

Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite on the notion of time*

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Abstract:

Pseudo-Dionysius knew Plato's texts and those of his descendants well. His familiarity with their works, especially with the dialogue Timaeus, becomes evident in the way he treats the notion of time. Here is where this concept is presented as 'a moving image of eternity', an idea to which Dionysius adheres.

The Syrian thinker Christianizes the term and sees it as a series of 'upliftings' and 'returns' towards the principle of life, God. He believes that people live both in time and in eternity.

Keywords:

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, God, time, Neoplatonic Philosophy, distention, temporality henosis, 'uplifting' (ἀγάγω) and 'return' (ἐπιστροφή), kataphasis, apophasis,

As for most Byzantine thinkers, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the meaning of the notion 'time' was closely connected to that of Divinity. He expounds his view on this topic around the idea that God "is the Eternity of all things", that he is "of their Time" [DN 937B] (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 215; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 120; See also Pseudo-Dionysius 1983; Pseudo-Dionysius 1979; Newheiser 2011, 23-43; Newheiser 2013, 215-221;

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Newheiser 2010, 211-216), and also that, in virtue of the reality of everything participating in divinity, all things have their ultimate and timeless being in it seen as a Person, a 'He/Him'. He is the "subsistence of absolute peace"; "a unity beyond all conceptions" [DN 949C] (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 218-219; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 120), and the "Super-Essence" (as implied in DN 936D (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 214 – 936 D exists only in J.-P. Migne (ed.) PG 3. B.R. Suchla has not translated this fragment in her edition of Dionysius the Areopagite; she skips it and jumps from 934D to 937A) and DN 937A (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 214; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 119-120)). God is anterior to Days, to Eternity, and to Time. Obviously that is also valid for Christ and subsequently an event as fundamental for Christians as His Crucifixion denotes, "in a Divine sense" [DN 937] (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 214-216; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 119-120) the beginning of their world as well as its centre. In the same sense, the terms "Time", "Day", "Season", and "Eternity" are applied to Him and are supposed to convey the following: he is the

One Who is utterly incapable of all change and movement and, in his eternal motion, remains at rest; and Who is the Cause whence Eternity, Time, and Days are derived. [...] Wherefore, in the Sacred Theophanies revealed in mystic Visions He is described as Ancient and yet as Young; the former title signifies that He is the Primal Being, existent from the beginning, and the later that He grows no old [DN 937B] (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 215; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 120).

In connection to time Dionysius also elaborates on the apparent paradox of God being eternal ('the Ancient of Days'; DN 936D) while also having a human nature and living (albeit temporarily) in the mundane world as Jesus. (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 214 – 936 D exists only in PG 3; my translation; as mentioned above (in ft. 187). Suchla has not translated this fragment in her edition of Dionysius the Areopagite, Suchla (ed.), CD I; she skips it and jumps from 934D to 937A), 937B (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 215), 940A (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 216-217; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 121). The Syrian clarifies that, in fact, there is no conundrum in this because God is and can be anything and exist in whatever state he chooses – hence there should be no surprise that he is concomitantly eternal and 'of Time' (*chronos*).

The Pseudo-Areopagite draws our attention to the fact that the things which are called eternal in the Bible “must not be imagined that [...] are simply co-eternal with God, who precedes eternity” (DN 940A) but, following the text accurately, we shall better understand the intended meaning of the words “Eternal” and “Temporal.” I.e. we should regard the reality which “shares partly in eternity and partly in time as being somehow midway between things which are and things which are coming-to-be” (DN 940A) (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 121), or rather between the Supreme Being and the creation. With regard to people, Dionysius upholds that they live in eschatological hope because they ‘participate’ in God’s Being. Their souls undergo the process of *henosis* – the term this ancient author uses for the process of union with God, i.e. deification (this is the case for instance in DN 948D (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 217; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 121. On this topic in the work of Pseudo-Dionysius see Ysabel de Andia 1996; and also McGinn 1994)). Dionysius affirms that earthly reality

comes into existence through participation in the Essential Principle of all things [...] for the ‘to be’ of all things is the Divinity above Being Itself, the true life. Living things participate in Its life-giving Power above all life; rational things participate in Its perfection and in Its great Wisdom above all reason and intellect [CH 187A-D (Pseudo-Dionysius, “Celestial Hierarchy” 4, 187A-D, in Migne (ed.) PG 3. The fragment has not been included either in Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a; or Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a); see also DN 644A-B (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 128-129; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 62-63)].

