

PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS ON THE PROCESSES OF NEGATION

Abstract: *One of the most intriguing characters of Late Antiquity is the author who wrote under the pseudonym 'Dionysius, the Areopagite'. Although the 19th century German scholarship challenged the authenticity of the Corpus Areopagiticum, interest in this singular synthesis of Greek Neoplatonist philosophy with Christian thought remains significant. Usually, the works of the corpus are organized according to their internal logic: departing from affirmations we find excellent negations, starting with the cataphatic method we prepare apophaticism. It is customary to point the dialectical structure of the areopagitica, for instance in comparison with authors such as Proclus. However, these kind of remarks undervalue the distinctive features of a profoundly 'work in process' speculation. This paper aims to describe the Dionysian system and its first principle's absolute difference, a synonym of God's ineffability and transcendence, in order to discuss how speech or thought of it still may subsist. Even if this One is ineffable and transcendent, it can nevertheless 'be', including to be 'known' and 'said', but differently from typical assertions of being, intelligence, and speech. This very otherness can be found translated through a positing beyond (ὑπέρ), a linguistic device which translates the author's whole philosophical thesis on the processes of negation and their overcoming.*

1.

'Dionysius' is the pseudonym of the author of a remarkable set of treatises which came to our knowledge under the name of *Corpus Areopagiticum* or, in the Latin tradition, *Corpus Dionysiacum*. The mysterious author identifies himself with Dionysius, the Athenian converted by St. Paul in the Areopagus, after hearing the apostle's preaching on the 'unknown God' (accordingly with the description of *Acts 17:34*). This identification was a successful argument from authority, resulting in centuries of crucial theological and philosophical influence in both Eastern and Western thought, until the beginning of the Renaissance, when scholars such as Nicholas of Cusa, Lorenzo Valla, or Erasmus of Rotterdam proved a long-suspected later dating.

What we do know is that the corpus is the work of an arguably Christian intellectual, acquainted with the Neoplatonist philosophy — namely authors such as Plotinus, and the followers of the Platonic Academy in Athens, mainly Proclus and Damascius —, who wrote in Greek in the late 5th or early 6th century CE and, as far one can suppose, living in Syria. Dating and situating the corpus and its controversies is feasible, once one can find some Monophysite theses, one of the reasons why — along with a manifest resume of

Proclus' doctrine of evil and testimonies of some Christian liturgical elements — a *terminus ad quem* of the corpus' writing and dissemination can be estimated.¹

After the discovery of forgery, a certain devaluation of the now-called Pseudo-Dionysius' thought occurred. However, pseudonymity as a literary and rhetorical device shouldn't be approached with our modern sensibilities, since it is with deliberate intention and historical awareness Dionysius uncovers his identity rather than claiming his originality. Authorship is relegated, and tradition (παράδοσις) gains prominence. The importance of this *declamatio* lies in what Dionysius does with the texts he read and now interprets. Merging — in one of first times and with a considerable success — the Neoplatonist highly-architectural philosophical system with the emerging Christian world view, someone who calls himself 'Dionysius, the Areopagite' creates an efficient device to inaugurate a new hermeneutical enterprise without losing the weight of history.

Recent literature shows a renewed interest in Pseudo-Dionysius,² and this can be explained by various reasons: first, revising the literary and philosophical canon, one finds Pseudo-Dionysius' subtle and silent influence in authors so diverse as Thomas Aquinas or Jacques Derrida; also, the quest of pseudonymity still causes astonishment and will remain likely unsolved, despite numerous attempts of identification; moreover, the *Corpus Areopagiticum* has an unparalleled history of translation into several languages and is a challenging case of manuscript diffusion during the Middle Ages; and finally, this same corpus develops some ideas that, although Neoplatonist framed, stand on their own, like a philosophy of language and a complex system of theologies — namely negative theology — with an interesting concept of *progress* — as we will see.

2.

Following the order of the corpus' manuscripts, one can find four extant treatises and ten authentic letters. The first two treatises are about *hierarchies*, both celestial and ecclesiastical. If the celestial hierarchy is a complex disposition of angels and their relationships according with a precise amount of rules, the ecclesiastical one is the mirror or the parallel of this ordered and rigid system within the church ranks, liturgical celebrations, and sacramental initiation. The hierarchic writings of the corpus convey an

¹ For good introductions to the author and the dating question, vd. Corrigan & Harrington 2015, Golitzin 2013, Lilla 1984, Rorem 1993, Schäfer 2006 and Suchla 2008.

