

Being and Non-Being in the Pseudo-Dionysius

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Notwithstanding my sparse resources of Modern Greek and the differences between Erasmian and demotic pronunciation, the reading at mealtime in the *Trapezaria* of the monastery of Saint Dionysius on Mount Athos caused an immediate and startling curiosity. Ἅγιος Διονύσιος, ὁ Ἀπόστολος Παῦλος, Ἄγνωστος Θεός: the words were uncannily familiar. Upon enquiry I was told the monks were on that day—October 3rd, the 16th in my diary—celebrating the feast of the first bishop of Athens, convert of St. Paul and author of sacred treatises on the monastic life. All appeal on my part to the results of modern research was in vain: science is powerless as an arbiter in matters of belief. This was a revealing moment, emphasized later by attendance at the liturgy of the day. Dionysius assumed a new actuality; no longer a mythic figure, he was a living inspiration who still survived in this remote haven of fervour and devotion, palpably attested by the solemn chants of praise, the scent of incense and the glow of oil lamps before the icons of the holy man. For how many centuries had these hymns been sung in unbroken tradition? Regardless of its authorship, the *Corpus Dionysiacum* has had a timeless power to draw its readers towards the divine secrets of the universe. Such was the status of the Pseudo-Dionysius for Christian writers throughout the Middle Ages. The pseudonymity of the writings was so artfully crafted as to mask successfully for over a millennium their Neoplatonic provenance. By contrast Dionysius was for the medievals truly *primus inter patres*.

Dionysius, under the inspiration of the Christian teaching of creation, attained to an appreciation of Being as the primary excellence of creatures¹ while steadfastly adhering to the characteristic Neoplatonist position regarding the supremacy of the Good beyond Being.

1 "Being" is written in upper case in order to indicate its substantive use as expressing the primary perfection of reality; "existence" is occasionally used also in this sense.

Such is the argument of this paper. It will be further argued that, quite paradoxically, in order to expound the transcendence of the absolute Good, Dionysius unwittingly relied upon an implicit realism regarding the fundamental and transcendent character of Being in itself (as originally discerned by Parmenides and later synthesised in the medieval doctrine *ens et bonum convertuntur*). As further evidence of the significant relationship between Neoplatonism and Christianity occasioned by this mysterious writer, I shall refer briefly to his influence on Aquinas, who in a majestic synthesis joined the many strands of the Greek tradition with the fundamentals of the Christian vision of reality.

The doctrine of creation fundamentally signifies that God is the unique and immediate cause of all beings. Whereas for Plotinus and Proclus there is a plurality of universal causes, Dionysius attributes the exclusive causality of the universe to a single source. The Good causes all things, together with all their perfections, directly in their Being. Although for Dionysius the Good is the universal and transcendent name which alone expresses God's nature, Being is the first gift of creation.

BEING: THE FIRST CREATED PERFECTION

The most explicit statement by Dionysius on the nature and status of Being is to be found in Chapter V of the *Divine Names*, where he treats of the name "Being" as it may be applied to God. For Dionysius, in accordance with the Neoplatonist tradition, Goodness is the first name of God, while Being is the most excellent of names drawn from creation and pronounced in praise of God. By contrast, for later Christian philosophers Being is not only the primary perfection of finite reality but the very essence and proper name of God. In Dionysius' view, however, "Good" is the universal and transcendent name which alone expresses God's nature; "Being" designates what is globally and primarily the first gift of creation and is therefore limited to the status of an effect. Being is spoken of God, therefore, not as indicating his nature, but affirming him as the cause of all things. Of inestimable interest to us, however, is the significance which Dionysius gives to the value of Being as constitutive of the perfection of finite beings. This is found in his exposition of Being as God's primary effect and first participation.

2 5, 4, 262; 817a. References to Dionysius' *Divine Names* are given, without abbreviation, both according to chapter and paragraph (the third number being the numeration added in Pera's text, referred to in footnote 3) and the pagination of the Migne edition (PG 3). For other works of Dionysius the following abbreviations are used: CH = *Celestial Hierarchy*, MT = *Mystical Theology*, Ep. = *Letters*. Translations are mine except where, in one instance, I

Dionysius gives two reasons why the name "Being", ὁ ὄν,² is applied most fittingly to God.³ Firstly, God is to be named according to his primary effect, i.e. the most sublime perfection which he produces. Dionysius first demonstrates, therefore, the paramount status of Being in creation, in order to show that Being must be attributed to God before all other names. Secondly, the argument is raised to the level of participation through an intensification of the value of Being which has been disclosed in the first step: "God himself possesses prior and pre-eminent Being in an anterior and transcendent way,"⁴ i.e. he possesses in the unity and abundance of his Being the unlimited measure of every perfection. This conclusion rests upon the first justification of the primacy of being.

Granted God's causality, and that he is most appropriately named from his primary and most noble effect, it is a matter of discovering which is his most noble effect and primary participation. We find in Dionysius a rational justification of the primacy of Being, albeit in a less developed and profound form than in Aquinas. Dionysius establishes summarily the excellence of Being and, once this position is attained, defends the priority of Being on the ground of its divine origin and its immediacy as the causal presence of God within beings. He begins, however, with a natural intuition of the radical value of Being and argues that for something to be wise or living, it must first of all be:

Being is established (προβέβληται, *propositum*) or created before the other participations in God, and Being itself (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι) is superior to life itself, wisdom itself or divine likeness itself; and all the other principles in which beings participate must themselves first participate in Being. Moreover, all of the subsistent principles in which beings participate themselves participate in subsisting Being; and there is no being whose substance and eternity are not Being Itself.⁵

Although the primacy of Being is attained by Dionysius through a natural insight and justified by reflection, this justification is achieved

quote Colm Luibhéid, *Pseudo-Dionysius. The Complete Works*, London, 1987. I wish to express my thanks to Dr Deirdre Carabine and Dr Gerald Hanratty for their valuable advice in the writing of this paper.

3 See Aquinas, In *Librum Beati Dionysii de Divinis Nominibus*, ed. C. Pera, Turin, 1950, V, i, 632.

4 See Aquinas, V, i, 636: *Hoc ergo est quod dicit quod ipse Deus praeesse et superesse prae habet et super habet*. See DN 5, 5, 267; 820b: καὶ γὰρ τὸ προεἶναι καὶ ὑπερεἶναι προέχων καὶ ὑπερέχων τὸ εἶναι πάν . . .

5 5, 5, 266; 820a.

in the context of reflection on created being. Being is the first perfection to be created; it is the premier participation in God.

