



How Negative Is the Theology of Dionysius the Areopagite?

MARK EDWARDS 

University of Oxford, mark.edwards@chch.ox.ac.uk

Abstract: This paper considers three recent studies on the negative theology of the Neoplatonists and Dionysius the Areopagite. The first is that of Lloyd Gerson, who argues that the One in Plotinus does not lack transcend existence but only definite existence; the second is the contrary thesis of Eric D. Perl that not only the One of Plotinus but the God of Dionysius transcend all being in such a way that they cannot be credited with existence. After some criticism of both the paper turns to the argument of Timothy D. Knepper that even the ineffability of the divine cannot be stated on our present plane of knowledge; it concludes with some reflections on the appeal to present or future experience as alternatives to epistemology as this is commonly understood in the analytical tradition of philosophy.

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In Christian theology and apologetic, the personal character of God is frequently asserted today with a vehemence that might have surprised their mediaeval precursors, and would surely have amused the Greek philosophers of antiquity, who, even as they deplored the anthropomorphic superstitions of their countrymen, were ridiculed by Christians for their willing participation in popular cults. It is fashionable to blame Christian philosophers of that period for imposing a loveless and soulless concept of divine transcendence upon the living, though elusive God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; for those who believe this, the most accomplished master of misdirection in the ancient canon, more culpable even than Origen or Augustine, is the impostor who styled himself Dionysius the Areopagite.¹ The charge against him is that he rewrote the scriptures not only on a Greek model, but on the model supplied by one Greek school in particular, which had stripped the gods of all attributes, even the attribute of being, and substituted a cipher for which no better name could be found than the Good or the One. So far did the teaching of Dionysius and his Greek and Platonic masters depart from their Greek and Christian models that even Dean Inge, a sympathetic expositor of Plotinus, complained that in sensibility he was

¹ See e.g. Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 358–375. Anders Nygren assimilates Dionysius to Proclus partly by construing his “divine eros” as a function of the worshipper (*ibidem*, 364–365) and partly by treating Proclus’ one clear reference to the descent of Eros as an axiom of his philosophy (*ibidem*, 352). The originality of Dionysius is acknowledged, without denying the influence of Proclus, by Rist, “A Note on Eros and Agape.”

Oriental rather than western – that is, his conception of the self and the primal consciousness were so austere denuded of finite properties that nothing remained to quicken our love or reverence.² Scholars since Inge have sometimes endorsed and sometimes challenged his estimates of both Plotinus and Dionysius, and if they have distinguished these authors have usually maintained that as Dionysius is the more Christian his deity is the more personal. In the most recent scholarship, however, we are presented on the one hand with an understanding of the Plotinian One that is far from impersonal, and on the other with a reading of Dionysius that denies that his God can even be said to exist. My purpose in this paper is to examine both of these essays in revision and to explain why I am inclined for the most part to favour the more traditional position, according to which the true theist of the two is Dionysius. I shall not pretend to know how the metaphysical difficulties which beset his theology when it is thus interpreted can be solved.

1. What Is the Negative Way?

Three modes of speech about the transcendent have come to be regarded as canonical.³ The *via analogiae* explains what it is for God to be just or wise or good by analogy with the same attributes as they appear in human beings – or rather, on the strict Thomistic view, explains his relation to his attributes as he possesses them by analogy with our relation to the same attributes as we possess them. The *via eminentiae* invites us to imagine the wisdom, the justice and the goodness that we know exalted to the highest conceivable degree and then beyond this. In contrast to the *via analogiae*, it appears to give a univocal sense to these terms when used of God and of his creatures, differentiating them only in degree and not in kind. Some would reply that a difference in kind is nothing more than a difference in degree when it reaches a certain limit, as shortening the wavelength of red light will produce first orange and finally blue. Be that as it may, the *via analogiae* and the *via eminentiae* concur at least in permitting us to apply quotidian terms to God, in however elusive a sense, whereas the third way, the *via negativa*, disarms us of every resource by denying that anything that is said of God can be true. God is not just, not wise, not good: by the daring logic of Meister Eckhart, “I am better than God.”⁴ It was the *via negativa* that led some Gnostics to say that God is *nihil*, or nothing,⁵ which is what the same theologians

² Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, 105–106. See further Edwards, “Three Theologians,” 585–587.

³ Festugière, *Dieu Inconnu*, 75–82.

⁴ Eckhart, *Selected Writings*, 236.

⁵ For Basilides see Hippolytus, *Haer.* 7.21.1, 7.21.5 and 7.22.6; on the *anousios* God of Mark the Mage see Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.42.4.

say of matter. David Hume is not the only sceptic to wonder whether a God who is nothing can be distinguished from a God who simply is not.⁶

As we shall find, there are students of Dionysius who would not resent this conclusion. It has been the custom, however, since the three ways were first set out by those whom we now call Middle Platonists,⁷ for pious philosophers to insist that God is ‘no thing’ because he transcends every attribute that can be named, whereas matter is nothing, or very close to nothing, because it lacks every attribute. In the Dionysian corpus that transcendence is indicated by the addition of the prefix *hyper-* to every noun or epithet which is applied with honour to beings in this world. The implication that matter is below all being (in Greek a *hypokeimenon*, or substrate) is universally accepted by those who have any place for matter, whereas the claim that God is ‘beyond being’ may not be easily reconciled with his own proclamation, at least in the Greek of Genesis 3:14, that the meaning of his name Yahweh is “he who is.” From this it might be inferred to be hyper-good or hyper-wise is not to be wholly removed from the realm of being and hence not wholly removed from the realm of predication. Even Eckhart, seldom accused of underestimating the sublimity of God, declares in his commentary on Exodus that rather than being superior to these attributes, God possesses them in a superlative degree.⁸

