

# Divine Eros: The Providential and Perfective Ecstasy of God in Dionysius' *Divine Names* IV

Daniel Heide  
MCGILL UNIVERSITY

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most striking developments in Dionysius' *Divine Names* is the identification of God as Eros (ἔρως). Whereas previous thinkers, following Plato's lead, employed ἔρως to describe the soul's yearning for the Beautiful, Dionysius takes the (possibly) unprecedented step of applying this spiritualized ἔρως to the Beautiful itself; God himself is ἔρως. Dionysius' understanding of God as ἔρως can be approached by means of three interrelated themes: I. ἔρως as overflow, as the providential outpouring of the supreme Good by which beings are constituted; II. ἔρως as ecstasy, the self-emptying of the Godhead by which the divine nature constitutes itself as other; III. ἔρως as unity, the solitary all-embracing power by which beings are held together and perfected. Through an analysis of these three categories, I hope to show how Dionysius' understanding of ἔρως as the providential and perfective power of God is best understood in terms of the Neoplatonic triad of remaining (μόνη), procession (πρόοδος), and reversion (ἐπιστροφή). By expressing this causal dynamic in terms of ἔρως Dionysius reveals the profound unity which underlies the whole of reality. Both Creator and creature are united in a common yearning for the fullness of Being. Each, in their respectively paradoxical way, finds fulfillment by remaining unfulfilled; each realizes itself in becoming other. As such, the all-embracing, all-consuming ἔρως of God revolves in an endless, inexhaustible circle of providential and perfective ecstasy.

*I. Eros as Overflow*

The first way in which Dionysius approaches the subject of divine ἔρως is in terms of the providential outpouring of the superabundant Good: “And let us speak boldly,” he declares, “and in all truth, that He who is the cause (αἴτιος) of all things through superabundant goodness (ἀγαθότητος ὑπερβολήν), loves (ἐρᾷ) all things, makes all things, perfects all things, holds all things together, returns all things, and He is also the divine Love (ἔρως), Good from Good for the sake of the Good” (DN IV.10 708B).<sup>1</sup> With this statement, Dionysius draws an explicit connection between God as ἀγαθός, and God as ἔρως. The divine yearning flows forth, so to speak, from the superabundance (ὑπερβολήν) of the Good; it is the spontaneous expression of the excess, the “extravagance” (ὑπερβολή)<sup>2</sup> of divine beneficence. While the identification of ἔρως as overflow is unique to Dionysius, the philosophical content, as Perl rightly argues, is not.<sup>3</sup> Plotinus states that, “the One, perfect (τέλειον) because it seeks nothing, has nothing, and needs nothing, overflows (ὑπερρερρύη), as it were, and its superabundance (ὑπερπλήρες) makes something other than itself” (V.2.1. 8).<sup>4</sup> Plotinus’ understanding of the “overfulness” (ὑπερπλήρες) of the One as *productive*, as constitutive of a reality other than itself, is analogous to Dionysius’ statement that the superabundance of the Good makes all things. So too Plotinus’ statement that the “Good has not given its gifts and then gone away but is always bestowing (ἀεὶ χορηγοῦντος) them as long as it is what it is” (VI.9.9.10). The Good by its very nature *as* good

---

1 All English translations of Dionysius are my own in consultation with the French/Greek edition: Ysabel de Andia. *Pseudo-Denys L’Aréopagite, Les Noms Divins*. Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2016, and the English: Luibheid, Colm, and Paul Rorem. *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*. Paulist Press, 1987. I am especially indebted to the French translation, whose fidelity to the Greek I have sought to emulate in my own fairly literal English renderings.

2 Liddell and Scott, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

3 Cf. Perl, Eric D. *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite*. SUNY Press, 2012. 44.

4 All English citations from Plotinus are taken from the Loeb Classical Library edition of the *Enneads*, trans. A.H. Armstrong.

*unceasingly* bestows goodness upon its recipients; it is not merely productive, but *providential*. The Good, as Dionysius puts it, “holds all things together” making, preserving, and perfecting them. It is this superabundant character of the Good whose irrepressible beneficence constitutes reality that Dionysius praises as ἔρκως.

