

Ancient Ideologies of Ineffability and Their Echoes

Naomi Janowitz, *University of California, Davis*

ABSTRACT

Ancient ideas about the limits of what can be put into words demonstrate the popularity of the notion that language is a guide to truth, even if that truth is defined by the limits of language. Two ancient and one modern example all locate truth in a reality that can be tracked both by the possibility of and the inherent failure of definition. Ancient exegetes started with the basic concept that words were both names for objects and the best formal representations of divinity. Yet names were not capable of fully defining ineffable divinity. These two ideologies—that names formally represent divinity and yet fail to completely describe divinity—coexisted in a delicate balance. The theme of divine ineffability, first articulated as part of a theology emphasizing the complete power of the deity over matter, has been adopted by modern scholars and converted to a theory to locate reality in hard-to-define personal experiences. The ineffable as what cannot be spoken about shifts focus from divinity to the self (the locus of modern experience).

What can and cannot be expressed by language? Diverse answers to this question are rich sites for examining linguistic ideologies, that is, ideas about how language functions.¹ Some ancient philosophers argued that it was impossible to describe a deity in words, as hopeless as capturing a deity in stone. They claimed that the deity was *arrēton*, an adjective formed from the a-privative combined with “to say/speak,” often translated as “ineffable.” They also employed *apophasis*, a rhetorical device that posits something by denying it (“I will not mention X”), employed to make negative theological claim.² Various fashions of ineffability or apophasis demonstrate the irresistible appeal of language as somehow containing a revelation of truth, even if that

Contact Naomi Janowitz at Religious Studies, University of California, Davis, One Shields Ave., Davis, CA 95616 (nhjanowitz@ucdavis.edu).

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1. The specific understanding of “linguistic ideology” used here derives from Silverstein (1978).

2. In modern discourse, negative theology culminates in, for example, the “radical negativity” of Shoshana Felman (1983, 139). See also the discussion of Sells below.

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truth is defined by the limits of language. The three examples discussed in this article all show that ideas of reference and definition undergird the search for truth at the very limits of language. The truth that these investigators find, however, is limited by how they imagine language to work.

The ancient examples of ineffability analyzed below come from the early Christian exegete Basilides (fl. 120–40 CE)³ and the Platonic commentator Plotinus (204–70 CE).⁴ For both these thinkers, bodily existence and materiality, including material language, can only partially stand for divinity, which itself exists outside materiality. While they did not invent these ideas, they crystallized a new version of Platonic ineffability that conflates ideas about words and matter with an increasingly monotheistic theology. By the first century CE, international trends toward monotheistic ways of describing the creator deity had begun to clash with textual depictions in the Hebrew scriptures and in Plato's *Timaeus* of the deity as the organizer of preexistent matter.⁵ The deity was imagined as being too powerful and too mighty in his omnipotence to have even the smallest shreds of primordial matter as a rival. Whereas at one time a theologian won by presenting his divinity as greater than someone else's, now he attained the winning edge by elevating the deity right out of the realm of representation and materiality.

In this historical context, Basilides offered one of the first statements of the doctrine known as "creation from nothing."⁶ He also posited that the deity is beyond naming. Similarly, Plotinus shared many of the same ideas about language, insisting that an even stricter ineffability was necessary for a pursuit of the truth. Although he was never able to systematize his ideas, Plotinus did present some propositions that helped domesticate the problem of matter. With their special exegetical emphasis, both these thinkers lay the groundwork for centuries of theological speculation on the immateriality of the deity and the limits of discourse.

In contrast to these ancient exegetes, Michael Sells (1994) recently articulated a modern theory of ineffability. Sells abstracts some of Plotinus's ideas from their

3. Since none of his writings are extant, they are known only from citations preserved by other ancient writers mostly hostile to Basilides. Fragments of Basilides appear in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.24.3–7; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies* 7.8–15, 10.10; and Clement of Alexandria, *Strom.* 7. For translations and commentaries on the fragments, see Layton (1987). For general discussions, see Layton (1989), May (1994, 62–84), and Pearson (2007, 134–44). Layton considers genuine the citations from Clement and Irenaeus (Layton 1989, 138–39), May, the citations from Hippolytus (May 1994, 62–84). Resolving this issue is beyond the scope of this article. Most of the Basilides citations discussed in this article are from Hippolytus.

4. In the vast bibliography on Plotinus, for the particular issues raised in this article, see Rist (1967, 213–30), Schroeder (1996), Dillon (1996, 2002), and Ahbel-Rappe (2000).

5. "That even a divine creator would, like any craftsman, have to use preexisting materials is an assumption that the ancient Greeks apparently never questioned" (Sedley 2007, xvii).

6. While he may well not have been the first to articulate this idea, Basilides is the first extant example.

exegetical context and reformulates them as first-order discourse. The context for this modern version of ineffability is academic battles about the status of mystical experience as proof of some level of reality. In short, for scholars such as Stephen Katz, all religious experiences are mediated by specific terminology and imagery that outline what is to be encountered (Katz 1978). Thus a Jewish mystical experience will be completely determined by the terminology of Jewish traditions. If, on other hand, the core of a mystical experience is the encounter with some reality beyond language, then that reality, usually a deity, is independent of any particular literary or oral tradition. The experience permits an individual to transcend a tradition or culture and have an unmediated encounter with truth.