This is as much as to say that the *via negativa* and the *via eminentiae* coincide. One obvious objection would be that if we reduced the two paths to quantitative expressions, the *via eminentiae* would be an ascent to infinity while the *via negativa* would be a descent to zero; and although it is true that both zero and infinity are ciphers rather than numbers, they are not interchangeable. And yet it is true as a matter of fact that infinity is introduced by Plotinus Ainto the intellectual realm,⁹ while Émile Bréhier opines that if the Greeks had had a symbol for zero, Plotinus could have avoided the misleading use of “One.”¹⁰ Zero and infinity have in common that they that, while each is a negation of any finite number, each is implied by the very existence of number, and arithmetic is impossible without the concept of them even in cultures that lack a sign for either. In Christian thought a similar role is assigned to being, considered as absolute or indeterminate, in contradistinction both to all concrete entities and to any definable essence. Being, on this account, remains a predicate, but a predicate of a very peculiar character: where the essence of an entity, so long as it exists, is to be a thing of this or that kind, God is no concrete entity, no finite being, no thing of any kind, but that one subject of discourse whose essence is simply to exist.

⁶ On philosophic interpretations of Exodus 3:14 see Pattison, *God and Being*, 17–21.

⁷ Origenes, *Cels.* 7.41; Alcinous, *Didascalicus* 10.5–6, both discussed by John M. Dillon (*Alcinous*, 107–110).

⁸ Eckhart, *Commentary on Exodus* 74–78 (CWS, 68–70).

⁹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 2.4.3. See further de Vogel, “La théorie de l’AITEIPON,” 390.

¹⁰ Bréhier, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 157.

2. The Way to the One in Plotinus

As E.R. Dodds observed,¹¹ the hallmark of Neoplatonism, in contrast to every previous school of thought that stemmed from Plato, is the positing of the One as the ineffable source all that exists, including the forms or archetypes of all phenomenal being and the transcendent intellect that contemplates them. The reasoning which led Plotinus to this innovation was partly exegetic and partly speculative. The text to which he and his successors return most frequently in their exegesis is the first hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, in which the great philosopher purports to show that, if the One exists we can predicate of it neither an attribute nor the contrary of that attribute.¹² The second hypothesis argues that if the One exists we can predicate of it not only attributes but their contraries.¹³ Whether or not it was Plato's intention to propound a serious thesis, the Neoplatonists understood this One which admits no predicates to be not only the originating principle of all things but the end for which they existed, otherwise called the Good; the One of the second hypothesis was usually identified with the intelligible realm of some portion of it.¹⁴ This reading of Plato is not corroborated, at least on the surface, by the *Philebus*,¹⁵ in which Socrates finds that neither the One nor the Many can be identified with the Good, but it finds support in sporadic accounts of Plato's unwritten teaching, in which he is said to have postulated the One, the principle of determination, as the first cause and the Indefinite dyad, the source of indeterminacy, as the second.¹⁶ There is clearly some relation (although we cannot be sure which is prior) between this doctrine and the theory attributed to the Pythagoreans, in which number flows from the monad and dyad, the monad itself being superior to number, while spatial existence flows from the point by way of the line, the plane and the solid, the point being that which because it has no dimension occupies no space, and is therefore arguably nothing.¹⁷ Thus the Pythagoreans arrive by another path at Parmenides' conclusion that there is nothing to be said about the One.

The speculative foundation for the Neoplatonic doctrine of the One is the notorious opinion of Plotinus that the intelligibles are not outside the intellect.¹⁸ This was his solution to the problem which arose for Plato's disciples from his habit of investigating one question at a time and through the mouths of dissonant speakers. In the *Timaeus* the Demiurge rules the other gods, yet does not create the paradigm

¹¹ Dodds, "Parmenides of Plato."

¹² Plato, *Parmenides* 137c–142a.

¹³ Plato, *Parmenides* 142a–155e.

¹⁴ See further Morrow – Dillon, *Plato's Parmenides*, xxxiii.

¹⁵ On the difficulties of this dialogue see Dancy, "The Limits of Being."

¹⁶ See Krämer, "Plato's Unwritten Doctrines."

¹⁷ See Hippolytus, *Haer.* 6.23.1–3; also 6.14, 5.9 and 4.51, with Whittaker, "Neopythagoreanism," 118.

¹⁸ On Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.5 see Armstrong, "The Background."

which he copies; in the *Republic* the mind of God contains the forms (or at least the forms of artefacts), but the sovereign and source of all things in existence is the Good, to which no personal attributes can be accorded.¹⁹ What then is the relation between the Good, the forms and the deity to whom some personal traits are accorded in both these dialogues? Numenius, writing two or three generations before Plotinus, sets the Good above the demiurge intellect, while the location of the forms remains obscure.²⁰ His contemporary Atticus appears, in Eusebius' excerpts from his work, to hold that the forms are *noêmata* or thoughts of the Demiurge, although Proclus understands them as products rather than as objects or contents of his meditation.²¹ The *Handbook* of Alcinous, a work of uncertain date whose author may be more an expositor than a follower of Plato, unambiguously makes the forms in the intellect of the Demiurge, though scholars may differ as to whether he takes this intellect to be the highest.²² By contrast Longinus, a learned contemporary of Plotinus, held that Plato clearly believed the forms to be external to the beholder. Plotinus, who judged Longinus to be a philologist but no philosopher, follows Aristotle in construing knowledge to be an embracing of the form of the object by the intellect.²³ In everyday perception, the form is abstracted from the object by the mind of the percipient; the demiurge however, differs from ordinary percipients, as his objects differ from ordinary percept, in being wholly immaterial, and therefore devoid of all potentiality. The embracing of the transcendent form by the Demiurgic To be above thought is thus to be above every concept and thus above predication; does to be "beyond *ousia*" mean to be above every mode of finite being, every existence as a "this or that," or also above whatever we might call being in its absolute and nakedly existential sense, which some would call "being-itself"? There is much doubt as to whether Plotinus himself could have put this question. The Eleatic Stranger in Plato's *Sophist* contends that *esti*, "it is" must always imply a predicate or a complement "it is X (and hence not Y)" or "it is an X (and hence not a Y),"²⁴ and a famous series of studies by Charles H. Kahn concludes that existence never emerged as a distinct concept in Greek thought, and that even instances of the verb *esti* which we render as "it exists" are not so much absolute as incomplete, implying always, when the context is considered, that the subject of the verb exists as a thing of a certain kind.²⁵ When this claim is challenged, it is often by the claim to have discovered the first occasion of the existential use in an author who has been

