

Article

# The Perception of God through Light in Plato and Dionysius the Areopagite

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**Abstract:** This article explores the soul's capacity to see God. This is the process by which a human subject can apprehend and define the nature of God on a philosophical and theological level. Two conceptually very close philosophers, Plato and Dionysius the Areopagite (pseudo-Dionysius), highlighted this metaphysical function. The article will look into light as a concept of the mind and an expression of God's nature. For Plato, God is the visible light, whereas for Areopagite, it is the invisible light. At the conceptual level, "God" will eventually combine the Platonic (Form of) Good(ness), or the "Good", with the Christian God, perceived and defined as Goodness, beauty, perfection, and virtue. In attempting to know God, the soul follows an ascending or descending path, and the concept of negation will play a crucial role in this metaphysical and theological function. It will eventually be shown that the Good is the essence of God and, at the same time, what defines his unique singularity.

**Keywords:** light; Good; negation; ideas; Plato; Dionysius the Areopagite

## 1. Introduction

This article explores the metaphysical process by which the soul becomes capable to see and know God through light, according to Plato and Dionysius the Areopagite. The primary objective is to highlight the Platonic elements in Dionysius's method of seeing God. The main topic will be the perception of knowledge through light, which will lead to the creation of an image as a sum of predicates. Notably, for Dionysius, seeing God is equated to knowing the unknown. For Dionysius, to know the transcendence of God, we must abstract multiple layers of knowledge and negate God's predicates, consequently resulting in perceiving the essence of God as a united One. Light, a usual requirement for seeing, must be turned off, just like the stars become visible in the absence of light. Seeing darkness requires the negation of all predicates, and darkness is the purpose of seeing because God is invisible. Therefore, we intend to eliminate knowledge to make this darkness visible.

By making darkness visible, it does not mean that God is darkness, but that it is where God stands. God is the sun and is invisible not because he does not exist but because he is not visible through the soul. He is the invisible light, in contrast with the equivalent Platonic God, who is the visible light.

### 1.1. The Concept of Light

This first section of this article will cover why light is not simply equated to God and how the subject uses light instead. In Plato, light is the cause that allows the act of seeing and being seen, and, by extending the analogy, the light of truth and being are the cause of one knowing and understanding the nature of reality. In other words, even seeing God is a capacity that requires light. Vision does not operate otherwise. However, the concept of light is more complicated in Areopagites because it refers to the function of the human mind. For Dionysius, light must turn into darkness so that the invisible light will become visible. The relationship between light and the capacity to see is similar to knowledge and the



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subject's intellectual capacity to understand. For knowing God, Dionysius borrows, from the language of the Platonic tradition, the two opposite directions the soul may follow: the downward direction, positive or cataphatic, which describes the characteristics of God, and the upward direction, or apophatic one [1] (p. 73) (Louth Andrew. "Apophatic Theology: Denys the Areopagite", *Hermathena*, 165 (1998): 73), which describes the nature of God. The downward movement, or positive direction, concerns the names of God; the upward movement, or apophatic process, negates all God's names to reach his transcendental nature. The article's next section will examine the soul's circular movement to explain its continuity and unchangeability. Next, I will present how the soul exits the prison of itself due to divine love. The power of divine love breaks the soul out of its prison and leads to its unification with the Good. For this to work, the circular movement contains two crucial components common to Plato and Areopagite: goodness and beauty. These two concepts have the power to liberate one's soul, while being two predicates that define the nature of God. In Plato and Areopagite, the exit of the soul and its unification with God is represented by the two directions, downwards and upwards. However, these two directions become one when the soul's unification with God is complete.

[508ε] Τοῦτο τοίνυν τὸ τὴν ἀλήθειαν παρέχον τοῖς γινωσκομένοις καὶ τῷ γινώσκοντι τὴν δύναμιν ἀποδιδὼν τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέαν φάθι εἶναι· αἰτίαν δ' ἐπιστήμης οὕσαν καὶ ἀληθείας, ὡς γινωσκομένης μὲν διανοοῦ, οὕτω δὲ καλῶν ἀμφοτέρων ὄντων, γνώσεώς τε καὶ ἀληθείας, ἄλλο καὶ κάλλιον ἔτι τούτων ἡγούμενος αὐτὸ ὀρθῶς ἡγήσῃ· ἐπιστήμην [509α] δὲ καὶ ἀλήθειαν, ὥσπερ ἐκεῖ φῶς τε καὶ ὄψιν ἡλιοειδῆ μὲν νομίζειν ὀρθόν, ἥλιον δ' ἡγεῖσθαι οὐκ ὀρθῶς ἔχει, οὕτω καὶ ἐνταῦθα ἀγαθοειδῆ μὲν νομίζειν ταῦτ' ἀμφοτέρα ὀρθόν, ἀγαθὸν δὲ ἡγεῖσθαι ὀπότερον αὐτῶν οὐκ ὀρθόν, ἀλλ' ἔτι μειζόνως τιμητέον τὴν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἕξιν [2] (p. 492) (Plato. *Republic* book VI, 508e.). [https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient\\_greek/library/browse.html?text\\_id=111&page=86](https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/library/browse.html?text_id=111&page=86) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

Now, that which imparts truth to the known and the power of knowing to the knower is what I would have you term the idea of good, and this you will deem to be the cause of science, and of truth in so far as the latter becomes the subject of knowledge; beautiful too, as are both truth and knowledge, you will be right in esteeming this other nature as more beautiful than either; and, as in the previous instance, light and sight may be truly said to be like the sun, and yet not to be the sun, so in this other sphere, science and truth may be deemed to be like the good, but not the good; the good has a place of honor yet higher (Translated by Benjamin Jowett in the following webpage: The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Republic, by Plato).

