

BEING AND COSMIC HIERARCHY IN PSEUDO-DIONYSIUS' *DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS*

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Dionysius' ordering of the processions being, life, and wisdom in *De Divinis Nominibus* book 5 seems to conflict with the structure of his cosmology. He argues that the procession being extends further than life and wisdom, while intellects are closer to God than things that have only life or being. His reply in 5.3 to the objection that if being is first among processions, then mere beings rather than intellects should be first in the cosmic hierarchy paradoxically reinforces the problem insofar as it implies that the cause of intellects, namely wisdom, must be most complete among processions. I will first spell out the apparent conflict between the orderings of the processions and the cosmic hierarchy, and then offer a solution by drawing a parallel between Dionysius' conception of love and the procession being. I will show that, by the nature of love, as illustrated by the image of the circle whose beginning and end is God, all beings depend in their essence on other beings, and therefore neither intellects nor wisdom are simply complete, thus defusing the apparent contradiction between the processions and the hierarchy.

Introduction

In *De Divinis Nominibus* 1.1-3, Pseudo-Dionysius (whom I will henceforth refer to simply as 'Dionysius') argues that the procession being is prior to life and wisdom. This priority seems contrary to Dionysius' ranking of natures in his cosmic hierarchy, according to which angelic intellects, not inanimate beings, hold the highest place. The two rankings seem to be arbitrarily inverted, and therefore contradictory. His reasoning in response to the question why intellects are the highest in the hierarchy despite the priority of being among the processions raises a further problem he does not explicitly address: if intellects are

first in the hierarchy, why is wisdom not first among processions? I will first lay out this problem in detail, and then attempt to resolve it. As an attempt to shed light on the nature of being, I will turn to Dionysius' account of love. I will argue that for Dionysius being is parallel to the circle of ecstatic love (*ἔρως*) whose beginning and end is God, and which suffuses the whole cosmic hierarchy, and furthermore that, since to be is to love the beautiful and good, to be is to be dependent on other beings as well as on God.¹ Intellects along with all other beings, as only parts of this whole circle, are in their essence dependent on others, on God first of all, but also on beings lower in the hierarchy. Once we see this, we no longer have reason to think that their cause, wisdom, is simply, without qualification, complete. The parallel between being and love in Dionysius' thought undermines the apparent contradiction.²

The Problem

I will begin with a brief sketch of Dionysius' account of the processions in *De Divinis Nominibus* 5. In 5.1, Dionysius compares the relative universality of the processions goodness, being, life, and wisdom. Goodness, he says, 'stretches out' (*ἐκτείνεται*)³ to all things that are and also all things that are not; being 'stretches out' to all things that are; life to all things that live; and wisdom to all things that have any form of cognition, whether sensation, discursive reason, or intellect. Dionysius tells us that the name 'good' reveals the whole of God's providence, and the rest of the names reveal more whole or more partial processions or providences (5.2). The processions goodness, being, life, and wisdom are as it were a series of concentric circles around each other, with being the outermost and wisdom the innermost. Goodness encompasses all things

¹ Dionysius' preferred term for love is *ἔρως*, which as John Rist showed several decades ago ('A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius', *Vigiliae Christianae* 20, no. 4 (December 1966), 235-243), Dionysius understands not to be contrary to the Christian notion of *ἀγάπη*.

² One possible objection to my approach here that I want to address before I continue is that I am equivocating insofar as I am trying to understand the procession being (*τὸ ὄν*) through his account of the being in created things (*τὸ εἶναι*). For Dionysius, there is clearly a distinction between being as the procession and the being in created things: the procession is beyond created things. However, by Dionysius' reasoning, we know the cause through the effect, so that we can call God 'being' by considering the nature of the being in creation (see *De Divinis Nominibus* 11.6). We do not thereby limit God to created being, but gain some insight into God's nature, to the extent that it is accessible to us.

³ All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

that are and are not. Being encompasses all things that are, including living things and cognitive things. Life encompasses living things and cognitive things, and wisdom encompasses only cognitive things. The key distinction between the processions is their respective universality: they are all more or less universal. The principle of order among the processions is universality: the more universal processions are prior to the less universal, a prioritization reflected in the composition of the *De Divinis Nominibus* itself, in which Dionysius treats goodness first (book 4), then being (book 5), followed by life (book 6), and finally wisdom (book 7).

