

The Divine Name of Wisdom In the Dionysian Commentary Tradition

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The Dionysian corpus twice introduces the theme of wisdom. At the beginning of the treatise *On the Divine Names*, Dionysius explains a kind of wisdom to be avoided when discussing the names—namely, the human wisdom that is persuasive but lacks divine inspiration. Later, in the seventh chapter of the same treatise, he asserts that wisdom as a name for God will be the chapter’s theme: “let us praise that good and eternal life as wise and as wisdom itself.”¹ Both introductions are misleading. Although the beginning of the treatise asserts that Dionysius will say only what he has found in the divinely-inspired scriptures, since human wisdom is out of its depth when talking about divine things, he nonetheless uses the very inadequacy of human wisdom as a means to clarify the character of divine wisdom. Likewise, in the seventh chapter, Dionysius follows up his claim that the chapter will focus on divine wisdom by engaging in a lengthy discussion of human wisdom. The scholia and commentaries that accumulated around this work of Dionysius, first in Greek, and then in Latin, expand on this exploration of human wisdom in its relation to the divine. In their interactions with each other and with the original text, these scholia and commentaries stress the close relationship between divine and human wisdom, a relationship that is only reinforced by their many attempts to separate the two.

Although “wisdom” as a name for God is only treated thematically in the seventh chapter of the *Divine Names*, it is actually the first of the names to appear in the treatise, in its opening lines, where Dionysius explains the “law of the

1. *Divine Names* (DN) 193, 5-6 (865B). Page numbers refer to B.R. Suchla, *De Divinis Nominibus* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990) and G. Heil and A.M. Ritter, *De Coelestia Hierarchia; De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia; Mystica Theologia; Epistulae* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991). All translations are my own.

discourses" (ὁ τῶν λόγιων θεσμός) that will serve as his method. "Let the law of the discourses," he says, "be defined at the outset, that we will set down the truth of the things said about God not in the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in the demonstration of the spiritually-moved power of the theologians."² Of course, Dionysius is using the term "wisdom" here not as a divine name, but as a reference to human reasoning. At least, that is how the term is being used in the source that Dionysius is paraphrasing, the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "my word and my proclamation are not in the persuasive words of human wisdom but in the demonstration of the spirit and of power."³ But Dionysius is not simply repeating Paul here. Intentionally or unintentionally, he makes an important modification to his source. Both Dionysius and Paul oppose human wisdom to a *dynamis*, a power. Paul seems to intend his audience to understand that he is talking about the power of God. Dionysius, on the other hand, says explicitly that he is talking about the power of the theologians, the *theologoi*, a term that he generally uses to refer to the writers of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, though he also refers to his own work as *theologia*.⁴ Theologians are human beings, but they possess a power, a *dynamis*, which is different from what we usually understand by human wisdom. He goes on to say that "according to this power we ineffably and unknowably make contact with ineffable and unknowable things, by a union that is better than our reasoning and intellectual power and activity."⁵ Human wisdom, then, seems to be a way of referring to "our reasoning and intellectual power and activity." But as we are told of its limitations, we are at the same time made aware of a higher wisdom, also possessed by certain human beings, who are capable of a union with ineffable and unknowable things.

2. DN 107, 3-108, 3 (585B).

3. 1 Cor. 2:4.

4. The *Divine Names* is "theology" at DN 139, 19 (681A).

5. DN 108, 3-5 (585B-588A).

The opening lines of the *Divine Names*, then, pose the problem of wisdom—what is it, and who has it—as necessary to identifying and employing the rest of the names. It is a problem for those who read sacred texts, as they must decide whether they are simply reciting names that have an efficacy independent of human reasoning, or whether they are engaging in an act of reason when they read the names. They must also decide which texts count as sources of divine names. Does the reasoning ability of the author have any influence on the authority of the text, or is a sacred text the result of a divine inspiration unrelated to reason, and how can the reader decide which is which? These are the questions addressed both by Dionysius himself and by his scholiasts and commentators.

Before we look at how medieval readers understood this law of the discourses, it is worth glancing ahead to the extended treatment of wisdom in Chapter Seven of the *Divine Names*, which also begins with a quotation from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: "the foolishness of God is wiser than humans."⁶ Here Dionysius makes no modifications to his source. The passage looks the same in Paul's letter, where it occurs in the context of proclaiming "Christ crucified." Dionysius, as we will see, sets the passage in a broader context without doing violence to its essential claim. Like the other passage from Paul, this one is comparative. By separating the human from the divine, it links the human to the divine. That is, I come to a certain understanding of divine wisdom by considering the limitations of human wisdom. We can explore this consideration by following these two passages, both derived from the same scriptural source, as they find their way through first the Greek and then the Latin medieval commentary tradition—not the tradition of commenting on the letters of Paul, but the tradition of commenting on the *Divine Names*.

6. 1 Cor. 1:25; DN 193, 11 (865B).

I. THE PERSUASIVE WORDS OF HUMAN WISDOM

The text of the *Divine Names* appeared in the early sixth century.⁷ Within a hundred years of its appearance, it had acquired a set of scholia, or perhaps a compilation of several sets of scholia, also composed in Greek, and apparently written out as a separate text. In other words, Greeks reading Dionysius would sit with two manuscripts in front of them, one with the *Divine Names* and another with the scholia. Copies of both the original and the scholia were in Rome by the seventh century, where they attracted no significant interest. But the Franks, through a confusion of identity, regarded the author of the Dionysian corpus as their patron saint, and so a copy of the corpus generated a great deal of interest when it arrived in Paris in 827. That was when the Byzantine emperor Michael the Stammerer sent a copy of the corpus, without the scholia, to the Frankish king Louis the Pious. This manuscript was deposited at the church of Saint-Denis outside of Paris, and was translated into Latin soon afterward by Hilduin, the abbot of Saint-Denis. No one seems to have liked his translation much, as the later Frankish king Charles the Bald commissioned his court philosopher, Eriugena, to produce a new translation, which he did around 860. This translation went to Rome, where the papal librarian, Anastasius had two comments on it. He was impressed that “this barbarian man” *vir ille barbarus*, had sufficient intellect to produce a translation of Dionysius, but he also found Eriugena’s word-for-word method unhelpful, so that, in Anastasius’ words, “what he undertook to translate remains to be translated.”⁸ Anastasius attempted to rectify the defects of Eriugena’s translation by translating the Greek scholia into Latin in its margins, as well as making short comments of his own.

7. On the transmission of the Dionysian corpus to the Latin West and its subsequent interpretation, see L. Michael Harrington, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 1-3. For the history of Eriugena’s translation, up to and including its incorporation into the thirteenth-century textbook edition, see H.F. Dondaine, *Le corpus dionysien de l’université de Paris au XIIIe siècle* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1953).

8. Anastasius makes these comments in a letter to Charles the Bald, printed in Migne, *Patrologia Latina* (PL) 122: 1025-1029.

