

PSEUDO-DENYS THE AREOPAGITE ON DIVINE UNITY AND INFINITY

A Philosophical Analysis of *On the Divine Names* VIII and X–XII

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In this paper, I propose to philosophically analyze how Denys conceives especially of divine unity and infinity in some of the closing parts of his major work *On the Divine Names*.¹ In particular, I will argue that Part VIII understands divine infinity in terms of unbounded creativity; that Part X views God as the principle of cosmic unity; that Part XI points us to God as the source of overwhelming harmony; while Part XII – leading the way to Denys’ ultimate statement on the insufficiency of the divine names – looks at God as “ever receding.” After spelling out in more specific terms what these insights reveal to us of the Areopagite’s philosophical theology, I will try to put that theology into the broader historical context of Denys’ complex relationship with Neoplatonism, hoping in this manner to contribute to a hypothetical reconstruction of his intellectual profile.

PART VIII: GOD AS UNBOUNDED CREATIVITY

The introductory chapters of this part underscore that the source of all power (*dynamis*) is directly God without any intervening medium and that He may be called “power” only *a posteriori*, on account of His causality, in the domain of positive theology. Other than that, in the privative terms of negative theology, He is rightly called “a power surpassing all power” – whereby Denys, again, dismisses the postulate that the divine nature may be defined at all. What is hereby revealed of God is only the accidental characteristic that the divine nature tendentially overshoots or exceeds itself, and that in a sort of programmed progression, it invariably reaches beyond the limits it has already reached. This accidental movement – a ceaseless

¹ This paper is part of a planned part-by-part commentary on the *De divinis nominibus*. – In developing my interpretation, I have been inspired especially by the respective studies of Eugeni Corsini, Ysabel de Andia, Endre von Ivánka, Sarah Klitenic-Wear and John Dillon, Andrew Louth, Ernesto Sergio Mainoldi, Eric Perl, Paul Rorem, and Christian Schäfer (see bibliography).

creation of the powers of an infinite amount of substances – may be termed divine inexhaustibility or, more specifically, inexhaustible productivity. This yields one of the main theological points of Denys’ treatise: divine infinity is construed here as inexhaustible fertility, inexorable creativity (a thesis recurring also in Part IX, Chapter 2). Otherwise stated, God as the universal efficient cause produces infinite times infinite effects but these do not sap His essence – a point that reminds one of the relationship there is between the Platonic idea of the Beautiful and the finite beautiful things participating in it, in the *Symposium*. Denys’ God is, however, somehow more dynamic than the static Platonic idea: His effects as it were spin off of Him and go their several ways while God constantly moves forward and keeps delivering as an unremitting spring head that is never clogged up by the waters gushing from it. In Leibnizian terms, this would be labelled as *creatio continua*:

...He is of endless power, not only because He brings about all power but also because He surpasses all power and even surpasses power-in-itself and because He is more than able to produce infinite times infinite powers different than the already existing powers and because not even these endless and endlessly multiplied powers would ever be able to diminish the output of His more-than-infinite capacity to produce powers...²

Next, to believe Chapters 3–4, inexhaustible divine creativity is the reason why all the intellectual, rational, sentient, animate, and existent things – that is, the entire gamut of existence – are endowed with their respective specific powers. This gradation of the whole range of being bears strong resemblance to the hierarchy of the divine henads in Book III, Chapter 6 of Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*. Yet the upshot of Denys’ thesis is directly the opposite of the Procline system of henadology insofar as here, the henads have been divested of all function because God operates without any kind of mediation. There is no interloper, no intervening agency to canalize divine power into creation. That for Denys, the powers of the angelic orders are also reduced to the one divine power props up just the same philosophical theological intention.

Chapter 5 intends to establish this thesis on a by and large systematic outline of the attributes of cosmic agents (space, time, heavenly bodies), the elements and

² ...ὡς ἀπειροδύναμος οὐ μόνον τῷ πᾶσαν δύναμιν παράγειν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τῷ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν καὶ τὴν αὐτοδύναμιν εἶναι καὶ τῷ ὑπερδύνασθαι καὶ ἀπειράκις ἀπείρους τῶν οὐσῶν δυνάμεων ἑτέρας παραγαγεῖν καὶ τῷ μὴ ἂν ποτε δυνηθῆναι τὰς ἀπείρους καὶ ἐπ’ ἀπειρον παραγομένας δυνάμεις τὴν ὑπεράπειρον αὐτοῦ τῆς δυναμοποιῶ δυνάμεως ἀμβλύναι ποιήσιν... (*On the Divine Names* VIII/2 = *Corpus Dionysiacum* I, 201) – All Greek citations of Denys are taken from Beate Regina Suchla’s critical edition (*Corpus Dionysiacum* vol. I, hereafter referred to as CD I). All translations were made by the author of the present paper.