For the Areopagite the degree of participation (*μετοχής*) depends on the faculty/readiness to experience, change, and receive illumination. For instance, in explaining why and how the “superior intelligences” participate in the Divine he says:

They are ‘perfect’, then, not because of an enlightened understanding which enables them to analyze the many sacred things, but rather because of a primary and supreme deification, a transcendent and angelic understanding of God’s work. They have been directed hierarchically not through other holy beings but directly from God himself, and they have achieved this thanks to the capacity they have to be raised up directly to him, a capacity which compared to others is the mark of their superior power and their superior order. Hence they are founded next to perfect and unfailing purity, and are led, as much as humanly possible,

into contemplation regarding the immaterial and intellectual splendour. As those who are the first around God and who are hierarchically directed in a supreme way, they are initiated into the understandable explanations of the divine works by the very source of perfection (CH 208C-208D (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 29)).

This source can **enlighten us** only by being upliftingly conceal in a variety of **sacred veils** which the Providence of the Father **adapts to our nature as human beings**. [...] [T]he sacred institution and source of perfection established our most pious hierarchy. He modelled it on the hierarchies of heaven, and clothed these immaterial hierarchies in numerous material figures and forms so that, **in a way appropriate to our nature, we might be uplifted from these most venerable images to interpretations which are simple and inexpressible**. For it is quite impossible that we, humans, should, in any immaterial way, rise up to imitate and to contemplate the heavenly hierarchies without **the aid of those material means capable of guiding us as our nature requires**. Hence, any thinking person realizes that the **appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness**; CH 121B-121D (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 8-9; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 146; my emphasis).

Simply said, in the process of deification – participation in the Divine virtue – we are conducted not only according to our measure, but also hierarchically; this is clearly stated, for instance, in CH 124A (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 9; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 147).

Participation happens at God's initiative because he, as the ultimate Cause of everything, has a communal nature; according to this, he invites all things to participate in Him (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 20; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 156). He calls people to uplift themselves through symbols [1] and they respond to this. Stephen Gersh refers to this co-operation as to a "downward and upward process" (Gersh 1978; also Gersh 1973, 50 f). The scholar does so when referring to a similar dynamic in the works of the Neoplatonists, but the expression represents equally well what is at work in Dionysius's writings. For the ancient theologian, there is no distinction between 'uplifting' (ἀγάγω) and 'return' (ἐπιστροφή). Within his texts both 'return' and 'uplifting' refer to the same movement towards the one God (Rorem 1984, 100; especially chapter 7 of this book elaborate on "the uplifting and return to God"). (It is

important to underline this with Paul Rorem because other thinkers regarded the two terms as being in opposition; Proclus is their most famous representative (Proclus 1963, no. 158, 138). Also Stephen Gersh describes the manner in which the Syrian utilises the concept of “uplifting” and its cognate notions in order to underline the dynamics of the soul’s activity in time. Such an enterprise on the part of Dionysius is consistent with his stance regarding the divine procession “from simplicity to trinity”, and “from the created word to its governance” (Rorem 1984, 99). The description of this state of affairs and the above considerations imply a cycle; all the ‘motions’ involved in the development of the soul (like Augustine’s *distentio*) happen periodically and in some kind of temporality, a subjective one; this is not only the ‘usual’ *chronos*, even though the latter is also a factor within the process. I would say that for Pseudo-Dionysius this cyclicity (that, as we shall see, is at work also in the case of ‘intelligible beings’) is ‘reinforced’ by eternity, which is linear. The Syrian theologian emphasizes that the incarnation of Christ ‘triggered’ the ‘course’ of salvation, and that salvation itself is a revelatory succession of happenings that mark the evolvment of human nature. All of this is summarised in the Eucharistic prayers. Rorem underscores the fact that a physical/sensible language is employed in the explanation of *henosis/theôsis* within the work of the Syrian despite the fact that “neither spatial nor even temporal movements” (Rorem 1984, 59) are of significance in its unfolding.