How does the Good constitute reality? Plotinus, as we saw, states that the Good bestows its goodness for “as long as it is what it is.” The example he uses is that of the sun. Just as light abides as long as the sun abides, so beings abide as long as the Good abides (VI.9.9.7). Dionysius makes an analogous claim in his discussion of the divine name “Good”: “This essential Good (οὐσιωδὲς ἀγαθόν), *by the fact of its existence* (τῷ εἶναι τὸ ἀγαθόν), extends goodness into all things” (DN IV.1 693B; emphasis added). He illustrates this point by employing the same sun analogy as Plotinus. The sun, he says, “without reasoning or choosing, but *by the very fact of its existence* (αὐτῷ τῷ εἶναι), gives light to all things able to partake (μετέχειν) of its light, according to their proper measure (οἰκειον...λόγον)” (*ibid*; emphasis added). Like Plotinus, Dionysius understands the Good as *essentially* productive, as Productivity or Providence itself (cf. DN V.2 817A). Just as the sun emanates life-giving light and warmth because that is what it means for the sun to be what it is, so the Good radiates goodness. That is simply what the Good *is*. As Proclus argues: “...the gods do so [exercise providence] by their very nature (συμφυῆς). For if the office distinctive of the providential character is the bestowal of good things upon the beings which are its objects, and if all gods are excellences (ἀγαθότητές) (prop. 119), then either the gods will communicate (μεταδώσουσιν) themselves to no recipient... or, if they communicate anything, what they communicate are goods (ἀγαθῶν), and in this way they will exercise providence (προνοήσουσι) towards all things” (prop. 120).<sup>5</sup> For the Good *not* to emanate goods would be a negation of its very nature *as* good. It is precisely *as* providence, *as* the transcendent source and sustenance of all, that Dionysius hymns the divine nature as Good.

---

5 Dodds, Eric R. *Proclus, The Elements of Theology: A Revised Text with Translation, Introduction, and Commentary*. 1992.

Yet, what precisely does it mean to say that the Good imparts (μεταδίδωμι) goods? While Dionysius does not exclude the notion of providence as caring for the particular problems of individual creatures (cf. DN IV.33 733B 10), for him providence means, above all, the generous bestowal of the gifts of being, life, and wisdom. These gifts do not proceed from distinct hypostases arranged in descending order as in Proclus, but from the sole, superessential Good. The divine names of Being, Life, and Wisdom reveal the different ways in which Goodness manifests itself, they are, so to speak, *modes* of Good, differentiated expressions of a single divine providence (DN V.2 816C-817A). The myriad particular beings which participate these gifts in all their dazzling diversity represent the diversification of the supreme Good, the providential procession of the superessential divinity into and *as* the cosmos. All beings, insofar as they *are*, are particular modes of being *good*. When Dionysius states that the Good by the very fact of its existence extends goodness into all things he is, in a sense, expressing a simple logical and ontological “fact”: the Good, by its very nature, *is* self-bestowal, and this self-bestowal, *by the mere fact of its existence*, constitutes beings as a diversity of goods.<sup>6</sup>

It is this understanding of providence as the bestowal of being, as the spontaneous outpouring of the superabundant (ύπερβολή) Good that Dionysius hymns as ἔρως. In this, he is almost certainly following Proclus.<sup>7</sup> In his *Commentary on the First Alcibiades*, Proclus attributes to the gods a certain “‘providential love’ (ἔρως προνοητικός) whereby they produce subordinate things by ‘filling all things with themselves.’”<sup>8</sup>

What then is it necessary to say about the gods or the good daimons? Is it not that *being present to all things* they transcend all things, and *having filled all things with themselves* they are likewise unmixed with all things, and permeating everywhere they have placed their own life nowhere? But what should we say about

---

6 I leave aside the vexed question concerning the freedom or necessity of creation within this emanationist understanding of reality. For an excellent treatment of this problem see Perl, 49-52.