the biosphere (that is, the entire spectrum of existence). Here, Denys is arguing on the strength of the intuition that things can only operate, continue to be, and so be part of the world by virtue of their capacities and powers. For the world to operate and continue to be, power is necessary: the world exists because its constituent parts never cease to exert their powers, which they receive directly from God. Owing to the inscrutable resolution of the Creator, these powers are diversified and disparate and in a mind-boggling manner, they still concur – right as they compete and clash with each other – to the emergence of the unity of the world, which is the universe. For Creation is a higher unity of identity and difference, God being, paradoxically, not only a differentiating but also a coordinating principle of things. As the Areopagite does not fail to point out elsewhere in this text (Part IX, Chapter 4), God as the One is, in parallel, the principle of identity of individual things as well as their principle of connectivity; which is to say that He is the source of reality (or substantiality) as well as of “worldliness,” *Weltlichkeit* (that is, the reason why things are arranged in order to constitute a world). Hence we seem entitled to say that unification and difference, *henōsis* and *diaphora* (for which see Part II), the two fundamental attributes characterizing the entire God-head, are after this fashion projected into creation as well:

Properties of the inexhaustible power are manifest in humans and in animals and in plants as well as in the entire nature of the universe; and they vest with power the unified things in order that they may be able to love, and enter into community with, each other, while they also give power to separated things in order that each of them may exist according to its own essence and definition without fusion and confusion; and they maintain the order and good arrangement of the universe in its best interest; and they keep unharmed [...] the heavenly and light-giving and star-like essences and orders; and enable eternity so it may exist, and separate the revolutions of time from each other [...]; and render the powers of fire inextinguishable and the flow of water inexhaustible, and they determine the movements of the air, and lay a ground for the Earth on the face of nihil...³

³ Πρόεισι δὲ τὰ τῆς ἀνεκλείπτου δυνάμεως καὶ εἰς ἀνθρώπους καὶ ζῶα καὶ φυτὰ καὶ τὴν ὅλην τοῦ παντὸς φύσιν καὶ δυναμοὶ τὰ ἠνωμένα πρὸς τὴν ἀλλήλων φιλίαν καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ τὰ διακεκριμένα πρὸς τὸ εἶναι κατὰ τὸν οἰκεῖον ἕκαστα λόγον καὶ ὄρον ἀσύγχυτα καὶ ἀσύμφურτα καὶ τὰς τοῦ παντὸς τάξεις καὶ εὐθημοσύνας εἰς τὸ οἰκεῖον ἀγαθὸν διασώζει καὶ τὰς ἀθανάτους τῶν ἀγγελικῶν ἐνάδων ζωὰς ἀλωβήτους διαφυλάττει καὶ τὰς οὐρανίας καὶ φωστηρικὰς καὶ ἀστρῶους οὐσίας καὶ τάξεις ἀναλλοιώτους καὶ τὸν αἰῶνα δύνασθαι εἶναι ποιεῖ καὶ τὰς τοῦ χρόνου περιελίξεις διακρίνει μὲν ταῖς προόδοις, συνάγει δὲ ταῖς ἀποκαταστάσει καὶ τὰς τοῦ πυρὸς δυνάμεις ἀσβέστους ποιεῖ καὶ τὰς τοῦ ὕδατος ἐπιρροὰς ἀνεκλείπτους καὶ τὴν ἀερίαν χύσιν ὀρίζει καὶ τὴν γῆν ἐπ’ οὐδενὸς ἰδρύει... (CD I/202.)

As Denys elaborates on how God has differentiated the several powers of the created things we understand that he also takes God to be the explanation for the stratification of the world and for its unstinting diversity of forms. God is hereby perceived as the reason why all available space in the world has been replenished, why all the potentialities of being have been realized, and why a seamless continuum of the echelons of being has been produced. To use a Scholastic term, Denys insinuates that God is the *principium repletionis mundi*. This thesis, unstated in this form, also relies on our author's aforementioned intuition that God is inexhaustibly creative. On top of that, the space of the world is filled up with entities not in a haphazard manner but – so the Areopagite argues – God as a taxative force accomodates time and space to the beings He creates. Hence in a tacit manner, Denys produces evidence here not only in favour of the argument for the existence of God from efficient causality but also for the physico-theological argument, insofar as providentially, every existant has a pre-planned location in being and powers corresponding to that pre-planned location.