This is the version that was read in Western Europe through the rest of the Middle Ages and on into the Renaissance. Readers at the University of Paris, such as Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas, did not read anything like our modern Classics of Western Spirituality edition, which isolates the original text.⁹ Their edition has more commentary than it does text. Even the relatively uncomplicated edition made by Anastasius has a commentary on the law of the discourses that is longer than the original text. Although Eriugena translates the Greek for this passage clearly and directly, Anastasius nonetheless provides a Greek scholium that comments on it. In what survives of Anastasius' rendering in the extant early editions, it reads as follows:

Human wisdom gathers the persuasiveness of its proofs from sensible things. For the great necessity possessed by syllogisms takes its occasion from the geometrical. As for bodiless things, and all the more for those that are over the body and over all substance, how could anyone rationally establish anything without interpretation, unless being able to weep by the highest intellect and through sincere piety to intellect ineffably their ignorance concerning God and how he is.¹⁰

So what does the Greek scholiast add to the original passage here? He begins to develop a thesis about human knowing that will continue throughout the *Divine Names* scholia, namely, that human knowing is tied to sensation. In later scholia, he will identify ordinary knowing as a materialization of the human mind, since it involves the mind's descent into the *pneuma*, that intermediary substance between the soul and the body.¹¹ The mind in itself is not multiple, and so to think in a way that involves multiplicity

9. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987).

10. MS. *Paris, Bibl. nat., lat. 1618*, fol. 46v: *humana sapientia ex sensibilibus suadelos approbationum colligit. Magna enim sillogismorum necessitas ex geometrica occasiones assumit. In incorporalibus, vero immo in his quae super corporalia et super omnem substantiam sunt, quomodo quis rationabiliter statuet sine interpretatione, vix summo intellectu flere de deo ignorantiam qualisque sit per sinceram pietatem ineffabiliter cointelligere valens.* A version of the Greek may be found at *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 4: 185.4.

11. On sensation as occurring through the *pneuma*, see PG 4: 372.2. The Greek scholiast here describes the spirit as "that through which the soul applies itself to sensible things." Anastasius changes "applies itself to" to "surpasses," losing the meaning of the passage.

requires that the body play a role, through the *pneuma*. Here he says only that human knowing relies on sensible things. As an example, he points out the science of geometry, whose proofs persuade us only because we can see them illustrated in visible figures. Such knowing will be ineffective when applied to objects that cannot be illustrated, such as angels—that is, “those that are over the body”—or the divinity, who is “over all substance.” The human mind, however, does have the possibility of transcending its ordinary mode of knowing. The Greek scholiast says it has a *dynamis*, referring to that power of the theologians that Dionysius mentioned in his law of the discourses. Eriugena translates *dynamis* as *virtus*, while Anastasius, unfortunately, translates the *dynamenos* of the scholium as *valens*, so the Latin reader loses the sense that Dionysius and the scholiast are talking about the same thing.

By the thirteenth century, when Parisian luminaries like Albert and Thomas read Dionysius and the scholia in these same Latin translations, it was even harder to understand what the original Greek scholiast was talking about. The scholiast says that we are able, *dynamenos*, by the “highest flower of our intellect,” to achieve *agnosia*, unknowing. “Flower of the intellect” is, of course, a Neoplatonic technical term, which would have been familiar to a sixth-century Greek Neoplatonist, but which proved too much for the Latin scribes who kept this text in circulation through the later Middle Ages. Migne’s Greek has τῷ ἀκροτάτῳ ἄνθει τοῦ νοῦ, which Anastasius must have translated correctly as *summo intellectus flore*, though the extant manuscripts consulted for this essay do not preserve his translation. The manuscript reading translated above, from the eleventh century, has *summo intellectu flere*, “to weep by the highest intellect.”¹² By the thirteenth century, the manuscript tradition had stabilized around *summo intellectu fore*, “to be by the highest intellect.”¹³ When Albert and Thomas read this scholium, as they certainly did, they saw an interpretation that simply said we can establish

12. MS. Paris, Bibl. nat., lat. 1618, fol. 46v.

13. See, for instance, MS. Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 17341, fol. 201r.

our being at the highest level of intellect and so ineffably intellect our own ignorance concerning the divine. Even in its garbled form, the scholium preserves the intellectual language used by the Greek scholiast for both human wisdom and our highest form of knowing, an “intellection” that is also an “ignorance.”

These mistranslations and garblings should not be interesting only to philologists. They represent the intellectual contribution of the larger community that kept these texts in circulation. When a scribe, confronted with a phrase like *summo intellectus flore*, found it so unfamiliar that he assumed it could not have been the original text, and so altered it, he was presenting a kind of community judgment on the concept. If the concept was important enough, it would have to be reintroduced by a later editor or commentator. In the case of the flower of the intellect, we will see later that it reappears in another location, in a distinctively Latin variation: the *apex mentis*.

The thirteenth-century edition of Eriugena’s translation that Albert and Thomas read did not just contain three hundred years’ worth of scribal errors. At some point during the thirteenth century, an editor of the text took excerpts from Eriugena’s own major work, the *Periphyseon*, many of them passages that commented directly on the *Divine Names*, and added them to Anastasius’ translation of the scholia. The *Divine Names* now not only contained Eriugena’s translation of Dionysius, but his own philosophical commentary on Dionysius. The presence of the *Periphyseon* in a thirteenth-century text is especially striking because it was a condemned book. In 1225, Pope Honorius III ordered all copies of it to be brought to Rome and burned. Its survival in the margins of the *Divine Names* allowed Albert and Thomas to read it without worrying about its doctrinal status, since the edition nowhere identifies Eriugena as a contributor. As far as any thirteenth-century reader was concerned, these were just more Greek scholia translated by Anastasius. Albert, for instance, refers to the singular “commentator” when talking about all of the scholia, as though one person were responsible for all of them.

So what does the *Periphyseon* have to say about the law of the discourses, that we speak not with human wisdom but with the power of the theologians? The thirteenth-century textbook edition of the *Divine Names* presents three excerpts from the *Periphyseon*. They are extraordinary in their length, when compared to the text they are addressing. In a copy of the textbook that circulated in the Dominican community in thirteenth-century Paris, and that one is tempted to say may be the very copy that Albert and Thomas read, the first excerpt is 37 lines long, the second excerpt 23 lines long, and the third is 17 lines long.¹⁴ For comparison, consider the length of the Greek scholium translated by Anastasius, which we examined above, on how human wisdom depends on contact with sensible things. The length of the scholium in this manuscript is only 17 lines. On the subject of wisdom, the excerpts from Eriugena's *Periphyseon* eclipse both the original text and all other scholia on it in their length.