The three examples of linguistic ideologies discussed below, articulated by Basilides, Plotinus, and Michael Sells, all use ideas about reference to map out reality.⁷ In each case, language is understood to be a powerful map of reality based on linguistic ideologies. As Michael Silverstein has pointed out in a series of foundational articles, these ideologies are based only on partial awareness that speakers have of how language functions. He writes:

The conscious native-speaker's sense of the transparency of the universe to representation by one's own language, and perhaps to language in general, is a function of (a) language's fashions of speaking, through which the universe makes itself manifest to the speaker and which thus guide the conscious, common sense of the representational systems. (2000, 99)

Locating ideas about words gives us precious information about the speaker's beliefs. This does not mean that the speaker has a theoretical understanding of all the ways in which language works at levels less transparent.

The Platonic Legacy concerning Words

In the late second century CE, the Christian exegete Basilides wrote extensively on ethics and cosmology.⁸ Engaging in a debate with contemporary philosophical, mainly Platonic, discourse, Basilides emphasized that the deity is ineffable. The term that Basilides used, *arrēton*, had several meanings in ancient Greek, including “unspoken” (*Odyssey* 14.466), “what should not be spoken” (Herodotus, *Hist.* 5.83), and “something horrible to utter” (Sophocles, *Elektra* 203). Basilides's use is closest to Plato's, “that which cannot be spoken” (*Sophist* 238c).

7. While this article focuses primarily on language, the linguistic ideologies have cross-modal implications for other types of nonverbal signs (a few are discussed below).

8. Layton wisely sets aside the label “gnostic” because it has distorted the analysis of Basilides's theology (1989). On the problematic nature of the use of “gnostics/Gnosticism,” see Williams (1992).

Basilides's particular theology of ineffability set him apart from contemporaneous writers who used the term as an adjective to describe the deity.⁹ He interpreted the common use of the term as one more in a string of attempts to name the deity, this time with the name "Ineffable."¹⁰ These writers, he claimed, failed to note that they were simply substituting a new name for the ones they considered inappropriate; they missed the central point that the deity cannot be named at all.

As an exegete, Basilides found a textual basis for his claim in Ephesians 1:20–21, which states: "God enacted this in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named" (my translation). The verse stresses the elevation of Christ. Basilides turned it into a metaphysical statement about divinity as beyond naming, due to a particular linguistic ideology about the function of naming. As Basilides explains it, "That which is named is not absolutely ineffable [Gk. *arrēton*], since we call one thing ineffable and another not even ineffable. For that which is not even ineffable is not named ineffable, but is above every name that is named" (Hippolytus of Rome *Haer.* 7.20.8). Basilides insisted on rejecting all names in order to move the deity to yet another level of transcendent mystery, one step beyond the simple reference of names. He is showing off, doing some one-upmanship in "an attempt to achieve the ultimate in negative theology" (Whittaker 1969, 368).

This argument is a reformulation of ancient ideas about names. In early Greek traditions, as in numerous texts that become part of Hebrew scriptures, it was valid and necessary to distinguish between the many different gods with different names. The ancient fashion of naming permitted the easy turning of a noun, or an adjective, into the name of a deity. Nouns and names were not distinguished as different linguistic entities, so "All-powerful" could successfully be used as a name for a deity.

Basilides's concerns about names and the limits of language were shared by contemporaries, preserving many ideas from Plato but adjusting others.¹¹ In

9. Whittaker describes the use of the term *arrēton* as commonplace in Middle Platonic speculation and also cites the Pythagorean *Lysis* (1969, 368). Clement claims God is ineffable (*Strom.* 5.65.2) as part of his extensive use of the a-privative (see Hägg 2006), even as he claims that divine names can be indicative of the deity's power (*Strom.* 5.82.1–2).

10. Jufresa (1981, 1) argues Basilides is countering, in particular, the rabbinic ideology of a powerful and not-to-be-spoken divine Name. The restrictions on using the name are due to the power of the Name and not the inherent ineffability of the deity.

11. Basilides may very well be citing lost Platonic sources here, as Whittaker argues, given the number of later sources that cite such arguments. See, e.g., Alcinous, *Handbook on Platonism* 10.4, citing *Phaedrus* 247c7f.