¹⁹ Plato, *Tim.* 31a11; Plato, *Resp.* 597b11, 509b14.

²⁰ For a survey of theories see F. Ferrari, "Numenius von Apamea," 654–655.

²¹ Eusebius, *Praep. ev.* 15.13; Proclus, *Comm. Tim.* (Diehl III, 234.8–238.3).

²² On the Ideas as thoughts of God in Alcinous, *Didascalicus* 9 see Dillon – Tolan, "The Ideas," 43–45.

²³ See Porphyrius, *Vit. Plot.* 20.86–104 with Männlein-Robert, "Longinos und Amelios," 1314–1315.

²⁴ See Plato, *Soph.* 236–239 with Pedro Mesquita, "Plato's Eleaticism."

²⁵ Kahn, "Why Existence Does Not Emerged."

overlooked in the scholarly tradition.²⁶ Plotinus, who denies that all finite being comes under one genus,²⁷ might have agreed, for all we know, with Immanuel Kant's much-debated assertion that "exists" is not a predicate; for all that, distinguished scholars have thought it reasonable to ask whether, if the question were put to him in a suitably rigorous form, he would have replied that the one exists, or is existence, or protest that it transcends any possible meaning of the verb *einai*. What would he have made, we may ask, of the Christian tradition, which, bound as it was to the biblical revelation of God as "he who is," arrived at a definition of God as "that being whose existence is identical with his essence," or in plainer terms "that being whose only predicate is to be."

This is the opinion of Lloyd Gerson, who has argued in a number of books and articles that the One in Plotinus is characterized above all by its simplicity, which Plotinus regards as the necessary ground of all composite being.²⁸ To be simple is not to admit of any distinctions, not even the distinction of subject and predicate: consequently the One (as we must call it, lest we be silent) is, properly speaking, not even one. This thesis bequeathed many difficulties to those who had followed his reasoning so far – how do beings participate in unity if the One is so simple as not to have this as a predicate? How can the One be a cause if it is unrelated to anything?²⁹ – but the problem as to whether the One exists was not among them, as is evident at more than one place in the *Enneads* where Plotinus is expressing himself with the utmost circumspection. Thus, in *Enneads* 6.8, his most tenacious examination of the dictum that the One is beyond *ousia*, he proposes that, as cause of itself, it has its own *energeia*, which furnishes it, as it were with a hypostasis, which we might translate "reality" or "existence."³⁰ Among all possible subjects of the verb *esti*, this is the one that is only and really itself, and not at the same time something else; it is, he continues, *autoousia*, "*ousia* itself," and in another treatise "one being" (*hen on*) though not first being (*proton on*).³¹ So far is he from denying the existence of the One that he endows it with personal attributes that are manifestly foreign to the Good as Plato posits it at *Republic* 509b.³² As John M. Rist observes, anticipating Gerson, Plotinus is as ready to style the One *theos* as to aver that it is "above *theos*," and he sees at times to approach the distinction that Origen draws, as a gloss on John 1:1, between

²⁶ E.g. Dillon, *Dexippus*, 71; Krausmüller, "Theology and Philosophy."

²⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.2.1.23–24; but cf. 6.2.7.16, where the admission that being is in some sense a genus leads to the postulation of the One.

²⁸ Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 303, citing Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.4.1.

²⁹ Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 100 and 105.

³⁰ On the important distinction between *energeia* of the *ousia* and *energeia* from the *ousia* see Gerson, "Plato's Metaphysics," 556, quoting Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.4.2.27–39. It is not clear to me, however, that the term *ousia* is here applied directly to the One.

³¹ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8.12.14–17 and 6.6.13.49–63, both quoted by Gerson ("Plotinus' Metaphysics," 570).

³² Gerson, "From Plato's Good," 95, citing Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1.8.1–5 at n. 6.

the Father as *ho theos*, God in himself, and the Son as *theos*, God by derivation.³³ It may not be irrelevant to add that Christian authors often spoke of God as a monad with the Pythagorean caveat that the monad is the source of the series of integers rather than part of it, and that while they might speak of the Father as “first God” and the Son as “second god,” they seldom employ these terms in apposition. We do not, for all that, deny that the God early church is personal, let alone that he exists.