7 Cf. *ibid*, 44.

8 *Ibid*, 45.

the gods who love their own offspring...? Is it not that such love is providential and preservative of those beloved, and perfective and constitutive of them?...And gods indeed love gods, the senior their inferiors, but providentially, and the inferior their superiors, but revertively (*Comm. Alc.* 55-56; emphasis added).<sup>9</sup>

In this passage we encounter the same understanding of the presence of divinity as intrinsically productive. The gods are present to all things and thus fill all things with themselves, with the gifts of being, life, and wisdom. This outpouring of the higher to the lower, whereby the latter are constituted and perfected as beings, Proclus terms ἔρωσ προνοητικός, the providential love of superior for subordinate. This providential ἔρωσ, whose counterpart is the revertive love of inferiors for superiors, Proclus identifies with the gods and daimons. Dionysius takes things a step further, identifying this providential yearning not with the henads, but with the One-Good itself: “He who is the cause (αἴτιος) of all things through superabundant goodness (ἀγαθότητος ὑπερβολήν), loves (ἐρᾷ) all things, makes all things, perfects all things” (DN IV.10 708B).<sup>10</sup> The “erotic” character of providence, in sum, lies precisely in the superabundance (ὑπερβολή) of the Good, its character as overfulness (ὑπερπλήρες), as overflow. The Good “yearns,” as it were, to share itself. It is the sheer *uncontainability* of the Good, the “Good from Good for the sake of the Good” (DN IV.10 708B), that Dionysius hymns as ἔρωσ.

## II. Eros as Ecstasy

The overflowing character of ἔρωσ which yearns to fill all things with itself is further described by Dionysius as ἐκστατικός: “But the divine love (ἔρωσ) is ecstatic (ἐκστατικός) so that the lovers belong not to themselves but to the ones being loved (τῶν ἐρωμένων)” (DN IV.13 712A). Dionysius identifies three distinct manifestations of this divine *ecstasis*, this “self-displacement” whereby God no longer belongs to himself but to the creature:

9 Cited in Perl, 45.

10 Cf. Perl, 45; Gersh, Stephen E. *From Iamblichus to Eriugena: An investigation of the prehistory and evolution of the Pseudo-Dionysian tradition*. Vol. 8. Brill Archive, 1978. 50-56.

1) the providential love of the superior for the subordinate; 2) the mutual love of equals; 3) the yearning of the lower for the higher. It is not merely the first, the ἔρωσ προσονητικός, that indicates the divine ἔρωσ but also the second and the third, the mutual love of equals and the love of the lower for the higher (*ibid*). Dionysius identifies *all three* with the divine ecstasy. "This is why," he declares, "the great Paul, possessed by the divine love (τοῦ θεοῦ... ἔρωτος) and partaking (μετεληφώς) of its ecstatic power, had this inspired word to say: 'it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me'" (*ibid*). The ecstasy of Paul, torn out of himself by his love for God, is at once the ecstasy of God who, in his providential love, proceeds outside of himself to abide in Paul.<sup>11</sup> One may recall Meister Eckhart's inspired utterance some eight centuries later that "to be empty of all creatures is to be full of God."<sup>12</sup> To be empty of self *is* to be full of God. They are one and the same thing. It is this recognition – that the erotic *ascent* of the soul to God is simultaneously an erotic *descent* of God to the soul – that enables Dionysius to transfer the traditional attribution of spiritual ἔρωσ from the soul to the divine. Lover and beloved partake of a single ecstasy, and that ecstasy is God.

Seeing how Paul's ecstatic yearning for God is simultaneously God's ecstatic yearning for Paul, helps us to understand how the divine ecstasy is not limited to providential ἔρωσ of the higher for the lower (1) but includes also the yearning of the lower for the higher (3). What Dionysius means by the mutual love of equals (2) is unclear. It could refer to the mutual love between the Persons of the Trinity, or simply to the bond of mutuality between equal members of the celestial hierarchy. If we take the love of equals as referring to the love within the Godhead, the mutual ἔρωσ ἐκστατικός of the Persons offers us the felicitous

---

11 The Greek term μετεληφώς has, in addition to "partaking" or "sharing," also the sense of "taking in exchange," "substitute," or "interchange." In the above context, Paul and Christ are literally being exchanged with each other in the ecstasy of divine love. Sc. Liddell and Scott, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