From the outset Being is taken by Dionysius to be the principal, "most ancient" and venerable of God's gifts. The priority of existence among all the participations of the Good stems from its privileged position as radix of all specific perfections; these must first participate in Being in order to be and to effect their presence within beings. Not only is Being the plenitude of perfection from which all individual beings derive, but it is the source of all the perfections in which they share. In Dionysius we re-encounter the Platonist concept of universal causes, i.e. transcendent and self-subsisting principles of perfection in which finite beings participate according to the various qualities which they enjoy. For the Pseudo-Dionysius, however, it serves as a model of reflection in order to conceive of the causality of distinct perfections and their exemplary presence in the Creator. The so-called transcendent principles are not distinct from Being, separate and apart from it, as it were, but are themselves participations in Being itself: "For, indeed, all the principles of beings through their participation in Being both are and are principles; they first of all are and are then principles."⁶

Thus, according to Dionysius, if we suppose that Life itself (αὐτοζωή) is the principle of living things, and Similarity itself the principle of all things which are similar, and Unity and Order the principles of all things which are unified and ordered; and likewise if we call "Participations per se" (αὐτομετοχάς) all the other principles in which beings participate, we will find that these participations themselves first participate in Being; through Being they first of all subsist themselves and are subsequently principles of this or that. By participation in Being, therefore, they both subsist in themselves and permit things to participate in them. And if these principles themselves exist through their participation in Being, much more so do those beings which in turn partake of them.⁷ Through Being all things both are and receive their determination as the kind of being which they are.⁸

The intensive unity of the qualities and perfections of a being in its very Being or its "to be" and the superiority of Being are illustrated by the reply to a hypothetical but interesting objection. If Being transcends life and life exceeds wisdom, why, it is asked, are living and intelligent beings superior to things which simply exist, i.e. beings whose highest perfection lies in the fact of their existence; and why

6 5, 5, 267; 820b: Καὶ γοῦν αἱ ἀρχαὶ τῶν ὄντων πᾶσαι τοῦ εἶναι μετέχουσιν καὶ εἰσι, καὶ ἀρχαὶ εἰσι, καὶ πρῶτόν εἰσιν, ἔπειτα ἀρχαὶ εἰσιν.

7 5, 5, 267; 820c.

8 5, 7, 274; 821c.

do intellectual and spiritual natures surpass all others and come closer to God, rather than those which have the simple richness of Being? Should not those which participate exclusively in the most sublime gift of God, namely existence, be superior and transcend all others?⁹ As Dionysius points out in his response, however, the objection assumes that intellectual beings do not also participate in life and existence, whereas it is precisely as beings that they are living and intelligent.¹⁰ The perfections are not separate but spring from Being itself; they are concentrated and rooted in Being. Just as life includes virtually within itself as one of its possible determinations the perfection of wisdom, Being embraces that of life, although it extends beyond living things so as to contain also inanimate beings. Its extension is more universal, and its perfection is therefore more fundamental and creative. This text of Dionysius clearly illustrates the nature of virtual and intensive presence of all perfection in Being and is frequently invoked by Aquinas to explain both the intimate and intensive presence of *esse* throughout all things and the unified presence of all finite reality in God as the source of Being.¹¹ In a startling sentence, expressing what has recently been termed the "ontological difference", Dionysius emphasizes the distinction and primacy of Being with respect to beings, and the priority of Being itself in the divine causation of that which is: "He is the Being of beings, and not only of beings, but the Being itself of beings is from the Being before the ages."¹²

PRIORITY OF THE GOOD BEYOND BEING

Dionysius' insistence on the priority of the Good is all the more convincing since he follows the principle adopted at the beginning of his treatise: we may conceive of God and speak of him only as he is revealed in Scripture. On three occasions Dionysius appeals to the sacred writers to portray goodness as the first name of God. He introduces the theme emphatically in Chapter 2, where he begins his quest in plain reliance upon Scripture: "The absolute Goodness is celebrated by the Scriptures as revealing and defining the entire and essential divine essence."¹³ This is what is signified by the proclamation "None is good but God alone" (Lk 18:19: οὐδεὶς ἀγαθὸς εἰ μὴ εἷς ὁ Θεός)—the total and exclusive identification of the nature of God with Goodness itself.

9 5, 3, 259; 817ab.

10 5, 3, 260; 817b.

11 E.g. ST I, 4, 2, ad 3.

12 5, 4, 264; 817d: ἀλλ' αὐτός ἐστι τὸ εἶναι τοῖς οὖσι· καὶ οὐ τὰ ὄντα μόνον, ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι τῶν ὄντων, ἐκ τοῦ προαιωνίως ὄντος· . . .

13 2, 1, 31; 636c.

A noteworthy passage in which Dionysius speaks of "Good" as the first name of God occurs in the penultimate paragraph of the *Divine Names*, where having treated of the many names given to the thearchy he places the entire enterprise in its total perspective. He sums up the value of the treatise and shows its accord with the holy writings:

We do not attribute to it the name of Goodness as appropriate, but through a desire to know and say something of that ineffable nature we first consecrate to it this most sacred of names. In this we shall be in agreement with the sacred writers, although the truth of the reality transcends us.¹⁴

While Dionysius stresses that no name whatsoever is of itself adequate to reflect the transcendent divinity, he suggests that "Goodness" is the most proper even though we are still far from the truth.

The most important of the passages where Dionysius agrees with Scripture in naming God as Goodness is the opening paragraph of Chapter IV, a chapter which deals specifically with the Good, and which constitutes more than one fourth of the entire work. Dionysius begins by remarking that the sacred writers have given the name of "Good" (*ἀγαθονομίαν*) to the "supra-divine divinity" in a pre-eminent manner, separating him from all things, portraying him as transcendent to all. Significant is the sense which Dionysius, for his part, attributes to this teaching: "They say, as I think, that the divine essence is goodness itself and that simply by its being the Good as the subsisting essence of the Good (*ὡς οὐσιώδες ἀγαθόν*) extends its goodness to all beings."¹⁵ This is of course the language of Neoplatonism but we observe how Dionysius on the authority of Scripture introduces and sustains what is unmistakably a Neoplatonist theory in the first place. Moreover, from the point of view of a metaphysics of being, it can be observed that Dionysius relies upon the very notion of being to express his stated primacy of the Good.

It is as the cause of beings, defined first in terms of their goodness, that the Absolute is known philosophically as the subsisting Good. The perfections of all finite things abide pre-eminently in God who is their cause. Dionysius summarizes this by pointing out that not only is God the cause of being for all things, constituting the source of life and perfection, but that he embraces all by anticipation "simply and without limitation".¹⁶

14 13, 3, 452; 981a.

15 4, 1, 95; 693b.

16 1, 7, 26; 597a: *ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀπεριορίστως*; see 5, 9, 284; 825a: *πάντα μὲν ἐν ἑαυτῇ προέχει, κατὰ μίαν ἀπλότητος υπερβολήν . . .*

The thearchy therefore, considered in itself, is first understood philosophically—in so far as possible—as the superabundant fullness of all of those perfections manifest in the universe of Being. It is conceived according to the manner whereby it anticipates and pre-embraces to an endless degree the riches it confers upon reality. "Nothing is self-perfect or lacking in complete perfection except that which is really self-perfect (*ὄντως αὐτοτελής*) and prior to all perfection."¹⁷ The goodness of God is known, therefore, in the first instance in terms of the participation and anticipation within it of all reality. In a word we may say, according to the positive mode of discourse, that from the perspective of reality God is Good as the plenary and pre-eminent perfection of Being itself.

The fullness of Being—the plenary presence of the perfection of all reality in God—forms the theme of Chapter 5 of the *Divine Names*. Although Being is for Dionysius of itself finite, it is the first of the divine gifts and thus the most significant with which to denote God's perfection.