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² E.g. Dillon & Wear 2007, Knepper 2014, Perl 2010 and Stang 2012.

understanding of the reality where everything is in its appropriate place, where each being is to be thought and considered according with its own rank, where even the rapports are foretold by immutable laws. These treatises are the Dionysian translation of the Proclean system into a Christian context, and the process starts with the first principle, God *in se*, as one can read in the first lines of the treatise *On the divine names*:

For just as intelligible things are incomprehensible and unseen to sensible things, just as simple and shapeless things are [incomprehensible and unseen] to the compounded and shaped, and just as the intangible and unstructured formlessness of bodiless things are [incomprehensible and unseen] to those formed in accordance with bodies' structures, by the same logic of truth the infinity beyond being lies beyond beings and the oneness beyond intelligence [lies beyond] intelligences. And the One beyond thought is unthinkable to all thinking, the Good beyond speech is ineffable to all speech, Unity unifying all unity, being beyond being, unintelligible intelligence, ineffable speech, speechlessness, unintelligibility, namelessness, being as any other being is and cause of all being, but itself non-being as beyond all being, as it alone could authoritatively and scientifically reveal itself.³

The very beginning of this passage asserts God's absolute difference from all other known and thinkable realities. We are told this One holds an unreachable status, whereas intelligible and sensible things are ontologically and epistemologically two distinct objects of perception and knowledge. This same logic applies to the relationships between things simple or compound, form or unshaped, and material or bodiless. The very speech or thought is beyond the speakable or the thinkable domains, without compromising *tout court* every speech or thought about it. In fact, language's failure resides in its application to those targeted realities, more than in language or thoughts themselves. Utterances, naming, and intelligences are not just other sources of paradoxes or senseless discussions, even if the One is ineffable and transcendent of all names and epithets. God may still 'be', including to be 'known' and 'said' — but differently from typical being, intelligence, and speech. And that otherness is to be found translated through its positioning *beyond*.

Of course this recalls Plato's *Parmenides* (and the importance of its commentaries for Neoplatonist philosophy), namely the end of the dialogue's first hypothesis (142 A): "Therefore there is no name or description, nor any knowledge or sensation or opinion of it.' It seems not.'" It is clear that this One — in

³ Ὡςπερ γὰρ ἄληπτα καὶ ἀθεώρητα τοῖς αἰσθητοῖς ἐστὶ τὰ νοητὰ καὶ τοῖς ἐν πλάσει καὶ τύπῳ τὰ ἀπλᾶ καὶ ἀτύπωτα, τοῖς τε κατὰ σωμάτων σχήματα μεμορφωμένοις ἢ τῶν ἀσωμάτων ἀναφῆς καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος ἀμορφία, κατὰ τὸν αὐτὸν τῆς ἀληθείας λόγον ὑπέρεκειται τῶν οὐσιῶν ἢ ὑπερούσιος ἀπειρία καὶ τῶν νοῶν ἢ ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἐνότης. Καὶ πάσαις διανοίαις ἀδιανόητόν ἐστι τὸ ὑπὲρ διάνοιαν ἐν, ἄρρητόν τε λόγῳ παντὶ τὸ ὑπὲρ λόγον ἀγαθόν, ἐνὰς ἐνοποιὸς ἀπάσης ἐνάδος καὶ ὑπερούσιος οὐσία καὶ νοῦς ἀνόητος καὶ λόγος ἄρρητος, ἀλογία καὶ ἀνοησία καὶ ἀνωθυμία κατὰ μηδὲν τῶν ὄντων οὐσα καὶ αἴτιον μὲν τοῦ εἶναι πᾶσιν, αὐτὸ δὲ μὴ ὄν ὡς πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα καὶ ὡς ἂν αὐτὴ περὶ ἑαυτῆς κυρίως καὶ ἐπιστητῶς ἀποφαίνοιτο, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De divinis nominibus* [DN] 588 B (109, 7-17 Suchla). On 'intangible and unstructured [ἀναφῆς καὶ ἀσχημάτιστος]': cf. ἀσχημάτιστος καὶ ἀναφῆς, Pl. *Phdr.* 247 D (missing from B. R. Suchla's conjectural *apparatus fontium*). All translations of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite are mine.

itself — is inapprehensible and unreachable, unfamiliar to perceptible and scientific processes of knowledge. Only a new or different state from the formers could be capable of overcome this limitations, and that would be by means of divine revelation of illumination.

