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Eis apeiron ienai: Dionysius the Areopagite's Infinite Approach to God in Parts IX and XIII of *On Divine Names*

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Abstract

In this paper, I carry out a philosophical analysis into the speculative theology of Parts IX and XIII of Dionysius the Areopagite's (*floruit cca* 500) major work *On Divine Names*. In a first instance, however, I make a reference to Part III of the same text as well, in order to outline the Dionysian alternative to theology—which is prayer. This is followed by a general characterization of Dionysian theology, which is represented here as an impossible effort to capture God's infinity. This effort presupposes that the Aristotelian logical and metaphysical principle concerning the impossibility of going to infinity is invalid, and that instead, if we really want to access divine essence, we have to postulate the exact opposite. In a Peripatetic conceptual framework, it is possible to locate God by denying an endless regress of (moving or efficient) causes; in a Dionysian universe, it is impossible to locate Him by an infinite induction of causality-based names. Next, a short presentation situates Parts IX and XIII in the context of *On Divine Names*, after which I delve into an analysis of Part IX. Here I argue that in this part, Dionysius interprets divine grandeur as inexhaustible productivity or creativity, and that thereby, he gives us a preliminary sense of God's infinity. Finally, Part XIII is an explicit rejection of the idea that any divine name will ever be able to pinpoint the infinite divine essence. Hence, in conclusion, Dionysius embraces the proposition that a *regressus infinitus* would be necessary to reach out to God and that, apparently, prayer and unmediated union are better ways of approaching God than speculative theology.

Keywords: Dionysius the Areopagite; philosophical theology; divine infinity; divine unicity; prayer

1. Introduction

In the present paper, I want to philosophically analyze Parts IX and XIII of Περὶ θείων ὀνομάτων (*De divinis nominibus*/*On Divine Names*), the truly epoch-making theological work of the Christian Neoplatonist Dionysius the Areopagite (active around 500, probably in Syro-Palestine), whose identity remains a mystery to this day.[1] In order to truly appreciate the role of Dionysian speculative theology as it is expounded in the said passages, however, I will first elaborate on Chapter 1, Part III of the same treatise, so as to outline Dionysius's alternative to theology, which is the so-called ontological prayer. Then I want to lay out the general framework of his theology, which will be revealed, ultimately, as a self-destroying project, an endeavour to found philosophical theology on causality, which, eventually, founders, demonstrating its own futility, at least if we have expected it to give us exhaustive understanding of divine infinity, a finished and consummated mental representation of what God is, a kind of rationally intuitable *omnimoda determinatio* of the divine essence. The reason for that failure is that in order to get hold of the infinitely productive divine essence,

Check for updates

Academic Editor: Alexandre Coello de la Rosa

Received: 19 October 2026
Revised: 13 November 2026
Accepted: 19 November 2026
Published: 24 November 2026

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philosophical inquiry too has to go to infinity, *eis apeiron ienai*, following in the footsteps of irrepressible divine creativity. After offering a broad picture of this undertaking, I situate Parts IX and XIII more precisely in the line of argument of *On Divine Names*. On account of Part IX, which discusses grandeur as a divine name, I will argue that the Areopagite has, by and large, ended his enumeration of the outflows of God understood as the Good here and gradually turns backwards to describe the process of *reditus*, return into God understood as the One; while I view Part XIII as a point of culmination where it is finally demonstrated with a full induction that what the treatise dedicated to naming God has proved is that this very enterprise is endless and that therefore, it has not even been worthwhile starting it in the first place—again, at least if we have expected it to lead us to a point where our dialectical-argumentative effort may reasonably come to a standstill, having exhausted, by a finite full induction, the storehouse of potential theonyms. Hence, prayer as an alternative to methodical theology, and a mystically interpreted church ritual, both of them providing an unmediated union with God, are the royal road to knowing God, for Dionysius.

2. Prayer According to Dionysius

On Divine Names is an undercover Neoplatonist philosopher's fundamental theological exploration of how God may be named on the basis of His causality as it is perceived in the cosmos and of how His infinite essence invariably, as it were, towers over His causal activity as manifested in the universe. Hence, it involves a transition from positive to negative theology and is situated somewhere in the twilight zone between the two, while by virtue of its culminating point in Section 3 of Part XIII, it even points forward to the entire Dionysian system's crowning point, the speechlessness of mystical theology. Whereas in the introductory Part I, Dionysius spells out the problematique of his quest for naming the divine, and in Part II, he explores what that quest would mean in terms of trinitarian theology, Part III, intermediate in character, ritually exhorts us to pray, before Part IV, the longest of them all, cuts to the chase and starts to unravel the meaning of the theonym "Good." To judge by what our seraphic theologian-philosopher says on account of prayer, then, in Part III, it appears that for him, approaching God is possible in two ways: through theology, and through prayer. Now Chapter 1 of this Part briefly describes the nature of prayer as follows:

> III/1. [...] Χρὴ γὰρ ἡμᾶς ταῖς εὐχαῖς πρῶτον ἐπ' αὐτὴν ὡς ἀγαθαρχίαν ἀνάγεσθαι καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτῇ πλησιάζοντας ἐν τούτῳ μυεῖσθαι τὰ πανάγαθα δῶρα τὰ περὶ αὐτὴν ἱδρυμένα. [...] Τότε δὲ, ὅταν αὐτὴν ἐπικαλούμεθα πανάγνοις μὲν εὐχαῖς ἀνεπιθολώτῳ δὲ νῷ καὶ τῇ πρὸς θείαν ἕνωσιν ἐπιτηδειότητι, τότε καὶ ἡμεῖς αὐτῇ πάρεσμεν. Αὐτὴ γὰρ οὔτε ἐν τόπῳ ἔστιν, ἵνα καὶ ἀπῇ τινος ἢ ἐξ ἑτέρων εἰς ἕτερα μεταβῇ. Ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ ἐν πᾶσι τοῖς οὖσιν αὐτὴν εἶναι λέγειν ἀπολείπεται τῆς ὑπὲρ πάντα καὶ πάντων περιληπτικῆς ἀπειρίας.
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> III/1. [...] For it is necessary that through our prayers, we be first led up to Him as the source of Goodness [ἀγαθαρχίαν], and, while drawing closer to Him, become initiated [μυεῖσθαι] into the perfectly good gifts that are situated around Him. [...] And then, whenever we call upon Him with our perfectly pure prayers, and with an undisturbed mind, and with a disposition suited to divine union, then we too shall be near Him. After all, He is not in a place such that He could be distant from anything or move from one place to another. Yet to say that He is present in everything that exists does not do justice to His infinity, which transcends and encompasses all things.[2]

