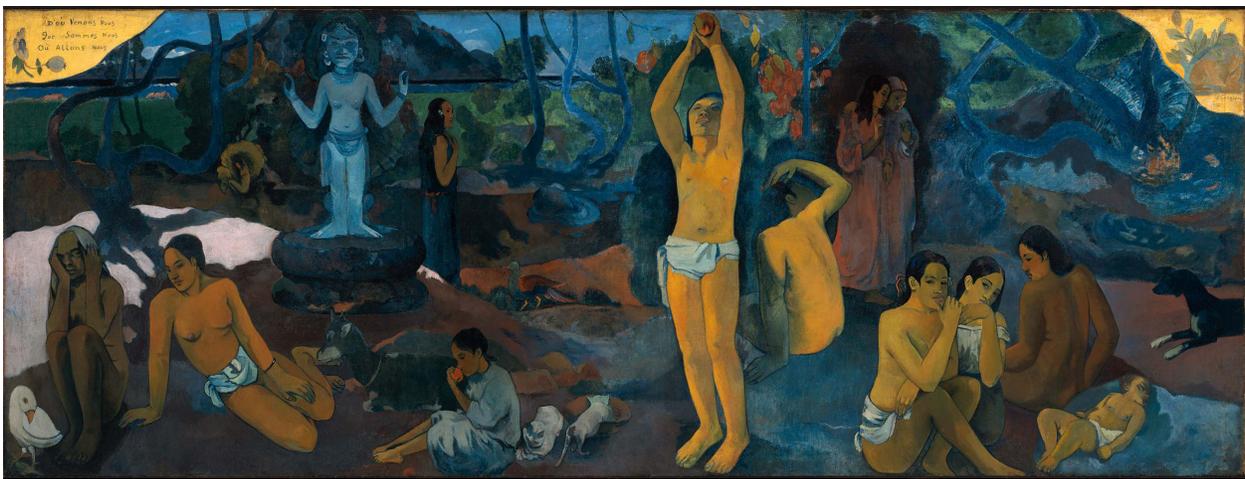


# More than Kind and Less than Kin: Relating to the Divine from Plato to Dionysius

*Cordelia: I am sure my love's more ponderous than my tongue. . .*

*Lear: Nothing will come of nothing.*

–Shakespeare, *King Lear*, 1.1



*D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous*  
*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*

–Paul Gauguin

Gauguin concludes a written description of the painting with the remark:

“Seeing they see not, hearing they hear not.”

~

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## Introduction

How do we relate to the divine? Humanity has been asking this question for as long as we have been able to ask questions. While today an atheist may answer, “not at all, because God does not exist,” there was a time when the divine was no more doubted than the rising of the sun each morning. Over time, the story changed, as stories do when they are told over and over again. This is surely not the first, and fates willing not the last, radical shift in narrative our species will undergo. To find a comparable moment, one may have to look back to the axial age, that momentous transition that projected the gods out beyond this world.<sup>1</sup> How might the notion of a realm *beyond* the starry heavens have sounded to an earlier culture, for whom there was no other world except the one we see around us? For those accustomed to living alongside the divine powers and in their midst, would transcendence appear as a kind of atheism?

The story I will tell is about the convergence of the Greek and Hebraic cultures coming out of the axial age, and the way they transformed one another in the Christian vision that emerged. How did these cultures conceive of their relation to the divine, and how did that story change over time? Specifically, I will be looking at the philosophic

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<sup>1</sup> Very generally speaking, tribal cultures had a more animist, immanent conception of divinity. After this, the archaic period of megalithic architecture and divine mediation by Pharaoh-type kings transitions to the axial notion of a fully transcendent God; see Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*.

and religious traditions from Plato to Dionysius the Areopagite, with regard to a cluster of related thematic questions:

- How was the world generated?
- Are we of the same nature as the divine?
- What can we know and say about the divine?
- How do we commune with the divine?

The first two questions are ontological: what is the nature of the cosmos and the nature of the human with regard to the divine? The third question is epistemological and theological: how do we speak about the divine; how do we name it; what are the limits of our knowledge and language? This question also concerns how we praise the divine, which also has bearing on the last question. How do we worship; how do we connect with the divine; what avenues of approach are open to us and for what can one hope in such an encounter? This is the broadest context of our inquiry, as these are some of the fundamental questions whose answers create a worldview. Important will be the way that the answers interact with one another, the way they cohere as a whole or come into friction and demand resolution. Understanding how our forbearers address these fundamental questions may shed light on our own response, helping us to grasp how we got here and where we want to go.

The narrower context of this study is the thinkers and ideas in the apophatic tradition that influence Dionysius the Areopagite (I will address apophatic theology below). We will see how these figures often offer conflicting and opposed answers to the questions above. Dionysius constitutes a certain crescendo moment in the dialectical synthesis of these opposing positions. He is a fascinating and fecund figure because he stands between worldviews, holding these divergences in exquisite tension, and

creating lush harmony from stark contrasts. In the rest of this introduction, I will paint these contrasts starkly, so as to better see their complex dance in the living philosophy that follows.

*How was the world generated? - Emanation and *ex nihilo**

Was the world created from God or from nothing?<sup>2</sup> The Greeks tend to employ an emanation theory to explain how the world “flows forth” or “pours out” of God, or rather, the first principle. The cosmos is a result of a divine superabundance emanating, overflowing, or streaming down. Modern Christians by contrast, believe that God created the world from nothing by a deliberative act of will, known as the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. However, the earliest Christians had not yet established this doctrine and partook of a worldview that predominantly embraced emanationism. In this period between the Greeks and modern Christianity, emanation and *ex nihilo* existed alongside one another, in conflict, in compromise, and in confluence. One of our tasks will be to trace this complex relationship through the philosophies of the thinkers in question.<sup>3</sup>

H.A. Wolfson distinguishes emanation from *ex nihilo* creation in three ways:<sup>4</sup>

- 1) Emanation is from God, creation is from nothing
- 2) Emanation is an eternal process, creation is an act in time
- 3) Emanation is by nature, creation is by will

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<sup>2</sup> These two options are of course not exhaustive. We will have occasion to mention *ex materia* creation below.

<sup>3</sup> Edgar Morin describes such an approach to analyzing “complex causality,” in which two forces are simultaneously concurrent, complementary, and antagonistic; see, *Complex Causality*.

<sup>4</sup> “The Identification of Ex Nihilo with Emanation in Gregory of Nyssa,” 55.

We have touched on (1) already. With regard to (2), the Greeks generally believe the cosmos is eternal, and is eternally being generated out of the eternal divine. This is in contrast to a Christian God who (2) creates the universe at a specific moment in time, through (3) an act of will. In regard to (3) on the Greek side, some nuance is needed. Properly speaking, primal emanation surpasses the categories of will and necessity; it happens neither out of will nor necessity, or it happens both out of will and necessity: the divine is as it willed itself to be.<sup>5</sup> In the Plotinian conception of the divine, volition and substance, freedom and essence, coincide. However, the metaphor of emanation itself (“flowing forth”), suggests something more automatic and less deliberate than Christians will eventually be comfortable with. But stories only change slowly over time, as we will see.

### *Are we of the same nature as the divine? - Continuity and Discontinuity*

In an emanationist ontology, being flows forth from the first principle, like a stream from a lake, and is thus implicitly continuous with it. Both consist of water, even though the stream receives its water from the lake. By contrast, *creatio ex nihilo* suggests a discontinuity with God, who creates out of nothing, not out of Godself. For the Greeks, the hierarchy of nature—referred to as the great chain of being or *scala naturae*—is the result of *being* pouring forth from the highest principle down through humanity to the various gradations of the animal and plant kingdoms, and trailing off into inert

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<sup>5</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.8; see also Michael Sells, *Mystical Language of Unsayings*, 19.

matter. Thus, each link in the chain receives its being from the one above it and passes it down to the one below. But for Christians, God creates the entire edifice whole cloth and immediately sustains each creature in their being, while remaining distinct from them. For the Greeks, the soul possesses a divine spark which allows it a certain participation in divine reality; because of the spark, by looking inside oneself, one can gain some knowledge of the divine. Christians believe the soul's spiritual capacity to participate in God is God given, a possibility created by God and not intrinsic to human nature. Self-knowledge is not knowledge of God, but rather self-knowledge reveals the soul's own nothingness and sheer dependence on God. Original sin has even exacerbated the gulf between omnipotent creator and fallible creature. But as we shall see, this divide or discontinuity also opens up a new possibility of relationship between God and human.

Let us also say a word about the Greek concept of *nous* [νοῦς], or universal mind, which was understood to encompass and pervade all individual minds. In fact, the same word was used to refer to the group and individual mind, reflecting their underlying continuity of nature. The Greeks were pre-Cartesian and possessed less of a sense of a 'skin-encapsulated ego,' strictly separated off from all other minds. Thinking was conceived more along the lines of swimming in the universal mind, where thoughts pre-exist the intellect who thinks them in a realm of divine ideas.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Louth, *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, xiv.

## What can we know and say about the divine? - Kataphatic and Apophatic

Kataphatic and apophatic theology, or positive and negative theology, are two different approaches to talking about God. As their names suggest, kataphatic theology has to do with affirmative propositions (God is good, God is light, etc.), while apophatic theology negates those same propositions (God is not light because God is so far above mere thingly luminosity that God's divine brilliance surpasses such a category). At first glance, it may seem like this distinction maps onto the former ones—that kataphatic corresponds to emanation-continuity and apophatic to *ex nihilo*-discontinuity—but this is not really the case. Even in an emanation paradigm, the divine source is still transcendent, and thus resists description in material terms; and even with *creatio ex nihilo*, Scripture says that from the goodness of creation we learn of the creator's goodness.

These two theologies express two intuitions about the nature of God. On the one hand, if God created or generated all things, these are in some way *of* God, and so they must tell us something about God. At the same time, the axial notion of a transcendent divine means precisely that God is in some way *not of* this world, and thus these things tell us nothing. This dialectic is central for both the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, and we can think about the two approaches in general terms outside their strictly theological application.

Two important kinds of kataphatic approach we will examine are ontological metaphor and allegorical interpretation. We have already seen how the theory of emanation hinges on a metaphor: The divine mechanism of action, so to speak, is

portrayed in terms of overflow, pouring, streaming, diffusion, boiling up, etc. What is interesting here is that the paradigm of emanation itself, by suggesting continuity between the celestial and terrestrial realms, underwrites the very use of metaphor. If we are of the same nature as the divine, then perhaps the things around us, by analogy, can tell us something about the divine. By contrast, *creatio ex nihilo* would seem less hospitable to metaphors drawn from the material world to explain God. And indeed, the Second Commandment's prohibition against idols is a prohibition against metaphor itself being used to describe the divine, and even finally the divine difference (the creator's difference from the creature).

Allegorical interpretation finds higher or deeper registers of meaning in a text. The text means more than it says on the surface level. Insofar as these interpretations are adduced to reveal something about the divine, they are a kind of kataphatic approach. In both the Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, readers will discover spiritual truths hidden beneath the letter of the text. Especially in the Bible, the text is sometimes in contradiction with itself or suggests something unseemly about God. The passages are to be understood as conveying a hidden meaning in these instances. Metaphor and allegory can thus be understood as two complementary gestures: Metaphor explains the metaphysical in terms of the literal, while allegory explains the literal in terms of the metaphysical.

While the kataphatic approach says and learns things about God, the apophatic approach denies that any of these really capture God in God's transcendence. Three central concepts for negative theology are the unknowability, ineffability, and

namelessness of the first principle.<sup>7</sup> The kataphatic thus seems to correspond to God's immanence, and the apophatic to God's transcendence. But it is not quite that simple. Apophatic theology actually presupposes kataphatic theology, because there must be an affirmative proposition in the first place if one is then to negate it. In fact, the only approach toward God's transcendence comes through the dual-employment of the two theologies.<sup>8</sup> One says, God is light, but then realizing the thingly category to which one has subjected the divine, one says, God is darkness. But to simply say God is not light, captures nothing about God. So one says, God is a luminous darkness, thereby stretching language toward its breaking point or self-transcendence, both in imitation of the divine transcendence, and as a practice of intuiting the divine through the shock of paradox. But nearly as soon as one has said the words, 'luminous darkness' is just another name, another idol of the nameless God.<sup>9</sup> Meaning is therefore fleeting, and only generated in the space between two poles, always needing to be created anew.<sup>10</sup> Because even with 'luminous darkness,' one is still engaged in metaphor, even if it is an enigmatic metaphor, at which point one may sweep away language and image altogether in favor of silence before the holy mystery. This is one option, but it ends the creation of discursive meaning. In the pages that follow, we will examine both how

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<sup>7</sup> Deirdre Carabine, *the Unknown God*, 9. They do not always all show up together, as we shall see.

<sup>8</sup> Dionysius calls the pair together, "Mystical theology," but in modern usage apophatic serves as synecdoche for mystical; see Charles Stang, *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite*, 156.

<sup>9</sup> Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 22.

<sup>10</sup> Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 2ff.

these authors keep the mystery open, continuing to generate meaning, and the methods they employ to transcend the discursive intellect.

### *How do we commune with the divine? - Divinization*

Because the Greek soul is connatural with the divine, Plato characterizes its quest as *anamnesis*, a remembering, a return to its home, an ascent to where it truly belongs. While for the Christian, it is only the Incarnation of God, his descent into the world, that permits, through grace, a communion that is not accessible to the soul by nature. And yet, the human is made 'in the image' of God (*imago dei*), harkening back to a certain semblance, which threatens to disrupt the clear lines I have drawn in this introduction. Indeed, the contrast between ascent and descent I just made will not hold for long, for soon we will see Christians ascend and pagan gods descend. At the moment of ecstatic communion, not much will hold at all, as the flood of divinity threatens to overcome divisions and identity. Each writer has their own take on what kind of communion is available to the seeker and what is the method of access: ascetic discipline, rising contemplation, rumination on scripture, inward meditation, ritual theurgy, Christian liturgy, sacramental self-emptying.

This last bears further notice: Throughout we will trace a tendency for apophatic theology to yield an apophatic anthropology.<sup>11</sup> The clearing away of idols and propositions inadequate to the divine nature will turn back on the seeker, demanding a similar self-effacement in order to access the divine communion. These writers' shared

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<sup>11</sup> For this term, see Bernard McGinn, *The Growth of Mysticism*, 105.

commitment to apophasis, to a God who cannot be named or fenced in by words and concepts, often leads through *eros* [ἔρως] to ecstasy, to passing over out of oneself, to losing oneself in union with the transcendent beloved. The resulting inability to write or speak about such an experience is the correlate of the ineffable divinity, but what cannot be said can be intimated and performed. Indeed, they are often at their most rhapsodic when they are speaking of what cannot be spoken, and thereby rising into song.

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Chapter I will present the backgrounds necessary to understanding Dionysius and his predecessors. Section 1.1 examines the fundamentals of Platonic thought and how they were received in Middle Platonism. Section 1.2 treats Philo, a Greek Jew who offers a synthesis of Hebrew revelation and Middle Platonic philosophy, laying the foundations for the Christian Platonism that will concern us throughout. Section 1.3 examines three early Christian theologians (Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen) who build upon Philo's groundwork, ushering it into the context of Christianity.

Having sketched the backgrounds of the antique synthesis, we turn in Chapter II to the foundational Greek and Christian thinkers of negative theology. In section 2.1 we explore the philosophy of Plotinus, which inaugurates what we retrospectively call Neoplatonism, so seminal is his contribution. Plotinus is a paradigmatic thinker of emanation whose system will remain the skeleton of all future innovations. In section 2.2 we briefly consider the First Council of Nicaea, which deals with the question of

emanation and *creatio ex nihilo* in the Christian tradition. Section 2.3 brings us to Gregory of Nyssa, who will fully embody an *ex nihilo* position with graceful innovation and surprising twists.

Chapter III begins to draw together all our threads, treating in section 3.1 the divergent receptions of Plotinus in Iamblichus and Porphyry. Next we will turn our attention to the systematic culmination of Neoplatonism presented by Proclus in section 2.2. Finally, section 3.3 will explore how Dionysius presents a unique fusion of all we have encountered thus far: Christianity and paganism, *ex nihilo* and emanation, discontinuous and continuous, apophatic and kataphatic, and beyond.

# Chapter I: The Antique Synthesis

## Section 1.1: Plato

*Helplessness guides the wandering thought in their hearts;  
they are carried along deaf and blind alike, amazed, beasts without judgment, convinced that to be and not to be  
are the same and not the same, and that the road of all things turns back on itself. . . .  
For things that are not can never be forced to be.  
–Parmenides, *On Nature*<sup>12</sup>*

See, says Socrates, humans living in an underground, cavelike dwelling.<sup>13</sup> Their necks and legs bound from birth, they can see neither their own bodies, nor the low wall and fire behind and above them. Atop the wall, puppets are illumined by the firelight, casting shadows on the front wall of the cave, the only field of vision the prisoners know. When the puppeteers speak, their voices echo off the front wall and appear to be coming from the shadows themselves, which the prisoners take to be reality.

Plato's allegory of the cave employs this subterranean image to represent our everyday world of sense perception. In contrast, the sunlit world outside the cave signifies the intelligible realm of archetypal forms. The world around us is but a dim reflection of a supersensible reality upon which it is modeled. We can trace such a contrast back to Parmenides' insistence on the reality of changeless being, which he opposes to the domain of seeming generation and decay, our world of becoming. But while Parmenides claimed all reality was one, rendering change an illusion or unreality,

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<sup>12</sup> 6.5-9, 7.1, translated in Leonardo Taran, *Parmenides*.

<sup>13</sup> *Republic* 514: ἰδὲ γὰρ ἀνθρώπους οἷον ἐν καταγείῳ οἰκήσει σπηλαιώδει. What follows is a paraphrase of this section. Plato, *Complete Works*.

the touchstone of Platonism is the divide—and relationship between—the sensible and the intelligible realms.

Socrates continues: Consider what would happen if one of these prisoners were freed and compelled to stand suddenly [*exaiphnes*, ἐξαίφνης] and walk up toward the light.<sup>14</sup> Because of its dazzle and glitter, he would not see clearly the puppets atop the wall, thinking their shadows more real. And if someone should drag him up the rough and steep ascent out of the cave, he would be blinded by the sun's beams, until over time, his eyes habituated, allowing him first to see shadows, then reflections in water, and eventually the things themselves. In time, he would look up toward the heavens at night, and finally gaze at the sun itself by day, inferring that it provides the seasons, presides over the visible realm, and in some sense, is the cause of all that is seen.

This part of the allegory corresponds to the philosopher's ascent to the divine realm of forms, which after requisite moral and intellectual purification, is achieved through contemplation (*theoria* [θεωρία]). The process of gaining such knowledge is described as remembrance (*anamnesis* [ἀνάμνησις]), because the soul originally dwelt in this divine place; but it forgot that truth upon joining its body at birth, only to awake bound below in the cave of changing shadows. True knowledge is remembering where we come from and what we once knew: the immutable forms or ideas, like truth,

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<sup>14</sup> The word "suddenly" in the original is *exaiphnes*, which will occupy us at several other key moments: see n.24 (Plato's *Seventh Letter*), n.25 (*Symposium*), n.474 (*Parmenides*), n.156 (Plotinus, *Enneads*), n.474 (Dionysius' *Third Letter*), n.473 (Acts 9:3).

beauty, and goodness, in which all particular instances of truth, beauty, and goodness participate.

But the 'dazzle and glitter' of such knowledge, the blinding sunbeams upon unaccustomed eyes, may shock at first, and even make seeing more difficult upon returning to the cave. Plato acknowledges three kinds of faulty vision: the first mistakes dark shadows for reality, the second is blinded by the too bright light of truth, and the third cannot see in the original darkness with its divinely dilated pupils. Such divine seeing is the goal of philosophy, but in its full perfection is only possible in the afterlife. Thus, philosophy is a practice for dying (*melete thanatou* [μελέτη θανάτου]), preparing for death, dying before one dies. Plato traces the edges of our knowing, acknowledging the difficulty of assimilating the divine light, and also marking a limit as to how far what is mortal can encompass what is divine.

There is however a definite kinship (*syngeneia* [συγγένεια]) between the intelligible forms and the soul. They are of the same kind, which is what allows the soul to know the forms. This affinity underscores the pre-existence and immortality of the soul alongside the eternal nature of the forms, return to which thus constitutes a kind of homecoming.<sup>15</sup> The act of contemplation (*theoria*) that realizes this homecoming is not just a thinking-about-something, but union with and participation in the thing thought, namely, the eternal forms, the true objects of knowledge. This is a knowing that surpasses mere intellectual awareness to intimately inhabit, even identify with what is

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<sup>15</sup> *Phaedo* 76E.

thought. In this way, Socrates can insist that virtue *is* knowledge, a knowledge-by-acquaintance closer to *riding* a bike, than *describing* how to ride a bike. And in this case, one has simply forgotten how to ride the bike and must remember.

Platonic education thus consists of a reorientation of the soul rather than an accumulation of knowledge or descriptions. Information is not passed from teacher to pupil, rather the teacher facilitates an awakening that brings forth dormant knowledge in the student. The teacher midwives the rebirth of insight in the soul.<sup>16</sup> To this end, the path of illumination demands moral purification, a certain taming of the passions. While Plato can sound critical of the body at times, this *askesis* [ἄσκησις] is a tuning of the body in service of the soul's *theoria*.<sup>17</sup> For this, intellectual purification is also needed, consisting of mathematics and dialectic, the search for the essence of things. Both activities promote *abstraction* from everyday perception toward the intelligible realm beyond the senses. For example, while horses are many and varied—*are born, grow old, and die*—the form of horse is single, immutable, and eternal. By abstracting from the diversity of different horses in space, and the diversity of a single horse across time, one reaches toward the perfect form of horse-ness: the true horse in the light of day rather than the shadow of a horse puppet on the cave wall; the eternal horse in which all particular horses participate. And while such abstraction can support world-denying

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<sup>16</sup> Socrates describes himself in this way, e.g. in *Theaetetus*, 148E-151D.

<sup>17</sup> While *Phaedo* presents the classic ascetic picture, *Republic* offers a more mitigated appraisal (401D: *mousike paideia*). The ascetic picture in *Phaedo* may reflect the intended audience, Pythagoreans (indicated by the homeland of Socrates interlocutors, Simmias and Cebes), more than a doctrinal statement of Plato's views. He never makes doctrinal statements.

tendencies, Plato also emphasizes that it only through sensible things that one could ever know the forms in the first place.

This then, in outline, is Plato's theory of the intelligible and sensible realms, as well as their relationship to one another and to the human soul. All the writers considered in this study accept the scheme to some degree, for even when they are making critical emendations (e.g. to the pre-existence of the soul, or its kinship with the divine), they are thinking with and against this framework. Often, we see a third level added to Plato's two-tiered world. In fact, Plato anticipates this development, providing the foundation for future innovations. How so?

Returning to *Republic* from which we drew the allegory of the cave, let us consider the related analogy of the sun. Socrates explains that just as the sun allows things to be seen in the visible realm, so the form of the good allows things to be known in the intelligible realm; and just as the sun provides growth and nourishment to visible things, the good bestows and sustains the very being of intelligible things, those patterns in which visible things participate.<sup>18</sup> In the allegory, the fire in the cave is likened to the visible sun, allowing sensible objects to be seen, but the true light outside the cave is provided by the intelligible sun, the form of the good, which allows knowledge and sustains being. However, it does so from *beyond being* (*epekeina tes ousias* [ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας]).<sup>19</sup> It is for these reasons that Socrates says "the form of the good

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<sup>18</sup> *Republic*, 508-9.

<sup>19</sup> *Republic*, 509B.

is the most important thing to learn," but that "we have no adequate knowledge of it."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this is what prompts him to employ the analogy of the sun in the first place, for what can one say directly about what lies beyond being? As Plotinus and others will note, Plato here implies three ontological levels: (1) the sensible realm of becoming; (2) the intelligible realm of being; and (3) the good beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*). He expresses doubt as to what can be known or said about that which is beyond being.<sup>21</sup> Though in the realm of the known, the good is "the last thing seen and hardly seen," still, "anyone who is to act wisely in public or in private must have caught sight of this."<sup>22</sup> Thus the philosopher is compelled to know that which is difficult, or perhaps impossible, to know.<sup>23</sup>

In the *Seventh Letter*, Plato describes an ineffability at the apex of the philosophical quest: "it does not at all admit of verbal expression like other studies, but, as a result of continued application to the subject itself and communion therewith, it is brought to birth in the soul on a sudden [*exaiphnes*], as light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter it nourishes itself."<sup>24</sup> This concurs with the pedagogical portrait offered above, with knowledge awakening in the soul, and further underlines the epiphanic nature of the breakthrough. A similar argument can be made for *Symposium*,

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<sup>20</sup> *Republic*, 505.

<sup>21</sup> For further development of this theme see my *Participation, Mystery, and Metaxy in the Texts of Plato and Derrida*, especially 144-162.

<sup>22</sup> *Republic*, 517BC.

<sup>23</sup> While *Republic* will ground future claims as to the utter unknowability of the highest principle, *Timaeus* will support the more optimistic claim that "the Maker and Father of the universe is *difficult* to discover." (28C, emphasis added). We return to this point in the following section 1.2 on Philo.

<sup>24</sup> *Seventh Letter*, 341CD. For "*exaiphnes*," see n.14 above.

when the lover climbs the “rising stairs” of love toward the form of beauty—which both stands above the realm of forms and comes upon the seeker “on a sudden [*exaiphnes*],” in a manner beyond the seeker’s control or understanding.<sup>25</sup> All three examples presage the apophatic developments this essay will trace.

The words “beyond” (*epekeina*) in the first example and “on a sudden” (*exaiphnes*) in the second and third examples, serve to mark the discontinuity, albeit in slightly different ways, between seeker and goal. While “beyond” tends toward an ontological demarcation, “on a sudden” indicates the subjective limit of the seeker’s powers, beyond which a certain grace consummates the endeavor.<sup>26</sup> Especially in the Abrahamic traditions, this discontinuity will be increasingly strengthened and absolutized.

But for the moment, this discontinuity can be overcome in some manner in all three cases—indeed, overcoming it is precisely the goal for Plato. Alongside the discontinuity, the specific images employed in each case also point toward a continuity. Here I am examining the choice of metaphor for its underlying implication of continuousness. Working backwards: the “rising stairs” image in *Symposium* suggests a sequential unfolding that, while the steps themselves are numerically discrete, does not differentiate the quality of the levels, or the last level from all the others. The *Seventh*

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<sup>25</sup> *Symposium*, 210-11. Andrew Louth makes this argument in *Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition*, 9-13, following Festugière, *Contemplation*, 229. Louth notes that beauty does not admit of definition (*logos*) and stresses how unknowability and ecstasy go together: the word “*exaiphnes*” describes how the final vision of beauty comes upon the lover; see n.14 above.

<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the Judeo-Christian religions, Platonists conceive no willful act on the part of the highest principle, which is impassive. I use “grace” here in a loose sense that applies to both Greek and Judeo-Christian apophases. A properly Christian grace which is freely given by God should not be understood in the Platonic context. This distinction will be elaborated later in the essay.

*Letter's* "light that is kindled by a leaping spark, and thereafter nourishes itself," increases the discontinuity with the notion of "leaping" and the subsequent autonomy of self-nourishment, but still suggests the underlying kinship between the philosophical goal and the soul it is able to ignite. And while the good is "beyond" (*epekeina*) in *Republic*, by likening it to the sun Plato is utilizing an exemplary emanation metaphor, that of diffusive light which can be followed back to its source. The sun can be distinguished from the sunlight, but it is precisely because the light and eye are sun-like that vision occurs.<sup>27</sup> In the intelligible realm, this suggests a continuity between the soul, understanding, and the good. As mentioned above, the good sustains the being of the intelligible forms, which in turn are participated in by the particulars of the sense realm. These relationships of continuity and successive dependence underscore the emanationist ontology and great chain of being trope that are more explicitly articulated in later Platonism. All three examples present a mixture of continuity and discontinuity between ontological levels, including the relation of the soul to the divine. The ontological problem that besets later Platonists,<sup>28</sup> namely how the first principle can be both autonomously removed (discontinuous), while still emanating the lower links in the chain (continuous), is present here in seed-form. And while the Judeo-Christian

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<sup>27</sup> In Greek optics, vision occurs because the fire emitted from the eye and the fire emitted from the sun meet at the object, with like knowing like—but this only strengthens the point about continuity between the observer, the light, and the sun.

<sup>28</sup> This is referred to below as the problem of the derivation of plurality or the origins of otherness. How does the simple, immutable one give rise to the mutable many? See for example, Plotinus, *Enneads* VI.3.44.

tradition will present a dialectical solution in the *creatio ex nihilo*, it will require a radical rethinking of the relation of the soul to the divine.

Such inner tensions are constant in Plato, indicating the breadth and fecundity of his speculation, rather than contradictions in his thought. While on the one hand, discontinuity of ontological levels, ascetic purification, and the philosopher's ascent in *Republic* prompts a tradition of Platonic dualism and otherworldliness—on the other hand, continuity of ontological levels, body and sensation as revealers of the forms, and the celebratory cosmological descent of creation in *Timaeus* stimulates a participatory Platonism of “exuberant this-worldliness.”<sup>29</sup> *Republic* likens our world to a cave from which the philosopher must emerge, while *Timaeus* sees our salvation in the very rhythms of the cosmos itself: One should rectify their inner revolutions “by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the universe, and thereby. . . attain finally to the goal of life.”<sup>30</sup> This dialectic of dualism and participation is one of the great drivers of Western thought.

One of Plato's central worldly concerns is politics, Middle Platonism's neglect of which likely would have disappointed the champion of philosopher-kings. Rather, seizing on the ontological challenges mentioned above, the Academy moved toward a more mystic and fully transcendent conception of the first principle, which in turn facilitated Philo's synthesis of Platonism and Judaism. To prepare that topic and what

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<sup>29</sup> Arthur Lovejoy, *Great Chain of Being*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Timaeus*, 90CD.

follows, let us conclude this section by considering a few aspects of Middle Platonism, beginning with Aristotle's influential presentation of Plato.

Drawing on the oral, unwritten doctrine (*agrapha dogmata* [ἄγραφα δόγματα]), Aristotle presents the two supreme principles in Plato's system as the one and the indefinite dyad.<sup>31</sup> Aristotle notes that Platonists deemed both principles necessary in order to account for plurality in the world, which otherwise would remain static and immobile in the Parmenidean one (again, the problem of the derivation of multiplicity from unity). The interaction of the two principles gives rise to the forms, which in turn give rise to two more levels of reality, three ontological levels in all: (1) the intelligible realm of forms; (2) an intermediate realm variously described as "mathematics" or as "soul"; (3) the sensible realm.<sup>32</sup> Tracing the philosopher's ascent back up these levels, such a division is already implicit in the sequence of (3) moral purification of the sensible, (2) intellectual purification through mathematics, and (1) contemplation (*theoria*) of the intelligible. Mathematics are the ontologically intermediate level because they share changelessness with the forms, and multiplicity with sensible things—just as mathematics is the pedagogically intermediate level because it abstracts from the multiplicity of sensible things, toward the changelessness of the forms.

The ambiguity between "mathematics" and "soul" seems to come from *Timaeus*, where the Demiurge creates the universal soul along the lines of a geometric

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<sup>31</sup> Which he likens to the formal and material causes in his own system. I draw the discussion that follows from P. Merlan, "Greek Philosophy from Plato To Plotinus," 15-18.

<sup>32</sup> These three levels are conceived 'horizontally' and are accompanied by the 'vertical' dualism of supreme principles (one and indefinite dyad).

structure. Some Middle Platonists, such as Xenocrates and Speusippus, describe the soul in mathematical terms. Furthermore, Speusippus casts the one as a single highest principle separate from the good, beauty, and perhaps even places it beyond being.<sup>33</sup> In retrospect, this all lays the groundwork for Plotinian metaphysics,<sup>34</sup> but it also indicates a period of speculation and uncertainty in Middle Platonism as to how to ontologically interpret the inner tensions in Plato's dialogues. Meanwhile, the Jewish thinker Philo, drawing on Middle Platonic sources, is forging his own synthesis in light of Old Testament revelation, laying the groundwork for the edifice of Christian Platonism.

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<sup>33</sup> There seems to be some scholarly disagreement here. Merlan, "Greek Philosophy," 31, drawing from a fragment of Iamblichus argues that Speusippus was the first to conceive the one as beyond being; but Iamblichus may have been reading Speusippus with Plotinian hindsight. L. Taran opposes Merlan in *Speusippus of Athens*, 86ff. Raoul Mortley sees Speusippus' one as outside the range of discourse, and thinks he may have derived it from Parmenides' one, in *From Word to Silence I*, 34. Also see discussion in D. Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 40-45.

<sup>34</sup> However, Plotinus asserts the one as the sole supreme principle and always posits soul as the hypostasis under the forms, never mathematical.

## Section 1.2: Philo

*Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself.*  
–Isaiah 45:15

If the philosopher's ascent in the allegory of the cave is paradigmatic for Platonism, Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai offers a comparable episode in the Judeo-Christian tradition we will be considering.<sup>35</sup> Yahweh summons Moses to the mountain to reveal the Decalogue, the sacred Law of Israel. He appears in a dark cloud with fire and smoke, beneath thunder and lightning. These pyrotechnics strike fear into the people of Israel, and rightly so, as the Lord warns Moses that the people must not ascend to gaze upon Him or they will die.<sup>36</sup> Moses withdraws into the "thick darkness" where God is, only to return later to find his people worshipping idols, in defiance of the Second Commandment.<sup>37</sup> After fiercely restoring order, Moses goes back to the mountain, asking Yahweh to show him favor so he can better lead his people. Show me your glory, he prays. And the Lord says, you cannot see my face; for no one may see me and live. However, Yahweh says, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand while my glory passes; then I will remove my hand and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen.<sup>38</sup>

Denys Turner compares this account with the allegory of the cave, noting that in both there is an ascent toward a brilliant light that is so bright as to cause pain and

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<sup>35</sup> In *The Darkness of God*, 11-18, Denys Turner suggests how the combined imagery of these two stories underlie Dionysius the Areopagite's account of Moses ascent in *Mystical Theology*, 1000C-1001A. We will return to this point in section 3.3.