many ways his linguistic ideology remained an extension of general ideas about words found in Plato's *Cratylus* and in later interpretations of this text. In the *Cratylus*, Socrates rejects Hermogenes's conventional theory of naming. He is also concerned with Cratylus's support of a single natural name for each object. While debates continue about what Socrates is ultimately arguing, Socrates never appears to accept the ideas that names are entirely conventional (Sedley 2003, 148).¹² Names offer the best descriptor of divinity since they have a natural and nonconventional relationship with what they stand for. A name imitates the thing's being (Sedley 2003, 83).¹³ According to the *Cratylus*, "A thing's name is its verbal portrait, in the sense that it is by virtue not just of its having been assigned to that thing but also of its mimetic description of it that the word secures its status as that thing's name" (Sedley 2003, 149). This idea includes two parts, one based on the notion of a name-giver, the other on names as tools.¹⁴ According to the first premise, the individuals who gave names to objects encoded descriptions of those object in the names they chose (*Crat.* 391b–427d). Names are "telescoped descriptions of their *nominata*" (Sedley 2003, 36).¹⁵ According to the second idea, names are a special kind of tool (*Crat.* 386d–390e). Imogen Smith argues that the tool analogy supports the idea that names are not arbitrary since "The tool analogy . . . advances a radical linguistic naturalism which follows from the conjunction of certain key claims" (Smith 2014, 95). Just as tool-makers require a special expertise, so too do name-makers.¹⁶

In short, in the *Cratylus* two "fashions of speaking" coexist in a delicate balance: names are chosen that best represent divinity, and at the same time, names fail to completely represent divinity. According to both of these ideas, names (and nouns) are the best formal representations of divinity and are therefore central to both philosophical investigation and ritual practices.¹⁷ No distinction is made here between names and nouns. Rachel Barney ex-

12. As Barney explains, "Once conventionalism is defeated, conservatism can no longer be assumed, and the way is clear for the critical, revisionist—not to mention madly counterintuitive—account of 'natural correctness' which Socrates proceeds to deliver" (1997, 158).

13. A more serious Socratic dismissal of natural theories is argued for by, among others, Williams (1982).

14. This argument, Smith contends, "comprises a largely deductive argument making appeal to the Forms and proceeds from a rejection of a traditional Platonic concern, Protagorean relativism" (2014, 77).

15. In Smith's terms, "names are non-arbitrary since their internal constitutions render them 'correct for' the objects they name" (2014, 77). See also Barney's description of the Plato expert knowledge that is required to decide if the name-giver knew what he was doing (1997, 160).

16. Smith points specifically to "Socrates' introduction of Species-Forms (389b8), which finely circumscribe the features of the specific tools that instantiate them," with a distinction between the crafts of the expert name-maker and the expert name-user (2014, 78).

17. The preserved fragments of Basilides are primarily exegetical, but there is no doubt that he employed divine names in rites as other early Christians did.

plains, “In keeping with standard Greek usage, ‘name’, *onoma*, is used in the *Cratylus* for common nouns as well as proper names; at various points we also find adjectives (412c2, e1), verbs in the infinitive form (414a8–b1) and participles (421c5–6) described as names” (1997, 143). Names are not distinguished from nouns, so the same investigations can be made of nouns and even adjectives. Defining nouns was an important tool for investigating reality. Etymology, another such tool, works on linguistic units from names and nouns to adjectives (Sedley 2003, 4). The same “subject plus predication” truth that can be uncovered by means of dialogic investigation is located, writ small, in every name.

Nevertheless, simultaneously names by definition have their limitations; they are not capable of fully defining the Forms (Sedley 2003, 5).¹⁸ The truth must be pursued beyond the name level. For example, dialogue itself is a form of linguistic investigation when definitions are discussed. Dialogues are central because Plato thought that conversation is the structure of thought itself (1). The form of a dialogue is the most extended Socratic investigation into words’ meanings and their implications and thus into truth (Nehamas 1992, 179).¹⁹

By the time Basilides was writing, just as the deity was increasingly seen as having a role other than that of matter-organizer, the representational capacity of material language was also being rethought. Basilides was one of the first Christian exegetes to explicitly claim the deity did not make any use of preexistent matter in creating the world. As with the names of gods, here too Basilides pushes the exegetical envelope. While a full description of this process is beyond the scope of this article, a quick review of its contours helps us understand his strategy.

The Antimaterialist Tipping Point: Representation beyond Name and Matter

Based on Jewish and Christian polemics, most modern readers assume that the Hebrew scriptures depict an all-powerful deity who creates the world out of nothing.²⁰ However, the imagery preserved in Genesis, Psalms, and prophetic writings conceives of creation as ordering chaos rather than as making matter

18. A nonverbal technique would be the use of silence attributed to Socrates. On the difficulty of attributing a specific meaning to his silence, see Nehamas (1992).

19. Long (2008) argues that Plato exhibits a very broad notion of dialogue, varying from example to example, even including dialogue with the self as in the *Sophist* (the soul thinking with the self).