Dionysius structures his cosmic hierarchy according to a different principle of order. He views the whole created cosmos, material and non-material, as a hierarchy of natures made up of angelic intellects, rational beings (humans), sensing beings (non-human animals), things that live but do not sense (plants), and inanimate things. Although he applies the term 'hierarchy' primarily to the angelic and ecclesial hierarchies in his *De Coelesti Hierarchia* and *De Ecclesiastica Hierarchia*, hierarchy in a broader sense is implicit throughout the *De Divinis Nominibus*.⁴ In this hierarchy, intellects are most like God and are therefore the best among created things, inanimate things are least like God and are therefore least good, and all other beings are somewhere between these two extremes. Furthermore, the natures in the cosmic hierarchy are what they are by sharing in some or all of the processions. So for example, a stone is a being and shares in the procession being, but as an inanimate thing it does not share in the processions life or wisdom; a tree shares in being and life, but not wisdom; a human shares in all three processions. The principle of order is therefore a kind of completion or fullness of nature.

Dionysius raises an objection to this metaphysical scheme arising from a juxtaposition of the two orderings. While on the one hand among the processions he prioritizes the most universal procession of being over the less universal of life and wisdom, in the hierarchy he makes angelic intellects first and closest to God even though angelic intellects are exemplars of the least universal procession, namely wisdom. The question as Dionysius states it is, given that the more universal procession

⁴ Eric Perl makes this observation in his *Theophany* (SUNY Press, 2007), 65.

is prior to and extends or ‘stretches’ beyond (*ὑπερεχτεινομένης*) the less universal, why do those things that participate in the less universal, more particular processions extend beyond those things that do not? We should be careful here not to misread the question. Dionysius gives the names of the processions in a genitive absolute with a circumstantial participle, thus taking the order among processions he has outlined for granted, and raises the question specifically about the hierarchy rather than the processions.

Ἀνθ’ ὅτου, τοῦ ὄντος τὴν ζωὴν καὶ τῆς ζωῆς τὴν σοφίαν
ὑπερεχτεινομένης, τῶν ὄντων μὲν τὰ ζῶντα, τῶν δὲ ὅσα ζῇ
τὰ αἰσθητικὰ, καὶ τούτων τὰ λογικὰ, καὶ τῶν λογικῶν οἱ νόες
ὑπερέχουσι, καὶ περὶ Θεόν εἰσι καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτῷ πλησιάζουσι;

If being stretches beyond life and life extends beyond wisdom, why do living things extend beyond things that are, and things with sensation beyond things that only live, and rational beings beyond these, and intellects extend beyond rational beings, and are around God and are nearer to him?

The question as he expresses it is, given that the more universal processions are prior to the less universal, why do intellects extend beyond living things, and living things beyond inanimate beings?⁵ In other words, he asks *if being is first among processions, why are intellects first in the divine hierarchy?*—not, *if intellects are first in the hierarchy, why is being first among processions?* The distinction may seem trivial, since the two questions are simply the reverse of each other, and both are equally worth asking, but Dionysius’ reasoning becomes clearer if we keep in mind that he is arguing that intellects are highest even though being is first, rather than that being is first even though intellects are highest. (I will argue in the next section that he does not ask the alternative question because his notion of ecstatic love prevents it from arising.)

The problem is that the ordering of the hierarchy seems to contradict that of the processions. Why do things with wisdom, such as human

⁵ Jones (*The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans John Jones [Marquette University Press, 1999], 164) reverses the terms of the question as it is found in the Greek. Perl does as well (*Theophany*, 69).

beings and angels, excel plants, which have life but not wisdom, and why do plants excel inanimate things, which have being but not life, if being is the first of the processions? The inversion of the two orders is awkward. Intellects, we might think, should not excel beyond inanimate things if being excels beyond wisdom, since inanimate beings participate in the highest of the processions. Dionysius responds to the objection by claiming that it would constitute a valid objection only if it were the case that beings with intellect did not also have life and being. But in fact, he says, intellects *are* more fully than other beings—they have being to a greater extent than living or inanimate things. They also live more fully than things that have only life but not wisdom, and they think and know more fully than those that have cognition only in the form of sensation or reason. This is Dionysius' stated reason for why those natures with wisdom excel those without wisdom, and in general why things that participate in the less universal processions excel those that participate only in the more universal.