<sup>36</sup> Exodus 19:16-21.

<sup>37</sup> Exodus 20:19, 32:19-27.

<sup>38</sup> Exodus 33:18-23.

darkness, even death in this case.<sup>39</sup> This is not the darkness of ignorance that afflicts those trapped in the cave or worshipping idols, but a darkness caused by an excess of light, a luminous darkness.<sup>40</sup> The inner tension of such a term does well to capture the mixed kataphatic and apophatic elements present in both the Old Testament and Greek philosophy. From these two sources emerge Philo's synthesis.

On the one hand, this Judaic *deus absconditus* has "made darkness his covering around him,"<sup>41</sup> prohibits graven images of his likeness,<sup>42</sup> and defies Job's ability to fathom his mysteries.<sup>43</sup> Yet on the other hand, he is the Bridegroom of his chosen people with whom he has made his covenant with a pledge of everlasting love, shaping their history and personally interceding on their behalf.<sup>44</sup> This double truth—the hidden God who reveals himself, who is both transcendent and immanent, absent and present—is the central paradox of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>45</sup> The history traced in this essay is very much the history of its adequate explication and accommodation.

Philo addresses this issue in his commentary on the Mount Sinai episode. God answers Moses' request to see him thus:

'Do not, then, hope ever to be able to apprehend me or any of my powers in our essence. But I readily and with right goodwill will admit you to share of what is attainable. That means that I bid you come and contemplate the universe and its contents, a spectacle apprehended not by the

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<sup>39</sup> *Darkness of God*, 17f.

<sup>40</sup> This term is not from Exodus, but is applied in this context by Gregory of Nyssa, as we will see.

<sup>41</sup> Psalms 18:11; see also Psalms 97:2, Job 22:14, 1 Kings 8:12, and 2 Maccabees 2:8.

<sup>42</sup> Exodus 20:4-6

<sup>43</sup> Job 36:26, 11:7-8, 28:12-28.

<sup>44</sup> Isaiah 54:5-8, Hosea 2:14-20.

<sup>45</sup> Carabine, *The Unknown God*, 200.

eye of the body but by the unsleeping eyes of the mind. . . .’ When Moses heard this he did not cease from his desire, but kept the yearning for the invisible aflame in his heart.<sup>46</sup>

This passage brings out several important ideas for Philo that will be addressed throughout this section:

- God cannot be known in his essence
- There is a distinction between God and his powers
- One can gain some knowledge of God by contemplating the universe
- This contemplation happens through the eyes of the mind
- Yearning to know the unknowable (to ‘see’ the invisible), does not result in negative frustration but rather a positive quickening in continuing love for God.

We can know of the *existence* of God but cannot know God in his *essence*; we can know *that* he is, but not *what* he is. Moses asks the Lord’s name and the Lord responds, “I am that I am.”<sup>47</sup> Philo interprets this as meaning: it is my nature to be, not to be described by name.<sup>48</sup> This unnameability goes hand in hand for Philo with God’s unknowability.

God is unknowable in himself and only made known insofar as he relates himself to us through his works or powers. In this sense, all knowledge of the divine is God-given, rather than a natural spiritual capacity (as Plato believed). He supports this distinction between God’s essence (*ousia* [οὐσία]) and His powers, activities, or energies (*dynameis* [δυνάμεις]), with the text from Exodus above where Moses sees only Yahweh’s back but not his face.<sup>49</sup> Everything that is *behind* God, that follows after him, belongs to his powers, and these powers make his existence known.<sup>50</sup> They mediate

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<sup>46</sup> *De specialibus legibus*, I.49f., translated in Colson and Whitaker, *The Loeb Classical Library*.

<sup>47</sup> Exodus 3:14.

<sup>48</sup> *De mutatione nominum*, 11.

<sup>49</sup> *De fuga et inventione*, 164f.; Exodus 33:23.

<sup>50</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 169.

between the simplicity and oneness of he who is, and the world of multiplicity. Philo explicitly identifies these powers with Plato's forms.<sup>51</sup> God's principal power is his *logos* [λόγος].

While the increasingly transcendent Middle Platonist conception of God fits well with the apophatic elements of the Jewish faith, Philo is also drawn to the Stoic conception of an immanent, vitalist divinity pervading the world (*anima mundi*); for Yahweh is not just a philosophical principle but the personal God of the patriarchs, caring for and guiding Israel's destiny. Additionally, Philo takes interest in Pythagorean thought, whose abstract terminology he seeks to bring in line with the personalist language of the Torah.<sup>52</sup> God is the one or monad, but to guard against thinking of God as the first number in a series, Philo also affirms that God is prior to oneness.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, Philo asserts that God "has gone forth beyond [the world's] confines not in thought alone, as man [*sic*] does, but in essential being also, as befits God."<sup>54</sup> These two statements, reminiscent of *Republic's* Good beyond being (*epekeina tes ousias*), imply a stark transcendence that, despite strides in this direction, is relatively rare in Middle

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<sup>51</sup> *De specialibus legibus*, I.48. Philo marks out two powers as most important: The kingly, sovereign, ruling power, and the beneficent, creative, bountiful power. God and his two powers are sometimes spoken of as a triad, but at other times Philo emphasizes the importance of a third power above the first two, the *logos*.

<sup>52</sup> H. Chadwick, "Philo and the Beginnings of Christian Thought," 141. Philo believed that the accord between Platonism and the Torah could be explained by an actual philosophical lineage beginning with Moses and passing through Pythagoras to Plato.

<sup>53</sup> *Legum Allegoriae*, II.3.

<sup>54</sup> *De migratione Abrahae*, 192, translated in Carabine, *Unknown God*, 208. Carabine claims this statement is influenced by *Republic* 509B, while D.T. Runia takes the opposite position in *Philo of Alexandria and the Timaeus of Plato*, 435.

Platonism until Plotinus.<sup>55</sup> If God's essence is beyond being, then his knowability is certainly in doubt; but in contrast to this conception of the divine, recall the God of *Timaeus*, who Philo is fond of citing: "Now to discover the maker and father of this universe were a task indeed; and having discovered him, to declare him unto all men were a thing impossible" (28C). Here God is only *difficult* to know, not impossible. While this section opened by considering the tension of transcendent and immanent aspects within Judaic revelation, this pairing of *Republic* and *Timaeus* shows the same tension within the Platonic tradition. Philo's solution to this problem, on the Judaic side no less than the Greek, is the essence/energies distinction mentioned above (God remains unknown in his transcendent essence but can be known through his immanent works). And while the essence/energies distinction itself is not original with Philo, his application is a novel one in the history of ideas, destined to become a mainstay of the Christian tradition.<sup>56</sup>

Gladly following both Moses and *Timaeus*, Philo maintains that the world is created (in contrast to prevalent Greek notions of the eternity of the cosmos). The cause of creation is divine bounty, overflow from God's willing of pure goodness.<sup>57</sup> The giver is undiminished by his act of benevolent giving, which Philo likens to a torch from which other torches are lit, to the sun giving off sunlight, and to a spring of water.<sup>58</sup> The three images of torch, sun, and water, are all emanation metaphors, highlighting the

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<sup>55</sup> One exception to this is Celsus, who is mentioned in n.122.

<sup>56</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 218; Festugière, *Le Dieu Cosmique*, 284f.

<sup>57</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 142.

<sup>58</sup> *De gigantibus* 24-27 (torches, spring); *Quaestiones in Genesim*, II.40 (sunlight).

influence of Greek thought and the influence of an emanation paradigm. At the same time, Philo states that God creates the cosmos out of non-being (*ek me onton* [ἐκ με ὄντων]).<sup>59</sup> While one may be tempted to read back a proto-*ex nihilo* creation, it is likely that a trace of *ex materia* creation is at play here. For the Greeks, matter itself was on the verge of non-being, and without the animating activity of the forms, would be so. Thus, saying that God creates out of non-being is close to saying that God creates out of matter. But Philo calls God not only demiurge (*demiourgos* [δημιουργός]) but also creator (*ktistes* [κτίζειν]), which may imply that God created the pre-existent matter.<sup>60</sup> The metaphors of emanation alongside these hints of *ex materia* and *ex nihilo* creation bring out the tensions of continuity-discontinuity between human and divine considered in the last section. This is perhaps an indication of the budding distinction between emanation and *ex nihilo* tendencies that will become explicit in later Christian writers.

In any case, God organizes chaotic and formless matter with his principal power, his *logos*, the pattern of order in the world. The material realm thereby mirrors the intelligible forms, which are conceived as the thoughts of God.<sup>61</sup> The sensible world results from God giving substance to his ideas, putting them into action. In anticipation of Plotinus, there are at least three ontological levels here: (1) God Himself, (2) His *logos* which embraces the intelligible forms, and (3) the material world. Philo often

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<sup>59</sup> *Legum Allegoriae*, III.10; *De fuga et inventione*. 46.

<sup>60</sup> *In somniis*, I.76.

<sup>61</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 142. Philo is the earliest witness to this doctrine.

subdivides this scheme and extends it into a great chain of being, filled out to the greatest plenitude.

As he continues to elaborate upon the ontological levels of being, Philo emphasizes the role of the *logos* as a higher power, above the other forms. The *logos* is called the “idea of ideas,”<sup>62</sup> the first-begotten Son of the uncreated Father, the “image of God,”<sup>63</sup> a “second God,”<sup>64</sup> and “the man of God.”<sup>65</sup> The *logos* is the immanent God who holds together the great chain of being by mediating between this world and its transcendent creator. By conceiving of the *logos* as a hypostasis, or substance, Philo takes a crucial step toward the Christian notion of a fully personified Christ-*logos*.<sup>66</sup>

Because the immanent *logos*, the image of God, is the organizing pattern of creation, and because humans are made in that image, they are able to attain to knowledge of the universe and thereby to contemplate (*theoria*) the immanent face of the divine.<sup>67</sup> The rationality of nature’s elegant design as well as its sustained operation attest to the creator, who is source of both the order and enduring existence of things (just as earlier we saw Philo contributing to the tradition of God as beyond being, here

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<sup>62</sup> *De migratione Abrahae*, 103. While broadly speaking the *logos* and the forms both belong to the level of intelligible reality, Philo’s more developed schemes subdivide this level, placing the *logos* above the ideas as the “idea of ideas,” as well as above the sovereign and creative powers.

<sup>63</sup> *Legum Allegoriae* III, 207; *De fuga et inventione*, 212; Genesis 1:27.

<sup>64</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 63.

<sup>65</sup> *De confusione linguarum*, 41. Philo interprets Genesis 2:4 as the creation of the earthly human, while he considers Genesis 1:26 the creation of the heavenly Adam, the *logos* of human reason and ordering pattern of creation. The two Adams correspond to Plato’s sensible and intelligible worlds.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of Philo’s importance due to this hypostatization, see Mortley, *Word to Silence I*, 39-46.

<sup>67</sup> Genesis 1:67; *De fuga et inventione*, 101.

he intimates the Christian tradition of God *as* being).<sup>68</sup> God's thought is present in the world as its ongoing harmony and stability. In contemplation, the mind rises from sensible things to the intelligible order of the *logos*.

While the contemplative path described by Philo has definite Platonic overtones, it adds a stage consisting of meditation on the deeper meaning of Scripture.

Understanding the well-ordered cosmos emphasizes the meaning of "*logos*" as "reason," but meditation on Scripture emphasizes its sense as "word" and "speech." The revelatory word of God is a direct communication, instead of creation's indirect testament. Contemplation of the divine self-disclosure mediates between the transcendent God and the soul, sustaining the latter on its yearning quest for the ineffable.<sup>69</sup> As creation in Genesis is a result of God speaking, Philo conceives of God as *ho legon* [ὁ λέγων], "The Speaker."<sup>70</sup> Scripture itself is an extension of the divine speech, offering a justification for Philo's method of allegorical interpretation.

It is no surprise then that the allegorist finds layers and depths of meaning in Scripture commensurate with God's unfathomable profundity. Philo draws his method both from the Stoic exegesis of Homer as well as Alexandrian Jewish tradition.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> H.A. Wolfson argues that the Christian and especially Scholastic development of the ontological doctrine of God as being can be seen as an intricate footnote to Philo, in *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Runia offers a critique of this view in *Philo and the Church Fathers*. In his exegesis of Genesis, see n.65, Philo calls *to on* the pre-*logos* God and *logos* the second God. This comes very close to a later Middle Platonic understanding of *Timaeus* 28C (in Numenius for example) where "the Father and Maker of this world" are distinguished as two separate entities, along the lines of Philo's first and second Gods. See Carabine, *Unknown God*, 216 and 96; Philo, *Legum Allegoriae*, III.207.

<sup>69</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 25f.

<sup>70</sup> J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 166.

<sup>71</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 138.

Historical account, myth, and ritual law are mined for their deeper meanings, which typically reflect the metaphysics of Middle Platonism. Inconsistencies in the text, as well as emotions or actions not considered worthy of God, are taken as cues for allegorical interpretation.<sup>72</sup>

One example is when Philo interprets God's "back" as indicating his powers in the world—that which comes after God, or in the case of the *logos*, a "second God."<sup>73</sup> Another passage that is used to justify the same metaphysical point is Genesis 22:4, where Abraham "came unto the place of which the Lord God had told him: and having looked up with his eyes, he saw the place afar off."<sup>74</sup> Philo wonders how Abraham can both come to the place *and* see it far off. This inconsistency or double meaning of "the place" is interpreted as representing the immanent *logos* and the transcendent God:

the former place. . . is the *divine word*, in which he who is fixed does not yet attain to such a height as to penetrate to the *essence of God*, but sees him afar off; or rather, I should say, he is not able even to behold him afar off, but he only discerns this fact, that God is at a distance from every creature, and that any comprehension of him is removed to a great distance from all human intellect.<sup>75</sup>

While one can arrive at an understanding of the divine word, Philo is at pains to emphasize the unknowability of God's essence. It is insufficient to say that God is beheld from afar, inappropriate to imply that his essence is like a thing one cannot make out in the distance, but perhaps in time will see clearly. Rather we cannot see his essence even a little bit, but are simply aware of the fact of the gulf between creature

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<sup>72</sup> Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, 142.

<sup>73</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 63.

<sup>74</sup> *De somniis*, 1.64, translated in C.D. Yonge, *Complete Works of Philo*.

<sup>75</sup> *De somniis*, 1.66 (my emphasis), translated in Yonge, *Complete Works of Philo*.

and Lord. Indeed, this seems implied by the image, for even when we have arrived at “the place,” it is still perpetually far off.

And yet Philo seems to equivocate, for he says comprehension of God is “removed to a great distance,” but not an insuperable distance. This sounds more like the father who is *difficult* but not impossible to know. And Philo says God is removed “from all human intellect.” Is there perhaps another faculty from which comprehension of God is not removed? Philo compares the soul on its quest for God with Moses at Sinai on the same quest:

Unceasingly does Moses himself yearn to see God and to be seen by him. . . . See him enter into the thick darkness where God was, that is, into the innermost sanctuary—formless conceptions concerning being. When therefore the soul who loves God seeks to know the essence of the Existent One, he enters on a quest of that which is beyond form and beyond sight. And out of this quest there accrues to him a vast boon, namely to apprehend that the God of real being is apprehensible by no one, and to see precisely this, that he is incapable of being seen.<sup>76</sup>

In pursuit of God himself, the soul rises above meditation on God’s self-disclosure in Scripture, toward “formless conceptions,” which seem beyond the level of Platonic forms and the immanent *logos*. Philo, like others after him, begins to push language to its edge in trying to articulate this “beyond”: One apprehends God’s inapprehensibility, and sees God’s incapability of being seen. These statements can still be understood rationally, as the final goal of the quest is to know that God cannot be known. This is not the fully paradoxical “unknowing knowing” which will become more explicitly articulated in later thinkers like Dionysius, but it does seem to be a first glimpse of such a formulation. In another passage, Philo goes further:

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<sup>76</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 13-15, translated in Colson & Whitaker, *Loeb Classical Library*.

There is a mind more perfect and thoroughly cleansed, which has undergone initiation into the greater mysteries, a mind which gains its knowledge of the first cause not from created things, as one may learn the substance from the shadow, but lifting its eyes above and beyond creation obtains a clear vision of the uncreated one, so as from it to apprehend both himself and his shadow.<sup>77</sup>

Here it seems a kind of knowledge of the first principle is possible. Philo is not systematic in treating these issues, so there is no sense in trying to pin him down on this point. Rather we find a blend of apophatic and kataphatic approaches that are in keeping with his already mixed Judaic and Greek sources.

This latter passage is rather Platonic in its emphasis on intellectual purification and a final contemplative knowing. Indeed, there is a rough approximation of the three-fold Platonic path of purification in Philo.<sup>78</sup> He exhibits the same Platonic ambiguity is asserting that some knowledge of God can be attained through observing the cosmos, but at the same time, moral purification requires a turning away from the body and the sensible world.<sup>79</sup> Having turned away from the spectacle of creation, the intellect must seek self-knowledge, which will open the 'eye of the mind,' the organ of true sight.<sup>80</sup> After meditation on Scripture, these acts of intellectual purification may climax in the contemplative knowledge of God cited above, replete with language of the Greek mystery religions.

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<sup>77</sup> *Legum Allegoriae*, III.100, translated in Colson & Whitaker, *Loeb Classical Library*. Philo is speaking of Moses here, but again it seems we can use Moses' ascent to God as an ideal exemplar of the soul's quest.

<sup>78</sup> See Carabine, *Unknown God*, 212f.

<sup>79</sup> *De fuga et inventione*, 63; Philo cites *Theaetetus*, 176B.

<sup>80</sup> *De somniis*, 1.58; *De Migratione Abrahae*, 39, 48, 57.

This latter detail may point toward a path other than the intellect, but as mentioned, Philo is not always consistent in his presentation. This passage describes a more ecstatic experience that seems to transcend the mind in love:

When the mind is mastered by the love of the divine, when it strains its powers to reach the innermost shrine, when it puts forth every effort and ardor on its forward march, under the divine impelling force it forgets all else, forgets itself, and fixes its thoughts and memories on him alone whose attendant and servant it is, to whom it dedicates not a palpable offering, but incense, the incense of consecrated virtues.<sup>81</sup>

This poetic text meets the unutterable divine with an act of self-forgetting, offering a holy intangible fragrance to the ineffable master. Though care must be exercised not to read later figures backward onto Philo, I see here the first traces of an apophatic anthropology, which will develop further on our course. Important here is the love which trumps the intellect and the graceful swoon that takes the soul beyond itself in straining for the divine.

Philo has taken both the metaphysical speculations and the religious side of Platonism, and combined them with the transcendent and immanent vicissitudes of the Jewish God. He presents an inward path which is Platonic in form, but which culminates in a love and yearning for God in himself, in his unknowability. The highest experience of God is not garnered through inferential reason but through intuition in an act of God-given grace.<sup>82</sup> But even in the soul's ecstasy, the portrayal of which recalls the language of dialogues like *Phaedrus*, the soul is always distinct from God. In contrast to Plotinus, Philo never speaks of unity of the soul with the one, but of an "unbroken

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<sup>81</sup> *De somniis*, 2.232, translated in Colson & Whitaker, *Loeb Classical Library*.

<sup>82</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 167.

union with God in love.”<sup>83</sup> While Philo’s is not a fully explicit negative theology, the apophatic is clearly thematized in a philosophical context, preparing the way for later Christian thinkers like Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory and Philo both use Moses as a model for the soul’s ascent and also share the notion of a continuing journey toward God in which the quest itself brings joy. Indeed, in a different context, Philo uses the same passage where Abraham “comes to place and sees it afar off,” to describe the “constantly retreating” nature of the divine:

The wise man. . . proceeding along the road which leads by knowledge and wisdom, meets with words [*logoi*] of God, among which he rest for a while; and though he had previously determined to proceed by some other road, he now stops and hesitates; for the eyes of his mind being opened, he sees more clearly that he had entered upon a chase after a thing which was difficult to overtake, which constantly retreated before him, and was always at a distance, and which outstripped its pursuers by placing an immeasurable distance between them. . . With the lovers of God, then, in their quest of the Existent One, even if they never find him, we rejoice, for the quest of the good and the beautiful, even if the goal be missed, is sufficient of itself to give a foretaste of gladness.<sup>84</sup>

This passage recapitulates all the major themes examined: God can be known through his divine word in the world and in Scripture, though he cannot be known in his essence. However, contemplation through the eyes of the mind leads to an experience of the unknowability of God that may culminate in loving union through grace, but even when it does not, still satiates and brings joy to the sojourner.

This synthesis of aspects of the Platonic paradigm, like contemplative ascent and the theory of forms, with the Hebrew revelation of a creator God who is at once unknowable and in intimate relation with his people, together with Philo’s

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<sup>83</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 12, translated in Colson & Whitaker, *Loeb Classical Library*.

<sup>84</sup> *De posteritate Caini*, 18-21, translated in Yonge, *Complete Works of Philo*.

hypostasization of the *logos* and employment of an allegorical method—all of these elements will influence early Christian thinkers in their efforts to conceptually frame their new dispensation.

### Section 1.3: Justin, Clement, and Origen

*No one knows the Father except the Son*  
–Matthew 11:27

With the arrival of Christianity, God the creator has intervened in history by becoming the God-man Christ to inaugurate his kingdom on earth and bring history to its glorious Redemption—no small feat. God beckons his holy community to participate in his revelatory self-communication in the flesh, and to prepare for the final consummation. A new universally salvific dispensation has overcome the divide between God and human caused by sin and finitude. In contrast to Platonic and Stoic notions of cyclic history and an eternal cosmos, Christianity has a marked eschatological dimension that goes even beyond the Jewish anticipation of the Messiah.<sup>85</sup> For the temporal world has been punctuated by the Incarnation in preparation for the Last Judgment. Philo's stress on a personal God is carried over and given even more emphasis in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.<sup>86</sup>

While the stern God of the Old Testament was veiled in cloud and darkness, the Christ of the New Testament is the light of the world. Indeed, the unknowable God has incarnated into knowable human form to bring the good news. This shift in narrative would at first glance seem less welcoming to a negative theological approach. Although a kataphatic presentation of God predominates in the New Testament, evidence of

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<sup>85</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 159. For a warning against the generalization that all biblical thought is linear and all Greek thought cyclic, see J. Barr, *Biblical Words for Time*, 137.

<sup>86</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 52. Louth notes further that Philo's idea of a God who *speaks*, who declares Himself, is sharpened and given more immediacy with the annunciation: God speaks and declares himself as Jesus.

God's invisibility and unknowability remain: "No one has ever seen God"<sup>87</sup>; "No one knows the Father except the Son."<sup>88</sup> Such elements join the emerging Greek and Hebrew apophatic traditions to form a Christian negative theology. And while the seeds of such a theology are present in Justin Martyr and Clement of Alexandria, it is Gregory of Nyssa who, by incorporating the more philosophically rigorous speculations of Origen, will offer its first fully formed presentation. A brief look at Justin, Clement, and Origen will set the stage for our examination of Gregory in the next chapter. Bearing in mind the radical shift in narrative, the philosophical scaffolding of early Christian thought will be familiar from Philo's synthesis.

Justin develops the idea that God is ungenerate (*agennetos* [ἀγέννητος]), a theologically important concept that will feature in the Council of Nicaea in the next chapter.<sup>89</sup> God's ungeneracy or unbegottenness entails his namelessness, since the act of naming would involve an ontologically prior namer.<sup>90</sup> And this namelessness implies God's ineffability. But if God's name cannot be spoken, Justin must account for the many names given to God in Scripture. Following Philo, Justin explains that names like "creator" and "Lord" describe God's activities in the world rather than God himself, who remains ineffable and nameless.<sup>91</sup> Justin does not insist on God's unknowability, a

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<sup>87</sup> 1John 4:12.

<sup>88</sup> Matthew 11:27.

<sup>89</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apologiae* I.14; Carabine, *Unknown God*, 227.

<sup>90</sup> Justin Martyr, *Apologiae* II.6.

<sup>91</sup> There is some disagreement among scholars as to whether Justin is more influenced by Philo or by the Middle Platonists. For the former view see E.R. Goodenough, *The Theology of Justin Martyr* while for the latter see L.W. Barnard, *Justin Martyr: His Life and Thought*. Chadwick tends toward the latter view in "Philo," 163.

concept that will be more developed in Gregory of Nyssa. At this point in Christian history the transcendence of God is understood in relation to the Incarnation. I requote the verse from above with its continuation: “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”<sup>92</sup> Thus the Father is knowable through the Son.<sup>93</sup>

Justin thinks Plato and Christianity can be easily reconciled since both have a transcendent God who is nameless, incorporeal, impassible, and immutable.<sup>94</sup> Like Philo, Justin notes that *Timaeus* and Genesis both teach that the cosmos is created and dependent on God’s will, though Justin does not insist on the *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>95</sup> Revelation is the final authority in determining where Greek philosophy has erred (e.g. the immortality and transmigration of souls).<sup>96</sup>

The cornerstone of Justin’s appreciation of Greek philosophy is his doctrine of the divine *logos*, which in many respects is similar to Philo’s notion, but with the crucial supplement that Christ *is* the *logos*.<sup>97</sup> Thus all who have acted in accord with the principal of order and reason have rightly participated in Christ, making Socrates and Abraham alike Christians *avant la lettre*. Developing this theology of world-history,

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<sup>92</sup> Matthew 11:27, emphasis added.

<sup>93</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 227; Justin Martyr, *Apologiae*, I.63.

<sup>94</sup> Chadwick, “Philo,” 161. This tendency to think of God in negative predicates, which we have seen already in Philo, is integral to the apophatic tradition. Even before the second century we find traces of a negative definition of God in the Christian tradition; see D.W. Palmer, *Atheism, Apologetic, and Negative Theology in the Greek Apologists of the Second Century*.

<sup>95</sup> Note that Justin neither insists on the *ex nihilo* nor God’s unknowability, suggesting perhaps that the two notions will be mutually reinforcing.

<sup>96</sup> Chadwick, “Philo,” 161.

<sup>97</sup> This notion is anticipated in the Gospel of John but the idea is not fully developed there and predates the Gospels in any case. See Chadwick, “Philo,” 158.

Justin pioneers the notion of Christianity as the keystone of an arch formed by the convergence of Greek and Hebrew cultures. Clement likewise says that God gave the Greeks philosophy and the Jews the Law as a preparation for Christianity, which is the fulfillment of both—two tributaries of one great river.<sup>98</sup> The three sections in this chapter sketch the foundations of such an idea, examining Greek, Judaic, and Christian sources in turn.

Like Philo and Justin, Clement speaks ambiguously about *creatio ex nihilo*, while Origen holds a definite *ex nihilo* doctrine.<sup>99</sup> As discussed in the introduction and treated in detail in the next chapter, the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine ensures that the gulf between creator and creature is not compromised. However, Origen also holds a doctrine of the pre-existence of souls. With this notion he defends a theodicy against the Gnostics, claiming that souls fall through their own freewill (while some Gnostics believe that the soul falls by accident or through design, both considered heretical claims of radical pessimism about the created order).<sup>100</sup> But Origen's work comes under scrutiny because of the dangerous implications of the soul's pre-existence. Does this doctrine imply the transmigration of souls? Does it imply their co-eternality with God? It is not clear that Origen thoroughly cements the *ex nihilo* divide in all aspects of his thought, for his views on contemplation and the soul's ability to know God resemble Greek notions of

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<sup>98</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 162, 170; Clement, *Stromateis*, 117. Justin and Clement, like Philo, believe that Plato's thinking drew on Moses'.

<sup>99</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 171, 189. Origen says, "I cannot understand how so many eminent men have imagined matter to be uncreated," in *De principiis*, II.1.4.

<sup>100</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 190-91; 166-67.

kinship between divine and human that are unacceptable by orthodox Christian standards. Clement attacks the Gnostics for a similar belief: that the divine spark in the soul of the elect makes them kin with God and destined for salvation.<sup>101</sup>

These examples bring out several of our key themes. The divine spark doctrine, like the emanation metaphor of creation, asserts or implies the continuity of the human with the divine, while the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine insists upon their discontinuity. The full implications of each position are not necessarily followed through in each writer who adopts them, and many writers combine aspects of both sides. Nonetheless, these questions on the nature of the soul and the nature of creation, and their relationship of continuity or discontinuity with the divine, will fundamentally separate the Greek worldview from the Christian.

In a related point, Justin addresses the emanation metaphors mentioned in the previous section, where Philo compares the transcendent God and the immanent *logos* to a torch from which other torches are lit, and to the sun and its sunlight. Justin accepts the first metaphor but rejects the second because it does not adequately assure the otherness of the *logos*, who is “another God, other not in will but in number.”<sup>102</sup> This brings to the fore the question of continuity-discontinuity within the Godhead itself. In what ways is the Son continuous with the Father, and in what ways separate? While Justin’s comment may have been a polemic against Hellenized Jews, in support of the distinctness of Christ, it would not be in keeping with later Christian dogma to call

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<sup>101</sup> Clement, *Stromateis*, II.74; 77; Chadwick, “Philo,” 172.

<sup>102</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, 128.4; quoted in Chadwick, “Philo,” 164.

Christ “another God.”<sup>103</sup> These attempts to demarcate aspects of the divine recall our discussion of God-as-being versus God-beyond-being in Philo. But none of these three theologians, nor most Middle Platonists, employ the beyond-being trope, which will not be rigorously applied to the highest principle until Plotinus.<sup>104</sup> In contrast to Justin’s remarks, Clement sometimes emphasizes the unity of Father and Son, as he is concerned not to make the *logos* a Gnostic emanation, though ultimately his position is Philonic.<sup>105</sup> These conflicting positions and differing emphases foreshadow both the Plotinian system of emanation and the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

Clement and Origen are also indebted to Philo for the method of allegory, which they extend to the New Testament. In addition to the levels of literal, historical, and moral interpretation present in Philo, the spiritual meaning of Christ’s incarnation and redemption now comprises a new register of interpretation.<sup>106</sup> Additionally, Origen emphasizes even more than Philo the ascent of the soul to union with God, which constitutes yet another level of allegorical meaning.

Origen interprets the three wisdom books, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs, as corresponding to the three progressive stages of the soul’s journey to God:

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<sup>103</sup> It is interesting to note in this regard Justin’s speculations that Plato’s *Second Letter*, presages the Trinity: “Related to the King of All are all things, and for his sake they are, and of all things fair he is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things and related to the Third the third” (312E). Plotinus will cite this same passage in support of his own tripartite scheme of reality.

<sup>104</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 135. The typical Middle Platonist position reflects an integration of Aristotelian ideas in which God, thought, and being are all closely related. Consider the views of Alcinous, for example, in Carabine, *Unknown God*, 71-83.

<sup>105</sup> Chadwick, “Philo,” 177. Clement, *Stromateis*, V.6.3. Gnosticism embraced a version emanation theory, in which a plethora different sub-gods or aeons emanate from the supreme God in a downward hierarchy.

<sup>106</sup> Chadwick, “Philo,” 180, 183.

*ethic* [ἠθικά], *physic* [φυσική], and *entopic* [ἐντόπτικῆ] (metaphysic).<sup>107</sup> Features of these stages are familiar from our treatments of Plato and Philo, beginning with the development of moral virtue (*ethic*) aimed at subduing the body and freeing the soul. Next, examination of the natural universe (*physic*) reveals its transience, eventually prompting a desire to pass beyond it. But first, the soul uncovers in nature *logoi* that can awaken the mind to God's wisdom. These *logoi* or forms are the thoughts of God (as in Philo), whose multiplicity is unified and absorbed in the embracing *logos* of Christ. The soul comes into the divine mind when it contemplates them, thus participating in Christ, the image of God after whom the soul is fashioned. At the high pitch of this participation, the soul is already engaged in the third stage (*entopic*), the contemplation of God leading to union. Here the soul passes beyond what it can achieve on its own and relies on divine mercy and love.<sup>108</sup> In this stage, scriptural exegesis itself becomes a kind of contemplation (*theoria*), not an intellectual exercise but a religious experience. For the *logos* is not just the divine speech, instituting and ordering creation, but also the revelatory word of scripture. The soul participates in the mystery of Christ himself when it apprehends the deeper meaning of biblical allegory.<sup>109</sup> At the culmination of the quest, the highest point in the soul (*nous* [νοῦς]) is joined to God in contemplative

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<sup>107</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 53-58. Origen draws his sequence from the Middle Platonists, who in turn draw from the Stoic division of philosophy into three branches by these names. These three stages will later be called purificatory, illuminative, and unitive, and feature prominently in both Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius. Clement also outlines three stages on the path to wisdom but changes the order: illumination is achieved through instruction, purification through confession, and contemplation through analysis.

<sup>108</sup> Origen, *Commentarium in Canticum Canticorum*, II.4; Louth, *Origins*, 59.

