolutely pre-supposed ... without any attempt at showing that this is the truth." G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.S. Haldane and F.H. Simon, vol. 3 (London, 1993) 525.

Dionysius, Vol. XVIII, Dec. 2000, 183–216.

itself, I shall examine Hegel's treatment of the primary Eleatic categories of pure Being and Nothing in order to demonstrate how these categories are retrieved in both Neoplatonic and post-modern ontologies. I conclude by suggesting how Jacques Derrida's position in relation to Neoplatonic and Heideggerian thought is a return to a Hegelian conception of indeterminate Being and Nothing. At the same time that Derrida places his own account beyond the opposition of these two sides as manifested in their pious and nihilist possibilities, he attempts to undermine the logical necessity of any further determination of Being and Nothing.

One purpose of the present essay is to clarify the relation of older philosophies to various contemporary thinkers. It has been widely argued that Aristotle and Hegel stand in a close philosophical relation. Both look to determinate Being, comprehensive of difference, as the necessary beginning point upon which thought must fix itself. In contrast, the Neoplatonic tradition (including the later Schelling), by returning in a certain way to the indeterminacy of Eleatic Being, is closely related to the Heideggerian position, which wishes to find, underlying all experience, an open, pious relation to indeterminate Being beyond thought. Both the Neoplatonists and Heidegger react against two approaches to Divinity which they perceive as impious.

There is both a *pious* and *impious* reaction against the determination of Being by Aristotle (against whom the Neoplatonists are immediately arguing) and Hegel (against whom Heidegger is directly arguing). Each reaction is a return to one side of the Eleatic opposition between Being and Nothing which Hegel conceived as identical. On the one hand, for Neoplatonists and Heidegger, this determination of the Principle, which thinks God only in relation to the otherness of the world contained within the Divine Principle, drags down the Divinity, beyond any relation to beings, into the realm of conceptual thought. On the other hand, the *impious* result of this beginning from immediate, indeterminate Being takes the rational indistinctness of pure Being and Nothing to reveal the nothingness of indeterminate Being. This sophistic denial of any existence apart from our own subjective creation is an option constantly threatening the Neoplatonic approach to the One.[3] This sophistry is intimately related to the Nietzschean view that the fundamental character of the totality of beings is the will to power, which in 'consummating' the Western tradition impels Heidegger towards what he conceives as a new beginning in thought.

3. In relation to Hegel and Schelling, one could equally include the Fichtean position within this subjectivist threat to piety. Historically, one only need look to the accusations of atheism levelled against Fichte's philosophy, culminating in 1799. See, for example, *Die Schriften zu J. G Fichte's Atheismus-Streit*, ed. Hans Lindau (Munich, 1912).

Jacques Derrida's deconstructive approach to these questions can be fruitfully compared with various forms of ancient Scepticism, notably the Pyrrhonian Scepticism of Sextus Empiricus.[4] However, Derrida also constantly professes an affinity and self-identification with the works of Plato. He admires the indeterminacy of the Platonic corpus, which leads to both Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism and contains the possibilities of both within it. His self-identification with this 'sceptical' Plato helps to explain Derrida's comment that we are at the "dawn of a new Platonism, which is the day after the death of Hegelianism."[5] Derrida returns to a Hegelian dissolution of pure Being and Nothing into the identity of the two in Becoming, while undermining the necessity of any further determination beyond this negative unity.

THE HEGELIAN CRITIQUE OF GOD AS INDETERMINATE BEING

Whether one takes a positive or a negative stance on the post-modern attack against Hegelian thought, the first step towards broaching the philosophical issues in question is to locate the post-modern thinkers vis-à-vis the Hegelian logic. Heidegger, Derrida, Lévinas and their followers all situate themselves in relation to Hegel. In various ways they view themselves as going before and beyond the tradition of rational philosophy beginning with Plato and achieving its full elaboration and perfection in Hegel. For this reason, the stages of Hegel's *Logic*, describing the absolute beginning of philosophy, assume crucial importance in any thoughtful response to these radical post-modern claims. Insofar as the stages of Hegel's *Logic* correspond to actual moments in the history of philosophy, it is also important to situate these contemporary attempts to escape Hegel's system in relation to the ancient philosophers the anti-Hegelians look to retrieve.

After outlining the nature of Logic and Thought through the first eighty-three sections of his *Logic*, Hegel begins his examination of Being from what he takes to be the first thought, the I=I, or pure self-identity. He moves through the various necessary determinations of Being, Essence and Notion in their dialectical progression, in which each stage passes into its opposite and then upward towards a further determination. Hegel's examination of the doctrine of Being in the *Logic* is central to my purpose here, because, by way of contrast, this account provides the basis for insight into the spirit of

4. For a comparison of Ancient Scepticism and Deconstruction, see Eli Diamond, "Derrida's Interpretation of Plato: Poison or Cure?" *Pseudo-Dionysius* II (Halifax, 2000): 87–88, n. 46.

5. Jacques Derrida, *La Dissémination* (Paris, 1972) 122–23. Since Derrida's self-identification with Plato is explicitly discussed only very briefly in the principal text considered in the present study, "How Not to Speak: Denials" (100–08 within his treatment of the *khora* of the *Timaeus*), a close examination of Derrida's relation to Plato is outside the scope of the present paper. See Diamond, "Derrida's Interpretation of Plato."

Neoplatonism. In such a contrast, the Neoplatonic tradition would appear as an attempt to show how Hegel's critique of the beginning from absolute self-identity is bound to a logic properly belonging to the realm of *Nous*. Hegel explicitly interprets Neoplatonic philosophy as having a quite different spirit than the Eleatic. Yet Hegel's account of Eleaticism is in many ways closer to the most important ideas of Neoplatonism than is his account of the Plotinian tradition in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. In the *Lectures*, he represents the Neoplatonic One as more Aristotelian than Platonic, and as having the character of simplified subjectivity.

Hegel defines pure Being as "immediacy itself, simple and indeterminate; and the first beginning cannot be mediated by anything, or be further determined."[6] In the face of this immediate beginning, "the propositional form ... is a mere superfluity" (124), anything predicated of Being is never adequate, and any determination either denigrates it or is irrelevant to it. Where thought cannot mediate what is wholly beyond its grasp, we see the roots of the apophatic tradition found throughout the Neoplatonic tradition. As a result of this beginning point, "God shall be the only real in all reality, the superlatively real" (125). All else has no substantial existence, since it is subsequent to the One (or Being).

Hegel views the necessary dialectical result of this beginning point as pure Nothing, absolutely inseparable from pure Being: "Being is nothing fixed and ultimate: it yields to dialectic and sinks into its opposite, which, also taken immediately, is Nothing" (126). To look for a distinction between them which can be expressed is impossible, since a distinction implies two existent things, one which has an attribute lacking in the other. Yet "Being is an absolute absence of attributes, and so is the nought" (128). One cannot affirm anything about either Being or Nothing. Hegel takes this identity of Being and Nothing to be a result of the inadequacy of this beginning point, a "mere abstraction." We are repelled by the proximity of Being and Nothing involved in asserting that "the thing-in-itself is indeterminate, utterly without form and so without content—or in saying that God is only supreme Being and nothing more" (127). As a result of "the shock of this nullity," the "attempt to fix Being and secure it against the transition into Nothing" (128) is stimulated in us.

For Hegel, our inability to leave Being in its identity to Nothing points towards the necessity to go beyond Pure Being, or the One, in which all difference is excluded from the First Principle, as a starting point: "the instinct that induces us to attach a settled import to Being, or to both (Being

6. G.W.F Hegel, *Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford, 1978) 124.

and Nothing), is the very necessity which leads us to the onward movement of Being and Nothing, and gives them a true concrete significance" (127). This positive significance emerges when "Being and Nothing are replaced by a concrete in which both these elements form an organic part" (128). Through this Unity in which Being and Nothing are simply constituent elements which can only be distinguished in thought, "we get rid of the immediacy in these determinations, and their contradiction vanishes in their mutual connection" (133). This determinate Being is Being "with a character or mode—which simply is" (134). This character is defined by Hegel as Quality, which is the inherent essence.

Before the concrete Unity of Being and Nothing is thought, Being's "distinction from nothing is a mere intention or *meaning*"(127). Until Being and Nothing are further determined, there is no logical necessity separating the pious and nihilist positions. We can neither apprehend nor express these two indeterminate options. Whether one takes this absolute self-identity to be the highest Deity worthy of the utmost piety, or whether one nihilistically takes this to be mere nothingness, is a decision not determined by any logical necessity. The only thing that distinguishes Being from Nothing is our subjective intention in the face of this indecidability. This indecidability reveals an insufficiency which, pointing beyond this oscillation between the two positions, compels us towards a further determination of Being through a proper integration of Being and Nothing.

Both the inadequacy of thought and language, and the nullity of the world in relation to God which result from the Hegelian account of Eleaticism, suggest a connection between Eleatic thought and the Neoplatonic tradition. However, I will focus on indeterminate Being of which *nothing* can be properly said or thought and which is thus identical to Nothing. To this identity of Being and Nothing, one may respond piously as to immediate presence. Equally, one may react sophistically and nihilistically as if facing absence. Thus the nothingness of Being would be used to establish oneself as measure of all things.

For Hegel, this first determination beyond Pre-Socratic abstractions is absolutely necessary. One cannot have a coherent thought without it. Yet the Neoplatonists, and more radically Heidegger and Derrida, attempt to undermine the necessity of a complete determination of a grounding principle which is accessible to human thought. As a result, these positions appeal to explanations which Hegel would characterize as 'psychologizing.' In other words, what Hegel views as an absolute identity of Being and Nothing, these thinkers view as an irreducible proximity. Importing an existential character to Hegel's argument, they argue that the proper relation to the proximity of these two equally indeterminate principles is found not through a dialectical overcoming of their apparent opposition, but through a decision based on an honest confrontation with these two forms of indeterminacy.[7]

We now travel forward in time from the Eleatic philosophers of the fifth century BC, to the third century AD in which we find Plotinus, in order to contrast Hegel's analysis of the Eleatic beginning point with his analysis of the Neoplatonic position.