Dionysius' argument here depends on his claim in 5.2 that the processions goodness, being, life, and wisdom are not substantially separate from each other: '[The argument (ὁ λόγος)] does not say that the good is one thing, and being another, and life or wisdom another' (5.2). Dionysius' response to the objection against his apparent inversion of the rankings of the processions and the hierarchy suggests that the objection is based on the assumption that being, life, and wisdom are separate substances standing apart from each other. If that were the case, then ranking their value would require putting wisdom in the highest place among the processions, since wisdom is the highest form of unity with God. Angelic intellects are 'around God', while inanimate things are not, so the procession that makes them intellects, i.e. wisdom, would be the highest. Dionysius denies this simplistic way of thinking. His reasoning is that angelic intellects must have being if they are to have wisdom, since what is wise also is; likewise, living things without cognition must also be in order to be alive. All things share in being before they share in any other procession (*De Divinis Nominibus* 5.5). Therefore, we cannot say that inanimate beings extend beyond intellects even though being is prior to wisdom, because intellects share in being and wisdom, while inanimate things only share in being; in general, the higher entities have what the lower have and more. The higher a nature

is in the cosmic hierarchy, the greater gifts it has, and the better and closer to God it is (*De Divinis Nominibus* 5.3). In an apparent rejection of Proclus' self-subsisting henads, Dionysius draws all the processions back to one cause, namely God, instead of to distinct divinities (5.2). Although there are four different names and four processions of God, such that goodness, being, life, and wisdom can be distinguished in some way, they are also somehow fundamentally one, rather than four externally related substances.

Unfortunately, Dionysius' solution to the objection he raises leads to the same problem, but from the direction of the hierarchy. Although Dionysius' intention here is to show why intellects are first in the hierarchy given the priority of being over other processions, it is also natural to ask why the processions are ordered according to universality given that the natures are ordered according to completeness. Though he does not raise this question explicitly, it is raised by his argument that intellects excel inanimate things and all other natures in the cosmic hierarchy as well because they have what other beings do and more. This argument gives us reason to think that wisdom ought to be first among processions (or at least prior to being), a claim that Dionysius denies. In reasoning from effects to their causes, if we attribute to one nature a higher status than another, should we not attribute a corresponding priority to their respective causes? The cause of a higher nature should be higher than the cause of a lower nature. The cause of intellects is wisdom, so, the universality of being notwithstanding, wisdom, it seems, should all the more be the first among processions. If we fall back on the substantial unity of being and wisdom, and reply that being and wisdom are not really at odds with each other in their causal role in relation to intellects, the question is still why Dionysius prioritizes the one aspect of God's unified processive activity in its manifestation as being over its manifestation as wisdom. Given that Dionysius distinguishes the processions in some fashion while nonetheless denying their substantial separation from each other, the issue is the same. Dionysius' prioritization of being over the value of wisdom seems mistaken by his own reasoning. And even if we allow one kind of priority to the universality of being, why does that priority take precedence over the completion that Dionysius ascribes to intellects?

Eric Perl addresses the issue of how the processions and the hierarchy relate to each other in his *Theophany*. According to Perl, the significance of Dionysius' claim that being, life, and wisdom are not separate substances is that all things are 'modes' of being or manifestations of God's presence in them.⁶ All things are the same content, namely God, but manifested in different and analogous ways.⁷ For Dionysius, being is prior to life and wisdom because 'the more universal contain the less universal as their specifications'.⁸ Perl claims that the 'processions are the modes in which God is constitutively present in the various ranks of beings'.⁹ On Perl's view, life is simply being in the way appropriate to living things, whether in the form of plant life, animal life, or intellectual life. Likewise, wisdom is being in the way appropriate to things with sensation, reason, or intellect. Therefore, argues Perl, being's priority to the other processions is its pre-containment of life, wisdom, and every being in the hierarchy.