<sup>109</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 63.

union. This is not an ecstatic experience where the soul passes out of itself. Rather, God is knowable because we are made after the image of God, the Christ-*logos*. God is not beyond being, but within our reach. Knowing God means being known by God, united to Him and sharing in his divinity, thus becoming divinized (*theopoiesis* [θεόποιήσις]).<sup>110</sup> As mentioned above, this continuity with God is what will bring Origen's work under suspicion, but is also a testament to its Platonic heritage. Origen's is a mysticism of joy, optimism, and light, in contrast to the cloud and darkness present in most of the writers considered in this essay.<sup>111</sup>

Indeed, Origen's predecessor Clement traces a path of wisdom that ends in "negative knowledge."<sup>112</sup> Through a contemplative method of abstraction (*aphairesis* [ἀφαίρεσις]), the seeker removes all physical qualities from an imagined body—depth, breadth, length—culminating in a single point, and finally removing even position to arrive at a concept of absolute unity.<sup>113</sup> Clement does not see this as a mere intellectual exercise but a method that will aid the soul in being "cast into the greatness of Christ."<sup>114</sup> This leads to a comprehension of God, however it is knowledge of what God is *not*, not what he *is*. Not even Christ can deliver positive knowledge of the unknowable Father. In this, Clement takes a step beyond Justin in negative theology.

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<sup>110</sup> Contemplation also plays an ontological role for Origen. The *logos* achieves its divinity through contemplation of God, and the spiritual beings (*logikoi*) are divinized through their contemplation of the *logos*, and at second remove, God (Louth, *Origins* 71-75). As we will see, this descending chain of contemplation will also feature in Plotinus and may be due to their common teacher, Ammonius Saccas.

<sup>111</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 55.

<sup>112</sup> Clement, *Stromateis*, V.10-11.

<sup>113</sup> This method is found in various Middle Platonic thinkers such as Alcinous. See Carabine, *Unknown God*, 71-83.

<sup>114</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 231.

He describes the soul's final vision of God in terms of darkness, drawing on Moses' ascent, like Philo before him, but says the beatific vision is possible only in the afterlife. There the soul will be purified in the baptism by fire, leading to greater and greater knowledge of God—an infinite advance into his mystery with no end in satiety.<sup>115</sup> But in this life, the limit of our knowledge is the Son, as the Father is incomprehensible, inexpressible, indefinable, nameless, and in truth, is no object of knowledge at all.<sup>116</sup> Gregory of Nyssa inherits this apophatic strain from Philo and Clement, and combines it with the more elaborated contemplative path described by Origen. Gregory's ascent climaxes in an unknowing co-presence with God that is a joyful but inexhaustible yearning, similar to the perpetuity of Clement's vision, but experienced in this life. But before turning to Gregory, let us examine Plotinus, who studied under the same teacher as Origen some years after him. Plotinus' metaphysics both resonate with Origen but also diverge in an apophatic direction that will set the stage for Gregory himself.

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<sup>115</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 178.

<sup>116</sup> Chadwick, "Philo," 179.

## Chapter II: Emanation and *ex nihilo*

### Section 2.1: Plotinus

Imagine a small glowing mass serving as center to a transparent sphere. . . . The single light of that small center illuminates the whole field. . . . If someone should take out the corporeal mass, but preserve the power of the light, would you then speak of where the light was? Or would it not be everywhere, distributed in and over the entire sphere? No longer can you say through *dianoia* where it was first located, and no longer can you say whence and how it came. You will be brought into perplexity and wonderment.<sup>117</sup>

It was here. Yet no; it was beyond!<sup>118</sup>

The metaphor above attempts to describe how the one is present to all and yet remains unified, simple, and self-sufficient, beyond the many things that partake of its radiant bounty. For Plotinus the first principle is unequivocally beyond being, the cause of all being, but not a being itself. And even saying that the one is “not a being itself,” shows how language fails, for the reflexive pronoun “itself,” cannot help but connote substantiality. Removing the “corporeal mass” corresponds to removing the categories of being from our conception of the one. For even the name “one” suggests that it is something, some one thing; and even the expression “beyond being” uses the spatial categories of the material world. The idea is not to remove the mass to some place outside the sphere, but to remove it all together while still it shines. The one is both everywhere and nowhere, here and beyond. Plotinus laments: “We find ourselves in *aporia* [ἀπορία], in agony over how to speak. We speak about the unsayable.”<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.4.7, translated in Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*, 18.

<sup>118</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.8, translated in Stephen McKenna, 389.

<sup>119</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.5.6, translated in Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 16.

The Platonic roots of this *aporia* lie in *Parmenides* and the tradition of commentaries upon it. Two theses feature in the dialogue: (1) that the one is one, and (2) that the one *is*.<sup>120</sup> The irreconcilability of being and being-one generates a series of paradoxes. For whatever is simply one cannot have existence added to it, and whatever exists must be more than one. If the one *is*, then by possessing being it has become multiple (one + being); and if the one is truly one, it can neither exist nor even have the name “one” added to it. Indeed, it turns out nothing at all can be said about the one in itself. Yet all things can be said about the one in relation to others, for all things must partake of oneness in order to be single individuals, and all those things’ individual qualities must partake of oneness for the same reason. Thus all things and nothing can be said of the one—all things in its relation to others, and nothing in itself (not even that).<sup>121</sup> While some think Plato intended the mental gymnastics of the dialogue merely as an exercise in discursive reason (*dianoia* [διάνοια]), the Middle Platonic tradition began to treat its gnomic utterances as sacred text.<sup>122</sup> Plotinus finds in them the means to a contemplation (*theoria*) leading to union with the one (*henosis* [ἕνωσις]). Indeed, the

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<sup>120</sup> *Parmenides*, 137B-144E.

<sup>121</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 39.

<sup>122</sup> Alcinoüs, for example, thought the dialogue was an exercise in dialectical logic, see Louth, *Denys*, 82. Proclus went to the trouble of refuting such a position in favor of the metaphysical interpretation in *Platonic Theology*, I.9. Let me briefly mention a few of the Middle Platonic figures to whom Plotinus is indebted: Moderatus was the first to have interpreted the *Parmenides* along Pythagorean lines, introducing three ones (beyond being; at the level of *nous*; and at the level of *psyche*) that were likely drawn from the first three hypotheses of the *Parmenides*. Thus, he is perhaps the first to suggest the ontological interpretation of the dialogue (Carabine, *Unknown God*, 49-50; Dillon *Middle Platonists*, 344-351). More generally, Celsus (and perhaps Speusippus, see n.33) anticipates a God that transcends being and says God cannot be known by the intellect but by an “ineffable way” (Carabine, *op. cit.*, 60-70; Dillon, *op. cit.*, 400, 11-22). Numenius makes the first reference to God being unknowable, but still conceives of the first principle as supreme intellect and absolute being (Carabine, *op. cit.*, 98; Dillon, *op. cit.*, 361-378).

fruits of deep reflection on these paradoxes help build the Neoplatonic edifice, and are subsequently passed on to Christianity.

From the first three hypotheses of *Parmenides* (the two above plus a third), Plotinus derives the three hypostases of his metaphysics, which in this regard he calls the one, the one-many, and the one-and-many, but more commonly refers to as the one (*to hen* [το ἓν]), intellect (*nous* [νοῦς]), and soul (*psyche* [ψυχή]).<sup>123</sup> Plotinus brings together in his hypostases three notions of god: (1) Plato's good beyond being, (2) Aristotle's intellect or self-thinking thought, and (3) the Stoics' world soul (*anima mundi*).<sup>124</sup> This higher-register ontological interpretation of the text is reminiscent of the method of allegory we encountered in Philo, Clement, and Origen.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, it serves a similar purpose, moving the soul from discursive reason (*dianoia*) to contemplation (*theoria*) of higher truths.

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<sup>123</sup> *Enneads*, V.1.8. In this section Plotinus also makes reference to Plato's *Second Letter* as pointing to his three hypostases or three ones: "Related to the King of All are all things, and for his sake they are, and of all things fair he is the cause. And related to the Second are the second things and related to the Third the third" (312E). Recall also Justin Martyr's reference to this same passage as anticipating the Holy Trinity, see n.103. While on the topic of Plato's letters, it is worth mentioning two other details Plotinus may have adduced to support his metaphysics. The *Sixth Letter* contains a reference to a god who is the ruler of the universe and to another, his father, who is thus above him (323D). Like the interpretation of *Timaeus* 28C that considers the father and the maker of the universe as two separate entities, this reference could be used to elevate a god above the artificer, or the one above *nous*. And finally, the famous *Seventh Letter* passage (mentioned in section 1.1) could be used in support of the Plotinian *henosis*, or ineffable union with the one; see Merlan, "Greek Philosophy," 30, and Carabine, *Unknown God*, 107, 132.

<sup>124</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 50.

<sup>125</sup> Like Philo and Clement, Plotinus hails from Alexandria, and was thus bathed in the same cultural and philosophical milieu in which his predecessors had thought. Though difficult to prove direct dependence, some similarities in their thought may be due to this shared marketplace of ideas. See Carabine, *Unknown God*, 221.

The name “one” tries to points toward the first principle’s utter simplicity and unity beyond all duality. But as shown above, the one’s nature turns back on the namer, undercutting the best efforts to speak about it. Indeed, it is in describing this aporetic unsayability that Plotinus bestows the word “apophatic” to the tradition.<sup>126</sup> When considering the one, we must read everywhere “so to speak” (*hoion* [οἷον]), for ultimately it is not just “difficult to know” as in *Timaeus*, but “unknowable,” and therefore truly “ineffable.”<sup>127</sup> Intellect tells us that the one *exists*, but we must not seek to *define* it, for it cannot be thought of as having definition or limit.<sup>128</sup> This is reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian position that one can know *that* God is but not *what* God is. It also anticipates Gregory of Nyssa’s notion of God as unlimited and boundless. When speaking of the highest principle, it is therefore safer to use negative predicates, which Plotinus indicates in his idiosyncratic reading of *Sophist*.

The Eleatic Stranger asks rhetorically: shall we let ourselves be persuaded that true being neither moves, nor lives, nor thinks?<sup>129</sup> No, that would be a shocking admission to make, answers Theaetetus. Recall that true being is another name for intellect (*nous*, realm of the forms), while the one is beyond being. While Plotinus accepts the Stranger’s imputation concerning intellect (indeed this is the source of the triad being-living-thinking, which becomes crucial for Neoplatonists), he concludes that the literal description must apply to the one, that it neither moves, nor lives, nor thinks:

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<sup>126</sup> *Enneads* V.5.6; Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 51.

<sup>127</sup> *Enneads*, VI.8.13 (*hoion*); V.3.12 (unknowable); V.3.13 (ineffable).

<sup>128</sup> *Enneads* V.5.6.

<sup>129</sup> *Sophist*, 248E-249A.

it is immobile, un-living, unthinking.<sup>130</sup> But lest the ultimate negation of the one leave us “in sheer dread of holding to nothingness,”<sup>131</sup> the other name for the one—the good—reminds us that the highest principle is not mere negation. Rather it is something hyper-positive, so positive that it is both *arche* [ἀρχή] and *telos* [τέλος] of existence. Its divine bounty overflows, begetting the other hypostases and all of creation.

The hypostases are related to one another by procession (*proodos* [προοδος]) and return (*epistrophe* [ἐπιστροφή]). Intellect emanates from the one, and soul from intellect. Finally, embodied life and matter (the furthest extreme, on the verge of non-being) proceed from soul. This is not an account of the genesis of the universe, for Plotinus believes the universe is eternal. Rather this is how things eternally are. Equally eternal is the return of all things back to the good, in an upward movement of desire and adoration.<sup>132</sup> But for the philosophical seeker, upward is inward. Because the soul is kin with the divine, ascending to the one means going deeply inside oneself. Self-knowledge and knowledge of the ultimate are bound up with one another, and perhaps even coincide at their highest pitch.<sup>133</sup>

There are two “moments” in the timeless generation of the second hypostasis (intellect) from the one. It first comes forth as an indeterminate potentiality or unformed vitality, a ‘sight not yet seeing.’ Here it can be called ‘intelligible matter’ (Aristotelian)

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<sup>130</sup> Merlan, “Greek Philosophy,” 20f. See *Enneads*, VI.7.39. For the triad being-living-thinking describing intellect, see for example, I.6.7; III.6.6; V.4.2; V.6.6.

<sup>131</sup> *Enneads*, VI.9.3, translated in McKenna, 592.

<sup>132</sup> This leads to the paradoxical assertion that the procession *is* the return, to which we will return later.

<sup>133</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 39. I will consider this question more closely below.

or 'indefinite dyad' (Platonic). In a second moment, it turns back in contemplation of the one, and is thus informed and filled with content, becoming intellect and being. It cannot wholly receive the one in its pure unity but divides it into many, constituting itself as a unity-in-multiplicity.<sup>134</sup> This rich and complex whole-of-parts is Plato's realm of forms, true being, the one-many. But in contrast to Plato's sometimes statuesque portrayal of the domain beyond change and decay, Plotinus offers this vivid image of the unity-in-diversity of *nous*: "It might be likened to a living sphere teeming with varied color and pattern, to a globe of faces radiant with faces all living."<sup>135</sup> The constant contemplative activity of the self-thinking thought is an interpenetrating and holographic community of living minds:<sup>136</sup>

Every being is lucid to every other, in breadth and depth, light is transparent to light. Each, There, has everything in itself and sees all things in every other, for all are everywhere and each and every one is all. . . . The sun, There, is all the stars, and every star, again, is all the stars and the sun. While some one manner of being is dominant in each, all are mirrored in every other.<sup>137</sup>

As the multifaceted jewel of intellect shimmers in its contemplation of the one, the third hypostasis, soul, spontaneously springs forth, contemplating intellect in turn, and thereby begetting and acting upon the material world.<sup>138</sup> Soul is the one-and-many,

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<sup>134</sup> *Enneads*, V.3.11; VI.7.15; A.H. Armstrong, "Plotinus," 241.

<sup>135</sup> *Enneads*, VI.7.15, translated in McKenna 551, translation altered.

<sup>136</sup> For forms as living mind, see *Enneads*, VI.7.9; V.9.8.

<sup>137</sup> *Enneads*, V.8.4. Plotinus has applied Aristotelian psychology to ontology, thus innovating a solution as to how in its diversity, intellect stays a unity: the mind is what it thinks. See *De Anima* III.4, 429B-430A; Armstrong, "Plotinus," 248.

<sup>138</sup> As mentioned in n.110, Origen presents a similar contemplative hierarchy which is perhaps connected to their shared teacher, Ammonius Saccas. This positive account of the procession of hypostases is in tension in the Plotinian opus with another explanation in terms of *tolma*, acts of illegitimate self-assertion on the part of the soul and the indefinite dyad which spur procession. Plotinus does not explicitly try to harmonize these two approaches. See Armstrong, "Plotinus," 242, 251; *Enneads*, V.1.1; III.7.11

Matter itself is considered utter negativity, darkness, the absolute limit at the opposite end of the spectrum from the one. As emanation descends, there is less and less goodness, unity, and reality, until

and with it enters time, characterized by a certain agitation and desire for movement, a desire not to have everything at once but in succession. This is how Plotinus understands Plato's famous characterization of time as the moving image of eternity; it is the one in succession, the one *as many*.<sup>139</sup> Soul forms, orders, and governs the material world according to the patterns it receives from intellect, creating harmony out of tensions and contrasts. It does so not from the outside like a doctor, but from the inside like nature.<sup>140</sup> However, this immanent vital force is not contained or confined by the cosmos, but rather contains it, like the sea encompasses a net:

The cosmos is like a net which takes all its life, as far as ever it stretches, from being wet in the water, and has no act of its own; the sea rolls away and the net with it, precisely to the full of its scope, for no mesh of it can strain beyond its set place: the soul is of so far-reaching a nature—a thing unbounded—as to embrace the entire body of the All in the one extension; so far as the universe extends, there soul is.<sup>141</sup>

The three hypostases are a hierarchical<sup>142</sup> distinction in unity, with the intellect and the one always being present to soul and acting upon it, while soul acts upon the sensate realm. The philosopher realizes this eternal presence and action through inward reflection, initiating the return or turning-back (*epistrophe*) toward the one.<sup>143</sup>

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the stream sputters to a stop, reaching a quasi-existence in matter. Plotinus likens the last and lowest forms of bodies to reflections in an invisible and formless mirror; see *Enneads* III.6.13-14.

<sup>139</sup> Armstrong, "Plotinus," 251; *Timaeus* 37D.

<sup>140</sup> *Enneads*, IV.4.11, paraphrase.

<sup>141</sup> *Enneads* IV.3.9, translated in McKenna.

<sup>142</sup> As well will see in section 3.3, it is Dionysius that first employs the word "hierarchy" to refer to this sort of vertical order, giving us its modern sense.

<sup>143</sup> Armstrong, "Plotinus," 250.

The return is a homecoming, which is possible Plotinus believes, because the soul is not fully descended.<sup>144</sup> The highest part of the soul is still in contact with its divine origin.<sup>145</sup> “You must close your eyes and awake to another vision within you, the birthright of all, but which few turn to use.”<sup>146</sup> The road to this reunion follows the familiar steps of moral purification, intellectual purification, and contemplation (*theoria*), but with Plotinus’ own distinctive emphases.<sup>147</sup> Purification (*catharsis* [κάθαρσις]) is achieved through *aphairesis*, a process of taking away or abstraction. Like Plato before him, and Dionysius and Eckhart after, Plotinus uses the image of a statue being chiseled to perfection:

Withdraw into yourself and look. And if you do not find yourself beautiful yet, act as does the creator of a statue that is to be made beautiful: he cuts away here, he smooths there, he makes this line lighter, this other purer, until a lovely face has grown upon his work. So do you also: cut away all that is excessive, straighten all that is crooked, bring light to all that is overcast, labor to make all one glow of beauty and never cease chiseling your statue, until there shall shine out on you from it the godlike splendor of virtue, until you shall see the perfect goodness surely established in the stainless shrine.<sup>148</sup>

Everything that is alien to the soul’s true nature must be removed, such as the bodily passions and worldly concerns.<sup>149</sup> The seeker abstracts from the things of this world, rising as Diotima counseled from beautiful things toward beauty itself. The *kosmos* [κόσμος] of the cosmos, its order and beauty, intimates its divinity and draws the soul

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<sup>144</sup> This doctrine will concern us again in section 3.1 when we consider Iamblichus’ contestation of it against Porphyry.

<sup>145</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 128. *Enneads*, III.8.5. Origen propounds a similar idea, which again makes one wonder whether this was a doctrine held by their common teacher, Ammonius Saccas.

<sup>146</sup> *Enneads*, I.6.8, McKenna translation altered.

<sup>147</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 40-41.

<sup>148</sup> *Enneads*, I.6.9.

<sup>149</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 132-135.

upward in contemplation.<sup>150</sup> The mind becomes purified, simplified, and thus more capable of understanding the one by the increasing similarity of their natures.<sup>151</sup>

Plotinus insists that purification of the mind is inseparable from moral and religious purification, embracing philosophy as a way of life that transcends the mind alone.

Ultimately, the goal is a “presence superior to knowledge,” but the only way “beyond knowing” is through the intellect.<sup>152</sup> What in part allows a final vision of the good is intellect without content rather than the abandonment of reason.<sup>153</sup> Exercises in mental abstraction and concentration prepare and empty the mind, such as the glowing sphere metaphor which opened this section, or the sequence of cube, line, point... imagined in succession toward an inconceivable simplicity.<sup>154</sup> In perfect contemplation of *nous*, thought thinks itself, but even this duality must be overcome.

The soul’s powers alone can take it no further. At this point it must not chase after the one, “but wait tranquilly for its appearance, as the eye waits on the rising of the sun.”<sup>155</sup> The final step beyond *nous* to the one is a sudden (*exaiphnes*), coming upon the soul.<sup>156</sup> No longer is thought just thinking itself, but instead there is a complete

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<sup>150</sup> Armstrong, “Plotinus,” 232. There is a distinct valuation of the beauty of art that distinguishes Plotinus from Plato.

<sup>151</sup> According to the maxim that ‘like knows like.’

<sup>152</sup> *Enneads* VI.9.4; Dionysius will assert the same, in contrast to someone like Bonaventure for whom love, rather than thought, is the faculty of divine union.

<sup>153</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 141.

<sup>154</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 44. We saw a similar method in Clement and in Middle Platonists like Alcinous. See n.113 and Carabine, *Unknown God*, 71-83.

<sup>155</sup> *Enneads*, V.5.8.

<sup>156</sup> For *exaiphnes*: *Enneads*, VI.7.34; VI.7.36; V.3.17; V.5.3; V.5.7. However, because the one is totally impassive, the one has no concern for the soul who seeks it, so there can be no doctrine of grace in the Christian sense; see Louth, *Origins*, 50.

fusion of subject and object, a pure thought without a thinker, a pure act without an actor. In the moment of union, the soul no longer knows anything, not itself, nor even that it is in union with the one, so effaced are all distinctions. In ecstasy one passes out of oneself and into the one.<sup>157</sup>

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The following passage describes the activity of intellect in turning back (*epistrophe*) to the one in an act of love. In achieving union (*henosis*), the individual shares in this process, indeed precisely becomes indistinguishable from this process. A close reading will allow us to delve deeper into the paradigm of emanation as procession (*prodos*) and return (*epistrophe*):

Intellect has one power for thinking, by which it looks at its own contents, and one by which it sees that which is above it by a kind of intuitive reception, by which it first simply saw and afterwards, as it saw, acquired intellect and is one. The first is the contemplation of intellect in its right mind, the second is intellect in love. When it goes out of its mind, being drunk with the nectar, it falls in love and is simplified into a happy fullness; and drunkenness like this is better for it than sobriety. But is its vision partial, now of one thing and now of another? No; the course of the exposition presents these states as [successive] happenings, but intellect always has thought and always has this state which is not thought but looking at him in a different way. In seeing him it possesses the things which it produces and is conscious at the same time of their production and their presence within it. Seeing them is what is called thinking, but it sees him at the same time by the power which makes it able to think.<sup>158</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> *Enneads*, VI.9.3, 11; Carabine, *Unknown God*, 142.

<sup>158</sup> *Enneads*, VI.7.35: “Καὶ τὸν νοῦν τοίνυν τὴν μὲν ἔχειν δύναμιν εἰς τὸ νοεῖν, ἣ τὰ ἐν αὐτῷ βλέπει, τὴν δέ, ἣ τὰ ἐπέκεινα αὐτοῦ ἐπιβολῆ τινι καὶ παραδοχῇ, καθ’ ἣν καὶ πρότερον ἑώρα μόνον καὶ ὁρῶν ὕστερον καὶ νοῦν ἔσχε καὶ ἔν ἐστι. Καὶ ἔστιν ἐκείνη μὲν ἡ θεὰ νοῦ ἔμφρονος, αὕτη δὲ νοῦς ἐρῶν, ὅταν ἄφρων γένηται μεθυσθεὶς τοῦ νέκταρος· τότε ἐρῶν γίνεται ἀπλωθεὶς εἰς εὐπάθειαν τῷ κόρῳ· καὶ ἔστιν αὐτῷ μεθεῖν βέλτιον ἢ σεμνοτέρῳ εἶναι τοιαύτης μέθης. Παρὰ μέρος δὲ ὁ νοῦς ἐκεῖνος ἄλλα, τὰ δὲ ἄλλοτε ἄλλα ὁρᾷ; Ἡ οὖν ὁ δὲ λόγος διδάσκων γινόμενα ποιεῖ, τὸ δὲ ἔχει τὸ νοεῖν ἀεὶ, ἔχει δὲ καὶ τὸ μὴ νοεῖν, ἀλλὰ ἄλλως ἐκεῖνον βλέπειν” (translated in Armstrong, “Plotinus,” 262). Armstrong uses this passage to argue that “the mysticism of Plotinus is not ‘monistic’ but ‘theistic’ . . . It is a mysticism in which the soul seeks to attain union with the Absolute of which the best earthly analogy is the union of lovers, not a mysticism in which the soul seeks to realize itself as the Absolute” (263).

In this passage Plotinus' language begins to perform the very event he is trying to describe. The text takes on in form what is being conveyed in content. This content is the paradoxical nature of emanation, which is simultaneously—not successively—a procession and return. This paradox poses difficulties both on the level of language and on the level of understanding. Language by nature is successive, and thus must contort itself to convey such content. The related difficulty is to conceive of causality non-temporally (imagine an eternal foot that is the cause of an eternal footprint without being temporally prior to it in any way). The purpose here is not to force the paradox to fit into language and thus comprehension, but to see how Plotinus uses language creatively to leave the paradox intact, rather than simply remaining silent. First we will see how far language and intellect “in its right mind” can analyze this passage, and then we will consider how language “in love” transcends itself. This is going to tie our brains in a knot, so please read slowly.<sup>159</sup>

Intellect has a double gaze, inward and upward, represented here by its two powers: “Intellect has one power for thinking, by which it looks at its own contents, and one by which it sees that which is above it by a kind of intuitive reception.” The first power is that of self-reflexivity, self-thinking thought, by which it takes itself as the content of its thinking and sees itself. The second power is an “intuitive reception” by which it sees “that which is above it,” and as it sees, acquires intellect, thus becoming itself. This circular, self-causality is the first aspect of the paradox: we begin with

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<sup>159</sup> This approach is indebted to Sells, *Mystical Languages*.

intellect, which by gazing above itself, becomes intellect.<sup>160</sup> One possible resolution would be to employ the terms used earlier: From the one springs the indefinite dyad, which then becomes intellect in its upward contemplation of its source. But this just reifies the temporal sequence we are trying to think past. Plotinus does not force the paradox into succession (one, indefinite dyad, intellect), but instead invokes self-causality, beginning from intellect and ending with the production of intellect. This circularity mirrors the structure of self-thinking thought.

The paradox of self-causality is related to the problem of deriving the many from the one: “How can the variety of things come from the one, which is simple and which shows, in its identity, no diversity and no duality?”<sup>161</sup> As first and highest principle, the one is the only source from which intellect can emerge. But the one’s absolute simplicity precludes any division within itself. So where did intellect come from? We are told that it is by gazing upward that it acquires intellect, becoming itself. Like the eternal footprint, intellect is eternally gazing upward, which is what makes it what it is, namely self-reflexive thought, an eternal gazing inward. We know that the one is a kind of pure act without an actor; and we know that intellect is an image of the one, the one-many,

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<sup>160</sup> While Plotinus does not explicitly address the issue of self-causality it is implicitly present throughout his work. Porphyry is the first to explicitly thematize the self-causing nature of the second principle (in *History of Philosophy*), and Iamblichus takes it up again, the notion eventually becoming ubiquitous throughout the entire metaphysical hierarchy: “it is a commonplace of Neoplatonic doctrine that spiritual principles, although causally dependent upon their priors, are to some extent self-produced” Stephen Gersh, *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An Investigation of the Prehistory and Evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian Tradition*, 49-54. This problem seems to be what prompts Porphyry to his unique innovation upon Plotinus, as we will examine below.

<sup>161</sup> *Enneads* V.2.1, translated in H.A. Wolfson, “Identification of Ex Nihilo with Emanation in Gregory of Nyssa,” 56.

whose nature is self-contemplation. The trick is to see how the contemplation of “that which is above it” is a quasi-self-contemplation because it culminates in a pure act of oneness in which the intellect as contemplator is effaced. If the intellect becomes oneness, and oneness is the object of contemplation, then it approaches a kind of self-contemplation at the moment of union, of which intellect’s proper self-reflexivity is the image. It is in the act of turning back to the one that the intellect becomes itself, thereby engendering itself as self-reflexivity in the act of proto-reflexivity that was the turning back to the one from which it emerged. Thus the initial turning back (*epistrophe*) is what constitutes the procession (*prodos*). The existence of intellect is imagined as spontaneous overflow which in no way lessens the one. It is self-caused in the act of contemplative reflection, which is thereby split into contemplation of its source and self-reflection.

This splitting of the upward and inward gazes is the simultaneous procession and return. Contemplation of the one culminates in oneness (return), but at the same time, this culmination in oneness is the original, of which self-reflexivity is the image (procession). It is in this sense that the intellect is both self-causing, leaving the one unperturbed in its transcendence, and yet dependent on the one. It is the eternal achieving of oneness in the upward gaze (return) that provides the archetype of which the self-reflexive inward gaze is the image (procession). In this way, the simultaneity of procession and return is inherent to the very structure of the hypostases themselves. There is a kind of holographic patterning in which the relation of the intellect to the one is recapitulated within intellect itself, thereby giving rise to soul in an analogous manner.

This does not mean that emanation is automatic in a way that would make it unfree or inferior to an intended act of creation.<sup>162</sup> In fact for Plotinus, the will and the being of the divine are identical: “He is as he willed himself to be.”<sup>163</sup> This is the self-causality whose image is then reflected in the intellect. Because the one is the good, its will and being incline toward goodness, which is the abundant overflow of emanation. So it is only natural that emanation is stitched into the fabric of the hypostases themselves. Emanation is the ontological structure of goodness, in both the subjective and objective senses of the genitive: the good’s ontology is best described as emanation, and that structure shows qualities of goodness.

Turning back to the text: while the first power (inward gaze) is likened to thinking, the second power (upward gaze) is likened to love. In this act of love, the lover is joined to the beloved unto the brink of indistinction: pure love without a lover or beloved. Plotinus uses the image of drunkenness to portray this state beyond logic, beyond right-mindedness, beyond the normal subject-object divide. In the upward gaze, “it” is “simplified into a happy fullness,” a kind of pure presence. At what does the intellect gaze, when it gazes above itself with its second power? Presumably the one, but to say so is to no sooner reify it as an object of sight and thought, which Plotinus is trying to avoid—notice he never says ‘the one’ (*to hen*), but uses pronouns. In gazing above itself, intellect loses itself in the pure act of love; itself and its beloved

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<sup>162</sup> Armstrong, “Plotinus,” 240.

<sup>163</sup> *Enneads*, VI.8.13. Here too we sense the paradox and circularity that is created when we conceive the eternal in temporal terms.

become one, and it thereby acquires unity and is filled with content. What is this content? It can be nothing other than the one, the object of its contemplation, except that the one is not an object, and in contemplating it, the intellect goes out of itself in ecstasy. So rather, the content is the oneness achieved, the pure act without an actor, of which self-reflexive thought is the image. The intellect is caught up in this pure act of love, becoming the oneness it contemplates (“it is simplified into a happy fullness”). The intellect both is and is not the one. It is an image of the oneness in which it partakes.

But recall, that it is of the utmost importance to Plotinus that the one transcend the intellect. This is the crux of the paradox: the cause of intellect must transcend intellect, but it is only in relating to its transcendent cause that intellect becomes intellect, which relation at its highest pitch is said to efface the difference between seer and seen, between intellect and its cause. Thus intellect becomes the one—but this could not be. Neither could it be logically (according to the first power), for the cause of intellect necessarily transcends intellect; nor could it be ‘erotically’ (according to the second power), for at the point beyond subject-object dualism, it is not permissible to say that the subject becomes the object, for these are the very terms that were surpassed. The intellect does not become the one *as* intellect, rather it goes out of itself in the pure act of oneness. The intellect is eternally becoming oneness in the upward gaze, which act provides the content for the inward gaze in which it thinks itself. As self-reflexive thought, it is of the nature of the intellect to contemplate itself, and it attains this nature in contemplating the one, which it becomes in the pure act of oneness. The intellect both is and is not the one.

Turning back to the text: Plotinus asks if intellect's vision is partial, "now of one thing, now of another?" This question corresponds both to intellect's double gaze but also crucially, to the duality that is being transcended in the process. Plotinus states that in presentation these things are successive, but in reality the two gazes are simultaneous. The intellect is "the eternal striver and eternally the attainer," it is "always desiring and always attaining its desire."<sup>164</sup> It is eternally *striving* after the one in unbroken contemplation of its source, while it is eternally *attaining* self-reflexive knowledge as image of the one. But it is simultaneously and reciprocally *attaining* oneness in contemplation, while eternally *striving* in self-reflexive thought. On the one hand, intellect in its right mind is the attainer because it can seize the object of its contemplation, i.e. itself, while intellect in love reaches toward the pure act and thus is eternal striving. But on the other hand, the *henosis* beyond duality is the attainment, while the intellect's self-reflexivity is eternal striving.

This analysis and piling up of the layers of reflexivity, reciprocity, and simultaneity are meant to elucidate the paradox of procession and return, as far as intellect in its right mind is able. But the content of the paradox comes to inhabit the form of Plotinus' language as well. While the first half of the passage corresponds to "intellect in its right mind," the second half will demonstrate intellect drunk and in love. Let's examine the second portion of the passage, first in the original Armstrong translation, and then consider the ambiguity as to direct object versus reflexive pronoun

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<sup>164</sup> *Enneads*, III.8.11, translated in McKenna.

in the original Greek (the words rendered here as “him”). For convenience I have numbered the sentences:

(1) intellect always has thought and always has this state which is not thought but looking at **him** in a different way. (2) In seeing **him** it possesses the things which it produces and is conscious at the same time of their production and their presence within it. (3) Seeing them is what is called thinking, but it sees **him** at the same time by the power which makes it able to think.

Rendered “him,” the pronoun is a direct object and seems to refer to the divine one, and indeed we can read this passage as a recapitulation of the intellect’s two gazes. I paraphrase sentence by sentence: (1) The intellect has reflexive-thought and it has the upward gaze toward the one. (2) In seeing the one it comes into its own as self-reflexive thought, consciously possessing what it produces. (3) The inward gaze is self-reflexive thought, but the simultaneous upward gaze to the one is what allows self-reflexive thought.

Armstrong may have used “him” to lessen the ambiguity in the original, but as we shall see, that ambiguity adds further levels of meaning. Now here is the second portion of the passage again, this time indicating the ambiguity in the original Greek of direct object versus reflexive pronoun with parentheses:<sup>165</sup>

(1) intellect always has thought and always has this state which is not thought but looking at **it(self)** in a different way. (2) In seeing **it(self)** it possesses the things which it produces and is conscious at the same time of their production and their presence within it. (3) Seeing them is what is called thinking, but it sees **it(self)** at the same time by the power which makes it able to think.