[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0009](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H_4_0009) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

One point that I think is worth mentioning at the outset is the clarification of the concept of light. The role of light is twofold because in a sense it is the idea of Good, and at the same time, light is used so that the soul becomes like light because it saw it. This rationale introduces us to the essential role of the idea of the Good, but also of Platonic ideas in general. The use of ideas is to ensure not so much non-deception at the level of whether or not the object of observation is true as to ensure that the concepts themselves exist. The great danger is that ideas are not merely concepts within the mind. In this case, they are only words as we see in the Platonic *Timaeus* (But let us investigate the matter by more exact reasoning, and consider this question. Does there exist any self-subsisting fire [51c] or any of those other objects which we likewise term "self-subsisting realities"? Or is it only these things which we see, or otherwise perceive by means of bodily senses, that exist, possessed of sensible reality; beside which no other things exist anywhere or anyhow, and it is merely an idle assertion of ours that there always exists an intelligible Form of every object, whereas it is really nothing more than a verbal phrase? This translation is in the webpage: ToposText), <https://topostext.org/work/552> (accessed on 15 March 2024)

and not only is objectivity not possible to be guaranteed, but even worse, the concept has no ontological substance. That is, there will be no good, bad, beautiful, or fair as such.

### 1.2. The Good as Light and Darkness

The first objective is to present the role of light in the process of seeing. Light is the precondition that allows knowledge and access to the thing itself [3] (p. 164) (Notopoulos James. "The Symbolism of the Sun and Light in the Republic of Plato I", *Classical Philology*, 39 (1944): 164). Here, we encounter a problem that Plato, too, refers to. The problem is that it is unclear whether we access a thing's essence or its properties. While properties of different things can be shared, the things themselves are entirely distinct. For instance, we use the word "ray" for light that comes from the sun and a light bulb, although they are two different things. The common feature is the Form, which is the idea, not the thing itself. The ray is one of the properties of light, which can come from different light sources. Properties are multiple and can be shared between different things, but the essence of each thing is unique. The problem is that in the process of knowing, through the light, we create mind images only of the common properties because only these are intelligible. Conversely, the essence is unique and, therefore, not visible because it is without predicates. Thus, to know something transforms into how to eliminate its predicates, although these are what we perceive and comprehend. Dionysius supports this process by saying that light is the medium that makes a projection of the thing visible, not the thing itself. In this case, the problem lies not in the thing itself or the illusion of the thing of the external world, as in Plato, but in the internal setup of the mind.

[509β] Πῶς;

Τὸν ἥλιον τοῖς ὁρωμένοις οὐ μόνον οἶμαι τὴν τοῦ ὁρᾶσθαι δύναμιν παρέχειν φήσεις, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὴν γένεσιν καὶ αὐξὴν καὶ τροφήν, οὐ γένεσιν αὐτὸν ὄντα.

Πῶς γάρ;

Καὶ τοῖς γιγνωσκομένοις τοίνυν μὴ μόνον τὸ γιγνώσκεισθαι φάναι ὑπὸ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ παρεῖναι, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὸ εἶναι τε καὶ τὴν οὐσίαν ὑπ' ἐκείνου αὐτοῖς προσεῖναι, οὐκ οὐσίας ὄντος τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ, ἀλλ' ἔτι ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας πρεσβεῖα καὶ δυνάμει ὑπερέχοντος. [4] (p. 494) (Plato. *Republic*, Book VI, 509b.) [https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient\\_greek/library/browse.html?text\\_id=111&page=86](https://www.greek-language.gr/digitalResources/ancient_greek/library/browse.html?text_id=111&page=86) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

In what point of view?

You would say, would you not, that the sun is not only the author of visibility in all visible things, but of generation and nourishment and growth, though he himself is not generation? Certainly.

In like manner the good may be said to be not only the author of knowledge to all things known, but of their being and essence, and yet the good is not essence, but far exceeds essence in dignity and power. (Translated by Benjamin Jowett in the following webpage: The Project Gutenberg eBook of The Republic, by Plato) [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0009](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H_4_0009) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

While light makes common properties visible, it renders invisible things that are visible in its absence. The Platonic element here is that (Form of) Good is the cause of knowledge and truth for all other Forms of things while being an object of knowledge itself. Dionysius's approach removes light. By using darkness, one can achieve knowledge of the unknown. The unknown is a condition where the subject is without itself. At this point, the subject is like a blind person, and the object of vision will not be a projection of the self. This will activate the negation process to make the invisible light visible. Although God is light, he is invisible to us because we use his light. By using his light, we can only see projections of ourselves in him.

...ὅτι λανθάνει τοὺς ἔχοντας ὄν φῶς καὶ ὄντων γινῶσιν ἢ κατὰ θεὸν ἀγνωσία καὶ τὸ ὑπερκείμενον αὐτοῦ σκότος καὶ καλύπτεται παντὶ φωτὶ καὶ ἀποκρύπτεται πᾶσαν γινῶσιν. Καὶ εἴ τις ἰδὼν θεὸν συνῆκεν, ὃ εἶδεν οὐκ αὐτὸν ἐώρακεν, ἀλλὰ τι τῶν αὐτοῦ τῶν ὄντων καὶ γινωσκομένων αὐτὸς δὲ ὑπὲρ νοῦν καὶ οὐσίαν ὑπεριδρυμένος, αὐτῷ τῷ καθόλου μὴ γινώσκεσθαι μηδὲ εἶναι, καὶ ἔστιν ὑπερουσίως καὶ ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσεται. Καὶ ἡ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον παντελῆς ἀγνωσία γινῶσις ἐστὶ τοῦ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ γινωσκόμενα. [5] (p. 480) (Dionysius the Areopagite. *Letter 1 To Gaius Therapeutes*, p 480.)