This argument could be saved from the charge of inconsistency if we grant that “exists” is not a predicate, or at least not a predicate like any other. At the same time, we must remember that not every scholar believes that these ruminations could be translated into the Greek that Plotinus spoke. If by “beyond *ousia*” he understands “beyond all qualified or determinate existence,” would there in his own idiom any mode of existence that is not transcended by the One? Are we sure that even the wariest of his formulations is not an accommodation to the necessary imprecision of speech? Or might we not wish to say that whatever reality or truth he associates with the One is not properly conveyed by the verb “to exist,” just as we might want to say numbers have a reality or that statements about them are true without affirming that they exist? Plotinus suggests at *Enneads* 6.8.20.9–10 that the One is *energeia* without *ousia*,³⁴ and we should hesitate to conceive it as an entity with which Plotinus seeks a union comparable to the union of a Christian mystic with God.³⁵ Plotinus himself does not speak of *henôsis* with anything higher than intellect, and the nature of the absolute *henôsis* which takes the self beyond that union may be better conveyed by Mackenna’s consistent translation of *to hen* as “unity.”³⁶

I shall not undertake a detailed critique of Gerson, as it would be only a pale foreshadowing of that of Eric D. Perl, which I shall examine in the next section of this paper. Since, however, Perl quotes sentences more often than paragraphs, I shall notice here one longer passage, which seems to me to militate strongly against the claim that Plotinus, at his most technical, can coherently grant existence to the One:

And perhaps one ought to suppose that it was in this sense that the ancients used the phrase “beyond [the] *ousia*”, to mean not merely that he generates *ousia*, but that he is no slave either to *ousia* or to himself, nor is his *ousia* its origin, but he himself, being the origin of [the] *ousia*, did not make [the] *ousia* for himself, but having made this thrust it outside him, as having no need of being because he was the one who made it. It is not indeed insofar as he is that he makes to be.³⁷

³³ Rist, “Theos and the One,” 177–180.

³⁴ Noted by Gerson (“Plotinus’ Metaphysics,” 569).

³⁵ See Edwards, “Plotinus,” 13–28.

³⁶ Plotinus, *The Enneads*.

³⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* 6.8.19.13–20.

I have noted in square brackets every occurrence of the definite article before *ousia*, since it might be argued that this is a way of denoting one *ousia* in particular rather than *ousia* in general. The fact that Plotinus himself inserts the article into his allusion to Plato might be thought significant; on the other hand, the paragraph makes equal or better sense if we took *ousia* to mean “existence” in the abstract sense, remembering that it is customary in Greek, though not in English, to place the definite article before abstract nouns. If Plotinus is speaking of a particular *ousia*, it can be only that of the One, yet it is plain enough that whatever *ousia* he has in mind is external to the One.

Here then is an argument that seems to entail that the One is above all being. There is, however, one curiosity of diction which should give us pause – the repeated use of masculine rather than neuter pronouns for the One, which I have reproduced in my translation by writing “he” rather than “it.” It is possible that this usage betrays a religious inclination which is at odds with the austere metaphysical reasoning of Plotinus. If that is so, we may diagnose a latent ambiguity in the *Enneads*; we shall see, however, that of Eric Perl is correct in his understanding of both authors, the dissonance between the professed Christianity of Dionysius and his negative theology is so obvious and so radical that it cannot have been unperceived, and may not have been undesigned.

3. Dionysian Atheism?

If it were true, as Michael Frede avers, that ‘there is nothing impersonal about ... the God of Plotinus,’³⁸ we could say no less of the God of Dionysius. Conversely, if we refuse to grant even existence to the One, we may also follow Dean Inge in finding an “Oriental” void in Dionysius where a true Christian would have placed the loving Creator. And this is indeed the thesis of Eric Perl, a stringent critic of every emollient to the hard saying that the One is “beyond *ousia*.” Dionysius, in his view, is a Platonist in the same mould, who denudes the first principle of all predicates, existence included, and hence cannot even be rightly described as a theist. Taking up from Kahn the position that “being” in Greek is always synonymous with finite being, he produces a cluster of passages from the *Enneads* to show that the one neither is nor possesses finite being, has neither form nor limit, and is not one of a class to be differentiated from the rest by any determinate property. In answer to the suggestion that its very infinity or indeterminacy is that property, he replies that for Plotinus, as for all Greeks, “infinite being” would be a contradiction in terms.³⁹ Even to style

³⁸ Frede, “Monotheism,” 48.

³⁹ Perl, *Theophany*, 11–12.

the One a cause is, on his own showing, to speak in relation not the One but to us (*Enneads* 6.9.3.49–52); even the designation of it as ‘One’ is a denial of multiplicity rather than an assertion of unity (5.5.6.26–27), and may indeed have been given to us only to be negated when we reach the end of ratiocination (5.5.6.31–34). To be above all finite being is to have no being to which the Greek language can give expression, and if we are to apprehend it at all, it will be by ceasing to exercise thought (5.3.13.32–33).⁴⁰

Perl, of course, is familiar with the argument that even if we cannot affirm existence of the One, we can affirm, as a true proposition, that it is the cause of whatever exists. Gerson indeed contends that biblical creation and Platonic emanation differ more in words than in substance.⁴¹ Perl agrees, but only because, in contrast to Gerson, he attenuate the notion of cause to preclude all action on the part of the One. Causation in Plotinus and his successors, he maintains, is nothing more than participation of all things in the first principle; each is determined by its mode of participation, but the One does not stand to them as producer to product.⁴² It is nothing more or less than production itself, and when we speak of procession and reversion, these are not discrete operations but two names for the individuation of the existent, one of which conceives unity as the source, and the other as the end, of its being as the entity that it is.⁴³ To say that the one is separate or transcendent is to say that it is unconditioned, not that it has some being which is external to its products; as Proclus says, it is at the same time everywhere and nowhere. When we turn to Dionysius, Perl continues, we find that the creative operation of God is equally immanent and equally transcendent in the sense that it is unconditioned and not to be identified with any finite activity. It is not to be imagined as an act of will by which a lone agent brings into existence that which was hitherto non-existent.⁴⁴ Even when it is described as *eros* or love – a linguistic innovation, as Perl admits – no more is meant than Plotinus means when he speaks of the One as that which provides for all things.⁴⁵ The apophatic philosophy of Dionysius is not an interpretation but a resolute correction of the anthropomorphic vocabulary of the scriptures.