TOWARDS AN ELEATIC-PLATONIC INTERPRETATION OF NEOPLATONISM

Hegel is an extremely important figure in the history of Neoplatonic interpretation, because he ascribed to these thinkers a philosophical importance in the history of thought seldom acknowledged within the philosophy of his time. In an era in which Neoplatonic thinkers like Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, and Proclus were considered to be excessively esoteric and irrational footnotes to the history of Greek philosophy, Hegel concludes that "the Neoplatonic standpoint is thus not a philosophic freak, but a forward advance on the part of the human mind, the world and the world-spirit."[8] Hegel views the Neoplatonists as an important step beyond the Hellenistic philosophies on the way to the new beginning of modern philosophy with Descartes. Yet he views the position itself as incomplete and one-sided, and as pointing beyond itself towards the Christian standpoint.[9]

From the perspective of many post-modern interpreters of Neoplatonism, what is most contentious in the Hegelian interpretation is that the One is implicitly a determinate thinking subject that is not properly beyond thought but *is* thought, having a closer affinity to Aristotle's First Principle than to

7. For example, see Jean-Paul Sartre's treatment of Hegel's *Logic* in *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (New York, 1972) 44–50. See also Kevin Corrigan's chapter "Being and Nothing. Some peculiarities of language in III.6. A comparison with Hegel, Sartre, and Heidegger," in Corrigan, *Plotinus' Theory of Matter-Evil and the Question of Substance: Plato, Aristotle, and Alexander Aphrodisias* (Leuven, 1996) 169–75.

8. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, trans. E.H. Haldane, vol. 2 (Nebraska, 1995) 452. In arguing against the interpretation of the Neoplatonists as eclectics who draw arbitrarily from previous thinkers what they deem valuable, Hegel writes in a way anticipatory of the tendency of twentieth-century French retrieval of this tradition. Hegel juxtaposes the French philosophic spirit with what he views as the truth of Neoplatonic thought as an inwardly consistent philosophical system: "In France, the Alexandrians are still called Eclectics; and there where *système* is synonymous with narrowness of views, and where indeed one must have the name which sounds least systematic and suspicious, that may be borne with" (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 401).

9. For a fuller treatment of the Hegelian interpretation of Neoplatonism in relation to the history of Neoplatonic scholarship, see W.J. Hankey, "Neoplatonism and Contemporary Constructions and Deconstructions of Modern Subjectivity," in *Situating Contemporary Freedom: A Doull Reader* (forthcoming). My own understanding of Neoplatonism has been greatly influenced by Dr. Hankey's seminars and papers.

the Platonic Good. Hegel is able to purify Neoplatonism of its poetic expression and its mystical, theurgical tendencies in order to discern that "the Idea of the philosophy of Plotinus is thus an intellectualism or a higher idealism, which indeed from the side of the Notion is not yet a perfect idealism."[10] This implicitly determinate subjectivity reaches its perfection in the Trinitarian formulation articulated in the philosophical Christianity of Augustine, with its analogy between the structure of divine and human thought. Throughout the development of pagan Neoplatonism from Plotinus to Damascius, Hegel detects the progressive integration of the One and the noetic world into the unified, subjective activity of Divine Mind.[11] This logical progression which leads out of Neoplatonism results in the following determination of God:

> God, as absolute pure mind in and for Himself, and His activity in Himself, are now the object. But God is no longer known as that abstract, but as the concrete in Himself, and the concrete is nothing but Mind. God is living, the One and the Other, and the unity of these distinct determinations; for the abstract is only the simple, but the living has difference in itself, and is yet therein at home with itself.[12]

In his *Logic*, Hegel expresses this implicit distinction in the One with great clarity. Being determined as the One is beyond the determinations of pure Being (self-identity), pure Nothing, Becoming, and Being-for-self. While the One without distinction excludes all otherness from itself, it is nevertheless infinitely determinate, since it "contains distinction absorbed and annulled in itself."[13] Having arisen through what Hegel calls the negation of the negation inherent in Scepticism, "the negation which is identical with itself and thus at the same time a true affirmation,"[14] the Neoplatonic One contains distinction within it, although this distinction is annulled. Unlike the Eleatic position which truly begins from self-identity, Hegel's Neoplatonism cannot truly begin from a One without distinction.

Neoplatonism is evidently not a simple return to an Eleatic logic. Plotinus and his followers are clearly beyond the Eleatic law of non-contradiction.[15]

10. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 412.

11. For an opposed interpretation of the movement from Plotinus-Proclus, emphasizing the progressively theurgic and mystical character of Neoplatonism, see H.D. Saffrey, "La théurgie comme pénétration d'éléments extra-rationels dans la philosophie grecque tardive" and "La théurgie comme phénomène culturel chez les Néoplatoniciens (IVe-Ve siècles)" in *Recherches sur le Néoplatonisme après Plotin* (Paris, 1990) 33–61.

12. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 384.

13. *Logic* 141.

14. *Logic* 138.

15. "This [he says] should not ever prevail in your thought: that the things that are not, are; Rather do keep your mind well shut off from this way of searching." See Plato's *Sophist* 237A.

The hypostatization of One, *Nous*, and Soul is an attempt to systematically explain how from a beginning with absolute, indeterminate Unity, one can attain a true philosophical knowledge of the finite (if only an incomplete one). Hegel's account effectively demonstrates the profound influence of the Aristotelian philosophy on the Neoplatonic tradition. Yet the insistence on a unity that radically excludes all multiplicity is a marked departure from the self-thinking thought of Aristotle, which includes the otherness of the world within itself. Neoplatonists certainly assume this self-thinking thought in their system, yet only as a means towards showing how the Parmenidean and Platonic beginning from absolute Unity does not necessarily fall into absurd impossibilities for the existence of the many.

From the Hegelian perspective, a principle without differentiation can only stay at one within itself eternally. The necessity of the self-otherness is not expressed, and thus retains a primarily contingent character. Hegel writes that "the Absolute cannot be conceived as creative, if it is determinate as an abstract, and is not rather comprehended as the One which has energy in itself."[16] This energy requires that the otherness of the world not be excluded from the beginning point, and thus God cannot be conceived separately from a relation to the world and to humankind: "this relation to the world is then a relation to an 'other' which thereby at first appears to be outside of God; but because this relation is *His* activity, the fact of having this relation in Himself is a moment in Himself."[17] In this way, God is properly determined as concrete, living God, as opposed to what Hegel views in the Eleatic principle as an abstract and lifeless Principle.

Importantly, this interpretation of the One as simplified subjectivity minimizes the importance of the apophatic tradition in Neoplatonism, ascribes an inherent substantiality of the world in relation to the One, determines Being and Nothing into a 'concrete' unity in the First Principle, and thus removes the close proximity of the One and Nothing. But does this Aristotelian, de-Platonized and de-Eleaticized Neoplatonism[18] hold up to closer scrutiny?

There are certainly many images employed by Plotinus which suggest that Hegel has reason to look to the One as the Aristotelian God simplified. Crucial passages in *Ennead* VI.8 disclose an "Intellect-in-Unity" which bridges the gap between *Nous* and the One:

16. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 415.

17. Ibid. 385.

18. This is not to suggest that Aristotle's thought is ultimately opposed to Platonism and Eleaticism. Yet because much that is purged from Eleaticism and Platonism in Aristotelianism is retrieved by the Neoplatonists, a contrast is appropriate.

> In the same way we are to take *Nous* and Being. This combined power springs from the Supreme, an outflow and as it were development from That and remaining dependent upon the Intellective Nature, showing forth that, so to speak, Intellect-in Unity which is not *Nous* since it has no duality .... Thus the Intellective power circles around the Supreme which stands to it as archetype to image; the archetype is Intellect-in-Unity; the image in its manifold movement around its prior has produced the multiplicity by which it is constituted as *Nous*: the prior has no movement; it generates *Nous* by its sheer wealth.[19]

The One here produces a second One which is implicitly *Nous* prior to its division. Hegel seems right in seeing that the One in this account is the simplified activity of mind prior to its division into subject and object. Yet the abundance of passages in the Neoplatonic tradition constantly asserting the non-subjective character of the First Principle compels us to re-evaluate whether this Aristotelian/Hegelian reading distorts the spirit moving the Neoplatonic tradition.

The mere fact that the *Parmenides* is the fundamental revelatory text of Neoplatonism, possessing an authority for the pagans comparable to Scripture in the Judaeo-Christian religions, is extremely telling. In this reflection upon the Eleatic philosophy, the first and second hypotheses represent two aspects present in Parmenides' thought. On the one hand, the philosophical spirit of the historical Parmenides as expressed in the maxim "all is One," is expressed through the pure, immediate self-identity of the first hypothesis. On the other hand, the actual description which Parmenides offers of this One as a sphere with centre and extremes is expressed as a whole of parts of the second hypothesis. Because throughout traditional Neoplatonic exegesis the One is interpreted as having its expression in the first hypothesis, we will now turn to this passage of Plato's *Parmenides* to identify the character of this traditional interpretation.

The first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, a consideration of immediate Unity, begins at 137C, "*ei hen estin*—If a One is (One)." This expresses absolute immediate self-identity: One=One, I=I. The first hypothesis corresponds to the image of the day in the first half of the dialogue. This image arises when Parmenides asks Socrates whether in participation the instance participates in the whole form or a part, and how it retains its unity through being dispersed into its many instances without being separate from itself. Socrates replies that the form is not separated from itself if dispersed like a day "which, although one and the same, is many places at once and is not at all separate from itself. In this way each form could be one, the same and in all things at once."[20] This analogy relies on a temporal image, in which everything is

19. *Ennead* VI.8.18. All texts from Plotinus are from Stephen MacKenna's translation.
20. *Parmenides* 131B.

unified in the same second. Like the image of light in the *Republic*, it also functions as an analogy for the diffusion of the Good beyond being and truth. The diffusion of light remains one with its source. Similarly, the image of diffused light is used throughout Plotinus' *Enneads* (see especially V.1.6). In the blinding light of the One beyond being, all difference is lost. Also, the many do not have an intrinsic relation to the One which would have a logically necessary explanation for their existence. Any single name ascribed to the plurality that is unified by this immediate self-identity thus abolishes all distinction in the immediate apprehension of it.