... that the *Agnosia*, respecting God, escapes those who possess existing light, and knowledge of things being; and His pre-eminent darkness is both concealed by every light, and is hidden from every knowledge. And, if any one, having seen God, understood what he saw, he did not see *Him*, but some of His creatures that are existing and known. But He Himself, highly established above mind, and above essence, by the very fact of His being wholly unknown, and not being, both is super-essentially, and is known above mind. And the all-perfect *Agnosia*, in its superior sense, is a knowledge of Him, Who is above all known things. (Translated by John Parker in the following webpage: The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite: Letters: Letter I. To Gaius Therapeutes. (sacred-texts.com))

<https://sacred-texts.com/chr/dio/dio25.htm> (accessed on 15 March 2024).

In the darkness, which represents seeing without light, the subject overcomes the obstacle of the self. Darkness becomes visible, but this does not mean that reality is dark. It means the subject is ready to see the unknown beyond, the essence. Removing light allows the use of an inner light that allows the light of the stars to be seen. The intention here is that the human eye must work like the sun. The eye must bring its own light to see God. In Areopagite, the soul will achieve this through upward movement, reaching the point where God once stood. God himself is invisible. The only thing we can do is see where he once stood, but we will be blind in that place. This blindness is the new ability to know the unknown, which is to perceive the invisible light. This light will not be light for seeing, but it will be the transformation of the subject into light. In both Plato and Dionysius, God is the unseen and the untold. However, in Dionysius, there is a significantly more demanding negation and exit from the self than in Plato. This is because, in Plato's case, light itself is visible, and the obstacle to seeing God is outside of the self. For Dionysius, the obstacle is internal: it is one's self that prevents subjects from seeing God. For Dionysius, God is entirely outside of Being in a far more radical way than it is for Plato. The initial inability to perceive God is not just a disadvantage but a way to reject the mind's projective way in accessing the intelligible world. According to Plato, Forms represent knowledge and carry the truth; to know them, one has to escape the limits of the self. Light, generated by the sun, which is the Good, allows the act of seeing and being seen and works as a symbolic representation of the light of reason used to access truth and meaning [6] (p. 532) (Fisher Jeffrey. "The Theology of Dis/similarity: Negation in Pseudo-Dionysius", *The Journal of Religion*, 81, 532). In Dionysian terminology, this is the 'symbolic' sense of the word 'light'. The enterprise concerned with this way of speaking about God is called 'symbolic theology' (which is also the name of a lost or fictitious treatise by Dionysius). The metaphorical belief that God is darkness, on the other hand, does not belong to symbolic theology but to the negative or apophatic approach adopted by Dionysius in *The Mystical Theology*. The literal basis of the metaphor of darkness is identical to the central idea of negative theology: that God cannot be spoken of [7] (p. 98) (Kugler Peter. "The meaning of mystical darkness", *Religious Studies*, 41 (2005): 98.).

The following section covers how the soul can access the highest levels of the intelligible world to perceive the Good. To achieve this transcendental ascent, the soul must renounce the self, or, in other words, exit and lose the self. In this process, the soul uses the power of love to move the self from its initial identity towards the object of love. After losing the self, the soul can be united with the One and become the unifying power of

the new self. Next, I will present the three movements of the soul towards light, before exploring the ecstasy of love, which is the ineffable union with the intelligible light.

The intelligible light [8] (p. 172) (Wheeler Samuel. "Plato's Enlightenment: The Good as the Sun", *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 14 (1997): 172.) is the Good, a light beyond any other light. It is essentially an invisible light from the subject's perspective, but from God's perspective, it is light itself. Its most important characteristic is that it has no properties at all. This type of light is the cause of the light we see and the carrier of goodness. The nature of the self is established in the power of the union that connects its properties with its essence. This is the definition of the one, and it is what makes something one. It is one because it is a unifying power without any properties. If the soul wants to approach the intelligible light, it must deny all the knowledge about the properties of its own self. To achieve this, the soul must participate in Beauty because Beauty participates in the Beautiful. God as the Good and the Beautiful is beyond the Form of Beauty, just like the intelligible light is beyond the Form of Light. The Good as beauty itself is beyond the Beautiful, just like the light is beyond the Form of Light. The intelligible light is not what causes the sensible distinctions of united things but the cause of the union of the self, which is eventually what the subject has to realize before attempting to remove himself from this union.

Καὶ γὰρ ἡ τἀγαθοῦ θεωνομία τὰς ὄλας τοῦ πάντων αἰτίου προόδους ἐκφαίνουσα καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄντα καὶ εἰς τὰ οὐκ ὄντα ἐκτείνεται καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ ὄντα καὶ ὑπὲρ τὰ οὐκ ὄντα ἔστιν. . . ἄλλ' ἐνὸς θεοῦ τὰς ὄλας ἀγαθὰς προόδους καὶ τὰς παρ ἡμῶν ἐξυμνουμένας θεωνομίας καὶ τὴν μὲν εἶναι τῆς παντελοῦς τοῦ ἐνὸς θεοῦ προνοίας ἐκφαντικὴν, τὰς δὲ τῶν ὀλιγωτέρων τοῦ αὐτοῦ καὶ μερικωτέρων. . . Ἐπειδὴ καὶ περὶ τούτων εἵπομεν, φέρε, τἀγαθὸν ὡς ὄντως ὄν καὶ τῶν ὄντων ἀπάντων οὐσιοποιὸν ἀνυμνήσωμεν. [9] (Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Divine Names*, Chapter 5, paragraph 1, 2 and 4.)