20. Sedley’s brief mention that Genesis is usually understood to say that God created the world out of nothing is itself evidence of the staying power of that idea.

out of nothing.²¹ While Greek creation stories included a range of options about creation and matter, the craftsman deity from Plato and Aristotle works with some type of “formless matter”—a philosophical version of the narrative imagery of primordial matter found in numerous Biblical creation myths.²² Belief in preexistent matter is not only clearly presupposed in various ancient Hebrew texts, but also was slow to change, which is not surprising given the conservative attitudes toward cosmologies. It took centuries to complete the slow ascent up the monotheism mountain to meet the deity who made everything out of nothing. As ancient Near Eastern religions moved into their late antique phase, the chosen people’s deity was refracted through the internationalist rhetoric of the prophets whereby their deity adopted not only local but foreign kings, becoming a type of supranationalistic, proto-monotheism as seen in Second Isaiah (Bickerman and Smith 1976, 119). This nationalistic stance paralleled the Greek belief, standard by the fifth century BCE, that Zeus represented a “supreme cosmic intellect” (Dillon 1999, 69).²³

For both Platonists and Biblical exegetes, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* emerged only in a series of partial steps as matter was increasingly subordinated to its creator.²⁴ Some of the steps are found in 2 Maccabees and Philo’s treatises on creation. In 2 Maccabees, a mother uses the phrase “things that exist” as she urges her seven sons to die as martyrs in the struggle against the Greek king Antiochus. The sons’ willingness to die marks a turning point in the narrative and the Hasmonean rebels begin to defeat the foreign king’s troops. The nameless mother gives two short rhetorical speeches, in which she declares first, I do

21. See Gen. 1:1–2; Isa. 44:24, 45:18, 51:10; Jer. 5:22; Prov. 8:22–31; Ps. 74:12–17, 89:1–14, 104; and Job 26:7–14, discussed by Levenson (1994, 3–13).

22. See, e.g., Plato, *Timaeus* 50d; and Aristotle, *Physics* 191a10. Another model of creation in both ancient Near Eastern and Greek texts was genealogical. Anaxagoras’s Mind is closer to a nature-based model of a farmer with seeds than of an omnipotent creator; atomists want nature to work by itself (Sedley 2007, 25).

23. As noted in more recent studies of monotheism, this complicates the Christian claims of transmission from Jewish to Christian then to pagan philosophy. For example, Blowers’s detailed study of late antique cosmological debates repeats early Christian claims of uniqueness, finding a “domestication” of Greco-Roman ideas first in Jewish and then in the Christian exegetes (2012). This argument partially refutes May’s position that Hellenistic Jews did not invent the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* because they did not “engage in a fundamental debate with the Platonic and Stoic doctrine of principles” (1994, 21).

24. Plato presented his creation story in the *Timaeus* as a myth, which “leaves the reader a good deal of room for varying degrees of deliteralization” (Sedley 2007, 100). According to Crantor (335–275 BCE), Plato implied by the term *created* that the “world is dependent on a cause other than itself.” This comment, from his third-century BCE commentary, is preserved in Proclus, *In Tim.* 1.277.8. Cf. Dillon (1977, 42). Aristotle claimed that followers of Plato employed the phrasing “that which does not have being” for matter (*Phys.* 1.192a 6–8). Winston characterizes this as meaning nonexistent in an incidental sense, only one of several ways of being nonexistent (1971, 186). A very similar claim is attributed to another of Plato’s disciples, Hermodorus. Cf. Simplicius, *In Phys.* 1.9 (May 1994, 17); and also Diogenes Laertius 2.106, 3.6. Pre-existent matter continued to be taken for granted in exegetical discussions up through the sixth century CE and beyond. For rabbinic use of preexistent matter, see Winston (1971, 191) and Niehoff (2005, 77). For Christian use, see May (1994) and Blowers (2012).

not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath, or I who set in order the elements within each of you. Therefore the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in his mercy give life and breath back to you again (2 Macc. 7:22–23, NRSV). In the second speech, to her final remaining son, she compares the creation of humans to the creation of the world, stating, “Look at the heavens and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that exist” and then urging him to accept death so that “I may get you back again along with all your brothers” (2 Macc. 7:28–29). In both her speeches the god’s creative power is emphasized in contrast to female creative power. The phrasing in 2 Maccabees 7:28, denying the creation of the world “out of formless matter,” is often cited as the first true demotion of matter.²⁵ However, David Winston translates the phrase as “the visible world of particulars,” which makes it far from a clear statement of creation from nothing. Instead, the phrase can be understood to be about the character of pre-existent matter.²⁶ If the phrasing was vague, a century after Basilides, Origen (184–254 CE) understood the phrase from 2 Maccabees as a claim about creation from nothing, expecting his readers to agree (*Comm. Jo.* 1.17).²⁷

While Origen had his interpretation, ambiguous statements were standard for several centuries. Philo (25 BCE–50 CE), a Jewish exegete who wrote extensively on the topic of creation, left a complex set of positions none of which clearly present the concept of creation from nothing.²⁸ In line with fellow Platonists, Philo “removed the Creator-God to a superior transcendence,” in the words of Paul Blowers, but did so unevenly (Blowers 2012, 53). Philo only ambiguously embraced what Winston calls a “double-creation theory,” creation of matter and then of the world (Winston 1971, 199 n. 140).²⁹ Philo states in *Confusion of Tongues*, “God created space and place simultaneously with bodies”

25. Second Maccabees is dated to the late second-century BCE (van Henten 1997).

26. The same phrase appears in *Wisd. of Sol.* 11:17, written sometime during the later decades of the first century BCE (Winston 1971, 77).

27. The other text he cites is *Shepherd of Hermas* 7.28. See Grant (1952, 148). In the mid-second century, Tatian argues in *Against the Greeks* 5 that the Christians, unlike the Greeks, do not diminish the deity by making matter eternal and thus equal to the deity.