As the argument unfolds, every possible spatial and temporal determination of the One is negated, until Parmenides concludes that "the One neither is one nor *is*... there's no name of it nor an account, nor is there any knowledge of it or perception nor opinion ... it is not named nor spoken of nor opined nor known, nor do any of the things that *are* perceive it."[21] Parmenides' simple and indeterminate first hypothesis cannot be mediated by any thought or expression of it, nor can it be shown to determine itself beyond this indeterminate stage through any logical necessity. There can be no logical connection made between this Absolute Being and the plurality which is simply posited as somehow springing forth from it.

Let us examine a passage in which Plotinus interprets what is true and false in Parmenides' poem:

> Knowing and Being are one thing, Parmenides says, and this unity is to him motionless in spite of the intellection he attributes to it: to preserve its unchanging identity he excludes all bodily movement from it; and he compares it to a huge sphere in that it holds and envelops all existence and that its intellection is not an outgoing act but internal. Still, with all his affirmation of unity, his own writings lay him open to the reproach that his unity turns out to be a multiplicity. The Platonic Parmenides is more exact; the distinction is made between the Primal One, a strictly pure unity, and a secondary One which is a One-Many and a third kind which is a One and Many; thus he too is in accordance with our thesis of the Three Kinds.[22]

Parmenides attempted to express the truth that "all is One," yet could not account for how this One could be both a true Principle of everything and a true Unity, and so he fell into certain expressions which were not suitable to the Absolute Unity of the First Principle. Plotinus views his own philosophical project as one that aims towards expressing more successfully what he perceives to be true of the Parmenidean philosophy: that "all is One." The difference beyond all difference that separates the One and *Nous* is intended to assert just this fact. When Plotinus opens *Ennead* V.2 with the statement,

21. Ibid. 141E–142A.
22. *Ennead* V.1.8.

"the One is all things and no one of them,"[23] he is reformulating the Eleatic maxim in different words.

Through their exegesis of Plato, the Neoplatonists are not aiming at introducing novel ideas into the philosophical history, but at arriving at more precise ways of accounting for this beginning point from absolute Unity. Contrary to the Hegelian characterization of Neoplatonism, they do not take as their assumed starting point the self-thinking thought of Aristotle. Such a beginning makes the One an abstraction from the distinction in thought of subject and object. Rather, like Parmenides and Plato, the Neoplatonists begin from a principle of absolute self-identity. Instead of seeing in this absolute self-identity the most abstract category, they see undetermined Being as an incomprehensible plenitude. They would consider themselves untouched by Aristotelian/Hegelian criticisms that they have not demonstrated the logical necessity of the productivity of the One, because, for them, the realm of logical necessity which governs thought constitutes the world up to the noetic level, yet not beyond. Nor would they accept Aristotle's criticism of Plato's poetic language, because here the use of poetic images only reveals a fundamental inability to apprehend the First Principle. Metaphorical language is considered the only way of approaching the incomprehensible production of the One.

There are numerous passages in which Plotinus excludes thought and deliberation from the One. Let us look at one passage that characterizes the non-subjective character of the First Principle:

> Intellection seems to have been given an aid to the diviner but weaker beings, an eye to the blind. But the eye itself need not see Being since it is itself the light; what must take the light through the eye needs the light because of its darkness. If then intellection is the light and light does not need the light, surely the brilliance (The First) which does not need light can have no need of intellection, will not add this to its nature. What could it do with intellection? What could even intellection need and add to itself for the purpose of its act?[24]

Georges Leroux's commentary on *Ennead* VI.8[25] takes as one if its principal aims the refutation of any reduction of the Plotinian One to a subject. Such a reduction would establish a continuity between Neoplatonism and Augustine and make possible the assimilation of Neoplatonism into Christianity described by Hegel. Leroux writes that "the Plotinian One cannot be identified with the creative God of the Christian Trinity, constituted as a

23. *Ennead* V.2.1.

24. *Ennead* VI.7.41. See also, among others, III.2.1, VI.7.1.

25. Plotinus, *Traité sur la liberté et la volonté de l'Un*, trans. with introduction and commentary Georges Leroux (Paris, 1990).

subject in a thought that naturally integrates the will."[26] This analysis seems especially true in those passages where Plotinus takes precautions not only to separate the One from mind, but even from associating the One with God:

> Think of the One as Mind or as God, you think too meanly; use all the resource of your understanding to conceive this Unity and, again, it is more authentically one than God, even though you reach for God's unity beyond the unity the most perfect you can conceive.[27]

While it is true that Plotinus does describe the will of the One in *Ennead* VI.8, Leroux takes this description to be intended metaphorically, a metaphor which can easily mislead the reader into ascribing subjectivity to the One. Citing V.3, V.5 and V.7, Leroux emphatically argues, against a Hegelian interpretation, that "the One does not think and cannot be put side by side with Aristotelian intellect."[28] In fact, concerning those passages of Plotinus' writings which would seem most conducive to the Hegelian interpretation of the One as subject, Leroux is especially adamant that they are not. He writes that "treatise VI.8, which predicates will to the One, is also the treatise that most vigorously excludes from it any exercise of consciousness and deliberation."[29] This exclusion will emerge more clearly in a closer examination of *Ennead* VI.8, where I will argue that within this treatise there is a refutation of the Idealist interpretation that would require a demonstration of the logical necessity of the One's self-differentiation.

The fact that the One is not infinitely determinate implicit subjectivity as in the Hegelian determination, but, in fact, a pure indeterminate self-identity, suggests an affinity between Hegel's account of the Eleatic categories of Being and Nothing, and the Neoplatonic categories of One and Nothing.[30] In refusing to introduce any duality into the First Principle, the One cannot be said to be, and thus, it *is nothing*. It would be limited through any

26. Ibid. 30: "L'Un plotinien ne peut être identifié au Dieu créateur de la Trinité chrétienne, constitué en sujet dans une pensée qui intègre naturellement la volonté."

27. *Ennead* VI.9.6.

28. Leroux, 38: "L'Un ne pense pas et il ne saurait être rapproché de l'Intellect aristotélicien."

29. Ibid. 51: "Le traité VI.8 qui en prédique la volonté est aussi celui qui exclut avec le plus de vigueur l'exercice de la conscience et de la délibération."

30. For an excellent account of the Neoplatonist attempt "d'empêcher l'origine radicale des choses de sombrer dans le néant absolu," see Émile Bréhier, "L'idée du néant et le problème de l'origine radicale dans le néoplatonisme grec" *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 26 (1919): 443–75. In this article Brehier considers the tradition from Plotinus to Damascius, setting out "à chercher si et comment deux termes, placés l'un et l'autre en dehors de toute réalité pensable, peuvent ne pas se confondre l'un avec l'autre" (444). See also Christian Guérard, "Le danger du néant et la négation selon Proclus," *Revue de philosophique de Louvain* 83 (1985): 331–54.

predicate or definition ascribed to it, even the predicate of Being, since its only true predicate is itself, "the only assertion is 'I am what I am' or 'I am I'."[31] In *Ennead* VI.7.38, Plotinus goes through an extensive account of the problem inherent in apophatic discourse: "It is not that we think it exact to call him either good or The Good: it is that sheer negation does not indicate; we use the term The Good to assert identity without the affirmation of Being."[32] If one were to maintain silence from the beginning, there would be no difference between the One and Nothing. The following passage discloses this proximity and the duty one has not to allow the One to appear as Nothing:

> Now when we reach a one—the stationary Principle—in the tree, in the animal, in the Soul, in the All—we have in every case the most powerful, the precious element: when we come to the One in the Authentically Existent beings, their Principle and source and potentiality—shall we lose confidence and suspect it of being—nothing? Certainly this Absolute is none of the things of which it is source—its nature is that nothing can be affirmed of it—not existence, not essence, not life—since it is That which transcends all these. But possess yourself of it by the very elimination of Being and you hold a marvel. Thrusting forward to this, attaining, and resting in yourself, seek to grasp it more and more—understanding it by that intuitive thrust alone, but knowing its greatness by the beings that follow upon it and exist by its power.[33]

Once again, with only this immediate, intuitive experience of the First Principle beyond Being, which no more *is* than Nothing itself, one must consider the dignity of Unity in the world. While there is nothing which logically compels us to think of this One as a presence rather than an absence, to think the opposite is inconceivable when one is surrounded by such wondrous beings around us. To think that there is nothing but ourselves responsible for all meaning is what repels the pious man and moves him towards the search for the presence beyond Being. Proclus expresses a similar, pious reservation in relation to this proximity between the One and Nothing:

> Nevertheless I see many problems provoked in these matters by those who believe that these negations lead us to absolute non-being or something similar, due to the indeterminacy of our imagination, which cannot hold on to any particular determinate thing, inasmuch as none is presented to it, all being purely suppressed by the One. These men are convinced that for this reason one must introduce some certain nature or particularity.[34]

31. *Ennead* V.3.10.
32. *Ennead* VI.7.38.
33. *Ennead* III.8.10.
34. *In Parmenidiem* 1105.32–1106.1.

Just as in Hegel's description of Being and Nothing, we are repelled by the logical identity of what could not be more opposed. Plotinus writes:

> The soul or mind reaching towards the formless finds itself incompetent to grasp where nothing bounds it or takes impression where the impinging reality is diffuse; *in sheer dread of holding to nothingness, it slips away.* The state is painful; often it seeks relief by retreating from all this vagueness to the region of sense, there to rest on solid ground ....[35]

This inherent danger is intensified through the soul's inability to recognize its immediate experience of the presence beyond all being and determination, because any mediated understanding imports into the experience a duality which destroys it. Plotinus writes: "In seeking thus to know the Unity it is prevented by the very unification from recognizing that it has found."[36] This obstacle institutes a responsibility of piety towards this Principle which will not cause us to flee to some more determinate materialist or sophistic position. This responsibility and promise is a central theme of Derrida's piece on negative theology, which we will consider as we conclude this essay.