Since these excerpts are not simply quotations of the *Periphyseon*, but a re-envisioning of it, they are worth quoting in full:

The authority of holy scripture must be followed in all things, since the truth is possessed in it as though in certain of its secret seats. Nonetheless, it must not be believed that it always enjoys the proper signs of its words or names when it suggests the divine nature to us. It uses certain likenesses and various ways of translating words or names, descending to our weakness, and righting our hitherto crude and childlike senses with a simple teaching. Listen to what the apostle says: *I have given you milk to drink, not food* (1 Cor. 3:2). The divine discourses pursue this so that it may hand down and persuade us to know something concerning the ineffable, incomprehensible, and invisible thing, for the nourishing of our faith. Of course, nothing else should be said or thought with chastity and piety by those who live and pursue the search for the truth, other than what is discovered in holy scripture. Those who seek or believe or discuss something concerning God are to use nothing other than what it signifies and translates. For who would presume to say anything discovered by themselves concerning the ineffable nature, beyond what it measures out concerning itself in its holy limbs—I mean the theologians? But so that you may believe and hold to this more firmly, I deem that the testimony of the holy Dionysius the

14. MS. *Paris, Bibl. nat. lat. 17341*, fol. 201r-201v. Albert, however, does not follow the precise wording of this copy when he is quoting from either the *Periphyseon* excerpts or the scholia translated by Anastasius.

theologian should be inserted in this place. For what is more freely to be accepted than reason, paved over with the firmest authority? After all, in the first chapter of *On the Divine Names*, the aforesaid theologian commends the authority of holy scripture with great praises. But since his customary discussion uses intricacy and transposition, and he is therefore quite a hindrance, and seems difficult for many to grasp, it pleased me to bring forth his sentiment concerning this thing with an order of the words that is easy to grasp. "We must," he says, "in every manner not dare," and the rest.¹⁵

After the things that were said above, turn your mind to this, that true authority does not hinder right reason, nor does right reason hinder true authority. Both of them, of course, stream from one font—the divine wisdom, you see. One of them grants and hands down many things to those who seek piously to think and speak about the incomprehensible and ineffable nature. It is not altogether silent on the pursuit of true religion, so that it may nourish with teaching those who are still crude in the simplicity of their faith, and so that it may provide those who are instructed, armed, and fortified for divine struggles with fervor for the catholic faith. But the other of them piously and chastely corrects those who are still simple, nourished in the cradles of the church, so that they neither believe nor value anything unworthy of God, nor reckon that all the authority of holy scripture predicates of the cause of all things is predicated properly, whether it is the most glorious and highest of all things—such as life, virtue, and the names of the other virtues—or middling things—such as the sun, light, a star, and the sum of

15. *Sanctae quidem scripturae in omnibus sequenda est auctoritas, quoniam in ea veluti quibusdam suis secretis sedibus veritas possidetur. Non tamen ita credendum est ut ipsa semper propriis verborum seu nominum signis fruatur, divinam nobis naturam insinuans, sed quibusdam similitudinibus variisque translatorum verborum seu nominum modis utitur, infirmitati nostrae condescendens, nostrosque adhuc rudes infantilesque sensus simplici doctrina erigens. Audi apostolum dicentem, lac vobis potum dedi, non escam. In hoc enim divina student eloquia ut de re ineffabili, incomprehensibili, invisibilique aliquid nobis ad nutriendam fidem nostram cogitandum tradat atque suadeat. Siquidem de deo nil aliud caste pieque viventibus, studioseque veritatem quaerentibus dicendum vel cogitandum, nisi quae in sancta scriptura reperiuntur, neque aliis nisi ipsius significationibus translationibusque utendum his, qui de deo querunt sive quid credant sive disputent. Quis enim de natura ineffabili a seipso repertum dicere praesumat, praeter quod illa de seipsa in suis sanctis organis, theologis dico, modulata est? Sed ut hoc firmiter et credas et teneas, sancti Dionysii theologi testimonium huic loco inserendum arbitror. Quid enim libentius accipiendum est, quam ratio firmissima auctoritate roborata? Capitulo quippe primo de divinis nominibus auctoritatem sanctae scripturae praedictus theologus magnis laudibus commendat. At quia more suo perplexo hyperbaticeque disputat, ideoque valde obstrusus, difficilisque ad intelligendum multis videtur, placuit mihi de hac re sententiam ipsius facili verborum ordine ad intelligendum depromere. Universaliter inquit non audendum et cetera. The original version of this portion of the *Periphyseon* may be found at PL 122: 509A-C.*

the things that are predicated of God from the loftier parts of this visible world—or from the lower motions of the creature—such as dew, river, rock, wood, lion, eagle, worm, and the numberless others that are translated from the founded nature to the founding nature by a kind of transformation and shaped signification.¹⁶

No one, I guess, who pursues the truth is ignorant that what is prior in nature is of more worth than what is prior in time. We say, moreover, that reason is prior in nature, while authority is prior in time. For although nature was created at once with time, authority nonetheless does not start to be from the beginning of time and nature, but reason arose with time and nature from the principle of things. Even reason itself teaches this. Authority, of course, proceeds from true reason, but reason never proceeds from authority. For all authority that is not proven by true reason seems to be weak. True reason, moreover, since as fixed and changeless it is fortified by its virtues, does not need to be paved over by the backing of any authority. For true authority seems to me to be nothing other than the truth discovered by the virtue of reason and commended by the holy fathers in letters for the use of posterity.¹⁷

16. *Animadvertite post ea quae superius dicta sunt quod neque recta ratio verae auctoritati obsistit neque vera auctoritas rectae rationi. Ambae siquidem ex uno fonte divina videlicet sapientia manant. Una quidem de natura incomprehensibili ineffabilique pie quaerentibus multa concessit ac tradidit et cogitare et dicere, ne verae religionis studium in omnibus sileat, ut et rudes adhuc in fidei simplicitate doctrina enutriat, et catholicae fidei aemulis instructa armataque divinis propugnaculis munita respondeat. Altera vero ut simplices adhuc in cunabulis ecclesiae nutritos pie casteque corrigat, ne quid indignum de deo vel credant vel aestiment, ne omnia quae sanctae scripturae auctoritas de causa omnium praedicat proprie praedicari existiment, sive gloriosissima et summa omnium sint, ut vita, virtus, ceterarumque virtutum nomina, sive media, ut sol, lux, stella, cunctaque quae ex partibus sublimioribus huius mundi visibiles de deo praedicantur, sive ex inferioribus creaturae motibus, ut ros, flumen, petra, lignum, leo, aquila, vermīs ceteraque innumerabilia, quae ex natura condita ad naturam conditricem transformatione quadam figurataque significatione transferuntur.* The original version of this passage may be found at PL 122: 511B-512A.

17. *Nemo ut opinor ignorat veritate studens maioris dignitatis esse quod prius est natura quam quod prius est tempore. Rationem autem priorem esse natura, auctoritatem vero tempore dicimus. Quamvis enim natura simul cum tempore creata sit, non tamen ab initio temporis atque naturae coepit esse auctoritas. Ratio vero cum tempore ac natura ex principio rerum orta est. Hoc etiam ipsa ratio edocet. Auctoritas siquidem ex vera ratione processit, ratio vero nequaquam ex auctoritate. Omnis enim auctoritas quae vera ratione non approbatur infirma videtur esse. Vera autem ratio, quoniam suis virtutibus rata atque immutabilis munitur, nullius auctoritatis astipulatione roborari indiget. Nil enim aliud mihi videtur esse vera auctoritas, nisi rationis virtute reperta veritas, et a sanctis patribus ob posteritatis utilitatem literis commendata.* The original version of this passage may be found at PL 122: 513A-C.