Reading “itself,” the new paraphrase of sentence (1) would run: the intellect has reflexive-thought and it has the upward gaze in which, insofar as it becomes oneness, is

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<sup>165</sup> Here I have employed Michael Sells’ approach, though he does not treat this passage. See *Mystical Languages*, especially 14-33.

a looking at itself in a different way (different than its self-reflexivity). By allowing this reading to stand alongside the other, there is a fusion of identity between the intellect and the one at the site of the ambiguous pronoun. This fusion of identity at the semantic level performs the ecstatic oneness achieved at the moment of union, precisely what is being described here. In an upward gaze toward the one, intellect looks at itself insofar as it passes into oneness.

In sentence (2), “in seeing it(self),” can refer to three different semantic situations: (a) the one sees itself and thus becomes intellect; (b) intellect sees the one and thus becomes intellect proper; (c) intellect sees itself and engages in self-reflexive thought. By allowing all three readings to stand alongside one another, we achieve a triply split reference which semantically mirrors the process of emanation. Generally, the proliferation of referents and readings is analogous to the overflow. But more precisely, the sequence (a), (b), (c), is the downward procession. We know that there is a fecundity at the heart of the one by which it overflows. Since this overflow comes *from* the one, it is in some way *of* the one; this one-like overflow turns back toward its source and is filled by the same perpetual overflow that it is; i.e. it is filled by itself.<sup>166</sup> And though it is technically incorrect to say (a), “the one sees itself,” this must in some way be what is going on if there is only one first principle. In any case, the pure act of sight that is the one is dynamic rather than Parmenidean. Thus we could rephrase (a) and lay out the whole sequence: (a) the fecundity of the one spills over as proto-intellect. Then (b), this

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<sup>166</sup> Sells calls this “the dilemma that the vessel is the content,” in *Mystical Languages*, 29.

intellect in turn sees the one, is filled, and becomes intellect proper. Then (c), intellect proper sees itself and thereby engages in self-reflexive thought. Thus the procession that can only be presented successively is semantically fused into a simultaneity.

For the original Armstrong translation, I paraphrased sentence (3) like this: The inward gaze is self-reflexive thought, but the simultaneous upward gaze to the one is what allows self-reflexive thought. The new paraphrase would run similarly: (3) The inward gaze is called thinking, but the intellect sees itself (i.e. thinks) because of the power which makes it able to think (i.e. the upward gaze). This does not change the meaning of the sentence drastically but it achieves a semantic fusion of the intellect's two gazes ("intellect sees itself" and "intellect sees him [the one]"). By fusing the two gazes, the very duality between intellect thinking and intellect in love, the duality between duality and oneness, is effaced.

This close reading has tried to show how Plotinus uses language to go beyond what language can express. In this we have reached a more conscious and concerted apophasis. But in the end, the seeker must "abandon words," and "go his way in silence."<sup>167</sup> Plotinus considers how the name "one" only designates partlessness and thus is a denial of multiplicity rather than any affirmation. He recalls the Pythagoreans, who under the same pressure, used

the symbol Apollo [Ἀπόλλων, *a-pollon*: not-many] with its apophasis of the many. If the one is to be taken positively as a name or thing, there would be more truth in silence. We speak it so that we can begin our search with that which signifies the most simple, ending with the apophasis of even that.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> *Enneads*, VI.8.19; VI.8.11.

<sup>168</sup> *Enneads*, V.5.6, translated in Sells, *Mystical Languages*, 17, translation altered.

Here Plotinus recognizes the symbolic nature of apophatic language, which may help explain why he and so many others have so much to say about what cannot be said. For Plotinus is also famous for his rich imagery and metaphor, as I tried to highlight earlier in the chapter. The apophatic language examined above can be considered a variety of metaphor, insofar as it says more than it means literally and points toward something it cannot say. Just as the semantic fusion of identity between intellect and the one performs the oneness of union that is beyond language, so too does the image of intellect as a sphere covered with living faces evoke something that is beyond imagery. I do not wish to insist too strongly here, but in this light, it seems only natural that apophasis and kataphasis go together. For ultimately the divine exceeds us, in the direction of plenitude and in the direction of emptiness, while still remaining present to and illuminating the world.

In the end, philosophy itself is not for Plotinus only a means of solving intellectual problems, it is also a method of prayer and a “charm.”<sup>169</sup> And while Plotinus does not leave us with formal religious practices, Iamblichus will integrate his philosophical system with the rites of theurgy, giving the performative dimension a new central role. But before following the Platonic lineage down that path, we jump ahead to Gregory of Nyssa, who like Plotinus conceives of God without limit.<sup>170</sup> Both

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<sup>169</sup> *Enneads*, V.3.17.

<sup>170</sup> Porphyry (234-305AD) and Iamblichus (245-325AD) predate Gregory (335-395AD), and as we shall consider, Porphyry likely influenced Gregory’s thought. However, Porphyry, though important in particular ways, is not central to our narrative. Thematic considerations have thus dictated the order of presentation. See Appendix for a timeline of the writers treated in this essay.

thinkers offer a new conception of divine boundlessness.<sup>171</sup> But in the image of the glowing sphere that opened this section, when Plotinus removes the limits of substance and position from the corporeal mass, he still imagines the one in terms of radiance and light. Drawing on the Judeo-Christian tradition traced thus far, Gregory will reverse this imagery, presenting the soul's ascent as a path of increasing darkness.

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<sup>171</sup> Generally speaking, infinity was an unsettling idea for the Greeks, who saw in its sprawling lack of form something negative rather than divine. If the forms constitute the realm of true being, that which does not admit of definition or form may seem the opposite of divine.

## Section 2.2: Council of Nicaea

Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα, πάντων ὁρατῶν τε καὶ ἀορατῶν ποιητὴν.  
Πιστεύομεν εἰς ἕνα Κύριον Ἰησοῦν Χριστόν, τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ Θεοῦ, γεννηθέντα ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς  
μονογενῆ, τοῦτέστιν ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ Πατρὸς, Θεὸν ἐκ Θεοῦ ἀληθινὸν, γεννηθέντα, οὐ ποιηθέντα,  
ὁμοούσιον τῷ Πατρί  
–opening of Nicene Creed

Before considering Gregory of Nyssa, let us look briefly at the First Council of Nicaea (325AD) to understand the Christian context in which Gregory found himself in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. As we saw at the end of section 1.3, the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* solidifies amongst the early Christian theologians of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century, partially in response to the Middle Platonists and Gnostics. However, some ambiguities persist and not until the First Council of Nicaea does the doctrine become unquestionably explicit in the context of the Arian controversy.<sup>172</sup> The 4<sup>th</sup> century Church Fathers stress a distinction that encapsulates the issues at hand: The world is created from nothing, while the Word is generated from God.<sup>173</sup> The first clause underlines the *ex nihilo* doctrine against the emanationist view that the world is generated *ex deo*, while the second clause rebuts the Arian view that the *logos* was created from nothing. Let's examine each in turn.

Recall that Origen propounded an *ex nihilo* doctrine but still claimed God knowable through contemplation of the *logos*—because the soul is made in its image. For later Christians this would too closely resemble both (1) the Middle Platonist

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<sup>172</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 73: “The [*ex nihilo*] doctrine was unknown to pagan philosophy, and emerged only slowly and uncertainly in early Christian theology. Even when it is verbally asserted, there can still be uncertainty as to whether a strict doctrine of creation out of nothing is implied. With Athanasius and Arius there is no doubt, for they enumerate the alternatives and reject them.”

<sup>173</sup> Wolfson, “Identification,” 53.

conception of the forms as an intermediate zone between God and human, and (2) the Gnostic (and Greek) spark in the soul that makes it kin to the gods, mediating its ascent to the divine realm. Rather than between sensible and intelligible, the 4<sup>th</sup> century Church Fathers teach that the fundamental divide in the cosmos is between creature and creator. With the full articulation of *creatio ex nihilo*, the human is created out of nothing by God, upon whom it depends wholly for its existence. Creature and creator are not related by kinship or continuity, but divided by an ontological rift, a fundamental disparity of being.<sup>174</sup>

Upon this much, the two sides of the Arian controversy agree. Their representatives are Arius and Athanasius. Both sides oppose Platonic tendencies toward mystical union.<sup>175</sup> With a view to guarding the absolute ontological transcendence of God, Arius emphasizes the ungenerate (*agennetos*) or unbegotten nature of the Father as opposed to the generate or begotten nature of the Son.<sup>176</sup> The Son's begottenness makes him foreign in essence (*ousia*) to the Father, truly distinct from him, and thus unable to know him.<sup>177</sup> But Arius wants to avoid the Gnostic tendency toward two Gods (which we saw a hint of in Justin), which he sees as tantamount to polytheism.<sup>178</sup> The Son's coeternity with the Father would imply the latter's divisibility, thus Arius doubles down on the ontological divide, making Christ a creature, albeit the first and most exalted of creation. God remains one, transcendentally

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<sup>174</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 75

<sup>175</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 76.

<sup>176</sup> Mortley, *Word to Silence II*, 128-59. Recall that the notion of *agennetos* was developed by Justin Martyr, see above p.39.

<sup>177</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 234.

<sup>178</sup> Charles Stang, "Negative Theology from Gregory of Nyssa to Dionysius the Areopagite," 163.

dissociated from creation, while Christ is formed *ex nihilo*, with a beginning in time and a distinct essence (*ousia*) from the Father.<sup>179</sup>

But for Athanasius, Arius' opponent and representative of what would become orthodox Nicene doctrine, this subordination of the Son threatens the unity of the Trinity. Rather, the Son is begotten by the Father from his own being, eternally, and therefore has no beginning.<sup>180</sup> Father and Son are coequal, consubstantial (*homoousios* [ὁμοούσιον]), and coeternal. The word *homoousios* originates in the context of Gnostic emanation, reminding us that emanation has not been rejected all together, but relegated to the sphere of the Trinity.<sup>181</sup> Thus contemplation (*theoria*), which depends on a continuity between divine and human, is no longer a means of divinization (*theopoiesis*). Athanasius, who began his career as an Origenist, rejects such a personal quest, asserting instead that collective redemption of humanity's fallen state comes only through the grace of the Incarnation.<sup>182</sup>

These debates forced the Christian tradition to clarify the relationship between the human and the divine, as well as between the divine persons, thereby distinguishing itself more fully from Platonism and Gnosticisms. And while Arius and Athanasius both had an anti-mystical streak, the Neo-Arian controversy which would embroil Gregory of Nyssa may have been adjudicating the acceptability of mysticism itself. Let us see how.

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<sup>179</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 234f.

<sup>180</sup> Wolfson, "Identification," 53.

<sup>181</sup> Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance*, 190–202. At the end of this section we will examine an interesting way in which emanation lives on in Gregory's thinking.

<sup>182</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 75-77.

### Section 2.3: Gregory of Nyssa

For, as the Samaritans, supposing the Deity to be compassed round by some circumspection of place, were rebuked by the words they heard, "you worship what you do not know," . . . so one might say to the new Samaritans, "In supposing the Deity to be limited by the absence of generation, as it were by some local limit, you worship what you do not know," doing service to him indeed as God, but not knowing that the infinity of God exceeds all the significance and comprehension that names furnish.<sup>183</sup>

Gregory of Nyssa, along with his fellow Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus, develops the position staked by Athanasius at the Council of Nicaea. The fundamental ontological divide is between the uncreated Trinity and the created world, the latter which encompasses both the phenomenal and intelligible realms.<sup>184</sup> Though Gregory inherited many Platonic elements like this one from Origen, he more rigorously applied the *ex nihilo* divide, insisting on God's unknowability.<sup>185</sup> The infinite God is invisible, incomprehensible, and unknowable, because he is beyond all sense, knowledge, and concept; he has no boundary.<sup>186</sup>

[God] cannot be grasped by any term, or any idea, or any other comprehension, remaining beyond the reach not only of the human but of the angelic and of all supramundane being, unthinkable, unutterable, above all expression in words.<sup>187</sup>

Do Christians worship nothing then? Gregory offers the familiar refrain: The creation implies a creator; we know *that* God exists but not *what* God is; effects point to the

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<sup>183</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium*, I.3 §5, translated in Moore & Wilson, 147.

<sup>184</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 78.

<sup>185</sup> Jean Daniélou notes how much Gregory inherits from Origen though he breaks from him as well, in *Platonisme et Théologie Mystique*, 144f.: "S'il le dépasse, il le prolonge aussi." In the end, Gregory shares the mystical ascent with Origen but does not give it primary or indispensable priority in Christian life.

<sup>186</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, I.46; II.162; II.236.

<sup>187</sup> *Contra Eunomium* I.683 (Jaeger), translated in Moore & Wilson, 99 [I.42], quoted in Carabine, *Unknown God*, 241.

existence of their cause, but not its nature.<sup>188</sup> God's activities (*energeiai* [ἐνέργεια]) are known, but God's essence (*ousia*) is not.<sup>189</sup>

The divine unknowability depends upon the divine infinity. Humans operate in dimensions and cannot understand that which is without limit (e.g. eternity).<sup>190</sup> Infinity is what escapes all the limitations of knowledge and naming. These limitations apply to the creature's nature, making it unable to attain to God's nature.<sup>191</sup> Furthermore, Gregory argues that the intellect cannot know the essential substance of *any* entity. For if one removes all the accidents from a thing (like shape, color, position...), there is nothing left to know. These categories are how one comprehends things through the senses. So Gregory asks, if the lower creation is unknowable in its *ousia*, how much more so the transcendent *ousia*?<sup>192</sup>

The Neo-Arians, represented by Aetius and his pupil Eunomius, assert that intellect can know the *ousia* of the father as unbegotten or ungenerate (*agennetos*). "Ungenerate" is said to denote God's very essence, not merely through privation, but as positive knowledge.<sup>193</sup> Eunomius argues that some names are not merely conventional but have a special status, for they bring out the very nature of a thing (*kata physis* [κατὰ φύσιν]).<sup>194</sup> At stake here is the original Arian issue of the subordination of the Son, and

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<sup>188</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 242f.

<sup>189</sup> *Contra Eunomium* III.v.183f. (Jaeger).

<sup>190</sup> Plotinus made a similar argument about the infinite nature of the one, though he showed some hesitation, reflecting the traditional Greek feelings around infinity.

<sup>191</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 239.

<sup>192</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, II.115-18, 95-96 (Karfikova); Carabine, *Unknown God*, 238f.

<sup>193</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 235.

<sup>194</sup> Mortley, *Word to Silence II*, 147f.

the question of the proximity of God. The controversy is sometimes presented with the Neo-Arians cast as kataphatic theologians claiming knowledge of the divine essence.<sup>195</sup> But what is a bit puzzling, and often noted, is that both parties are arguing for the transcendence of God. Knowing the divine essence as unbegotten delivers hardly any kataphatic content whatsoever, all but leaving the divine transcendence intact. As Charles Stang puts it: "Knowledge of the unbegotten God amounts to knowledge *that* the unbegotten God is unapproachably remote, incomparably other."<sup>196</sup> In fact, the Neo-Arians are not overly kataphatic but staunchly apophatic, and furthermore, anti-mystical for the same reasons. Their God is completely inaccessible, with no possibility of relationship or communion, not even of a paradoxical variety.

Gregory insists that such transcendental exile would limit the omnipotent God, whose nature is to be in relation to his creation. It is precisely because he is unlimited and without boundary that God pervades all things, omnipresent. Perhaps rather than insisting on the unknowability of God in opposition to the Neo-Arians' kataphasis, Gregory's position can be better understood as an attempt not to be outflanked by their radical apophasis. This appears to lead Gregory to some impossible views: we cannot know the God to whom we relate; the gulf separating creature and creator is kept only as it is crossed; that which is the most transcendent is the most immanent.<sup>197</sup> Gregory wants both distance and immediacy. He holds the dialectic in tension rather than

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<sup>195</sup> See for example Carabine, *Unknown God*, 235 and Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 141.

<sup>196</sup> Stang, "Negative Theology," 169.

<sup>197</sup> Stang, "Negative Theology," 167-69.

submitting to a flat apophaticism that merely negates. That which is beyond is not beyond in such a way that an extraordinary encounter is impossible:

Whatever be the nature of God, he is not to be apprehended by sense, and he transcends reason, though human thought, busying itself with curious inquiry, with such help of reason as it can command, stretches out its hand and just touches his unapproachable and sublime nature, being neither keen-sighted enough to see clearly what is invisible, nor yet so far withheld from approach as to be unable to catch some faint glimpse of what it seeks to know.<sup>198</sup>

It is for the sake of this faint glimpse, to keep the mystic approach to God open, that Gregory takes on the Neo-Arians, who would lock God away in the divine beyond.

Under Gregory's critique, the Neo-Arian notion of beyond reveals itself as a spatial idol, shedding light on the question of God as being versus God beyond-being. An interpretation like the Neo-Arian one is what Plotinus wants to forestall when he insists on the paradoxical nature of the one: it is beyond being but still intimately present with and sustaining all being things.<sup>199</sup> While for Plotinus, that which is beyond being is present to beings, for Gregory, that which is uncreated is present to creation. There is a vast difference for Gregory between created and uncreated *ousia*, as God alone possesses the fullness of being, in which humans only participate.<sup>200</sup> The need to stress God's presence in the world and his relation to creation mitigates against the beyond-being trope, whose role in Plotinian metaphysics seems to be fulfilled here by the created-uncreated distinction. In light of the Arian and Neo-Arian controversies,

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<sup>198</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, II.138 (Karfikova), translated in Stang, "Negative Theology," 170 [II, 264].

<sup>199</sup> It is unclear whether Gregory was influenced by Plotinus, though there are several thematic parallels between them, including knowledge of the divine existence but not the divine essence, and a method of *aphairesis* in the quest for the divine, see Carabine, *Unknown God*, 236, 255.

<sup>200</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.25.

designating God as beyond-being is too close to ungenerate, stretching the distance between Father and Son and thereby risking subordination.

It is for these reasons that the peculiar innovations of the Plotinian doctrine developed by Porphyry were so attractive to the Cappadocian Fathers.<sup>201</sup> In light of the problem of the derivation of multiplicity from oneness, Porphyry developed a position not unlike some of the notions offered in the close reading of Plotinus above. In attempting to solve the problem of the derivation of plurality from unity, Porphyry proposes to consider the one under two aspects: (1) in its full transcendence, and (2) in its creative role as the primary object of intellection (*proton noeton* [πρωτον νοητον]) for the second principle (intellect). Recall that when intellect looks back upward to the one, it is given content and becomes intellect proper. Porphyry says that under this second aspect, the one can be understood as infinitive being (*einai* [εἶναι]), because it gives content to the proto-intellect (which as indefinite dyad is considered a kind of vital potency or life), thus generating intellect proper, which is true being and substance (*ousia*). The one maintains a transcendent aspect, but under its second aspect as being, it is the first member of the intelligible triad: being, life, intellect.<sup>202</sup> This solution is attractive to the Cappadocians for at least three reasons: (1) it counters the Arian's extreme sense of the beyond while still maintaining the creator-creature divide and a certain transcendence for God; (2) it at the same time renders God present as the principle of being itself; (3) the triadic structure promises to accommodate Trinitarian

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<sup>201</sup> Sarah Klitenic and John Dillon, *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 34.

<sup>202</sup> Dillon, "Porphyry's Doctrine of the One," in *The Great Tradition*, esp. 361-64.

formulations. The dual-aspect of the highest principal as both being but also transcendent dovetails nicely with the essence-activities distinction coming from Philo through the early Christian theologians. This confluence of streams will have a rich future in the Dionysian synthesis.

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The block quote above regarding the “faint glimpse” of God, demonstrates Gregory’s threefold path, passing through sense, to reason, and finally to a brushing touch of “his inapproachable and sublime nature.” Gregory outlines the path in his *Life of Moses*, which follows in the allegorical tradition traced through Philo, Clement, and Origen.<sup>203</sup> Gregory assimilates the achievements and contrasts of his predecessors into a fully mature symbolic theology of dynamic tension. By combining the more apophatic approach of Philo and Clement with Origen’s optimism in the feasibility and transformative power of the ascent, Gregory offers a dialectical vision of the soul’s relation to its creator, figured in the life of Moses. The method of allegory itself can be seen as a rising above the sensible, literal letter of the text, toward its moral and conceptual lessons, finally to its spiritual meanings.

Gregory represents his three stages as the way of light (*phos* [φῶς]), the way of cloud (*nephele* [νεφέλη]), and the way darkness (*gnophos* [γνόφος]), imagery drawn from Moses’ journey.<sup>204</sup> The tripartite path is based on Origen—paralleling again

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<sup>203</sup> Gregory goes further than Origen, for whom the spiritual interpretation of the text was an interiorization of the sacraments, see Daniélou, *Origène*, 260.

<sup>204</sup> Light refers to the revelation of God at the burning bush, cloud to Moses’ first ascent of Sinai, and darkness to the second, in which Moses asks to see God’s glory.

Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs—but its increasing darkness is at odds with Origen, echoing Philo and Clement instead.<sup>205</sup> In the way of light, the soul must purify itself so as to restore its divine image, acknowledging that only God is worthy of the soul’s love.<sup>206</sup> In the way of cloud, the soul realizes the ultimate unreality of created things, while also seeing in their harmony a testament to the glory of the creator.<sup>207</sup> Gregory calls it, “the knowledge of the divine power which comes from the contemplation of reality.”<sup>208</sup> This second moment corresponds to the realm of Platonic *theoria*, the true being of the forms.<sup>209</sup> Because the soul was never divine, return to the intelligible realm does not result in deification and is not the end of the path.<sup>210</sup> This marks a crucial difference in Gregory from Plato and Origen: God’s unknowability means contemplation (*theoria*) must be transcended in the third moment, the way of union through love (*agape* [ἀγάπη], and in its ecstatic form, *eros* [ἔρως]).<sup>211</sup> The way of darkness passes into an awareness of the incomprehensibility of God—knowing one does not know—but also an elated experience of infinite desire in the face of God’s inexhaustibility, a paradoxical event of constant satiation without final satisfaction.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>205</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 80.

<sup>206</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 253.

<sup>207</sup> Recall that a similar ambiguity was present in Origen’s description of the second phase.

<sup>208</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.169, translated in Malherbe & Ferguson, 96f.

<sup>209</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 83.

<sup>210</sup> I. P. Sheldon-Williams, “The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from The Cappadocians to Maximus And Eriugena,” 453. Sheldon-Williams also explains how Gregory’s three phases correspond to the Three Heavens, to the third of which Paul was rapt, 448, 451.

<sup>211</sup> Daniélou, *Théologie Mystique*, 207.

<sup>212</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 85.

Jean Daniélou calls this constant progression Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis* [ἐπέκτασις], drawing the term from one of Gregory's favorite verses, Philippians 3:13: "straining toward what is still to come."<sup>213</sup> The event of the soul encountering the unlimited deity leads to the mystic moment Gregory defended earlier against the Neo-Arians: relating to the unknowable God in simultaneous intimacy and alterity, proximity and distance. Rather than saying that such an event simply transcends intellect and is thus rendered paradoxical, I wish to show how Gregory's contradictory statements are consistent with the inner dialectic of *epektasis*. This will reveal further aspects of Gregory's anthropology and ontology, demonstrating the coherence of his thought in light of an apophatic dialectic. Let's begin by examining his notion of the mirror of the soul, followed by *epektasis* itself, and finally its implications for the soul and the phenomenal world.

Scripture promises that the pure in heart will see God, but it also promises that none shall see God's face.<sup>214</sup> In Philonic fashion, Gregory first addresses this inconsistency by pointing to the essence-activities distinction.<sup>215</sup> But then he goes further, unsatisfied that an indirect knowledge of God through his powers truly fulfills the first promise. Rather, when the heart is purified, the soul sees the image of the divine nature in its own beauty. The soul was once a perfect image of the good, but the

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<sup>213</sup> Daniélou, *Théologie Mystique*, 291. Daniélou notes however that this term is only used in a mystic sense by Gregory once (298).

<sup>214</sup> Matthew 5:8; Exodus 33:20.

<sup>215</sup> *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, VI.1269-71.

fall tarnished that image.<sup>216</sup> The soul is a mirror that through polishing reacquires characteristics of the good and the beautiful. The divine is reflected in the soul's virtue.<sup>217</sup> By contemplating the divine image inside itself, the soul possesses in a created manner what God is in an uncreated manner.<sup>218</sup> Thus self-knowledge is a means to knowledge of God without suggesting any kinship between self and divine. God is ontologically discrete from the mirror of the soul, even though the mirror contains God's image. The soul cannot know God, but God can be present in the soul.<sup>219</sup> This metaphor begins to articulate Gregory's dialectical understanding of the relationship to the creator, providing a solution as to how God can be both transcendent and immanent.

In a way, this is an interiorization of the essence-activities distinction. God, unknowable in his essence, is knowable through his activities in the world *and* through his active presence in the soul. This is a definite step past Philo, but God's essence remains unseen. Has the promise to the pure of heart been fulfilled? Gregory takes the pursuit further in his symbolic account of the ascent of mount Sinai. Moses beseeches God to appear to him

not according to his capacity to partake, but according to God's true being. . . . The ardent lover [*eros*] of beauty, although receiving what is always visible as an image of what he desires, yet longs to be filled with the very stamp of that archetype: . . . to enjoy beauty not in mirrors and reflections, but face to face. The divine voice granted what was requested in what was denied, . . .

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<sup>216</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 245.

<sup>217</sup> *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, III.824.

<sup>218</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 89-90.

<sup>219</sup> This idea was already present in Athanasius, but perhaps because of his resistance to mysticism, he did not fully work it out as a solution to preserving God's transcendence while still allowing participation in him. See Louth, *Origins*, 77-78.

assented to the fulfillment of his desire, but did not promise any cessation or satiety of the desire.<sup>220</sup>

How does the divine grant the request by denying it? How is the perpetuity of desire the fulfillment of desire? The answer to these questions seems to be in an apophatic understanding of the divine *ousia*, which is the logical concurrent of the divine infinity.<sup>221</sup> If the divine is infinite, then any seeing of it which *terminates* would not be a true seeing of the divine *qua* infinite. Thus by denying fulfillment of the desire to see the divine, the vision of the divine as *unlimited* is granted: "Moses is filled with what he desires by having his desire remain unfulfilled."<sup>222</sup> Unfulfillment, rather than constituting a lack, is an infinite filling, just as the transcendent, rather than being unreachable, is omnipresent. Indeed, it was this boundlessness that was invoked in the argument against the Neo-Arians: "For nothing is divine that is conceived as being circumscribed, but it belongs to the Godhead to be in all places and to pervade all things, and not to be limited by anything."<sup>223</sup> This transformation in the notion of the divine infinity, which we first spied in Plotinus, marks both thinkers off from their predecessors. Origen's God was knowable and therefore finite, while those Middle Platonists who conceived of the highest principle as beyond being sometimes resembled the Neo-Arians. Instead, God is unknowable because unencompassable, and because

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<sup>220</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.230-32, translated in Malherbe & Ferguson, 114-15.

<sup>221</sup> Daniélou, *Théologie Mystique*, 292.

<sup>222</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.235.

<sup>223</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, I.3.5, translated in Moore & Wilson, 147. Compare Plotinus: "there is no attempt to circumscribe it: to seek to throw a line about that illimitable Nature would be folly, and anyone thinking to do so cuts himself off from any slightest and most momentary approach to its least vestige" (*Enneads*, V.5.6).

unencompassable, all-encompassing—the water we swim in.<sup>224</sup> And while there is no fixed boundary, there is a sharpened distinction between creature and creator.<sup>225</sup> But this allows for a heightened relation: Rather than at an infinite distance, the embrace of the Bridegroom is infinitely deep:

The first good is in its nature infinite, and so it follows of necessity that the participation in the enjoyment of it will be infinite also. . . . This search will never overtake its object, because its fund is as inexhaustible as the growth of that which participates in it is ceaseless.<sup>226</sup>

Just as the divine depths can never be plumbed, neither can the growth of the soul who does the plumbing. As the soul polishes its mirror, the divine image ingresses deeper and deeper, ceaselessly. This brings out a certain homology between the divine and the soul, suggesting the soul's own bottomlessness:

one may explore every divinely inspired word, and not find teaching about the divine nature, nor indeed about the essential existence of anything. Hence, we humans live in total ignorance, in the first place about ourselves, and then about everything else. Who is in a position to understand his own soul? Who knows its inner being?<sup>227</sup>

Indeed, it is precisely because the soul is made in God's image, asserts Gregory, that it cannot know itself.<sup>228</sup> Gregory's apophatic theology implies an apophatic anthropology, which instead of locking either away in transcendence actually deepens their relation.<sup>229</sup> It is in *epektasis* that the soul returns to its true nature, restores its fallen image, and from one point of view, arrives at its goal.<sup>230</sup> But that goal is the restoration of the image of

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<sup>224</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.236. Plotinus' image of the cosmos as a net in the sea of soul comes to mind.

<sup>225</sup> Catherine Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, 62.

<sup>226</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, I.291 (Jaeger), translated in Moore & Wilson, 62 [I.22], quoted in Carabine, *Unknown God*, 255f.

<sup>227</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, II.106-7, translated in Karfíkova, Douglass & Zachhuber, 83.

<sup>228</sup> *De hominis opificio*, XI.3-4; Carabine, *Unknown God*, 244.

<sup>229</sup> Bernard McGinn makes the same point about Eriugena in *Growth of Mysticism*, 105, and Charles Stang about Dionysius in *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite*, 156f.

<sup>230</sup> Daniélou, *Théologie Mystique*, 299.

divine infinity, which is reflected in the infinite motion of the purified soul: “the same thing is both a standing still and a moving.”<sup>231</sup> *Epektasis* does not result in knowledge, as there is no grasping, enclosing, or bounding the infinite.<sup>232</sup> Rather the infinite difference between creator and creature is understood as inexhaustible relation—the way of union in love.

Daniélou conceives of *epektasis* as a double movement of God into the soul, and the soul outward toward God, the roots of the word itself reflecting the inward (*epi*) and outward (*ek*) thrusts.<sup>233</sup> On one level this is the tension between God’s participible *energeiai* and imparticipable *ousia*. The soul wants to experience God not just in his powers but also in his infinite essence, which is why it can be satiated and not satiated simultaneously, says Daniélou. There is a certain similarity here between the two gazes of the intellect discussed in the last section.

With its upward gaze the Plotinian intellect is in love, looking ever toward the one beyond being, which remains transcendently distinct from it, and yet intimately present. With its inward gaze, intellect looks towards itself in an act of self-reflection that is an image of the oneness it contemplates with its upward gaze. Here we are not so far from Gregory’s way of union in love and the mirror of the soul reflecting the image of the divine. Both soul and intellect are images of the divine infinity they contemplate and strain toward upwardly; at the same time, by looking inward they can contemplate

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<sup>231</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.243, translated in Malherbe & Ferguson, 117.

<sup>232</sup> *Life of Moses*, II.236.

<sup>233</sup> Daniélou, *Théologie Mystique*, 295.

the image of that which is above them in an act of reflexivity. Recall in Plotinus that the intellect is “always desiring and always attaining its desire.”<sup>234</sup> We saw a double dialectic in which both the upward gaze and inward gaze could reciprocally be the attaining or the striving.<sup>235</sup> Likewise, in desiring the divine infinity, the soul will never cease from striving (imparticible *ousia*), and while looking into its mirror, it attains its desire by possessing its image (participable *energeiai*). At the same time, the soul attains the divine infinity *qua* infinite in *epektasis*, rendering its own growth, the polishing of the mirror, a ceaseless striving.

This double dialectic goes beyond the essence-activities distinction, which allowed a glimpse of God’s back by taking away the sight of his face. First, Gregory transposes this distinction onto the soul, allowing a glimpse of God’s image in the mirror while refusing a direct sightline. But second, Gregory grants to the pure of heart a vision of the divine as infinite by taking away the ability to ever finish polishing the mirror, the soul’s perpetual growth in goodness. Just as scripture says that God can and cannot be seen, the soul attains to its true nature in the striving of *epektasis*, seeing and not seeing God.

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<sup>234</sup> *Enneads*, III.8.11, translated in McKenna.

<sup>235</sup> I quote from above, p.62: Intellect “is eternally striving after the one in unbroken contemplation of its source, while it is eternally attaining self-reflexive knowledge as image of the one. But it is simultaneously and reciprocally attaining oneness in contemplation, while eternally striving in self-reflexive thought. On the one hand, intellect in its right mind is the attainer because it can seize the object of its contemplation, i.e. itself, while intellect in love reaches toward the pure act and thus is eternal striving. But on the other hand, the *henosis* beyond duality is the attainment, while the intellect’s self-reflexivity is eternal striving.”

To conclude this section, let's visit one further point of contact with Plotinus. As he conceives soul (*psyche*) and the material world as an image of intellect, which in turn is an image of the one, so too does Gregory's apophatic theology and apophatic anthropology imply an apophatic phenomenology:

We lack essential knowledge of soul, body and universe. For this reason, one may explore every divinely inspired word, and not find teaching about the divine nature, nor indeed about the essential existence of anything. Hence, we humans live in total ignorance, in the first place about ourselves, and then about everything else.<sup>236</sup>

Earlier we encountered Gregory's argument that one cannot know the essential substance of any entity because the categories of accidents (shape, color, position...), when abstracted away, leave us with nothing.<sup>237</sup> And so perhaps the world as a whole is simply an apophatic theophany of an apophatic deity.<sup>238</sup> But was not the world created out of nothing?

Indeed it was, and Gregory was the first to imply that the nothing out of which God created, was nothing but his own nothingness, thereby equating emanation as an act in time with the *creatio ex nihilo*.<sup>239</sup> Discussing the Plotinian point of view, Gregory notes that God is said to create out of intelligible matter that is in God, which matter is incomprehensible in its essential substance for the same reasons that ordinary matter is. So by "nothing" it seems that Gregory means "the negation of all that can be spoken of or thought of," which in this sense makes *creatio ex nihilo* the same as *creatio ex deo*, as

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<sup>236</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, II.106, translated in Karfíkova, Douglass & Zachhuber, 83.

