As is well-known, the ultimate reality in Hinduism is usually referred to as Brahman. The word has several meanings but by the time of the Upaniṣadic period, which commenced around the 8th century B.C. and which was a decisive period from the point of view of Hindu thought, it had acquired the dominant sense it retains to the present day—as signifying the ultimate reality.

In an early reference in one of the oldest Upaniṣads, the Brhadāraṇyaka (2.3.6), the expression neti neti or ‘not so, not so’ occurs in a context in which, according to both traditional and modern scholarship, Brahman is the subject of discussion. The statement therefore represents the via negativa in Hindu thought. The reference runs as follows:

Hence, now, there is the teaching ‘not thus! not so!’ (neti neti), for there is nothing higher than this, that he is thus. Now the designation of him is ‘the Real of the real’. Verily, breathing creatures are real. He is their Real.

It is the purpose of this paper to establish that in the context of a ‘negative theology’ this statement neti neti—not thus, not so—has been understood in three subtly different ways. These three understandings may be referred to as those of (1) empirical negation, (2) negative affirmation and (3) affir-
mative negation. At the moment these terms are merely expressions in search of a meaning. It will now be shown that they are shorthand symbols for the general positions which have crystallised around the significance of neti neti as a statement about Brahman.

II

The first position seems to be best represented by Paul Deussen. According to him, neti neti basically emphasizes the unknowability of Brahman. It is called empirical negation here because although any empirical definition of Brahman is denied, the existence of Brahman is not—it is its unknowability and not its non-existence to which neti neti is seen to refer. The following passage from Paul Deussen spells out his position quite clearly:

The result of all the investigations of the present chapter is to show that in his essential nature Brahman is and remains completely unknowable. Neither as the (metaphysical) being (sat), nor as the knowing subject within us (c’it), nor as the bliss (ananda) that holds sway in deep sleep when the opposition of subject and object is destroyed, is Brahman accessible to knowledge. No characterisation of him therefore is possible otherwise than by the denial to him of all empirical attributes, definitions and relations,—neti, neti, ‘it is not so, it is not so.’ Especially is he independent, as we have shown, of all limitations of space, time and cause, which rule all that is objectively presented, and therefore the entire empirical universe.11

The second position appears to be less severe than the first and takes neti neti as representing the fact that Brahman is knowable—though only negatively. Hence the position has been described as one of negative affirmation—it affirms by denying, every negation being an affirmation. This position is cogently presented by Eliot Deutsch:

The via negativa of Advaita Vedānta also safeguards the unqualified oneness of that state of being called Brahman and silences all argument that would seek either to demonstrate or to refute it. Human language

11. Paul Deussen, The Philosophy of the Upanishads (New York, Dover Publications 1966: first published 1906) p.156. Paul Deussen goes on to say (ibid., pp.156-157): ‘In another connection passages have been already discussed which assert the absolute unknowableness of Brahman. Here we append to them merely a beautiful story which Śaṅkara reports as s’ruti, and which therefore he derived possibly from a lost or still unrecognised Upanishad:

‘When Bāhva was questioned by Vāshkali, he expounded the nature of Brahman to him by maintaining silence as the story relates. And he said, “Teach me, most reverent sir, the nature of Brahman.” The other however remained silent. But when the question was put for the second or third time he answered, “I teach you indeed, but you do not understand; this ātman is silence.” ’
NETI NETI AND VIA NEGATIVA IN HINDU THOUGHT

has its source in phenomenal experience; hence, it is limited in its application to states of being that are beyond that experience; logic is grounded in the mind as it relates to the phenomenal order; hence, it is unable to affirm without at the same time denying, what extends beyond that order. ‘All determination is negation’; to apply a predicate to something is to impose a limitation upon it; for, logically, something is being excluded from the subject. The Real is without internal difference and, in essence, is unrelated to the content of any other form of experience. The Real is thus unthinkable: thought can be brought to it only through negations of what is thinkable.12

Thus whereas the approach of ‘empirical negation’ represented by Paul Deussen strongly emphasized the unknowability of Brahman, the approach adopted here, which we have described as one of negative affirmation, concedes that there is ‘a negative way of knowing God’ instead of insisting on the unknowability of the ultimate reality.

The third position takes an even more positive view of neti neti and adopts the position we have referred to as affirmative negation, that is to say: negation is preliminary to affirmation. This view is best developed by M. Hiriyanna who points out that one should ‘be careful what is meant when the Upanisads describe Brahman . . . as indefinable and unknowable. It is not in every sense beyond the reach of words. To suppose that it is so, would be to deprive the Upanisads of the whole of their purpose’.13 He goes on to say:

For all propositions directly or indirectly refer to reality and negation necessarily has its own positive implication. As a matter of fact, however, the Advaitins assign Upanisadic statements like neti neti—‘Not this, nor that’—a secondary place while the primary place is given to those like Tat tvam asi, which point to the reality in us as the ultimate. That is, the negative statement is not to be understood in isolation, but along with positive ones like Tat tvam asi. Negation is only a preliminary to affirmation. It means that the Absolute is not conceived here objec-

12. Eliot Deutsch, *op. cit.*, p.11. Also Benimadhab Barma, *A History of Pre-Buddhist Indian Philosophy* (University of Calcutta 1921) p.156-157: ‘All predications therefore that one may reasonably make about God are negative, No No (nēti nēti), neither this nor that. This view being logically worked out, comes to this. The infinite is beyond the comprehension of a finite mind. It is therefore only an infinite mind, a mind without any idea of the many or plurality, that can indeed comprehend the infinite. There is only this one way of apprehending the eternal Being that can never be proved or measured, namely, to know that it is pure, beyond ether or space, the unborn one, great and immutable. This implies a negative way of knowing God, namely, not to indulge in many words, “for that is mere weariness of the tongue.”’

tively—as merely inferred from outer phenomena; but as revealing itself within us. This alters totally the significance of the negative description, for we are thereby constrained to admit not only its positive character but also its spiritual nature.14

III

It is clear, therefore, that the expression *neti neti* and its ‘negative theology’ conceals within itself epistemological issues of great significance. According to how it is interpreted, *neti neti* and its ‘negative theology’ seems to yield three degrees of answers to the question: is Brahman or God or the ultimate reality knowable? The response at the first degree is no; at the second degree, yes—but negatively; and at the third degree, yes—and positively. It should be noted though that each answer implies its own epistemological framework. When it is said that Brahman is unknowable, it is implied that it is unknowable in terms of empirical attributes; when it is said that Brahman is negatively knowable, it is implied that it is identifiable as extraempirical and when it is said that Brahman is knowable, it is implied that it is experientially knowable—it may be outside the range of our sensory experience, or may be capable of being thought of only as outside the scope of thought but it is not outside the scope of our intuitive experience. It is as if the negative theology of *neti neti* comprehends these three degrees of knowing the unknowable.