It is certainly true that for Dionysius being contains all beings of any sort, even the other processions. For Dionysius, being is not empty of content, although it cannot be limited to any particular being. Being extends to all the things that are (*εἰς πάντα τὰ ὄντα*) but is also beyond all the things that are (*ὑπὲρ τὰ ὄντα*), and so transcends being as their cause. Inyx this way, being contains all things (5.1). Whatever any being has is within being itself. Nonetheless, the question remains why wisdom is not prior. If angelic intellects are the fullest mode of God's creative activity and are the most complete, wisdom has as good a claim to be the highest procession for the same reason being does, i.e. because of its completeness. No more content is found in the lower levels of the hierarchy than is already present in intellects, so why is their cause as intellects the first procession?¹⁰

⁶ *Theophany*, 65, 70.

⁷ *Theophany*, 72.

⁸ *Theophany*, 70.

⁹ *Theophany*, 65, 72.

¹⁰ I think a problem with Perl's approach is that he reverses the objection Dionysius raises in 5.3, as if the question were why being is beyond life and wisdom, whereas (as I pointed out above) Dionysius asks why intellects are highest. Perl translates Dionysius: 'Yet someone might say, "Wherefore is Being set above Life and Wisdom, when living things are above beings, and sensitive things which live above these, and rational things above these, and the intellects are above the rational things and are more around God and closer to him?"' The question put this way makes takes the hierarchical order for granted and then asks about the order of the processions. But Dionysius' question is the reverse, and his immediate goal in *De Divinis Nominibus* 5.3 is to show why intellects are first, not why being is first (*Theophany*, 69).

Solution

To resolve the apparent contradiction between the two orderings, I propose we think of being in relation to God's creative love as understood by Dionysius. Being and love play parallel roles in his thought. For Dionysius, love or *ἔρως* plays a constitutive role for the nature of every being moving in a circular motion beginning from God, going through all things, and returning to God. Dionysius presents being, too, as having a circular structure. To be is to love the good and beautiful as a point on this circle. The upshot is that Dionysius' notion of love undermines the motivation for thinking that wisdom is superior to being. This motivation was the assumption that intellects are simply complete. In fact, for Dionysius intellects by themselves are only parts of the whole circle insofar as they are dependent on God and other beings. Seen in this light, we have no reason to suppose that wisdom must be more complete than being.

In Dionysius' metaphysics, love (in the words of Hierotheus) is a unifying power (*ένωτικήν τινα καὶ συγκρατικήν έννοήσωμεν*, *De Divinis Nominibus* 4.15), aimed at the good ('ἔρως is of the good' (4.10) and conferring being on both lover and beloved. To be is to love the beautiful and good: 'there is no being that does not participate in the beautiful and good' (4.7.704b); 'in desiring the beautiful and good, all things do and will whatever they do and will' (*πάντα τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ ἐφιέμενα, ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται πάντα ὅσα ποιεῖ καὶ βούλεται*, 4.10.708a). This is a comprehensive claim, including every created being and any dimension of its being, reaching to the very essence and natural function of each being. As Dionysius says in 4.4 (700b), all things in the cosmic hierarchy desire the good according to their nature, whether through knowledge, sensation, a 'natural motion', or (in the case of inanimate beings) simply by being suited to participate only in being. No being is entirely outside the scope of love (even the demons exercise a distorted form of love, see 4.34). Dionysius' ontology is based on his account of God as the final cause of all beings as beauty itself and goodness itself. In 4.7 he argues that the beautiful and the good are identical: because both the beautiful and the good are causes in the same way, as productive, final, and paradigmatic cause, they are identical. As the source of all goodness, beauty, and being, the beautiful and good itself is God, who therefore acts as productive, final, and paradigmatic cause.

We can see how God acts as each of these causes through love. As the beautiful and good itself, God is the final cause of all beings, which love him insofar as he is beautiful and good. God acts as productive cause as well as final cause, making them what they are and sustaining them in being. Moreover, final and productive cause are conjoined: the beautiful itself (*κάλλος*) ‘calls’ (*καλοῦν*) all beings to itself (4.7), and in doing so preserves every being ‘from this beauty is the being for all things’ (*ἐκ τοῦ καλοῦ τούτου πᾶσι τοῖς οὖσι τὸ εἶναι*, 4.7.704a). Furthermore, God is the paradigm cause of the nature of each being (4.7). These three forms of causation are therefore intertwined.