<sup>237</sup> *Contra Eunomium*, II.115-18 (Karfíkova); Carabine, *Unknown God*, 238f.

<sup>238</sup> In these speculations, Gregory can be seen to anticipate Eriugena.

<sup>239</sup> Wolfson, "Identification," 55.

God is ineffable and incomprehensible.<sup>240</sup> Not until Eriugena will all this be made explicit, but in good allegorical fashion, this may have been Gregory's solution to the fact that scripture says creation is from nothing, but also says that all things were created from God.<sup>241</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Wolfson, "Identification," 60.

<sup>241</sup> Wolfson, "Identification," 59.

## Chapter III: The Dionysian Synthesis

### Section 3.1: Iamblichus and Porphyry

Both Plotinus and Gregory take a major step forward by conceiving the divine dialectically, guarding its absolute transcendence while stressing its immanence, declaring regal independence alongside pervasive presence. Much of the fecundity of their thought emerges from the dynamism of this tension. In the Neoplatonic tradition, Porphyry and Iamblichus can be seen as each developing opposing tendencies inherent in the Plotinian dialectic in several different ways.

Porphyry has often been portrayed as a monist, such as in A.C. Lloyd's description of his "telescoping of the hypostases."<sup>242</sup> And while this propensity definitely exists in his thought, we also find there a subtlety that is often overlooked, and which, as we saw in the last section, is important to our story. While Porphyry did, in a way, go against Plotinus and identify the one with being (*einai*), this is not the whole story. Porphyry is taking on the problem of the origins of otherness and the paradox of self-causality in the second principle. How does the one generate anything if it is completely impassive? We saw that Porphyry's solution is to consider the one under two aspects: under the first aspect it is seen as totally transcendent first principle;

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<sup>242</sup> Lloyd, "The Later Neoplatonists," 287-93. Andrew Smith argues against the monistic portrayal of Porphyry offered by Lloyd, suggesting that elements of hierarchy persist and that the basic tenets of Plotinus have not been altered, see Smith, *Porphyry's Place in the Neoplatonic Tradition*, 5-19. While I ultimately agree with Smith's argument, if Damascius' claim that Porphyry identified the one with being (*einai*) is correct, it still illustrates the basic tendency toward monism (*Dubitaciones et solutiones*, 43). However, it seems like Damascius and Proclus may have uncharitably portrayed Porphyry's view; see Dillon, "Porphyry's Doctrine."

while the second describes it as active, creative wholeness and generator of the cosmos insofar as it is taken as object of intellection by the second principle.<sup>243</sup> Dillon argues that Porphyry could have drawn such a notion fairly directly from Plotinus. Speaking of the one Plotinus states:

the intellect which has the object of thought would not exist if there was not a reality (*ousia*) which is pure object of thought; it will be an object of thought to the intellect, but in itself it will be neither thinker nor object of thought in the proper, authentic sense.<sup>244</sup>

Here we see implicitly Porphyry's notion of the dual-aspect one. The objection would naturally be that this introduces duality into the one, but Porphyry's instinct seems sound: the one needs to have some sort of commerce with what follows from it if anything is going to follow from it at all. This instinct seems to lead Porphyry to conceive of the hypostases as interpenetrating; and this interpenetration is what seems to tend toward monism. Just as the one is "everywhere and nowhere," Porphyry describes intellect and soul in these same terms, emphasizing their unity and sometimes risking to efface their difference from one another.<sup>245</sup>

A bigger problem is that Porphyry frames embodiment and the material world as an illusion of thought. The forms never descended into matter; they only appear to have done so as a result of our feeble thinking.<sup>246</sup> Just as those things which we attribute to the one belong to us rather than it, so is the sensible world a subjective deviation

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<sup>243</sup> Klitenic & Dillon, "Dionysius," 34, 43-48; Dillon, "Porphyry's Doctrine," 356-66.

<sup>244</sup> *Enneads*, V.6.2, quoted in Dillon, "Porphyry's Doctrine," 361.

<sup>245</sup> *Sententiae ad intelligibilia ducentes*, XXXI.

<sup>246</sup> Porphyry, *On Matter*, in Simplicius, *In Phys.* 231, cited in "Later Neoplatonists," 292.

from the reality of *henosis*.<sup>247</sup> At its extreme, the identification of the one with being can subsume all of reality into a single pure act.<sup>248</sup> The punctuation of levels lose their reality, which means that even our belief in the person, the embodied soul, is simply a misapprehension of how things really are.<sup>249</sup> While this extreme pantheism seems to be a caricature of Porphyry, I will accept for the moment that his partial identification of the one with being (*einai*) tends in an opposite direction from Iamblichus and his successors. At the root of these opposing tendencies seems to be different solutions to the problem of the origins of otherness. While Porphyry introduces being into the transcendence of the one, thereby offering a plausible explanation of how all things spring from it, Iamblichus mediates the transition from the one to the many by multiplying the subdivisions between them.

What was a hierarchy-in-unity in Plotinus becomes increasingly stratified in Iamblichus. While Porphyry seems to diminish the transcendence of the one by its rapprochement to being, Iamblichus expands his sense of what is beyond-being. Or put another way: While Porphyry may be seen to stress the ubiquity of the divine by denying the reality of the sensible world, Iamblichus' introduction of "imparticipables" emphasizes an aspect of divine transcendence.<sup>250</sup> Each of the hypostases exists first "imparticipably" (like a whole *prior* to its parts), and then in its participated form (a

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<sup>247</sup> Some of this summary is based on the anonymous fragment which Pierre Hadot has argued was authored by Porphyry, see *Porphyre et Victorinus II*.

<sup>248</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 63; Damascius, *Dubitaciones et solutiones*, 43.

<sup>249</sup> Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 288.

<sup>250</sup> Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 298.

whole of parts), which is partaken of by a participant (a whole *in* its parts)—forming the triad, unparticipated, participated, participant. Grades of reality interlock by each level's highest part participating with a form of the level above it. For example, the material world is the participant in its participated soul, above which exists imparticipable soul on the level of the participant intellect, which would begin the series again. What was implicit in Plotinus' understanding of the one being everywhere (immanent, participated) and nowhere (transcendent, unparticipated) has been made explicit and formalized. At the top of the series, Iamblichus places an ineffable one before the imparticipable one.<sup>251</sup> So to what was the transcendent aspect of an already transcendent principle, a further transcendence has been added! While the imparticipables resist the monistic tendency and its attendant effacement of transcendence, this last point also shows the regress that emerges from the naming and formalization of the unnameable.

Iamblichus' other major metaphysical contribution is to develop the notion of procession not just between the hypostases but within them, according to a tripartite structure of rest (*mone* [μονή]), procession (*prodos* [προδοσ]), and return (*epistrophe* [ἐπιστροφή]).<sup>252</sup> Such a structure was already implicit in the hypostases at large, with the one corresponding to the transcendent remaining (*mone*) from which all else proceeds and returns. This same arrangement is understood to pertain to the triad being-living-thinking, which characterizes intellect. The division is formalized in

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<sup>251</sup> Damascius, *Dubitaciones et solutiones*, 43, 44, 51.

<sup>252</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 46.

Iamblichus as what I will refer to as the Neoplatonic triad of the second hypostasis: being, life, intelligence.<sup>253</sup> Within itself, intellect rests (being), proceeds, (life) and returns (intelligence). The same tripartite structure is thought to describe all entities. This procession of triads at every level and sublevel of reality, held together and held apart by the relation of participables to imparticipables, lays the bedrock of Neoplatonic ontology through its systematic culmination in Proclus.<sup>254</sup>

This divergence of ontological tendencies toward monism and stratification can also be seen in the controversy of the descended soul. Porphyry defends the Plotinian doctrine that a portion of the soul does not fully descend into the body, allowing union (*henosis*) with the divine through contemplation (*theoria*).<sup>255</sup> By contrast, Iamblichus asserts that the soul fully descends; thus divinization (*theopoeisis*) requires an intercession from the gods, which can be brought about by the rites of theurgy (*theourgia* [θεουργία]).<sup>256</sup> Again the question of the human's continuity or discontinuity with the divine is brought to the fore. Iamblichus' embrace of theurgy goes hand in hand with his negative theology: it is because one cannot know the divine through

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<sup>253</sup> Recall that Plotinus was the first to characterize intellect according to these three features (being, living, thinking) in relation to his interpretation of *Sophist*, see above p.50. It seems Plotinus thought of these more as qualities of intellect rather than real metaphysical divisions. Plotinus' student Amelius goes a step further, actually dividing the intellect into three (that which is, that which has, and that which sees), while Iamblichus completes the gesture by formalizing the triad; see "Later Neoplatonists," 265 and Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Timaeus*. I.306, 2-3.

<sup>254</sup> "Later Neoplatonists," 299; Proclus, *Timaeus Commentary*, III.145, 8-11. We will explore this system further in section 3.2. Creatures receive their being, life, and intelligence from participating in these aspects of intellect, while a portion of them remains imparticipable according to the scheme mentioned.

<sup>255</sup> *Enneads*, IV.8.4.

<sup>256</sup> Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 72.

one's own powers that an intercession is necessary.<sup>257</sup> The seeds of this notion are clearly present in Plotinus who also asserts that the last breakthrough to *henosis* is not achieved on one's own and transcends discursive thought.<sup>258</sup> Porphyry by contrast, sometimes gives the impression that higher *noesis* [νόησις] is a continuation of abstract thought.<sup>259</sup> Here again an inner tension in Plotinus between philosophic reasoning and the transcendence of that reasoning is split open and pushed further in opposite directions. Porphyry places philosophy over theurgy on the path to salvation, and even goes so far as to say that the philosopher is the savior of himself, an extreme version of the divine spark doctrine.<sup>260</sup> Iamblichus, as well as Proclus and Damascius after him, places theurgy above philosophy, noting that when they contradict one another, one should remember that human reason is frail.<sup>261</sup> Porphyry denies that theurgy can effect complete salvation, but justifies it as an allegorical version of philosophical truth,<sup>262</sup> while Damascius insists that the union achieved through philosophy is only analogous to the truly ineffable *henosis*.<sup>263</sup> Iamblichus complains that Porphyry prefers to talk about

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<sup>257</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 43. It should be noted at the outset that theurgy does not manipulate or bend the will of the gods, who intercede or not of their own accord. Another way of saying this is that *theurgy* as "the work of God" always corresponds to a subjective genitive, never an objective genitive. It is the gods who do their work through the theurgist, not the theurgist doing work on the gods. Shaw has argued at length for this in *Theurgy and the Soul*, and with respect to the Dionysian tradition in "Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite." See also Stang, *Apophasis*, 105-9.

<sup>258</sup> *Enneads*, V.5.8.

<sup>259</sup> Smith, *Porphyry*, 149f.

<sup>260</sup> Porphyry, *De abstinentia*, 2.49.1

<sup>261</sup> "Later Neoplatonists," 279; Smith, *Porphyry*, 149-50. This recalls Justin Martyr's approach to combining philosophy and revelation. See *infra* p.39.

<sup>262</sup> "Later Neoplatonists," 285.

<sup>263</sup> *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo II: Damascius*, I.68, 13-15.

gods rather than worship or experience them.<sup>264</sup> To be fair, Porphyry concedes that *henosis* occurs beyond subject-object thinking and thus is really not thinking at all. But while philosophy is not *the* goal, it is the best means by which to arrive at the goal, and the intellectual virtues remain the highest.<sup>265</sup>

But for Iamblichus theurgic virtues are supreme, and rites more effective for salvation. Contact with the gods is not properly called knowledge, because knowledge is always dualistic.<sup>266</sup> In the vein of Plato's early aporetic dialogues, the impasse that rational thinking reaches is meant to provide *katharsis*; this intellectual purification is then followed by a poetic-mythic awakening.<sup>267</sup> Iamblichus sees *aporia* and unknowing as the gateway to the divine.<sup>268</sup> Furthermore, this unknowing implies an apophatic anthropology: it is by embracing our not knowing that we empty ourselves and thus become receptive to the divine influx.<sup>269</sup> We approach the gods (*theoi*) with our own nothingness, becoming pure vessels for their work (*ergon* [εργων]).<sup>270</sup> Iamblichus transposes the cosmic *khora* [χώρα] onto the individual, making the purified soul the receptacle for the divine forms. The highest condition for souls is not their enjoyment of

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<sup>264</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 259.5-19

<sup>265</sup> "Later Neoplatonists," 295

<sup>266</sup> *De mysteriis*, 8.3-9

<sup>267</sup> Shaw, *After Aporia*, 59. *Phaedo* offers a good example when after pages of intellectual jousting about the immortality of the soul, Socrates ends with a myth, intimating a transcendence of the discursive reason that occupied so much of the dialogue.

<sup>268</sup> Shaw, *Talisman*, 28.

<sup>269</sup> Shaw, *Chora*, 113.

<sup>270</sup> *De mysteriis*, 47.13-48.4

divine status, but their bestowal of divine measurements in a co-creative ritual cosmogenesis. This makes *theourgia* superior to the highest forms of *theoria*.<sup>271</sup>

The full descent of the soul sunders its unity but is necessary for its mediating function in cosmogenesis. It is midway between what is immortal and mortal, permanent and changing, divine and sensible, noetic and irrational.<sup>272</sup> The divided human soul is an essential part of the unbroken continuum of creation, without which the work of the demiurge would remain incomplete.<sup>273</sup> Below it are animals, plants, and matter; above it are heroes, daimons, and the gods.<sup>274</sup> Its split state leads to a sense of self-alienation, but is also what allows the soul to mediate and thereby impart unity on the diversity and chaos of the sensible realm.<sup>275</sup> Self-division is what permits participation in the activity of the demiurge. In this mediating role, the soul bears a striking resemblance to Plato's description in *Symposium* of metaxic *eros*, the child of poverty (*πενία*) and plenty (*πόρος*) who partakes of both. And indeed, the will of the demiurge is precisely the procession of *eros* which descends through the soul and returns to the immortal realm through theurgy. It is the same *eros* that transforms the soul in ritual and that holds together the cosmos.<sup>276</sup> Embodiment in matter and self-alienation are not a fall but the necessary pivot through which cosmic *eros* can circulate.

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<sup>271</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy*, 117.

<sup>272</sup> Priscianus, *Metaphrasis*, 32.

<sup>273</sup> *Timaeus*, 41B.

<sup>274</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy*, 79.

<sup>275</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy*, 101.

<sup>276</sup> *De mysteriis*, 211.3-18.

It is only by becoming divided from itself that the divine can experience true separation, and thus, love for itself.

This positive reappraisal of matter and the body is another way that Iamblichus resolves an ambiguity present in Plotinus, with Porphyry again moving in the opposite direction. Plotinus had characterized emanation both as an abundant overflow from the good, but also as *tolma* [τολμᾶ], which would have been better had it never happened.<sup>277</sup> Porphyry speaks of the soul's permanent escape, "never again to find itself held and polluted by the contagion of the world."<sup>278</sup> But for the theurgist, nature is the material expression of the divine calling the soul back to co-creation with the demiurge.<sup>279</sup> In divinization, the soul becomes an organ of god.<sup>280</sup> Divine *eros* wants not beauty, but to *give birth* in beauty.<sup>281</sup> The theurgist partakes of the immortality of the gods, embodying the demiurge by giving birth to the world.<sup>282</sup> Theurgy awakens the soul to the trans-conceptual *eros* that reveals the path back to the gods written in matter, hieroglyph, and number—so many icons of theophany.<sup>283</sup>

Let us briefly explore some of these material symbols to get a better sense of how theurgy may have been understood to function. Neoplatonists note how on the great chain of being both extremes (the one and matter) tend toward simplicity, providing

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<sup>277</sup> See above, n.138.

<sup>278</sup> Porphyry, *De regressu animae*, 40.15-16, translated in Shaw, *After Aporia*, 76.

<sup>279</sup> Shaw, *After Aporia*, 80.

<sup>280</sup> Shaw, *Eros and Arithmos*, 138.

<sup>281</sup> *Symposium*, 206E.

<sup>282</sup> Shaw, *Chora*, 124.

<sup>283</sup> Shaw, *Eros and Arithmos*, 126.

ontological support for the dictum, 'as above so below.'<sup>284</sup> This sense of cosmic sympathy implies that the material features of the physical realm can reflect divine truths. Certain precious stones because of their color or texture may be associated with a certain god. In the intermediate realm of numbers, the Pythagoreans had long expounded the qualitative characteristics of the first ten numerals. But a particularly interesting case comes from the qualities of language itself, somewhere between material objects and numbers. This intermediate case emphasizes the sympathetic continuum between terrestrial and celestial, the breathing together of all things that underlies theurgy's analogical efficacy.

Theodore of Asine was a contemporary of Iamblichus who expounds a theurgic method based in linguistic analysis.<sup>285</sup> In his system, the first triad of principles after the ineffable supreme cause is described by the phonetic components of the name "hen [ἐν]" (which means "one"). These components are the rough breathing of the "h," the vowel sound of "e," and the final consonant "n." While the supreme cause itself is imagined as silence, the three letters constitute a kind of procession and return: the breath emerging out of silence, the vowel sustaining, and then the mouth closing with the final consonant.

Another example of such phonetic analysis is reported by Proclus.<sup>286</sup> The relationship of vowels and consonants are likened to the relationship between form and

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<sup>284</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 116f. n.179; Louth, *Origins* 156-58.

<sup>285</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 289-304. The discussion that follows is drawn from this source.

<sup>286</sup> *Commentary on Plato's Republic*, 265.

matter, or alternatively between soul and body, the former in each pair animating the latter. A similar theory connects the vowels to the planetary spheres and the consonants to the signs of the zodiac, allowing an examination of the composition of words in relation to the heavens. Just as a vowel animates consonants, so too does the power of a planet animate the arena of life ruled by the receiving sign through which it passes.

In addition to phonetic analysis, Theodore and others also employ graphic analysis. For example, the shape of the Greek letter  $\chi$  in the word *psyche* ( $\psi\upsilon\chi\acute{\eta}$ ), is said to represent the soul's quality of equilibrium.<sup>287</sup> One could also point to the soul's mediating function as discussed above. Recall too that Iamblichus likened the soul to *khora* [ $\chi\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ ]. When the demiurge joins together the circles destined to be the rotations of the same and the different, he joins them "together center to center like an X."<sup>288</sup> This "X" is the word  $\chi\acute{\epsilon}\iota$  in the Greek, the name for the first letter of *khora* [ $\chi\acute{\omega}\rho\alpha$ ]. *Khora* is a mediator of opposites, of same and different, or being and becoming, just like the soul. The shape of the letter itself performs the chiasmic role.

Theodore's third form of analysis was *gematria* [ $\gamma\epsilon\omega\mu\epsilon\tau\rho\acute{\iota}\alpha$ ] or arithmetical analysis, in which numbers are assigned to each letter of the alphabet, thereby giving words a summed numerical value. This method can find hidden relations between words with identical values, or can relate words to seasonal periods like the number of days in a month or a year. Gnostics were also said to employ similar methods, with

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<sup>287</sup> The doctrine of the  $\chi$  in the soul is also discussed by Proclus in his *Republic Commentary*. Proclus reports the opinion of Porphyry that such a doctrine was known to the Egyptians in *Timaeus Commentary*, II.247, 18-20.

<sup>288</sup> *Timaeus*, 36C.

Tertullian reporting an opinion that Christ calling himself the  $\Lambda$  and the  $\Omega$  had prompted an exploration for numerical equivalents.<sup>289</sup>

These methods of analysis may have guided the employment of words and creation of incantations for theurgic ritual, with the divinities invoked reflected in the phonetic, graphic, and/or arithmetic composition of the language used. Some papyri bearing such incantations have appeared to be gibberish to scholars, but turn out to reflect such principles.<sup>290</sup> Interesting in our context is the way that these analyses constitute a kind of allegorical reading of the features of language itself. Theophany extends to and inhabits the very tools one uses to describe the theophany. The whole world speaks the glory of God; traces of the word (*logos*) are everywhere, especially in the structures of words themselves.

But a word of caution: Iamblichus was critical of Theodore, not because he disagreed that the spiritual was reflected in the material, but because Theodore reasoned too much *from* the material to the ontological, rather than affording primacy to metaphysical truths.<sup>291</sup> Theodore's analyses are ultimately discursive and therefore limited. Theurgy is more erotic than intellectual, and one must always be wary of making intellectual idols out of what should remain evocative icons, always pointing beyond themselves and thereby preserving the transcendence of the divine.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> *De praescriptione haereticorum*, 40A.

<sup>290</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 293-94.

<sup>291</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 302-304.

<sup>292</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy*, 121, 97.

Now let us offer a few summary reflections connecting this section to the rest of our material. Porphyry and Iamblichus develop Plotinus' hierarchy-in-unity in the opposite directions of monism and stratification, with respective emphases on being and transcendence. Porphyry is often portrayed as an outright pantheist but this neglects the actual complexity of his attempt to solve the problem of otherness. Porphyry's solution spares him from the baroque elaborations that begin with Iamblichus and which reach full systematic pitch in Proclus.

Iamblichus' turn to theurgy is a different kind of response to transcendence, one which embraces the ineffability of the first principle. It is a logical and authentic solution to the apophatic dilemma: what the soul can never know it can nonetheless *perform* with the gods.<sup>293</sup> What the soul can never name or say can speak through the soul in the naming process of cosmogenesis.

For this, the soul must be fully descended in order to fulfill its mediating function. This is one of Iamblichus' most distinctive doctrines, for Proclus after him will revert to a more Plotinian notion.<sup>294</sup> It takes the soul one step further away from being kin with the divine, and in this it resembles Christianity. Though not nearly as stark as the creator-creature divide, it serves a purpose similar to what we saw in Gregory, insofar as difference is necessary for relation, separation necessary for love. While Gregory folds infinite transcendence into inexhaustible presence, Iamblichus turns the

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<sup>293</sup> Shaw, *Theurgy*, 110.

<sup>294</sup> Proclus solves the paradox of the soul being both mortal and immortal by saying that it has an eternal substance and temporal activity in *Elements of Theology*, prop.191. Damascius however, keeps to Iamblichus' teaching in *Dubitationes et solutiones*, II.263.

divine *eros* back on itself through the pivot of embodiment. Their contrast is as instructive as their similarity in light of the respective *ex nihilo* and emanation metaphors under which each operates.<sup>295</sup> In Gregory's case the love is between the Bridegroom and the Bride (the separation entailed by *ex nihilo*), while for Iamblichus the demiurge's love is ultimately for itself (the unity and continuity of emanation).

Gregory Shaw calls the descent of the soul a *felix culpa* in the drama of cosmogenesis, intimating a similar parallel with Christianity.<sup>296</sup> And indeed, the Iamblichean soul is like Christ in a way, partaking of two opposed natures and thus serving a mediating and salvific function. Salvific because, in contrast to Porphyrian and Gnostic notions of escape, after its apotheosis the theurgic soul continues to descend for the benefit of others in a ritual enactment without end.<sup>297</sup> Stretched in the *metaxy* [μεταξύ], the soul's paradox resembles Gregory's *epektasis*: infinite straining as the true nature of the soul. But rather than the soul's ascent to God, theurgy mediates the demiurge's descent into creation. In this Iamblichus reverses the ascension symbolism of Platonism, while Gregory reverses the light symbolism of Platonism. But in both cases the soul's path is an apophatic one: the theurgist cannot know the divinity in which she participates, not can Gregory know the God to whom he relates. Both

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<sup>295</sup> For the sake of clarity, I momentarily shelve Gregory's equation of emanation and *ex nihilo* creation. On the whole, the underlying metaphor shaping his thought is the *ex nihilo*, with the gulf between creator and creature being fundamental.

<sup>296</sup> *Theurgy*, 15.

<sup>297</sup> John Dillon calls this Iamblichus' bodhisattva doctrine, *Iamblichi Chalcedensis*, 243.

conceive of a stage above *theoria*, where *eros* is harnessed in pursuit of union with the divine.

Theurgy's emphasis on the sanctity of the cosmos is in contrast to both Plotinian and Christian ambiguities in this regard. But alongside its world-denying tendencies, Christianity certainly has a robust tradition of the blessedness of the creation, and the redemption brought about by the incarnation. Theurgy is a kind of ongoing incarnation in which the demiurge permeates and inhabits the human, in which the divine is brought into deeper and deeper union with the sensible.

Iamblichus' teachings are passed on to Proclus, and from there to Dionysius, who synthesizes the Neoplatonic tradition with the Christian *apophasis* coming out of Gregory – which legacy we will examine in section 3.3. Many commentators emphasize that Porphyry transmits the Plotinian teachings to Marius Victorinus, who passes them to Augustine.<sup>298</sup> But the less noted is the influence he had on the Cappadocian Fathers, where the developing doctrine of the Trinity could even be imagined as a compromise between the tendencies of monism in Porphyry and stratification in Iamblichus. I will reexamine this thread in my treatment of Dionysius, but first let us turn our attention to the grand systematic expression of Neoplatonism forged by Proclus.

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<sup>298</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 156-58.

## Section 3.2: Proclus

Parmenides abides in the transcendent one, Zeno projects the many on the one, and Socrates turns back even these many to the Parmenidean one, since the first member in every triad is an analogue of rest (*mone*), the second of procession (*prodos*), and the third of reversion (*epistrophe*), and the reversion rounds out a kind of circular path connecting the end with the beginning.<sup>299</sup>

Foreshadowing Hegel's dialectic of history, Proclus sees the structure of his triadic metaphysics traced in his philosophical predecessors. And why not, since he believes his metaphysics the true though hidden meaning of Plato, deriving ultimately from the secret teachings of Pythagoras and Orpheus.<sup>300</sup> But it is Parmenides who abides in the transcendent one, and in fact it is the Platonic dialogue by that name which provides the context for the comments above—a dialogue that Proclus considers the peak of philosophy. He ascribes to it a unique, even revelatory authority, contemplating its undulating propositions as incantation.<sup>301</sup> As implied by the passage above however, Proclus sees no need to posit a super-ineffable one, in contrast to Iamblichus before him and Damascius after.<sup>302</sup> Rather, there is simply the one beyond being, and below it, being itself—corresponding to the first two hypotheses of *Parmenides*.<sup>303</sup> Concerning the one beyond being, only apophatic propositions are

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<sup>299</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on Plato's Parmenides*, I.712-13, translated in Morrow and Dillon, 86.

<sup>300</sup> Lloyd, "Later Neoplatonists," 305.

<sup>301</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 76.

<sup>302</sup> Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, VIII.2; Damascius, *Dubtiones et Solutiones* II.8

<sup>303</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 161. Proclus credits Plutarch of Athens for properly systematizing all nine hypotheses of *Parmenides*, recognizing that the first five arrive at true conclusions from true premises, while the last four are *reductiones ad absurdum*. Thus, he is the first to correctly understand the last six hypotheses. After (1) God, (2) intellect, and (3) soul, these are (4) forms immanent in matter, (5) matter, (6) sensation alone, (7) absence of any awareness, (8) shadows and dreams, and (9) absence of even shadows and dreams. Hypotheses 2-5 correspond to the four segments of the divided line in *Republic* (509D-513E); Proclus, *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1058-59; "Later Neoplatonists," 304.

appropriate, while kataphatic propositions apply to the lower hypostases.<sup>304</sup> Proclus is the first to deploy the language of “apophatic” and “kataphatic” in coordinate tandem and to apply the method systematically. All that is denied of the first hypothesis is reaffirmed of the second.<sup>305</sup>

But as mentioned above, just how emanation happens over the divide implied by this radical epistemological break is a persistent problem for Neoplatonists: How does the one in its unity give rise to diversity? What is the origin of otherness? The problem seems to spring from the postulate of a transcendent cause that is unaffected by its lower products—which is in tension with an emanation theory that requires continuity between causes and effects.<sup>306</sup> This mediation between the one and the many, between cause and effect, seems in large part to prompt the triadic nature of Neoplatonic thinking—since to mediate between any two things is to invoke a third.<sup>307</sup> Iamblichus’ subdivision of the three hypostases into further triads seems to serve this general purpose, and Damascius offers a more specific account. Recall the division of the second hypostasis (intellect) into being, life, and intelligence—indexed to rest,

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<sup>304</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 87.

<sup>305</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 184.

<sup>306</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 49-55. Stephen Gersh’s discussion helps to elucidate this thorny issue. He draws attention to the way the verb “to remain [*menein*]” is used in two senses that are often not distinguished, thereby underwriting some of the ambiguities in question. An effect “remains” in its cause in the sense of being identical to it; having proceeded from the cause, the effect maintains an aspect of its source within itself and is linked to that source even though the source is undiminished. The second sense is just that the source “remains” undiminished, i.e. remains in itself in the sense of being unaffected by its effect. Both notions taken together lead to the idea of a self-produced effect. Even still, the initial impetus of separation remains mysterious. As we will see in the next section, the notions of the Trinity and creation *ex nihilo* will help to transmute this problem.

<sup>307</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 13.

procession, and return. Damascius explains that the third term in its turning back (*epistrophe*) is a compound of the first two terms, reuniting the separation of procession (*proodos*) to the initial rest (*mone*).<sup>308</sup> Thus compounded, the third term contains all three terms inside itself, mirroring their action internally. The relation between the third term and its priors is analogous to its own internal articulation; it is holographic. Damascius then extrapolates his reasoning to suggest that the first and second terms also contain such an inner subdivision, albeit in a more contracted, less articulated manner. Therefore, the basic structure of intellect, the second hypostasis, is nine-fold or enneadic.<sup>309</sup> From the one spring unities (*henads*), from intellect, divine intelligences and daimons, and from soul, souls (like our own, for example).<sup>310</sup> As all things at all levels partake of the tripartite movement of rest, procession, and return, all reality is enneadic. As a trinity of trinities, this structure will be central for Dionysius' Christian revisioning of Neoplatonism.

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<sup>308</sup> *Dubitiones et solutiones*, I.168-71.

<sup>309</sup> See discussions in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 127-29, 143n.88. Pierre Hadot has traced the whole theory as far back as Porphyry in *Porphyry et Victorinus*. In later Neoplatonism, the holographic subdivisions are often extended further into the nine terms, though not in a strictly consistent manner. Some are further subdivided than others, often in relation to the gods they are identified with in religious belief or sacred texts, like the *Chaldean Oracles*. For example, the hypostasis of being has only has its second subdivision further divided, while the hypostasis of life contains nine members in its first subdivision alone.

Additionally, each of the three terms in each of the three subdivisions participate in their higher, prior subdivisions. So, the three terms of the second order (life) participate in the first (being), and those of the third (intelligence) participate in the first and second (being and life). Thus, the second hypostasis as a whole consists of  $9+27+81=117$  terms ("Later Neoplatonists," 309). But this does not take into account the further subdivisions below the initial nine which would ostensibly participate in their priors as well, creating an exponential flurry of relationships that, in any case, is not rigorously expounded. Suffice it to say that the Plotinian image of a sphere of shining faces has been formalized along the lines of a similarly multifaceted conceptual edifice.

<sup>310</sup> Louth, *Origins* 158-64.

Central to the Neoplatonic revisioning of Plato is the absorption of Aristotle, what A.C. Lloyd calls, “one of the few undeniable ‘dialectical’ processes in the history of philosophy.”<sup>311</sup> Like many Neoplatonists, Proclus believes the two thinkers to be fundamentally in accord. The exposition of the finer points of this accord drive much of the era’s activity. One fascinating example is the Neoplatonic application of Aristotle’s doctrine of causality to the spiritual realm.<sup>312</sup> Aristotle developed his theory of potency and act in the context of physical and psychological processes (e.g. an acorn growing into an oak, or an instructor teaching a student), but the Neoplatonists inductively extend it to divine beings and processes – albeit in an analogical manner and with some warnings and correctives: Such an analysis only dimly reflects the true nature of spiritual workings and should be supplemented by more revelatory sources, such as the *Chaldean Oracles* and Platonic dialogues. The emanative theory drawn from these latter sources helps to refine the Aristotelian doctrine. Because spiritual powers are generally undiminished in their causation, a notion of excess or surplus potency is developed, and even inexhaustible or infinite potency on the part of a transcendent cause.<sup>313</sup>

This example illustrates the broader tendency in Neoplatonism to find deeper meanings in relatively straightforward Aristotelian texts (as they did in the less

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<sup>311</sup> “Later Neoplatonists,” 322

<sup>312</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 32-37.

<sup>313</sup> Damascius, *Dubitiones et solutiones*, II.19. Just as often however, the undiminished source is described in terms of activity, emphasizing the idea that causation is already fulfilled before the process begins (contributing to the sense of self-causation on the part of the effect). It is worth noting that an excess potency which leads to an emanative process in which it is gradually diminished in a descending hierarchy is in tension with an infinite potency which is never diminished. This reflects the same tension discussed in n.306 regarding the dual usage of “remain.”

straightforward *Parmenides*).<sup>314</sup> Here their allegorical reading of the text is paralleled by a kind of allegorical reading of the material world, the latter offering a veiled account of things divine; causality in the physical realm is a suggestive icon for causality in the spiritual. This would be in keeping with the theurgic context of the world as theophany. Such an allegorical approach becomes increasingly explicit for the People of the Book in their reading of the Book of Nature.

Within a Christian *ex nihilo* context, the Book of Nature is revelatory because God wrote it and thus willed it to be so, while within an emanative framework, analogical thinking is rendered plausible by the very nature of things: the physical is continuous with the celestial. If the realm of the forms is the ultimate cause and animator of material processes, then it stands to reason that the structural underpinnings of these processes in some way reflect their source. The theory of forms itself seems to spring from just such an induction. At the same time, though continuous, reality is also punctuated, with the sensible-intelligible being the most fundamental, though still ultimately traversable, dividing line.