28. On Philo’s creation imagery in general, see Wolfson (1948, 300–310), Sorabji (1983, 203–9), and Dillon (1977, 158ff.). For additional bibliography, see May (1994, 9–22). For an attempt to make a synthetic reading of Philo’s various views, see Blowers (2012, 46–66), and compare Niehoff’s argument that different audiences affect his mode of argumentation (2005).

29. Preexistent matter seems to be presumed in *On the Creation* 5.21. The now-familiar phrase “formless matter” appears in *Who Is the Heir?* 140 and *Special Laws* 1.328; the alternate phrasing “out of preexistent matter” in *Life of Moses* 2.267 and *Special Laws* 2.225. Sorabji (1983, 203–9) argues that in *On Providence* 1 and 2 the deity created the cosmos and matter simultaneously.

(136). Given that some Platonists call matter by the term “space,” Philo appears to be using contemporary theology, Aristotelian and Platonic.³⁰ Eudorus, interpreting Aristotle in the first century BCE, argued that the One created matter.³¹ Matter is subordinated to the deity not via a direct statement of creation from nothing but by the more indirect claim that the deity is the cause of the essence of everything, including matter.

There was a time, Basilides argues, when not even nothing existed (*Haer.* 7.20). The world has more things than can be named, and homonyms are also a problem, so it is necessary to use one’s mind in a wordless manner (*Haer.* 7.20.4).³² The world was contained in a seed that was sowed and planted by the deity. The seed is equated with the word of deity who made the world through speech, Basilides argued, citing Psalm 32:9 in the Septuagint version, “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, by the breath of his mouth, all their host” (*Haer.* 7.22.3).

At the moment when the word became “flesh,” that is, when it was spoken in material language, the materiality of the world came into being. Thus “non-being” was turned into being. Basilides explains, “Just as the grain of mustard comprises all things simultaneously. . . . In this way ‘non-existent’ God made the world out of nonentities, casting and depositing some One seed that contained in itself a conglomeration of the germs of the world” (*Haer.* 7.21–22). The material seed the deity planted appears to be the Word, with everything then being generated from the Word. These theological shifts articulated with shifting linguistic ideologies. For Basilides, the only deity who exists far divorced from the world of matter did not need any of the names found in earlier texts and used to distinguish the deity from other deities (Yahweh).

Basilides’s status as a heretic/gnostic in the eyes of some early Christians may explain a hesitancy by modern scholars to attribute importance to Basilides’s articulation of what became a central theological doctrine.³³ The expanded creative power doctrine itself was “heretical” in the sense of being new, yet it was embraced by those who claimed to be orthodox.³⁴

30. Alcinoüs, *Handbook on Platonism* 8; Aristotle, *Phys.* 209 b 11. Cf. Grant (1952, 141).

31. Alexander of Aphrodisias’s third-century commentary on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* credits Eudorus with emending Aristotle’s text in order to show that the One created matter (Dillon 1977, 128 and n. 121; Dorrie 1944). Eudorus may have done this to support Pythagorean ideas, raising the question of whether Pythagorean doctrine was another force toward an emanation version of creation (a form of subordination of matter to the deity).

32. Unfortunately, the excerpt does not explore this idea in greater detail. See Whittaker (1992) for a brief discussion.

33. As, e.g., by May (1994, 76 n. 70). See also the hesitancy in Blowers (2012, 178–79, 182).

34. Thus the ancient impetus for subordinating primordial matter to the deity was not to fight heresy as argued by May (1994) for the Christian material and Winston (1971, 192 n. 12) for the Jewish.

Beyond Language: Linguistic Ideologies of Nonverbal Representation

Not too long after Basilides, Plotinus (204–70 CE) reformulated Platonic linguistic ideas for very specific exegetical reasons.³⁵ Plotinus was, like Basilides, attempting to systematize and modernize a set of contradictory writings, in this case Plato's treatises (Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus* 15). Plotinus's work was ad hoc, primarily meta-linguistic interpretations that posited new definitions for Platonic, and to some extent, Aristotelian terms.³⁶ Plotinus's dense and sometimes cryptic statements are often open to more than one interpretation. Like his student Porphyry, who edited Plotinus's treatises and composed a biography, every reader has to make their own synthesis of Plotinus's corpus.³⁷

According to Porphyry, Plotinus gave public discourses where he was presented with various conundrums of Platonic interpretation. He responded to questions from his students, a smattering of Roman senators (*Life* 7) and even members of the imperial court (*Life* 12).³⁸ His exegetical success was mixed. His treatises were found unintelligible; his discourse was described as "a great deal of wandering and futile talk" (*Life* 3) while he was "despised as a word-spinner" (*Life* 18). Many of his points were rejected by later exegetes.³⁹

Naming was central to Plotinus's investigations. He explains why in the *Enneads*: "We speak of the unspeakable; wishing to signify it as best we can, we name it" (*Enn.* 7.7.7).⁴⁰ The general themes of his linguistic ideology are familiar from Plato: language has its limits but it is the best strategy for locating truth. Investigating names via definitions is placed at the heart of philosophical endeavors even as the limits of discourse are acknowledged. Schroeder summarizes as follows: "Language will never disclose the One. . . . Yet we may use language about, or discuss, the One, so long as we are aware of the limitations of speech" (Schroeder 1996, 344).