For the Name of "Good" revealing all the emanations of the universal Cause, extends both to the things which are, and to the things which are not, and is beyond both categories. . . but we hold that one God is the universal Source of the emanations, and the Possessor of all the Divine Names we declare; and that the first Name expresses the perfect Providence of the one God, and the other names express certain more general or more particular modes of His Providence. . . Having now dealt with this matter, let us consider the Good as that which really Is and gives their being to all things that exist. (Translated by C.E. Rolt in the following webpage: Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. (documentacatholicaomnia.eu))

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,\\_Dionysius\\_Areopagita,\\_On\\_The\\_Divine\\_Names\\_And\\_The\\_Mystical\\_Theology,\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,_Dionysius_Areopagita,_On_The_Divine_Names_And_The_Mystical_Theology,_EN.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

The choice of the name Good for God is of course chosen to achieve the connection with Platonism, which is a key issue. Dionysius indeed, in *Divide Names*, attributes many names to God and all have their significance. But we find, according to the above text, that the name Good prevails and mainly indicates the power of its unity as opposed to multiplicity. The choice of this name is of course also found in Plotinus, where, especially there, we have the disconnection between *self* and the *intellect*. In the case of the Areopagite, however, the Good will lead us to the final name that Dionysius attributes to God. Dionysius mentions that the Good is praised as the true being, that is, that which offers existence to all beings. Therefore, from this, it follows that the name of God is *ὄν* (Being), since he gave existence beforehand to all being. "The first divine name, for Dionysius, because it accounts for the divine processions through which alone we have any knowledge of God, is 'Good'. He writes, 'The Godhead is granted as a gift to all things. It flows over in shares of goodness to all' (DN 11.11 649B). In his goodness, that is, God causes all existence as a series of processions from his unity. His goodness carries him outside of himself, as it were, into the creation and preservation of all creatures, and into their return to himself as their end

(DN IV. 13 712A). Dionysius writes, ‘The divine name “Good” tells of all the processions of the universal Cause’ (DN V.I 816B). Dionysius identifies these good processions with the Christian category of Providence [10] (p. 53). (Ferretter Luke. “How to avoid speaking of the other: Derrida, Dionysius and the problematic of negative theology”, *Paragraph*, 24 (2001): 53.)”

Before looking at the movement of the soul, I think a small reference to Plotinus is needed, which is connected with the name of the God. In particular in the sixth Ennead, Plotinus [11] (p. 429) (Plotinus enneas VI. 7. 38. 9–25) proceeds onto a very critical separation of the concept of *Ev* (*One*). He divides this 1st substance into the *self* and the *intellect*, wanting to show that the Good, which is one, is characterized by the name *t’Agatho* (Good) as one word, which is something without being. This distinction refers to this epistemological opposition to the self, which results in the abstraction of everything and the knowledge of ignorance (*gnosi agnosias*). In other words, the obstacle to the truth is what makes me who I am, that is the thinking itself. In this sense, this apparent contrast will come very close to the Dionysian God, who is *superlight darkness*. In the final analysis, of course, the Areopagite is closer to Plotinus, but I do not want to expand since the topic of the article aims at the connection with Plato.

Light in Plato arises from the idea of the Good as we see in 517c book Z in *Republic*. Thus, we could say that the idea of the Good is the final cause, while light is the efficient cause. Now lies the central argument of disconnecting the idea of the Good from what it gives birth to, such as light and truth. Since now the idea of the Good is above light, it bears crucial resemblance to the Areopagite’s God. To support this view, we look for a condition that connects the *superluminous gnophos* with the Platonic idea of the Good. In *Republic*, in 516b, Plato states that the idea of the Good is visible in night conditions, looking at the sky through the light of the stars and the moon. This means that the light itself in daytime conditions also acts as a deterrent to viewing the Good. Therefore, this visible light represents the contents of the mind, which need to be removed and led into this superluminous darkness, which is the knowledge of ignorance.

The similarities between Plato and the Areopagite, I think, center on the concept of light and the word *Good*. Nevertheless, Dionysius, by emphasizing the concept of darkness, differs from Plato in terms of the final result. In this sense, the sky God is higher than the sun. This strong position of the Areopagite, where he takes away everything, is very tellingly found in the fifth chapter of the mystical theology. There, he states that God is neither light, good, truth, nor darkness, to the point that God is not even God. This absolute and extreme abstraction is not simply the abstraction of essence between the self and itself in the Plotinian *One*, but potentially much more. The interesting thing now is that we also find such a strong scale of resemblance in the first hypothesis of the Platonic Parmenides 141d8–142a8. There, of course, the reference is made to the one, but this abstraction is total. The one there does not exist; it is not known, to the point that the one is not one. In this sense, I believe that the two philosophers finally converge.

### 1.3. The Actions–Movements of the Soul

During this process, the soul executes three movements. The linear movement, at the lowest level, concerns whatever is around the soul, and in this way, it represents communication through symbols with things in the outer world and back. This movement belongs in the sensible world because it contains relationships with others. At the next level is spiral movement. It concerns the relationship between the soul and the soul’s self. It includes the stability around oneself and indicates the soul’s way to recognize its identity. It is about contemplating the unity of the soul and the power that makes it as it is. This stability is the way the soul gains its identity. Because of this identity, the soul can participate in the next movement, in which the soul has its own self to lose. The circular movement is the most divine and belongs to the highest level. This is how the soul isolates and withdraws from the external world. In the circular movement, the continuous motion and convolution of the soul around itself will allow it to connect with the power that keeps

it united and, more importantly, to unite with the Beautiful and the Good, which is without a beginning or end. It could be said that this unifying power comes from the circle's center and keeps the soul in orbit as a planet around the sun.