3.

If God's nature is absolutely unknowable, and of utter being and goodness, Dionysius doesn't assign the quest for knowledge to an inferior dignity. Ultimately, negative theology is only one face of the process — even if it employs more powerful resources — and we can attempt to design its symmetrical logic. There are traces and expressions of the very source of being among beings, creation manifests likenesses, and each thing is placed according to a hierarchical ordering. The whole is contained in the particular, which bears an image of this same whole. This process happens — as famous Neoplatonist formulas say — 'in the proper way for each one [οικείως ἐκάστῳ]' and 'according to its own capacity (or power) [κατὰ δύναμιν ἐκάστου]'. Still in the same treatise we read:

So it is never true to say that we know God not from his own nature, since this is unknowable and raised beyond all reason and mind, but rather from the ordering of all beings, as [everything is] projected out of him and having some images and likenesses of his divine paradigms, we ascend, according to our capacity, to that which is beyond all things, in the removal and transcending of all things and in the cause of all things. Wherefore God is known in all things and separately from all things. God is known through knowledge and unknowing [or ignorance].⁴

Dionysius appears in the traditions of Middle Neoplatonist authors, in a tradition where 'order' and 'system' were key-concepts, translating them into the unique concept 'hierarchy'. Each one's proper place is like a step in a major stair, a point within the cosmos and, although each individual member is bend to the whole, that same particular intellects according to its ontological and noetic qualities or attributes. This is like shaping a circle with a precise perimeter and geometrical centre. 'According to its own capacity' stands for not overstepping these same boundaries. Though the Stoic *οικείωσις* resonates an ethical meaning, Dionysius and the Neoplatonists emphasize the sense of a familiar place (*οἶκος*), like when we read 'in the proper way for each one'. In these same treatises on hierarchies, sensible and intelligible realms aren't immediately available, instead they are reached through levelled schemes of mediation in downward and upward processes. That is why beauty, for instance, binds everything and promotes attraction and union of

⁴ Μήποτε οὖν ἀληθὲς εἶπεῖν, ὅτι θεὸν γινώσκουμεν οὐκ ἐκ τῆς αὐτοῦ φύσεως, ἄγνωστον γὰρ τοῦτο καὶ πάντα λόγον καὶ νοῦν ὑπεραῖρον, ἀλλ' ἐκ τῆς πάντων τῶν ὄντων διατάξεως ὡς ἐξ αὐτοῦ προβεβλημένης καὶ εἰκόνας πινὰς καὶ ὁμοιώματα τῶν θείων αὐτοῦ παραδειγμάτων ἐχούσης εἰς τὸ ἐπέκεινα πάντων ὁδῶ καὶ τάξει κατὰ δύνამιν ἄνιμεν ἐν τῇ πάντων ἀφαιρέσει καὶ ὑπεροχῇ καὶ ἐν τῇ πάντων αἰτίᾳ. Διὸ καὶ ἐν πᾶσιν ὁ θεὸς γινώσκειται καὶ χωρὶς πάντων. Καὶ διὰ γνώσεως ὁ θεὸς γινώσκειται καὶ διὰ ἀγνωσίας, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 869 C-872 A (197, 18-198, 4 Suchla).

the various parts, once it calls all of them back to the very cause — ‘the’ cause *par excellence* — from where they all came from.

4.

Dionysius is not only concerned with God’s nature or reachability, but also with the inherent pre-containing of everything within itself, both manifest in the overflowing procession and in the different levels of returning. The two treatises on hierarchies and the short treatise on mystical theology are mainly about the different ways effects relate to their cause. The *Divine Names* is the main work about the middle term of the Proclean scheme ‘abiding—procession—return’ (and one must recall Proclus’ proposition “every effect remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and converts to it”⁵).