Any reader of the *Periphyseon* knows that the text is a dialogue between a teacher and a student. In order for the thirteenth-century editor to disguise the *Periphyseon* sufficiently, he had to remove the dialogue format. This meant removing the titles of the speakers, *nutritor* and *alumnus*, as well as any statements that clearly address the other speaker, such as “this seems clear to me” (*videtur plane*). The result is that conversations between the teacher and student become internal monologues in the mind of the Greek scholiast, who now seems to be of many minds on the role of human wisdom.

The first of the three excerpts claims that authority must be followed, but we must not think that what it says should be taken literally. The scriptures do not use “proper signs” for the divine nature, but “likenesses” that are suited to our weakness as knowers rather than to the nature of their object. Because of our weakness, we must rely on these signs, saying nothing about the divine nature “other than what is discovered in holy scripture.” In this passage, Eriugena twice uses this preposition “in” to indicate that there is no going beyond what is already found in the scriptures.

The second of the three excerpts continues the theme of the first, but it spells out the relation between reason and authority, making the famous claim that true authority and right reason do not oppose each other. Authority, in the form of the scriptures, “grants and hands down many things,” presumably the divine names, so that people may “know and think about the ungraspable and ineffable nature.” Reason, on the other hand, does not hand down anything, but exercises a critical function. It “corrects” us, so that we do not make the mistake of thinking that the names provided by authority are “proper” names. The scriptures may provide the name of “life,” without saying anything else about it, but reason steps in to show the reader that “life” cannot properly be said of God. Reason does not exercise a creative function, as though it were capable of constructing or discovering new names for the divine nature, but limits itself to critiquing the names that come to it from elsewhere.

The third excerpt presents a different approach to reason, treating it as exercising a creative rather than a critical function. The passage begins with the claim that “what is prior in nature

is of greater worth than what is prior in time." Reason, Eriugena says, is prior to authority in nature, though authority is prior to reason in time. That is, the scriptures already exist when we apply our reason to them, so they are prior in time. But the scriptures could not be composed without the use of reason on the part of the scripture writers, and so reason has a causal priority over the written text of the scriptures. Reason is prior to authority in nature. We now come to understand the scriptures by discovering the same reason according to which they were composed. As Eriugena puts it, the scriptures are "nothing other than the truth discovered by the virtue of reason and commended by the holy fathers." We are back to the "virtue of the theologians" mentioned by Dionysius, which the Greek scholiast identifies as the flower of the intellect, and which Eriugena identifies here as a creative employment of reason.

Albert the Great was so disturbed by the third excerpt from the *Periphyseon* that he addressed it explicitly in his commentary on the *Divine Names*. He first quotes the entirety of the excerpt, then observes that "this seems to make false what is said in the letter of the text."¹⁸ That is, Eriugena seems to contradict Dionysius, who identifies the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as the only source for what we say or think about the divinity. Dionysius appears to be saying that reason ought to follow authority — just the opposite of what Eriugena is saying. Albert's solution is to say that Dionysius is talking about the relation between human reason and divine authority, while the commentator is talking about the relation between divine reason and divine authority. "Divine authority depends on divine reason," Albert says, "but we do not know the reason of divine authority. It is as Augustine also says, that God has made all things by a just judgment, even if it is hidden from us."¹⁹ Albert implicitly finds a way to make Eriugena's third excerpt compatible with the first and second. Human reason is capable of critiquing the use of divine names, as Eriugena's first two excerpts assert, while divine reason is capable of discovering them, as

18. See the edition of P. Simon, *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, in *Alberti Magni Opera Omnia*, vol. 37:1 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), p. 6, ll. 23-24.

19. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 6, ll. 46-50.

Eriugena's third excerpt asserts. Divine reason is the ground of divine authority, but divine authority is the ground of human reason when it attempts to speak or think about the divine nature.

One problem with this reading is that Eriugena is thinking specifically of human beings—namely, the scripture writers—when he refers to the creative employment of reason. These human beings used reason to discover the divine names that they then recorded in the scriptures. Albert implicitly addresses this problem by noting that the scripture writers are inspired not by human reason, but by divine reason. “In other sciences,” he says, “authority depends on human reason, which may easily be deceived, and therefore has no great firmness. But the authority of sacred scripture depends on divine reason, which cannot be deceived, in that it is received through inspiration.”²⁰ Albert moves Dionysius in the direction of Paul here, making the speech of the theologian dependent on the power of God rather than on an extraordinary power of the human mind.

When Thomas discusses the law of the discourses in his own commentary, he covers roughly the same ground as Albert without explicitly addressing any of the passages from the *Periphyseon*. He implicitly disagrees with the first of the *Periphyseon* excerpts, that we must restrict ourselves to what may be found in the scriptures. Dionysius, in fact, says only that we must not go beyond what is expressed “from” the scriptures. Thomas notes that “it is significant that he does not say ‘in the holy discourses,’ but ‘from the holy discourses.’” The consequence is that “whatever can be drawn out from those things that are contained in holy scripture is not foreign to this doctrine, even if it is not contained in holy scripture.”²¹ The creative capacity of human reason is here reasserted at a lower level. It gives us new names by drawing out from the scriptures, rather than by relying on its own resources.

20. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 6, ll. 54-59.

21. *In Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, cap. 1, lect. 1.

II. COMPRESSION

Eriugena himself never uses the verb “to draw out” (*elicio*) in his translation of the Dionysian corpus, but he does use similar verbs to express an idea already present in the Greek text. In the first line of the *Divine Names*, Dionysius says that he will now proceed to an “unfolding” (ἀνάπτυξις) of the divine names present in the scriptures.²² As becomes clear in later passages, this “unfolding” means taking a divine name like “being” and explaining its content to the reader by using other names. These names add nothing to its content but make that content more apparent. Interpretation can also proceed in the opposite direction, to “enfolding,” as when we go beyond the “persuasive words of human wisdom.” The passage that discusses this is somewhat difficult to follow in the original Greek. “To the degree that they look up to what is higher,” Dionysius says, “to such a degree the ray of the thearchic discourses gives it, while they are compressed (συστελλομένουσ) toward the higher beams with forbearance and holiness concerning divine things.”²³ The first “they” refers to people who go beyond intellect and reason. The second “they” — the “they” that are compressed — has no obvious referent. There is an almost identical passage in the *Mystical Theology* that provides a possible referent for the “they.” “Indeed, to the degree that we look up to what is higher, to such a degree our words are compressed by the sight of the intelligibles together.”²⁴ The language used here is the same as in the *Divine Names* passage. And Dionysius explains what is being compressed: it is the words we use. Eriugena consistently translates these participial forms of συστέλλω and περιστέλλω with the Latin *coarto*: “in as much as they look up to it, the ray of the divine discourses makes itself come to higher clarities concerning divine things, drawn together (*coartatas*) with forbearance and holiness.” It is the “clarities” that

22. DN 107, 2 (585B).

23. DN 108, 10-109, 2 (588A).

24. MT 147, 7-8 (1033B). For Eriugena’s translation, see L.M. Harrington, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook of Mystical Theology at the University of Paris* (Leuven: Peeters, 2004), pp. 86-87.

are drawn together in his translation. Since these are the clarities given by the divine discourses, and so they at least have their origin in words, Eriugena's translation makes the *Divine Names* passage equivalent to the *Mystical Theology* passage: "since, in as much as we look up to higher things, our words are drawn together (*coartantur*) by the contemplation of the unseen things."