Most importantly, these movements are how the soul exits itself. This is similar to the Aristotelian view that the Good is the object of love, and the soul moves towards it because it is in love with the Good. The soul is in love because it can now see the Good. Divine love leads to ecstasy. This is because the power of love can move the soul out of itself and draw it to be united with something that lies outside it. This is the Good, which is beautiful. This Beauty emanates from the Good and is the cause of the connection between the lover and the object of love. From now on, the soul will belong to the object. In this context, Dionysius invokes the words of St. Paul:

Διὸ καὶ Παῦλος ὁ μέγας ἐν κατοχῇ τοῦ θείου γεγονῶς ἔρωτος καὶ τῆς ἐκστατικῆς αὐτοῦ δυνάμεως μετεληφῶς ἐνθέρω στόματι: «Ζῶ ἐγώ», φησίν, «οὐκ ἔτι, ζῆ δὲ ἐν ἐμοὶ Χριστός», ὡς ἀληθῆς ἐραστῆς καὶ ἐξεστηκῶς, ὡς αὐτός φησι, τῷ θεῷ καὶ οὐ τὴν ἑαυτοῦ ζῶν, ἀλλὰ τὴν τοῦ ἐραστοῦ ζῶν ὡς σφόδρα ἀγαπητήν. [12] (p. 276) (Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Divine Names*, Chapter 4, paragraph 13, p 276.)

And hence the great Paul, constrained by the Divine Yearning, and having received a share in its ecstatic power, says, with inspired utterance, "I live, and yet not I but Christ liveth in me": true Sweetheart that he was and (as he says himself) being beside himself unto God, and not possessing his own life but possessing and loving the life of Him for Whom he yearned. (Translated by C.E. Rolt in the following webpage: Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. (documentacatholicaomnia.eu))

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,\\_Dionysius\\_Areopagita,\\_On\\_The\\_Divine\\_Names\\_And\\_The\\_Mystical\\_Theology,\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,_Dionysius_Areopagita,_On_The_Divine_Names_And_The_Mystical_Theology,_EN.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

Through St. Paul, Dionysius explains the result of this love, which represents the exit from the self. This is when the subject stops living their own life and lives the life of the One they love. The circular movement expresses this divine love. This eternal movement is around a center, which is the Good, and inside the Good at the same time, while also being the cause of the movement. In its simplest Form, this power recycles around and inside itself, offering a merge upon itself. The soul becomes divine through this ineffable, transcendental union.

The following section examines how the soul uses light to approach God in Plato and Dionysius. For this purpose, it is not enough to trace the Platonic elements in Dionysius; instead, it is more crucial to compare the processes of the two philosophers. Although this comparison will highlight their differences, as, for Plato, God is the visible light, and for Dionysius, the invisible light, their methods of approaching God may share something in common. First, both thinkers similarly perceive how God can be described. The upwards approach is the apophatic way, which attempts to describe God by what he is not. Abstraction converts the subject into a blind viewer who realizes that the obstacle to seeing is his self. The downwards approach, which is the cataphatic way, attempts to describe God via positive attribution. For both philosophers, not only are these two ways similar, but also, more importantly, their chosen name for God is Agathos, which is the Good(ness). I intend to argue that these two approaches can be combined into one. This will prove how Platonic Dionysius is. In addition, it will show that from the soul's point of view, there is only one way to see God, and that is by combining the two approaches. For this topic, I will also adopt the Good as God's name. This means that the cognitive process to approach God does not strictly require using light but incorporates the concept of virtue.

If the image of God is the knowledge of the unknown, mainly in Dionysius and at some level in Plato, the perfect knowledge will still maintain aspects mentioned in the cognitive process and keep the two ways distinct. These two ways can be combined only when we change our perspective from knowledge to virtue. I intend to argue a transformation that

converts knowledge into truth and explain why truth is virtue. An excellent example of how the soul merges the two routes is divine love. The objective is to show the function of divine love and the exit from the self and demonstrate how the two ways become the same process because of divine love. According to Vasilakis [13] (p. 153) (Vasilakis Dimitrios. *Eros in Neoplatonism and Its Reception in Christian Philosophy*. Bloomsbury Academic, London 2021. Page 153), divine love is related to the ecstasy the subject will experience. It is essential to highlight that in this ecstasy, the subject is connected with God in a way that they become one. In this union, when this ecstasy occurs, we cannot observe the different routes and directions that were followed to achieve it. At the ecstatic moment, the apophatic and the cataphatic directions, the way up or the way down, are one and the same. Vasilakis [13] (p. 152) (Vasilakis, page 152) supports that *ecstasis* combines the upward and downward processes because we cannot recognize the previously followed direction when unification has been achieved. This is how knowledge and vision are transformed into a condition of spiritual emotion. However, I would like to clarify that at the moment of union when we have ecstasy, the way up and the way down are one and the same. But this is simply the result of the movement having ceased and the union between the soul and the God having been completed. Therefore, I think that at the moment of union, the two paths do indeed become one, but the opposition of directions remains. That is, we now have the same route that represents the same course, but still two opposite directions. On the contrary, Vasilakis, I think, considers that the direction is also common, because of the identification that has been made in the union. The next move is to convert this ineffable sentiment into the condition of Goodness.