Dionysius accounts for the ontological power of love in terms of ‘ecstasy’, and as I will now argue, the concept of ecstatic love makes every being incomplete when taken by itself, independently of others. For love to be ecstatic means that to love is to be outside oneself and to ‘belong to’ the beloved (4.13.712a) so that the lover is somehow in the beloved. For Dionysius, even God’s creative activity is his love directed toward beings. He accounts for God’s creation as a consequence of God’s being ‘charmed’ by the goodness in beings: ‘the very cause of all beings, by the good and beautiful love of all things comes to be outside itself through an excess of erotic goodness, by its providences toward all beings, and is as it were charmed by goodness and by *ἀγάπησις* and by *ἔρως*, and from being removed beyond all beings, is set down to what is in all beings’ (4.13). God’s going-out-of-himself is ecstasy (*ἔκστασις*, literally ‘standing out of’). That God’s love is ecstatic is a strange claim insofar as it seems to imply that there are beings prior to God’s love for them, and that upon seeing them, God is somehow deceived by them and consequently confers being on them, but Dionysius should not be taken literally. The point is that God’s love is a creative act: all beings are caused by God’s motion outward from his essence, to somehow be in beings, yet without losing his transcendence. As Dionysius is quick to add, God comes to be in beings without wandering outward from himself (*ἀνεκφοίτητον ἑαυτοῦ*).

Dionysius’ presentation of God’s creative act through love in effect introduces an element of otherness into the concept of being. Since all goodness and beauty are from the beautiful and good, there can be no being that is beautiful or good apart from God as the source of the being’s beauty and goodness. Each being therefore always participates

in God's beauty and goodness as long as it is, while at the same time the being is other than God such that God can love it as an other. Love here involves a paradoxical combination of same and other: the created being has all its goodness, beauty, and being from God, and to that extent has some form of sameness with God, and yet God transcends the created being, which is therefore radically other than God. For Dionysius, love continues to be a relation involving difference even while it unifies. From the primary object of love, i.e. the beautiful and good, says Dionysius, come 'all unities and distinctions, samenesses and differences, likenesses and unlikenesses' (4.7.704b). Dionysius is careful to pair opposites here. In general, all communions of opposites are from the beautiful and the good. For a communion of opposites to remain a communion instead of a simple unity, those opposites must retain their distinct natures. Therefore, the beautiful and good unites beings through love without erasing the distinctions between what it unites. There would be no unity of things that are different from each other if the difference were undone. Rather, love simultaneously magnifies differences insofar as it gives and preserves a thing's being by orienting it toward the good.

As an example of ecstatic love, Dionysius offers Paul's words, 'I live no longer, but Christ lives in me' (4.13). This is a vivid illustration of how the lover's being is dependent on the being of the beloved. As a lover of Christ, Paul's being is replaced by Christ's. In fact, Christ gives Paul being ('life', *ζωή*, suggesting not just a way of living as *βίος* might, but substance or essence) as the object of Paul's love. Speaking in general terms at the beginning of 4.13, Dionysius says 'the ecstatic divine love does not allow lovers to belong to themselves, but to those they love' (*ἔστι δὲ καὶ ἐκστατικὸς ὁ θεῖος ἔρως, οὐκ ἑῶν ἑαυτῶν εἶναι τοὺς ἐραστὰς, ἀλλὰ τῶν ἐρωμένων*). I take this claim to be a partial account of what it means for love to be ecstatic: the lover is not a self-contained unit, but 'belongs to' another, or rather others. This 'belonging to' entails ontological dependence, certainly for Paul, but by extension for all created beings. Here Dionysius has already applied love to the entire hierarchy, relating beings at all levels to each other at 4.10.708a, where he claims that inferiors love superiors, superiors love inferiors, and equals love equals. Again referring to the entire hierarchy in 4.13.712a,

he offers Paul's love for Christ as a paradigm of the ecstatic love that holds throughout the cosmos.