12 Eckhart, Meister. *Meister Eckhart, from Whom God Hid Nothing: Sermons, Writings & Sayings*. Ed. David O'Neal. New Seeds, 2005. 113.

circumstance of allowing us to be both Trinitarian theologians *and* Neoplatonic philosophers. In terms of the first, the mutual outgoing of the Persons into and as each other, provides a superb metaphor for *perichoresis*,<sup>13</sup> the interpenetration of the Persons as simultaneously three and one. In terms of the second, if we take the love of equals as the mutual indwelling of the divine Hypostases, this accords well with the Neoplatonic term *μόνη*, or remaining – the mutual love of equals neither proceeds nor reverts but *remains* within the Godhead. That the providential love of the higher for the lower (1) is *πρόοδος*, or procession; the yearning of the lower for the higher (3) is *ἐπιστροφή*, or reversion; and the mutual love of equals (2) is *μόνη*, or remaining, is in fact made explicit when Dionysius describes the dynamic activity of *ἔρωσ* as “always proceeding (*προϊών*), always remaining (*μένων*), always being restored to itself (*ἀποκαθισταμενος*)” (DN IV.14 713A). The ecstatic character of divine *ἔρωσ* is such that it eternally proceeds out of itself, and this *processio* is simultaneously a remaining in itself and a *conversio* of itself *qua* other.

The best (and arguably only) way to come to some rational understanding of Dionysius’ inspired utterances concerning the *ἔρωσ* ἐκστατικός of God is by recourse to the Neoplatonic understanding of *μόνη*, *πρόοδος*, *ἐπιστροφή*, the dynamic causality of remaining, proceeding, and reversion whereby the One constitutes reality – that is, constitutes *itself* as other while remaining itself:

And one must venture also to say, in the interest of truth that, himself the cause of all by his beautiful and good love for all, through the superabundance (*ὑπερβολήν*) of his benevolent yearning (*ἔρωτικῆς ἀγαθότητος*) is carried out of himself (*ἔξω ἑαυτοῦ γίνεται*) by his providence for all things. And beguiled, as it were, by goodness, by love, and by yearning, he is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things (*ἐν πᾶσι*), by virtue of his superessential and ecstatic capacity to remain within himself (*κατ’ ἐκστατικὴν ὑπερούσιον δύναμιν ἀνεχφοίτητον ἑαυτοῦ*; DN IV.13 712B; emphasis added).

---

13 The use of this term is perhaps slightly anachronistic insofar as it is really only later with John of Damascus that it comes to be applied to the Trinity. Cf. *On the Orthodox Faith*, I. 14. 10-20. Needless to say, we are not in Augustine’s world here, so any temptation to interpret *eros* as the mutual bond of love between the Persons must be resisted.

In terms of the logic of procession and return, the causal dynamic whereby beings are produced and perfected, Perl is correct in his estimation that ἔρωσ προνοητικός and ἔρωσ ἐκστατικός coincide.<sup>14</sup> For both expressions the logic is that of the constitutive procession of the One into the many and the perfective reversion of the many back into the One. Yet Dionysius' "terminological innovation," as Perl somewhat dismissively calls it, is far from neutral. Granted this innovation offers no new philosophical content, the metaphor of divine ecstasy nonetheless communicates in a novel and powerful manner the radical *continuity* between cause and effect, God and creature. It is not merely that beneficent effects proceed *from* God as the natural expression of his providence; it is *God himself* who proceeds, who is "carried out of himself" in his providential ecstasy for and *as* beings even as he remains immovably within himself (cf. 10.1. 937A). To restate: logically speaking, there is nothing uniquely Dionysian here – the same understanding of the procession of the One into and *as* the many and the reversion of the many back to the One is present in Plotinus and Proclus.<sup>15</sup> The metaphor of divine ecstasy, however, articulates this dynamic reality in a way that precludes any temptation to dualism, however subtle. By hymning God not merely as ἔρωσ προνοητικός, but above all as ἔρωσ ἐκστατικός, Dionysius drives home the point that transcendence and immanence are radically and inextricably *one*.