This statement would seem to imply that prayer (εὐχή) is, in particular, a prerequisite for theologizing ("through prayers, be first led up"); it is a divinely guided elevation (ἀνάγεσθαι) from man's originally designated, creaturely place—an upward movement within the otherwise rigid structure of being, directed and supervised, in principle, by the higher entities of the celestial hierarchy (as we know from Dionysius's Περὶ τῆς οὐρανίας ἱεραρχίας, especially Part III, 1–2)—at the price of leaving the locus assigned within that structure. At the same time, it is also an initiation (μυεῖσθαι) into the higher-order gifts of grace that are found "in the vicinity of God," that is, in the outward-turning halo of divine providence. This is, in a broader sense, a salvific turning back or return—a Neoplatonic *epistrophē*/*reditus*—, a conversion of the human being to the cause, into the First Cause; while Dionysius may be referring to Plato himself as he explains that in spite of the place adverbs he is utilizing, God is not in a place, nor does He "move from one place to another"—which just may rest on the First Hypothesis of Plato's *Parmenides* (137 C 4–142 A 8; more specifically, 138 B 6–139 B 4). For Plato argues that

> οὐκ ἄρα ἐστίν που τὸ ἕν, μήτε ἐν αὑτῷ μήτε ἐν ἄλλῳ ἐνόν. [...] Οὔτ' ἄρα ποι ἰὸν καὶ ἕν τῳ γιγνόμενον χώραν ἀλλάττει, οὔτ' ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ περιφερόμενον οὔτε ἀλλοιούμενον. [...] Κατὰ πᾶσαν ἄρα κίνησιν τὸ ἓν ἀκίνητον. [...] Οὐδέποτε ἄρα ἐστὶ τὸ ἓν ἐν τῷ αὐτῷ. [...] ...οὔτε ἡσυχίαν ἄγει οὔθ' ἕστηκεν. [...] Τὸ ἓν ἄρα, ὡς ἔοικεν, οὔτε ἕστηκεν οὔτε κινεῖται.[3]
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> the One is, hence, not in a place—for it is neither in itself, nor in another thing. [...] Therefore, it does not go anywhere and does not change its place, being in something else; neither does it revolve in the same place, nor does it change. [...] Hence the One is not moved by any kind of movement. [...] But neither is, then, the One in the same place. [...] ...it does not rest, nor has it stopped. [...] Hence it seems that the One is neither at rest, nor is it moved.

The kind of prayer that propels the ecstatic soul, as it emerges from the bonds of the body, into the divine presence, and prepares it for union (*henōsis*) with God is termed "ontological prayer" in the philosophical-theological literature, by grand masters Jean Trouillard and Andrew Louth.[4] A conception of prayer of this kind, or something much like it, had appeared before Dionysius in Origen, Evagrius Ponticus, and Gregory of Nyssa, on the Christian side, and in Plato, Plotinus, and Proclus, on the (Neo)platonic side, showing a more straightforward path to the divine sphere than systematic philosophical theology, and inciting Dionysius to look at prayer as a serious practical alternative to the latter, should speculative thinking about God come to a deadlock. In order to see how the Areopagite seeks an off-ramp or exit strategy from that impasse, we briefly turn to the forenamed antecessors for instruction on how "ontological prayer" operates.

3. "Ontological Prayer" in the Christian and Neoplatonic Traditions

In more detail, Origen, discussing the usefulness of prayer in *De oratione* VIII, 2, dwells long on the ascent into the divine presence that takes place in prayer; while Chapter IX, 2 likewise depicts prayer as a process through which the soul, leaving the body and becoming spiritualized, draws near to God. When we raise the "eye of the intellect," says Origen here, so as to rise above creation, direct ourselves solely toward the knowledge of God, and converse appropriately with Him who listens, then the soul can contemplate His glory with unveiled face and be transformed into His image, as it rises up, follows the spirit and is separated from the body. On the basis of this account, it is justified to say that in prayer, a real or "ontological" elevation takes place for Origen.[5]

In his wake, Evagrius describes a similar scenario as he famously writes, in more straightforward terms, that "prayer is the communion of the intellect with God... with

nothing intervening between them" ("ἡ προσευχὴ ὁμιλία ἐστὶ νοῦ πρὸς Θεόν... μηδενὸς μεσιτεύοντος," *De oratione*, Aphorism 3). Aphorism 35 doubles down on this as it says that "prayer is the ascent of the intellect to God" ("Προσευχή ἐστιν ἀνάβασις νοῦ πρὸς Θεὸν"); while Aphorisms 61 and 65 insist that the mind, *nous*, might ecstatically leave the flesh ("οἷον ὑπαναχωρεῖ τῆς σαρκὸς") in prayer and in this pure condition, it stays in the company of God.