Chapter 7, again, detects a pre-established harmony in the domain of morality and calls it divine justice. To judge by the wording of the text, this also results from the harmony God has established between the planned essences of things and their respective powers; and from the separation there is between the several essences. For God prevents an illegitimate amalgamation of sundry essences and powers as He maintains the cosmos, the good order of the world. In this regard, God's creativity is boundless also in the Leibnizian sense that He antecedently co-ordinates an indefinitely large amount of beings in a cosmic network, in the frame of an *harmonie préétablie*. Finally, Chapter 9 confirms that God as a universal guardian constantly maintains (*sustentatio*) the specific differences of things – that is, that He has the immense power to reverse universal entropy. For the natural tendency of nature would be to go down the wrong way into collapse and dispersal. In His quality of creator of essence and existence, God is able to overpower this natural tendency *ab intra*, from inside the individual essences of things:

On account of this, the theologians also call her <the divine justice> “redemption” [...] insofar as she does not allow the true realities to go astray, towards non-being, and also because even if something should deviate towards disharmony and disorder and should suffer a loss of perfection in terms of its specific excellencies, she will redeem such things from their suffering and weakness and indigence as she fills up what is missing and paternally invigorates whatever is weak and deflects <us>

from what is bad, and, rather, leads <us> on to what is good and makes up for the good that has been lost and puts in order the disarray and disorder of a thing and renders it complete as she rescues it from mutilation.⁴

Part VIII, then, proffers a theory of the divine design of the world. To implement that design, power, *dynamis* is needed. From this point of view, the world as an effect of God is a metaphysical display of strength. For Denys, the power at work in the design and coordination of the universe is indefinitely grand. The fundamental nature of God is thereby characterized here, first and foremost, as boundless productivity, whose effect is a premeditated, controlled, maintained and uninterrupted flow of creation. This, however, elicits some tension between God's boundlessness and His so much accentuated unity. But by the time we reach the end of *On the Divine Names*, it will have been seen that these apparently contradictory attributes will just coincide, revealing a God who is a coincidence of opposites, *coincidentia oppositorum*.

PART X: GOD AS THE PRINCIPLE OF COSMIC UNITY

Part X, a short essay on God as omnipotent, ancient of days, young, time, and eternity, interprets divine omnipotence in terms of a cosmic principle of unity. In Chapter 1, God is described as a *radex mundi* in that a power capable of keeping the world from falling apart may derive only from a supreme, all-surpassing source. Denys builds his position on the rational insight that departing from the individuality of the individual things it is impossible to grasp why they are ordered into a universe. By reason of their respective principles of identity and separation, their disunion and segregation would be legitimately expected – that is, not the presence but the lack of a cosmos. Hence the unity of the world calls for an explanation along the lines of the principle of sufficient reason. This rationale will be God as – metaphorically speaking – a rope that ties up the sheaf of the universe, as the inverse of entropy and dispersion.

⁴ Διὸ καὶ «ἀπολύτρωσιν» αὐτὴν <= τὴν θεῖαν δικαιοσύνην καὶ σωτηρίαν> ὀνομάζουσιν οἱ θεολόγοι, [...] καθ' ὅσον οὐκ ἔα τὰ ὄντως ὄντα πρὸς τὸ μὴ εἶναι διαπεσεῖν καὶ καθ' ὅσον, εἰ καὶ τι πρὸς τὸ πλημμελεῖς καὶ ἄτακτον ἀποσφαλεῖ καὶ μείωσιν τινα πάθοι τῆς τῶν οἰκείων ἀγαθῶν τελειότητος, καὶ τοῦτο τοῦ πάθους καὶ τῆς ἀδρανείας καὶ τῆς στερήσεως ἀπολυτροῦται πληροῦσα τὸ ἐνδεές καὶ πατρικῶς τὴν ἀτονίαν ὑπερείδουσα καὶ ἀνιστώσα τοῦ κακοῦ, μᾶλλον δὲ ἰστώσα ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ τὸ ὑπεκρυνὲν ἀγαθὸν ἀναπληροῦσα καὶ τάττουσα καὶ κοσμοῦσα τὴν ἀταξίαν αὐτοῦ καὶ ἀκοσμίαν καὶ ὀλόκληρον ἀποτελοῦσα καὶ πάντων ἀπολύουσα τῶν λελωβημένων. (CD I/206. – τὰ ὄντως ὄντα is an expression originating from Plato's *Phaedrus*, 247 E.)

At the same time, the Greek counterpart of omnipotence, *panokratoria* literally means holding sway over all, which invites Denys' thesis that God is a universal ruler beloved by His subjects. In philosophical terms, this indicates that God is also a universal final cause, the object of universal desire (in an apparently Peripatetic mode). Hence the full characteristics of God includes universal efficient causality (creation), universal formal causality (God is also the originator of the essences of things) as well as universal final causality. As a result, it is justified to say that God is origin and end as well as the orbit the world runs between that origin and that end:

He is called omnipotent on account of His being the omnipotent foundation of the universe, which holds together and surrounds everything and establishes and positions and girdles round and perfects the universe in Himself so that it becomes indissoluble, and He brings forth all from Himself as an omnipotent origin and brings the universe back to Himself as an omnipotent abyss and keeps it together as a foundation of the universe, more powerful than all else, <a foundation> which consolidates all it encompasses by virtue of one all-surpassing embrace, and does not allow that the things should fall out of Him as their completely perfect home and should perish as they move [...] Besides that, [...] He rules all, and [...] every existing thing desires Him and loves Him while He puts on everything the self-imposed yoke and sweet suffering of the divine, omnipotent and pain-neglecting erotic love for Goodness.⁵

Hence besides the internal articulation and differentiation of the world, the unity of the world also follows from the – internally differentiated, trinitarian – unity of God. Part XIII, however, will point out that God considered *in se* transcends all unity and trinity and displays an infinite excess or superabundance vis-à-vis the world, the creation of which never exhausts His depths.