Latin readers of Eriugena's translation, starting with Anastasius, did not really know what to do with this idea of compression. By the thirteenth century, they have provided the reader with several ways to avoid it. In the thirteenth-century textbook edition of the *Mystical Theology*, an interlinear comment above Eriugena's translation of *περιστέλλονται*, *coartantur*, reads *id est deficiunt*, "that is, they are lacking," meaning that our words are not compressed, but that they fail altogether when we contemplate invisible things. A Greek scholium on this passage says τὸ δὲ περιστέλλονται ἀντὶ τοῦ συστέλλονται τέθεικεν—that is, *peristellontai* is here put in place of *systellontai*.²⁵ The Greek scholiast recognized that Dionysius is making the same point in the passage from the *Divine Names* and the passage from the *Mystical Theology*, that our words are compressed as we speak about a higher object. He simply used two different prefixes with the same verb to make this point. When Anastasius translated this line from the scholium, he rendered it as *coartantur aut sive desinunt pro subtrahuntur posuit*. Anastasius interprets both verbs as meaning that our words disappear altogether. They *subtrahuntur*—they are subtracted or withdrawn.

There are two points at issue here. First, are enfolding and unfolding, or compression and expansion, appropriate concepts to use when discussing the ascent from human wisdom to the divine? Second, is it we or language itself that is enfolded in these passages? By language here I mean all forms of *logos*, including the natural language present in the forms of things, their *physikoi logoi*. To say that language can be enfolded as Dionysius does, and as Eriugena correctly translates, is to say that language has a place in the ascent toward divine wisdom. In that case, the ascent toward wisdom is a

25. PG 4: 425.6.

shared ascent. Contemplation may be the act of an individual, but language is always shared. The commentator's refusal to interpret Dionysius as saying that language can be enfolded may reflect a nervousness about positing intermediary forms between God in himself and the world of reasoning about sense objects. Though Dionysius and Eriugena are not nervous in this way, it finds its way into their text through the interlinear comments and the scholia.

We have seen that Eriugena's translation treats the "clarities" of the divine ray as what is compressed in the ascent toward God. A thirteenth-century editor added a short passage from Eriugena's *Periphyseon* that identifies these clarities explicitly with language: "do you see the way in which he forbids in every manner anyone from daring to speak about the hidden divinity beyond what has been said in the holy discourses? These discourses, you see, he calls 'higher clarities,' using a most glorious and true name. They are drawn together around the divine things in holiness and forbearance."²⁶ In this passage, the clarities do not originate in the discourses; instead, they *are* the discourses. Their language becomes more compressed when it speaks about higher things.

There is a difficulty in reading the passage as Eriugena does. Eriugena is saying that it is the clarities, the beams, that are compressed. "Beams," ἀγῶας, is feminine, while "compressed," συστελλομένους, appears to be masculine. When Eriugena makes his translation, he gives "compressed" a feminine ending, so that we have *claritates coartatas*, feminine noun and feminine participle. If συστελλομένους is in fact masculine, it must refer to the people who are contemplating higher things, rather than to the things that are contemplated. This is how John the Sarracen understood it when he translated the *Divine Names* in 1167. His translation reads: "in as much as we look up to the higher, the ray of the thearchic discourses sends itself into higher splendors, and we are constrained (*constricti*) by forbearance and holiness concerning divine things." Notice that he has added words to Dionysius' translation to make this clear: *et simus*, "and we." The reader of the Sarracen's

26. PL 122: 509C-D.

translation can only understand that it is the people doing the contemplating that are compressed, not the words they contemplate.

Albert and Thomas follow the Sarracen's translation here. This is a general principle of Albert's. He says laconically: "we intend to explicate the new translation of John the Sarracen, because it is better."²⁷ Thomas never passes such a judgment, and is generally friendlier to Eriugena than Albert is. In this case, both Albert and Thomas understand the Sarracen to mean by "constrained" that we are limited in important ways when we try to understand divine things. In other words, they do not take "constrained" to mean that we become more unified, but that we exclude certain things from our thought process. They provide different explanations of what these limits are. Albert explains that "our intellect is limited according to the principles of faith" and "the purity of the intellect."²⁸ Thomas explains that we are limited "when we preserve the truth of sacred scripture free from all error," and "when we do not take in more than is given to us."²⁹ Unlike Albert, Thomas does not ignore Eriugena's translation completely here. He glosses the Sarracen's *constricti* with a version of Eriugena's *coartatas*, saying that we are "constrained (*constricti*), as though drawn together (*coarctati*) by certain limits." So, though he uses Eriugena's term, he interprets it in line with Albert.

The opening passage of the *Divine Names* and its paraphrase of the Apostle Paul makes an unheralded but significant modification to its scriptural inspiration. What appears to be, and in the original letter of Paul almost certainly was, a criticism of human wisdom, becomes in Dionysius and some of his commentators an account of the ladder from ordinary human reason to the divine, as well as a renewed appreciation for ordinary reason. The Greek scholiast may reject ordinary reason as bound to the senses, and Albert may see only its critical function in naming God, but Eriugena and Thomas both find in it the ability to make manifest names that would otherwise remain concealed. There is also some

27. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 3, ll. 47-48.

28. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 7, ll. 51-53.

29. *In Librum De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, cap. 1, lect. 1.

question about whether ordinary reason and its *logoi*—words, forms, and meanings—are enfolded or abandoned in the ascent toward God. The passages we have observed in Eriugena's translation treat the *logoi* as enfolded, while Anastasius and other editors of the text, as well as the Sarracen in his translation, move in the direction of saying that reason is abandoned.

III. THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD IS WISER THAN HUMANS

What does Dionysius have to say when he takes up the divine name of wisdom explicitly in Chapter Seven of the *Divine Names*? This is the chapter that takes the divine name of wisdom as its explicit theme. And Dionysius does begin the chapter with his boilerplate treatment of any divine name. He praises God's life as "wise" (σοφία) and as "wisdom itself" (αὐτοσοφία), then immediately says that, rather than these, God is "the subsistence-maker of all wisdom" (πάσης σοφίας ὑποστατική) and "over-exists over all wisdom and understanding" (ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν σοφίαν καὶ σύνεσιν ὑπεροῦσαν).³⁰ I won't discuss these distinctions here except to note that Eriugena, as usual, translates "subsistence-maker" not as what makes something else subsist, but as what subsists in itself, emphasizing God's identity with his names rather than his transcendence of the names. A thirteenth-century interlinear commentator recognized this poor translation and provided a more correct alternative: "giving substance to" (*substantificam*). More germane to our discussion here is that, after the first two sentences of this chapter, Dionysius tables the discussion of the name of wisdom as applied to God, and turns instead to human wisdom and the divine name of "foolishness." This is where Dionysius quotes the Apostle Paul, saying that "the foolishness of God is wiser than human beings." What does Paul mean by this? Dionysius has two answers: "he says not only that every human reasoning is a kind of straying when judged in relation to the steadiness and fixity of the divine and most perfect intellections, but also that it is customary for theologians to declare privations to be in God, though received in a contrary manner."³¹