While I share Perl’s opinion that the logic of negation in Plotinus requires us to read his predicative statements as accommodations to our weak capacities, I wonder why Dionysius, had he shared this view, would have chosen to ground his theology on a book so full of anthropomorphic elements as the Bible, construing it not as a philosophic text but as the manual of a church in which the duty of the wise was to guide the simple, and in which custom permitted neither the wise nor the simple

⁴⁰ Perl, *Theophany*, 12–13.

⁴¹ Gerson, “Plotinus’ Metaphysics”; Perl, *Theophany*, 12.

⁴² Perl, *Theophany*, 28.

⁴³ Perl, *Theophany*, 19 and 38.

⁴⁴ Perl, *Theophany*, 29, quoting *Divine Names* 5.8, 824c. Cf. Perl, *Theophany*, 49.

⁴⁵ Perl, *Theophany*, 48–49.

to deny the truth of any part of the text or even to bury the literal sense entirely in figurative exegesis. Plato had set the example of disbelieving the tales of poets and had made it clear that his own myths were to be understood allegorically; for his students in late antiquity the negative way of speaking about the first principle was so obviously the better one that the only danger to be apprehended was that a novice might imagine that the One is really one, and that the apophatic caveats which are attached to every description of it were real propositions conveying its attributes.⁴⁶ Dionysius, by contrast, maintains that it is the very unknowability of God that necessitates the kataphatic revelation: as Kant might have said, the negation is empty without the predication, and without negation predication is blind.

Since Clement of Alexandria it had been a Christian truism that God is known as he chooses to be known and that only the advent of the Word in flesh, as attested in scripture, can put to rest the cacophony of the schools.⁴⁷ Clement, Origen and their intellectual heirs abandon the literal sense when reason proves it untenable, but not for one that deprives God of rational motive in his choice of human words. Christ would not be called the Son of God if he were not divine by nature; God would not be said to love the world if he were not in some sense possessed of mind and will. In exegesis the *via analogiae* is a corollary of the infallible truth of the prophets, the law and the gospel. Dionysius' belief in the reality of the incarnation was never doubted before the modern era, even by those who suspected him of heresy,⁴⁸ and his reverence for the scriptures exceeds the fidelity of the Platonist to his master, for even the most infatuated votary of Plato holds that his arguments can be proved by impartial reasoning, whereas the Christian doctrine of scriptural inerrancy requires that much be accepted in faith that eludes or even defies the intellect. It is hard to see how Dionysius could subscribe (as he clearly does) to such a tradition if he did not think of God as a being who is capable of acting with design.

His devotion to scripture accounts for a number of elements in the thought of Dionysius which would strike us as incongruous in the works of a pagan Platonist, for whom the first principle can have no being, no cult, no love and no local presence in this world:

1. Although he sets God above being, Dionysius has not forgotten that the name under which he disclosed himself to Moses at Exodus 3:14 is rendered in the Greek text as "he who is."⁴⁹ While scholars are quick to note that both he borrows from Proclus the trope of coupling the prefix *hyper-* with every adjective or noun that he attaches to the first principle, they pay much less attention to his adoption and

⁴⁶ Proclus, *Theologia platonica* 2.10. (Saffrey – Westerink, II, 63.23–27).

⁴⁷ On the possibility that God is above all being in Clement (especially at *Paed.* 1.7.1.1, where he is above the Monad), see Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria*, 173–179.

⁴⁸ See Perczel, "Greco-Syriac Reception."

⁴⁹ Exodus 3:14 is quoted by Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 1.6, 596B; 2.1, 637A etc. Cf. e.g. Clement, *Strom.* 6.173.3.

multiplication of terms which carry the prefix *auto*. These, as I have noted elsewhere, pertain in Proclus “exclusively to the noetic realm,” so that “even the *autoen*, the one-itself, is the henad, not the imparticipable One.”⁵⁰ By contrast:⁵¹

In Dionysius compounds of *auto*-, no less than compounds of *hyper*, are a monopoly of God as first principle.⁵² Some twenty-four of these are enumerated in the index to Heil and Ritter, of which one, *autotheos*, appears to be Origen’s neologism, while *autoaiôn* may be a Dionysian addition to the language.⁵³ Yet even the most frequent, *autokinêtos*, appears only seven times, and more than half (thirteen) are represented only by a single instance. In Proclus the compounds of *auto* exceed the compounds of *hyper* in frequency and variety; in Dionysius the reverse is true because it is *hyper*- which best conveys the strict alterity – that is, the absolute rather than paradigmatic status – of the Creator. At least two of his inventions – *autohyperousios* and *autohyperagathotês* – attach the prefix *auto*- to terms which signify transcendence, and of which there can therefore be no paradigm.

We need not wonder, then, that Dionysius has been accused of conflating the first two antinomies of the *Parmenides*, the first of which states that “if the One is, nothing is,” and the second that “if the one is, everything is.”⁵⁴ For Proclus this would be impossible, as it would mean that the One has properties – and indeed those very properties which belong eminently, if not uniquely, to *nous*.