⁵ Τὸ μὲν γὰρ λέγεται διὰ τὸ πάντων αὐτὸν εἶναι παντοκρατορικὴν ἔδραν συνέχουσαν καὶ περιέχουσαν τὰ ὅλα καὶ ἐνιδρύουσαν καὶ θεμελιούσαν καὶ περισφίγγουσαν καὶ ἀρραγῆς ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὸ πᾶν ἀποτελοῦσαν καὶ ἐξ ἑαυτῆς τὰ ὅλα καθάπερ ἐκ ρίζης παντοκρατορικῆς προάγουσαν καὶ εἰς ἑαυτὴν τὰ πάντα καθάπερ εἰς πυθμένα παντοκρατορικὸν ἐπιστρέφουσαν καὶ συνέχουσαν αὐτὰ ὡς πάντων ἔδραν παγκρατῆ, τὰ συνεχόμενα πάντα κατὰ μίαν ὑπερέχουσαν πάντα συνοχὴν ἀσφαλιζομένην καὶ οὐκ ἔωσαν αὐτὰ διεκπεσόντα ἑαυτῆς ὡς ἐκ παντελοῦς ἐστίας κινούμενα παραπολέσθαι. Λέγεται δὲ παντοκράτωρ ἢ θεαρχία καὶ ὡς πάντων κρατοῦσα καὶ ἀμιγῶς τοῖς διοικουμένοις ἐπαρκοῦσα καὶ ὡς πᾶσιν ἔφετη καὶ ἐπέραστος οὔσα καὶ ἐπιβάλλουσα πᾶσι τοὺς ἐθελουσίους ζυγοὺς καὶ τὰς γλυκείας ὠδίνας τοῦ θείου καὶ παντοκρατορικοῦ καὶ ἀλύπου τῆς ἀγαθότητος αὐτῆς ἔρωτος. (CD I, 215.)

PART XI: GOD AS OVERWHELMING HARMONY

Part XI carries on with the idea that God is the universal principle of unity as it describes God as a boundary surrounding all. The tiny Part XII is going to do essentially the same. There, Denys will characterize God as the Holy of Holies and the King of Kings etc., steadily advancing towards the ecstatic rise of the final, climactic Part XIII, which is headed towards the One and even beyond that, pointing us to infinity or, better, to the unbounded. Part XI is hence rightly viewed as the second last step to be taken in the course of this induction that advances from the unity of the world to God construed as the One. Here, the unity of God is represented as a force countering the entropy, or centrifugal force, of the Many, which seeks to disintegrate the world. The Creator as it were “hedges in the universe” (τὰ πάντα ὀρίζει καὶ περατοῖ) “in virtue of certain fences” (ὥσπερ τισὶ κλειθροῖς) – which invites the question of whether Denys is not referring here to the henad of Boundary, *peras*, from Proclus’ *Platonic Theology*.⁶ By the same token, when our author suggests that the “higher connective powers” subordinate to God are unified with God on the one hand, and with the lower things subjected to them, on the other, hereby operating as instruments of universal unity, then again, this seems to be a distant echo of Proclean henadology.⁷ Contrary to Proclus, however, Denys ascribes no degree of divinity to the “higher connective powers” and does not label them as either henads or monads. Boundary-setting itself is typified as an unmediated operation of God and not as a substantialized, logically necessary mediating agent of a divine status – which is necessarily posited by Proclus in order that instead of the imparticipable One, finite dependent substances may at least participate in Boundary (and in the Unbounded). Without that participation in the highest-ranking order of causes, essences, for Proclus, could not become realities, left to their own resources. But as Denys takes the function of *methexis* back to God, assuming all the logical consequences of that move, he has, on the whole, no need of the mediation of the stratum of the henads.

Part XI, therefore, departs in a pronounced Christological direction, instead of reaching out to the Neo-platonic doctrine of metaphysical mediation, as it applies, in Chapter 2, the unmistakable Christological terms of the Chalcedon confession

⁶ Proclus: *Platonic Theology*, III/8: Τίνας εἰσὶν αἱ δύο μετὰ τὸ ἐν τῶν πάντων ἀρχαί, καὶ πῶς αὐτὰς ὁ ἐν Φιλήβῳ Σωκράτης πέρας καὶ ἄπειρον ἐκάλεσε, καὶ τίνων αἰτίαι τοῖς οὖσιν. – See also Plato’s *Philebus* (27 B 7–C 1); Pythagoras through the testimony of Aristotle, *Metaphysics* A 5 (986 A 23); as well as Philolaus of Croton, B 1 and B 2.