Pseudo-Dionysius indicates that the union with God is the final goal not only of the human soul, but **of every element of creation**. He says this a few times with reference to the celestial powers (the various categories of angels); additionally to being engaged in achieving their own *theôsis*, these are instrumental in the deification of people (who need to undergo a process of purification in order to be able to participate in the divine being). The heavenly entities intercede as part of this process because they can better be ‘heard’ by God due to their greater closeness to him:

Similarly, it seems to me, the immediate participation in God of those angels first raised up to him is more direct than that of those perfected through a mediator. Consequently – to use the terminology handed down to us – the first intelligences perfect, illuminate, and purify those of inferior status in such a fashion than the

latter, **having been lifted up** through them to the universal and transcendent source [...] acquire their due share of the purification, illumination, and perfection of the One who is the source of all perfection (CH 240C-D) (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 33-34; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 168 - (in ft. 209 abbreviated as CW); emphasis added).

The *Celestial Hierarchy* is the treatise in which Dionysius particularly refers to the 'divine intelligences' as they "lift up" or move "upwards" toward God [2]. Concerning the "return" of the soul towards "that principle which is above all principles" (CH 257B (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 36; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 169-170)) a direct reference to it is made, for instance, in DN 705A (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 153; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 78), and CH 293B (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 43; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 176). The Syrian concludes that "all being drives from, exists in, and is returned towards the Beautiful and the Good" (DN 705D (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 154; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 79)). For him, the return always brings an improvement or a 'progressive' restoration, as Dionysius illustrates via the following example that refers to the "return" of Israel (i.e. of any human being) to God (CH 261C (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 39; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 172)); an explanation is also provided for this state of affairs:

Now God, out of his fatherly love for humanity, chastised Israel so as **to return it to the road of sacred salvation**. In order to cause a change of heart he handed Israel over to the vengeance of barbaric nations. This was **to ensure that the men who were under his special providence would be transformed for the better**. Later, in his kindness, he released Israel from captivity and **restored it to its former state of contentment** (CH 240D-241A) (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991a, 34; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987b, 168; emphases added).

Throughout his work, Dionysius also holds that the returns is the movement from the perceptual to the conceptual and, finally, beyond the conceptual to unknowing and silence.

The idea of 'return', which is expressed in various ways in the *Corpus dionysiacum*, is Neoplatonic and has both ontological as well as epistemological connotations. Ontologically speaking, the 'plurality' of the world – its differentiation in various entities – goes back to oneness, to 'that which truly is'. From the epistemological perspective this constitutes

also a progression because it is a return “from numerous false notions [...] to the single, true, pure, and coherent knowledge.” In all the forms in which the notion is exploited by the Syrian, the return is oriented to the highest principle of existence. The *thearchia* (the divine source) “overflows” (i. e. flows out of itself) to be united with the community and the community turns toward the One; [for this discussion see DN 952B (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 219-220; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 123), DN 980A-C (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 227-229; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 128-129)]. As Rorem explains, “Emanation and return describe respectively divine and human ecstasy” (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, fn. 266, 130). The difference between Plato and Dionysius’s concept of return consists in the fact that the Greek philosopher connects it with the epistemological problem of knowing God (Proclus 1963, prop. 39), while for Dionysius it is a matter of ontology; here is where the notion of time is considered. For the latter, God moves into creation (time and space) through *eros*, therefore the return and union with God happens through the movement (diffusion) of love (DN 708C-716A (Pseudo-Dionysius 1990, 156-163; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 80-84)). This course of action takes place on a vertical axis – an aspect that is peculiar to the Dionysian theology; according to it, the concept of hierarchy itself points out towards such a reality. The approach of the Syrian differs from that of Maximus the Confessor for whom, as we have just noticed, the deification involves prominently (even though not exclusively) a horizontal motion. Dionysius argues that *eros*, or ‘yearning’ as it is translated by Luibhéid, is as legitimate a term for divine love as *agape* is. That varies somehow, but not radically, from what we noticed in Plato’s dialogues, where the ontological ground of return is the identification of the transcendent One with the Good (Plato, *Republic* 509b; Plotinus, *Ennead* V, 5.13; Proclus 1963, prop. 8) and with its concrete manifestations in time and space. According to Raoul Mortley, “This is the Greek view of the generation of reality which underpins the development of negative theology.” For this researcher, “The ‘descent’ of essence into material reality eventually leads to its concealment: the knowledge of essence [...] becomes a matter of difficulty” (Mortley 1982, 436). His discussion about ‘negative theology’