2. The God of Dionysius, being the god of the Bible, is the sole object of worship, whereas worship in Neoplatonism is offered to every divinity but the highest. The *Mystical Theology* begins with a prayer to the supereminent Trinity;⁵⁵ the coda to the *Divine Names* is an expression of the author’s desire to please God, while the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* is punctuated by references to liturgical invocations. Plotinus, to the astonishment of his disciples, worshipped nothing, but even the devout Proclus, when he imagines the intellect catching sight of the One like the rising sun, enjoins us “as it were, to salute it with a hymn.”⁵⁶ Proclus, so far as is known, did not compose a hymn to the One.

3. The attribution of *eros* to God in Dionysius cannot be passed over lightly, for none of his Christian predecessors had so profoundly subverted Plato’s assumption that *eros* is always a symptom of need. It follows for Plato and most of his successors that the higher can feel no *eros* for the lower; only in Proclus’ *Commentary on the First Alcibiades* – only, that is, in one short work of his among many of greater

⁵⁰ See Proclus, *Elements of Theology* 114 and 128.

⁵¹ Edwards, “Dionysius the Areopagite,” 613.

⁵² Heil – Ritter, *Corpus Dionysiacum*, II, 185–186.

⁵³ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 189.17 (Suchla).

⁵⁴ Corsini, *Il trattato De Divinis Nominibus*.

⁵⁵ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* 997A (Luibheid, 135).

⁵⁶ Porphyrius, *Vit. Plot.* 10.45; Proclus, *Theologia platonica* 2.11 (Saffrey – Westerink II, 65.5–6).

length and intellectual compass – do we read that the approach of Socrates to Alcibiades symbolizes the condescension of the divine to our mortal intelligence.⁵⁷ Origen and Gregory of Nyssa have no difficulty in crediting God with *eros*, but in their writings on the Song of Songs this term denotes the incandescent longing of the soul for its heavenly spouse.⁵⁸ Only in Dionysius is *eros* represented exclusively as a activity of God, as though the paradigmatic use of the term connoted not deficiency but superabundance; when he quotes Ignatius’ saying “my *eros* is crucified,” by which the martyr surely meant “my love of the world has been put to death,” he understands *Eros* as a name for Christ.⁵⁹

4. It need hardly be pointed out that when he thrusts this inspired misreading upon Ignatius, Dionysius is violating more than one axiom of Neoplatonic thought. Plotinus and Proclus cannot conceive of any descent for the higher plane to the lower that does not entail some loss to the one who descends; and even if they could admit this, it would not be by allowing the one who descends to exist without division on both planes at the same time. Yet Dionysius stands out even among his fellow-Christian in his willingness to affirm at once the humanity of the Word and the divinity of the man Jesus. The modern theologian, for whom the incarnation is primarily (if not solely) God’s self-emptying and assumption of human frailty, is disappointed to read in *Letter 4* that even the human works of Christ were performed in a superhuman manner;⁶⁰ but this is only the author’s way of saying, as the Chalcedonian Definition required, that he was one person and not two, and thus that all his human acts were acts of God. The cry of docetism is, as usual, anachronistic, for in early Christian parlance this term signifies not the denial of imperfection or infirmity but the denial that God the Word had become a second Adam in spirit, soul and flesh.

To be, to be worshipped, to love and to be knowable as a person are all traits of God as this name is used in the Christian tradition. It is often assumed that they do not sit well with an apophatic theology, yet it might be maintained that they are the logical consequences of raising God above knowledge. It is common for human societies to pay solemn devotions to powers of whom they know little, and while it may sound like a truism to say that we cannot love unless we know what we love, the mediaeval successors of Dionysius teach that when reason has reached its limit love succeeds it as the sole ground of communion with the Inapprehensible.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Proclus, *In Platonis Alcibiadem primum* (Segonds, I, 55.14–15).

⁵⁸ Origenes, *Comm. Cant.*, proem 19–40; Gregorius Nyssenus, *In Canticum canticorum* 1.24–27; Limone, “The Desire.”

⁵⁹ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De Divinis Nominibus* 4.12, 709B; Ignatius, *Romans* 7.2. Cf. Origenes, *Comm. Cant.*, proem 36.

⁶⁰ Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Epistola 4* (PG 3, 1072B–C). For bibliography see T. Hainthaler et al, *Christ in the Christian Tradition*, 333–336.

⁶¹ See e.g. Thomas Gallus, *Commentaire*.

We may urge that, since we must be persons before we can have knowledge, there is nothing more apprehensible than personhood; yet we might invoke the same premiss to show that, our sense of personhood cannot be an object of knowledge for us if all our knowledge presupposes it. Gregory of Nyssa, the first Christian to affirm that God is infinite,⁶² assures us that this does not prevent our knowing him any more than the unfathomability of the human mind precludes self-knowledge. Vladimir Lossky extends this reasoning from the essence of the Godhead to the three persons, maintaining that the “irreducibility of a hypostasis to its essence” which is implied in the theological use of the term is also implicit in our understanding of ourselves as persons, which could not be replaced by the most exhaustive enumeration of our attributes.⁶³ It may be that beneath all expressible knowledge there is a bedrock of knowledge that defies expression; if this is true it will not be true, without qualification, that the knowable is coterminous with that which can be expressed. And thus we come to Timothy D. Knepper’s thesis that apophaticism is bound to be incoherent until it defines a sense in which the unknowability of God is an item of knowledge for one who is not an atheist.