All things are subsumed under a vertical process, each one in its place, and their constitutive identity is defined through a series of assertions establishing the relationships of identity or difference between them and with the other terms. This means that the series of causality is never lost, since within the identity of each thing is preserved a print of the cause from where it came from and to which it will return. Quoting Dionysius:

These things we learn from the divine scriptures. And, so to say, you will find all the sacred hymnology of the theologians who distinguish the divine names in manifesting and hymning ways, with respect to the beneficent procession of the thearchy.⁶

Divine names are more than affirmations. Naming is not an arbitrary process, nor an accidental or random phenomenon. As stated, they come from the thearchy (that deity that is simultaneously one and trinity) and primarily are sources of intelligible properties to all realities. The cosmos is sourced by this thearchy that provides the ontological ground of every existent thing. Their properties can be found in some names extensively debated by Dionysius, such as ‘good’, ‘being’, ‘life’, and ‘wisdom’. Each of them opens one window on the essential, processional, and transcendent statuses of beings, once they are more than mere descriptions or even metaphors. Please note names can be so, but their functioning is beyond that ambit. And, if all reality is given intelligibility and being through hierarchical ordering and functioning, names grant and empower all ranks and all processional and returning activities — a true overflowing activity (for

⁵ Πάν τὸ αἰπιατὸν καὶ μένει ἐν τῇ αὐτοῦ αἰτία καὶ πρόεισιν ἀπ’ αὐτῆς καὶ ἐπιστρέφει πρὸς αὐτήν, Procl. *El. Theol.* §35, 1-2 Dodds.

⁶ Ταῦτα πρὸς τῶν θείων λογίων μεμυήμεθα. Καὶ πᾶσαν, ὡς εἶπεῖν, τὴν ἱερὰν τῶν θεολόγων ὑμνολογίαν εὐρήσεις πρὸς τὰς ἀγαθουργοὺς τῆς θεαρχίας προόδους ἐκφαντορικῶς καὶ ὑμνητικῶς τὰς θεωνυμίας διασκευάζουσαν, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 589 D (112, 7-10 Suchla).

instance, see Proclus' proposition "every cause both operates prior to its consequent and gives rise to a greater number of posterior terms").⁷

If "God is known in all things and separately from all things", we are allowed to pursue even further affirmative theology's speculation on the various names of God. More than the naming process and its attributive or linguistic nature — which provides a successful ontological and epistemological architecture of the cosmos — whatever is said or thought is contained without differentiation in God, and this guarantees this same process' truth value; to distinguish the divine names may be done regarding their manifesting and hymning ways, as quoted. And since in every single name — and in every single being — God is truly named, hymned, and present, God's reality becomes theophany (that beneficent procession of the thearchy) and the biblical epithet 'all things in all things' now makes sense, once (and after Proclus) "[...] the [qualities] that belong to the effects pre-exist abundantly and essentially in the causes".⁸ In itself, God pre-contains simply and indeterminately all beings, as the thearchy is "[...] all beings and none of the beings".⁹

Again the same proposition: if "God is known in all things and separately from all things", this means that the other side of the coin — now negative theology — does not go to say merely what God is not, like what happened with Plotinus. What is separate from all things would be limited with mere negations, since "[...] it should not be supposed that negations are opposites of affirmations; rather, it is far superiorly beyond deprivations that which is beyond every removal and position".¹⁰ Affirmations are side by side with negations and both have the same properties or suitability: in the same way God stood beyond affirmations, he is beyond negations. Unknowability or ineffability — and their opposites — cannot be ascribed *stricto sensu* to God, but only *lato sensu* and within a still dialectical framework. God is only properly situated beyond unknowing and ineffability.

5.

As one reads and translates the corpus, principally as one approaches chapters concerning the *via negativa*, language progressively becomes even more strange, unnatural, and unfamiliar. It is my belief —

⁷ Πᾶν αἴτιον καὶ πρὸ τοῦ αἰτιατοῦ ἐνεργεῖ καὶ μετ' αὐτὸ πλείονων ἐστὶν ὑποστατικόν, Procl. *El. Theol.* §57, 1-2 Dodds.

⁸ [...] ὅτι περισσῶς καὶ οὐσιωδῶς προένεστι τὰ τῶν αἰτιατῶν τοῖς αἰτίοις, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 645 D (133, 3-4 Suchla).

⁹ [...] πάντα τὰ ὄντα καὶ οὐδὲν τῶν ὄντων, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *DN* 596 C (119, 9 Suchla).

¹⁰ [...] καὶ μὴ οἶεσθαι τὰς ἀποφάσεις ἀντικειμένας εἶναι ταῖς καταφάσεσιν, ἀλλὰ πολὺ πρότερον αὐτὴν ὑπὲρ τὰς στερήσεις εἶναι τὴν ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν καὶ θέσιν, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *De mystica theologia* [MT] 1000 B (143, 5-7 Ritter).

and this is empirically demonstrated — that there is a particular philosophy of language within Dionysius' own language. The only work devoted to this subject was written by P. Scazzoso, the same scholar who translated into Italian the whole corpus. With plenty of examples, the author shows how Dionysius forces Greek with such violence in order to create eccentric morphological and syntactic structures that convey the ideas discussed inside the text. More than a philosophy of language, we find a philosophy inside the language.