God is properly and principally praised above all else as Being (*ὡς ὄν*), from the most excellent of all his gifts, since as pre-containing and embracing all being—I mean (absolute) Being in itself—superabundantly in its origin and its transcendence, he has pre-established being itself, and through being has established all that is, whatever its manner of existing.¹⁸

Again: "The transcendent Goodness itself, pouring forth the first gift of being itself (*τοῦ αὐτοῦ εἶναι*), is named from this venerable and primary participation."¹⁹ Dionysius sums up the aim of Chapter 5: "Let us praise the Good as that which really is (*ὡς ὄντως ὄν*) and as the cause of existence for all beings."²⁰

We must remember that for Dionysius the word "Being" is of itself inadequate to denote the divine nature of the thearchy; here he is employing the name to convey God's perfection in so far as possible from the evidence of finite reality. In whatever way we use the term, our language is always bound to our experience of the finite world. Nevertheless, rooted and restricted as it is within the finite horizon,

17 CH 10, 3; 273c.

18 5, 5, 266–7; 820b. *Πάντων οὖν εἰκότως τῶν ἄλλων ἀρχηγικώτερον ὡς ὄν ὁ Θεὸς ἐκ τῆς πρεσβυτέρας τῶν ἄλλων αὐτοῦ δωρεῶν ὑμνεῖται· καὶ γὰρ τὸ προσεῖναι καὶ ὑπερεῖναι προέχων καὶ ὑπερέχων τὸ εἶναι πᾶν, αὐτὸ φημι καθ' αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι, προὑπεστήσατο καὶ τῷ εἶναι αὐτῷ πᾶν τὸ ὅπως οὖν ὄν ὑπεστήσατο.*

19 5, 6, 267; 820c.

20 5, 4, 261; 817c.

the following denotation of God in terms of "Being" emerges as significant: "He neither was, nor will be, nor became, nor is becoming, nor will become, rather he is not; but he is the Being (τὸ εἶναι) of all beings."²¹ God embraces the fullness of Being, is yet beyond all Being. Again Dionysius' appreciation accords with Scripture: "He who truly pre-subsists" (ὁ ὄντως προῶν) is named by Scripture in many ways, according to every conception of Being; thus he is rightly praised by "Was", "Is", "Became", "Becomes" and "Will become". Such terms signify that God "is supra-existentially (ὑπερουσίως) and is the cause of every mode of existence."²² Dionysius praises God as "He who truly is" (ὄντως ὢν),²³ a name which carries all the resonance of Exodus 3:14. For him the name is a resumé of God's causal presence in beings. "He who is (ὁ ὢν) is through his power beyond being the substantial cause of all being; creator of being, of subsistence, substance, essence and nature . . . he is the Being (the "to be", τὸ εἶναι) of all things, whatever their manner of being."²⁴ Dionysius cautiously establishes a distinction: "Moreover, God is not somehow something which is (οὐ πῶς ἐστὶν ὢν), but rather he exists in a simple or absolute and unlimited way (ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀπεριορίστως), embracing and pre-containing the whole of being in himself."²⁵ He brings out further God's fullness of Being: "For he is not this, but not that; nor does he exist in one way and not in another; rather, he is all things as cause of all, embracing and anticipating in himself the beginnings and ends of all things. And he is beyond all as supra-existentially transcending all that is."²⁶

—Ontologically, the root characteristic of the Good in its excellence as the fullness of Being lies in its identity: it is the One par excellence: unique and immutable, the total, exhaustive and simple plenitude of all perfection in a unique presence, not only of that perfection which is present in limited measure in created being, but all perfection whatsoever. Briefly, the full plenitude of the Good is characterized by its identity in and with itself, its fullness and presence beyond division or dependence. Herein reside its self-sufficiency, self-rootedness and selfsameness. As the source of Being, the thearchy is beyond the diversity of being; as the source of multiplicity, it is transcendent

21 5, 4, 264; 817d: καὶ οὔτε ἦν οὔτε ἔσται οὔτε ἐγένετο οὔτε γίνεται οὔτε γενήσεται, μᾶλλον δὲ οὔτε ἔστιν· ἀλλ' αὐτός ἐστι τὸ εἶναι τοῖς οὐσι . . .

22 5, 8, 280; 824a.

23 5, 1, 257; 816b.

24 5, 4, 262; 817c.

25 5, 4, 263; 817c.

26 5, 8, 280; 824ab: Καὶ γὰρ οὐ τόδε μὲν ἐστὶ, τόδε δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν· οὐδὲ πῇ μὲν ἐστὶ, πῇ δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν· ἀλλὰ πάντα ἐστὶν, ὥς πάντων αἴτιος, καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ πᾶσας ἀρχάς, πάντα συμπεράσματα, πάντων τῶν ὄντων συνέχων καὶ προέχων· καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ πάντα ἐστίν, ὥς πρὸ πάντων ὑπερουσίως ὑπερών.

unity; there is no division or dispersion, decrease or increase within its nature (axiomatic for Neoplatonist metaphysics). "To it, then, must be attributed all things in an all-transcendent unity. . . . It pre-contains all things in itself and in a unique and transcendent simplicity excludes all duality, embracing all things equally in its supra-simple infinity."²⁷

God is the One and the Good beyond Being. And while this notion of the thearchy is unmistakably of Neoplatonist provenance, Dionysius again appeals to Scripture in favour of his explanation: "Theology praises the whole thearchy as the cause of all by the name of the One—for all things are pre-contained and enclosed uniformly in the One itself."²⁸ It is indeed, Dionysius claims, the most powerful of all names (καρτερώτατον). "Theology predicates all things of the universal cause, both singly and together, and praises him as the Perfect itself and as the One."²⁹ The epithets of "Perfect" and "One" are most closely related. The thearchy is perfect because it is all in one; it is the fullness of Being in a unified presence; it is fulfilled in its own totality, complete and replete within itself. It is its own end and the end for all (τέλειον).

The perfection of the One consists in its most consummate selfhood, in the unique and transcendent manner in which it enjoys and exercises the wealth of all beings in the intimacy of its self-constitution beyond all manner of being. The Good is the supreme and primordial One. Dionysius states succinctly: "The cause of all is the supra-plenitude of all, according to a single transcendent superfullness of all."³⁰ Negatively, it can be appreciated that "no duality can be a principle."³¹ Diversity for Dionysius is a sign of limitation, indicating a lack of completeness or absence of total perfection and goodness. Unity, simplicity and identity are hallmarks of perfection. They may be interpreted fundamentally as perfections, qualities or characteristics of Being. They were indeed so identified by Parmenides, and Dionysius echoes the portrayal of the One as "the all-embracing and undivided whole", expounded by Plato in the dialogue named after the father of ontology.³² Such aspects of the perfect Goodness of the thearchy, its transcendence beyond difference,

27 5, 9, 284; 825a: Πάντα οὖν αὐτῇ τὰ ὄντα κατὰ μίαν τὴν πάντων ἐξηρημένῃ ἐνωσιν, ἀναθετέον· . . . πάντα μὲν ἐν αὐτῇ προέχει, κατὰ μίαν ἀπλότητος ὑπερβολὴν πᾶσαν διπλόην ἀπαναινομένη· πάντα δὲ ὡσαύτως περιέχει κατὰ τὴν ὑπερπληρωμένην αὐτῆς ἀπειρίαν.

28 13, 3, 446-7; 980b.

29 13, 1, 435; 977b.