Repulsed by the indeterminacy of this Principle and assuming that this mode of thinking leads to atheism, many interpreters have ascribed to the Neoplatonic One a deliberate subjective activity.[37] Yet the general trend in current Neoplatonic scholarship has moved away considerably from the notion of the One as subjectivity in Neoplatonic thought. Through approaching Neoplatonism in the light of the Heideggerian problematic of the ontological difference between Being and beings, the focus of Neoplatonic studies has shifted considerably. The distance and altitude of the One beyond beings, the radical rupture of all thought and totality, the impossibility of subsuming the One into any rational dialectic have all been enthusiastically appropriated by many thinkers within phenomenological and post-modern schools of thought.

Even a thinker like Emmanuel Lévinas, who is not by any means devoted to any extensive study of Neoplatonism—there are a handful of references to Plotinus, and he refers to none of the later Neoplatonists—appropriates this interpretation of Neoplatonism to support his quest to establish an ethics of radical alterity as against the Hegelian interpretation: "In fact, the Unity of the One excludes all multiplicity, whether it be that which emerges in the distinction between thinker and thought or even in the identity of the

35. *Ennead* VI.9.3.

36. Ibid.

37. For an account of the debate between the deliberate vs. automatic character of emanation, see Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition* (Leiden, 1978) 17–27.

identical conceived under the guise of self-consciousness, where, one day in the history of philosophy, one will go to find it."[38] Levinas sees the Plotinian philosophy as one which feels acutely the deficiency of rational thought, and he stresses thought's inherent privation and consequent perpetual striving and responsibility to the source and origin of what constitutes its subjectivity. In *Autrement qu'etre ou au-delà de l'essence*, Lévinas views Plotinus as revealing that the fundamental question about God is never 'to be or not to be.' This question, which moves Hegel to the determination of Being, corresponds "to the desire to have a clear heart and not to trouble oneself with "Nothingness" and words."[39] Lévinas views the Hegelian determination of God as Being as possible, but describes this possibility in the following way:

> And there, as total illusion or as luxurious subtleties of sated consciousness, sink all differences of height, of dignity, and of distance; there all abysses of transcendence are filled, all intervals that interfere with the unity of analogy. This philosophy of success is itself assured of success.[40]

Lévinas aims to show that this determination is not the only philosophical option, and that the Hegelian exclusion of the indeterminacy of Being as unphilosophical works from too narrow a definition of philosophy. In the absence of philosophical stability and certainty which determination provides, this philosophy *requires* a leap of faith in the distinguishing of God from Nothing, yet this leap would not occur through some deficiency in thought. For Lévinas, Plotinus' One, which overflows in plenitude in the very fact that it is beyond Being, relation and totality, has a profoundly philosophical character "in leaving to faith proper, the hope, beliefs, the solution of the enigma and symbolic formulas which suggest it."[41] Philosophy no longer consists merely of what is absolutely impenetrable to doubt. There is the realm of the correct and the certain, and there is the realm of truth which is beyond a dichotomy between certainty through logical necessity and doubt.

38. Emmanuel Lévinas, "De l'un à l'autre: transcendance et temps," in *Entre Nous* (Paris, 1991) 143. "L'unité de l'Un exclut, en effet, toute multiplicité, fut-celle qui se dessine déjà dans la distinction entre pensant et pensé, et même dans l'identité de l'identique conçue en guise de conscience de soi où, dans l'histoire de la philosophie, on ira, un jour, la chercher."

39. Emmanuel Lévinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence* (Paris, 1978) 151: "au désir d'en avoir le cœur net et de ne pas se laisser abuser par le 'néant' et les mots."

40. Ibid. 151: "Et là sombrent comme illusion ou comme subtilités luxueuses de consciençes repues—toutes les différences de hauteur, de dignité et de distance; là se comblent tous les abîmes de la transcendance, tous les intervalles qui strient l'unité d'analogie. Cette philosophie du succès est assurée elle-même de succès."

41. Ibid. 152: "en laissant à la foi proprement dite, l'espoir et les croyances et la solution de l'énigme et les formules symboliques qui la suggèrent."

Lévinas belongs to this emerging movement in contemporary thought which includes, among others, Jean-Luc Marion and Michel Henry. In their critique of metaphysics, they look to Plato's Good beyond all being and knowing (*Republic* 509B) and the Neoplatonic elevation of the One above the noetic as bright spots in a tradition that has been characterized by the reduction of the world to concept.[42] All these French thinkers follow in the wake of Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics, and it is to him we now pass, so that we may discern more clearly the relation between these contemporary thinkers and Neoplatonism.

HEIDEGGER—TRANSCENDENT BEING AND NOTHING

Heidegger's role in this anti-idealist interpretation of Neoplatonism is of crucial importance. Yet Heidegger himself restricted comment on this tradition to scattered disparaging remarks. In a recent article entitled "Heidegger et le néoplatonisme," Jean-Marc Narbonne proves convincingly through a close examination of Heidegger's remarks on the subject that Heidegger had little understanding of the Neoplatonic tradition. The thesis of Narbonne's paper is well summarized in the following question:

> How can Heidegger characterize metaphysics essentially as the research of beings and the beingness of beings, without committing violence upon a tradition of thought extremely pregnant in the Occidental world for which the language of ontology is relegated to second place?[43]

Narbonne exposes Heidegger's caricature of Neoplatonism brilliantly. Yet the state of Neoplatonic studies since Heidegger's death in 1976 has progressed to such a degree that it is quite possible Heidegger himself would reconsider his position on the subject in light of these recent re-interpretations. Narbonne's clearing away of Heidegger's interpretation of Neoplatonism re-opens the task of determining what in Heidegger's thought is pre-figured in this aspect of the Platonic tradition, and what in his critique of the history is novel and different from Neoplatonism.[44] In order to establish how both Heidegger and the Neoplatonists are involved in the quest to establish a pious, receptive relation to the indeterminate, groundless ground that lies

42. For a history of this tradition in French Neoplatonism, see W.J. Hankey, "French Neoplatonism in the 20th Century," in *Animus* 4 (1999): www.mun.ca/animus.

43. Jean-Marc Narbonne, "Heidegger et le néoplatonisme" (unpublished): "Comment Heidegger peut-il caractériser la métaphysique essentiellement comme recherche de l'étant et de l'étantité de l'étant sans faire violence à une tradition de pensée très prégnante en Occident pour laquelle le langage même de l'ontologie se voit relégué au second rang?"

44. For a good summary of some fundamental differences between Heidegger and Neoplatonism, see Pierre Hadot, "Heidegger et Plotin," *Critique* 1959: 539–56.

beyond thought, let us look briefly at some themes in Heidegger's 1927 lecture *What is Metaphysics?*, in which the issue of the proximity between Being and Nothing is the primary interest. By returning to the indeterminate Being of the Pre-Socratics as the principle of all things, Heidegger is self-consciously attempting to undermine the necessity of the first determination in Hegel's 'Doctrine of Being,' the absolute identity of indeterminate Being and Nothing. In opposition to this first determination, Heidegger attempts to show how these two nearly indistinguishable terms belong together. As for the Neoplatonists, "if the Nothing becomes a problem at all, then this opposition (of Being and Nothing) does not merely undergo a somewhat more significant determination."[45]

Our preoccupation, total satisfaction and rapture with beings reduces the world to our relation with particular existents. The first disclosure of our limitations which breaks through this selfish reduction of the world occurs in a confrontation with Nothing. For the purposes of the following interpretation, what is crucial in Heidegger's questioning is the limit of our understanding and our inherent inability to grasp the Nothing. This realization of intellectual limit actually opens our understanding to the perplexity of Being which, in everyday life, seems to be the easiest of all things to grasp. Consequently, because Being and Nothing share the same unthinkable indeterminacy, everything which is disclosed in relation to the Nothing is equally disclosed of Being.

What is first revealed about the Nothing is its utterly unknowable and ineffable nature. Heidegger remarks that all questioning and answering in relation to the Nothing presupposes it as some *thing* that is: it is always posited as a being, and in a comment reminiscent of Hegel's treatment of Nothing, it "turns what is interrogated into its opposite" (96). As a result, "with regard to the Nothing, question and answer are equally absurd" (97). So far as one takes the logic of non-contradiction to be constitutive of every conceivable human approach to the world, no further investigation is possible. If one proceeds "assuming that ... logic and intellect are the means, thought the way, then nothing further could be pursued of the Nothing" (99).

But what if this Nothing, which is incomprehensible by the intellect, grounds the existence of thought itself? Heidegger looks at the Nothing not as a mere negation of all beings, as if they were all present for thought to freely think their nullity, but rather as the possibility for thought's negativity. It is not simply an abstraction of thought achieved through the negation of all beings, but thought's necessary prior condition. Just as Heidegger's be-

45. Martin Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" *Basic Writings* (San Francisco, 1993) 108. All references to Heidegger are drawn from this volume unless otherwise indicated.

ginning from indeterminate Being is taken to possess a fullness through which beings are sustained in their existence, so too does the Nothing sustain specific instances of negated beings, which "are given only because the Nothing is given" (97). Heidegger asserts that the Nothing is "more original" (97) than any particular act of negation, and that the intellect itself, in its rational grasp of beings, is grounded by the Nothing beyond thought. He questions whether thought can *decide* anything about that which is beyond and prior to its activity.

Thus the Nothing is revealed and given to us immediately, neither as a being, nor as an object for thought. This Nothing discloses the radical otherness and strangeness of beings which stand in relation to it. Thus disclosed and exposed, the self no longer believes beings have their existence in relation to itself. As a result, this encounter with the indeterminacy of the Nothing prepares us for the revelation of Being: "it awakens for the first time the proper formulation of the metaphysical question concerning the Being of beings" (108). Through this proximity of Being and Nothing emerges the most fundamental question of all: why are there beings rather than nothing?