After transforming light into divine love, we must transform divine love into virtue. In other words, I will explain why love is virtue. Eventually, seeing God is not an act of vision in the traditional sense but an act of goodness. To achieve this, the soul must react according to its nature because its nature is good. Here, the problem of evil appears. According to Dionysius, evil does not exist:

Εἶτα πῶς οἱ ἐκ θεοῦ γενόμενοι δαίμονες εἰσι κακοί· τὸ γὰρ ἀγαθὸν ἀγαθὰ παράγει καὶ ὑψίστησι. Καίτοι λέγονται κακοί, φαίη τις ἄν, ἀλλ' οὐ, καθ' ὃ εἰσίν, ἐκ τἀγαθοῦ γάρ εἰσι καὶ ἀγαθὴν ἔλαχον οὐσίαν. . . . Κακοὶ δὲ εἶναι λέγονται διὰ τὸ ἀσθενεῖν περὶ τὴν κατὰ φύσιν ἐνέργειαν. Παρατροπή οὖν ἐστὶν αὐτοῖς τὸ κακὸν καὶ τῶν προσηκόντων αὐτοῖς ἔκβασις. . . . [14] (p. 307–309) (Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Divine Names*, Chapter 4, paragraph 23, pp. 307–309)

Moreover, how can the devils be evil since they are sprung from God? For the Good produceth and createth good things. But it may be said that they are called evil not in so far as they exist (for they are from the Good and had a good existence given them). . . . But they are called evil because they fail in the exercise of their natural activity. The evil in them is therefore a warping, a declension from their right condition; (Translated by C.E. Rolt in the following webpage: Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. ([documentacatholicaomnia.eu](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu)))

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,\\_Dionysius\\_Areopagita,\\_On\\_The\\_Divine\\_Names\\_And\\_The\\_Mystical\\_Theology\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,_Dionysius_Areopagita,_On_The_Divine_Names_And_The_Mystical_Theology_EN.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

Evil is simply the lack of good and represents the soul's weakness, or incapability, to act according to its nature. God, as the Good, has placed goodness in our souls; therefore, our souls' nature is also good. The problem is how the soul will act according to its nature because the self is the obstacle in the soul's attempt to see its true nature. For instance, the problem with demons is that they act badly not because of their nature but because they act against their nature. They wish bad because they seek the not-being. In this case, the lack of light is not because there is no light, but due to our inability to see it. According to Dionysius, the soul's essence is good because Being derives from the Good. Therefore, if the soul desires the Good, it is looking for its essence, which is also good. With this in



mind, divine love is the desire of the true, authentic inner self, which is the unknown but actual reality of the self. This realization will transform the double Form of self-awareness, the recognition of the self, into one structure without projecting the self. The whole process incorporates the concept of virtue. This is because the vision of the self converts into one, and it has to do with the knowledge that the self is the obstacle. In other words, it means that the connection of the self is established in passions, contrary to the desirable disconnection from the self, which is achieved through virtue.

The most crucial term in the process of seeing is negation, first found in Plato and present throughout the Neoplatonic tradition. Describing God's nature requires not only the negation of God's predicates but, even more radically, the negation of the subject's self. In Dionysius, God becomes visible when the subject becomes blind and succeeds in seeing the unseen. However, this negation pertains not only to the desired lack of knowledge but also to virtue. We are now at the core of determining when an action can be characterized as moral. Denying light is not initially expected from the soul, as it goes against human nature. This is the equivalent of an inner conflict of human nature with itself, which is vulnerable to passions and evil. In other words, the subject has to be worthy of what they aim to see. This requires exceeding human nature, which needs light to see. We want to achieve seeing through the darkness because only then can we overcome the obstacle that is the self. According to Jones [15] (p. 369) (John N. Jones, "Sculpting God: The Logic of Dionysian Negative Theology", *The Harvard Theological Review* 89 (1996): 369), in Dionysius's theology, there are two forms of denial, denial of a particular being and of all beings, but negation pertains only to the latter. He summarizes Dionysian negative theology: "God is not a being and so cannot be known or spoken of as beings are known or spoken of" [15] (p. 369) (Jones, 369). Jones argues that it is crucial to understand that the logical structure of Dionysius's theology is not self-contradictory.

This is the crucial point that shifts the main topic in question from philosophy to theology. This conceptual transition allows the transformation of the One into God. This issue becomes even more interesting when the role of nature is also involved, which is already a combination of intelligibility and sensibility. This is aptly elucidated by Steiris [16] (p. 142) (Georgios Steiris. "Medieval readings of Plato". *Scientific Journal of the Humanity school of NKUA*, Vol. ΜΔ' Athens 2020. 142), who refers to Eriugena's Christian Neoplatonism. According to Eriugena, the immovable self-determining One is natura, associating God with nature. Through the Dionysian corpus, Eriugena transforms the Platonic dialectic of the One into a theological approach to God, creating the framework of Western mystical theology. This is exactly why I made the reference to the One from the Platonic Parmenides before. There, the One has a role that more represents nature as a whole. The logic of all eight hypotheses is this gradual evolutionary relationship of the One with its parts. But the weakness that results from the identification of nature and God is the integration of the concept of Good. So far, we have defined God with light and darkness. In the next and final stage, we will unite the concept of God in both philosophers. This aspect concerns the name of God and, at the same time, represents God's essence too. This comes together in God's name as the Good, which I argue is the most common element between Plato and Dionysius. In Areopagite's case, goodness is transferred to all beings, which can be explained by how Platonic Forms operate. This unification also concerns the relationship between nature and the intelligible world. This is how we arrive at the Platonic One:

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 extends its goodness to all beings. [17] (4, 1, 95.)