Then again, in the first part of his homily on the Beatitudes (PG 45, 1120 B 1–1136 D 2), the Nyssene theologian defines prayer literally as a "communion with God," as a being together with Him, and as an intellectual vision of what is not visible through bodily eyes ("χωρίζεται δὲ τοῦ Θεοῦ ὁ μὴ συνάπτων ἑαυτὸν διὰ προσευχῆς τῷ Θεῷ. [...] Ἐκ γὰρ τοῦ προσεύχεσθαι περιγίνεται τὸ μετὰ Θεοῦ εἶναι. [...] Προσευχὴ Θεοῦ ὁμιλία, τῶν ἀοράτων θεωρία...").[6]

Next, on the (Neo)platonic side, great importance had been attached to prayer as a precondition of systematic and successful philosophical inquiry already by Plato himself (cf. *Timaeus* 27 C;[7] *Critias* 106 A; *Philebus* 61 B–C); while prayer was used for the same dialectical purposes by Plotinus too (*Treatise* 10 [*Enneas* V/1], 6), who also offers an example of the "ontological prayer" as he describes the soul's call for the One to actually come forward (*Treatise* 31 [*Enneas* V/8), 9). But in the (Neo)platonic tradition, unsurprisingly, Proclus provides us with the most explicit—and for Dionysius, the most important—theory of this kind of prayer, in his profound analysis of the divine origin and essence of prayer, in the commentary on Plato's *Timaeus*.

For Proclus, then, prayer is a turning back toward the higher principles, a means of *epistrophē* that unites the one who prays with the gods and moves the latter to bestow good gifts ("τῶν θεῶν τὴν εὐποιίαν ἕλκουσα <ἡ εὐχὴ> εἰς ἑαυτὴν καὶ ἑνοῦσα μὲν τοὺς εὐχο-μένους ἐκείνοις, πρὸς οὓς εὔχονται, συνάπτουσα δὲ καὶ τὸν τῶν θεῶν νοῦν πρὸς τοὺς τῶν εὐχομένων λόγους"). Now "perfect prayer," *teleia euchē* can reach its goal through four stages, which follow one another as follows: 1. Knowledge of the divine orders; 2. moral imitation of the gods and attainment of moral purity; 3. entering into contact with the divine substance through the "summit" of the soul; 4. the union of the One present in the gods, with the One present in the soul, whereby the activity of the gods and that of the soul become identical through the mediation of the One ("τελευταία δὲ ἡ ἕνωσις, αὐτῷ τῷ ἑνὶ τῶν θεῶν τὸ ἓν τῆς ψυχῆς ἐνιδρύουσα καὶ μίαν ἐνέργειαν ἡμῶν τε ποιοῦσα καὶ τῶν θεῶν"). This is the boundary and goal of true prayer—and it clearly anticipates the Areopagite's theory of prayer as such a practical alternative to conceptual theology that is, by contrast, able to approach divine infinity.[8]

There is good ground to believe, then, that Dionysius had been inspired by authoritative Christian and (Neo)platonic sources alike to look at prayer as a royal road to God. On this account, prayer is much more than a simple prerequisite for the practice of theology; to say the least, it complements it, throwing a lifeline to a noble enterprise—systematic philosophical theology—that is nevertheless doomed to fail, if we expect too much of it.

4. Infinite Theology

Because theology as a rational, systematic branch of study operating with concepts—and, in the present case, theonyms—is eventually impossible on account of God's hyperbolical transcendence; it can never yield exhaustive knowledge of God precisely because of divine inexhaustibility. Due to the infinity, incomprehensibility, supra-rationality of the divine essence, theology as a master science or *epistēmē architektonikē*, being a sort of Wittgenstein's ladder, will have proven, after all, only its own invalidity when it has fulfilled its mission. For if it is a theological mission to deliver all-inclusive knowledge of God's "hard core," then theology should be going to infinity, *in infinitum debet ire*. Theology as an

endless challenge—*theologia sine fine*, an open-ended dive into the divinity, theology with no end in sight—is hence a call to come forward from the safety and clarity of the articulate *logos*, which is a defensive bulwark covering the *theos*, towards and into the pure *theos*. And this will prove to be a different, unbounded kind of endeavour, one that relinquishes systematic rational inquiry in order to reach out towards the *summum*, the inward-turning divine depth.

From a classical Greek epistemological point of view, it is at the same time paradoxical that that *summum* should be beyond the reach of the topmost cognitive power of the human being, the *nous* or unmediated intuition. Plato's analogy of being and cognition, the Analogy of the Divided Line (*Republic* VI, 507 B–511 E), does not obtain in Dionysius's conception; the prearranged Platonic correlation between the essentially different categories of being, and the respective relevant cognitive powers and forms of holding-to-be-true loses its effect here. For Dionysius, man has no *capacity* which could be activated for this outreach—here, human *substance* is about to get united with the divine, not one human attribute or accident. For in the Areopagite's conception, divine philanthropy will not settle for less; after all, it is precisely divine infinity itself that will not put up with less than the entire human being, with humanity itself—that is what God as an infinite *Abgrund* or *Ungrund* will allow, will want to enter into an unmediated proximity with Himself in the course of the Incarnation.

From a Peripatetic stance, then, the Dionysian open-ended theology, a *theo-logia* beyond the *logos*, will, again, seem baffling insofar as the Philosopher would argue that only argumentative rationality may bring human reason near to God—in especial, finite approximation, as this is demonstrated by the argument from motion (*Metaphysics* XII, 6–7, with *Physics* VIII, 4). The method of bounded approach is the royal path for the Peripatetic, the Thomistic,[9] the Scotistic,[10] the Renaissance,[11] and the second Scholastic tradition;[12] the way to go in order to reach the supernatural condition of the natural universe—and the rule of this method—is *ouk estin eis apeiron ienai—non posse in infinitum ire*.