4. Adventures in Epistemology

Timothy Knepper’s contestation of the standard reading of Dionysius is not inspired by the theories of Lloyd Gerson, and his presuppositions are largely consonant with those of Perl.⁶⁴ He does not deny that the God of the *Divine Names* and the *Mystical Theology* is beyond being and hence beyond speech, but he denies that he denies that these works, as we commonly interpret them, are able to express this thesis without contradicting themselves by the very fact of expressing it. Reference to Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* is sufficient, in his view, to show that the prefix *hyper* raises God above every predicate to which it is attached by Dionysius; and he does not seem to doubt that to be *hyperousios* is to exceed every possible definition of being. The very use of such terms, however, creates a language in which to speak of God and thus subverts the assertion of his ineffability. The use of the term *apophatikos* to characterize this mode of speaking implies that the theologian needs a special idiom, rather than that no idiom is available to him: it may be for this reason that Dionysius makes much frequent use of the term *aphairesis*, or diremption,⁶⁵ which describes the process of stripping away the elements of common speech and

⁶² Gregorius Nyssenus, *Contra Eunomium* (GNO 1, 281.24 and 2, 226.29).

⁶³ Edwards, “Three Theologians,” 589–592.

⁶⁴ Knepper, “Techniques and Rules,” 3–31.

⁶⁵ Knepper, “Techniques and Rules,” 7–9.

thought without implying that any positive affirmation will replace them. If our language will not supply us with adequate terms to speak of God, the assertion that God is ineffable cannot be adequately formulated in that language. As he transcends every predicate, so language must be transcended before we can apprehend him as the being for whom our language has no terms.⁶⁶ In short, we must not treat Dionysius as a theorist of religious language, but take seriously his exhortation to enter into the darkness of unknowing – at which point there is indeed nothing to be said.

As Knepper's quotations show, he does not accuse Dionysius himself of an ingenuous substitution of negation for affirmation. He sees that the famous passage of the *Mystical Theology* which denies to God both the positives and the negatives in a series of paired antonyms, including the antonyms "being" and "non-being," implies that in using such terms of God we are guilty not so much of falsehood as of a category mistake. As our analytical philosophers argue, the statement that virtue is easy is false, but the statement that virtue is yellow is neither false nor true, but senseless. Dionysius knows, though he does not say as clearly as Proclus, that apophatic propositions do not constitute an alternative discourse that is truer than the cataphatic. At the same time, he had inherited from the Athenian school another way of speaking about the first principle which, common as it, may not be readily definable as cataphatic, apophatic or even analogical. That which we style the Good or the One, says Proclus (after Plotinus), exhibits these properties only in being the cause of goodness and unity in everything that exists, and may therefore be known by its effects while remaining in itself unknowable. The same would be true of every other predicate that we accord to it: might we not find in causality, therefore, the means of making God the subject of an intelligible sentence without pretending that he himself can be brought within the compass of the intellect?

The Cappadocian Fathers appear to have taken this position before Dionysius when they argued against Eunomius that on the one hand a negative term such as 'ingenerate' does not define an essence, and on the other that the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by no other properties than the relation of the cause to that which he causes.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, they do not furnish Dionysius with a model, because the Father's causal act within the Trinity consists in the imparting of his *ousia* or essence to the Son and the Spirit. Inexpressible as the shared nature of the three persons may be, there is such a nature according to the Cappadocians;⁶⁸ if the Dionysian God is beyond *ousia*, we cannot say that he imparts his own qualities to that which he brings into being. If we assert instead (as the Cappadocians would not be afraid to do) that he brings all things into existence by his will, we endow him with

⁶⁶ Knepper, "Techniques and Rules," 14–15.

⁶⁷ See Radde-Gallwitz, *Doctrinal Works*, 129–163.

⁶⁸ See Gregorius Nyssenus, *Ad Ablabium* 6–10 (Moreschini, 1918–1922). I do not know what significance should be attached to Gregory's use of *phusis* in preference to *ousia*.

the faculty of volition and thus deprive him of the perfect simplicity that Plotinus ascribed to the One. Where there is both a willer and a will, there is distinction, and distinction cannot be expressed without predication. If God indeed is able to will each thing in its singularity, and not only existence in general, we must attribute to him an indefinite number of discrete acts of willing, and he will no longer be the One of the first hypotheses in the *Parmenides* of Plato, but of the second, of whom it is said that “if he is, then everything is.”

Concluding Observations

Ontology, the study of that which exists, is not easily divorced from epistemology, the study of that which is known; there are many who believe that they are the same science. Parmenides held that that which is not cannot be even an object of thought;⁶⁹ and conversely both Plotinus and Origen take the Platonic maxim that the Good is beyond *ousia* to imply that is beyond thought or intellect.⁷⁰ In Gerson's view the Good is not thereby removed from the sphere of ontology, and if it can be defined as that whose essence is to exist it must be in some sense an object of knowledge.⁷¹ For Perl it appears neither an object of knowledge nor an existent, but for Knepper the impossibility of bringing it within any current ontology or epistemology does not preclude the apprehension of it on a higher plane of knowledge. Whether this involves the occupation of higher plane of being remains uncertain so long as his argument turns primarily on the question of what can be said, which for some schools of philosophy in the modern world is no longer a question either of ‘what there is’ or of what can be known. These schools may be legitimately invoked in the criticism of Dionysius; they cannot afford any key to the understanding of him, as some have sought in Hegel a key to Plato or in Heidegger a key to Nagarjuna (who is no surely Dean Inge's type of the “Oriental”).⁷² He is not, for example, anticipating Derrida in denying the power of a sign to signify anything but a sign. He could not have escaped the difficulty of aligning the signifier with the signified by adopting Ludwig Wittgenstein's maxim that the meaning of a word is its use, for the common use of words is, in his view, that which cannot be our guide to the reading of scripture, while the vocabulary that he himself employed for its decipherment is an arsenal of private neologisms to which a Wittgensteinian might be reluctant to grant the status of language. How then could he hope to be understood if he could rely neither on the conventions of everyday

⁶⁹ Graham, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 212–218.