30 12, 4, 433; 972a: Ἐπειδὴ δὲ ὑπερπλήρης πάντων ἐστὶν ὁ πάντων αἴτιος, κατὰ μίαν τὴν πάντων ὑπερέχουσαν ὑπερβολήν.

31 4, 21, 205; 721c: Πᾶσα γὰρ δυὰς οὐκ ἀρχή.

32 Parmenides 137cd; 145a.

change, diversity and time etc., are illustrated throughout the treatise. Remarkable for its richness indeed is the variety of names used by Dionysius to praise the complete and exhaustive perfection of the thearchy, the singular fullness and excellence of the divine Good. Almost all of these names are, however, so many variations on the fundamental unity and identity in the Being of the primordial One. The total and exclusive perfection of God, his plenitude and autonomy as the Primary Good, are expressed positively in terms of what is most extensive and radical in the sphere of our experience, namely Being in its various aspects. It will be of interest to examine Dionysius' appreciation of the positive dimension of the divine transcendence and elaborate upon some of the names which he attributes to the thearchy.

The perfect subsistence in Being of the thearchy is indeed stressed by Dionysius' references to the constancy of the Good, named equally as the Beautiful. In a litany of phrases, increasing and intensifying the expression of perfection, Dionysius extols the glory of God as goodness and beauty:

It is (called) Beautiful because it is all-beautiful (*πάγκαλον*) and more than beautiful (*ὑπέρκαλον*), being always and in the same manner beautiful, subject neither to generation nor corruption, to increase nor decrease; not beautiful in one part and in another ugly, nor beautiful in relation to one thing and not to another, nor beautiful in one place and not in another, as though it were beautiful to some and not beautiful to others; but it is itself beautiful, in itself and by itself, uniquely and eternally beautiful, containing in advance and pre-eminently within itself the original beauty of all that is beautiful.³³

The characteristics of identity and totality, eternity and immutability are clearly pronounced. The fact that the aspects denoted in this passage—which Dionysius adapts from Plato—are those which Parmenides prescribes for Being, gives it a twofold historical value.³⁴

The absolute self-perfection and self-containment of the thearchy within itself is again highlighted by Dionysius in Chapter 9, where he considers the application to God of the quality of "sameness". Here the mark of identity is made the specific object of praise. Dionysius writes:

The Same is supra-ontologically (*ὑπερουσίως*) eternal, immutably abiding in itself, having always the same manner of being, present to all things in the same way; it is itself firmly and purely

³³ 4, 7, 136–8; 701cd.

³⁴ Symposium XXIX, 211ab; see Pera, S. Thomae Aquinatis, In Librum Beati Dionysii de Divinis Nominibus Expositio, Observationes, 115–16.

established through itself and of itself in the most beautiful limits of its identity beyond Being (*τῆς ὑπερουσίου ταυτότητος*); without change, unfailing, unwavering, abiding, pure and immaterial, perfectly simple, without lack, with neither increase nor decrease; it is ungenerated—not in the sense of being as yet unborn, nor as still incomplete, nor as unengendered by this or by that, nor in that it does not exist in any manner or not at all—but as wholly and absolutely ungenerated, as eternal Being, as Being perfect in itself (*ἀεὶ ὄν καὶ αὐτοτελὲς ὄν*), the same in and according to itself, uniformly and identically determining itself.³⁵

God, Dionysius continues, "abides within himself, unmoved within his own identity."³⁶ This is repeated when Dionysius considers the terms "standing" or "sitting" as pronounced of God (*στάσις, καθέδρα*); they likewise convey Dionysius' appreciation of the divine permanence and subsistent self-sufficiency, the stability of the thearchy. "God remains himself in himself, abiding stably in his unmoved identity, transcendentally established in his power and acting in the same way according to the same. He is altogether self-subsistent in his own stability and wholly immovable in his immutability; and this in a supra-ontological manner."³⁷ Another aspect of the thearchy's consummate identity is indicated when Dionysius describes God as "without parts and inflexible" (*ἀμερῇ καὶ ἀπαρέγκλιτον*).³⁸ The names "sameness", "unmoving" etc., applied to God, denote his self-sufficiency—a characteristic par excellence of Being. To be, without condition, is *to be fully*, without indigence but replete and autonomous within the self.

Moreover, Dionysius expresses God's absolute primacy in Being with regard to time in a variety of ways which praise him as the all-embracing ground and transcendent source of all things temporal and eternal. This is what is signified, he suggests, by the biblical name "Ancient of Days" (Dan 7: 22): God is both "the eternity and the time of all things, is yet before every day, beyond time and eternity."³⁹

According to Dionysius, "time" denotes that which is affected by generation, corruption and change.⁴⁰ Now God, needless to say, is beyond all such change. His Being is simple and absolute, without limit of time or change since he precontains the plenitude of all that is. "He neither was, nor will be, nor became, nor is becoming, nor will

³⁵ 9, 4, 366–368; 912bc.

³⁶ 9, 5, 370; 912d.

³⁷ 9, 8, 377; 916b.

³⁸ 9, 10, 381; 917a.

³⁹ 10, 2, 388; 937b.

⁴⁰ 10, 3, 395; 937d.

become. . . . He is the being of all beings."⁴¹ His Being cannot be measured; he is beyond all measure and is himself the measure of all. "He is the source and measure of the ages (ἀρχὴ καὶ μέτρον), the being (ὄντοτης) of temporal things, the eternity of that which is, the time of things which become, the existence of all beings whatsoever."⁴²

God is called "King of Eternity" (I Tim 1: 17), Dionysius suggests, "since all being exists and subsists"⁴³ in him and around him who remains "unchanged and unmoved with respect to every movement, abiding within himself in his eternal movement."⁴⁴ Eternity is the "measure of universal being" (τὸ καθόλου τὸ εἶναι μετρεῖν),⁴⁵ of "that which is incorruptible and abides in sameness".⁴⁶ Here Dionysius suggests the twofold aspect of God's immutability, together with his unending activity. Timelessness does not imply a static nature; God is eternally active within himself but in his nature transcends all change. He is so exhaustively and intensely active that all change is impossible. God is fully actual; change indicates a potency which has yet to be actualized. Significant, moreover, is Dionysius' remark that "eternity" principally and most properly refers to "beings which are" (τὰ ὄντα), while time indicates those things which are in a state of becoming.⁴⁷ There is here a suggestion of Being as the all-embracing and fundamental perfection. Eternity is a characteristic of Being itself (τοῦ αὐτοεἶναι ἐστὶν αἰῶν).⁴⁸

The names "ancient" and "young" both signify in their diverse ways the pre-eminence of God (τὴν ἀρχαιότητα τὴν θείαν), that he proceeds through all things from beginning to end.⁴⁹ He is named "ancient", signifying that he is primary and from the beginning, as preceding and transcending time (ὥς πρὸ χρόνου καὶ ὑπὲρ χρόνον);⁵⁰ the epithet "young", on the other hand means that he does not grow old.⁵¹

Even more characteristic of Dionysius' approach, however, is his description of God as prior even to eternity itself (πρὸ αἰῶνος),⁵² and beyond the eternal. Thus he argues that God lies beyond all manner

41 5, 4, 264; 817d.

42 5, 4, 262; 817c.

43 5, 4, 263; 817d.

44 10, 2, 389; 937b.

45 10, 3, 394; 937c.

46 10, 3, 396; 937d.