Heidegger would argue that in any explanation of God as creating through a rational subjectivity, the wonder at the heart of the existence of things is already lost. He argues that the encounter with Nothing reveals itself as the basis for our true self-hood and freedom because it inspires a genuine relation to Being as what is truly beyond concept and rational ordering of the world.[46] In Heidegger's view, the Hegelian identification of Being and Nothing (which is historically initiated by the Platonic philosophy in the *Sophist*) is the first stage of the fateful forgetting of Being which he takes to characterize the whole of post-Platonic philosophy. Through an authentic and difficult confrontation with the irreducible proximity of indeterminate Being and Nothing, one can begin to overcome this forgetfulness.

46. Narbonne's *La Métaphysique de Plotin* (Paris, 1997) formulates Plotinus' philosophical innovation in a way that implicitly brings it very close to Heidegger's own questioning: "La formulation plotinienne de la question fondamentale de la métaphysique devient ainsi, dans sa forme la plus générale: 'Pourquoi cela qui est, est-il, existe-t-il?' C'est la possibilité même de l'être qui entre dès lors en jeu et non plus la simple possibilité (ayant déjà implicitement admis qu'il y avait de l'existence, des êtres, de la nature ...) des étants particuliers. Alors que la possibilité, on l'a vu, était limitée chez Aristote par la structure ontologique du cosmos, c'est le cosmos lui-même dans son existence concrète en tant qu'il dépend de l'Un, de son pouvoir et de sa volonté, dont il est nécessaire désormais de sonder la possibilité. Ce qui avait auparavant valeur de principe passe à l'état de principé, ou disons, doit répondre de la possibilité qui est la sienne, non seulement d'*agir* comme principe, mais d'*être* un principe" (26).

For both Plotinus and Heidegger, the Nothing is the impetus of our approach to what is most real in the world, although beyond essence and existence: the One, or Being. This is also an important point in Derrida's analysis: he aims to blur the lines between atheism and negative theology, and to make manifest the indecidability between these two choices. In the irresolvable oscillation between these two positions, the existence of one is a provocation that is necessary to ensure the authentic existence of the other.

HEIDEGGER AND PLOTINUS ON THE PRIMORDIAL FREEDOM

At the heart of the question of whether the One could be said in any way to possess any subjective deliberation lies the question of whether freedom can be ascribed to the originary presence of the Principle. While Hegel sees the Neoplatonic idea of freedom as a significant progression from the inward flight of the Hellenistic schools,[47] he also sees a glaring contradiction in the Plotinian conception which must be resolved in the subsequent history:

> If we adopt this one-sided position, God is on the one side, and man and his freedom is on the other. A freedom such as this, standing in contrast to the objective, a freedom in which man, as thinking self-consciousness, conceives as the absolute the relation of his pure inwardness to himself, is, however, only formally, and not concretely absolute.[48]

For Hegel, Plotinus' view of the nature of the freedom of the One is not compatible with a modern view of human freedom; that is, it is not compatible with the notion that the free will is directed outwardly in the production of being and the regulation of the world. Plotinus' conception of the One's freedom as a necessary unreflective willing of itself falls short of the freedom of a subjective divine activity, because it has no analogy in the human realm. Turning inward, the questing individual must discover that the structure of his own thought has an analogy in the ultimate object sought, or else God and man will remain in this harsh contrast, and the subjective freedom will find no ground outside of itself. Plotinus demonstrates that no such analogy exists here in the transition from the first half of *Ennead* VI.8 concerning human freedom through to the second half concerning the freedom of the One. The One's freedom is found to be wholly other than the

47. Hegel writes that in Neoplatonism, it is determined that "freedom can only be brought about by turning to God, by giving heed to absolute truth; so that by means of the objective itself, liberty and happiness are attained for the subject. This is the standpoint of reverencing and fearing God, so that by man's turning to this his object, which stands before him free and firm, the object of the subject's own freedom is attained" (*Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 384–85). The comparisons here between Hegel's interpretation of Judaism and Neoplatonism are striking.

48. Ibid. 385.

nature of human freedom as teleological destiny. Unless the divine activity is a free thinking, of which human noetic freedom is the image, it necessarily falls short of the Hegelian idea of freedom.

In contrast with the Hegelian conception of the freedom of the Principle, there is an extremely interesting comparison to be made between the freedom of the One, as it is presented in *Ennead* 6.8. *On Free Will and the Will of the One*, and the freedom of Being, as it is briefly evoked in *The Question Concerning Technology*.[49] Both Heidegger and Plotinus purge any reflective self-consciousness from what is most fundamentally real.[50] Because both begin from indeterminate Principles, there are no determinate options which would lay the foundation for some deliberative choice in the One or Being.

This indeterminate foundation opens Heidegger's and Plotinus' arguments to two related critiques. First, one might argue that the determinations of this indeterminate Being are purely arbitrary manifestations, wholly *opposed* to what is rationally explained through a deliberative subject as a Creator, and thus the product of mere chance and contingency. Second, one might argue that these non-deliberative principles are governed by a sort of necessity, and that they are limited by their natural, automatic production. Both Heidegger and Plotinus wish to place the freedom of the One and the freedom of Being beyond the oppositions of necessity and contingency, rational mediation and natural immediacy. They look to a more original freedom prior to any determination, one that is not governed by the 'either/or' logic of these dichotomies.

Plotinus' treatise on the freedom of the One begins with a reflection upon whether the gods have voluntary action. It seeks to understand how far freedom extends. For if the One necessarily emanates because of its own nature, it can appear to be unfree by doing so, just as the growth of trees could not be characterized as a free act, because they are governed by natural laws which exist above and beyond their own existence. In this first chapter,

49. The respective notion of freedom in the Plotinian One and in Heideggerian Being determines the nature of human freedom for each thinker. When the Ultimate Principle of the cosmos is beyond the grasp of rational thought and has nothing of the character of a subjectivity which might serve as the analogy between the human thinking and Truth, how is human freedom constituted and in what does it consist? Through a consideration of Heidegger's *On the Essence of Human Freedom*, a comparison between the Plotinian relation between divine and human freedom in VI.8 and Heidegger's own conception would be of great interest.

50. Derrida characterizes Heidegger's Being in the following way: "the Being of which certain texts of Heidegger speak (es gibt Sein) ... the es or id of giving, before all subjectivity." See "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York, 1992) 106. In "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger's conception of essence as a shift from 'what endures continuously' to 'what grants continuously' also evokes this non-subjective donation.

Plotinus warns against setting up a dichotomy in the divine like the one that exists in the human, for whom deliberative choice seems essential to every free act: "the very notion of power must be scrutinized lest in this ascription we be really setting up an antithesis of power (potency) and Act, and identifying power with Act not yet achieved."[51] In his *La Métaphysique de Plotin*, Jean-Marc Narbonne identifies an important distinction within *Ennead* II, 5, *On What is in Potency and What is in Act*, which refines the distinction in Aristotle between potency and act in the following way:

> For Plotinus, intelligible beings are not only *in act*, in the sense that they will exist forever eternally and will be opposed to beings subject to becoming that exist only in potentiality: they are equally Act, as effect or crystallization of an active productive power that dwells in them and in fact identifies itself with them.[52]

Thus, as Plotinus writes in II, 5, "It is preferable and more clear to refer being in potentiality to being in actuality, and power to act."[53] The power of the One cannot be set in opposition to the fact that it is pure Act. Its power is not something that is in the process of coming to be, because 'to act' is identical to its very 'essence.'

While *Ennead* 6.8 begins from this reflection on divine freedom, Plotinus quickly moves to address the question of freedom in relation to us. The purpose of the first six chapters on human freedom is to bring out the limitations of this apparent freedom in order to strip away the imperfect definitions. Proceeding negatively, these chapters show what the freedom of the One *is not*. Before Plotinus moves to a reflection on the freedom of the One, he determines that what limited freedom we do have is founded in *Nous*, because all that is free is found to be unrestricted by the constraints of the material.

Chapter 7 is the transitional chapter in which Plotinus moves to a reflection on the freedom of the One. Here Plotinus introduces an objection which he labels rash thinking, a position which is different from his own. This objection, whose refutation guides the rest of the treatise, is stated in the following way:

51. *Ennead* VI.8.1.

52. Jean-Marc Narbonne, *La Métaphysique de Plotin* 30: "Chez Plotin, les entités intelligibles ne sont pas seulement en acte, dans le sens où elles existeraient toujours déjà éternellement et s'opposeraient aux êtres soumis au devenir qui n'existent qu'*en puissance*: elle sont également acte, en tant qu'effet ou que *cristallisation* d'une puissance productrice active qui réside en elles-mêmes et qui s'identifie en fait à elles-mêmes."

53. "Il est préférable et plus clair de rapporter l'être en puissance à l'être en acte, et la puissance à l'acte" (II.5.1 as cited in Narbonne, *La Métaphysique de Plotin* 31).

> It is rash thinking drawn from another order that would imagine a First principle to be chance-made what it is, controlled by a manner of being imposed from without, void therefore of freedom and self-disposal, acting or refraining from compulsion.[54]

This objection limits freedom to the realm of the noetic and below. There are two implicit aspects in this position: first, that the character of the One is contingent, arbitrary and accidental, and second, that its act is limited by a compulsion from without. Unless the One is a thinking, deliberative subject, either it is pure contingency without logical necessity, or it is purely subject to the laws of its nature, and thus unfree. The objection anticipated here by Plotinus is the same criticism that Hegel levels against the Plotinian conception of the One. For Hegel, what is not clearly demonstrated in Plotinus' philosophy is that "God's way of working is *not external, as if he were a subject*, and therefore that all this does not come to pass as a *casual relation* and decree of God, to whom the thought of so acting *happened to occur*."[55] In this passage, we see all the same elements present in the counter-argument addressed by Plotinus: servitude imposed from without or lack of freedom, or an arbitrary nature based purely on random chance.