By contrast, the discontinuity of an *ex nihilo* framework would seem to curtail speculation across the created-uncreated divide. But as we will see in the next section with regard to Dionysius, the strong co-presence of an element of emanation alongside the *ex nihilo* seems to underwrite similar speculations (similarity between terrestrial and celestial structures and processes), again supplemented by revelatory scripture.

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<sup>314</sup> P. Shorey, "Simplicius *De Anima* 146.21," 143f.

Intriguingly, the very gulf between creator and creature makes the separation of sensible and intelligible less and less fundamental for Christian thinkers, which along with the gradual removal of emanative theory and metaphor, eventually leads them to apply Aristotelian causality *literally*, not by analogy, to both realms.<sup>315</sup> As long as the transcendence of the creator is safeguarded, the difference between various levels of creation becomes less important.

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In an effort to safeguard the transcendence of the one, Proclus is as meticulous and systematic in his unknowing as he is in his ontology.<sup>316</sup> While Plotinus felt the one cannot know itself without jeopardizing its simplicity, Proclus says we cannot even know whether the one is knowable to itself.<sup>317</sup> There is a shift in terminology from the more prevalent *aphairesis* [ἀφαίρεσις] (abstraction) in Plotinus, to *apophasis* [ἀπόφασις] (negation) in Proclus.<sup>318</sup> This seems to reflect Proclus' more methodical approach to the rules of what can and cannot be said about the one, as well as his systematic

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<sup>315</sup> In Maximus the Confessor, for example, Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 204. As noted in the section on Gregory, this process was already underway in the Cappadocian Fathers.

<sup>316</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 164ff., 185.

<sup>317</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1108.25-29. Damascius takes this even further saying, "moreover, even [the one's] being unknowable is an unknowability that we either know or ignore. But if we ignore it, how do we say that it is wholly unknowable? And if we know it, it is to that extent already knowable, inasmuch as, being unknowable, it is recognized as knowable" (*Dubitationes et solutiones*, I.6, translated in Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 100). Damascius is more skeptical of language than Proclus, rejecting finally even the *via negativa*. He is perhaps closer in thought to Iamblichus, with whom he shares a reputation for being a mystic. In passages like this one, Damascius can be seen to use aporetic logic as a spiritual practice in a way that resonates with Dionysius' own usage, though Dionysius has perhaps a greater confidence in the *via negativa*; see Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 92-94; Mortley, *Word to Silence II*, 253.

<sup>318</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 184. Dionysius will actually use *aphairesis* more than *apophasis*, despite his modern association with the latter (Timothy Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 40). See n.438.

coordination of *apophasis* and *kataphasis* [κατάφασις]. He grounds his method of negation in *Republic* and follows the Plotinian guideline that concerning the one, additions diminish.<sup>319</sup> Proclus even goes so far as to deny the quality of unity to the one, since in its supreme ineffability it possesses no attribute whatsoever.<sup>320</sup> Caution must be exercised even with superlatives, for that which has no qualities at all cannot be described as the best of any class.<sup>321</sup> The one reason we can ultimately speak about it is because of our desire for the one, which is closest to it, followed by silent understanding, and only in a tertiary position, language.<sup>322</sup>

If we must speak about it then, Proclus discusses what and how we should call it—the question of the divine names, which will be taken up by Dionysius.<sup>323</sup> It turns out that there are names existing on each level of reality, for many different spiritual beings, some of which are unutterable by mortals.<sup>324</sup> Certain names also have special powers in a theurgical context.<sup>325</sup> But for the one, no name is appropriate, not father,

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<sup>319</sup> *Republic* 534B: “As if in battle one has to rob it of everything and separate it from everything,” cited by Proclus in *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.65K. *Enneads* III.8.11: “Once you have uttered “the good,” add no further thought: by any addition, and in proportion to that addition, you introduce a deficiency,” translated in McKenna, 230. *Parmenides Commentary* VII.1177.20-23: “For whatever you add to the one by its addition causes oneness to vanish, since it rejects the addition of everything that is alien to it,” translated in Morrow & Dillon, 527.

<sup>320</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.52K.2-10.

<sup>321</sup> For example, one cannot describe as superlatively white that which is not at all white.

<sup>322</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.54K.23-25.

<sup>323</sup> *Platonic Theology* I.29; *Parmenides Commentary* IV.849, VII.50K. In these discussions, Proclus takes *Cratylus* 390D as his point of departure, discussing the conventional versus natural origin of names.

<sup>324</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, IV.853.3-8

<sup>325</sup> Mortley, *Word to Silence II*, 100-102. See also Jean Trouillard, “L’activité onomastique selon Proclus,” 242, where he paraphrases Proclus’ attitude to the importance of naming: “To name is to create, to create is to express; naming is therefore an act of wisdom. The gods name and create by their act of thinking. For us, the power of imposing names is measured against the extent of our participation in the divine

maker, divinity, not even “one” itself.<sup>326</sup> Recalling the speculations of Theodore of Asine, Proclus notes that decomposing the name “*hen*” into its constituent parts (breath, vowel, consonant) reveals its multiplicity and thus unsuitability.<sup>327</sup>

Negative language is therefore the most suitable for speaking about that which is beyond being. Properly speaking neither assertions nor negations apply, but at least negation is *more* proper.<sup>328</sup> Assertions pick out a definite piece of reality whereas negations simplify, moving from multiplicity toward unity. Negations are the mother of assertions, which is why all that is denied of the first hypothesis is affirmed of the second.<sup>329</sup> Proclus insists that this is not a form of privation (*steresis* [στέρεσις]), as the one is not deprived of the qualities denied of it, anticipating Dionysius’ use of the prefix *hyper-*.<sup>330</sup> Rather these qualities have communication with the one, since they are caused by it.

In all this, Proclus establishes a definite order for negating names ascribed to the one: in the case of assertions, we first deny those names that are most similar (one, good, beautiful, etc.), moving toward what is least similar (bug, rock, heap, etc.); and in the case of negations we first deny what is least similar, moving toward what is most similar.<sup>331</sup> In the end, we must even negate the negations (*negatio negationis*) and pass

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wisdom. To the extent that we yield passively to impressions, we introduce into language an element of chance and arbitrariness.”

<sup>326</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1070.22-24.

<sup>327</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.62K.9. Proclus relates the unnameability of the one to the unnameability of *khora*, at the other end of the great chain of being, at VII.61K.

<sup>328</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1072.32; 1073.14-21.

<sup>329</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI. 1074.7-11; 1133.3-5.

<sup>330</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1074.33-35.

<sup>331</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1088.4.

into silent understanding.<sup>332</sup> Proclus explains that Parmenides, in the eponymous dialogue, concludes by sweeping away the negations and the whole argument in order to end the discourse on the one with the inexpressible—to end in silence. Purified by dialectical negation, we are conducted to what lies before the threshold of the one.

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Passing beyond language and through silent understanding, one arrives at desire (*desiderium*). Desire constitutes the soul's likeness to the one, holding together the whole cosmos in each being's striving for the one.<sup>333</sup> Proclus wrote a hymn to god (ὕμνος εἰς θεόν),<sup>334</sup> praising the ineffability of the first principle, and it is in the context of prayer that we best understand the desire coursing through the cosmos: 'All things pray except the first'<sup>335</sup> and prayer is a turning to god as the sunflower (*heliotropion* [ἡλιοτρόπιον]) turns to the sun.<sup>336</sup> If we could hear the vibration of the air that its rotations make, Proclus writes, we would hear its heliotropic hymn to the creator. In our desire, we experience this tropism for the unnameable one, a desire which, like the sunflower's circling, continues perpetually, never fulfilled, in inextinguishable love (*amor inextinguibilis*).<sup>337</sup> In this strain (*tensio*),<sup>338</sup> the soul's desire for the one actually constitutes

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<sup>332</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.74-76K. This portion of the manuscript only survives in a Latin translation, meaning that Proclus never actually used the term "*negatio negationis*," but probably rather *hyperapophasis*.

<sup>333</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, IV.922.38, VII.58K.16-17; Carabine, *Unknown God*, 177f.

<sup>334</sup> *Patrologia Graeca*, 37.507 (Migne). Proclus writes: "What celestial spirit could penetrate your more-than-light darkness?" translated in Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, xi.

<sup>335</sup> Proclus was fond of this quote from Theodore of Asine, *Timaeus Commentary*, I 213.3, paraphrased in "Later Neoplatonists," 312.

<sup>336</sup> Proclus, *On the Hieratic Art*, 148 (Bidez).

<sup>337</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.74K.19-21

<sup>338</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VII.74K.20-30. This terminology recalls Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis*, as does the treatment of perpetual desire (*desiderium*).

its likeness to the one, allowing an escape from the impasse of unknowability. The soul no longer tries to win object-knowledge of the one, but in outstretched desire attains likeness to the one—a kind of sympathetic comprehension since like ‘knows’ like—animated by the song of its praise, “performing a dance around it,”<sup>339</sup> like a spinning sunflower.

It is fitting then, that Proclus draws from the *Chaldean Oracles* a doctrine of higher cognition variously called “flower of intellect” (*anthos tou nou* [ἄνθος τοῦ νοῦ]), “flower of fire,” (*pyros anthos* [πυρός ἄνθος]) and “torch (of the soul)” (*pyros... [πυρός]*), by which intellect transcends itself and participates in the divine.<sup>340</sup> Proclus writes:

To the extent that there is part of it which is not intellect the intellect is god, and so far as there is a part of it which is not god the god in the intellect is intellect. The divine intellect which is a whole is an intellectual substance with its own summit and unity, knowing itself inasmuch as it is intellectual, but drunk as someone has said with nectar and engendering the whole of cognition inasmuch as it is flower of intellect and a superessential henad.<sup>341</sup>

Stephen Gersh, as well as Morrow and Dillon, note that Proclus’ reference is almost certainly to the passage we examined at length in the section on Plotinus.<sup>342</sup> Again we see the double gaze inward and upward, the identification of intellect (as flower) with an aspect of the one (“superessential henad”), and the attendant notion of self-causality (“engendering the whole of cognition”). Proclus describes this special type of cognizance further in some of the fragments of his *Commentary on the Chaldean*

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<sup>339</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1072.15, translated in Morrow & Dillon, 425; see also III.808, VII.1217, as well as *Enneads*, VI.9.8., I.8.2. Morrow and Dillon speculate that the image derives from the dance of the planets at *Epinomis*, 982E: “dancing the fairest and most magnificent of all dances in the world, they make good the needs of all living creatures.”

<sup>340</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 119; *Chaldean Oracles* 1, 49; 34-35; 121-28

<sup>341</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, 1047.10-24, translated in Morrow & Dillon, 406.

<sup>342</sup> *Enneads*, VI.7.35.

*Philosophy*. He contrasts it with intellection in the normal sense, and describes its activity as unitary, an approach to silence, initiation into the mysteries, and renunciation of the lower world.<sup>343</sup> Becoming quiet, simple, one-like, we know the one beyond being as not-being by not-being:

Let us then declare it to be not-being, and let us recognize it by that in us which is similar to it, for there is in us a kind of seed of that not-being. . . . All knowledge of the one is through negation.<sup>344</sup>

Here we see a hint of that self-negation we have been calling apophatic anthropology, correlate to apophatic theology. By becoming not-being we attain to a likeness of the one beyond being; we “rouse up the one of the soul, which is in us as a kind of image of the one.”<sup>345</sup>

Thus Proclus recapitulates many of our main themes, and brings the Neoplatonic edifice to its most systematic culmination. After Proclus, Damascius will be the last head of the Platonic Academy, eventually fleeing the Justinian interdiction on pagan philosophy (529AD). He and others are welcomed at the court of King Choesroes of Persia, where some speculate apophatic ideas may have been transmitted to Iranian Sufism.<sup>346</sup> And while the official Platonic succession ends, Neoplatonism lives on favorably alongside Christianity in the figure of Dionysius the Areopagite, to whom we now turn.

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<sup>343</sup> *Commentary on the Chaldean Philosophy*, 209.20-22. At 210.28, Proclus makes a further distinction between “the flower of intellect” and “the flower of our whole soul” (*to pases hemon tes psyches anthos*), the latter of which is an even higher capacity that ultimately allows union with the one (see Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 122).

<sup>344</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1082.6, translated in Morrow and Dillon, 432-33. Deirdre Carabine notes that for Proclus the final union is achieved through not-being, whereas for Dionysius it will be through not-knowing (*Unknown God*, 187). However, in the next section I will explore how Dionysius performs not-being in his own way.

<sup>345</sup> *Parmenides Commentary*, VI.1071.25-29, translated in Morrow & Dillon, 424. This notion recalls the Christian *imago dei* trope and the mirror of the soul.

<sup>346</sup> Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 91.

### Section 3.3: Dionysius the Areopagite

Theological tradition has a dual aspect, the ineffable and mysterious on the one hand, the open and more evident on the other.<sup>347</sup>

Though we may never know the true identity of the author who wrote under the aegis of Dionysius the Areopagite, we know him through his writing.<sup>348</sup> Unknown in his essence, he is knowable through his activity in the world. However, the author's resemblance to the age-old formula for God seems to have only intensified the impassioned striving after his identity, a perpetual quest of unknowing. Having been mostly taken at his word for hundreds of years, only in the nineteenth century was the Biblical personage definitively uncoupled from the corpus<sup>349</sup>—after which point the speculations begin.<sup>350</sup> Was it Ammonius Saccas, the mysterious teacher of Plotinus and Origen, whose place at the root of both Greek and Christian philosophical traditions

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<sup>347</sup> Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, *Mystical Theology*, 1105D, translated in Luibheid, 283.

<sup>348</sup> The Biblical Dionysius is one of Paul's converts at the Areopagus in Acts 17:34. The corpus is now known to have been written in the sixth century. For a study of the Christian Heritage of the author, see Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 1-16.

<sup>349</sup> These classic works are H. Koch, "Proklus als Quelle des Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Bösen," *Philologus* 54 (1895), 438-54; and J. Stiglmayr, "Der euplatoniker Proclus als Vorlage des sogen. Dionysius Areopagita in der Lehre vom Uebel," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 16 (1895), 253-73 and 721-48. The earliest doubts regarding authenticity come from Hypatius of Ephesus who led the conference (532AD) where Severus of Antioch made the first known historical reference to the Dionysian corpus. John of Scythopolis who composed the earliest annotations on the corpus also drops hints of doubt in the course of his efforts defend its authenticity. After this, it is not until the eleventh century that Peter Abelard raises questions; then in the Renaissance Nicholas of Cusa, Lorenzo Valla, and Erasmus again express skepticism; and not until the nineteenth century does Johann Englehardt reopen and finally, Koch and Stiglmayr, settle the issue. See Klitenic & Dillon, *Dionysius*, 1-4, for a concise discussion of the authorship question.

<sup>350</sup> A convenient table listing published proposals and rebuttals of conjectural personae (chronologically by identity) is given by Hathaway, in *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius*, 31-35. This table, which does not claim to be exhaustive, offers 22 different identities argued for by scholars.

makes him an aesthetically satisfying if ultimately anachronistic choice?<sup>351</sup> Or perhaps it was Severus of Antioch who claimed the pagan wisdom for the Church, ventriloquizing through the corpus his Monophysite position—a position that spurred the burning of his works that were not pseudonymously protected.<sup>352</sup> My favorite, however, is Damascius himself, the last head of the Platonic Academy, who in the face of persecution and eventual exile, may have either infected Christianity with a pagan virus in an effort to transform it, or simply stowed away the Greek wisdom there, keeping it safe until a friendlier time.<sup>353</sup>

A first wave of Dionysian scholarship detailed the corpus' debt to Proclus and Neoplatonism, sometimes implying its Christian allegiance was only nominal.<sup>354</sup> By

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<sup>351</sup> E. Elorduy, "¿Es Ammonius Sakkas el Seudo-Areopagita?" and *Ammonio Sakkas I. La doctrina de la creacion y del mal en Proclo y el Pseudo-Areopagita*.

<sup>352</sup> J. Stiglmayr, "Der sog. Dionysius und Severus von Antiochien"; "Urn eine Ehrenrettung des Severus von Antiochien," partial retraction of the thesis; *Göttliche Namen*, 162ff., the thesis reaffirmed.

Without claiming Severus as author, Sarah Klitenic Wear and John Dillon argue more generally that the author of the corpus is "despoiling the Hellenes," following in the tradition of Philo and Clement of Alexandria ("despoiling the Egyptians") and reclaiming for Christianity the truths contained in Neoplatonism. They also argue that the author's more immediate concern was "to defuse the Chalcedonian–Monophysite controversy by producing, from an impeccable source, a formula describing Christ's nature such as would satisfy both sides," in *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition: Despoiling the Hellenes*, 133. Andrew Louth agrees that there seems to be deliberate ambiguity in Dionysius' language with regard to the Monophysite question, in Louth, *Denys*, 14.

<sup>353</sup> Ronald Hathaway considers this position and notes that no less a figure than Alexandre Kojève held to the view, in *Hierarchy*, 18, 25-29, 35; more recently C.M. Mazzucchi has argued the viral transformation theory: "Damascio, autore del *Corpus Dionysiicum*, e il dialogo *Περὶ πολιτικῆς ἐπιστήμης*." The stowaway hypothesis is advanced by Tuomo Lankila, who does not however insist that the author is Damascius, but simply pagan: "The Corpus Areopagiticum as a Crypto-Pagan Project."

One fascinating if inconclusive detail from Mazzucchi's work (748) is the phonetic parallels he finds between, on the one hand, Dionysius and his teachers Paul and Hierotheus, and on the other hand, Damascius and his teachers Proclus and Isidorus: Διονύσιος – Δαμάσκιος; Παῦλος – Πρόκλος; Ἱερόθεος – Ἰσιδώρος. Each pair of names share the same initial letter, final syllable, and number of syllables.

<sup>354</sup> See for example, J. Vanneste (*Le Mystere de Dieu*), B. Brons (*Gott und die Seienden*), Mortley (*From Word to Silence II*), Hathaway (*Hierarchy*).

contrast, a second wave focused on situating the work firmly in a Christian historical context, apologetically downplaying its pagan debts.<sup>355</sup> Scholarship over the last 35 years has worked its way out of this *either-Neoplatonist-or-Christian* binary, and in that spirit, the present study has tried to even-handedly trace the lineages that come together in the Dionysian synthesis.<sup>356</sup> Like the merging of Aristotle's thought with Platonism, this dialectical fusion of sources transforms both Neoplatonism and Christianity, offering a new vision of the relationship between divine and human. What concerns us is the emerging worldview framed by the philosophy, theology, and liturgy in question—rather than any query into identity or loyalty. Like God, an author we cannot know turns out to be more attractive, provocative, and productive, than one we can.

Let us take “Dionysius the Areopagite” then, as indicating not so much the site and issue of authorship, as a topic being treated indirectly by the corpus.<sup>357</sup> Paul's conversion of Dionysius at the Areopagus thus heralds the meeting of Jerusalem and Athens at the altar of the unknown God.<sup>358</sup> Indeed there are Epicureans and Stoics present at the encounter, and Athens itself naturally points to Plato.<sup>359</sup> But it is not just

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<sup>355</sup> R. Roques, V. Lossky (*The Vision of God*), A. Louth (though his position is sometimes more nuanced).

<sup>356</sup> These more balanced sources are many of the ones I draw on here. The Monophysite controversy of Dionysius' time offers a poignant context for these questions. Does Dionysius have two natures or one? The early scholars seem to think there is just one Dionysius who has to be either a Christian or a pagan, while more recently both natures are seen to exist alongside one another. But perhaps the author believed that both streams, pagan and Christian, come from one source of truth, reflecting his Monoenergist position. For Dionysius' Monoenergism, see Klitenic & Dillon, *Dionysius*, 4-6.

<sup>357</sup> Schäfer, *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 170.

<sup>358</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 280.

<sup>359</sup> Epicureans and Stoics mentioned at Acts 17:17-18. See also Louth, *Denys*, 10.

the Greeks who are converted when the name of their unknown God is proclaimed by Christianity. For by underwriting the budding apophasis found in Gregory<sup>360</sup> with the more systematic approach of Proclus,<sup>361</sup> Dionysius is the first to explicitly theorize “apophatic theology” and to enthrone *agnosia* (ἀγνωσία) as the path to mystic union, even backdating Paul as its first enthusiast: “I proclaim to you that which you worship through your unknowing [ἀγνοοῦντες].” This retranslation of Acts 17:23 by Charles Stang suggests how “unknowing” can be understood as the method of prayer rather than an ignorance to be cast aside. The Christian revelation does not eclipse pagan worship but rather concurs with its notion of an ineffable highest principle that is best ‘known’ and praised apophatically.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>360</sup> For the question of Gregory’s influence on Dionysius, see H.C. Puech, “La ténèbre mystique chez le Pseudo-Denys l’Aréopagite et dans la tradition patristique,” 131; and Lossky, *The Vision of God*, 100. While the question of Gregory’s influence cannot be definitive, it seems more than likely, as we will continue to see in the thematic parallels throughout this section.

<sup>361</sup> Dionysius’ dependence on Proclus is well-documented, see for example Eugenio Corsini, *Il trattato De Divinis Nominibus dello Pseudo-Dionigi e I commenti neoplatonici al Parmenide*; H.D. Saffrey, “Nouveaux liens objectifs entre le Pseudo-Denys et Proclus”; and W. Beierwaltes, “Dionysius Areopagita—ein christlicher Proklos?” For a more general summary, see Lloyd “Later Neoplatonists,” 306; Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 77, 159.

<sup>362</sup> Acts 17:23 translated in Stang, *Apophasis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite*, 142-44. Stang casts Neoplatonism as the prodigal son, returning to the fold of Christianity, and thus inaugurating a new dispensation. Stang’s discussion of Paul’s speech at the Areopagus (144-48) offers valuable context, as well as this interesting historical detail: “In Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, Orestes flees the Fates, who are pursuing him for matricide, and makes his way to Athens to seek asylum from Athena. Athena establishes the court of the Areopagus to hear the case between the Fates, representing the will of Mother Darkness, and Orestes, representing the will of Zeus. The twelve members of the court split their vote and Athena breaks the tie in favor of Orestes. When the Athenians hear Paul preach “foreign divinities” in opposition to their own gods, the author of Luke-Acts has them take him before the very court that was convened in the Athenian imagination precisely to judge contests between gods” (144n.111). See also Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, 21-23, for an interesting discussion about the Neoplatonists’ possible familiarity with Acts 17 and its role in the authorship question.

But concurrently, Dionysius will follow the Cappadocian Fathers and *also* identify God with the fullness of being itself, knowable as immanent cause of the cosmos and thus hymned kataphatically. By incorporating the intricate Procline hierarchies, Dionysius gives new vibrancy to the Christian sense of creation as an elegantly-arrayed reflection of the divine glory. Furthermore, he uses the principles of theurgy to give an account of the efficacy of the liturgy,<sup>363</sup> thus casting the liturgy itself as a new form of theurgy. Neither Neoplatonism nor Christianity emerges unchanged from the symbiotic encounter. Let us take a look at these Dionysian syntheses in light of the themes we have been tracing throughout this study—beginning with the hierarchies of creation and the Thearchy that is God, then moving to the theologies with which we praise God, and ending with the practices with which we assimilate ourselves to the hierarchies and become “co-workers with God” (*theou synergoi* [θεοῦ συνεργοί]).<sup>364</sup>

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*The Celestial Hierarchy* and *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* trace the sacred orders of the ranks of angels and the church.<sup>365</sup> By assuming our place in the graded continuum of reality, we become a conduit for God’s work (*theourgia*) or worldly activity (*energeia*), and are thereby deified (*theosis* [θεώσις]).<sup>366</sup> *Energeia* recalls the essence-activities distinction of the Cappadocians, and indeed, God’s grandeur is seen shining through

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<sup>363</sup> Louth, *Origins* 158-64; Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy”, 586; Stang, *Pseudonymity* 110-16

<sup>364</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 165B.

<sup>365</sup> Dionysius coins the sense of the term “hierarchy” as “sacred order.” Before this, “hier-arch” meant primarily “sacred ruler,” such as a bishop. A change of “hierarchy” could thus refer to a change of bishopric. Dionysius’ new sense is what gives us the modern meaning.

<sup>366</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 372B.

the harmony of the hierarchy.<sup>367</sup> *Theourgia* hearkens back to Proclus and Iamblichus, emphasizing our role as vessel and conveyor of the sacred. As diaphanous channels of the divine will, we make of creation a perfect theophany, reflecting the glory of God through order and beauty. Dionysius inherits the metaphors of ascent we have seen throughout, but for him union involves going deeper *into* one's place in the hierarchy rather than *up* it.<sup>368</sup> We must allow the divine current to flow through us, so the ascent is better understood as assent.<sup>369</sup> We sanction the stream of sanctity that is "traveling in an endless circle. . . always proceeding, always remaining, always restored to itself."<sup>370</sup>

It is the illumination of revealed wisdom that runs through the hierarchy, passing from level to level of the *scala naturae*.<sup>371</sup> In Neoplatonism by contrast, each creature receives its *being* from the one above it in the great chain.<sup>372</sup> This is a crucial and ambiguous difference in Dionysius. Orthodox doctrine says we are created *ex nihilo* and sustained in our being directly by God, without intermediaries. Dionysius concurs: Because we are created immediately by God,<sup>373</sup> we have a direct connection back to him without ascending the hierarchies. So far so good. But Dionysius never mentions the *ex nihilo*, preferring to say that we come from (*ek* [ἐκ]) God rather than from nothing.<sup>374</sup>

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<sup>367</sup> *Letter 9*, 1108B: "the ordered arrangement of the whole visible realm makes known the invisible things of God," a reference to Romans 1:20.

<sup>368</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 165.

<sup>369</sup> Stang, "'Being Neither Oneself Nor Someone Else': The Apophatic Anthropology of Dionysius the Areopagite", 61.

<sup>370</sup> *Divine Names*, 712D-713A. Let us note in passing that the traditional sequence of Neoplatonic procession (*mone, prodos, epistrophe*) has been altered. We will return to this issue below.

<sup>371</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 165A.

<sup>372</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 105f.

<sup>373</sup> *Divine Names*, 649BC, 817C.

<sup>374</sup> See B. Brons, *Gott und die Seienden*, 194.

Mirroring the formulation quoted above, he writes: “all being derives from, exists in, and is returned toward the Beautiful and the Good.”<sup>375</sup> This sounds like an emanative doctrine of being. We will return to this question below, but our purpose will never be to pin Dionysius down on one side or the other of the Neoplatonist-Christian either/or, but simply to notice and analyze the tensions arising from his mixed birth.

Let us briefly address this alteration or elaboration in the sequence of *mone*, *prodos*, *epistrophe* that has just reared its head again. While the overall arc of procession and return is retained, Dionysius inserts a moment of sustain between *prodos* and *epistrophe* (“proceeding, remaining, restored” and “derived, exists, returned” in the examples above).<sup>376</sup> This middle moment is often rendered *mone*, but also sometimes *stasis* [στάσις] and *eirene* [εἰρήνη]. This is introduced to explain the “solidification” of different levels of being (e.g. life, wisdom) and give reason why everything is not in a flux of perpetual procession and return. While God remains the principal *mone* from which everything flows and returns, in practice the sequence we will be encountering is *prodos*, *mone*, *epistrophe*.

Moving along: Recall in Proclus that each hypostasis (one, intellect, soul) issues forth corresponding entities: *henads*, intelligences, and souls.<sup>377</sup> Dionysius parallels this structure with the Thearchy, the celestial hierarchy, and the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Recall too that the Procline structures are enneadic, or nine-fold, organized into three

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<sup>375</sup> *Divine Names*, 705D.

<sup>376</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, 89-94; *Divine Names*, 704C.

<sup>377</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 157f.

groups of three. The celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies are likewise arranged in three groups of three: the nine choirs of angels drawn from Scripture, and three each of rites, clergy, and laity.<sup>378</sup> We are not so much concerned with the content of these hierarchies as with their enneadic structure borrowed from Proclus. Also worth mentioning is the triad of purification (*katharsis*), illumination (*photismos* [φωτισμός]), and perfection (*teleosis* [τέλειος] or *henosis*), which applies to the upward sequence of ranks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy.<sup>379</sup> Dionysius seems to have drawn this triad from the Christian tradition, as we have seen in Gregory and Origen, and to which we will return. Having briefly sketched Dionysius' vision of creation, let us turn now to his vision of the creator, the Thearchy, to see how the Greek and Christian elements of the synthesis hang together there. To draw in all the strands of our inquiry, we must begin where we began, with Parmenides.

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<sup>378</sup> The ordered ranks of the celestial hierarchy from highest to lowest in groups of three are: Seraphim, Cherubim, and Thrones; Dominations, Powers, and Authorities; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels; see *Celestial Hierarchy*, 200D-201A. The ordered ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy from highest to lowest by groups are: **rites**: holy oil (*myron*), Eucharist, and Baptism; **clergy**: bishops, priests, and deacons; **laity**: monks, the baptized, and the excluded; see *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 516A.

<sup>379</sup> For example, the excluded are in need of purification, the baptized in need of illumination, and the monks in need of perfection, while the deacons help purify the excluded, the priests help illuminate the baptized, and the bishops help perfect the monks. See *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 504A-509A and discussion in Louth, *Denys*, 52-55.

*For things that are not can never be forced to be.*  
--Parmenides, On Nature, 7.1

Dionysius risks being accused of a triple parricide: Betrayal not only of father Proclus for “making unholy use of things Greek to attack the Greeks,”<sup>380</sup> and of father Paul for Platonizing the Apostle’s doctrines and neglecting central elements of the faith,<sup>381</sup> but also of father Parmenides, for attributing to the highest principle both being and not-being. I have tried to argue above why Dionysius should be acquitted on the first two counts (no pagan-Christian binary), but at least as far as the *Parmenides* hypotheses are concerned, he is certainly guilty on the third: he effects a revolution in the *Parmenides* commentary tradition by applying both the first and second hypotheses to a single God.<sup>382</sup> And while we have come some way from father Parmenides himself, perhaps we can see how Dionysius, in his seeming betrayals, is a bit like the Eleatic stranger, who implores Theataeatus to “not assume I am becoming a sort of parricide.”<sup>383</sup> The Eleatic stranger appears to go against father Parmenides’ *logos*, but

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<sup>380</sup> *Letter 7*, 1080AB: “But you say that the sophist Apollophanes reviles me, that he is calling me a parricide, that he charges me with making unholy use of things Greek to attack the Greeks.”

<sup>381</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, 166, e.g. salvation history and good stewardship. Sheldon-Williams notes that Dionysius’ interpretation of *praxis* in theurgic terms leaves him with no moral philosophy at all, in “The Greek Christian Platonist Tradition from the Cappadocians to Maximus and Eriugena,” 459.

<sup>382</sup> *Divine Names*, 596A-C, 648C, 825B, 842B, 872A. It seems E. Corsini was the first to thoroughly articulate this insight and demonstrate the dependence of Dionysius’ discussion on the *Parmenides* commentary tradition, in *Divinis Nominibus*, 42f. Klitenic & Dillon quote the relevant passages from the *Divine Names* alongside the corresponding references to *Parmenides*, in *Dionysius*, 16-17. See also Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 153-167; Louth, *Denys*, 87-88; Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 160. Recall that for Proclus, the first hypothesis applied only to the one, and the second to intellect and lower entities.

<sup>383</sup> *Sophist*, 241D. One cannot help but notice that Dionysius’ reference to parricide thus puts him in the role of the Eleatic *stranger*, whose identity remains unknown, but whose association with Elea gives indirect information as to his role in the dialogue. This underlines the point made above: it is as if the author of the corpus has written a monologue and titled the speaker so as to give us indirect information about the corpus’ contents.

only to secure its truth from the sophists who would have it devolve into relativism and contradiction. So too must Dionysius seem to betray both his Greek and Christian fathers, and thereby save them from contradicting one another; his way of doing so is by betraying the mutual exclusivity of the *Parmenidean* hypotheses: God is both being and beyond being, the single subject of both kataphatic and apophatic theology.<sup>384</sup>

And while Dionysius offers a breakthrough in the *Parmenides* exegesis tradition and in his approach to systematic theology, the basis is familiar from both the Greek and Christian side. In Plotinus' image of the sphere, the one beyond being is no thing among things yet is present to all things as their cause.<sup>385</sup> In the Cappadocian Fathers and as far back as Philo, God is unknowable in his essence but understood through his activities in the world, preeminently in creation as theophany.<sup>386</sup> God is known in all things as immanent cause, and yet distinct from all things as transcendent creator.<sup>387</sup> One of Dionysius' unique qualities is how rigorously he follows through on this double logic, bringing out the full paradox:

He is all things in all things and he in no thing among things. He is known to all from all things and he is known to no one from anything. This is the sort of language we must use about God.<sup>388</sup>

This is what Catherine Keller calls Dionysius' "apophatic panentheism."<sup>389</sup> While pantheism would be a simple, "he is all things," adding "in all things" makes the fold of panentheism, allowing alongside this immanence, God's simultaneous transcendence

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<sup>384</sup> *Divine Names*, 588C-89C; 648CD.

<sup>385</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads*, 6.4.7

<sup>386</sup> Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* III.v.183-84; Philo, *De virtutibus*, 25; *De praemiis et poenis*, 44.

<sup>387</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 283f.

<sup>388</sup> *Divine Names*, 872A.

<sup>389</sup> Keller, *Cloud*, 68.

and thus apophasis: “he is no thing among things.” Although the seeds of such an approach are present in Plotinus, by the time the propositional languages of apophasis and kataphasis are systematized by Proclus, the *Parmenides* commentary tradition has slotted those languages into the first and second hypotheses, respectively. It is this more systematic approach, as well as his own linguistic pyrotechnics, that Dionysius brings to bear on the familiar essence-energies distinction. But in literally insisting that God is both being *and beyond being*, there is more at stake than a restatement of the essence-energies distinction. Let us consider for a moment the two sources in play to see why.