To return to our discussion of causality, how are we to understand Dionysius' paradoxical utterance, not only that God remains even as he proceeds, but that he proceeds precisely *in virtue of* (κατ'... δύναμιν) his capacity to remain (see above)? How is it that God's remaining (μόνη) is simultaneously his procession (πρόοδος), is, in fact, precisely his ability (δύναμιν) to proceed? In order to understand this, it might be helpful to recall the basic logic of remaining and procession (we shall deal separately with reversion below) which hinges upon the notions of identity and difference. To cite Proclus, "In so far, then, as it has an element

---

14 Perl, 45-46.

15 Cf. Gersh, 46.

of identity (πρὸς...ἔχει) with the producer, the product remains (μένει) in it; in so far as it differs (ἕτερόν) it proceeds (πρόεισιν) from it" (Prop. 30). Remaining (μόνη) indicates identity, procession (πρόδος) difference. It is only insofar as there is difference, some element of otherness, that one thing can be distinguished from another. To say that an effect 'proceeds' from its cause is simply to say that it has become other (ἕτερόν). In the absence of any difference there is no procession, and the effect is said to 'remain' in its cause as indistinguishable (ὅμοιον) from it.<sup>16</sup> Proclus concludes his discussion by bringing procession and remaining together: "But being like it, it [the produced] is at once identical (ὅμοιον) with it [the producer] in some respect and different (ἕτερόν) from it: accordingly it both remains (μένει) and proceeds (πρόεισιν), and the two relations are inseparable" (Prop. 30). If there is only difference, the effect has no relation to its cause; if there is only identity, the effect is indistinguishable from its cause. It is only when there is both identity *and* difference that causality is able to function.

How does the simultaneity of procession and remaining pertain to God? Gersh notes that there are in fact two, interrelated ways in which the Neoplatonists talk about remaining (μόνη): the first is the one discussed above, in which the effect is said to remain in its cause insofar as it retains a certain identity with it; the second has to do, not with the effect, but with the *cause*, whereby "a cause is said to remain (undiminished) in producing its effects."<sup>17</sup> Gersh points out that the Neoplatonists make little effort to distinguish the two senses of remaining, often moving from one to the other within a single, continuous argument. Thus, Proclus argues that "every producer (τὸ παρὰ γόν) remains (μένει) as it is, and while it remains (μένοντος) its consequent proceeds" (2<sup>nd</sup> sense of remaining), and then subsequently argues that "all that is immediately produced (τὸ παρὰ γόμενον) from something remains (μένει) in the

---

16 Dodds sketches the outlines of this doctrine in Proclus' *The Elements of Theology*, 218-221.

17 Gersh, 51.

producer (τῷ παραγόντι) (1<sup>st</sup> sense of remaining).<sup>18</sup> Thus, one can speak equally of the produced (τὸ παραγόμενον) remaining in the producer (τὸ παράγον), and the producer remaining *in itself* in the act of producing. It is this latter that especially interests us here.

The remaining of the producer within itself in the act of producing – that is, the simultaneity of μόνη and πρόοδος – can itself be understood in two, interrelated ways. This first is made explicit by Proclus when he states that, “It follows that the productive principles remain undiminished (ἀνελαττώτων... μενόντων) by the production from them of secondary existences: for what is in any way diminished cannot remain (ἐλαττούμενον μένειν ἀδύνατον) as it is” (Prop. 26, *Cor.*).<sup>19</sup> Remaining (μόνη) is described here not in terms of identity (ὅμοιον), but in terms of being undiminished (ἐλαττούμενον). Still, insofar as being undiminished means that the productive principle remains unchanged, it is synonymous with identity. The goodness of the Good remains undiminished and hence the Good remains identical to itself *as* goodness. In other words, remaining undiminished is yet another way of speaking about the superabundance (ὑπερβολή) of the Good whose ecstatic procession into and *as* the world does not result in any depletion whatsoever of itself. As ἕως ἐκστατικός God empties himself, filling the world with himself while himself remaining full, or rather, *overfull* (ὑπερπλήρης). The superabundance of the Good is such that it can never be diminished.<sup>20</sup> This undiminished remaining is thus the very power (δύναμις) by which the Good proceeds, its “superessential and ecstatic capacity to remain” (DN IV.13 712B) precisely *in* its procession.