30. DN 193, 5-7 (865B).

31. DN 193, 12-194, 1 (865B).

The first answer, then, is that “every human reasoning is a kind of straying when judged in relation to the steadiness and fixity of the divine and most perfect intellections.” Dionysius seems to mean that God, even on his worst day, is smarter than a human being, and so “the foolishness of God is wiser than humans.” Albert and Thomas worry a little about whether this means that all human wisdom is literally error. Dionysius uses *πλάνη*, which can mean “wandering” as well as “falsehood,” as a playful way of contrasting the movement of human reasoning to the fixity of divine intellection. Though the Latin *error* can also mean wandering, Albert is thinking only of its meaning of “falsehood” when he says that human wisdom is not error *per essentiam* but *per causam*, since “it proceeds through composition and division, and through contraries discovered in things, in which falsehood is frequently mixed.”³² Thomas is more sanguine about human reasoning here, as well as more appreciative of Dionysius’ wordplay, when he says that human reasoning is only called error “by comparison with the stability and permanence of divine and perfect knowledge.”³³

The commentators spend more time trying to puzzle out Dionysius’ second answer: “it is customary for theologians to declare privations to be in God, though received in a contrary manner.” The theologians—that is, the scripture writers—use negative language when they mean something positive. They “declare privations,” but they do so “in a contrary manner,” since they mean something positive. Dionysius goes on to give some examples that make this meaning clear. He says that the theologians call the divine light “invisible,” which is a privation, but they mean it “in a contrary manner”—that is, they mean something positive by it. If we understand “foolishness” as a privation of wisdom, then “foolishness” can be understood in the same way, as meaning something positive rather than a privation.

32. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 340, ll. 32-35.

33. *In Librum De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, cap. 7, lect. 1.

Eriugena's translation of the above passage changes its meaning at least slightly: "it is a custom for the theologians to push away privations in God by a contrary affect of the mind." Eriugena reads the Greek ἀποφάσκειν as coming from ἀπόφημι ("deny") rather than from ἀποφαίνω ("declare"). He also renders the Greek adverb ἀντιπεπονηθώς ("in a contrary manner") as "by a contrary affect of the mind" (*contrario mentis affectu*). The resulting translation says that scripture writers reject privative terms like "invisible" because they have an affective experience of the opposite. In other words, they know the term "invisible" does not properly apply to God because they have experienced the contrary. Albert and Thomas ignore Eriugena's translation completely on this point. But there is another medieval commentator who does try to figure out what Eriugena means here. The fifteenth-century commentator Denys the Carthusian has no choice but to interpret this passage because he has based his commentary exclusively on Eriugena's translation. His commentary reads:

"But also that it is a custom for the theologians to push away privations in God by a contrary affect of the mind" — that is, to remove from God through privatives "by an affect of the mind" — that is, from devotion and the grace of God. To remove, I say, from God "the contraries" of the things "that are in God" — that is, those things that are incompatible with what is appropriate for and existing in him.³⁴

Denys makes his job easier by changing the gender of *contrario* to *contraria*. Now we have the plural "contraries," which have nothing to do with the "affect of the mind." The theologians are not pushing away privations, but pushing away contraries, by using privations, motivated by a certain affect of the mind. That affect is "devotion and the grace of God." Dionysius is now understood to be saying that the theologians call God "invisible," a privation, so as to remove visibility, a contrary, from him. As a result, Dionysius' second

34. *Commentaria In Librum De Divinis Nominibus, in Opera Omnia*, ed. Monachi sacri ordinis Cartusienensis, vol. 16 (Montreuil-sur-Mer, Tournai, Parkminster: Typis Cartusiae S.M. de Pratis, 1902), p. 251: "sed quia et consuetudo est theologis contraria mentis affectu in deo quae sunt privatione depellere" — id est, remove a deo per privativa "affectu mentis" — id est ex devotione et gratia dei. Remove, inquam, a deo "contraria" eorum "quae sunt in deo," — id est illa quae repugnant convenientibus et inexistentibus ei.

answer to what Paul means when he says that the foolishness of God is wiser than humans becomes the same as the first. Theologians call God “foolish” as a way of devotedly removing human wisdom from him. Nothing remains of Dionysius’ own second answer: that we use the name “foolish” to speak of the divine wisdom in a way that is more adequate to it than our normal use of language.

The earlier commentators take Dionysius’ first answer—that human reason is a kind of error when compared to divine intellection—not to be distinguishing human from divine thinking, but to be distinguishing two kinds of human thinking. We’ve already seen the Greek scholiast distinguish two kinds of human thought in commenting on “the persuasive words of human wisdom” at the start of the *Divine Names*. Human wisdom is reasoning based on the senses, while the higher power of the soul is the flower of the intellect. The scholiast makes a similar distinction here in explaining the foolishness of God: “here especially he expresses how the foolishness of God is the most wise greatness of the incomprehensibility that concerns God. For he says that, fenced in by our accustomed sensibility and scrutinizing the preaching concerning the immateriality and super-substantiality that are said of God, we err, weighing them using sensible things.”³⁵ The scholiast goes on to explain how this applies to the doctrine of the Trinity. We see with our senses that three bodies cannot occupy the same place. If we reason solely according to the senses, then the doctrine of the Trinity will seem foolish. Accepting the Trinity requires a form of thought not dependent on the senses.

This higher form of thought is unknowing, which the scholiast is willing to identify as a form of knowledge. He notes that one of the psalms says that “your understanding is made marvelous to me, it is too strong, and I am incapable of it.”³⁶ The same explanation can be given of this unattainable understanding as was given of

35. PG 4: 344.2. An English translation of the complete Greek scholium appears in Paul Rorem and John C. Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis and the Dionysian Corpus: Annotating the Areopagite* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 227.

36. Ps. 138:6, quoted by the Greek scholiast at PG 4: 340.5. An English

the inaccessible light. Just as such a light may be called darkness, so such an understanding, the scholiast says, “may be compared to unknowing, which transcends all the knowledge in creatures.” He goes on to say that “unknowing concerning God is not unlearnedness, but the knowledge of those who are wise concerning divine things.” The scholiast interprets the foolishness of God in two ways. First, the “gentiles and heretics,” as the scholiast puts it, see the nature of God as foolish because their knowing depends on the senses. What Christians say about God is foolish when understood according to the perspective of the senses. But the scholiast also interprets the foolishness of God as the negation of ordinary human knowing, a negation that is regarded as foolish, in a positive sense this time, from the perspective of the theologians.