47 10, 3, 397; 937d – 940a: κυριώτερον τὰ ὄντα τῷ αἰῶνι, καὶ τὰ ἐν γενέσει τῷ χρόνῳ καὶ λεγόμενα καὶ δηλούμενα.

48 6, 1, 285; 856b.

49 10, 2, 391; 937b.

50 10, 3, 398; 940a.

51 10, 2, 391; 937b.

52 10, 3, 398; 940a.

of human denomination, even that which has been refined and purified of the limits of time and Being. He does not, however, venture so far as to say that God is the "non-eternal". To the meaning, method and scope of such negative hyperbole we now turn.

TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD BEYOND BEING

From what we have seen, we can say that Dionysius praises God positively as Being itself. More characteristic, however, is his denomination of God as *other* than Being, as *prior* to Being, and ultimately even as *Non-Being*.

For Dionysius, the transcendence of God beyond beings, considered both positively and negatively, is again indicated primarily through the relation of causality. In the positive sense God constitutes the plenitude of such perfection as is apportioned to creation in finite measure. As causal origin the thearchy surpasses and excels all beings. "The Beautiful and Good is above all things that are."⁵³ The original Platonic phrase ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (*Republic* VI 509b) is re-echoed in various forms: The Good is: πάντων . . . ἐπέκεινα,⁵⁴ ἔξω καὶ ἐπέκεινα τῶν ὅλων,⁵⁵ πάντων ἐπέκεινα,⁵⁶ πάντων ἐστὶν ἐπέκεινα πάντων αἴτιος ὢν,⁵⁷ ἐπέκεινα τῶν ὅλων.⁵⁸

Negatively, this fullness or transcendence is most clearly expressed as follows: "The cause of all things that are is itself none of these but *supra-ontologically transcends them all* (ὑπερουσίως ἐξηρημένον)."⁵⁹ In other words, not only does the thearchy surpass all things but it is "free of" or "exempt from" all beings.⁶⁰ It is "supra-essentially separated from all things".⁶¹ As de Gandillac points out, ἐξηρημένη is the classical Neoplatonist term to indicate the transcendence of the One.⁶² This is clearly stated in the *Celestial Hierarchy*: "The hidden thearchy is supra-essentially separated from all, abiding transcendentally in itself (ὑπεριδρυμένον); and none among beings can be properly and fully called by a name similar to his."⁶³ More significant, however, both here and elsewhere, is the word ὑπερούσιος, -ως. Not only does

53 4, 9, 148; 705a.

54 11, 1, 405; 949b.

55 Ep. 9, 5; 1112c.

56 9, 5, 371; 913a.

57 Ep. 5; 1076a.

58 MT 5; 1048b.

59 1, 5, 23; 593c.

60 2, 11, 73; 649b.

61 CH 13, 3; 301a.

62 La Hiérarchie Céleste, traduction et notes par Maurice de Gandillac, Paris, 1970, 150 n. 3.

63 CH 12, 3; 293b.

the thearchy transcend all beings: it transcends even Being itself and all modes of Being. God is "supra-existential" or "supra-essential", ὑπερούσιος; He "is" beyond all manner of existence, "existing supra-essentially beyond all beings" (ὕπὲρ τὰ ὄντα ὑπερουσίως εἶναι).⁶⁴ "The cause of all is truly beyond all, and he who is supra-essential and supernatural entirely transcends all things (ὕπερέχῃ), whatever their being and nature."⁶⁵ Dionysius is incongruously constrained by a language proper to beings to speak of the thearchy which "really is" (ὄντως ἐστίν) the One beyond all things.⁶⁶ His writings abound with such phrases denoting the transcendence of God as "existing" beyond all manner of existence. In brief, "God transcends Being and is 'supra-essentially'".⁶⁷ This might well be taken to mean that God himself has no essence, that his Being is not circumscribed by any finite measure or limitation. This understanding would indeed be correct, since Dionysius uses the word οὐσία to refer to beings both in their essence and to the reality of their existence. The transcendence of the thearchy beyond Being is, therefore, not totally conveyed by ὑπερούσιον—although it could be held that, because he does not distinguish between the essence and existence of beings, in denoting God as "super-essential", Dionysius also understands him as beyond existence itself. Because of an as yet undifferentiated vocabulary the interpretation of God as "supra-existential" would be legitimate, and I believe this is the author's intended meaning. That it is so, i.e. that he considers God "to be" beyond all existence, is, moreover, clear from Dionysius' *Letter to Titus*, where God is said to be ὑπὲρ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι.⁶⁸ And in a pithy phrase he writes that "the 'to be' (εἶναι) of all things is the divinity beyond Being".⁶⁹ God therefore transcends existence itself. He is more than Being; he is other than Being.

The total ontological priority and transcendence of the thearchy is also expressed in the term προὖν. The cause of all beings precedes and anticipates Being itself. Being may well be the first participation but the Good itself exceeds and is anterior to Being.⁷⁰ "Being itself is never deficient in any being, but Being (the self-existent) is from the Pre-existent."⁷¹ Beings come to be because they participate in self-existing Being, but they are caused by the Pre-subsistent. "All beings and all ages have their being from the Pre-existent."⁷² Dionysius

64 MT 1, 2, 1000a.

65 11, 6, 426; 956b.

66 MT 1, 3; 1000c.

67 4, 20, 201; 720b.

68 Ep. 9, 5, 1112; c.

69 CH 4, 1; 177d: τὸ γὰρ εἶναι πάντων ἐστίν ἢ ὑπὲρ τὸ εἶναι θεότης.

70 5, 5, 266; 820ab.

71 5, 8, 278–9; 821d – 824a.

72 5, 5, 265; 820a.

emphasizes, moreover, that the Pre-existent is both the beginning and the end of all things.⁷³ "The Pre-existent is the principle and cause of every kind of being . . . if anything howsoever is, it is and is thought and is preserved in the Pre-existent."⁷⁴

The pre-eminent and pre-ontological causation of the thearchy is forcefully expressed in a passage referred to already, where Dionysius uses the words προεῖναι and ὑπερεῖναι together with προέχων and ὑπερέχων, suggesting more adequately by the verbal form the intense activity and presence, yet the transcendence of the supra-original Good.⁷⁵ In another striking phrase Dionysius states that "He who is really pre-existent" is cause and source of all.⁷⁶ The very phrase ὁ ὄντως προὖν, literally "beingly before Being", appears almost as a contradiction. Dionysius is here straining against the limits of language. Similarly we find the statement that "God is *Being supra-existentially*".⁷⁷ And Dionysius even speaks of the Good which is really (i.e. in its being) beyond Being.⁷⁸

In Dionysius we meet the basic Neoplatonist principle that the cause of all beings is itself necessarily beyond or prior to its effects. "Only Being itself beyond being is the source, being and substance of the being of all beings".⁷⁹ And he notes that all beings have "their being and their well-being from the pre-existent".⁸⁰ God, it is emphasized, "is infinite in power (ἀπειροδύναμος), not because he produces all power, but because he is above and beyond all power, even self-subsistent power itself" (αὐτοδύναμις).⁸¹ God produces power, therefore, only because he is himself beyond all Power. His creative causality stems from his utter transcendence as the Good beyond Being itself, which in turn is elevated beyond all that shares in Being. Only with the prefatory remark, "If it is proper to say so", does Dionysius conclude that "Being itself has the power to be from the power beyond Being."⁸²

73 5, 10, 284; 825b.