This objection arises because the One is neither deliberative nor itself a rational principle. However, as Jean Trouillard writes of the freedom of the One:

> Since it is a matter of a creation that encompasses norms and possibilities themselves, it cannot be a question of logical deduction, of emanation by nature, or of genesis regulated by a defined law. For the same reason, there is no contingency properly said when the possible is constituted at the same time as the real.[56]

Prior to the determination of the One, there are no laws, no contingency, no realm of possibility in distinction from the realm of necessity: all these come into existence in the emanation of the One which constitutes the realm of the noetic and the divided. The necessity inherent in the One is not a necessity imposed by some external force, because there is no externality which could compel the One to *be* anything. There is nothing but the One itself: "The Supreme is the term of all; it is like the principle and ground of some vast tree of rational life; itself unchanging, it gives reasoned being to the growth into which it enters."[57] Therefore, the very constraints that are sup-

54. *Ennead* VI.8.7.

55. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* II, 380.

56. Jean Trouillard, *La Procession plotinienne* (Paris, 1955) 3: "Puisqu'il s'agit d'une création qui englobe les normes et les possibles eux-mêmes, il ne peut être question de déduction logique, d'émanation de nature, de genèse réglée par une loi définie. Pour la même raison, il n'y a pas de contingence proprement dite quand le possible est institué en même temps que le réel."

57. *Ennead* VI.8.15.

posed to limit the freedom of the One do not even exist prior to the emanation of the First.

At the end of Chapter 7, every distinction in *Nous*, the difference between act and essence, act and existence, are negated in the One. The production of the One is absolutely identical to its nature. In the apophatic approach of Chapter 8, all predicates which could become obstacles to an understanding of the freedom of the One are negated. Consequently, the necessity of the One can be approached in subsequent chapters without any residue of anthropomorphic notions of freedom which could translate this necessity into either a lack of freedom or a contingent, arbitrary production. Though the human freedom as described in the first six chapters is a Stoic conception of freedom, a freedom which consists in conforming our passions and desires to the noetic and rational, this conception does not hold true for the One, for whom these considerations are wholly subordinate and subsequent. In Chapter 14 the One is definitively placed above all intellect and deliberation, and is described as the cause of itself. This is not ordinary causality, however, for the order of forms in which logical causality exists emanates from the One, yet is not at all present in the One's non-reflexive, non-deliberative self-identity.

In Chapter 20, the conclusion to this investigation into the freedom of the One outlines a First Principle quite different from Aristotelian *Nous*, and the Aristotelian criticism of Plato is not accepted as legitimate. For Plotinus, the One as pure Act is prior to any Substance, whereas the Aristotelian God is the highest Substance. Furthermore, the One is never engendered, and thus can never be considered accidental. The Aristotelian principle that nothing is made by itself pertains to all Substances, but not to the One which is both beyond and without Substance. The One is free because "surely an Activity not subjected to Substance is utterly free."[58] Unlike Aristotle, for whom nothing is superior to the most actualized Substance, for Plotinus "Activity is more perfect than Substance."[59] This freedom has nothing to do with freedom of choice. There is nothing arbitrary or accidental in what is necessary and beyond choice. Rather, the necessity of the One imposes all limits, because there is nothing other than the One to govern its own activity and productivity, which are beyond all Substance.

Heidegger seems moved by a similar reflection on the nature of freedom. For those who would criticize the location of Being in time as naturalistic immediacy, Heidegger wishes to show that the freedom of Being is neither arbitrary, nor governed by any intelligible logic. Heidegger writes that "the essence of freedom is *originally* not connected with the will or even with the

58. *Ennead* VI.8.20.
59. Ibid.

causality of human willing."[60] At the most primordial, pre-rational state of the world, Being does not have the character of a free subject who wills, and its freedom is not to be related to the cause and effect logic of human willing. Heidegger wishes to move away from a concept of destiny or Providence or any sense of an eternal Now in which all reality past, present and future is held in one perspective. The reduction of the *original* freedom to cause and effect has the following conclusion for Heidegger:

> where everything that presences itself exhibits itself in the light of cause-effect coherence, even God, for representational thinking, can lose all that is exalted and holy, the mysteriousness of his distance. In the light of causality, God can sink to the level of cause, of *causa efficiens.* He then becomes even in theology the God of the philosophers, namely, of those who define the unconcealed and the concealed in terms of causality of making, without ever considering the essential provenance of causality. (331)

Heidegger does not deny that there is a correctness and a comprehensibility in the relation of cause and effect, nor does he deny that this relationship exists in the world; he simply wants to point towards something prior to this intelligibility of correctness, the True apart from our rational conception of it.[61]

In Heidegger's view, the primordial freedom and truth "stand in the closest and most intimate kinship" (330). The freedom of Being constitutes what is true (but not correct, which is a truth relative to our own understanding only). The content of this freedom is, by its very nature, never made wholly manifest to us, and so the revealing of Being "belongs within a harbouring and a concealing ... it is concealed and always concealing itself" (330). This freedom, which Heidegger calls "the mystery," is the origin of everything that appears and everything that we can grasp, but is not itself a determinate thing which is comprehensible by thought. He expresses the revelation of Being in its freedom in a manner peculiarly reminiscent of an *exitus-reditus* language, in which the origin and end remain inaccessible to our understanding: "All revealing comes out of the free, goes into the free, and brings into the free" (330). Yet, to say that everything comes from and returns to the free does not mean that the mystery of this process is lost, because this procession into appearing always occurs beyond thought and logic.

Heidegger thus formulates the freedom of Being in a phrase strikingly similar to Plotinus' own defence of the freedom of the One: "The freedom

60. Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings* 330.

61. "... the unconcealment in accordance with which nature presents itself as a calculable complex of the effects and forces can indeed permit correct determinations; but precisely through these successes the danger may remain that in the midst of all that is correct the true will withdraw" (331).

of the free consists neither in unfettered arbitrariness nor in the constraint of mere laws" (330). It is beyond the constraints of a logic which would limit its revealing, yet it is not characterized by the contingency of irrationality. It is prior to the division of rational and irrational. Heidegger describes this freedom in relation to our unknowing of Being as that which manifests itself by making present to us the limits of our own understanding. He expresses this limit as a veil, and says that "freedom is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing shimmers the veil that hides the essential occurrence of all truth and lets the veil appear as what veils" (330). When this veil is not apprehended by us, and when we do not recognize the inherent inadequacy of our knowing in relation to what is really real, man forsakes his proper freedom which consists in an originary contact with the pre-reflective truth of Being.

This ignorance of our limit is the inherent danger of our non-reflective relation to the indeterminacy of Being, a danger which Hegel himself recognized. Through our inability to distinguish Being from Nothingness, we are logically impelled to search for a further determination of Being, so that Being cannot be expressed according to the whim of the subject. To avoid this relativist result, Being must instead be comprehensible by a logic that is accessible to human thought. Heidegger, too, recognizes that there is always the danger of interpreting this Being as Nothing,[62] and that this interpretation has in fact been the destiny of the modern world. Because Being is not determined, and its revealing is not governed by a logical necessity intelligible to us, we can interpret the truth of Being to be Nothing. Man "is continually approaching the brink of this possibility of pursuing and promulgating nothing but what is revealed in ordering, and of deriving all his standards from this basis."[63] Nihilism, relativism, and sophistry result when the noetic activity of man is taken to be constitutive of reality, and through this closure to the truth of things "the other possibility is blocked" (331).

This other possibility is that man may have a fundamental experience of this truth, and recognize himself not as master of the revealing, but as *be-*

62. This has its most clear expression in the following passage by Heidegger: "Das Sein ist nicht und gleichwohl können wir es nicht dem Nichts gleichsetzen. Aber wir müssen uns andererseits dazu entschliessen, das Seyn als das Nichts zu setzen, wenn 'Nichts' besagt das Nicht-Seiende. Das Seyn aber "ist" über solches 'Nichts' hinaus nun nicht wieder 'Etwas,' solches, wobei als einem Vorfindlichen wir, es vorstellend, ausruhen könnten .... Die Einzigkeit dieses und das Unvor-stellbare im Sinne eines nur Andwesenden ist die schärfste Abwehr der Bestimmungen der Seindheit als *idea* und *genos* Bestimmungen, die anfänglich notwendig sind, wenn vom 'Seienden' als *phusis* her der Aufbruch zum Seyn erstmals geschieht." *Beiträge zur Philosophie* 286–87, as cited in Narbonne, "Heidegger et le néoplatonisme" 15–16.

63. "The Question Concerning Technology" 331. For Heidegger, this Nietzschean conclusion to philosophy is "the one final delusion: it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself" (332).

longing to it. The closing of the possibility of the human relation to truth "thrusts man into the danger of surrendering his free essence" (337). As for Plotinus, the essence of human freedom lies in the contemplation of this indeterminate being, all the while realising that this Truth will always remained concealed to our thought, and that it will never be truly reduced to the noetic grasp. Both Heidegger and Plotinus acknowledge the fundamentally rational, totalizing essence of the human mind as what fundamentally makes us human, yet both insist that mind must perpetually recognize its own limits.

Heidegger views the possibilities of Being's essence as ambiguous and never pre-determined for us. He acknowledges that our tendency is to fall into "the frenziedness of ordering that blocks every view into the propriative event of revealing and so radically endangers the relation to the essence of truth" (338). Yet the very danger manifesting itself in the modern world which has engendered an atomic age, within which exist the possibilities of destroying the conditions for continued human existence, is the grounds for our salvation. It reveals the other possibility to the rational human: "that he may be the one who is needed and used for the safekeeping of the essence of truth" (338). The danger inherent in the irrepressible ordering tendencies of our noetic capacities can never be neutralized by us. We can merely be ever attentive to how we relate to the world, and to the imminent possibility of slipping into a nihilistic relation to it. In order to minimize the danger, it is crucial that we preserve the distance between Being and the realm of what we can comprehend. Likewise, for Plotinus, the realm of rational thought is enthusiastically preserved and developed to its most perfect degree. Notwithstanding, thought must realize its own limit and dissimilitude from the One in order to maintain its freedom. Herein lies what Heidegger calls the "piety of thought" (341).