5. Position of Part IX in the Structure of *On Divine Names*

Dionysius's first approach to God also departs from (efficient) causality, in order to arrive—by virtue of an ascending positive theology—to the point where causality is, as it were, dissolved in God. For the Areopagite, however, this is only the jumping-off point for true theology, merely the front porch to the sanctuary—and if God is not ready to put up with less than the entire human being, then Dionysius also will not settle for less than God Himself, the entire godhead. The story Dionysius has to tell is the narrative of a penetration into the infinity of God, and the thematic set-up or structure of *On Divine Names* may well be an expression of that advance into the divinity. For—contrary to Proclus's normative line of reasoning in the *Elements of Theology*[13]—Dionysius sallies forth, after the first three introductory Parts, from the theonym "Good" understood as *diffusivum sui*, and not from the theonym "One." So setting forth from the Good is only a start taken from the source and origin of the Many (Part IV). Next, Part V delves into the divine name Being, Part VI into Life—which are, strictly speaking, direct effects of the Good as an efficient cause; while Part VII grasps God under the appearance of the intellectual powers and excellences, and since such capacities can only be in living beings, even these divine aspects may perhaps fit in with a logically composed and comprehensive list of the effects or outflows of the Good.

From here on, however, it is as if a sort of anagogy were to start toward the transcendent cause, or a return, *epistrophē* were to take off towards the depths of God, insofar as Part VIII looks into God understood mainly as authority or might; Part IX interprets divine grandeur essentially as God's productivity and causality, describing God in the main as a transcendent efficient cause; Part X identifies eternity and the source of time in God; Part XII applies the *par excellence* monarchical names to God (like, for instance, King of Kings

etc.); whilst the last part, Part XIII ultimately arrives at or goes up to the One. This is like advancing from the Good conceived as the source of the Many, and from the immediate effects of the Good, towards the One in the course of a name-theological *anagōgē*—in order to reject, as soon as we have reached the boundaries of God as the really infinite one, even oneness as a valid essential theonym.[14]

Let us now examine, from a philosophical theological viewpoint, Parts IX and XIII, two important momenta of this anagogy, in more detail. In Part IX, Dionysius is setting out to try and reconcile, partly still in a positive theological mode, God's creative outflow and perfect seclusion. At the terminal point of this process, in Part XIII, however, he is already giving up the idea of a dialectical-argumentative articulation of the concept of God and as it were "goes into infinity," *it in infinitum*, endlessly approaching what is truly endless.

6. Part IX: God as Grandeur and Identity

In a first approach, Part IX construes divine grandeur especially as irrepressibility, that is, as a repudiation of any and every concrete, specific or specifiable magnitude with respect to God. In this vein, God is not simply great but has an irrepressible tendency of exceeding limits—hence, in other words, He is illimitable or inexhaustible:

> IX/2. Μέγας μὲν οὖν ὁ θεὸς ὀνομάζεται κατὰ τὸ ἰδίως αὐτοῦ μέγα τὸ πᾶσι τοῖς μεγάλοις ἑαυτοῦ μεταδιδὸν καὶ παντὸς μεγέθους ἔξωθεν ὑπερχεό-μενον, πάντα τόπον περίεχον, πάντα ἀριθμὸν ὑπερβάλλον, πᾶσαν ἀπειρίαν διαβαῖνον καὶ κατὰ τὸ ὑπερπλῆρες αὐτοῦ καὶ μεγαλουργὸν καὶ τὰς πηγαίας αὐτοῦ δωρεάς, καθ' ὅσον αὗται πρὸς πάντων μετεχόμεναι κατὰ ἀπειρό-δωρον χύσιν ἀμείωτοι παντελῶς εἰσι καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν ἔχουσιν ὑπερπληρότητα καὶ οὐκ ἐλαττοῦνται ταῖς μετοχαῖς, ἀλλὰ καὶ μᾶλλον ὑπερβλύζουσιν. Τὸ μέγεθος τοῦτο καὶ ἄπειρόν ἐστι καὶ ἄποσον καὶ ἀνάριθμον, καὶ τοῦτο ἔστιν ἡ ὑπεροχὴ κατὰ τὴν ἀπόλυτον καὶ ὑπερτεταμένην τῆς ἀπεριλήπτου μεγαλειότητος χύσιν.[15]
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> IX/2. Now God is called grand on the basis of His peculiar grandeur, which imparts itself to every great thing, and flows out over and exceeds all magnitude, surrounds every place, surpasses every number, oversteps all boundlessness; and also because it is overfilled and produces great things, and generous are His donations since they are totally unstinting, although by virtue of their endlessly bounteous outflow everything participates in them, and yet they remain over-charged to the same degree and are not depleted on account of the participations but rather, overflow even more. This grandeur is infinite and the concepts of quantity and number do not express it—it is a supereminence that is due to an absolute and majestic outflow of incomprehensible magnificence.

Apparently, this infinity displays two, certainly related aspects here: On the one hand, God is, as a spiritual substance, indeterminable (in terms of the Peripatetic category of quantity, He is even supra-categorial). On the other hand, He as an efficient cause is inexhaustibly fertile or productive (and this is argued with clear reference to the concept of participation, μετοχή, as it is elaborated in Plato's *Symposium*, 211 B 1–5).[16] Since Dionysius is not ready to tell us what exactly we are to understand by the magnitude or infinity of a purely spiritual substance (once God is one and simple so there can be no talk of extension in Him), we are reduced to believing that on the basis of the text as it is, divine boundlessness is essentially interpreted by him as infinite productivity. Hence God's infinity appears as creative operation unbounded in time and intensity. It is by virtue of its effects that we know this inexhaustible *energeia*, and, strictly speaking, it is this effect which is

extended ("great") in space and time, while the creative powers of God invariably override (ὑπεροχή) whatever they have realized beforehand.