For Dionysius, therefore, every being is entirely dependent on God as the beloved. All intelligent beings have their being by desiring (ἐφιέμεναι, 4.1.696a) the good, i.e., God. More surprisingly, angelic intellects are ontologically dependent not only on God but on each other and even those toward whom they exercise providence. For Dionysius, the ecstatic dimension of love is not restricted to God's love for creatures, or for a creature's love for God, but includes the love between created beings.¹¹ In each case of genuine love, the lover belongs to the beloved. Dionysius' description of ecstatic love as 'divine' therefore cannot mean that God is always one of the terms in the relation in such a way that would exclude ecstatic love from holding between creatures. As a natural consequence of Dionysius' claim that God is somehow present in all things even while he is transcendent ('both all things in all things and nothing in anything' (καὶ ἐν πᾶσι πάντα ἐστὶ, καὶ ἐν οὐδενὶ οὐδέν, 7.3), God is in a sense always the object of love. But just because God is present to the creature, every creature is at least in principle an object of the love of other beings. God of course exhibits this divine ἔρωσ above all others, but the ecstatic love Dionysius describes in 4.13 as 'divine' is so not because it is only God's love toward creatures. It is divine in the sense that it is the true ἔρωσ Dionysius distinguishes from its false image, its 'falling away' (ἐκπτώσις), in *De Divinis Nominibus* 4.12. Furthermore, ecstatic love is not one species of love among many. Dionysius' point is that all love is inherently ecstatic, a belonging of the lover to the beloved, in such a way that the lover's very essence is somehow received from the beloved.¹²

¹¹ As Dmitrios Vasilikas argues (*Eros in Neoplatonism and its Reception in Christian Philosophy* [Bloomsbury Academic, 2021], 142 ff.), for Dionysius the movement of ecstatic ἔρωσ can go in any direction, whether toward higher or lower, or toward beings of the same ontological status as the lover.

¹² Regarding the question of the nature of ἔρωσ in Dionysius and its relation to Christian theology, see also Rist, 'A Note on Eros and Agape in Pseudo-Dionysius', 235–243; Cornelia J. De Vogel, 'Greek Cosmic Love and the Christian Love of God: Boethius, Dionysius the Areopagite and the Author of the Fourth Gospel', *Vigiliae Christianae* 35, no. 1 (March 1981), 70–71; Alexander Golitzin, *Mystagogy: A Monastic Reading of Dionysius Areopagita* (Liturgical Press, 2013), 63 ff.; Vasilakis, *Eros in Neoplatonism and its Reception in Christian Philosophy*, 143 ff.; Paul Rorem, 'Empathy and Evaluation in Medieval Church History and Pastoral Ministry: A Lutheran Reading of Pseudo-Dionysius', *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 19, no. 2 (1998), 111–115.

Dionysius spells out the cooperative nature of creation in book 3 of the *De Coelesti Hierarchia*: 'For each of those who have been called into the Hierarchy find their perfection in becoming a fellow-worker with God, and in shewing the Divine energy dwelling in itself, manifested as far as possible to others'.¹³ A being in the hierarchy is made complete, in other words receives its full being, by cooperating in God's creative activity, which as we have seen is his love. Although my aim here is not to decide the question how Dionysius' view of love fits into the Greek philosophical and Christian traditions as they had developed by his time, it is worth observing that there is nothing merely selfish or egoistic about love in Dionysius' view, contrary to Anders Nygren's interpretation.¹⁴ The ecstatic nature of love by which the lover belongs to the beloved, thus losing an entirely independent identity, precludes this possibility.