⁷ Τῇ μετοχῇ τῆς θείας εἰρήνης αἱ γοῦν πρεσβύτεραι τῶν συναγωγῶν δυνάμειον αὐταὶ τε πρὸς ἑαυτὰς καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλας ἐνοῦνται καὶ πρὸς τὴν μίαν τῶν ὄλων εἰρηναρχίαν καὶ τὰ ὑφ’ ἑαυτὰς ἐνοῦσιν αὐτὰ τε πρὸς ἑαυτὰ καὶ πρὸς ἀλλήλα καὶ πρὸς τὴν μίαν καὶ παντελῆ τῆς πάντων εἰρήνης ἀρχὴν καὶ αἰτίαν... (*On the Divine Names* X/1 = CD I, 217–218.)

of faith (451) to the way God harmonizes the individual things with each other. The Many are linked up into one seamless network, the world without fusion or coalescence (ἀσυγχύτως) and yet inseparably (ἀδιαιρέτως).

In this fashion, these two Chalcedonian attributes of the double nature of Christ emerge as principles safeguarding a supra-rational, overwhelming harmony of creation. Conversely, then, the the harmony of creation will implicitly suggest that even in the Christ, the two radically different – finite versus infinite – natures are at peace with each other:

Let us contemplate, then, the one and simple nature of peaceful unification, which unifies all with itself, as well as each individual thing with itself and with the others, and maintain the universe by holding together everything, as it mingles them without fusing or confusing them.⁸

On top of that, however, God is not only an ontological borderline but also a catalytic agent for all kinds of *cognition* insofar as cognition and knowledge also presuppose a unification, that between the cognizant and the object of cognition.⁹ Through this universal unifying power of divine peace, the love (φιλία) God displays towards all has it that the individual entities as it were open up to constitute one nontight unit, a permeable whole. So doing, they experience peace directly in the form of delight (ἀπολαύειν). Existence is henceforth not an axiologically neutral terrain but being is pleasure – more specifically, being conjoined and interconnected by divine peace with other entities is pleasure. This controlled community of substances that together constitute the world is no less than a cosmic fraternity (ὁμόγνια), a lofty idea that hovers high above the Aristotelian metaphor of the commander and the army in *Metaphysics* XII, 10.

Talking about God as the source of overwhelming harmony, I am referring to all that: to use Denys' beautiful expression, peace ὑπερβλύζει περιουσία τῆς εἰρηνικῆς γονιμότητος (“gushes over by the excess of peaceful fertility”).¹⁰ For to believe the Areopagite, the world points us to divine boundlessness not only by virtue of the seamless gamut of substances it includes; creation refers to the in-

⁸ Μίαν οὖν τινα καὶ ἀπλῆν τῆς εἰρηνικῆς ἐνώσεως θεωρήσωμεν φύσιν ἐνοῦσαν ἅπαντα ἑαυτῇ καὶ ἑαυτοῖς καὶ ἀλλήλοις καὶ διασώζουσιν πάντα ἐν ἀσυγχύτῳ πάντων συνοχῇ καὶ ἀμιγῇ καὶ συγκεκραμένα. (CD I, 219.)

⁹ Δι' ἦν οἱ θεοὶ νόες ἐνούμενοι ταῖς νοήσεσιν ἑαυτῶν ἐνοῦνται καὶ τοῖς νοουμένοις καὶ αὐθις ἐπὶ τὴν ἄγνωστον ἀναβαίνουνσι τῶν ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἰδρυμένων συναφῆν. Δι' ἦν αἱ ψυχαὶ τοὺς παντοδαποὺς ἑαυτῶν λόγους ἐνοῦσαι καὶ πρὸς μίαν νοερὰν συνάγουσαι καθαρότητα προβαίνουσιν οικείως ἑαυταῖς ὁδῶ καὶ τάξει διὰ τῆς ἀῦλου καὶ ἀμεροῦς νοήσεως ἐπὶ τὴν ὑπὲρ νόησιν ἔνωσιν. (CD I, 219.)