35. There is no evidence that Plotinus had read Basilides despite their similarities.

36. Schroeder describes Plotinus's writings as "intertextual metalanguage" (2002, 34).

37. Sometimes his students seem unwilling to pursue an enigmatic saying, as in the case of his statement that it is for the gods to come to him.

38. Plotinus only wrote his treatises down in his fifties and in hurried fashion (*Life* 8). Porphyry organized them and gave them their titles (*Life* 4).

39. Schroeder describes some of Plotinus's work as "impossible interpretations" (2002, 23), while Remes notes that "Plotinus' commitment to monism seems slightly compromised by his descriptions of matter's nature as always the opposite of form and goodness" (2008, 95). She also notes many places where later Platonists rejected Plotinus's ideas, including Remes (2008, 71). For Porphyry's, Damascius's, and Proclus's reworkings of the concept "the One," see Dillon (122–23).

40. On Plotinus's ideas about language, see in particular Schroeder (1996) and Ahbel-Rappe (2000). Jufresa argues that Plotinus was dependent on Basilides, but there is no evidence of direct links nor are they necessary (1981).

Naming in this broad sense clarifies reality at several different levels. Plotinus mentions, for example, that the Pythagoreans name their god “Apollo.” This name means “Not-many,” which demonstrates one level of wisdom. At the same time, like Basilides and other contemporaries, Plotinus emphasized the limits of language for the highest level of divinity: “The One is in truth beyond all statement” (*Enn.* 5.3.13.1).⁴¹ Using a section from *Parmenides* as an exegetical key to the linguistic ideology, Plotinus defines the meta-linguistic realm of ineffability: The One is without attributes.⁴² In short, Plotinus posits that while nouns are the best descriptors, rejecting definitions and descriptors can help overcome both the materiality of language and its predication about a god who is also mistakenly identified with materiality.

Given that his linguistic ideology is based on a very specific notion of naming as definition, it should be expected that a “gap” between a name and what is named will become increasingly important for all the reasons already discussed.⁴³ Again like Basilides, Plotinus will engage in one-upmanship about how to best investigate the most complex limitations of naming.⁴⁴ The ultimate tool Plotinus used to prove that his interpretations are superior is his status as a more divine being than the other interpreters. Given the ancient scale, this had to be a very high level of divinity. Plotinus revealed these credentials on at least a few occasions either hinting or having someone around him clarify just how divine a being he truly was or claiming that his interpretations had brought him into contact with divinity (*Life* 10.14–33).

Beyond showing his divine status and using discourse, Plotinus outlines other modes of representation that do not suffer from the problems of names. These include sign modalities other than definition, such as Egyptian hieroglyphs, prophecy as letters written in nature (*Enn.* 3.3.19), and vision of images.⁴⁵ In semiotic terms, these are understood by Plotinus to be iconic (formal) representations and therefore do not suffer from the gap found in naming. For example, he encourages his reader to imagine a diaphanous sphere.⁴⁶ Visualization is presented as a solution to the problem posed by the linguistic ideology.

41. He is drawing here in particular on *Republic* 6.506D–509B, *Timaeus* 28C, and *Letter* 7.341C–344B as well as *Parmenides* 137b–144e, where the One is denied Being since that would imply it is not perfect.

42. See Bussanich (2007, 61) and Dillon (1996, 121–22).

43. Increasing monotheistic theology placed greater distance between the deity and matter.

44. For a discussion of this gap, see Ahbel-Rappe (2000, 28).

45. For the hieroglyphs, see *Enn.* 5.8.6 discussed in Ahbel-Rappe (2000, 107); for letters in nature, see Schroeder (2002, 27); for the nonpropositional status of visual images, see Bertini (2007, 40–41) and Ahbel-Rappe (2000, 23ff).

46. For this specific use of imagination, see Ahbel-Rappe (2000, 79–80).

In this linguistic, or perhaps more correctly semiotic ideology, the gap between name and object can be overcome when discourse is avoided.⁴⁷ Internalized thought overcomes some of the problems of definition with mental images breaking down the boundary of self/other model of name/object. These semiotic structures lead to truth because of their formal representation of reality at a nonverbal level.⁴⁸

Plotinus rejects other interpreters based in part on distorting how other people read texts and use language. For example, he reads astrological texts literally to distort their depiction of the future (Lawrence 2007, 28).⁴⁹ He vehemently attacked “Know-It-Alls” (gnostics), the ancient term of abuse applied by some Christian theologians to Basilides.⁵⁰ He did not like their use of myths (despite Plato’s use of myths)⁵¹ and their rituals that used symbolism, breathings, and secret divine names (*Enn.* 2.9.14).⁵² The secret names and myths that exegetes like Basilides used offend Plotinus’s sensibilities and his notions of how to investigate truth. In particular, Plotinus states,