Love for Dionysius displays a circular form, a circle whose beginning and end is God.¹⁵ It is a single power moving 'to the last among beings and, subsequently, back again from this, through all, and into the good. It revolves out of itself, through itself, and upon itself; always and in the same way reverting into itself'¹⁶ (4.17). In this use of the circle-image, love begins from God in the act of creation, moving downward to creatures, and returns to him in the creature's love for God. Love therefore relates beings toward each other at the same time that it relates them to God. The image of the circle harmonizes love for God and love for creatures as reflections of God. Here God is the beginning and end as a point on the circle. Dionysius uses the image of the circle in another way when he describes the ontological dependence of every creature on God in 5.6. This use of the image is especially illustrative of the coincidence between love for God and love for the creature. All the lines and points of the circle are contained in (*συννυφεστήκασι*) the one center point (821a). Here God is not a point on the circle but is the center point by which every point on the circle has its being. As each point on the circle is defined in terms of this center, so every creature

¹³ *The Celestial and Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker (Skeffington and Son, 1894), 22.

¹⁴ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 576–593.

¹⁵ See Vasilakis, *Eros in Neoplatonism and its Reception in Christian Philosophy*, 153–155.

¹⁶ Jones, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, 148.

has its essence in its relation to God. Precisely by its essence, given in terms of its relation to the center point, each point on the circle comes to be a point on the line that constitutes the circle. The point on the circle is related first to the center, but at the same time to every other point on the circle. The relations the points or lines on the circle bear to the center determine their relations to each other: 'insofar as they are nearer to the center, they are unified with it and each other' (821a). In an analogous way every created being gets its essence by its relation to and love for God but is also at the same time put into its essential place in a complex whole in relation to every other being. Although the context here is the procession of being from God to the creature, I suggest it captures the nature of love as a cosmic phenomenon relating the creature to God as well. What this means is that there is no conflict between genuine love for God and for creatures. Rather, a genuine love for God as the good and beautiful puts the creature into a relationship of genuine love of the appropriate sort for other creatures.

We can now see how the procession being and the divine love that suffuse the cosmos work in a parallel fashion, and all created beings are dependent in their essence on other beings as well as God through love. Even angelic intellects exercise love in their providential love for lower beings, and therefore are ontologically dependent on other created beings. We have no reason to suppose that Dionysius' view implies the absurdity that the higher natures are as dependent on the lower natures as the lower are on the higher, e.g., that angels are as dependent on humans as humans are on angels. (And of course, God's love for created beings does not make God dependent on them, even though God loves ecstatically, mysteriously going out of himself while remaining in himself, since God is transcendent love itself.) Nonetheless, higher beings depend on the lower even while exercising providence toward them. The providential activity of an angelic intellect is an instance of ecstatic love, and so the angelic intellect too receives its being in some way by providentially loving others, as well as their love for each other and God. This follows from Dionysius' claim in his discussion of Paul's love for Christ that the lover has its being in the beloved.

To sum up, love, like being, is not any particular being, but runs through the totality of beings, including them all within its scope and conveying being on them. Moreover, to be is to love God and

beings insofar as they are reflections of God. Being itself is parallel to the circular motion of love moving through all beings. This way of understanding being gives us insight, I think, into the question of how the procession being is prior to wisdom. In comparison with being, the other processions are only partial. Being is prior because it is the totality of dependence of created beings on each other and on God, whereas wisdom, which contains only some beings, is only a part of this totality. Angelic intellects reflect the partiality of wisdom. If to be is to be dependent on other beings through ecstatic *ἔρως*, then intellects are not self-standing beings independent of all others. It is their nature as beings to love others whether those others are superior, inferior, or equal in nature to themselves. Because angelic intellects by nature love those beings that are lower than themselves (including at least humans) they are not complete when considered in isolation from other beings, since to be an intellect is to exercise providence toward lower natures and therefore not to be simply complete. Paradoxically, wisdom considered by itself does not capture the essential relatedness to other, and even lower, beings that is essential to all beings, including angelic intellects. But it was the apparent ontological completeness of the intellects that gave us reason to think that their cause—wisdom—must be complete in comparison with the cause of the other natures. We therefore are not compelled to suppose that their cause is complete without qualification. We can now see the hierarchy and the processions as aligned, instead of being inverted: as intellects depend on other beings because of their essential relationality in the form of *ἔρως*, so too wisdom is somehow dependent on other beings and being as a whole. Furthermore, given the close parallel between being and love, we can now see why Dionysius does not explicitly raise the question why being is first given the superiority of angelic intellects to all other beings. Being and ecstatic love are so closely associated in his thought that he sees no need to.