"Good" not only expresses a meaning that unites the essence of God into One because of the perfection of virtue, but at the same time, it transfers goodness into all beings. Fran O'Rourke describes this process as follows: "God is Goodness itself and merits, in an exclusive way, the honor of this singular name. Beings are "good", but their goodness is not self-efficient. It is a participation in essential goodness beyond good things. God's divinity is identical with his very goodness; he is at once both God and Good (ὁμότηρον καὶ

ὁμοῦλαθον)”. I argue that the name “Good” not only unites the essence of God but also signifies the cognitive process that invites the soul towards a destination by determining what the soul can become, as in Plato’s analogy, the light invites us towards the sun. In other words, “seeing” light becomes self-actualization with virtue, an act that transforms the soul. It is an approach to the ultimate meaning, but at the same time, an inwards look at the self, where there is already goodness. “According to Aquinas, the purpose of the Pseudo-Dionysius’ claim was to describe the situation of the finiteness of the human mind and the limits of possible knowledge of God. Since the human mind can only know “what is already there to be known” and since God is “beyond what is there, . . . he is not intelligible, he is beyond understanding.” [18] (p. 150) (Ross Robert. “The non existence of God: Tillich, Aquinas, and the Pseudo-Dionysius”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 68 (1975). In the *Mystical Theology*, the Pseudo-Dionysius refers to our acknowledgment of this circumstance as the “darkness of unknowing,” the “divine gloom,” in which, after the mind has removed the inadequate and anthropomorphic images from its concept of God, it renounces all apprehension of God by the understanding and becomes mystically united to the God, who is wholly unknowable by the finite mind [18] (p. 142) (Ross Robert. “The non existence of God: Tillich, Aquinas, and the Pseudo-Dionysius”, *The Harvard Theological Review*, 68 (1975): 142).”

#### 1.4. *The Good as Beauty*

Next, I discuss the concept of beauty as expressed by the Good. The Beautiful and the Good are connected with desirability, which is another important concept. The soul desires what it loves, which is the Good. It is worth mentioning here that there is a difference between Aquinas and Plato regarding desire. For Aquinas, desire is directed towards the absolute goal of perfection. As the Good is perfect as such, perfection is part of its essence. This definition of the Good, as desired perfection, goes against Plato, who claims that the Good is primarily known not because of its desirability but through its generosity. Τὸ ἀγαθόν, for Plato, is at the summit of the intelligible world and is the source of all being and value. This is why the Good exercises efficient rather than final causality in the Platonist tradition [19] (p. 160) (Fran O’ Rourke 86, de Finance, *Connaissance de l’être*, p. 160). I claim that the sun and the idea of the Good in general are efficient causes, in the sense that both the Good itself acts and is used by the mind. We see this in *Republic 509b*, where the sun gives power to objects to be seen and birth itself, without being the birth itself. That is, the Good gives something that is not part of the Good itself. It gives substance without being the same substance. The role of the Good is essentially energetic, because the Good is constantly used to be able to know things. In the same way that light does not merely give birth to beings, but we use it to see, so also the Good enables us to know what each thing is through its idea. In the event that it were a final cause, it would function as a first principle, giving birth to the world but remaining unrelated to the produced beings. Here, we have relation and, therefore, movement. The Aristotelian [20] (Aristotle’s, *Metaphysics Lambda* Λ, 1072a23—1072a27) first principle is a first cause but it is also an immovable object. The concept now that achieves this relationship and gives the movement is beauty. Since the Good is beautiful, then motion can be explained, which is the condition of seeing. It is the reason for wanting to see something. I think the connection between the Good, the Beautiful, and desirability compose not only the essence of God but also, more importantly, explain how the soul eventually sees God. Through its movement, the soul achieves this by exiting its current sense self, entering its new self and reaching a new self-awareness.

Although the primary name for God is indeed the Good, the other commonly associated attribute and name for God is the Beautiful. This is another Platonic element we meet in Dionysius, which can better explain the concept of divine love. In the following section, I present the difference between Plato’s notion of divine love and Dionysius’s. The difference lies in the process of abstraction from the self. For Plato, the soul is divided into three parts. This means that the process of exiting from the self occurs between the rational and the appetitive parts of the soul. The reason itself is the one that communicates with

the Forms and, of course, is the immortal part. Although this part belongs to the soul and has the privilege of being higher when compared with the appetitive part, which is lower, we still have two parameters that hold back the Platonic perspective inside the essence of the world. The Platonic ecstasy still belongs to the intellectual process and offers some movement from the changeable (the lack of Form) into the unchangeable (the perfect Form). It is a movement caused by desire and feeling towards the Perfect, the Beautiful, and the Good. Although the Platonic Good is beyond the essence and must be, Platonic Forms can still be determined inside the intelligible. Therefore, abstraction in Plato functions as the distinction between the parts of the soul and how the soul remembers. From this point of view, love is the power of this abstraction. Of course, this kind of power must be Beauty itself to function in the frame of meaning. The memory, in essence, is the goodness that has been placed by the Good inside the Being, and then the soul desires to recall this through remembering.

For Dionysius, although the power of divine love is still used to activate the attraction, the exit from the self is far more radical. Here, the movement is from perfect to imperfect because, in Dionysius, God is beyond the essence of the intelligible. The problem is not the subject's weakness or vulnerability to desire; the opponent here is the perfect self. This means that this kind of attraction is beyond the intellectual state, and the main issue to confront is the function itself. Although Dionysius accepts the names of Good and Beautiful, the subject must lose itself to avoid being drawn by the Good inside himself. Divine love extracts the Good from inside the subject, and the remaining empty self is moved beyond the Good. The intellectual part is still inside self-recognition and where the initial goodness is because the problem is meaning itself. This intelligible light is not visible even when the subject has become Good. In Dionysius's case, the desired object is still the Beautiful and the Good, but the subject will never see it. Instead, the subject will see the reason why he cannot see it, and this reason is darkness, which is the obstacle. The visible light in Dionysius is also the Good, but this Good is the inside goodness and represents the place where God once stood. God himself is beyond this place, and he is invisible. In Dionysius's words,

