

The Trajectory of Negative Theology in the Platonic Tradition

Beginning in the middle Platonic period, some of Plato's dialogues—in particular the *Timaeus* and the *Parmenides*—became theological prooftexts for Platonist exegetes, which certain Platonists such as Alcinous or the anonymous commentator on the *Parmenides* eventually developed into a complex negative theology. This tendency to define God or the One by the negation of attributes (e.g. God is unmoving, unchanging, etc.) or by describing him as transcending pairs of contraries (e.g. God is and is not, is one and is not one, etc.) became a hallmark of late Platonist theological expression. However, there remains a largely unaddressed need to describe the development and trajectory of negative theology, particularly in the middle Platonic period. This paper follows the development of negative theology in the later part of the middle Platonic period, stretching into the third century, by investigating how Alcinous' *Didaskalikos* and the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* increasingly define God or the One as a result of their interpretation of Plato. Several developments become clear, including the emerging possibility of reading the *Parmenides* theologically rather than as a purely logical treatise, the increasing complexity of apophatic expression through an emphasis on transcendence rather than negation, and the positing of additional ontological, divine “levels” to further elevate the transcendent One.

Although many middle Platonists similarly define God apophatically, Alcinous and the anonymous commentator both take a particular interest in theology and thus develop cohesive systems. In addition, they are both representative of mainstream Platonic thought, unlike others who may be overly influenced by outside traditions (such as Numenius, who includes Gnostic and Hellenistic Jewish ideas in his philosophy). One additional benefit of using these texts is

the possibility of analyzing the *Anonymous Commentary on the Parmenides* for its fascinating theological content—a remarkably neglected aspect of this text—rather than assessing its dating, authorship, or classification as middle Platonic or Neoplatonic, which is largely what scholarship has yielded so far on this text. By describing the theological development in these two authors, we can begin to understand this trend in late Platonism as a whole.

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