In the sacred formulas they inscribe, purporting to address the Supernal Being . . . they are simply uttering spells and appeasements and evocations in the idea that these Powers will obey a call and be led about by a word from any of us who is in some degree trained to use the appropriate forms in the appropriate way—certain melodies, certain sounds, specially directed breathings, sibilant cries, and all else to which is ascribed magic potency upon the Supreme. (*Enn.* 2.9.14)

Plotinus’s fashion of ineffability emerged as both an ontology (how divinity came into being in the first place) and an epistemology (how we can learn about divinity). Plotinus’s reshaping of terms firmly moved the deity beyond any formal connection between name and thing represented in a way that

47. “Plotinus’ problem is that he needs to convey a theory of truth that is precisely non-representational, without the unwanted result that reality collapses into mere representations” (Ahbel-Rappe 2000, 28).

48. “Western concepts for grasping reality may be the product of the grammatical structures of European languages, especially through a secondary rationalization of cryptotypic categories” (Lee 1997, 195).

49. Similarly, Michael Williams points out that the distinction between “gnostic” and Platonic notions of fate is overdrawn (1992).

50. He rejects some of the teachings on Sophia as presented in story version (*Enn.* 7.1.9, 11–11.9) and rejected their multiplications of aspects of divinity (hypostases) and also ridicules their incantations (*Enn.* 2.9.14) despite the fact that he is in favor of prayer.

51. In *Enn.* 2.9.10 Plotinus belittles stories about a revolt by the demiurge against a female figure.

52. Basilides, for example, includes a secret name Caulacau. See the excerpt in Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 24.5; and May (1994, 63). For one example of how intertwined Plotinus was with “gnostic” texts, see Turner (1992).

Basilides's work did not.⁵³ Plotinus differed from Basilides in insisting that the deity was unified and not multiple and thus entirely beyond, and not simply above, matter. This gave a new emphasis to the limits of reference with respect to representing something entirely outside the normal "standing for" relationships. Plotinus provides a good example that "In reality, the framework of philosophical discourse produces the very picture of subjectivity it was supposed to simply clarify and reveal" (Lee 1997, 225).

A Modern Interpretation of Plotinus

Michael Sells (1994) offers an interpretation of Plotinus that has become the cornerstone of a modern theory of ineffability. Sells's apophatic ideology offers one more level of abstraction drawn from the Greek linguistic ideology of definition and naming. It is still possible to find reality based on language because now reality is modeled on the reverse of definitions. The abstract linguistic ideology (found in Plotinus and in the later writers cited by Sells) offers a potentially universal structure as the map of a reality hidden, yet ultimately revealed, by language.

Sells outlines a discourse of ineffability that universalizes the ancient Greek linguistic ideology. He abandons any remaining notion of the natural connection between names and what they name. This move, in contradistinction to Plato and Plotinus, aligns closely with modern linguistic sensibilities. These sensibilities place the motivated (nonconventional) link with reality just outside of language in the realm of mental rejection of reference as a map around it to reality.

Sells constructs a new discourse about the ineffable that "displaces the grammatical object, affirms a moment of immediacy, a moment of ontological preconstruction" (Sells 1994, 9–10). In other words, the speaker is able to reach directly past nouns to a "meaning event" that exists outside of language. This meaning event is "transreferential" and in particular is the basis for an experience of truth. Thus the discourse can "evoke in the reader an event that is—in its movement beyond the structures of the self and other, subject and object—structurally analogous to the event of the mystical union" (10). Reifying the gap of reference leads to mystical union, something that happens far from the realm of language and instead in the world of personal experience. "This moment in which the transcendent reveals itself as the immanent is the moment

53. Plotinus's move created as many problems as it solved. For example, he failed to develop a consistent theory of evil.

of mystical union” (212).⁵⁴ While it is possible that other routes lead to mystical union, this is the core for his study. The model can easily be extended beyond these sources since the claim can be made that no language is able to encompass reality and therefore all experiences of truth, in this case the self, are founded on structural negation of negation.

In addition to jettisoning the natural link between name and object, two new aspects of the modern ineffable discourse are particularly striking. First, that which is attained only via ineffable discourse is not divinity. Since he is universalizing Plotinus, it is best to avoid reference to a specific divinity. That is, while Basilides and Plotinus had very specific late antique ideas about divinity, Sells is seeking something suitable for contemporary debates about mysticism. No specific theological concepts can be used and the discredited perennial philosophies that lumped distinct religious traditions together must also be avoided. The ineffable now appears to be not so much divinity as it was for Basilides and Plotinus, as a notion of the Self. The gap of reference is overcome by an experience of mystical union of the Self presumably with some Other, an Other which is usually as distant from it as a word is from the object it refers to.