¹⁰ Ibid.

finitude of the Creator not only by dint of being uninterrupted; but divine measurelessness is also evinced by the excessive, overwhelming beauty of the world as a lustre of the surface, as a blossoming of the universe. This is an efflorescence that rationally need not be in the sense that it redundantly overshoots the necessary or erogatory cohesion of the world, being an unnecessary or super-erogatory excess, a lavish display of divine generosity or, better, prodigal wastage, which nevertheless quite reveals something of the innermost riches of God:

Because the fullness of perfect peace extends to every existing thing by virtue of the completely simple presence of His unifying force, insofar as this fullness unifies everything, connecting the extreme parts via the middle members with the other extremity in a manner that it couples them up by dint of one unitary love; and it offers a delight of itself even to the outermost boundaries of the universe and by virtue of unities, identities, unifications, collections, it introduces a universal inseparable fraternity, whilst divine peace is not moved and reveals everything in one and pervades everything and never leaves its own identity; since it [...] overflows because of the excess of its peaceful exuberance; but as it is unitary in a manner transcending unity, it is never diminished with respect to its own fullness, so lofty is its unity.¹¹

Essentially, this entire paragraph conceives of “the fullness of perfect peace” as the illimitable fecundity of the divine essence, in the same manner as this has happened already in Part IX, Chapter 2. This conception has it that God imparts His own unity to every single thing and yet that unity goes unstinted as divine fullness does not hereby dwindle. Which is to say that this somewhat paradoxical interpretation reduces fullness (completeness) to infinity (a sort of incompleteness). *Totalité* and *infini* so conceived, however, do not exclude each other for Denys (*pace* Lévinas).

The ensuing Chapters 3 to 5 are dedicated to ward off the counterargument that movement and conflict, opposites of peace and rest, are also present in nature. As the Areopagite is not ready to identify this as a problem, he proposes that

¹¹ Διήκει γὰρ ἡ τῆς παντελοῦς εἰρήνης ὀλότης ἐπὶ πάντα τὰ ὄντα κατὰ τὴν ἀπλουστάτην αὐτῆς καὶ ἀμιγῆ τῆς ἐνοποιοῦ δυνάμεως παρουσίαν ἐνούσα πάντα καὶ συνδέουσα τὰ ἄκρα διὰ τῶν μέσων τοῖς ἄκροις κατὰ μίαν ὁμοφυῆ συζευγνύμενα φιλιαν καὶ τὸ ἀπολαύειν αὐτῆς δωρουμένη καὶ ταῖς ἐσχάταις τοῦ παντός ἀποπερατώσει καὶ πάντα ὁμόγνια ποιοῦσα ταῖς ἐνότησι, ταῖς ταυτότησι, ταῖς ἐνώσεσι, ταῖς συναγωγαῖς ἀδιαρέτως δηλαδὴ τῆς θείας εἰρήνης ἐστώσης καὶ ἐν ἐνὶ πάντα δευκνουούσης καὶ διὰ πάντων φοιτώσης καὶ τῆς οἰκείας ταυτότητος οὐκ ἐξισταμένης, πρόεισι γὰρ ἐπὶ πάντα καὶ μεταδίδωσι πᾶσιν οἰκειῶς αὐτοῖς ἑαυτῆς καὶ ὑπερβλύζει περιουσία τῆς εἰρηνικῆς γονιμότητος καὶ μένει δι’ ὑπεροχὴν ἐνώσεως ὅλη πρὸς ὅλην καὶ καθ’ ὅλην ἑαυτὴν ὑπερηνωμένη. (Ibid.)

conflict arises out of the fact that the individual things are bent on actualizing the full potentials of their respective essences. In other words, strife and struggle between individual entities derive from their natural tendency to be at peace with their respective individual essences (so strife is reduced to peace). Movement, on the other hand, is nothing else for Denys but the expression of a desire for divine peace understood as a maintaining and animating principle. It is possible that Denys here tacitly relies on the Aristotelian doctrine of the First Unmoved Mover in *Metaphysics* XII, 6–10, which implies that the entire natural universe is moved *kat' ephesin*, as a result of its desire for divine perfection, imitating that perfection by movement, that is, in the only manner possible for the natural world.

Part XI thus elaborates on the concept of a cosmic ordering and connective power emanating from the unity of God. Whilst Chapter 2 suggested that divine peace and order operate in a manner that the hypostatic attributes of the uncreated nature – that is, God – are somehow projected into the relations existing between the individual substances of the created nature, Chapters 4 and 5 apparently want to convince us that the ultimate objective divine peace aims at is in some fashion to provide atonement in the original sense of the term. Which is *at-one-ment*,¹² Christ's saving act, ultimately the buyback and salvation of the world by bringing it back into unity with God. Hence I think that Part XI displays sharper Christian features (as it even confronts Proclus in Chapter 6) and that it already clears the ground for the closing Part XIII, in that it elaborates on the divine power of unification. This entire line of thought is a philosophical ascent and anagogy into the One – which is, in keeping with Part XIII, the most solid point, the anchor of positive theology: τὸ καρτερώτατον, the most important divine name. However, Denys' final, mystical and tacit theology is going to rise above that most solid point too.