Despite some hints in Plato, the first principle is equated with being throughout Middle Platonism. Its conception as beyond being begins in earnest only with Plotinus, passing through Iamblichus and Syrianus to Proclus. For these latter thinkers, that which is the cause of being must transcend being. However, such a notion seems to be carried by the created-uncreated distinction in Christian thinkers, who also have additional reasons for not wanting to adopt the beyond-being position. Because Christ is identified with the *logos*, a Father beyond being who is the cause of being jeopardizes the consubstantiality of Father and Son, thus risking subordination. Hints of such positions are present in early Christian thinkers and fully formed in the Arian and Neo-Arian insistence on the transcendence of the Father. In light of this tendency to project God outward, the Cappadocian Fathers’ formulation of God as the fullness of being in which humans participate seems unsurprising. As mentioned earlier, they likely drew on Porphyry’s crucial divergences from Plotinus in this regard. Sarah Klitenic and John Dillon argue that it is an appropriation of Porphyry’s views, either directly or via the

Cappadocians, that underlies Dionysius' thinking in this regard, permitting him to make his ineffable unity a concurrent trinity.<sup>390</sup> Porphyry applies both *Parmenidean* hypotheses to the first principle, but in different aspects. The first hypothesis describes the one in itself as completely transcendent, while the second hypothesis describes it in its creative role as generator of the cosmos, and therein as the first member of the intelligible triad: being, life, intellect.<sup>391</sup> If Klitenic and Dillon are right, then Dionysius can be seen to unite two streams which run from Plotinus: from Porphyry through the Cappadocian Fathers on the one hand, and from Iamblichus through Proclus on the other. By combining the best thought on both the immanence of God as being and the transcendence of God as beyond being, Dionysius will ratchet up the dialectical tension between kataphasis and apophasis to a heretofore unknown degree, in service of an unknowing breakthrough. But before we examine that unknowing, let us take a closer look at Dionysius' synthesized triad, which draws together ideas from Porphyry, Proclus, and the Cappadocians.

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While Porphyry elides one aspect of the first principle with the first member of the Neoplatonic triad, Dionysius will appropriate all three members to the first

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<sup>390</sup> Klitenic & Dillon, *Dionysius*, 10, 16, 132, but especially 33-34 and 45-48.

<sup>391</sup> Dillon, "Porphyry's Doctrine of the One" in *The Great Tradition*, 356-66. As mentioned in the section on Porphyry, the specifics of this doctrine remain murky, so we will not assume Dionysius takes it over whole cloth. With regard to the parricide trope, I was tempted to write that Dionysius appropriates Porphyry's parricide as his own. But it could be argued that Porphyry's parricide is only an apparent one, finally in service of the father. Though Plotinus called the one "beyond being," his actual treatment of it was thoroughly dialectical in terms of its concurrent transcendence and immanence. In this light, Dionysius both vindicates the father and exonerates the son.

principle itself. What is striking in both cases, is that this provides a solution for the problem of the origins of otherness. Recall that most Neoplatonists in their insistence on the transcendence, unity, and impassivity of the one, could never admit its being moved in any way. This prompts the awkward question of how the one creates while remaining passive, leading to notions of self-generation or self-causality on the part of the second principle, as well as the image of spontaneous overflow. With the exception of Porphyry, Neoplatonists attempt to solve the problem through mediation, postulating a series of intermediaries between the one and the many. Despite the complexities of system and nuance of definition, the problem persists since diversity does not intuitively spring from immutable unity.

However, by locating the source of multiplicity within the first principle itself, Porphyry and Christianity offer a distinct alternative.<sup>392</sup> While the subtlety of Porphyry's position may have been lost on his critics, Christianity seems to provide a more hospitable context for such a formulation. The doctrine of the Trinity is all about how God is at once unified in substance (*ousia*) and triune in persons (*hypostases*), while the firm line between creator and created guards the transcendence the Neoplatonists were so eager to protect.

The irony is that outside of an emanative framework, in the new context of an omnipotent God who creates through a deliberate act of will, it is perhaps less pressing to explain the origins of otherness. Because our discontinuity with the divine is

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<sup>392</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 138. This alignment is ironic in light of Porphyry's treatise, *Against the Christians*.

assumed, we need not explain how diversity flowed forth from Godself. The problem does not disappear completely of course, since God is still immanent cause of creation, and because Dionysius retains traces of the emanation paradigm. But now there is a compelling solution: the multiplicity of creation is prefigured in the Trinity.

Dionysius changes the third term in the Neoplatonic triad (being-life-intellect) from intellect to wisdom, in keeping with the Christian context.<sup>393</sup> As transcendent and beyond being, God is the cause of this triad, but as immanent, God is identified with the triad.<sup>394</sup> God is the very being, life, and wisdom, in which the soul participates. This modification of Neoplatonism, perhaps surprisingly, makes God more intimate with His creation by removing the continuous intermediaries in the great chain of being; despite the discontinuity of *ex nihilo*, God is immediately present to each creature. The result for Christians is that they exchange continuity of nature *with* the divine for proximity through participation *in* the divine. The distance between creator and creation is what allows the closeness of their relation, an idea we saw in Gregory. Panentheism introduces another layer to reality; God is coextensive and thus present to all things without actually *being* the same as them (pantheism).

The treatment of the simultaneous transcendence and immanence of God becomes more complicated in conjunction with not only being, but also with life and

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<sup>393</sup> Corsini argues both for the biblical association of “wisdom” and for the fact that “intellect” will be reserved primarily for the angels, in *Divinis Nominibus*, 53ff.

<sup>394</sup> Dionysius deals with this paradoxical notion head-on at *Divine Names*, 953B: “You once asked what I meant by being itself, life itself, and wisdom itself. You said you failed to understand why I sometimes call God “life itself” and sometimes “subsistence of life itself.” Therefore, sacred man of God, I have thought it necessary to solve your problem. . . . [This] involves no contradiction.”

wisdom.<sup>395</sup> For the Neoplatonists, this triad always consisted of a descending series, which reflects their notion of an emanative and stratified great chain of being.

Dionysius often seems to adopt the idea of a descending order in the triad:

Being is placed before God's other participated terms, for being through itself is higher than life through itself, wisdom through itself, and divine likeness through itself. All the other terms in which created things participate must participate first of all in being. Or rather all those participated terms through themselves participate in being through itself.<sup>396</sup>

The graded arrangement of terms alongside the mention of created things shows that Dionysius is suggesting an analogy of structure between God and the great chain of being or *scala naturae*. Dionysius also demonstrates the priority of terms when he explains that being extends furthest down the hierarchy, even unto inanimate objects, while life extends only as far as animals and plants, and wisdom only to angels and human souls.<sup>397</sup> Taken together, these points suggest that the hierarchy of the cosmos in some way reveals something about the order of the nature of God, as expressed in the triad.

However, this hierarchical triad within God is in tension with another tendency in Dionysius:

We do not consider that the good is one thing, being another, life another, or wisdom another, nor that there are many causes and different divinities higher and lower in status producing different effects, but that these are entirely the good processions of a single God and the names by which we call him among ourselves.<sup>398</sup>

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<sup>395</sup> The ensuing consideration of hierarchical and non-hierarchical notions of the Neoplatonic triad follows Stephen Gersh's illuminating discussion in *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 153-67.

<sup>396</sup> *Divine Names*, 820A, translated in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 160.

<sup>397</sup> See *Divine Names*, 817AB, and discussion in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena* 196-72.

<sup>398</sup> *Divine Names* 816C, translated in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 160.

This passage sounds like a polemic against pagan polytheism, but also probably reflects a wariness toward subordination within the Trinity. Even though the divine persons are not being directly identified with the Neoplatonic triad, a graded hierarchy within God would ring alarm bells of subordination. This prompts a contrasting co-equal understanding of the triad subsisting within the first principle.<sup>399</sup> Such an understanding constitutes another major change in the Neoplatonic system, but just as transcendent and immanent conceptions of God coexist in the Dionysian corpus, so too do hierarchical and non-hierarchical conceptions of God.<sup>400</sup>

This tension is reflected and reinforced by the presence of two conflicting metaphors: emanation and *ex nihilo*. While *ex nihilo* creation is implicit in God's immediacy to all beings, the presence of a concurrent emanative paradigm is undeniable. For example, Dionysius analyzes the Hebrew etymology of Cherubim as "effusions of wisdom"<sup>401</sup> and portrays the Thearchy as "outpouring" toward the

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<sup>399</sup> Marius Victorinus however, who also drew on the thought of Porphyry, will explicitly identify the triad with the members of the Trinity: The Father is being, the Son life, the Spirit wisdom; see *Against Arius* III.1, discussed in Klitenic & Dillon, *Dionysius*, 48. This co-equal understanding will also permit a change of order in the terms, prompting later thinkers to make a different equation of Father as being, Son wisdom, and Spirit life; see Maximus, *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, 296B, and Eriugena, *Periphyseon*, I.455C, discussed in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 164n173.

<sup>400</sup> Gersh writes, these "conceptions are not successive stages in the evolution of Christian Neoplatonic thought but are present simultaneously in its conception of reality. . . [leading it] to expand its terms of reference, for the metaphysical status of such a tension is now problematic. Christian Neoplatonists make no attempt to evade their responsibilities here. . . . These responsibilities include exploration of the epistemological element in the modes of procession" by thinkers like Eriugena (Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 166f.).

<sup>401</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 205B, 304A. Except where noted, translations in this discussion are taken from Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 18-26 and 34, who renders the Greek more literally than the Luibheid translation.

creatures who participate in it.<sup>402</sup> We partake of the “bubbling over” and “bubbling forth” of providence.<sup>403</sup> Emanation was traditionally interpreted as an “ecstasy” by Neoplatonists, and Dionysius describes God’s creation in terms of ecstatic love: God’s superabundant love ecstatically overflows into being.<sup>404</sup> We also read that God loves all his creatures “through an excess of his goodness,” and the word “excess” (*hyperbole* [ὑπερβολή]) is the same word that is used in Proclus to describe the “excess” of potency that overflows from the first principle.<sup>405</sup>

Such metaphors are also employed in relation to all five senses, underscoring the continuity between terrestrial and celestial in the emanative paradigm. Dionysius speaks of “light bestowal” that radiates from the Thearchy, and “sensible odors that are the images of a conceptual diffusion.”<sup>406</sup> Dionysius suggests that the etymology of “angel” is related to the Greek verb “to announce,” making them “heralds of the divine silence” as transmitters of God’s ineffability.<sup>407</sup> Even taste is invoked with regard to our “receptiveness to the divine nourishing streams,”<sup>408</sup> and the gradual diminishment of diffused heat is used to illustrate a similar point.<sup>409</sup> Writers after Dionysius will become

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<sup>402</sup> *Divine Names*, 649B, 909C.

<sup>403</sup> *Divine Names*, 952A; *Celestial Hierarchy*, 177C

<sup>404</sup> *Divine Names*, 712B. On the Neoplatonist interpretation of emanation as ecstasy see Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 20.

<sup>405</sup> *Divine Names*, 708A and Proclus, *Elements of Theology*, 118.18-19, translated in Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 34.

<sup>406</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 121B, 121D.

<sup>407</sup> *Divine Names*, 696B. Dionysius also uses a sonic image to describes God’s concurrent unity and embrace of all things as “shared indivisibly by all in the same way that one and the same sound is perceived by numerous ears” (*Divine Names*, 825A, translated in Luibheid, 102).

<sup>408</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 332B, translated in Luibheid, 185. Also, *Celestial Hierarchy*, 144D: “They call [God] water filling up life and, so to speak, entering the stomach and forming inexhaustible streams” (152).

<sup>409</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 301B.

more circumspect with regard to metaphors of emanation because their implied automatism runs contrary to creation by deliberative will.<sup>410</sup> But for Dionysius, there is still some aspect of emanation at work.<sup>411</sup> For example, those creatures endowed with being, life, and wisdom are said to be “nearer to God, since their participation in him takes so many forms,” while a plant possessing being and life would be further away, and a rock possessing only being, further still.<sup>412</sup> The concept of hierarchy is built around a spatial metaphor, which does seem to capture something about the basic contours of reality insofar as creatures participate in God as immanent cause.

At the same time however, God as transcendent cause ostensibly created both angel and rock *ex nihilo*, with the same immediacy, and is in this sense not any closer to the angel than to the rock. Neither can we say that God is the same distance from them, as God transcends all spatial categories, and thus is in no sense near or far from anything at all.<sup>413</sup> Dionysius’ attempt to capture the nearness of God as immanent cause alongside the inapplicability of the category of distance to God as transcendent cause, prompts formulations like: “The Trinity is present to all things, though not all things are present to it.”<sup>414</sup> At one end of a spectrum, we have God in his transcendence who

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<sup>410</sup> Gersh (18) notes that Maximus the Confessor is perhaps the first to address the problem directly when he argues that a created thing participates in God but “does not flow forth” (*Ambigua*, 7.1080C); see also 206ff. in *Iamblichus to Eriugena*. Gersh argues that metaphors of emanation were gradually replaced by metaphors of mixture in later Christian Neoplatonism, 193-203.

<sup>411</sup> This has been an area of contention among scholars, with some trying to explain away emanation in an effort to secure Dionysius’ orthodoxy (e.g. W. Volker, E. Corsini), while others think his Christianity is just the veneer of a basically traditional pagan outlook (e.g. Roques, Hathaway); see discussion at Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 22.

<sup>412</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 177D, translated in Luibheid, 156.

<sup>413</sup> Turner, *Darkness*, 32.

<sup>414</sup> *Divine Names*, 680B.

admits of no hierarchy, while on the other end, God in his immanence seems to manifest hierarchically. Creation as theophany, as revealing the divine nature, would seem to impute hierarchy to its structure—but in its transcendence it seems to admit of none. This is the incessant Dionysian double logic. It is the tension between immanence and transcendence, and between emanation and *ex nihilo*, that necessitates the paradoxical language with which we praise God through the dialectic of kataphatic and apophatic theologies. “As cause of all and as transcending all, he is rightly nameless and yet has the names of everything that is.”<sup>415</sup> But furthermore, the aspect of hierarchy dictates that there is a proper order to the divine names, while God’s unnameability places him beyond sequence. Let us turn to the divine names of the Thearchy to examine these tensions more closely.

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Dionysius bases his *Divine Names* on both Greek and Christian precedents. Both Justin and Clement had treated the theme, as well as the Cappadocian Fathers.<sup>416</sup> These latter had especially dealt with the topic in relation to the Neo-Arian controversy, in which Eunomius claimed that the name “unbegotten” provided special access to the nature of God the Father.<sup>417</sup> The *Parmenides* commentary tradition also evolved a treatment of divine names, as well as their appropriate sequence, as noted in the

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<sup>415</sup> *Divine Names*, 596C.

<sup>416</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 288.

<sup>417</sup> See above, Section 2.3: Gregory of Nyssa Andrew Louth also examines a possible Syrian inspiration for Dionysius’ treatment in *Denys*, 79-81.

previous section.<sup>418</sup> Dionysius claims to be examining only names drawn from Scripture, but his treatment of designations like great, small, same, different, equal, and unequal, betokens his debt to the Greek sources.<sup>419</sup> For Proclus the divine names refer to *henads* or gods in a hierarchical pantheon. What interests us here is the structure and status of the divine names for Dionysius. How will he accompany them to his monotheism and what will become of their hierarchy? Are the names merely symbolic titles that will ultimately be denied, thereby posing no problem in these regards?<sup>420</sup> Or can they be understood as divine attributes of a single God, and thereby neutralized?<sup>421</sup> Is Dionysius really a proto-derridean, deconstructing not just names but any ontotheological notion in general?<sup>422</sup>

Following Timothy Knepper, I wish to disagree with all three suggestions and claim that the divine names have a definite structure and sequence, as well as a definite reality, thus playing the role of Platonic forms or Procline *henads* in the creation and continuance of the cosmos.<sup>423</sup> As Knepper points out, the term “divine name”

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<sup>418</sup> See above, section 3.2; see also, Franke, *Cannot Be Said*, 77.

<sup>419</sup> These terms are drawn from *Parmenides* 137Cff. and figure prominently in the commentary tradition.

<sup>420</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 288.

<sup>421</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 85ff.

<sup>422</sup> Denys Turner, whose *Darkness of God* may have suggested such a notion, has retracted it in “How to Read the Pseudo-Denys Today?": “I will no longer misrepresent the pseudo-Denys as a derridean deconstructionist *avant la lettre*” (438).

<sup>423</sup> Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 1-34. Knepper seems unconvinced that there is any sense of *ex nihilo* creation in Dionysius, while I will walk a middle path between emanation and *ex nihilo*, continuing to highlight the reality of both and their tension. In *The Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, 177-180, Christian Schäfer offers helpful diagrams outlining the structural approaches to *Divine Names* of E. Ivanka, H.U. von Balthasar, Schäfer, and Aquinas. The corresponding sections of the books where those positions other than his own are treated: Ivanka (228-42), von Balthasar (192f.), Aquinas (262-65). My objections to all these schemas pertain to their relative complexity and lack of symmetry. It seems improbable and illogical that Dionysius, who has clearly and cleanly ordered the celestial and

(*theonumia*) applies only to the intelligible names (e.g. being, power, peace), not to the perceptible symbols (e.g. rock, worm, cup) that are under the purview of the symbolic theology.<sup>424</sup> As such, divine names are not mere names or inadequate metaphors pointing to God, but rather inhere in him as divine causes of intelligible properties. For example, there would be no beauty in the world if not for the divine cause of beauty-itself, which belongs to and is God. When we designate “beauty” as one of God’s names, we are *not* speaking metaphorically. When, as we will see, Dionysius “unsays” beauty, he is only “unsaying” its effects and not the beauty-itself that resides in the Thearchy.<sup>425</sup>

The fact that Dionysius calls it a “Thearchy” already suggests that there is a structure to the divine names. Ultimately, this structure is related to the order of the *scala naturae*, including the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies. As such, the divine names organize the procession, endurance, and return of creation in an emanative manner and are responsible for the basic constraints and parameters of reality. I summarize Knepper’s scheme in the table below, which is organized, unsurprisingly, in a nine-fold manner:

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ecclesiastical hierarchies enneadically, would then employ a baroque, asymmetrical structure to describe the Thearchy in its procession as ordered creation. As we will see, Occam’s razor provides a more elegant approach.

<sup>424</sup> *Divine Names*, 913B, 981C-984A; *Mystical Theology*, 1032D-33B.

<sup>425</sup> The prefix *auto-* corresponds to the suffix “-itself”; Dionysius never prefixes the divine names with *auto-* when he is “unsaying” them.

↓ Ch.4 Names: Good	Divine Names of Ontological Procession	Being (ch.5)
		Life (ch.6)
		Wisdom (ch.7)
Beautiful	Divine Names of Functional Ordering	Power, justice, salvation, redemption (ch.8)
		Great, small, same, other, like, dislike, rest, motion, equality (ch.9)
		Almighty, ancient of days (ch.10)
Love	Divine Names of Unificatory Return	Peace (ch.11)
		Holy of holies, king of kings, lord of lords, God of gods (ch.12)
		Perfect, one (ch.13)

Beginning at the upper right of the table, chapters 5-7 trace the Neoplatonic triad (being-life-wisdom). Each of these intelligible causes source the procession of basic ontological types or strata of being (all things participate in *being*, while only plants and higher participate in *life*, and only human souls and higher in *wisdom*). The names of chapters 8-10 source those properties that allow proper hierarchy and function (*justice* distributes proportion and rank, the *Parmenidean* categories order all relations between things, *ancient of days* indicates eternity and time). Chapters 11-13 source those properties that permit all things to unite and return to their source (*Peace* unifies amongst us, the reduplicated names join plural into singular and point to the divine names themselves as sources of unification, and *perfection* brings about the final oneness). The names of chapter 4 each correspond to one of the phases: good to the abundant overflow of procession, beautiful to the ordered harmony of function, and

love to the erotic unification of return.<sup>426</sup> Thus, the structural organization of the divine names implies that God is not only unity and trinity, but also ennead.

Knepper's objection to describing the divine names as *attributes* is that such a term is misleading if it "functions in such a way as to demote the divine names to a non-essential, non-processional, non-transcendent status."<sup>427</sup> The point here is that insofar as God is cause of all the properties sourced above, God *is* the divine names in an essential manner. To not be so would remove God's ability to give forth and sustain creation in its ordered form.<sup>428</sup>

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<sup>426</sup> The name *light* is also mentioned in chapter 4, but this seems to function as a diffusive image or equivalent of the good—the Platonic image *par excellence*. I will offer a few brief speculations regarding chapters 1-3: (1) treats God's unity, emphasizing that everything that follows describes and precedes from a single source, the monotheistic God; (2) treats God as Trinity, sourcing and organizing the differentiation of all that follows according to the divine difference itself; (3) invokes prayer to remind us that in his transcendent aspect, God remains even beyond unity and difference, and additionally marks the threshold before the processive names begin in chapter 4. (1) unity, (2) difference, (3) *hyper*-unity-and-difference. This triple dialectical structure also evokes the unity-in-distinction that is the mystery of the Trinity.

<sup>427</sup> Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 19. This is against Louth (*Denys*, 86) and P. Rorem (*Pseudo-Dionysius*, 140, 154, 161-64), whose interest seems to be in distinguishing the divine names from Neoplatonic *henads* and thereby guarding the orthodoxy of Dionysius' Christianity. Knepper's conclusion is that divine names are functionally equivalent to Neoplatonic *henads*, but of course are not to be identified with pagan deities. Nor for Dionysius does anything below the *henadic* level play any role in the procession of beings and their properties, in contrast to Neoplatonism.

<sup>428</sup> A helpful tripartite distinction within the names that Dionysius employs and Knepper clarifies is the application of *hyper-*, *auto-*, and *-osis*. When prefixed with *hyper-*, the divine names are referred to as substantially pre-contained in God independent of their role as cause; when prefixed with *auto-*, as causes apart from the participation of beings; when suffixed with *-osis*, as actually participated in by beings (19). This scheme is also worked into the 4-part division describing the unions and differentiations of the divine union and the divine difference, mentioned at *Divine Names*, 640D-641A. (1) The divine unities of the divine unity are the *hyper-* prefixed divine names; (2) the divine differences of the divine unity are the persons of the Trinity; (3) the unities according to the divine difference are the divine names as participated in (*-osis*); (4) the differences according to the divine difference are the participants. Distinctions (1), (2), (4), respectively, correspond to the Neoplatonic distinction between imparticipable, participated, participant; see p.90 above.

We are now in a position to note how the enneadic structure of the divine names is echoed in the enneadic structures of the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Thus taken together, we have three groups of three groups of three—a majestic testament to the glory of the Triune God. The purpose is not to establish a one-to-one correspondence between levels, but rather to underline the notion that we learn something about the structure of God from the structure of the hierarchies and vice versa. This homology suggests that in some way we come *from* God. This does not eliminate the possibility that God created us from nothing—and simply created us in his triply triadic image—but it begins to efface the difference between the two positions. Perhaps this is to be expected in light of the two creation metaphors Dionysius is trying to accommodate. We are reminded of Gregory's own accommodation of both.

One more point bears mentioning in relation to the structure of the divine names. While it definitely comprises an ordered sequence, it is not strictly hierarchical. The names of ontological procession are hierarchical within their group and reflect the vertical organization of the *scala naturae*. But the names of functional ordering govern the relationships between entities in time and space on a 'horizontal' plane. The names of unificatory return both draw entities together horizontally and raise them back up to their source vertically, ultimately completing the circuit of the whole process. All of this could be viewed as a compromise formation in light of the conflicting emphases of hierarchy and anti-hierarchy mentioned above. While the order of the *scala naturae* demands some sort of corresponding order in God, the coequal definition of the Trinity conflicts with the inherited hierarchy of the Neoplatonic triad. But by expanding that

triad into a nine-fold structure, Dionysius balances the descent of ontological procession with the return of unification, shot through with the names of functional ordering. This triple division is headed by the triad good-beautiful-love, making the original Neoplatonic triad a subdivision of the good rather than the principle triad to be subdivided. This is another major departure from the original Neoplatonic scheme, though the notion of a principle triad divided into further triads is retained.<sup>429</sup> Thus Dionysius creates a prismatic refraction of the Trinity that accompanies both coequality and partial hierarchy within “an endless circle. . . always proceeding, always remaining, always restored to itself.”<sup>430</sup>

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The *Divine Names* deal with the conceptual names for God, and constitute the first phase of affirmative or kataphatic theology. The second phase is the *Symbolic Theology*, which examines perceptual names for God.<sup>431</sup> The divine names denote essential creative powers of God and are thus *not* metaphors, while the names drawn from the perceptual realm are used metaphorically. One can say that ‘God is a rock’ to mean that ‘God is steadfast.’ Because all things come from God, we can call God by the names of all things; only the sum total of reality can approach an adequate reflection of

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<sup>429</sup> The next question one would be prompted to ask is whether there is any holographic correspondence between the triad good-beautiful-love and the three subdivisions of each of its terms. While a few poignant connections jump out, a comprehensive treatment of this possibility feels forced at this time.

<sup>430</sup> *Divine Names*, 712D-713A.

<sup>431</sup> The *Symbolic Theology* is likely fictitious (or lost) but we can infer its contents from the rest of the corpus, especially *Letter 9*.

the superabundant God.<sup>432</sup> This is the essence of kataphasis or the path of affirmation. Dionysius proceeds from the conceptual names to the perceptual names because the former are more similar to God than the latter. He calls the two groups similar similarities and dissimilar similarities, respectively.<sup>433</sup> All things are similar to God, because all things come from God, but some things are more similar to God than others, reflecting the *scala naturae* (some creatures are “nearer to God, since their participation in him takes so many forms”).<sup>434</sup> Thus from affirming the loftier names (“sun of righteousness,” “star of morning”) one moves downward to those less so (“cornerstone,” “sweet-smelling ointment”), even unto those decidedly dissimilar (“charging bear,” “worm”).<sup>435</sup> In fact it is these dissimilar similarities that by their sheer crassness shock the mind out of any tendency to idolatry. “Everything, then, can be a help to contemplation.”<sup>436</sup> The danger of the similar similarities, like “golden light,” is that one may be lazily misled to imagine that heavenly beings consist of *actual* golden light, whereas one would never imagine an angel in the guise of a maggot. Having descended from zenith to nadir, it is this property of self-subversion in the most dissimilar similarities which transitions into apophatic theology.<sup>437</sup> The sheer crassness of the symbol prompts the sayer to deny it.

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<sup>432</sup> Turner, *Darkness*, 23f.

<sup>433</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 141C.

<sup>434</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 177D, translated in Luibheid, 156.

<sup>435</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 144C-145A, translated in Luibheid, 152.

<sup>436</sup> *Celestial Hierarchy*, 141BC.

<sup>437</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 290f.

Apophatic theology re-ascends through the series of names, removing each one as inadequate to the transcendent, nameless God.<sup>438</sup> God is not image, word, thing, life, mind, or beauty.<sup>439</sup> God is invisible, incomprehensible, inscrutable, infinite.<sup>440</sup> Even the names unity and trinity must be unsaid in the search for the one-beyond-the-one and the three-beyond-the-three—the unknown beyond even the source of unity and trinity.<sup>441</sup> At the peak of the series, even the negations are negated, a procedure we saw in Proclus.<sup>442</sup> For neither must the negations themselves become idols of the discursive mind. This double, cyclical procedure of kataphatic and apophatic theology keeps the mind constantly in motion, affirming that God is all things until the very things we affirm (God is a drunk) awaken us to God’s concurrent dissimilarity to all things, prompting the negation that God is any thing, and even the negation of those negations, in pursuit of God’s receding transcendence. But we must not stop there and fixate on God’s super-transcendence or the negation of negation as yet another idol—for in practice the cycle would continue back into an affirmation of the divine names.

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<sup>438</sup> As mentioned in n.318, Dionysius uses the term *aphairesis* more frequently than apophasis. Timothy Knepper makes a cogent argument that *aphairesis* is the method of removal, whereas apophasis is the logic that interprets that removal, in Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 66f.

<sup>439</sup> Recall that Dionysius is only unsaying the effects of those names which are divine (God is not any beautiful thing). Dionysius never says that God is not beauty-itself (*auto-kallos*).

<sup>440</sup> *Divine Names*, 588C, 593A-C.

<sup>441</sup> *Divine Names*, 641A, 981A. Dionysius here anticipates the idea of the ineffable Godhead, which will become more developed in thinkers like Eriugena and Eckhart.

<sup>442</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides*, VII.1172. We also saw in Proclus the same formal ordering of affirmations and negations, affirming from most similar to least similar, and negating from least similar to most similar, see above p.109.

Proclus calls the negation of negation *hyperapophasis* [υπεράποφασις].<sup>443</sup> This term brings out the way that God is above the alternative between affirming and denying. The negation of negation is not privative, but rather indicates a positive surpassing of the binary.<sup>444</sup> Dionysius' God is not just super-transcendent, but also super-immanent (both *Parmenidean* hypotheses). Many commentators place the accent on the former, to the neglect of the latter. Let us try to balance this picture. Dionysius' use of the prefix *hyper-* to indicate the way God is beyond certain names and qualities should be understood simultaneously as logical inapplicability (being beyond or separated from) and as metaphysical preeminence (being above or more than).<sup>445</sup> Insofar as God is transcendent, he is beyond all names, none of which can apply to him in any way, even superlatively. But insofar as God is immanent cause *as* the divine names, he is above any intelligible property as its source and it flows from him. Now God must not be mistaken for a participated property that God sources (God is life-itself but God is not a living thing). Nor must the transcendent side of God be neglected (God is not just life-itself, but also subsistence of life-itself; not just being but beyond being). But neither must the immanent side of God be forgotten, for it is the divine names as preeminent causes that give structure and order to the cosmos.

This metaphysical point being made, let us remind ourselves that the whole purpose of the theologies is to celebrate and hymn the divine, and not so much to do

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<sup>443</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on the Parmenides*, VII.1172. See also Stang, "Being Neither", 64.

<sup>444</sup> Carabine, *Unknown God*, 292f. When we say, God is neither in motion or at rest, it is not because he lacks movement nor stability, but because he surpasses the very categories in question.

<sup>445</sup> Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 36.

metaphysics (though some of that is certainly going on).<sup>446</sup> The practice of saying, unsaying, and unsaying the unsaying of names, is meant to do something to the practitioner. Dionysius' *Mystical Theology*, which is the culmination of his apophatic theology, brings this practice to its peak in union with the transcendent God.

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The blessed Moses is commanded to submit first to purification [ἀποκαθαροθῆναι] and then to depart from those who have not undergone this. When every purification is complete, he hears the many-voiced trumpets. He sees the many lights[φῶτα], pure and with rays streaming abundantly. Then, standing apart from the crowds and accompanied by chosen priests, he pushes ahead to the summit of the divine ascents. And yet he does not meet God-himself [θεῶν], but contemplates [θεωρεῖ], not him who is invisible, but rather the place where he is. This means, I presume, that the holiest and highest of the things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the *logoi* [λόγους] of all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through them, however, his unimaginable presence is shown, walking the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious [μυστικόν] darkness [γνόφον] of unknowing [ἀγνοσίας]. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and the invisible, he belongs completely to him who is beyond everything [πάντων ἐπέκεινα]. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united by a completely unknowing inactivity [ἀνενεργησία] of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind [ὑπὲρ νοῦν] by knowing nothing.<sup>447</sup>

After an initial hymn and some introductory remarks, Dionysius' *Mystical*

*Theology* offers this account of Moses' ascent, familiar from Philo and Gregory. Denys Turner suggests that Dionysius' version can be understood as a pastiche of Exodus and Plato's allegory of the cave.<sup>448</sup> Dionysius himself—whichever he is—is just such an amalgam, and his Sinai narrative is peppered with key Platonic terms, like *theoria*, *logoi*, and *epekeina*. But as with Gregory, the light imagery has been reversed and the ascent is one of increasing darkness.

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<sup>446</sup> For hymning the divine, see for example, *Mystical Theology*, 1032D.

<sup>447</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1000C-01A, translation modified from Luibheid, 136f.

<sup>448</sup> Turner, *Darkness*, 14.

Gregory's three stages also seem to be evident here: (1) the initial purification (*katharsis*) and streaming rays correspond to Gregory's way of light; (2) the subsequent contemplation (*theoria*) of the *logoi* correspond to the way of cloud; and (3) the final unknowing (*agnosia*) and union correspond to the way of darkness.<sup>449</sup> Gregory has recourse to the 'presence of the divine' with regard to an unknowing that seems more literal than Dionysius'; for Gregory, we know that we cannot know God and thus our journey becomes an infinite yearning for the divine. By contrast, Dionysius seems closer to Plotinus' view that the only way to transcend the intellect is through the intellect; unknowing takes on a cryptic quality and final *theosis* is a possibility. In the holy moment, the mind is void (but not abandoned) and the divide between seer and seen surpassed; the self is effaced in pure union and the God worshipped through mysterious unknowing.<sup>450</sup>

The three stages also recall Dionysius' use of purification, illumination, and perfection in describing the orders of the ecclesiastical hierarchy; if this is the case, the subjective ascent in some way echoes the hierarchical structure—anthropology recapitulating ontology.<sup>451</sup> This notion recalls the famous exhortation of the *Timaeus* to align the revolutions in our heads with those of the cosmos; creation is nothing but the ordered manifestation of God's glory, which we must imitate on our path back to the

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<sup>449</sup> See page 77.

<sup>450</sup> Michael Sells writes: "The Dionysian darkness of unknowing. . . is the subjective correlate to the nonsubstantialist deity beyond being. It is encountered when the self-other polarity is transcended" (*Mystical Languages*, 35).