Καὶ τότε καὶ αὐτῶν ἀπολύεται τῶν ὁρωμένων καὶ τῶν ὁρώντων καὶ εἰς τὸν γνόφον τῆς ἀγνωσίας εἰσδύνει τὸν ὄντως μυστικόν, καθ'ὸν ἀπομύει πάσας τὰς γνωστικὰς ἀντιλήψεις, καὶ ἐν τῷ πάμπαν ἀναφεῖ καὶ ἀοράτῳ γίγνεται, πᾶς ὢν τοῦ πάντων ἐπέκεινα καὶ οὐδενός, οὔτε ἑαυτοῦ οὔτε ἐτέτου, τῷ παντελῶς δὲ ἀγνώστῳ τῇ πάσης γνώσεως ἀνεργησίᾳ κατὰ τὸ κρεῖττον ἐνούμενος καὶ τῷ μηδὲν γινώσκειν ὑπὲρ νοῦν γινώσκων. [21] (p. 466) (Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Mystical Theology*, chapter 1, paragraph 145 p. 466).

And then It breaks forth, even from the things that are beheld and from those that behold them, and plunges the true initiate unto the Darkness of Unknowing wherein he renounces all the apprehensions of his understanding and is enwrapped in that which is wholly intangible and invisible, belonging wholly to Him that is beyond all things and to none else (whether himself or another), and being through the passive stillness of all his reasoning powers united by his highest faculty to Him that is wholly Unknowable, of whom thus by a rejection of all knowledge he possesses a knowledge that exceeds his understanding. (Translated by C.E. Rolt in the following webpage: Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. (documentacatholicaomnia.eu))

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,\\_Dionysius\\_Areopagita,\\_On\\_The\\_Divine\\_Names\\_And\\_The\\_Mystical\\_Theology,\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,_Dionysius_Areopagita,_On_The_Divine_Names_And_The_Mystical_Theology,_EN.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

The cause of this divine love is the intelligible light. The main characteristic of this light is not to illuminate but to unify the self of the thing by providing the essence of that. What makes God, God is the unified power that takes place through the light. This is the cause of harmony and provides the light to access the intelligible world. Beauty is the

beginning of beings and connects everything with the love of its own Beauty. It is also the final purpose of everything and the first principle. That is why God is identified as the Beautiful. These are the only common things that can attract everything. This process reaches the top, when Dionysius says that even the not-being participates in the Good and the Beautiful:

Καὶ τῷ καλῷ τὰ πάντα ἤνωται, καὶ ἀρχὴ πάντων τὸ καλὸν ὡς ποητικὸν αἴτιον καὶ κινουῦν τὰ ὅλα καὶ συνέχον τῷ τῆς οἰκείας καλλονῆς ἔρωτι καὶ πέρας πάντων καὶ ἀγαπητὸν ὡς τελικὸν αἴτιον, τοῦ καλοῦ γὰρ ἕνεκα πάντα γίγνεται, καὶ παραδειγματικόν, ὅτι κατ'αὐτὸ πάντα ἀφορίζεται. Διὸ καὶ ταῦτόν ἐστι τἀγαθὸν τὸ καλόν, ὅτι τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ κατὰ πᾶσαν αἰτίαν πάντα ἐφίεται, καὶ οὐκ ἔστι τι τῶν ὄντων, ὃ μὴ μετέχει τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ. [22] (p. 259) (Dionysius the Areopagite. *The Divine Names*, chapter 4, paragraph 7, p. 259).

And by the Beautiful all things are united together and the Beautiful is the beginning of all things, as being the Creative Cause which moves the world and holds all things in existence by their yearning for their own Beauty. And It is the Goal of all things, and their Beloved, as being their Final Cause (for 'tis the desire of the Beautiful that brings them all into existence), and It is their Exemplar from which they derive their definite limits; and hence the Beautiful is the same as the Good, inasmuch as all things, in all causation, desire the Beautiful and Good; nor is there anything in the world but hath a share in the Beautiful and Good (The translation is from C.E. Rolt in the following webpage: Dionysius the Areopagite: On the Divine Names and the Mystical Theology. (documentacatholicaomnia.eu)).

[https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,\\_Dionysius\\_Areopagita,\\_On\\_The\\_Divine\\_Names\\_And\\_The\\_Mystical\\_Theology,\\_EN.pdf](https://www.documentacatholicaomnia.eu/03d/0450-0525,_Dionysius_Areopagita,_On_The_Divine_Names_And_The_Mystical_Theology,_EN.pdf) (accessed on 15 March 2024).

## 2. Conclusions

The conclusion of this article can be summarized as follows. Initially, Plato laid the foundations based on the Form of the Good. He introduced light itself as the visible God and involved the concept of virtue connected with the Platonic Forms. Dionysius followed the same path, but the critical difference was that his God became the invisible light. He managed to give a far more transcendental characteristic to God. Two significant common elements between them were God's association with virtue and the necessity of the negation in attempting to see God. Dionysius managed to unify the essence of God by using the criterion of existence, giving God the name "Ὀν" [23] Maximus, Comments, 317C: Ἐαυτῷ ταύτην τὴν προσηγορίαν ἔθετο ὁ Θεός, εἰπών· Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὄν (Exod. 3:14). Eventually, determining God's nature was achieved in the name "the Good", which combines beauty, desire, perfection, and virtue. I support that Dionysius managed to combine the Neoplatonic elements with the Christian Orthodox tradition in a way that God remained at the same time not visible and undetermined but also reliable and existing through faith. I support this because from the moment that the God in Dionysius becomes known through the knowledge of ignorance (*gnosi agnosias*), this is how the concept of faith is also explained. Faith is how we can say something without speaking.

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