Next, the grand development of Chapter 4 concerning God conceived as the self-identical grasps the fundamental nature of God first and foremost as a Platonic idea whose essence is unchangeability (as Dionysius has shown this already in Part IV). Here, the Areopagite enumerates, in a sort of inspired philosophical anthem, the (Neo)platonic attributes of God, which are most of them neuter adjectives supplied with a privative prefix, properties expressed in negative theological terminology:

> IX/4. Τὸ δὲ ταὐτὸν ὑπερουσίως ἀΐδιον, ἄτρεπτον, ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ μένον, ἀεὶ κατὰ τὰ αὐτὰ καὶ ὡσαύτως ἔχον, πᾶσιν ὡσαύτως παρὸν καὶ αὐτὸ καθ' ἑαυτὸ ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ σταθερῶς καὶ ἀχράντως ἐν τοῖς καλλίστοις πέρασι τῆς ὑπερουσίου ταυτότητος ἱδρυμένον, ἀμετάβλητον, ἀμετάπτωτον, ἀῤῥεπές, ἀναλλοίωτον, ἀμιγές, ἄϋλον, ἁπλούστατον, ἀπροσδεές, ἀναυξές, ἀμείωτον, ἀγένητον, οὐχ ὡς μήπω γενόμενον ἢ ἀτελείωτον ἢ ὑπὸ τοῦδε ἢ τόδε μὴ γενόμενον, οὐδ' ὡς μηδαμῇ μηδαμῶς ὄν, ἀλλ' ὡς ὑπὲρ πᾶν ἀγένητον καὶ ἀπολύτως ἀγένητον καὶ ἀεὶ ὂν καὶ αὐτοτελὲς ὂν καὶ ταὐτὸν ὂν καθ' ἑαυτὸ καὶ ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ μονο-ειδῶς καὶ ταὐτοειδῶς ἀφοριζόμενον καὶ τὸ ταὐτὸν ἐξ ἑαυτοῦ πᾶσι τοῖς μετ-έχειν ἐπιτηδείοις ἐπιλάμπον καὶ τὰ ἕτερα τοῖς ἑτέροις συντάττον, περιουσία καὶ αἰτία ταὐτότητος ἐν ἑαυτῷ καὶ τὰ ἐναντία ταὐτῶς προέχον κατὰ τὴν μίαν καὶ ἑνικὴν τῆς ὅλης ταὐτότητος ὑπερέχουσαν αἰτίαν.[17]
>
> IX/4. And the self-identical is superessentially eternal, unalterable, remaining in itself, being always the same and in the same manner, present to everything in the same way whilst it is situated according to itself in itself firmly and flawlessly among the wonderful boundaries of supra-essential self-identity, being unchangeable, non-convertible, balanced, impassive, unalloyed, immaterial, completely simple, autarchic, neither growing nor diminishing, ungenerated but not in the sense of not yet generated or not yet perfected or not generated by a particular thing or not resulting in a particular thing, nor in the sense of not being anywhere but in the sense that it has absolutely never been generated and is totally ungenerated and existing forever and is complete in itself and identical with itself and determined by itself as uniform and of the same form as itself, as it projects identity from itself, upon all such entities as are capable of partaking in it, and it coordinates the several things, being an abundance and a cause of identity by itself, which has encompassed the opposites uniformly from the very beginning, since it is the unique and unitary cause of perfect self-identity.

Clearly, this description is a development—at certain points, a literal takeover—of Plato's account of the idea of the Beautiful as it is formulated in *Symposium* 210 E 5–211 B 1;[18] as well as of Plato's differentiation between "what is existent always" (τὸ ὂν ἀεί) and "what is becoming always" (τὸ γιγνόμενον ἀεί) at the beginning of Timaeus's cosmogonical exposition in the *Timaeus* (27 D 6–28 A 4).[19] But it may also rest on Plotinus's characterization of the One in, for instance, *Treatise 9* (*Ennead VI*, 9), 1–3 (Henry and Schwyzer 1983, pp. 271–76), and, probably, on Proclus's analysis of the same in the *Platonic Theology*, Book II, Chapter 12, inspired chiefly by the First Hypothesis of the *Parmenides*, and so on. In the wake of that tradition, the adjectives and participles in the neuter in the preceding citation emphasize God's impersonal, "thinglike" character to the detriment of His personal, hypostatic traits. But Dionysius wants to make the point that while God is, according to this description, perfectly removed from all, He is, at the same time, the principle of identity and connectivity for everything—or, in other words, the origin of all substantiality and world-forming capacity (arrangement in a cosmos). This principle, moreover, encapsulates

as it were in a transcendent bud even the accidents ("the opposites," *ta enantia*) of the several different beings, as Dionysius points out. Hence, although the Areopagite is already laying here the fundaments of a transcendent, negative theology, God still appears as the One that, in spite of its reclusion, gives birth to the Many. The nature of the transition zone between the two contradictorious spheres remains unclear here just like the relationship between the First Hypothesis and the Second Hypothesis in the *Parmenides* is not specified by Plato.

However, it strikes the reader that Dionysius perceives no contradiction between divine introversion (God's transcendent, inward-turning facet) and extroversion (God's creative character) but, rather—as though in the frame of a paradoxical theology—discerns a logical link between divine reclusion and creativity, setting these two aspects in a relation of interdependence. Both facets, after all, logically follow from God's being the most sublime thing that there is, so a lack of either seclusion or fertility (creative power) would immediately count for an imperfection and a shortcoming of potency, an eclipse of power in the Highest Being.

On top of that, the Areopagite takes even the exclusivity (unicity) of God for part and parcel of the idea of "highest ranking:" Besides the Highest Being, there can evidently be no other source of being because that would arguably delimit the operation of the "highest ranking" (later, a version of this idea returns in the form of an argument for the unicity of God in the first proof in Part IV of Scotus' *Tractatus de primo principio*[20]—and has also been well known in Islamic *kalām* theology[21]). Since by virtue of this insight, the entire gamut of being shall be reducible to a single principle, this is an implicit assumption of divine unicity. In this manner, the concept of the "highest ranking" will extend to divine undelimitability as well.

But as it has been pointed out above, all these attributes raise God to a height where personal traits are naturally effaced and the analogy with the human being gradually fades out, to ultimately sink out of sight completely—under these circumstances, the personal pronoun to properly designate God will be "It" rather than "He." One danger this kind of theological discourse runs is (from a Scotistic point of view) the loss of the univocal mode of expression or (for a Thomistic frame of mind) the fadeaway of the *analogia entis*. Broadly speaking, however, *On Divine Names* is not willing to renounce the personlike character of God, certainly on account of multiple philosophical and scriptural considerations.