PART XII: GOD AS EVER RECEDING

Part XII, concerning “God as the holy of holies, king of kings, lord of lords and god of gods,” presents God as a ruler. The opening sentence directly applies to God the epithet “of infinite names,” in anticipation of Chapter 3 of Part XIII. Hereby, Denys announces that he is going to focus on God's infinite – more precisely, indefinitely grand – excess. So far, he has been constructing a positive theology along the principle of causality but now he is crossing over into a new domain and the mention of the “infinite names” is a token of that shift, reminding us of the utter

¹² ...ἀποκαταλλάσσοις ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ ἐν πνεύματι καὶ δι' ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ πατρὶ. (CD I, 221.)

insufficiency of the divine names he has discussed up to now. Duplicate names, however, of the kind of “king of kings” – argues the Areopagite – are able to refer to God’s transcendent, surpassing nature (because no more than a hint, a reference is possible to it). If we conceive of God as the cause of causes, the *causa causarum* or *causa supercausalis*, then we can express something of His hidden, as it were, ever receding nature. Denys’ famous analogy of being in this passage indicates exactly this divine going to infinity: non-being relates to being as being relates to God. Since being absolutely surpasses non-existence, therefore – on this analogy – God surpasses being in absolutely every respect. Hereby, the Areopagite projects the divine essence into infinity:

Since the cause of all is – in concord with its unitary, all-surpassing transcendence – overfilled with all, He is praised as the Holy of Holies and the like, on account of His being an overflowing cause and transcendent rising above... As the existing things, holy or dominating or royal, overstep the non-existing, and the participations themselves the participating things, in the same proportion the imparticipable cause, which is beyond all existing things and all the participating things and the participations, rises above all that is.¹³

That said, the incomprehensibility of God does not entail that He is completely impossible to get at. Divine providence itself is at work, insists Denys, in order that we may attain the end of mystical theology, which is deification (ἐκθέωσις).¹⁴ This return of the soul into the divine supra-essential (*to hyperousion*) is a withdrawal from cognition and the world, which, so far, have served as the grounds for our knowledge of the knowable side of God. Already Plotinus fashioned the return of the individual soul into the One in a similar manner (*Enneades* V/1), and this Neo-platonic idea is accompanied by a couple of others here at the close of Part XII of *On the Divine Names*: God is characterized as an imparticipable cause (ἀμέθεκτος αἴτιος) – that is, with a term borrowed from Proclus; and the “commanding orders” (ἀρχικώτερα διακοσμήσεις) display an activity which multiplies

¹³ Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὑπερπλήρης πάντων ἐστὶν ὁ πάντων αἴτιος κατὰ μίαν τὴν πάντων ὑπερέχουσαν ὑπερβολήν, ἅγιος ἀγίων ὑμνεῖται καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ καθ’ ὑπερβλύζουσαν αἰτίαν καὶ ἐξηρημένην ὑπεροχήν [...]. Καθ’ ὅσον ὑπερέχουσι τῶν οὐκ ὄντων τὰ ὄντα, ἅγια ἢ θεῖα ἢ κύρια ἢ βασιλικά καὶ αὐτῶν μετεχόντων αἰ αὐτομετοχαί, κατὰ τοσοῦτον ὑπερίδρυνται πάντων τῶν ὄντων ὁ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ πάντων τῶν μετεχόντων καὶ τῶν μετοχῶν ὁ ἀμέθεκτος αἴτιος. (Part XII, Chapter 4 = CD I, 225.)

¹⁴ ἑαυτὴν ἀγαθοπρεπῶς ἐπιδιδούσα πρὸς ἐκθέωσιν τῶν ἐπεστραμμένων. (Part XII, Chapter 3 = CD I, 225.)

divine *charisma*,¹⁵ and which bears a resemblance to how Proclus describes the “divine henads” in Chapter 3, Book I of the *Platonic Theology*. For Proclus, the simplicity of the henads, mediating between the One and the individual things, is multiplied in the variety of substances constituting the world; and by a reversal, the individual substances go back to the One via the divine simplicity of the henads. Which justifies the remark that the Areopagite is here speaking in a Neo-platonic register about topics he considers to be cognate, between Christian theology and Proclean henadology. – And this remark ushers in our conclusion.

CONCLUSION

In the text parts examined above, it strikes the reader that Denys downplays the role of mediating divine entities, as compared to the metaphysical weight they carry with Proclus. The Areopagite attributes all essential creative functions directly to God while his text also displays a number of embryonic passages that could be developing into Neo-platonic doctrines but as it were die down before going into bloom, that is, before becoming full-fledged exponents of Proclean henadology. At the end of the day, God is represented as the one unmediated agent, the unique efficient cause of creation, whose order and beauty is a mirror image of divine glory. Denys hereby voices his conviction that after God, no other canalizing principle (or henad) is needed for the existence of the world to be accounted for.