<sup>451</sup> Hathaway, 49f.

divine.<sup>452</sup> Indeed, the ecstatic soul that goes out of itself to know God is made in the image of an ecstatic God, who is

beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning [*eros*], and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things. . . by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain nevertheless, within himself.<sup>453</sup>

As “drunk” God stands outside of all good things, being the superfullness of all these things.<sup>454</sup>

Ecstasy meets ecstasy in an act of self-emptying. Inebriation meets inebriation: Drunk with the nectar, Plotinus’ intellect in love and Proclus’ flower of intellect anticipate this mysterious unknowing that is also an un-selfing. Dionysius writes:

The human mind has a capacity to think, through which it looks on conceptual things, and a unity which transcends the nature of the mind, through which it is joined to things beyond itself. . . . We should be taken wholly out of ourselves and become wholly of God, since it is better to belong to God rather than to ourselves.”<sup>455</sup>

One is so beside oneself, that one is no longer a self. Apophatic theology points again to apophatic anthropology. As we saw in Iamblichus, it is *eros* that stokes the locomotive of procession and return, and it is the task of the divided soul to channel

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<sup>452</sup> *Timaeus*, 90CD: “For the divine part within us the congenial motions are the intellections and revolutions of the Universe. These each one of us should follow, rectifying the revolutions within our head, which were distorted at our birth, by learning the harmonies and revolutions of the Universe, and thereby making the part that thinks like unto the object of its thought, in accordance with its original nature, and having achieved this likeness attain finally to that goal of life which is set before men by the gods as the most good both for the present and for the time to come.” See also *Republic*, 500BC: “the man whose mind is truly fixed on eternal realities. . . fixes his gaze upon the things of the eternal and unchanging order, and seeing that they neither wrong nor are wronged by one another, but all abide in harmony as reason bids, he will endeavor to imitate them and, as far as may be, to fashion himself in their likeness and assimilate himself to them.”

<sup>453</sup> *Divine Names*, 712B. Catherine Keller comments on this passage: “So it is not just a generous and paternal love, a unilateral gift, but a craving for ecstatic relation that after all produces the world” (*Cloud*, 76).

<sup>454</sup> *Letter 9*, 1112C.

<sup>455</sup> *Divine Names*, 865D.

that love back toward its source.<sup>456</sup> So too does the Dionysian soul split itself between the poles of kataphasis and apophasis, symbolically crucified and therefore deified.<sup>457</sup> The linguistic praxis of *Divine Names* and *Mystical Theology* can be understood as a spiritual technology designed to short-circuit, or rather to *hyper*-circuit, the mind into a state of *agnosia*, leading to a self-clearing that culminates in mystical unification.<sup>458</sup>

The text of the Moses sequence is clothed in ritual terminology, indicating that Dionysius intends it as a parallel to the liturgical experience of the hierarch<sup>459</sup>—as when the high priest enters the holy of holies. Indeed, after the longer and more explicative *Divine Names*, all of *Mystical Theology* has a tersely pregnant and performative aspect. After the opening hymn and the narrative ascent, Dionysius offers the image of a sculptor carving a statue, familiar from Plotinus: one must clear aside (*aphairesis*) every obstacle, every idol, to reveal a pure view of the hidden beauty.<sup>460</sup> The brevity of *Mystical Theology* after the *Divine Names* seems to perform this reaching toward the silent sanctuary of union with the indescribable.<sup>461</sup> This enacted climax points toward the liturgy as the proper context in which to understand *theosis*.<sup>462</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Cf. Charles Stang: “What drives this endless apophasis of God and self is love (*eros=agape*),” (*Pseudonymity*, 194). Dionysius equates *eros* and *agape* at *Divine Names*, 709BC and even calls *eros* “more divine.”

<sup>457</sup> Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy,” 586. See also Stang, “Being Neither,” 62f.

<sup>458</sup> Stang, *Pseudonymity*, 155. Stang invokes Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.

<sup>459</sup> Luijckheid & Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 137n10.

<sup>460</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1025B.

<sup>461</sup> *Mystical Theology*, 1033C.

<sup>462</sup> Andrew Louth argues that liturgy is more fundamental than Scripture for Dionysius, underlining the author’s engagement in divine praise rather than divine predication, in Louth, *Origins*, 158-64. He additionally provides some interesting textual evidence from Basil regarding the unwritten mysteries of the Church, in Louth, *Denys*, 27-30.

This clarifies the connection between the three stages of Moses and the triad of purification, illumination, and perfection, in which the individual ascent echoes the roles of the collective ecclesiastical structure.<sup>463</sup> It suggests not only that the steps on the subjective path mirror the objective principles of order in the hierarchy—anthropology recapitulating ontology—but also that the individual soul’s journey is only truly fulfilled in a shared liturgical context. And in fact, that shared context is precisely the ecclesiastical hierarchy, an ordered embodiment of the divine concord in the cosmos:

When these sacred hymns, with their summaries of holy truths have prepared our spirits to be one with what we shall shortly celebrate, when they have attuned us to the divine harmony and have brought us in accord not only with divine realities but with our individual selves and with others in such a way that we make up one homogenous choir of sacred humans, . . . one will see something that both brings about unity and manifests a single empathy, of which the source is the spirit of the Deity. . . . The theurgies are the consummation of the theologies.<sup>464</sup>

While in the omitted context this last line ostensibly describes how Jesus’ works (*urgia*) fulfil the words (*logia*) of the Old Testament, I think we can discern another level of meaning that commends the efficacy of sacred ritual over intellectual discourse. Just as Iamblichus puts *theourgia* above *theoria*, so too does Dionysius put it above *theologia*, and for the same reason: it effects salvation. The material sacrament facilitates the deification of the soul by acting as symbolic icon, bringing the soul into correspondence

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<sup>463</sup> Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, 49f.

<sup>464</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 432AB. Gregory Shaw has argued convincingly that Dionysian theurgy, though set in a Christian context, is not different in kind from Iamblichean theurgy, in “Neoplatonic Theurgy and Dionysius the Areopagite.” It should be noted that Dionysius often replaces *theourgia* with *hierourgia*, seemingly as an accommodation to the Christian context. But the more important point is Shaw’s refutation of contentions that pagan theurgy employs an objective genitive (the work of God) while Christian hierurgy employs a subjective genitive (God’s work). The contention made is that pagan theurgy attempts to manipulate the will of the God’s, while Christian hierurgy surrenders to doing God’s will; see for example, Louth, *Denys*, 73. This is not an accurate assessment of pagan theurgy, as we saw in section 3.1 with regard to Iamblichus. Stang concurs with Shaw in *Pseudonymity*, 108.

with divine archetype.<sup>465</sup> At the height of the cycle of kataphatic and apophatic theologies, one transcends the theologies, the positive and the negative, the seer and the seen. Dionysius' "theologies" are "sacred hymns," and as such, are preparation for union through the sacrament. One leaves the mind, "in mysterious inspiration, not only learning [*mathein*, μαθεῖν] but also experiencing [*pathein*, παθεῖν] the divine things," embracing the liturgy as the ritual path to deific perfection.<sup>466</sup>

But perhaps the original context, in which Jesus' theurgies are fulfillments of the Old Testament prophecies, is still relevant. Dionysius writes:

The great Paul, swept along by his yearning for god and seized of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."<sup>467</sup>

Paul has become the theurgic vessel for Christ's work and serves as exemplar on the road to *theosis*.<sup>468</sup> One must "vanish as a person" to become a "divine task."<sup>469</sup> In light of this Christian theurgy, an earlier comparison I made takes on new relevance: The Iamblichean soul is like Christ in a way, partaking of two opposed natures and thus serving a mediating and salvific function. By being divinized from on high, the Iamblichean theurgist is able to conserve the harmony of the cosmos:

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<sup>465</sup> Shaw, "Neoplatonic Theurgy," 586.

<sup>466</sup> *Divine Names*, 648B. See Louth, *Denys*, 25, for the roots of this expression in Aristotle and ultimately the Eleusinian mysteries.

<sup>467</sup> *Divine Names*, 712A; Galatians 2:20.

<sup>468</sup> Charles Stang develops a rich argument that the entire Dionysian corpus is animated by Paul as ecstatic mystic, in *Apophysis and Pseudonymity in Dionysius the Areopagite*. Also in Stang, "Being Neither," 68, he discusses the Pauline ecstasy: "Christ is he who intrudes and interrupts the self that mistakes itself for whole."

<sup>469</sup> Von Balthasar, "Denys," quoted in Stang, *Pseudonymity*, 38f.

All theurgy has two aspects. One that is a rite conducted by men which preserves our natural order in the universe; the other that is empowered by divine symbols, is raised up through them to be joined on high with the Gods.<sup>470</sup>

The Dionysian soul too is deified in ecstasy and thus better fulfills its terrestrial position in the hierarchy. The illumination of revealed wisdom is more deeply incarnated when the soul mediates its passage.

“*Exaiphnes*” is the word Dionysius uses in his *Letter 3* to describe Christ’s love for humanity. This well-chosen word seems to refer not only to Christ, but also both to Plato and to Paul:

The sudden [*exaiphnes*] is that which is drawn out, against hope, into visible shape from its former invisibility. Theology hints subtly at this, I believe, concerning the love of Christ towards man, [implying] that what lies beyond being has come forth from its concealment, assuming substance humanly in the [world] visible to us.<sup>471</sup>

*Exaiphnes* transitions between the visible and the invisible. It performs a similar mediating function in *Parmenides*, where its alternate meaning as “an instant” is employed. The “instantaneous” is said to be a kind of included-middle:

there is this strange [ἄτοπός] instantaneous [ἐξαίφνης] nature [φύσις], something interposed between [μεταξύ] motion and rest, not existing in any time, and into this and out from this that which is in motion changes into rest and that which is at rest changes into motion.<sup>472</sup>

*Exaiphnes* is also the word used in the Bible to describe the “sudden” light of Christ that prompts Saul’s conversion to Paul on the road to Damascus.<sup>473</sup> Furthermore, *exaiphnes* in

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<sup>470</sup> *De mysteriis*, 184.1-7, translated in Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy,” 590.

<sup>471</sup> *Letter 3*, 1069B, translated in Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, 69.

<sup>472</sup> *Parmenides*, 156E.

<sup>473</sup> Acts 9:3: “Now as [Saul] journeyed he approached Damascus, and suddenly [*exaiphnes*] a light from heaven flashed about him. And he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’ And he said, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ And he said, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” For *exaiphnes*, see also Stang, “Being Neither,” 387n60; and Alexander Golitzin, “‘Suddenly, Christ’: The Place of Negative Theology in the Mystagogy of Dionysius Areopagites.”

*Parmenides* is associated with the third hypothesis and thus correlate to soul.<sup>474</sup> In this one word then, we have Christ transforming the soul and thereby facilitating its mediating function between celestial and terrestrial. In being divinized, we are able to pass along the illuminative transmission:

. . . enlightened by the knowledge of what we have seen, being both consecrated and consecrators of mystical understanding, we shall become luminous and theurgic, perfected and able to bestow perfection.<sup>475</sup>

In the ecclesiastical instant, we are deified and become conductors of the ever-present divine current, thereby fully assuming our position and duty in the earthly order.<sup>476</sup> By fulfilling our role in the hierarchy, we complete the analogy with God of which the *scala naturae* consists; we complete the divine work.<sup>477</sup>

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Let us conclude where we began, with a few remarks about the author, and the form of the work he created in relation to the ideas it contains. The main body of the corpus is addressed to Timothy, a companion of Paul who, like him, was of Jewish and Greek ancestry. In Greek, his name is Τιμοθεος, which means “honoring God,” and indeed these writings are a hymn to the divine. Another name that comes from the

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<sup>474</sup> See n.303 for the correspondences between the hypotheses and hypostases. Hathaway suggests that *exaiphnes* in *Letter 3* points to the third hypothesis of *Parmenides*, then proceeds to map all nine hypotheses onto the first nine *Letters* of Dionysius, in *Hierarchy*, 80. For *exaiphnes* see n.14.

<sup>475</sup> *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, 372B, translated in Shaw, “Neoplatonic Theurgy,” 574.

<sup>476</sup> Stang, *Pseudonymity*, 110-16. Timothy Knepper argues against a tendency he sees in Andrew Louth that suggests that the hierurgies and hierarchies are finally “kicked away” (like Wittgenstein’s ladder) in mystical union. Knepper sees them as always necessary, with negative theology serving as a preparation for the sacrament, not an overcoming of it. He also notes that *aphairesis* serves not just as a theological preparation but also as a ritual component of liturgical rites, revealing their *hyper*-content rather than negating them. See Knepper, *Negating Negation*, introduction, 70, 102f., 132.

<sup>477</sup> Louth, *Denys*, 106ff.

Greek root τιμαω, is Τιμαιος, from the eponymous dialogue, *Timaeus*, which honors God's created cosmos. Dionysius' work seems to fuse the two, praising the processional descent of divine immanence alongside the mystic ascent toward divine transcendence.

At least as early as Aquinas, commentators note that the downward affirmative series of the *Divine Names* and the upward negative series of the *Mystical Theology* mirror the ontological procession and return,<sup>478</sup> suggesting again that we align our praise of the creator with the rhythms of creation. God shows himself in creation, but also remains hidden; Jesus too "is hidden even amid the revelation." I suggest that the "lost" treatises are meant to reflect part of the unknowability of God. Even from creation, we only infer toward the divine nature, only experience it indirectly. The lacunae in the corpus embody this truth.

Commentators note that the structure of the *Letters* performs the idea of hierarchy, with each letter addressed to appropriate ranks in a climbing sequence (each letter except the 8<sup>th</sup>, which fittingly chastises a monk who has overreached the authority of his station, and is thus the exception that proves the rule). If we combine this series with Hathaway's proposition that the sequence of letters corresponds to the sequence of *Parmenidean* hypotheses,<sup>479</sup> then we have terrestrial hierarchical ascent interpenetrating with divine procession down through the hypostases—an image of the symmetrical ecstasy between human and God.

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<sup>478</sup> Schäfer, *Philosophy*, 28-30.

<sup>479</sup> This is by no means certain. See n.474.

It seems only natural that in hymning the unsayable, Dionysius would do so in unsayable ways, structuring the corpus as another intimation of God's glory – and perhaps most of all by unsaying himself under the pseudonym. Stang develops a stimulating account of pseudonymous writing as an ecstatic regimen of apophatic anthropology.<sup>480</sup> In the practice of writing under the pseudonym, Dionysius undergoes the very self-emptying he commends as the path to union. The identity is stretched unto breaking as time is telescoped, Christ rushes in the ecstatic cracks, and the unsaid self achieves union with the unknown God.

And we too in our stretching toward the unknown writer, imitate the approach to the unknown God. In his absence, our Dionysian author has become no one and everyone: an Athenian judge, a convert of Paul, an Egyptian Jew, a Gazan Scholastic, two different Peters (the Iberian and the Fuller), an Alexandrian member of a secret Christian fraternity, the teacher of both Origen and Plotinus, and the successor to Plato at the Academy of Athens.<sup>481</sup> True to its ambiguity on the question of creation, the corpus is a kind of *creatio ex nihilo* and yet it is clearly born from the body of its Greek and Christian forbearers. Dionysius performs his vision of God: nowhere, everywhere, in all things, nothing. We become Timothy, honoring all that is seen and unseen, and what surpasses seer and seen.

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<sup>480</sup> Stang, *Pseudonymity* and "Being Neither."

<sup>481</sup> These identities are drawn from the scholarly propositions resumed in Hathaway, *Hierarchy*, 31-35.

## Conclusion

The title of this study, “More than Kind and Less than Kin,” is a play on Hamlet’s quip to Claudius, his uncle and stepfather, whose unnatural taking up with Hamlet’s mother after his father’s unnatural death, prompts him to characterize Claudius as “more than kin and less than kind.”<sup>482</sup> In our context, “more than kind” refers to the abundant overflow of emanation, and “less than kin” to the demarcation between creator and created. But also afoot here is the death of the father. Hamlet wonders if his inability to act has brought about his father’s death, making him a parricide. Like the ghost of father Hamlet looms over the play, so too does the ghost of father Parmenides loom over our story. It was Parmenides who first argued the eternal and changeless nature of true being, which later incited the dictum, *ex nihilo nihil est*: Nothing comes from nothing, those words echoed so many centuries later by King Lear. Yet the King’s issue is not metaphysical, but personal. Lear is dividing his daughters’ inheritance of the kingdom, and the conniving elder daughters have just given protracted, obsequious speeches in his honor. Cordelia, who truly loves her father and sees through her greedy sisters’ loquacious ruse, laments, “my love’s more ponderous than my tongue.” She finds silence a more fitting tribute to her faithfulness than her sisters’ false praise, so many verbal idols betraying the pure of heart. Or perhaps the personal does have commerce with the metaphysical: what is the proper way to relate to the Father?

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<sup>482</sup> Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1.2.

Let us draw together the different threads of our inquiry according to the thematic question laid out in the introduction:

- How was the world generated? (emanation and *ex nihilo*)
- Are we of the same nature as the divine? (continuity and discontinuity)
- What can we know and say about the divine? (kataphatic and apophatic)
- How do we commune with the divine? (divinization)

As has become apparent, these questions are interconnected with one another and cannot really be treated separately. One's notion of how the world is generated has bearing on one's continuity with the divine, affecting what can therefore be said and known about it, as well as the method and possibilities of communion. Each individual section has tried to portray this holistic aspect by thinker, so now let us attempt to decompose their ideas by thematic grouping.

### *How was the world generated? - Emanation and ex nihilo*

The Christian absorption of Greek emanation theory causes many and varied tensions to arise within their philosophy. It is not so much that thinkers consciously decide to absorb the emanation theory piece, rather the theory permeates the entire structure of Neoplatonic philosophy. As soon as one starts borrowing terms and concepts from that edifice, one is taking in emanation as well.

On the Greek side: From the Plotinian three-hypostases, to the Neoplatonic triad and ennead, to the complex subdivisions beyond, we see a tendency toward increasing stratification, outlining the nooks and crannies of the great chain of being. This system of multiplied mediators is meant to address the problem of the derivation of plurality

from unity. But we saw another solution to that issue in the dual-aspect one of Porphyry, which was taken up by the Cappadocians, and then by Dionysius.

For the Christians: the problem is framed less as the origins of otherness, and has more to do with preserving the unity of a triune God, who needs to be both transcendent and immanent, both beyond being and the fullness of being itself. Dionysius' solution to this paradox is God's *hyperousia* [υπερουσία], which both transcends the category of being (logical inapplicability) but also fulfills it to the utmost (metaphysical preeminence). Dionysius for his part, has no objections to the stratified systems of Porphyry's critics, synthesizing a dual-aspect God whose glory shines in the ordered hierarchy of the *scala naturae*. One question for Dionysius would be the status of the rest of the great chain, below the celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchies. Are the animal, plant, and mineral kingdoms organized enneadically? Furthermore, what bearing may Neoplatonism have on modern conceptions of order? The Neoplatonic triad (being, life, intelligence) seems to identify real ontological categories, which we now understand in an evolutionary context: when cosmosgenesis leads to higher orders of complexity in matter, which we may associate with sheer being, life emerges. The evolution of life leads to another punctuated emergence of mind. The Greeks, with their sense of an eternal cosmos, would have trouble fathoming evolution; for that, a more temporal and directed conception would be needed—just what the Judeo-Christian worldview provides.

But already Plato had anticipated creation in time in the *Timaeus*, and this served as a lynchpin in Philo's synthesis of Athens and Jerusalem. Creation through the *logos*

was another such halfway house. The original Greek notion came from an emanative framework, but by making it God's principal power, Philo shores up for the creator God the pagan forms as his ideas and capacities. For Philo and Justin, the *logos* is even a "second God," which in light of the later Gnostic controversies would begin to have a subordinationist ring to it. It is in this context that the *creatio ex nihilo* doctrine begins to solidify in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, culminating in the orthodoxies of the First Council of Nicaea: The world is created from nothing (in opposition to emanation theories of *creatio ex deo*) and the Word is generated from God (in opposition to the Arian contention that Christ is a creature created from nothing). The Neo-Arian controversy forces Gregory to be clearer in this regard than Origen had been. However, we did see an intriguing hint that he may have threaded the needle and equated *ex nihilo* with *ex deo*, in light of the twin apophyses of God and human—this, nearly 500 years in advance of Eriugena, who makes such an idea explicit. Dionysius keeps both paradigms in play in his own way, showcasing the glittering array of hierarchies that come from God, while still honoring the divine darkness of the divine difference that separates creature from transcendent God. Only with Maximus will the emanation language be fully evacuated from theological speculation, but Eckhart (not to mention Eriugena) will reintroduce it with his notion of *ebullitio* ("boiling over"). Despite orthodox attempts to enforce the *ex nihilo*, the idea that we come from God has irresistible staying power; a rich and compelling worldview like Dionysius' seems to generate meaning between the two poles.

### *Are we of the same nature as the divine? - Continuity and Discontinuity*

The Greeks generally believe that the human soul is kin with the divine, thus knowledge of the forms is *anamnesis*, and philosophical ascent through *theoria* constitutes a homecoming. Plotinus, Porphyry, and later Proclus, believe that the highest portion of the soul remains connected to the divine. Iamblichus and Damascius break with this doctrine, asserting that the soul is paradoxically both mortal and immortal—but in terms of discontinuity, they do not go as far as the Christians who posit a radical gulf between creator and creature. This *ex nihilo* divide develops against Gnostic notions of a divine spark in the soul that destines the elect for salvation from a fallen world. We still see traces of the more Greek, divine spark view in Origen, for whom knowledge of God is possible, because we are made in his image. The *imago dei* presents a persistent ambiguity in Christianity as regards this question of the soul's nature and its relation to the divine nature. Gregory's doctrine of the mirror of the soul offers an original solution to the tension: the soul reflects the image of God, so by turning inward can contemplate in a created manner what the divine is in an uncreated manner. The image of God is present to the soul, but not ontologically continuous with it. The soul approaches God in its growth in goodness, but because the divine nature is infinite it never arrives at its goal—which both maintains ontological discontinuity, but also allows the soul a certain semblance to the divine infinity in its own infinite quest. Again, meaning is generated between the two poles. Furthermore, the discreteness of creator and creature is the precondition for their relation. This idea seems to carry over from Gregory to Dionysius, though it is less explicit in the latter. Additionally,

Dionysius thematizes God's superlative immanence *as* being, life, wisdom, etc. These two modifications of Neoplatonism actually make God more intimate with his creation, despite the discontinuity of *ex nihilo*, because relation is increased and the continuous intermediaries in the chain of being are removed. The upshot for Christians is that they exchange continuity of nature for divine intimacy and proximity. There is also a budding sense in Dionysius of an analogical solution to the dialectic of continuity and discontinuity. Because the hierarchy is a reflection of God's order, fulfilling our role in it promises divine likeness by analogy: we become like the divine by remaining distinct from the divine in our God given place. This analogy between God's nature and the great chain of being becomes explicit in Maximus and Eriugena, based on the manifestation of the *logos* in creation.<sup>483</sup> It is developed to a new level in Bonaventure's synthesis of the Dionysian hierarchies with Augustine's own notion of the soul as a reflection of the divine nature.<sup>484</sup> Because the *scala naturae* and our souls are both in analogy to God's nature, we find an enneadic hierarchy of powers within us. These developments will offer a dialectical solution to the question of our continuity or discontinuity with the divine.

### What can we know and say about the divine? - Kataphatic and Apophatic

This transitions naturally to the *metaphors* of continuity used to express our relation to the divine (which along with allegory are two modes I will loosely treat

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<sup>483</sup> Gersh, *Iamblichus to Eriugena*, 160-64.

<sup>484</sup> See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum (The Soul's Journey into God)*, and Turner, *Darkness*, 102-35.

under the heading of kataphasis). These metaphors of continuity are naturally metaphors of emanation. Plato describes the good in terms of diffusive sunlight, and our approach to it as climbing stairs and as a leaping spark. Philo portrays how the *logos* comes forth from God as light from the sun, water from a spring, and a torch lit from another torch. Justin Martyr accepts the torch metaphor but rejects that of sunlight, because it does not adequately capture the distinctness of the “second God.” Plotinus again uses a metaphor of light in his illumined sphere, but then removes the corporeal source, intimating the disjunction of transcendence represented by “beyond-being.” Gregory’s mirror of the soul is a conscious compromise, accommodating the simultaneous transcendence and presence of God. Though not mentioned above, Gregory also employs a metaphor of fragrance, similarly conveying the concurrent presence and invisibility of the Bridegroom to the Bride. Philo expresses a similar sentiment when amid “formless conceptions” the soul offers to the divine the incense of its consecrated virtues.

With Iamblichus and theurgy the metaphor becomes literal. Actual fragrances, fires, and waters becomes ritual vessels of the divine influx. The human soul itself becomes a sacred receptacle—another metaphor. The cosmic sympathy underwritten by a continuous emanative framework begins to break down the barrier between literal and metaphoric. The Aristotelian doctrine of causality describing physical and psychological processes is transferred, by analogy, to realm of the divine. And while it happened much earlier, is not the Judeo-Christian transfer of deliberative will to God

already an example of the same phenomena? In fact, some of these all-too-human qualities will need to be explained away by allegory.

Dionysius draws from all his predecessors, embracing metaphors of emanation and showing in his symbolic theology how the whole world is an invitation to the contemplation of God. Furthermore, he reveals in the liturgy, not just symbolic metaphor, but salvific sacrament, a literal transubstantiation of the word made flesh and sacrificed for our sin. In his depiction of divine union, Dionysius reverses Platonic light symbolism, as Gregory, Clement, and Philo had done before him. But more particularly, he and Gregory do not just reverse the symbolism, but make it dialectical and paradoxical—*luminous darkness*—reflecting an increasingly nuanced sense of what can and cannot be known about the divine. We also see emerge a more complex treatment of the Platonic metaphor of ascent. In theurgy, there is no philosophical ascent without a corresponding demiurgic descent, and in Christianity, God deigns to descend as Christ in the Incarnation, so that the human may finally ascend at the last judgment.

Allegory too has been a consistent mode of expressing and interpreting divine truths, beginning with the image of ascent in Plato's allegory of the cave. We saw Philo interpret Moses' vision of God's back but not his face as the famous activities-essence distinction. Origen adds additional layers pertaining to Christ and the *theoria* of the soul. Gregory picks up the thread from Origen, using the Song of Songs and Moses' ascent of Sinai to develop a full spiritual path and method, consisting of the ways of light, cloud, and darkness. Dionysius construes Moses' entrance into the darkness of

God in his own way, and thereby reads back both his method of *agnosia* and *himself* into the text of Acts 17. In theurgy the metaphor becomes literal; and Dionysius' is an allegory that becomes truth.

The Neoplatonists too reflect the allegorical fervor of the age, finding in the *Timaeus*' "father and maker" of the cosmos two separate deities, and in Aristotle's physics, metaphysics. But the *Parmenides* commentary tradition represents the most sustained and intricate development of the hidden meaning of a text. What began perhaps as an exercise in logic for Plato, becomes Plotinus' three hypostases, and by Proclus' time a full nine-tiered description of reality and unreality. By eliding the first two hypotheses, Porphyry, and then Dionysius, incite a revolution in this tradition, conceiving of the same divine subject as both transcendent cause and immanent source of being. The problem of the origins of otherness is resolved in the triad and the Trinity, leading to Dionysius' notion of the unions and differences of the divine union and difference.

While the Timaeian father and maker is only difficult to know, the good of *Republic* is *epekeina tes ousias* – and as beyond being is perhaps impossible to know. Here in seed form Plato bestows the dialectic of kataphasis and apophasis upon his descendants. No less do the Old and New Testaments present a mixed picture of the knowability and unknowability of God, and relatedly, his ability to be named and said. While Justin thinks knowledge of the Father is accessible through the Son, Clement denies that we will receive any such knowledge in this lifetime. The essence-activities distinction serves to mitigate this mixed message, but still we see Origen claiming

positive knowledge, and Gregory denying it. But even Gregory's doctrine of *epektasis* ends up embracing a double dialectic where God is both unknown and known—our desire to know God's infinity is fulfilled in its perpetual unfulfillment, denied in its constant satisfaction, yet without satiation, prolonged.

Proclus systematizes both the Neoplatonic ontology as well as the propositions of kataphasis and apophasis. He meticulously maps enneadic reality, at whose summit one must even negate negation in *hyperapophasis*. Dionysius presents the hierarchies as manifestations of the divine names which can be known and spoken about kataphatically. But mystical theology will combine kataphasis with apophasis in pursuit of the transcendent God at the source of those names, who can only be known through unknowing. Taken together, Dionysius' *oeuvre* bespeaks the essential connection between the scintillating array of the hierarchies and the unutterable divinity dwelling in darkness.<sup>485</sup> In the end, Dionysius' God cannot be absolutely ineffable because he is known as cause through the names, because a ranked sequence applies to these names, and because even saying that he is unknowable requires a certain knowledge.<sup>486</sup> Was there ever really a choice between a God who can be known and a God who cannot? God always embraces both poles.

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<sup>485</sup> Louth, *Origins*, 172.

<sup>486</sup> Knepper, *Negating Negation*, 130.

### How do we commune with the divine? - Divinization

Plato bequeaths to the tradition a regimen of *katharsis*, culminating in doctrines of both *theoria* and *eros*, which twist and turn in concurrent, conflicting, and confluent relation. Philo, Origen, and Gregory all trace a path of moral and intellectual purification moving to contemplation, which also involves meditation on scripture. But while for Origen this is a culmination in divine knowing, Philo seems to speak generally about a love on the other side of “formless conceptions,” and Gregory explicitly surpasses the intellect in union through love in the way of darkness. In contrast to either the intellectual or the erotic path to union, we saw the Arian and Neo-Arian opposition to mysticism altogether.

While Plotinus and Porphyry cleave to a method of philosophical ascent, Iamblichus and Damascius embrace theurgy as the ritual of demiurgic descent. The fully descended soul even echoes the Christian fallen creature in insisting that an intercession of the gods is necessary for divinization of the soul; one cannot achieve it through one’s own efforts but is in need of grace. However, this sentiment is also present in Plotinus and Proclus’ doctrine of the flower of the intellect. Though union is achieved *through* the intellect, final *henosis* transcends both mind and will. It is the intellect drunk and in love who finds happy fullness.

Dionysius seem to mobilize both approaches. On the one hand, unknowing knowing leads to divinization *through a surpassing* of the mind, while on the other, the liturgy is perhaps the ultimate context of salvation. It is not clear in Dionysius if the former is a metaphor for the latter, or if each represent separate approaches to the

divine. In any case, the adoption of theurgic principles also leads to a sense of the world as theophany, and thus another site of communion with the divine. This prompts Iamblichus and Dionysius to affirm the sanctity of both cosmos and body, in contrast to more ambiguous stances in Plotinus and Christianity at large.<sup>487</sup> For Iamblichus the body and matter are the means of the circulation of *eros* out from and back to the divine, the entire world quickened by love. For Dionysius, the division between creator and creation is the permeable membrane across which symmetric ecstasy unfolds. God is beguiled by goodness from his transcendent dwelling place, pouring out being into the world; and the ecstatic soul pours its very self out of itself, consecrated in apophatic union upon the altar of the unknown God.

This apophatic anthropology can be traced back perhaps all the way to Plato's *melete thanatou*, that practicing for death, the ultimate self-emptying, which is the praxis of philosophy. Philo describes a "self-forgetting" that accompanies his "formless conceptions" as he swoons in love with the divine; while Clement follows his perpetual quest into the darkness of God even beyond the threshold of death. Plotinian *henosis* is an awakening without an awakener, and for Gregory the self is unknowable precisely because God is unknowable—infinite depth in a hall of mirrors. The theurgic vessel of the soul must be a pure receptacle if it is to accept the influx of the divine will; and the Proclean "rousing up of the one in the soul" demands that we identify with that part of ourselves which is of non-being. Beyond even Dionysian ecstasy is Dionysian

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<sup>487</sup> *Divine Names*, 718D-719A: "There is no evil in our bodies. . . . The body is not the cause of evil in the soul. . . . There is no truth in the common assertion that evil is inherent in matter *qua* matter."

pseudonymity. He performs for us the very self-emptying that he espouses, and thereby enacts union through the practice of writing, like the practice of saying, unsaying, and un-unsaying the names of God. The unsaid self dances round the one like a sunflower, inhabiting ambiguous pronouns in the Plotinian text, and sacred objects in the Iamblichean ritual, flashing as the flower of fire and torch of the soul. The Dionysian corpus is a liturgy, sacred body singing praises of the divine, moved by a Bacchic frenzy between kin and kind, seen soon and unseen, something from naught and ponderous silence ecstatically loved; in that song perhaps even the divine ear is caught, and in humming the hymn, moved.

## Appendix: Timeline of Persons

Leftmost date is approximate year of 40<sup>th</sup> birthday rounded to nearest multiple of five or approximate time of flourishing. Birth and death dates are approximate.

530BCE	Pythagoras (571-497)
485	Parmenides (515-?)
430	Socrates (470-399)
415	Plato (427-347)
370	Speusippus (408-339)
345	Aristotle (384-322)
15CE	Philo (25BCE-50CE)
75	Moderatus
160	Celsus
140	Justin Martyr (100-165)
150	Numenius, Alcinous
190	Clement (150-215)
225	Origen (185-254)
245	Plotinus (205-270)
260	Amelius
275	Porphyry (234-305)
285	Iamblichus (245-325)
325	First Council of Nicaea
375	Gregory of Nyssa (335-395)
425	Syrianus (?-437)
450	Proclus (412-485)
500	Damascius (458-540)
550	Dionysius the Areopagite
620	Maximus the Confessor (580-662)
845	John Scottus Eriugena (815-877)

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