This brings us to a related yet slightly different understanding of the simultaneity of μόνη and πρόοδος. God may be said to

---

18 Proclus, *El. Th.* 30. 31-2 and 34. 12-12; Gersh, 51.

19 Cf. Gersh, 51.

20 In a sense, this is not so difficult to understand. While it is true that the material resources of a human giver are diminished with each gift, it cannot be said that his *generosity* is thereby diminished. To the contrary, the more one gives, the more one acquires the habit of generosity, the *more* generous one becomes. Unconditional generosity, like unconditional love is infinite and inexhaustible. The more one exercises these virtues the more they in fact *increase*.

simultaneously remain and proceed, to be carried out of himself even as he remains within himself (sc. DN IV.13 712B) in that God *is* Productivity itself. To borrow Perl's potent phrase, God is "intrinsically ecstatic" in that he is "not a self-contained self but always 'already out of himself' and 'in all things' as their constitutive differences."<sup>21</sup> Dionysius, as we noted above, states that the Good "by the fact of its existence (τῷ εἶναι τὸ ἀγαθόν), extends goodness into all things" (DN IV.1 693B). It belongs to the very nature of the Good to bestow goodness – that is simply what the Good *is*. For the Good to cease to radiate goodness would mean a diminishment of its nature by which it would cease to be identical to itself *as* Good and become different (ἕτερόν). Because the Good is not providential, but *Providence itself*, its *procession* by which it constitutes all things *is* the activity by which it *remains* what it is; namely, the Good-as-Providence. Thus, while the "being-making procession" (οὐσιοποιόν πρόοδον; DN V.1 816B) of the Good in a sense constitutes itself as other (ἕτερόν), this very "self-othering" is, paradoxically, the key to its own timeless self-identity. As *intrinsically ecstatic*, God's remaining *is* his proceeding, and his proceeding *is* his remaining. "In God as Love, therefore, pure interiority coincides with pure exteriority"<sup>22</sup> and this is what Dionysius hymns as ἔρωσ ἐκστατικός.

### III. *Eros as Unity*

Having come to some understanding of ἔρωσ as providential and ecstatic, as simultaneously remaining and proceeding, it remains for us to consider how it is also revertive and perfective, how, in a word, ἔρωσ is unity. Dionysius explicitly defines ἔρωσ as "a one-making power (δυνάμεωσ ἐνοποιουῶ), an alliance, and a particular commingling (συγκρατικῆσ) in the Beautiful and the Good...a power which binds the things of the same order in a mutually regarding union. It moves the superior to provide for the subordinate, and stirs the subordinate in a return (ἐπιστροφῆ)

---

21 Perl, 46.

22 Ibid.

to the superior" (DN IV.12 709D). Dionysius further cites the blessed "Hierotheus" who counsels that whenever we talk of yearning (ἔρωτα) "whether this be divine or angelic, noetic or psychical or physical, we should think of a unifying and comingling power (ένωτικὴν τινα καὶ συγκρατικὴν... δύναμιν)" (DN IV.15 713B). The most basic definition of ἔρωσ, then, is that of a unifying, "one-making" (ένοποιου) power; it is the power (δύναμις) of cohesion that binds the multiplicity of the cosmos into a single, unified, and harmonious whole. At the same time, ἔρωσ is *perfective*, it is the divine power which yearns to mingle (συγκρατικῆς) together all things, to merge them with itself as the Beautiful and the Good. While the emphasis in this section will be on ἔρωσ as revertive and perfective, its unifying power, as we can see, is inseparable from remaining and procession. The divine ἔρωσ simultaneously binds all things together from the top down and from the bottom up. Superior is bound to inferior by providential love; equal is bound to equal by mutual love; inferior is bound to superior by revertive love. All of these loves are merely differentiated appearances of the sole divine ἔρωσ, of "the one (έννα) and unified (συνεπτυγμένον)<sup>23</sup> yearning which is the father of all yearnings" (DN IV.16 713C). This solitary yearning of yearnings is the ultimate desire of the Good for itself; it is "the Good from Good for the sake of the Good" (DN IV.10 708B).