In the main, then, the world as an effect points to the unity of God: Existence, before all else, points us to the One. However, as Denys pens Chapter 3 of Part XIII, he is ready to overshoot the world as a cosmic piece of evidence for the unity of God and to reach out to His infinity understood as inscrutability and ineffability. In Neo-platonic terms, this move could be seen as a shift away from the Proclean One towards Damascius’ Ineffable (*to arrhēton*) whilst in respect of Christian doctrine, it is line with Cappadocian fundamental theology (think, for instance, of Gregory of Nyssa’s *The Life of Moses* or the *Second Theological Oration* of Gregory of Nazianzen). As Damascius sees it in *De primis principiis* 1–2, the

¹⁵ “Scripture names saints and kings and lords the more dominating orders among the individual things, by virtue of which the secondary orders partake of the gifts deriving from God, and multiply the simplicity of donation of these gifts according to their several differences, whose diversity is <then> providentially and divinely collected by the very first orders into a unity typical of them.” (Ἁγίους δὲ καὶ βασιλεῖς καὶ κυρίους καὶ θεοὺς καλεῖ τὰ λόγια τὰς ἐν ἐκάστοις ἀρχικωτέρας διακοσμῆσεις, δι’ ὧν αἱ δευτέραι τῶν ἐκ θεοῦ δωρεῶν μεταλαμβάνουσαι τὴν τῆς ἐκείνων διαδόσεως ἀπλότητα περὶ τὰς ἑαυτῶν διαφορὰς πληθύνουσι, ὧν αἱ πρόωπιστα τὴν ποικιλίαν προνοητικῶς καὶ θεοειδῶς πρὸς τὴν ἐνότητα τὴν ἑαυτῶν συνάγουσιν. (CD I, 225–226.)

One as the principle, *archē* of the Many necessarily belongs into one causal array with its effect so this compound must be carried by a more remote platform, the Ineffable. In a parallel, if unequal, move Denys departs from the efficient causality of God, which is a traditional start for philosophical theology, and yet from the oneness of God, much in the vein of Damascius, he deduces the ineffability of God, His “supra”-character and infinite distance. This is to say that we may want to track down God till the end of time, there is no way of pinpointing (identifying) Him as He is always cutting in front of us. The world may be a mirror image of God but that image will always remain a throwback. The world may point us to God but never to the plenitude (plethora) of God. The world is groundwork for the demonstration of some divine attributes; it may highlight a phenomenology of God; but that light does not enlighten the depths.

Hence the Dionysian God is a One forever forsaking His (Its) unity for a regress to infinity. This idea does seem to me to incorporate a fusion of the First and the Second Hypotheses of Plato’s *Parmenides*.¹⁶ Put differently, God reconciles irreconcilable attributes in His (Its) inscrutable nature. That God goes out to boundless productivity and yet displays a unitary character somehow also recalls how the Platonic idea of the Beautiful distributes itself endlessly without waning in substance, in the *Symposium*: αὐτὸ καθ’ αὐτὸ μεθ’ αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς αἰεὶ ὄν, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα καλὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα (“though it exists in itself forever self-identically with itself, yet all the other beautiful things participate in it,” 211 B 1). Here, the idea of the Beautiful is at work as a formal (perhaps also as an efficient) cause without undergoing any change – in sum, it is productive and self-identical at the same time. To dialectically argue for a transition from the unity of the One to the Many is the philosophical agenda of the mature Plato, evidenced by the *Parmenides*, the *Sophist* and the *Philebus* alike. This agenda envisions that the Parmenidean idea of positing one real Existant does not in itself account for the phenomenal universe; and yet, only the One maybe the *radex mundi* because the One is the highest ranking reality, the *ens realissimum*. In a final metaphysical analysis, then, the idea of God, in the *De divinis nominibus*, as the infinitely productive One is a Christian resolution, in Neo-platonic terms, of an originally Platonic dilemma, a resolution that is also in concord with Cappadocian fundamental theology. Along that line, I would like to endorse the interpretation of the *Corpus Dionysiacum* that in it, a Christian convert coming from the Academy at Athens makes a polemical and apologetical theological statement partially against the same Academy but with the intention of initiating a constructive dialogue. Certain passages, on the

¹⁶ This is also the main thesis of Sarah Klitenic-Wear’s and John Dillon’s monograph titled *Dionysius the Areopagite and the Neoplatonist Tradition. Despoiling the Hellenes*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007.

other hand, in which Denys is arguing against the supposition of more than one transcendent efficient principle have a drift general enough for us to believe that they are not necessarily directed against a Neo-platonic (Proclean) metaphysical position but, rather, against Hellene polytheism. We may find such passages much earlier and much later as well, in the respective oeuvres of, for instance, Gregory of Nazianzen, or Saint Maximus the Confessor.¹⁷

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¹⁷ On this, see the chapter dedicated to Denys in Endre von Ivánka's excellent volume titled *Plato Christianus. Übernahme und Umgestaltung des Platonismus durch die Väter*. Einsiedeln, Johannes Verlag, 1964.