74 5, 5, 265; 820a: πάντ' ὁπωσοῦν ὄνος, ὁ προὖν ἀρχὴ καὶ αἰτία . . . καὶ ἀπλῶς, εἴ τι ὁπωσοῦν ἐστίν, ἐν τῷ προόντι καὶ ἐστί, καὶ ἐπινοεῖται, καὶ σώζεται . . .

75 5, 5, 267; 820b. See note 18 above.

76 5, 8, 280; 824a.

77 2, 11, 73; 649b: ἐπειδὴ ὧν ἐστίν ὁ Θεὸς ὑπερουσίως . . .

78 4, 3, 111; 697a. Cf. 5, 8, 280; 824ab.

79 11, 6, 424; 953c: μόνον γὰρ τοῦ εἶναι πάντα τὰ ὄντα, καὶ αὐτὸ τὸ εἶναι ὑπερούσιον, ἀρχὴ, καὶ οὐσία, καὶ αἴτιον.

80 5, 8, 277; 821d.

81 8, 2, 333; 889d.

82 8, 3, 334; 892b: καὶ αὐτὸ δέ, εἰ θέμις εἰπεῖν, τὸ εἶναι δύναμιν, εἰς τὸ εἶναι ἔχει παρὰ τῆς ὑπερουσίου δυνάμεως.

In order to emphasize even further the otherness and transcendence of the thearchy beyond Being Dionysius conceives of God even as Non-Being! "He abides transcendentally beyond mind and Being . . . he is not, but is supra-essentially."⁸³ The "non-being" or "non-existence" of God is, needless to say, in no manner a depreciation of the divine, and Dionysius makes the distinction: "For nothing is completely a non-being unless it is said to be in the Good in the sense of beyond-being."⁸⁴ According to Dionysius reason will even dare to say that "Non-Being is beautiful and good when celebrated supra-essentially of God by the removal of all things."⁸⁵ We have here an eloquent example of Dionysius' apophatic discourse indicating the transcendence and pre-eminence of the divine.

The negation of Being in God, as of all perfections, is the indication of its transcendent and pre-eminent presence according to a wholly distinct mode within the divine thearchy. "In no manner like any being, yet the cause of Being to all things, it is itself Non-Being as beyond all Being."⁸⁶ We find this doctrine outlined with some detail in the *Divine Names* 4, 3 where Dionysius writes "Since the Good is above all beings, as indeed it is, as formless it creates all forms, and in it alone is Non-being a super-excellence of Being."⁸⁷ The Good is Non-Being precisely because it is an excess or superabundance of Being. Significantly the principle established by Plotinus comes to the fore: a cause must be free from limit and must transcend whatever it causes. The Good is cause of Being only because it is itself other than Being, i.e. Non-Being. As formless it can of its limitless power create all forms and so determine all beings. Only as Non-Being is it the superabundant source of Being. It is the source of life only because as non-living it is the superabundance of Life (καὶ τὸ ἄζωον ὑπερέχουσα ζωή). Without intellect it is itself transcendent wisdom (καὶ τὸ ἄνουν ὑπεραίρουσα σοφία). In summary, "Whatever is in the Good is by a supereminent formation of the formless."⁸⁸ Here we have not merely a theory of negative discourse which serves to highlight the absolute transcendence of the Good but more radically a theology of Non-

83 Ep. 1, 1065a: αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ ὑπὲρ οὐσίαν ὑπεριδρυμένος . . . μηδὲ εἶναι, καὶ ἔστιν ὑποούσιος.

84 4, 19, 190; 716cd; translation, Luibhéid, 85.

85 4, 7, 141; 704b: Τολμήσει δὲ καὶ τοῦτο εἰπεῖν ὁ λόγος, ὅτι καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν μετέχει τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ, τότε γὰρ καὶ αὐτὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν, ὅταν ἐν Θεῷ κατα τὴν πάντων ἀφαίρεσιν ὑπερουσίως ὕμνηται.

86 1, 1, 7; 588b: κατὰ μὴδὲν τῶν ὄντων οὐσα· καὶ αἴτιον μὲν τοῦ εἶναι πᾶσιν, αὐτὸ δὲ μὴ ὄν ὡς πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα . . .

87 4, 3, 111; 697a: Εἰ δὲ καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα ἐστίν—ὡς περ οὖν ἐστι—τάγαθόν, καὶ τὸ ἀνείδεον εἰδοποιεῖ· καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ μόνῳ καὶ τὸ ἀνούσιον· οὐσίας ὑπερβολή·

88 4, 3, 111; 697a.

Being itself. The same doctrine also appears in the *Mystical Theology*, where Dionysius states that "The cause of all, being beyond all, is not without Being, or life, nor without reason or intelligence."⁸⁹ This triad of created perfection—Being, Life and Wisdom—is a fundamental theme in Neoplatonism and recurs as a constant refrain in the writings of the Pseudo-Dionysius.

GOD: BEYOND BEING AND NON-BEING

Not yet content with his definition of the thearchy as beyond Being, or even as Non-Being, Dionysius seeks to advance still further in his attempt to express the supremacy of God. The highest to which he attains is to say that the Good even transcends both Being and Non-Being: the things which are and the things which are not. Here he formulates, in terms borrowed from reality, the principle that the Good is beyond both affirmation and negation.

This is an even more remarkable aspect of the relation between the Good and Being. Not only must the primary Good be understood as Non-Being, precisely as the transcendence and supereminence of Being itself; its primacy beyond Being also means that even *that which is not* is contained within the Good. Not only do all beings derive from the transcendent Good, and are therefore embraced in it by anticipation, but moreover, "all the things which are not abide supra-essentially in the Beautiful and the Good."⁹⁰ Dionysius reasons: "If all beings are from the Good, and the Good is beyond beings, then even non-being has its being in the Good."⁹¹ He gives some indication of what this may signify by placing it in the context of the finality of causation. "The Beautiful and Good is desired, sought and loved by all; even non-being desires it and strives somehow to be in it . . . and through it that which is not is affirmed and exists supra-ontologically."⁹²

Dionysius suggests that, prior to existing, things which are as yet uncaused desire the Good in some way: "If it is lawful to say so, even non-being itself aspires to the Good beyond all beings and strives through the denial of all things somehow to exist within the Good which is really beyond Being."⁹³ They come into being in fulfilment of their love for the Good. In this way, whereas "Being" embraces things which have being, the Good has dominion both over things which are as well as things which do not yet exist. The Good is understood by

89 MT 4; 1040d.

90 4, 10, 155; 708a: πάντα τὰ οὐκ ὄντα, ὑπερουσίως ἐν τῷ καλῷ καὶ ἀγαθῷ·

91 4, 19, 190; 716c.

92 4, 18, 184; 713d–716a.

93 4, 3, 111; 697a.

Dionysius, therefore, not only as the fullness of Being but as preceding and superseding Being itself, not merely as Non-Being but even as transcending Being and Non-Being. The thearchy is Non-Being itself as surpassing both Being and that which has not Being.