How are we to understand this profoundly unitary and unifying desire of the Good seeking good for the sake of the Good? One way to understand this is in terms of ἔρωσ as the revertive and perfective power of the cosmos. All of the ways in which we have discussed ἔρωσ up to this point – as providential and constitutive of being, as simultaneously remaining and proceeding – all have reversion as their ultimate aim, or *telos*. The ultimate divine desire is for all beings to return to itself, to merge (συγκρατέω) them with its own unconditional goodness and beauty, to lead them

---

23 Literally "having been enfolded." Sc. Liddell and Scott, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>. The One, it would seem, is not merely some sterile singularity, but a transcendent simplicity which implicitly contains, in an ineffable manner, all the riches of multiplicity.

to the fullness of being in perfect deiformity. Providence is not content merely to bestow being, but yearns to bestow *wellbeing*, yearns to share itself fully and utterly, to overcome the otherness of procession in order to resolve difference back into identity.

In our discussion of ἔρως as ecstasy we noted that μόνη and πρόοδος can be understood in terms of identity (ὁμοιον) and difference (ἕτερόν). Insofar as the effect resembles its cause it is said to remain (μόνη); insofar as it is distinguished from it, it is said to proceed (πρόοδος). In terms of the effect, the logic of causality requires that there be both identity *and* difference. If there were only difference, the effect would have no relation to its supposed cause; if there were only identity, the effect would be indistinguishable from its cause. It is only when the effect is simultaneously 'like' (ὁμοιον) and 'unlike' (ἕτερόν) its cause that causality is able to function. To the inseparability of remaining and proceeding we must now add reversion (ἐπιστροφή) as the crucial third term by which the effect is brought to completion (τελείωσις): "Every effect," Proclus states, "remains in its cause, proceeds from it, and reverts upon it" (Prop. 35). As the counterpart to procession, reversion indicates the overcoming of difference, the acquisition or recovery of value lost in the procession, the restoration of identity between cause and effect, yet in such a way that the individuality produced by procession is not only preserved, as Dodds indicates,<sup>24</sup> but *perfected*. Proclus describes the reversion of the effect upon its cause as a movement from being to *wellbeing*: "Through that which gives it being (τὸ εἶναι) it attains its well-being (τὸ εὖ [εἶναι])." Because "all things desire (ἐφίεται) the Good" and the Good is the cause of being, "each has appetite (ὀρέγεται) of its own cause also" (Prop. 31). Insofar as all beings desire not merely to *be*, but to *be as fully as possible*, and insofar as the Good *is* the superabundant principle and perfection of Being, all beings yearn (ἐφίεται) for their origin (ἀρχή) as end (τέλος). As the overcoming of difference, this reversion (ἐπιστροφή) of the effect upon its cause culminates, to the furthest

---

24 See Dodds, *Elements of Theology*, 218-221.

extent possible, in ὁμοίωσις θεῶ, likeness to God (*Theaetetus* 176B).

The active reversion of the effect upon its cause can also be understood as the passive reversion of the effect *by* its cause. It is this understanding of ἐπιστροφή that dominates Dionysius' understanding of ἕκτως as unity.<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting, however, that the active reversion of the effect upon its cause is not absent in the *Divine Names*. In terms of the angelic intellects, Dionysius states that it is from "their longing (επιέμεναι) for the Good that they possess both being and wellbeing" (καὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ εὖ εἶναι; DN IV.1 696A). Like Proclus, Dionysius associates reversion with the perfection of the creature. Yet the active reversion of the effect upon its cause, is simultaneously the passive reversion of the effect *by* its cause:

The Good *returns* (ἐπιστρέφει) all things to itself and, as unifying and one-making deity (ἐναρχική καὶ ἐνοποιός θεότης), is the Principle of Unity (ἀρχισυναγωγός) of all things having been dispersed; for each being *longs for it* (ἐφίεται) as its principle, its protector, and its perfection....Everything is *returned* (ἐπιστρέφεται) to it as its own proper end (πέρας). Everything longs for it (ἐφίεται): intellectual and rational beings gnostically, sensible beings sensibly, things lacking sensibility by an innate motion of vital appetite, and everything lifeless and merely existent *long for it* (ἐφίεται) by its simple capacity for being (DN IV.4 700B; emphasis added).