DERRIDA—A SCEPTICAL CONCLUSION

In Jacques Derrida's "Post-Scriptum" to the book *Derrida and Negative Theology*, Derrida cites Heidegger citing Leibniz concerning the proximity of negative theology and atheism, or, in other words, the proximity of the One and Nothing:

> Like a certain mysticism, apophatic discourse has always been suspected of atheism. *Nothing seems at once more merited and more insignificant, more displaced, more blind than such a trial.* Leibniz inclined to this. Heidegger recalls what he said of Angelus Silesius: 'with every mystic there are some places that are extraordinarily bold, full of difficult metaphors and inclining almost to Godlessness, just as I have often seen in the German poems—beautiful besides—of a certain Angelus Silesius.[64]

64. Derrida, "Post-Scriptum" in *Derrida and Negative Theology*, ed. Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (New York, 1992) 284. All subsequent Derrida references are drawn from this.

In all of his writing on negative theology, Derrida attempts to bring out both the inherent indecidability between whether one experiences a presence or absence, and how each possibility provides the grounds and impetus for its opposite. Derrida agrees with Hegel's position, that unless one moves to a determinate conception of Being beyond its identity with Nothing, then the line between piety and sophistry, faith and nihilism, is one of mere *meaning*, one which concerns only how each individual *decides* to approach the world. The two are intricately linked, and oscillate back and forth into one another. Derrida asks if "the apophatic inclines almost toward atheism, can't one say that, on the other hand or thereby, the extreme and more consequent forms of declared atheism will have always attested the most intense desire of God?" (284). To this Derrida answers with his famous 'yes and no.' He characterises the difference between the nihilist and pious responses as a difference of desire: one responds to "the most insatiable desire of God" according to the immediacy of the experience; the other "can remain foreign to all desire, in any case to every anthropotheomorphic form of desire."[65]

The question of presence or absence of the trace in relation to the opposition of atheism and negative theology is taken up explicitly for the first time in Derrida's article "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials."[66] An important theme in this treatment of negative theology is the notion of *obligation*, that which moves one to speak of the unspeakable, provoking in us a responsibility to speak without speaking about what cannot properly be spoken. The article addresses comparisons made between Derrida's deconstructive approach and the tradition of negative theology. He suggests that the problems which confront any negative theologian in relation to discourse are parallel to the problems which confront Derrida himself in speaking of the plurality of negative theologies. The two questions he asks himself with regard to how it is possible to avoid speaking about negative theology, are in fact the very questions which the pious negative theologian must ask concerning the ineffability of God as beyond being and essence:

> 1. How is it possible to avoid speaking of it henceforth? This appears impossible. How could I remain silent on this subject? 2. How, if one speaks of it, to avoid speaking of it? How not to speak of it? How is it necessary not to speak of it? How to avoid speaking of it without rhyme or reason? What precautions must be taken to avoid errors, that is, inadequate, insufficient, simplistic assertions? (82)

65. Ibid. 284–85. Derrida brings out the crucial importance of meaning and intention in Neoplatonism in Denials. See for example his discussion of *eros* in Dionysius: "Dionysius warns us: it is necessary to avoid using the word eros without first clarifying the meaning, the intention" (109).

66. "How to Avoid Speaking."

This is what Derrida means when he speaks later of the becoming-theological of all discourse: the same precautions which guard us against inadequate, insufficient and simplistic dogmas that would denigrate God's name, open up an analogous attitude to all objects of our discourse.

In one sense, Derrida places deconstruction beyond the division of the dichotomy of atheism and negative theology, such that although it can assume both forms, it is never wholly reducible to either, and is never logically compelled to choose one or the other. Derrida admits that deconstruction resembles negative theology, if one takes this tradition to signify:

> a certain typical attitude towards language ... considering that every predicative language is inadequate to the essence, in truth to the hyperessentiality (the being beyond Being) of God; consequently, only a negative attribution can be made to approach God. By a more or less tenable analogy, one would recognize thus some traits, the family resemblance of negative theology, in every discourse that seems to return in a regular and insistent manner to this rhetoric of negative determinations, endlessly multiplying the defences and apophatic warnings: this, which is called X ... 'is' neither this nor that, neither sensible nor intelligible, neither positive nor negative, neither superior nor inferior, neither active nor passive, neither present nor absent, not even neutral, not even subject to a dialectic with a third moment, without any possible sublation. (74)

In this similarity between deconstruction and negative theology, Derrida is fascinated by the "automatic, ritualistic and 'doxic' exercise of suspicion brought against everything that resembles negative theology" (75). These discourses, which claim not to be reducible to some repetitive technique, are accused of not having sufficient faith in the powers of rational thought, exploiting this "rhetoric of failure ... that renounces knowledge, conceptual determination, and analysis" (75). Derrida outlines three criticisms launched against him as an exploiter of the 'techniques' of negative theology. He orders the criticisms from the least sophisticated and adequate to the most interesting and true.

First, there are those who equate this deconstructive technique with *nihilism*, a simple *preference* for the Nothing and negation. This criticism assumes that there is a choice, and that Derrida simply chooses 'nothing' as the object of his discourse over 'something.' This interpretation corresponds to those who accuse negative theology, in an "equally trivial fashion," of having its truth in atheism. Second, there are those who say that the neither-nor logic speaks for nothing but the sake of speaking. Derrida finds this more compelling, since to speak for the sake of speaking "is not to speak in vain and to say nothing. It is perhaps to experience a possibility of speech which the objector himself must presuppose at the moment when he addresses this criticism. To speak of *nothing* is not: not to speak. Above all, it is not to speak to no one" (75–76). This corresponds to the way that Derrida will approach prayer as the discourse which in itself *means* nothing, but is the "preamble on the methodological threshold of experience" (76). Though this preamble can be mimicked, it claims to escape reduction to a mechanical technique through this prayerful address to the other.

Third, Derrida takes the final criticism to be the most revelatory of all: "once the apophatic discourse is analysed in its logico-grammatical form, it is not merely sterile, repetitive, obscurantist, mechanical, it perhaps leads us to the becoming theological of all discourse" (76). As a result of this apophatic tradition, whenever one employs negative language to express something, "every negative sentence would already be haunted by God or by the name of God, the distinction between God and God's name opening up the space of an enigma" (76). This introduces the Heideggerian position, in which the Nothing as that which reveals Being is not the result but the origin of all negation. Derrida writes that "God would not merely be the end, but the origin of this work of the negative" (76). Here, instead of proclaiming atheism to be the truth of negative theology, God is seen as the truth of all negativity. Following Heidegger, Derrida argues that there is always the possibility that in every act of proclaiming 'neither this nor that,' there is the "first mark of respect for a divine cause which does not even need to be" (77). This final critique, which I believe corresponds to contemporary theologians such as Marion and John Milbank,[67] would like to see deconstruction as "the last testimony, not to say the martyrdom, of faith in the present fin de siècle."[68] This is where the 'position' of Derrida himself emerges. For he does not prohibit this reading of deconstruction, for "who could prohibit it? In the name of what?" (77). There is no logical necessity which moves us towards or away from this interpretation of deconstruction, whether the most faithful or the most faithless.

It is this lack of logical necessity, this indecidability that Derrida wishes to emphasize, for it is in this that deconstruction is beyond both interpretations yet can also embrace each one. He asks "what has happened, so that what is thus permitted is never necessary as such?" (77). In one sense, Derrida is returning to a kind of Hegelian position beyond the dichotomy between the Heideggerian and Neoplatonic view of the proximity of Being and Nothing on the one side, and the sophistic, Nietzschean view on the other. For the Neoplatonists and Heidegger, this proximity of Being (what is present yet indeterminate) and Nothing (what is absent and indeterminate) impels us towards the full presence of Being. Derrida will find that this is a *possible*

67. See W.J. Hankey, "Theoria versus Poesis: Neoplatonism and Trinitarian Difference in Aquinas, John Milbank, Jean-Luc Marion and John Zizioulas," in *Modern Theology* 15:4 (1999): 387–415.

68. "How to Avoid Speaking" 77.

yet not a *necessary* result of the closeness of Being and Nothing and, furthermore, that indeterminate Being equally impels us to its opposite determination, Nothing. Because one can affirm absolutely nothing about either Being or Nothing, the pious option remains within the realm of the possible. Derrida returns to Hegel's position that these two choices, which are each equally indeterminate, unthinkable and unspeakable, remain indecidable prior to any further determination. He questions the fundamental distinction that Pseudo-Dionysius makes between this positive and negative indeterminacy, between a formless God beyond Being and essence, and pure Non-Being or Evil: "What is the more or less in regard to what is already without essence?" (110). Derrida would completely agree with the Hegelian formulation that "it is as correct however to say that Being and Nothing are altogether different, as to assert their unity."[69] In his *Logic*, Hegel refers to the truth of Being and Nothing as a unity of the two in Becoming. He would view Derrida's satisfaction with having grasped this result as a sophistic manipulation of this elementary stage in the logical progression of the Idea. In the face of this indecidability, rather than move through the compulsion of logical necessity towards a higher determination, Derrida finds the space within which to write.

Having thus located deconstruction within this framework, we can better understand how Derrida is able to answer, with such uncharacteristic directness, that he *is not* writing negative theology. Though there remains an affinity between deconstruction and an apophatic approach, to call Derrida a negative theologian would be a reduction of the indecidability to one side of this dichotomy: "hyperessentiality" beyond all discourse.[70] While negative theology "seems to exceed the alternative of a theism or an atheism which would only set itself against what one calls, sometimes ingeniously, the existence of God,"[71] deconstruction could be said to exceed both the pious and the sophistic meaning towards that which is beyond being. Derrida treats the Neoplatonist and Heideggerian pious approach with the following response:

> One can always say: hyperessentiality is precisely that, a supreme Being who remains incommensurable to the being of all that is, which *is* nothing, neither present nor absent, and so on. If the movement of this reappropriation appears in fact irrepressible, its

69. *Logic* 129.