Dionysius appears to be quite aware of the magnitude and ambition of his enterprise: "All things desire the Beautiful and the Good according to every cause and there is not any among beings which does not participate in the Beautiful and Good. Indeed, our discourse will even *dare* to say that non-being (τὸ μὴ ὄν) participates in the Beautiful and the Good."⁹⁴ He believes, however, that he has nevertheless equalled the magnitude of the task. Concluding Chapter 4 of the *Divine Names*, Dionysius claims that he has "adequately celebrated the Good as truly admirable, as the principle and end of all . . . as perfect Goodness transcending both beings and non-beings."⁹⁵ The significance of the name "Good" and its transcendence beyond Being is again given in résumé in a passage at the start of Chapter 5:

The divine name of Good, revealing all the processions of the universal cause, is extended to beings; it is beyond both beings and non-beings. The name of Being, however, is extended to all beings and is beyond beings.⁹⁶

The name of Being when attributed to God praises him as the Cause of Being and as transcending, therefore, all things which are. The name of the Good praises him, however, as embracing not only the things which are, but those which are not; these participate in anticipation of their existence, as it were, already in the Good. The transcendence of the Good, its primacy before Being, derives from its dominion not only over beings, but also over non-being.

MATTER AS NON-BEING

"How can that which is non-being participate in the Good?" This very question is raised by Maximus in his scholion to the *Divine Names*. In his response the Confessor tellingly remarks: "This holy man understands 'non-being' differently,"⁹⁷ and he gives an accurate summary of Dionysius' doctrine: "non-being" refers to God who is beyond beings and to matter which, being formless, cannot properly be said to be, but which—participating in the Good—acquires form and therefore being.

⁹⁴ 4, 7, 141; 704b.

⁹⁵ 4, 35, 256; 736b.

⁹⁶ 5, 1, 257; 816b.

⁹⁷ PG 4, 254c.

Nowhere does Dionysius explicitly identify non-being with matter. We find passages, however, where non-being and "formless" are associated and where the non-being of what is formless through an absence of being is juxtaposed with the Good which through superabundance is without form and existence. In 4, 3, for example, we read: Εἰ δὲ καὶ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὄντα ἐστίν, ὥσπερ οὖν ἐστι, τὰγαθόν, καὶ τὸ ἀνείδεον εἰδοποιεῖ· καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ μόνῳ καὶ τὸ ἀνούσιον οὐσίας ὑπερβολή.⁹⁸ The same relation between these two distinct kinds of non-being is repeated in 4, 18, 184; here again we find the contrast between non-being which desires the Good, and the supra-existential Good which gives form and being to the formless and non-existent: . . . Εἰ πᾶσιν ἐστὶ τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθὸν ἐραστὸν καὶ ἐφετὸν καὶ ἀγαπητὸν—ἐφίεται γὰρ αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν, ὡς εἴρηται, καὶ φιλονεικεῖ πῶς ἐν αὐτῷ εἶναι· καὶ αὐτὸ ἐστὶ τὸ εἰδοποιὸν καὶ τῶν ἀνείδεων, καὶ ἐπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ τὸ μὴ ὄν ὑπερουσίως λέγεται καὶ ἐστὶ . . .⁹⁹

Indeed, not only is the Good supra-existential in itself, embracing all things that are, but more significantly, as the ground of all things which it inaugurates into existence from non-being, all things which are not are anticipated supra-existentially in the Beautiful and the Good.¹⁰⁰ Dionysius sums this up in the last lines of the chapter on the Good: "The Good is praised as embracing the things which are, and as creating the forms of non-beings, transcending beings and non-beings."¹⁰¹ Here again what is without form is equated with non-being.

We may safely conclude, therefore, that by "non-being" Dionysius understands matter which is devoid of form and which thus cannot be said properly to be. He does not, however, characterize the non-being of matter as something which is completely non-existent. Absolute non-being is predicated of God alone. Speaking in another context—that of evil—Dionysius affirms: "Nothing is wholly non-existent unless this is said supra-substantially of the Good."¹⁰² The transcendent Good alone is non-existent in a supra-existential manner. From the phrase, "If all beings are from the Good, and the Good is beyond beings, even non-being has its being in the Good,"¹⁰³ we may conclude that matter falls within the domain of non-being which abides within the Good. Of the Good, Dionysius states forcefully: "The Good transcends by far, and is greatly prior to, what simply is and what is not."¹⁰⁴ And of evil he declares that it is even more distant from the Good than non-being.¹⁰⁵ Thus we have three senses of non-being: (a): The tran-

⁹⁸ 4, 3, 111; 697a.

⁹⁹ 4, 18, 184; 713d–716a.

¹⁰⁰ See 4, 10, 155; 708a.

¹⁰¹ 4, 35, 256; 736b.

¹⁰² 4, 19, 190; 716cd.

¹⁰³ 4, 19, 190; 716c.

¹⁰⁴ 4, 19, 190; 716d.

¹⁰⁵ 4, 19, 190; 716d.

scendent Non-Being of the absolute Good which exceeds both Being and non-being, (b): the relative non-being of matter deprived of form, which has however a disposition towards determination and existence, and (c): evil, which is even more distant from being than matter and of which Dionysius declares "it is not itself in any manner whatever existent".¹⁰⁶ Thus while Dionysius considers matter to be without form—and therefore less than fully existent—he never asserts that it is wholly non-existent. Indeed in the *Divine Names* 4, 28, Dionysius emphasizes that matter has a certain share in beauty, order and form; and while matter cannot act without these and is therefore incomplete in itself, it is nevertheless necessary for the complete perfection of the universe.¹⁰⁷ Without form and order matter is not complete in its being; it is nevertheless more than non-being. Dionysius considers indeed the possibility of the non-existence of matter as well as its existence, to indicate that in neither case could matter be a source of evil. He rejects, however, the conclusion that matter does not exist. To the contrary, in the *Celestial Hierarchy*, Dionysius states that "matter also has received existence from him who is truly beautiful."¹⁰⁸ Thus, whereas Plotinus considers that the last trace of divine power is to be found in living things,¹⁰⁹ Dionysius in this unique passage attributes existence to matter and refers it to the divine Good. More characteristic is the affirmation that matter is a remote echo, the most distant and most feeble of all the realities which proceed from God.¹¹⁰ Such, in brief, is the meaning which Dionysius attaches to the notion of matter, which is crucial for his understanding of the priority of Goodness over Being.

BEING AND THE REVELATION OF EXODUS

There can be no doubt but that the doctrine of creation revealed to both Dionysius and Aquinas, as to all Christian philosophers, the fundamental character of existence—*εἶναι*, *esse*—which had remained

106 4, 32, 245; 732d.

107 4, 28, 232–4; 729a.