At all events, the outlines of a concept of God thus traced effectively blow up the boundaries of logic (more specifically, invalidate the principle of contradiction in His case) because in this manner, God will be conceived of as a thing in which all that is incompatible in the order of existence will belong together—paradoxically—exactly on account of their incongruence in an order *underlying* existence. Which is to say that in God, paradoxicality is normality insofar as it is a proof of divine omnipotence, of the all-overriding character of divine power.

Hence, at the end of Part IX, Dionysian theology is beginning to zoom in on divine impenetrability. This supports the often-suggested point that the pathway leading from the Good to the One is a track running from God understood as the source of phenomenal multiplicity to the most transcendent divine theonym, which is God's aspect as an ultimate goal. As this idea presupposes two contradictory motions in God, an *exitus* and a *reditus*, an outflow and a takeback, a giver and a keeper, self-disclosure and seclusion, the resulting theological dilemma is that God delivers but also retains Himself—that is to say, He delivers Himself exactly when He retains Himself, and He retains Himself exactly when He delivers Himself; this is one single act, one unitary event. Still in other words, the question Dionysian theology is faced with at this point is whether the fundamental nature of God is an ideal unchangeability or a bounteous self-giving; or, whether these two aspects can somehow be

reconciled to each other within the same essence; or, again, on the contrary, whether they follow from each other, defying common sense but harmonizing with the Christian idea of the "folly of God," and with the Platonic–Plotinian–Proclean conviction that the most transcendent thing must also be the most productive thing?

7. Part XIII: Conceptual Theology Conceding Defeat

The keystone of the entire treatise, Part XIII develops the final considerations of our seraphic author and imparts his last determining word on the inscrutability of the divine nature, on account of the comprehensive theonym "One:"

> XIII/3. Διὸ καὶ μονὰς ὑμνουμένη καὶ τριὰς ἡ ὑπὲρ πάντα θεότης οὐκ ἔστιν οὐδὲ μονάς, οὐδὲ τριὰς... Οὐδεμία δὲ μονὰς ἢ τριάς, οὐδὲ ἀριθμὸς οὐδὲ ἑνό-της ἢ γονιμότης οὐδὲ ἄλλο τι τῶν ὄντων ἢ τινι τῶν ὄντων συνεγνωσμένων ἐξάγει τὴν ὑπὲρ πάντα καὶ λόγον καὶ νοῦν κρυφιότητα τῆς ὑπὲρ πάντα ὑπερουσίως ὑπερούσης ὑπερθεότητος, οὐδὲ ὄνομα αὐτῆς ἔστιν οὐδὲ λόγος, ἀλλ' ἐν ἀβάτοις ἐξήρηται. [...]. Διὸ καὶ αὐτοὶ <οἱ θεολόγοι> τὴν διὰ τῶν ἀπο-φάσεων ἄνοδον προτετιμήκασιν ὡς ἐξιστῶσαν τὴν ψυχὴν τῶν ἑαυτῇ συμφύ-λων [...], ἐπ' ἐσχάτων δὲ τῶν ὅλων αὐτῷ <τῷ "ὑπὲρ πᾶν ὄνομα"> συνάπτουσαν, καθ' ὅσον καὶ ἡμῖν ἐκείνῳ συνάπτεσθαι δυνατόν.[22]
>
> XIII/3. Hence although we praise the all-surpassing deity as a monad and a triad, It is neither a unity, nor a trinity... But no monad or triad, no number, no unity or fertility or even anything else from among the beings and the accidents of beings we come to know together with them, can express the totally suprarational and supraintellectual enigma of the supradivine divinity that superessentially more-than-exists beyond all; there is neither name nor word to designate It as It has receded to places beyond reach. [...] For this reason, the theologians themselves have appreciated more an anagogy by way of negations as it pulls the soul out of the company of the things it is related to [...], which path, at the boundary of the universe, touches the soul to what is above all names, at least as far as it is possible for us to come into contact with It at all.

This truly dramatic and climactic passage tells us that the pathway leading to a knowledge of God is endless approximation—which implies that the tension building up between divine supereminence and productivity is only the first pitfall along an unending road. For, according to the Areopagite, it must be generally admitted that when we have identified and certified a divine name, we ought to immediately repudiate and overstep it as insufficient, and keep steadily on, ultimately following the chain of causality-based theonyms even upwards into infinity, in the teeth of established philosophical dogma: the Aristotelian, the Thomistic, the Scotistic, the Ficinian, and the Suárezian dialectical rule, which dictates that God is to be found by not going into infinity, *mē eis apeiron ienai*, *non ire in infinitum*. The exclusion of a *regressus infinitus* is the *nervus probandi* of the second syllogism of the Peripatetic and Thomistic argument from motion, and of the Scotistic and Suárezian argument from efficient causality—while rejecting the same argumentative prohibition in the enumeration of the divine names is the genuine hallmark of Dionysian theology.

8. Conclusions: Why the Defeat Is a Win

After all, Dionysius is not into demonstrating the existence of God (that is something of an evidence to him); he is looking to penetrate God, leave the surface and dive into the deep: *baptizesthai eis ton Theon* (cf. Galatians 3, 27: "ὅσοι γὰρ εἰς Χριστὸν ἐβαπτίσθητε, Χριστὸν ἐνεδύσασθε"). That is a radically different (moral) theological undertaking than that of either Plato (*homoiōsis theō*$_i$) or Aristotle (the imitation of God by virtue of *theōria*), while

it is closely akin to Plotinus's striving for an unmediated union with the One (as it is described, for instance, in *Treatise 9* [*Ennead* VI, 9], 9).[23] Now, orthodox theology indoctrinates the unknowability of God (and this really holds for the Cappadocians, Chrysosthomus, Dionysius, Maximus the Confessor, and some major later Byzantine theologians), but as concerns the Areopagite, this observation may be completed with the remark that in black and white terms, his self-defeating discursive theology only charts a course towards God, while it is prayer and church ritual that lead the practical way into God, to an actual union with God, according to the *Mystical Theology* and the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy*.