70. See Douglas Hedley, "Should Divinity Overcome Metaphysics? Reflections of John Milbank's Theology beyond Secular Reason—Confessions of a Cambridge Platonist," *The Journal of Religion* 80:2 (2000): 271–98. See also Ian Almond, "Negative Theology, Derrida, and the Critique of Presence: A Post-Structuralist Reading of Meister Eckhart," *The Heythrop Journal* 40 (1999): 150–65.

71. "How to Avoid Speaking" 78.

> ultimate failing is no less necessary. But I concede that this question remains at the heart of a thinking of differance or of the writing of writing. *It remains a question, and this is why I return to it again.*[72]

Derrida writes not in order to decide between these two, but to make manifest this indecidability between possible positions. He is compelled to write by those who would repress and exclude one possibility in favour of the other.

Derrida ends his article by approaching *deconstruction as a form of prayer.*[73] Prayer is a central theme which runs throughout Derrida's entire treatment of negative theology. Derrida first refers to prayer in his examination of Plato's *Timaeus*[74] by distinguishing it from one's approach to the *khora.* Nothing can be properly predicated of this mysterious entity which is the condition of possibility for all discourse, because it is precisely what is never "something that is or is not, that could be present or absent, intelligible, sensible, or both at once, active or passive, the Good (*epekeina tes ousias*) or the Evil, God or man, the living or the nonliving."[75] For the impossibility of speaking or naming this *khora* does not impel the interlocutors of Plato's text to silence, but inspires a very particular kind of discourse. This impossibility,

> far from reducing it to silence, yet dictates an obligation, by its very impossibility: *it is necessary* to speak of it and there is a rule for that ... *it is necessary always to refer to it in the same manner.* Not to give it the same name, as one French translation suggests, but to call it, address oneself to it in the same manner("*tauton auten aei prosreteon*"; 49b). This is not a question of a proper name, but rather of appellation, a manner of addressing oneself. *Prosrerô*: I address myself to someone, and sometimes: I adore-divinity; *prosrema* is speech addressed to someone; *prosresis* is the salutation that calls. (107)

Closely identifying the *khora* with *différance* and deconstruction with this form of address *to* (in contrast with a statement *about*), one is obliged to respect the singularity of this difference, and one must always "rediscover the trace, still unique, in other languages, bodies and negativities."[76] What is important to note here is that *sometimes* it is Divinity that is adored in this address, but that this approach does not presuppose a determinate object. It is never restricted to the form of prayer, although this prayer is included as a possibility within the approach.

72. Ibid. 79.

73. In Derrida's eulogy at Lévinas' funeral, he credits the reflection on "a question-prayer that, as he says, would be anterior to all dialogue" to Lévinas. See Derrida's *Adieu to Emmanuel Lévinas*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Nass (California, 1999) 13.

74. See Derrida's articles "Chora" and "Plato's Pharmakon" for his interpretation of Plato's *Timaeus* and the importance he ascribes to this third term in Plato's creation account.

75. "How to Avoid Speaking" 106.

76. Ibid. 108. This could also be seen as a slogan for deconstruction itself.

After examining prayer in the writings of Eckhart and Dionysius, Derrida then distinguishes prayer from certain approaches with which it is so often associated that it is often completely assimilated: the encomium and the celebration. In contrast to these other types of address, prayer "does not speak *of*, but *to*." It is:

> an address to the other as other...an asking, supplication, searching out ... it is not predicative, theoretical (theo*logical*), or constative ... it implies nothing other than the supplicating address to the other, perhaps beyond all supplication and giving, to give the promise of this presence as other, and finally, the transcendence of the otherness itself, without any determination.[77]

In contrast to this open address, the encomium implies determination and closure of possibilities, a speaking about the one whom one is addressing which specifies the one invoked. For Derrida, such an address is no longer a pure prayer to the other. The apostrophe of prayer and the determination of the encomium are two different structures that cannot be reduced to one single kind of address. Derrida recognizes the contentious nature of this distinction, and writes that "to reject this doubtless subtle distinction, inadmissible for Dionysius and perhaps for a Christian in general, is to deny the essential quality of prayer to every invocation that is not Christian" (111). Prior to the determination of its addressee accomplished by the encomium, which almost always accompanies it, prayer asserts nothing in its opening itself to whatever will or will not be revealed to it.

Prayers, according to Aristotle, are neither true nor false. Derrida concludes by bringing out the question that is evoked by every prayer: "can or must a prayer allow itself to be mentioned, quoted, inscribed in a compelling, agogic proof? Perhaps it need not be. Perhaps it must not do this. Perhaps, on the contrary, it must do this" (130). There is no reference that exists outside the prayer as a standard by which one could detect whether it is empty automatic repetition of words, or whether it is a genuine call to the other: "Are there criteria external to the event itself to decide whether Dionysius, for example, distorted or rather accomplished the essence of prayer by quoting it, and first of all by writing it to Timothy?" (130). Derrida suggests that one think of both prayer and deconstruction as "pure address, on the edge of silence, alien to every code and to every rite, hence to every repetition" (75). As Derrida suggests at the beginning of the article, this

77. Ibid. 110–11. One wonders whether Derrida's definition of prayer corresponds to any historically antecedent form of prayer, or whether he merely redefines this word in relation to his own philosophical purposes.

notation of prayer, or the writing of deconstruction, "can also be mimicked, and even give way, as if despite themselves, to repetitive technique" (75). Derrida sees that this risk, "fortunately *and* unfortunately, is also a piece of luck" (75). The fact that negative theology turns into its opposite, and that it must be distinguished from its opposite, is the very grounds for its existence: "perhaps there would be no prayer, no pure possibility of prayer, without what we glimpse as a menace or as a contamination: writing, the code, repetition, analogy, or the—at least apparent—multiplicity of addresses, initiation" (131). It is the truth of nihilism that impels one to piety, and conversely, it is the truth of indeterminate Being which creates the opening for nihilism.

If the logically necessary resurgence of the Nothing as indistinguishable from Being or the One did not exist, would the responsibility to speak or write be present for either Heidegger or Plotinus? Is it possible to think of Plotinus and Heidegger outside the context of those impieties against which they are reacting? The objection in Chapter 7 of *Ennead* VI.8 provokes Plotinus' approach to the freedom of the One, and the nihilistic culmination of Modernity in our slavery to technology prompts Heidegger's response. In both cases, the opposite of the pious relation to the indeterminacy of the ultimate truth of the world requires this negative impetus. Derrida asks "if there were a purely pure experience of prayer, would one need religion and affirmative or negative theology?" (131). Derrida suggests that deconstruction is like the bending of prayer to writing which makes all theology possible. Here, there is no Hegelian determination of Being and Nothing into a concrete beginning point at which one could rest, but an oscillation back and forth between Being and Nothing. Derrida takes deconstruction to be a kind of prayer, which, though neutral in relation to truth or falsity, encourages the interplay between Being and Nothing, or negative theology and atheism. It incites the crossing of the limit by which both atheists and Neoplatonists would like to distinguish Being from Nothing. Both the pious and impious relations presuppose the other as the grounds for its activity.

Just as this obligation presupposes this interplay, Derrida's own deconstructive activity has depended upon the criticisms of his position which have assimilated him to either side of the dichotomy of indeterminate Being or Nothing, characterizing deconstruction as a religion or a form of nihilism. He is self-consciously parasitic upon these in order to begin his own writing, and these criticisms establish the obligation for him to write, to respond. Derrida's article reveals that the identity of Being and Nothing, in which neither possibility is ultimately repressed, is the grounds for a properly pious relation to the world.

Deconstruction serves to prevent the determination of this oscillating cycle, a determination which makes theology less genuine, and true piety impossible. It aims to show how the indeterminacy between Being and Nothing brought out by Hegel need not lead to the further determination of both as necessary constitutive moments. Thus, Derrida attempts to demonstrate how his own deconstructive approach to philosophy can "have the seriousness of prayer," a prayerful approach which he would not consider to be possible from within the Hegelian determination of Being.

The relation between Pure Being and Nothing yields a contradiction which, for Hegel, necessarily moves thought towards the determination of these two moments. Yet there exist entire schools of thought which take as their principal aim to show that one need not look to a more concrete relation in order to prevent an oscillation between these two oppositions. In order to understand the place of Neoplatonism within this framework, one must liberate both the mystical and Eleatic side of Neoplatonism that is purged from the Hegelian interpretation of the Plotinian tradition.

On the one hand, the history of philosophy includes various recurring forms of nihilism, from the sophists to Nietzsche and his contemporary followers. These thinkers attempt to show that one need not overcome their position, which emphasizes that nothing in the world has any existence in and for itself. These nihilists consider the apparent fullness of the indeterminate Principle as mere illusion. On the other hand, both Heidegger and the Neoplatonists look to the indeterminacy of what unifies our existence as neither arbitrary nor subject to external constraint. Confronted by a nihilism that views the indeterminacy of their Principle as proof of its inherent nothingness, these thinkers do not acknowledge the necessity of any further determination of the mysterious Unity beyond conceptual thought. Both the nihilist and pious sides of this recurring debate agree that Being must necessarily remain indeterminate in order to realize a true, authentic freedom. Derrida sceptically suspends judgement in relation to this dichotomy between nihilism and piety, and he refuses to offer a normative stance on which of the two positions offers a more authentic relation to the world. Hegel, however, would view these forms of subjectivist nihilism, supra-rational mysticism, and total suspension of judgement as inadequate, limited expressions of our freedom. Whether any of these responses to this crucial stage in the Hegelian philosophy lead to metaphysical, political, and ethical consequences that are acceptable to modern society continues to be a matter of fruitful debate in our time.