108 CH 2; 144b.

109 M. de Gandillac, *La Hiérarchie Céleste*, 83, n.1.

110 4, 20, 198; 720a: κατ' ἔσχατον ἀπήχημα πάρεστι τὰγαθόν. We may note that Dionysius once uses the term πρώτη ὕλη (CH 13, 3, 301a, ed. Heil, 151), not in the sense of Aristotle, but as referring to the objects in the material world which first receive the rays of the sun. He is using the image to illustrate the degrees in which the divine power is received by the angelic orders. In this analogy Dionysius indeed suggests that there are degrees of nobility in the material world itself; sunlight passes easily "through first matter" but diminishes when received and reflected by more dense and opaque matter. In accordance with this meaning Corderius translates πρώτη ὕλη as *materia proxima* (PG III 302a).

concealed to Greek philosophy. For the Greeks, the radical origin of things in their being held no mystery; existence posed no question since it was assumed to be eternal: the question for the Greeks was rather to explain the genesis of the world-order or *cosmos*. However, once the possibility of an origin or radical beginning is raised, being is put into question; it loses its transparent intelligibility and opens up as endless mystery in need of illumination. Once the necessary eternity of the universe is no longer assumed existence itself is radically called into question. Being is what is most in need of question; no longer may it be taken for granted. The Christian doctrine of creation thus played, I suggest, a crucial and positive role in disclosing to philosophy the radical character of being. This in turn awakened an appreciation that existence is what is fundamental in all things. Dionysius recognised indeed the primacy of Being, as Fabro remarks,¹¹¹ in an eminently realist manner: in order to live or know, something must first of all be. And even if the Platonist theory of individual transcendent or separate causes is espoused, one must admit that such participations first partake of the primary efficacy of existence.

Now if there is but a single, all-perfect cause of all things, and if the first and final perfection of each individual is that of being, it must be the nature of the cause to be the endless perfection of Being itself, which is continuously and intimately operative at the core of each thing. Expressed philosophically, it is because all determinations are latent or implicit within the perfection of being that there is need of only a single source which causes everything through the power or *virtus* of Being. To natural reflection and intuition it is evident that Being is the first perfection of all, more universal than life or wisdom; God causes, therefore, all things through the primary perfection and presence of Being, although he is himself transcendent Being. The difference between Dionysius and later authors—Aquinas, for example, on whom Dionysius' influence is immense—is that for Dionysius God excels even Being itself, whereas for Aquinas God is subsistent Being, and precisely as Being itself is absolutely transcendent.

In naming God as Being, i.e. ὁ ὢν, or *Qui est*, both authors refer to Exodus 3:14. I do not wish to engage here in any extended discussion on the question of the so-called "metaphysics of Exodus". Much has been made of its importance by some interpreters; this has been disputed by other commentators with equal vehemence. Indeed in weighing up the influence of Exodus and the *Areopagitica*, respectively, on Aquinas, Van Steenberghen goes so far as to declare: "Le sens des formules de l'*Exode* est très discuté et il paraît certain que S. Thomas doit sa métaphysique de l'*esse* à Denys et non à l'*Exode*; il a ensuite

111 C. Fabro, *Participation et causalité*, Louvain, 1961, 226.

interprété le texte sacré à l'aide de sa métaphysique."¹¹² In attaching importance, however, to the absence of any reference to Exodus in Dionysius' text confirming the primacy of Being, Van Steenberghen overlooks the *Divine Names* 5, 4 (817c), where Dionysius, in keeping with his expressed aim of praising God only with names drawn from Scripture, names the universal cause as ὁ ὢν, which Pachymeres (long before Pera, who also notes it), already took as referring to the divine revelation by Moses.¹¹³

In highlighting the importance of Dionysius, it would be excessive to attribute exclusive influence to a single source for the development of this doctrine in medieval metaphysics. I do suggest that possibly Exodus, and certainly the revealed doctrine of creation, played a decisive role in leading Dionysius to the central meaning of being and the unique and immediate character of creation.

Creation certainly exerted a fundamental influence as a background to the philosophical thought of both Dionysius and Aquinas. Dionysius had already followed Exodus 3:14 in calling God ὁ ὢν. And in the case of Aquinas there are grounds for agreeing with Fabro's view that "l'instrument principal et décisif de cette transformation métaphysique de l'esse biblique semble avoir été indubitablement le Pseudo-Denys."¹¹⁴ That is to say, Aquinas discovered in Dionysius both the theological and the ontological signification of this passage. There is a happy confluence of inspiration.

CONCLUSION

"Being" is one of the most significant names used by Dionysius to describe the divine nature. God is called "Being" from the most noble of his gifts. Dionysius referred to the "I am who am" of Exodus but exploits greatly the Parmenidean intuition of the absolute nature of Being and elaborates upon many characteristics which are grounded in Being. However, while Being is the first created gift and primary participation shared by all creatures, it has in itself the finite status of a creature. God, as the divine Good, surpasses Being in his nature and in the bestowal of creation. He is described as "Pre-existence" (προεῖναι); he is Being "supra-existentially" (ὑπερουσίως).

Extending and intensifying this motif by means of the apophatic method, Dionysius states that God is Non-Being; a further appreciation of the divine Good leads him to declare that God is beyond both

112 "Prolégomènes à la quarta via", *Rivista di filosofia neoscolastica* 70 (1978) 105, n. 13.

113 PG 3, 836c.

114 Id., 217.

Being and Non-Being. God is thus for Dionysius the transcendent Good surpassing Being and Non-Being. This is more intelligible in the light of Dionysius' view of matter which, devoid of form, cannot be said properly to be. Matter is, however, only relative non-being since it is predisposed towards determination and existence; God alone is absolute Non-Being. (At the other extreme there is the absolute absence of being in evil.) The non-being of matter as absence of form, and existence is contrasted with the thearchic Good which is devoid of form and existence precisely by virtue of its superabundant plenitude.

In summary, we have seen that the unity of causation brings the primacy of Being into clear focus as the first created perfection, and restores universal and absolute transcendence to God as unique creative cause. In agreement with the Platonist tradition Dionysius asserts the primacy of the Good. God is the absolute Good, "surpassing Being in both dignity and power." As infinite perfection and love, the Good is the diffusive source of creation. Unlike his predecessors, however, Dionysius reduces all perfections of finite reality to the pervasive presence and power of Being, eminent and immanent, which is the first effect of God's creative action. Being, according to Dionysius, is thus the primary perfection of finite reality, its first and immediate participation in the absolute.

This fundamental sense of the primacy of the real attains its fullest appreciation and expression in Aquinas, who fully adopts from Dionysius the priority of Being within finite reality. Aquinas, however, deepening the notion of existence as perfection, establishes its transcendental character and thus applies it in a pre-eminent sense to God. For Aquinas Being is not simply the first participation of finite reality in the transcendent Good, but is itself perfection unlimited, the very essence and proper name of God. Goodness is a co-extensive aspect of Being, identical with it in reality but notionally secondary in signification. We may say, therefore, that Aquinas makes his own Dionysius' notion of Being but deepens it in the light of Dionysius' very notion of the Good, adopting the primacy of Goodness asserted by Dionysius, but restoring it to the implicit meaning of Being which, on deeper reflection, is appreciated as primary.

Establishing the primacy of Being in an absolute sense, Aquinas in turn ascribes to it the excellence of the Neoplatonist Good, attributing to it the generative diffusion of perfection. He unites, therefore, within a more profound theory of Being, Dionysius' view both of the primacy of existence in the realm of the finite and of the transcendental character of the Good. Indeed the transformation effected by Aquinas can even be seen as a more profound and persistent

application of an insight into the radical character of Being which Dionysius had glimpsed but confined to finite reality.

In Dionysius' unique vision, as well as in his influence upon the greatest of medieval metaphysicians, we observe a fascinating and fruitful encounter of Neoplatonism and Christianity.¹¹⁵

115 For a more extensive comparison of the Pseudo-Dionysius and Aquinas see my forthcoming book: *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, Leiden, 1992.