⁷⁰ Origenes, *Cels.* 7.38; Plotinus, *Enn.* 5.1.8.6; Whittaker, “ΕΠΕΚΕΙΝΑ ΝΟΥ ΚΑΙ ΟΥΣΙΑΣ.”

⁷¹ Gerson, *Plotinus*, 15–16.

⁷² Sinari, “Experience of Nothingness.”

speech nor on a public familiarity with the encoded truths of scripture that would spare him the labour of putting them into words?

Christian thought has recognised two ways of advancing from the mere premonition of higher truths to immediate knowledge of them, one of which we may call eschatological and the other mystical. The eschatological transition takes place only with our entrance into the kingdom, which is made possible only by death or the end of the world. Assuming that he would experience the latter before the former, Paul foretold that he would see face to face the one whom he had hitherto perceived darkly, as in a mirror (1 Cor 3:12); John, his fellow-apostle, proclaimed that “when Christ appears we shall be like him because we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:3). Origen surmised that the soul, when parted from the body, will rise through the planetary orbits, growing in knowledge of the cosmos and its own place in it, until it attains the summit of contemplation, where God will be its all in all. Philosophers of more recent times have maintained that only the afterlife will enable us to meet the demands of the verification principle,⁷³ or (in the older words of Immanuel Kant) to possess as constitutive objects of knowledge the preconceptions that furnish us with a basis for conduct in the present world.⁷⁴

The mystical way, before the twentieth century at least, was not an alternative to the eschatological way but a foretaste of it. Origen, basing his theory on the homonymy of the “outer man” and the “inner man,” argues that when the scriptures exhort us to taste or see or hear the Lord they are appealing to our spiritual senses;⁷⁵ conversely, it is by exercising these senses that we grasp the spiritual sense of scripture. Gregory of Nyssa, expanding these laconic intimations, conceives the life of faith as one of perpetual advance from glory to glory, commencing even in this life as the increase of wisdom promotes, and in turn is promoted by, our increasing likeness to God.⁷⁶ The mediaeval church produced a copious literature on the cultivation of faculties other than intellect as a means to the knowledge of God: some authors enjoin little more than the rational fostering of love until love at last eclipses reason, while others explain in detail how the capacities of the soul are converted into their spiritual counterparts.⁷⁷ The wiser sort do not attempt to describe the transcendence of everyday consciousness, even by analogy, but content themselves with metaphors that give some notion of the heights to be scaled and the arduousness of the ascent.

Neither of these approaches satisfies the analytical philosopher, who assumes that all that is real can be captured in propositions grounded either in logical

⁷³ See e.g. Hick, “Theology and Verification.”

⁷⁴ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. John A. Palmer (*Plato's Reception of Parmenides*, 17–30) suggests that the young Plato looked to the afterlife to resolve the difficulties raised by Parmenides.

⁷⁵ On homonymy see *Origenes, Comm. Cant.*, proem 6; on spiritual senses Origenes, *Princ.* 1.1.9 etc., with McInroy, “Origen of Alexandria.”

⁷⁶ See von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 153–169.

⁷⁷ See e.g. Gerson, *Sur la théologie mystique*.

necessity or in the evidence of the senses; abstruse as the terms composing these propositions may be, they purport to be clarifications of common speech, common observation or common values, rather than halting reports of experiences whose incommunicability is their sole content, or promissory notes for a verification in some unverifiable future. The most that the mystic or visionary can offer us, in the view of most analytical philosophers, is a record of the experience of an experience, which seldom achieves coherence in itself, let alone any claim to correspondence with the facts. A postmodernist or a Heideggerian might say as much of every exercise in the production or interpretation of signs, and if we turn from the European to the Asiatic tradition we shall find it to be a commonplace of Vedantic teaching that the ultimate object of experience is the Atman, or deepest self, while there are Buddhists (perhaps the majority) whose goal in meditation is the experience of nothing. This state, we are told, is sometimes declared by Nagarjuna to be “different from both being and non-Being,” so that we can say of it, in flat defiance of Parmenides that it is and is not.”⁷⁸

Among Greeks we do not find this dictum even in Plotinus, who for good reasons is the philosopher most often compared with the commentators on Hindu or Buddhist scriptures, even when he is not suspected of learning from them. It is, however, a tenet of Dionysius that God is neither one of the things that are nor of those that are not (*Mystical Theology* 5, 1048A); and if this were the whole of his doctrine, those who deny that he is a Christian would be justified – and indeed there might be equal justification for denying that he is a Greek. Yet, as we have observed, he also believes that God is the author of the book that abounds in positive, if enigmatic, disclosures of his nature, and that this God is not only “the one who is” but the font of a universal and superabundant love on which the existence of all other things is grounded. He is both *hyperousios* and *autoousios*, at once beyond being and eminently being. The *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* and the *Celestial Hierarchy* are proof enough that the author has left the school of Proclus behind, even if that were not evident from his choice of the Bible rather than Plato as his oracle.⁷⁹ The harmonization of his Christianity with his philosophy of negation is not effected in the extant writings, where at best there are hints of both the eschatological and the mystical way. No doubt it was for this reason that for centuries he was seldom read without the apparatus of John of Scythopolis or Maximus the Confessor, who in taking his reasoning further can be said to have reclaimed him for the church.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Sinari (“Experience of Nothingness,” 281) though he does not eat this as characteristic utterance.

⁷⁹ The importance of these texts has been emphasized by Andrew Louth (*Denys the Areopagite*).

⁸⁰ See Rorem – Lamoureaux, *John of Scythopolis*, 36–39.

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