The second major shift is in the use of this new ineffability. Sells is constructing a discourse about ineffability as part of a scholarly debate about the use of religious experience as evidence for truth claims. Mystical experiences are often presented as proof of an encounter with reality in some form and if that is to be accepted, the manner in which reality is encountered must be clarified. As Hollywood points out, “Sells work seems poised with and against modern and postmodern academic discussions of mysticism” (Hollywood 1995, 565). If ideas about reference are cultural-constructs, the deeper semiotic structure outlined as black against the white of naming is not, since minds are universal and so are specific images.⁵⁵

In elevating ineffability to the status of an instrument for proving the validity of mystical experience, Sells goes so far as to claim its moral superiority.⁵⁶ If a fashion of ineffability is seen simply as theology, as it was in the ancient

54. Sells maps reality from language in great detail, for example, regarding mystical union he states, “At this moment, the standard referential structures of language are transformed: the breakdown of the reflexive/nonreflexive grammatical distinction in the antecedence of a pronoun it sees it(self) in it(self); the breakdown of the perfect/imperfect distinction (it always has been occurred and always is occurring)” (1994, 212).

55. Proudfoot outlines this use of mystical experience as a truth claim, stating, “Ineffability is not a simple unanalyzable characteristic of the experience, as [William] James implies, but . . . an artifact of the peculiar grammatical rules that govern the use of certain terms in the religious context” (1985, 125). Thus the term *mysticism* carries with it truth implications, as does the term *miracle* (145).

56. Note the claim about the moral superiority of ineffability in the next modern example as well.

world, then both its truth and moral value are impugned even as the “anarchic” (nonreferential) meaning event is reduced in value. He writes, “To explain away the anarchic moment is to turn apophatic language into conventional theology. Yet to insist upon the integrity of the anarchic moment is to highlight certain moral and intellectual risks” (1994, 209). The stakes are higher since this fashion of ineffability leads not only to the truth based on a distinct theological tradition and experience, but to that of other individuals as well. Otherwise, it would be of little scholarly value for evaluating claims about mystical union.

Ultimately, Sells inhabits rather than describes the ideology in question. In addition to using (instead of explaining) the ideology, he elevates his theory of ineffability, drawn directly from a language ideology, to a theory of reality. This is a category mistake, conflating a set of epistemological concerns (specifically about the capability of the medium of representation) with a belief about the world. As a parallel example, Benedict Anderson argued that the “we” of nationalism emerges out of discourse. He is able to describe how voicing a “we” constituted an “imagined community” in a way that instantiated a new, global community. Anderson relies on language for the “superstructural order of collective consciousness” (Silverstein 2000, 110). What Anderson did not analyze is how this voicing emerges from decontextualized language ideologies as they are championed by specific historical sources of power, the linking of a new “metaphysics” with the mechanisms to manifest this “we” voice as not just a potential voicing but as a very real and consequential discourse. Thus we are left wondering about the reasons this linguistic ideology emerged when and how it did.⁵⁷

Similarly, Sells presents a universal “chronotope” of voicing that is completely decontextualized from earlier uses.⁵⁸ His ineffability drops the exegetical context of Plotinus and Basilides, a specific argument about materiality and creation. It universalizes the Platonic ideology of reference (modified to drop any idea of natural reference). Just as the magic of nationalism turns chance into destiny via the “we” voicing (Anderson’s claim), the magic of pointing to the limitations of reference makes the noncontingent reality of mystical union available to everyone, and not just as a result of human intention in any form.

Sells’s fashion of ineffability elevates meta-semantic linguistic structures into an ontological description of reality. His “ontological preconstruction” can be found since “This primordiality appears to emerge out of an ontic realm

57. As Silverstein explains, Anderson never makes it clear if he is presenting a merely historical argument or a functional/evolutionary one (2000, 110). The term *chronotope* comes originally from Bakhtin and refers to a time/space experience that emerges from semiotic processes.

58. For the decontextualization of Anderson, see Silverstein (2000, 117).

beyond the contingent one of historical circumstances and happenings” (Silverstein 2000, 109).

Conclusion

For both Basilides and Plotinus, the monotheistic deity was above matter and above materialist theories of language as well. The best etiquette for speaking about the deity was a fashion of ineffability. Neither author was aware of the extent to which linguistic structures shaped his theology.

Modern scholars, as in the case of Sells, drawing on this tradition, see reference as a path to truth. Language can still provide the model of reality based on the way reference appears to the speaker to work.⁵⁹ Yet the fashion of using descriptive names and of undoing description via reverse description builds upon aspects of language of which “their users have no accurate, conscious, meta-level understanding” (Silverstein 2000, 95). Each model for investigating truth (e.g., nouns, dialogue) is an example of “a conceptual product of the linguistic conditions on which it rests” (86).

What Sells did not fully realize is how this voicing emerges from decontextualized language ideologies as they are championed by specific historical sources of power. The exegetes had particular roles in the changing landscapes of emerging monotheism in which ancient texts were being reinterpreted. Sells constructs a modern fashion of ineffability by further abstracting the limits of reference from the Platonic linguistic ideology. This new model is needed to shore up recent debates about the validity of mystical experiences and the question of what lessons can be drawn from them. Truth is still sought, and found, in the realm of linguistic structure.

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59. As Silverstein explains, “Languages, then, each seem to contain an implicit ontology as a function of structural factors of mapping from/projecting onto the universe of ‘reality,’ the uniqueness and nonlinguistic manifestation of which become critical issues” (2000, 91).

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