We have seen the complementary routes of the *via affirmativa* and of the *via negativa*, and of their cataphatic and apophatic methods. In the corpus, the speculative and dialectical progresses do not end in one synthesis — as one could expect — but rather they maintain the logic unchanged until the very last limits of an incurable antinomy.¹¹ However, there are some linguistic and philosophical devices to negate and, more than that, to surpass negation, even before that mystical union that is beyond being and intelligence.

Here, every time we translated Dionysius' text, we have resourced to the preposition and adverb *beyond*, but in reality we were concealing and covering the Greek word ὑπέρ, which in Latin was translated into *super* or *supra*, according with the acceptations. (*Ultra* is clearly to be the best translation but the Latin tradition for some inscrutable reason did not use it.) The Greek ὑπέρ has plenty of meanings, used both alone and in compound occurrences, and sometimes there is a use of ὑπέρ that is clearly graphical. This can be seen in the quotes I have given or, mentioning two examples, in the well-known (and untranslatable) apostrophising beginning of *Mystical Theology* and in the *First Letter*, which resumes the former treatise:

Τριάς ὑπερούσιε καὶ ὑπέρθεε καὶ ὑπεράγαθε, τῆς Χριστιανῶν ἔφορε θεοσοφίας, ἴθυνον ἡμᾶς ἐπὶ τὴν τῶν μουσικῶν λογίων ὑπεράγνωστον καὶ ὑπερφαῆ καὶ ἀκροτάτην κορυφήν.¹²

But himself [God], *hyper-established hyper* mind and being, totally not being known nor being, exists *hyper-beingly* and is known *hyper* mind.¹³

Searching for ὑπέρ in a reference dictionary, such as in the Liddell-Scott-Jones, one will find it is plenty of meanings and rich in patterns of sense; for instance, in its entry, concerning the occurrences with an object in accusative, the authors emphasise the significances: (a) of place, in reference to motion, *over, beyond*; (b) of measure, *above, exceeding, beyond*, of transgression; (c) of number, *above, upwards of*; (d) of time, *beyond*, i.e. *before, earlier than*; (e) in some dialects, *on behalf of, concerning*.¹⁴

¹¹ Cf. Scazzoso 1967, p. 112.

¹² Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *MT* 997 B (141, 1-3 Ritter).

¹³ αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ οὐσίαν ὑπεριδρυμένος, αὐτῷ τῷ καθόλου μὴ γινώσκεισθαι μηδὲ εἶναι, καὶ ἔστιν ὑπερουσίως καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκειται, Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita, *Epistula I* 1065 A (157, 1-3 Ritter).

¹⁴ Liddell, Scott & Jones 1996, s.v. ὑπέρ (with adaptations).

In this entry, I believe that there are two main senses to be highlighted, both trying to convey the transcendence of the word that occurs linked with ὑπέρ (sometimes ἐπέκεινα is a similar case, but with smaller consequences): (i) first, an ontological and epistemological pre-eminence (ὑπερούσιος; ὑπεροχή), an inherent and attributive superiority or superlativeness, inapplicable and incomparable with other entities, ultimately an insoluble difference; (ii) a sense of spatial or referential location (ὑπερίδρυσις), surpassing everything (ὑπερβολή), with exceeding qualities (ὑπερπλήρης), overflowing measures, quantities and any conceivable number.

From a mere linguistic device to a powerful metaphor of thought, Dionysius is able to swiftly change the scope and the quest's focus, since its very speculative limits being are to be depicted by the language's failures. Strictly speaking, even if Dionysius seems much more interested in the *via negativa*, his metaphysical system comprehends two ways of speculation, interrelated and mutually necessary. To overcome this process, Dionysius does not simply negate negation. He goes beyond that and *hyperbolises* thought. We saw the meta-linguistic character of this process which, after positions and removals, tries to surpass and to go beyond negation, aiming for a target that is *per definitionem* beyond being and intelligence. And — as Dionysius claims — if God is only properly situated beyond unknowing and ineffability, right after asserting this we should remain silent.

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