For the *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy* describes how the bishop experiences a real rapture in the course of the Eucharist (Part III, Θεωρία), and, more importantly, the *Mystical Theology* emphatically teaches that the ultimate goal of the soul is a free ecstatic *henōsis* with the Unnameable (Part I, 1), beyond both positive theology (Part III) and hyperbolical negative theology (Part V). The grand paradoxical characterization of God at the closure of the *Mystical Theology* denies absolutely all potential divine attributes of Him except that it is possible to get united to Him—which is a distinctly Plotinian climax. Hence, ultimately, the struggle to name the Unnameable has been lost, but in its wake, a different kind of access to God has been won.

The fact that the access to the ecstatic way is somehow revealed or at least pointed to by the impassibility of conceptual theology makes one want to say that although in the manuscripts of the corpus, the usual order of the texts is DN—CH—EH—MT—Ep, the true order, which really corresponds to the anagogical route Dionysius navigates, would be EH—CH—DN—MT. This bottom-up order would mirror the itinerary Dionysian self-destroying theology runs, as it traces a path which is in a way a *regressus infinitus*, a return to divine infinity, a better way of approaching God than speculative theology.

Funding: This research was funded by Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, by grant number 260880/2026.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in this study are included in the article. Further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 This article is a thoroughly reworked and extended version of my Hungarian paper titled "*In infinitum ire*: Ál-Areopagita Szent Dénes végtelen közeledése Istenhez. (Az *Isten nevei* IX. és XIII. részének filozófiai értelmezése)" = *Vallástudományi Szemle/Hungarian Journal of Religious Studies*, 2022/1, 32–43 https://btk.kre.hu/images/vallastudomanyi_szemle/2022-1/VSz_2022_1_032-043.pdf (accessed on 18 November 2026)—On the arduous question of Dionysius's personal identity, see Beate Regina Suchla's recent summary: (Suchla 2022, pp. 13–32); more specifically, 17–20.

2 Beate Regina Suchla, ed.: Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: *De divinis nominibus*, 138. (*Corpus Dionysiacum I*, hereinafter = CD I.)—All translations are by the author of the present paper.

3 https://plato-dialogues.org/links.htm, accessed on 20 November 2026.

4 See Jean Trouillard: *L'Un et l'âme selon Proclus*, 178: "prière ontologique" (Trouillard 1972); Andrew Louth: *Denys the Areopagite*, 92: "ontological prayer" (Louth 2001; Vassányi 2023).

5 *De oratione* VIII, 2: "καὶ πρῶτόν γε πάντως ὥνατό τι ὁ πρὸς τὸ εὔξασθαι ταθεὶς κατὰ τὸν νοῦν, δι' αὐτῆς τῆς ἐν τῷ εὔχεσθαι καταστάσεως θεῷ παριστάναι ἑαυτὸν καὶ παρόντι ἐκείνῳ λέγειν σχηματίσας ὡς ἐφορῶντι καὶ παρόντι. [...] ...τῆς ψυχῆς... ρυθμιζούσης ἑαυτὴν ἀρέσκειν ὡς παρόντι καὶ ἐποπτεύοντι καὶ φθάνοντι ἐπὶ πάντα νοῦν τῷ ἐτάζοντι 'καρδίας' καὶ ἐρευνῶντι 'νεφρούς.'" (Koetschau 1899, p. 317)—IX, 2: "ἐπαιρόμενοι γὰρ οἱ ὀφθαλμοὶ τοῦ διανοητικοῦ... καὶ ἐπὶ τοσοῦτον ὑφούμενοι, ὥστε καὶ ὑπερκύπτειν τὰ γεννητά καὶ πρὸς μόνῳ τῷ ἐννοεῖν τὸν θεόν κἀκείνῳ σεμνῶς καὶ πρεπόντως τῷ ἀκούοντι ὁμιλεῖν γίνεσθαι... 'ἀνακεκαλυμμένῳ προσώπῳ τὴν δόξαν κυρίου' κατοπτριζομένους καὶ 'τὴν

αὐτὴν εἰκόνα' μεταμορφουμένους... ψυχὴ δὲ ἐπαιρομένη καὶ τῷ πνεύματι ἑπομένη τοῦ τε σώματος χωριζομένη..." (ibid., pp. 318–19).

6 PG 45, 1120 A 8–B 4 (Migne 1857–1866); cf. Louth: *Denys the Areopagite*, 92 and 97 (Louth 2001).

7 "Ἀλλ', ὦ Σώκρατες, τοῦτό γε δὴ πάντες ὅσοι καὶ κατὰ βραχὺ σωφροσύνης μετέχουσιν, ἐπὶ παντὸς ὁρμῇ καὶ σμικροῦ καὶ μεγάλου πράγματος θεὸν ἀεί που καλοῦσιν· ἡμᾶς δὲ τοὺς περὶ τοῦ παντὸς λόγους ποιεῖσθαί πῃ μέλλοντας, ἢ γέγονεν ἢ καὶ ἀγενές ἐστιν, εἰ μὴ παντάπασι παραλλάττομεν, ἀνάγκη θεούς τε καὶ θεὰς ἐπικαλουμένους εὔχεσθαι..." (*Timaeus* 27 C 1–8).

8 In the *In Platonis Timaeum commentaria*, Proclus discusses the origin and essence of prayer addressed to the gods, in the course of his treatment of an Orphic hymn and of *Timaeus* 27 C, while explaining the introduction to the *Timaeus*. He first surveys the views of Porphyry and Iamblichus on prayer and then, in an extensive discussion, sets out his own view of the relation between the gods and the other entities, in particular, the souls. It is at this point that he begins to discuss the function and mode of operation of prayer. (Book II, 65 A 12–C 10 = Diehl (1903, pp. 207–22); Trouillard: *L'Un et l'âme*, 177).