In this single, majestic passage, we find a complete intermingling of activity and passivity. It is, first and foremost, *the Good* that turns (ἐπιστρέφεται) all things to itself. And yet each being actively turns to the Good, yearns (ἐφίεται) for it as its goal (τέλος), as the very fulfillment of its being. The image that Dionysius uses to describe this dynamic is that of sunlight. Like the sun, the light of the Good "recollects and returns all things to itself" (*ibid*, 700C). The simultaneous activity/passivity of reversion is analogous to that of heliotropic plants – it is equally true to say that the sun turns the plants to itself, and that the plants turn themselves to the sun. Ultimately, however, it is the

---

25 Gersh remarks that this passive reversion of the effect by the cause is also present in Proclus (*Th. Pl.* 216), though it is "especially prominent in Ps.-Dionysius who thereby seeks to express – in contrast to the pagan Neoplatonists – the notion that all causality must be referred to God rather than divided among intermediate principles." Gersh, *Iamblicus to Eriugena*, 56 nt. 140.

sun that is at once the source and the goal of this life-bestowing orientation. The “sun” (ἥλιος), Dionysius puns, is the “sum” (ἀολλῆ) that gathers up all things having been dispersed (*ibid.*).

The “one (ἓνα) and unified yearning (ἔρωτα) which is the father of all yearnings” (DN IV.16 713C), is God’s erotic longing to share himself fully with beings, to draw them back to himself, to unite them with himself in all-encompassing unity. Providence, as we noted above, is not content merely to bestow the gift of being; it also yearns to bestow the grace of *wellbeing*, to overcome the otherness of procession and to resolve difference back into identity. Insofar as beings are *not* one, have *not* realized perfect unity in God, one might say that the divine longing remains unrealized, that, in a certain sense, there is a kind of “deficiency by excess” in God which Dionysius praises by the divine name ἔρωσ. Reversion as the universal yearning of all beings to be filled with God, is at once the eternal, ecstatic yearning of God to fill all beings with himself. To the extent that beings fall short of their goal, God, so to speak, falls short of his. This is *not* to say that there is an actual deficiency in God; yet, there is a way in which God becomes implicated in the deficiency of beings. Paradoxically, God’s very character as overflow, as the superabundance (ὑπερβολή) of Good means that God cannot be satisfied until he has filled all beings with the overfullness (ὑπερπληρες) of his transcendent Being. Insofar as the finite creature cannot possibly contain the fullness of the infinite Good, insofar as it must, *qua* creature, forever retain an element of otherness by which it is what it is, the goal of reversion, of perfect identity with God will, and *must*, remain eternally unrealized. Beings may well become ὁμοῦσιος (of like substance) to God, but they can never become ὁμοούσιος (consubstantial).<sup>26</sup> As unitive, as ἔρωσ ἐνωτικός, God remains *intrinsically* dissatisfied, and this divine dissatisfaction *is* divine superabundance.

Ultimately, μόνη, πρόοδος, ἐπιστροφή, the ecstatic remaining, providential procession, and perfective reversion by which all

---

26 Indeed, it is precisely this ‘divine deficiency’ that rescues Dionysius from the charge of pantheism.

beings are produced and perfected, culminate in the all-embracing ἔρως of God who is “a simple, yearning motion, self-moved, self-acting, pre-existing in the Good, flowing out from the Good to all beings and returning back again to the Good” (DN IV.14 712D). The divine unitive longing, as we have repeatedly declared, is “the Good from Good for the sake of the Good” (DN IV.10 708B). As the Beautiful, God is “both the yearning and the object of that yearning” (DN IV.13 712B), at once lover, beloved, and love. The intrinsic dissatisfaction of God is the true satisfaction of both God and creatures – both of whom realize themselves, so to speak, in their insatiable yearning for the other. The whole of reality thus finds itself unified in God as the supreme and solitary Good which, in its unceasing erotic overflow, “turns from itself and through itself and upon itself and toward itself in an everlasting circle” (DN IV.17 713D). It is this all-encompassing, dynamic reality that Dionysius hymns, in a diversity of ways, as the divine name ἔρως.