That the foolishness of God is referring to two forms of human knowing seemed so obvious to the thirteenth-century editor that he inserted here a passage from the *Periphyseon* discussing two kinds of human knowing even though it says nothing at all about the foolishness of God. Here is the passage as it appears in the thirteenth-century textbook:

How wisdom and understanding are accepted in the divine discourses must be considered. There is a twofold species of reason. One is wisdom and the other is understanding. For wisdom is said properly to be that virtue by which the contemplative soul—whether human or angelic—considers divine, eternal, and changeless things or turns about the first cause of all things or about the primordial causes, which the father founded at one and the same time in his son—his word, you understand—which is called a species of reason by those wise in theology. But understanding is a virtue by which the theoretic soul—whether human or angelic—touches on the nature of the things that proceed from the primordial causes through birth, and are divided into genera and species though differences and properties, whether they are subject to accidents or lack them, whether they are joined to bodies or are thoroughly free from them, whether they are allotted places and times or are united and inseparable beyond places and times by their simplicity. Such a species of reason is said to be physics. For physics is the natural understanding of the natures that are subject to senses and intellects, which the craft of customs that is useful to all always follows.³⁷

translation of the scholium may be found in Rorem and Lamoreaux, *John of Scythopolis*, p. 226.

37. *Quomodo sapientia et scientia in divinis accipiuntur eloquiis considerandum*

Eriugena here distinguishes wisdom and understanding, *sapientia* and *scientia*, as two forms of reason, or *ratio*. The latter half of the excerpt discusses *scientia*, or what Eriugena also refers to as physics, knowledge of the creation that has proceeded from God. He distinguishes this from wisdom, which is “that virtue by which the contemplative soul—whether human or angelic—considers divine, eternal, and changeless things or turns about the first cause of all things or about the primordial causes, which the father established at one and the same time in his son—his word, you understand—which is called a species of reason by those wise in theology.” To say that the foolishness of God is wiser than men in this context simply means that wisdom is wiser than understanding, or the theologian is wiser than the physicist.

The distinction between two forms of human knowing is made explicit by Dionysius himself a few sentences later in one of the more famous passages from the *Divine Names*: “our intellect has one power for intellection through which it looks at the intelligible things, and a union transcending the nature of the intellect through which it is put in contact with things that are beyond it.”³⁸ This is a paraphrase of an equally famous passage from Plotinus’ *Enneads*: “the intellect has one power for intellection by which it looks at the things that are inside it, and another by which it looks at things that are beyond it by a kind

est. Rationis quidem duplex est species, una sapientia, altera scientia. Sapientia namque dicitur virtus illa proprie qua contemplativus animus—sive humanus sive angelicus—divina aeterna et incommutabilia considerat, sive circa primam omnium causam versetur sive circa primordiales causas, quas pater in filio suo—scilicet verbo suo—semel simulque condidit, quae species rationis a sapientibus theologia vocatur. Scientia vero est virtus, qua theoreticus animus—sive humanus sive angelicus—de natura rerum, ex primordialibus causis procedentium per generationem, inque genera ac species divisarum, per differentias, et proprietates tractat, sive accidentibus succumbat, sive eis careat, sive corporibus adiuncta, sive penitus ab eis libera, sive locis et temporibus distributa, sive ultra loca et tempora simplicitate unita atque inseparabilis. Quae species rationis physica dicitur. Est enim physica naturarum sensibus intellectibusque succumbentium naturalis scientia, quam semper sequitur morum utilis omnibus disciplina. The original version of this passage may be found at PL 122: 629A-B.

38. DN 194, 10-12 (865C). For a discussion of this passage, see Harrington, *A Thirteenth-Century Textbook*, p. 12.

of onrush and reception."³⁹ Dionysius has made a couple small changes to Plotinus in his paraphrase. The intelligible things that the intellect looks at are no longer explicitly in the intellect, as they are for Plotinus. Presumably this change is owing to the fact that the Plotinian intellect contemplates itself, while the Dionysian intellect contemplates the divine mind. Dionysius also removes the cognitive language from the higher act of the intellect. The Dionysian intellect "looks" at intelligible things, but it has only a "union" through which it is "put in contact" with what is beyond it.

Eriugena's translation of this line diminishes its ecstatic character. His version reads: "our soul has a power for intellection through which it sees invisible things, and a super-exalted unity and nature through which it is connected to what is highest in it." Rather than being united with what is beyond it, our soul now has a nature of its own, which connects it to what is highest in itself. This change does not originate with Eriugena. His Greek manuscript has "and a nature" (τὴν δὲ φύσιν) rather than "the nature of the intellect" (τὴν νοῦ φύσιν).⁴⁰ But the change suits Eriugena's own interpretation of Dionysius, as it pairs well with his usual translation of the Greek *epekeina* or "beyond" as *summitas*, the "highest point of." Denys the Carthusian does his best to stay with Eriugena here. His commentary reads:

"A super-exalted unity" — that is, the super-high and most simple deity in which there is no diversity in any way. About which vision the savior says: *blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God* (Matt. 5:8). "And nature through which it is converted to what is highest in it" — that is, its mental vertex and apex of the affective elevated above time.⁴¹

In this passage, Denys makes the remarkable move of saying that the unity referred to by Dionysius is not the intellect at all, but God himself. To say that the soul possesses a unity now just means that

39. *Ennead* IV.7.35.

40. MS. *Paris, Bibl. nat.*, gr. 437, fol. 162v.

41. *Commentaria In Librum De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 252: "unitatemque superexaltatam" — *id est superaltissimam ac simplicissimam deitatem in qua non est diversitas ulla modorum. De qua visione salvator: beati, inquit, mundo corde, quoniam ipsi deum videbunt. "Naturamque per quam convertitur ad summa sui" — id est sui ipsius verticem mentalem ac apicem affectivae elevatam super tempus.*

the soul possesses God. How the soul possesses God is explained in the rest of the line. The soul has “a nature through which it is connected to what is highest in it.” This nature, according to Denys, is the “mental vertex and apex of the affective.” The soul possesses God through an affective experience of its own highest part. Here is where the Neoplatonic “flower of the intellect” rejoins the Dionysian commentary tradition, albeit with a different metaphor.

Eriugena’s translation of the next line in the *Divine Names* also diminishes the ecstatic character of this highest use of the intellect. Dionysius famously says that those who experience this union “are wholly outside of their whole selves, becoming wholly of God, for it is better to be of God and not of themselves.”⁴² Twice in this one statement Dionysius says that the soul is outside of itself, or not of itself. Eriugena eliminates both these claims in his translation, saying: “we wholly exist by our whole selves and are made wholly of God, for it is better to be of God and to be members of them.” Instead of being outside ourselves, we exist “by our whole selves”; instead of being “not of ourselves,” we are “members of them,” whoever they are. This latter change does not originate with Eriugena but his Greek manuscript, which reads “members” (μέλη) rather than “not” (μη).⁴³ The result of these two changes, in Eriugena’s reading, is that we do not move outside ourselves to get to God. Rather, we become more ourselves as we get to God.