makes us remember how important this was for Dionysius, who dedicated a substantial part of his “Mystical Theology” to it as well as to the terms ‘affirmation’ and ‘negation’ (Pseudo-Dionysius 1991b, 143-144; Pseudo-Dionysius 1987a, 136; emphases added). When operating with the latter notions within this framework, the question of ‘time’ comes into discussion again. Ferdinand Edward Cranz elaborates on the relationship time – affirmation/negation in the writings of the Syrian, thus: “Dionysius’s *kataphasis* (affirmation) and *apophasis* (negation) are not distinct moments in time, or two aspects of a linear process. For him, as for the Neoplatonic philosophy which inspired him, they are simultaneous. But – commented by Eriugena – the Areopagite adapted these aspects of his theology to fit a historical model of creation (*kataphasis*) and salvation (*apophasis*)” (Cranz 2000, 102-103) Indeed, in his *On the Division of Nature*, conceived as a dialogue between a Master and a Disciple, John Scotus Eriugena (c. 810-c. 877, Dionysius’s most known Latin translator, indicates the manner in which these two concepts are instrumental within the system outlined by the Pseudo-Areopagite: in knowing God our negations are more “correct” than our affirmations, and the only affirmation one can make with certainty is that strictly speaking nothing can be predicated about the Deity (Scotus Eriugena 1987 (The Irish theologian and philosopher was Dionysius’s most known translator, commentator, and popularizer in the Latin West)). Because, as C. E. Rolt phrases it, “For whatever you deny concerning Him you deny correctly, whereas the same cannot be said of what you may affirm” (Sparrow-Simpson 1983, 206-207). Cranz also explains that the notions of affirmation and negation aid in the understanding of the continuous changeover between emanation of power and return towards God so characteristic to Dionysius’s texts. That may imply that we live simultaneously in the present and in eternity.

Notes

- [1] The expression “lifting up” is to be found, for instance, in Pseudo-Dionysius, “Celestial Hierarchy”, Heil and Ritter (eds.), CD II, CH 121B, p. 8, 137A, pp. 10-11, CH 241C-D, pp. 33-34, CH 257B, p. 36, CH 257C, p. 37, 260B, p. 40, CH 293B, p. 43; “The Celestial Hierarchy”, in Rorem (ed.), *Complete Works*, p. 79, and also 146, p. 147, 169, 170, 171, and 176. Also in the “Ecclesiastical Hierarchy”, 372B, Heil and Ritter (eds.), CD II, p. 65; in Rorem (ed.), *Complete Works*, p. 196, and in DN 708A, Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Divine Names”, in CD I, Suchla (ed.), p. 155; in Rorem (ed.), *Complete Works*, p. 79. Concerning symbols, see Rorem 1984, 99, 105; also Rorem and Lamoreaux, 1998.
- [2] The expression “Moving ‘upwards’ toward God”, is to be found, for instance, in the following fragments: CH 121B, Heil and Ritter (eds.), CD II, p. 8; Rorem, CW, p. 146 - see also footnotes 7 and 8 on that page; 137C, in CD II, pp. 10-11; Rorem, CW, p. 148; 237C, in CD II, pp. 32-33; Rorem, CW, p. 166-167; 240A-B, in CD II, pp. 33-34; Rorem, CW, p. 167 as well as 260B-C, in CD II, pp. 37-38; Rorem, CW, p. 171; 261A, in CD II, p. 38; Rorem, CW, pp. 171-172; 273A, in CD II, p. 40; Rorem, CW, p. 173; and 273C, in in CD II, pp. 40-41; Rorem, CW, p. 174.

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