9 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa contra Gentiles*, Book I, Chapter 13, paragraphs 3–4 and 17–20; cf. paragraph 3: "Aut ergo est procedere in infinitum; aut est devenire ad aliquod movens immobile. Sed non est procedere in infinitum. Ergo necesse est ponere aliquod primum movens immobile." www.corpusthomistocum.org (accessed on 18 November 2026).

10 Johannes Duns Scotus: *Tractatus de primo principio*, Chapter III, *conclusio* 2: "Aut procedetur in infinitum in effectivis, quorum quodlibet respectu prioris erit secundum, aut stabitur in aliquo non habente prius. Infinitas est impossibilis ascendendo; ergo primitas est necessaria..." (Kluxen 1974, p. 34).

11 Ficino (1561): *Compendium Platonicae theologiae*, Section 4: "Itaque si absque termino in causis ad causas ascendatur, similiter praeter terminum ad effectus ab effectibus descendetur. Nulla erunt extrema, sed omnia media, omnia infinita. [...] Innumerabilia erunt infinita. Quod est absurdum." (*Marsilii Ficini Florentini, insignis Philosophi Platonici, Medici, atque Theologi clarissimi, Opera, & quae hactenus extitere, & quae in lucem nunc primum prodiere omnia*. Basileae: Anno MDLXI, 692).

12 Suárez (2023): *Disputationes metaphysicae*, Treatise 29, Section 1, 21: "...ita tandem aut sistendum erit in ente non facto, aut procedendum in infinitum, aut circulus committendus; non potest autem aut committi circulus, aut in infinitum procedi; sistendum ergo necessario est in ente non facto." https://homepage.ruhr-uni-bochum.de/Michael.Renemann/suarez/d29.pdf (accessed on 18 November 2026).

13 As is known, Proclus, Dionysius's master, departs from the concept of the One (theses 1–6) in the *Elements of Theology*, and it is only in a second approach that he identifies this with the Good (thesis 13).

14 As is known, Endre von Ivánka, in an influential article, reconstructed the logic of composition of *On Divine Names* quite differently (von Ivánka 1940). On his reconstruction, see also (Schäfer 2006, pp. 26–35).

15 CD I (Suchla 1990), p. 208.

16 "τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα καλὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα τρόπον τινὰ τοιοῦτον, οἷον γιγνομένων τε τῶν ἄλλων καὶ ἀπολλυμένων μηδὲν ἐκεῖνο μήτε τι πλέον μήτε ἔλαττον γίγνεσθαι μηδὲ πάσχειν μηδέν".

17 CD I (Suchla 1990), pp. 209–10.

18 "...τοῦτο [...] πρῶτον μὲν ἀεὶ ὂν καὶ οὔτε γιγνόμενον οὔτε ἀπολλύμενον, οὔτε αὐξανόμενον οὔτε φθίνον [...], ἀλλ' αὐτὸ καθ' αὑτὸ μεθ' αὑτοῦ μονοειδὲς ἀεὶ ὄν, τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πάντα καλὰ ἐκείνου μετέχοντα ...." (*Symposium* 210 E 5–211 B 2).

19 "τί τὸ ὂν ἀεί, γένεσιν δὲ οὐκ ἔχον, καὶ τί τὸ γιγνόμενον μὲν ἀεί, ὂν δὲ οὐδέποτε; τὸ μὲν δὴ νοήσει μετὰ λόγου περιληπτόν, ἀεὶ κατὰ ταὐτὰ ὄν, τὸ δ' αὖ δόξῃ μετ' αἰσθήσεως ἀλόγου δοξαστόν, γιγνόμενον καὶ ἀπολλύμενον, ὄντως δὲ οὐδέποτε ὄν." (*Timaeus* 27 D 6–28 A 4).

20 Part IV: "De simplicitate et infinitate et intellectualitate primi entis," Conclusion 11: "Quod scilicet unus Deus sit, extra quem non est alter, sicut per Prophetam dixisti, ad quod ostendendum non puto deficere rationem" (Kluxen, ed.: Scotus: *Abhandlung über das erste Prinzip*, 128).

21 See for instance Çetin (2026)—Ulvi Murat Kılavuz: "Can an Infinite God be Opposed?—Constructing the Argument from Mutual Hindrance (*Tamānuʿ*) in Muʿtazilī Theology" = *Religions* 2026, *17* (10), 1196; special issue "Divine Infinity," https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/17/10/1196, accessed on 18 November 2026.

22 CD I (Suchla 1990), pp. 229–30.

23 Cf. this passage: "Ἐρᾷ οὖν κατὰ φύσιν ἔχουσα ψυχὴ θεοῦ ἑνωθῆναι θέλουσα... [...] Ἐκεῖ δὲ τὸ ἀληθινὸν ἐρώμενον, ᾧ ἔστι καὶ συνεῖναι μεταλαβόντα αὐτοῦ καὶ ὄντως ἔχοντα... Ὅστις δὲ εἶδεν, οἶδεν ὃ λέγω, ὡς ἡ ψυχὴ ζωὴν ἄλλην ἴσχει τότε καὶ προσιοῦσα καὶ ἤδη προσελθοῦσα καὶ μετασχοῦσα αὐτοῦ... [...] Ὁρᾶν δὴ ἔστιν ἐνταῦθα κἀκεῖνον <the One> καὶ ἑαυτὸν ὡς ὁρᾶν θέμις..." ("The soul, then, according to its nature, loves God, wishing to be united with Him... [...] There is the true beloved one, which it is also possible to be together with, when someone is participating in Him and partaking of Him... [...] There, it is possible to see It <the One> as well as itself <the soul,> insofar as it is meet and right to see at all...").

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