Even in the earliest editions of Eriugena’s translation, this reading was thought to be beyond the pale. Where Dionysius says that we are “made wholly of God,” *totos deo factos*, Anastasius cautions in a scholium that this is *secundum voluntatem*—that is, we align our wills with God. It is our will that changes, not our being. The earliest surviving editions also contain a correction made to Eriugena’s claim that we “become members of them.” An interlinear comment restores the original meaning of Dionysius, that we are God’s *et non suos*, “and not our own.”⁴⁴

42. DN 194, 13-15 (865D-868A).

43. MS. Paris, Bibl. nat., gr. 437, fol. 162v.

44. MS. Paris, Bibl. nat., lat. 1618, fol. 69v.

The wrestling with Eriugena's translation continues in the thirteenth-century edition. Anastasius' scholium that we are united to God according to will rather than being turns into an interlinear comment, giving it more urgency by bringing it into the space of the primary text. The earlier interlinear comment *et non suos* has disappeared. But a new correction has appeared. Eriugena says that we "exist by our whole selves," turning the Dionysian *ecstasis* into Eriugenian *existentia*. An interlinear comment notes that Eriugena's *existentes* is really *excessum patientes*, "suffer an excess." In the fifteenth century, Denys the Carthusian follows this corrected reading. But he decides to remain faithful to Eriugena's claim that "it is better to be of God and members of them." His commentary reads:

"For it is better to be of God and to be members of them"—that is, it is more healthy by far that we reach God in this way, and that we be co-members of those who are thus made ministers and members of it, as sustained by its spirit. Whence it is said to the Corinthians: *do you not know that your members are the temple of the holy spirit, and you are not your own* (1 Cor. 6:19)? Whence another translation has: "we must intellect divine things in this way, exceeding ourselves entirely and entirely crossing over into God. For it is more honorable to be of God than of our own rule."⁴⁵

Denys observes that the pursuit of wisdom is a shared project. He says: "it is more healthy by far that we reach God in this way, and that we be co-members of those who are thus made ministers and members of it, as sustained by its spirit." It is better to pursue God in the company of others than to go it alone. Denys then, remarkably, finds a passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians that supports both Eriugena's translation—"to be members of them"—and the original Greek—"to be not of themselves." Paul says: "do you not know that your members are the temple of the holy spirit, and you are not your own?" Denys wraps up by

45. *Commentaria In Librum De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 252: "*melius enim est esse dei et membra eorum*"—*id est, multo salubrius est ut ita pertineamus ad deum, et simus commembra illorum qui ita effecti sunt ministri et membra illius, utpote vegetati spiritu eius. Hinc ad Corinthios dicitur: an nescitis quoniam membra vestra templum sunt spiritus sancti et non estis vestri? Hinc continet translatio alia: "sic oportet ut intelligamus divina, toti integre a nobis ipsis excedentes et toti in deum transeuntes: praestantius enim est dei esse quam proprii juris."*

providing his own translation, based closely on the fifteenth-century translations of Marsilio Ficino and Ambrose Traversari, which correctly translate the Greek here. For Denys, Eriugena's mistranslation actually enhances the reading of the original Greek.

If we were to proceed on through Chapter Seven of the *Divine Names*, we would see Dionysius himself explain how wisdom is not exhausted by any individual or rank of beings, but is woven through every rank, from angels, through humans, to unreasoning animals. Eriugena's mistranslation, and Denys' explanation of it, assist the reader in preparing for this account of wisdom as shared across all beings. One final idiosyncratic translation by Eriugena increases this sense of wisdom as a shared project. After Dionysius claims that angels and humans both participate in wisdom, he goes on to say that "someone calling even the senses themselves an echo (ἀπήχημα) of wisdom would not err in his aim."⁴⁶ The Greek scholia have nothing to say about this, though one line in Anastasius' translation of the scholia comments: "he speaks also concerning the senses and the demons, how even these are from wisdom." This line appears in neither Migne nor Suchla's edition of the Greek scholia.⁴⁷ It may be an addition made by Anastasius himself, or simply a variation in the Greek manuscript that served as his source. Whatever the source, this line aims to prevent the reader from assuming that the senses are in some way an incarnation of divine wisdom. Instead, when Dionysius calls the senses an "echo" of wisdom, he means only that they are from wisdom, not that they are a form of wisdom. No passage from Eriugena's *Periphyseon* is cited here to comment on the matter, but Eriugena's translation of this passage does provide an alternative interpretation. The whole passage reads, in his translation: "someone would perhaps not sin in saying that the senses themselves are a harmonization (*consonantia*) of the vision of wisdom." Instead of an echo, we have a harmonization. There is just the difference of a prefix between Eriugena's translation

46. DN 195, 16-17 (868C).

47. Migne's version of the scholium appears at PG 4: 345.3.

of *consonantia* and the Sarracen's more faithful translation of *resonantia*, but it yields a dramatic difference in meaning. Albert notes that *resonantia* means "the lowest and most obscure participation."⁴⁸ Aquinas agrees: "the bottom of any procession is named *resonantia*, in the likeness of that which cannot be sensed of a sound because of its distance."⁴⁹ When Aquinas uses *consonantia*, he means something quite different, for *consonantia* is order, the ordering of things toward God as their goal, and the ordering of things to each other hierarchically.⁵⁰ Neither Anastasius, Albert, nor Aquinas wish to include the senses in the project of wisdom to this degree. Denys the Carthusian, on the other hand, characteristically finds a way to agree with Eriugena's translation. Dionysius is not denigrating the senses here, but emphasizing, as Denys puts it, that "sensitive knowing is a certain imitation and participation of intellectual knowledge." Denys adds: "whence in certain beasts we see a great industry and marvelous skills." The participation of the senses in wisdom is not to be characterized with the language of obscurity and distance, but is "great and marvelous."⁵¹

IV. CONCLUSION

A cursory reading of Dionysius could take him to be saying at the beginning of the *Divine Names* that he will use the authority of the scriptures alone in his explication of the names. Such a reading could also take him to be discussing only the meaning of divine wisdom in Chapter Seven. But, in fact, his quotations of the Apostle Paul immediately introduce the question of human wisdom into the discussion of God. Chapter Seven discusses divine wisdom *by way of* discussing human wisdom. And the same can be said of the *Divine Names* as a whole. It approaches the contemplation of the names only by setting them partially in relation to, and partially separate from, their human meanings. The medieval translators and commentators enact the two sides of this approach. Eriugena's

48. *Super Dionysium De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 346, ll. 32-34.

49. *In Librum De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, cap. 7, lect. 2.

50. *In Librum De Divinis Nominibus Expositio*, cap. 4, lect. 5.

51. *Commentaria In Librum De Divinis Nominibus*, p. 254

translation tends to bring God and the human together, such that we contemplate God in what is highest in our own minds. The Greek scholiast tends to go in this direction as well, to the extent that he survives at all in Anastasius' translation. Human reason gains a kind of independence in some of the excerpts from the *Periphyseon* and the Latin commentators, yet it is an independence that is gained only in its relation to God. That is, human reason may have a creative function, but it is exercised in eliciting new divine names. And so, the translations, mistranslations, and commentaries in the Dionysian tradition are not just better or worse repetitions of his original text. They are the continued articulation of the wisdom that Dionysius describes, explicating it out to its last "echo," as Dionysius puts it, or as Eriugena translates it, its "harmonization."