Introduction

How can that which is absolutely ineffable be or do something in particular? How, for that matter, can it be anything at all? For if it is or does anything at all, then something can be said of it. And if nothing can be said of it, then it cannot be or do anything at all.

This is the predicament in which recent interpreters of the Dionysian corpus have found themselves, having to explain the many positive details of the corpus on the one hand, but wanting to proclaim the absolute and unqualified ineffability of the Dionysian God on the other. Their solution, although varying in grounds and ends, is more or less the same—apophatic abandonment, the ultimate and complete negation of all things of an absolutely and unqualifiedly ineffable God.

Among these grounds, two general strategies stand out; both, however, fall short. The first consigns the many positive details of the Dionysian corpus to the linguistic realm of the non-literal.¹ Here, for example, the divine names of God or ecclesiastical rituals of the church are said to be metaphors that are not literally true of God or means that are merely useful at attaining some salvific goal. Here it is said that God is metaphorically predicable as the divine names or soteriologically accessible through the ecclesiastical rituals, while remaining literally absolutely ineffable. The second strategy instead relegates the positive details of the Dionysian corpus to the ontological realm of the non-ultimate.² Here the divine names and ecclesiastical rituals are said to pertain only to the

¹. Examples of this strategy that I will consider below include John Hick, Denys Turner, and Paul Rorem. See my introductions to all four chapters, but particularly those of the first three chapters.

². Examples of this strategy that I will consider below include John D. Jones, Eric Perl, and Andrew Louth. See my introductions to chapters 2 and 4.
realm of “being” or only to the God of causation. Here it is said that God is predicable with respect to the things of being that God causes, while remaining ultimately absolutely ineffable.

Both strategies come up short. In the case of the first, such metaphorical-pragmatic predications rest on literal understanding. We can only know that God is metaphorically the divine name life or that the liturgical rite of baptism is soteriologically efficacious given some sort of appropriate literal understanding of what God actually is and does—e.g., that God actually causes life in things that live, or that baptism symbolizes the actual death and resurrection of Jesus. And in the case of the second strategy, such ontological segregations also presuppose some sort of understanding of what God ultimately is and does. We can only know that the divine names and ecclesiastical rituals pertain only to the realm of being or the God of causation if we understand God to be the cause of being.

There is a simpler solution: the Dionysian God is not absolutely and unqualifiedly ineffable; rather, the Dionysian God is ineffable only in certain respects and for certain reasons and to certain ends. This solution is not only simpler; it is also sounder, better fitting of the Dionysian corpus itself. Or so this book will argue.

Our pervasive (post)modern misunderstanding of the Dionysian corpus begins with the divine names. So will this book, showing in chapter 1 how the divine names are not mere names, let alone metaphors, but the divine causes of the intelligible properties in which beings participate. Dionysian divine names are therefore something like Platonic forms (especially in their late Neoplatonic instantiation): the divine name life-itself is the cause of the property of life in things that live. This means that since the divine names themselves are responsible for the basic parameters of reality, they must be precise in order and number (or at least not culturally or personally arbitrary). This also means that every divine name has (at least) two senses: a primary sense that pertains to the divine name itself qua cause of its property (e.g., life-itself), and a secondary sense that pertains to the property caused by its divine name itself (e.g., life). Thus, when a divine name is removed (aphairesis) from God, it is logically possible for it to be removed only as effect or also as cause.

Chapter 2 argues at length for the former: when divine names are aphairetically removed from God, they are removed only as effects and not also as causes. This must be so for (at least) four reasons. First, Dionysius tells the reader that removals from God must be interpreted preeminently
(hyperochē) rather than privatively, where hyperochic preeminence reveals the priority of causes over their effects. Second, when Dionysius removes divine names from God, he never auto-prefixes them, as he often does to the divine names themselves when distinguishing them as causes rather than effects. Third, Dionysius calls those things that are removed from God “be-ings”; but the divine names themselves qua causes are “divine unities” that transcend the realm of being. Fourth, since the divine names themselves are God’s means of causation, and since Dionysius never denies causation of God, Dionysius logically cannot deny the divine names themselves of God.

Chapter 3 then places these findings within the context of the hierarchical structure and ritual practice (hierurgy) of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, demonstrating how the Dionysian corpus gives no indication that such hierarchical order or hierurgical ritual should be subjected to negation but instead suggests that the aphairetic removal of divine names functions as both theological preparation for and theurgical component of the liturgical rites. Negative theology is not the means by which hierarchical order and hierurgical ritual are negated and overcome; rather it is a means by which hierarchical uplifting and hierurgical union are affirmed and accomplished.

Finally, chapter 4 maintains that given all this, given everything the Dionysian corpus tells us about supposedly “ineffable” and “unknowable” things, Dionysian ineffability and unknowability not only are not, but also cannot be, absolute and unqualified in nature. Although completely ineffable and unknowable by “ordinary” cognitive means, ineffable divine things are partially effable and knowable as divinely revealed, hierarchically disseminated, and hyper-intellectually (hyper-noētically) understood.

We need not, therefore, resort to theo-logical contortions in order to explain how Dionysius says all this (and more) about an unsayable God. Nor need we admit that Dionysius just did not appreciate the logic of ineffability. Instead, we can read the Dionysian corpus for what it is: the explication of a highly detailed and culturally specific metaphysics and ecclesiology, some aspects of which are said to be unspeakable in certain ways and for certain reasons, no aspect of which is absolutely and unqualifiedly ineffable.

But more is at stake here than just getting the Dionysian corpus right. Also at stake is letting the Dionysian corpus be, and listening to what the Dionysian corpus can teach.
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Chief among the variety of contemporary ends or uses of the Dionysian corpus alluded to above rank religious pluralism and anti-onto-theology. But if the Dionysian corpus offers a highly detailed and culturally specific metaphysics and ecclesiology, as I have claimed above and will demonstrate below, then it stands witness for neither. Since the Dionysian corpus does not metaphorize or relativize all religious doctrine and ritual of an absolutely ineffable God, it does not evince any program of religious pluralism that claims that the religious traditions hold such a “God” in common. And since the Dionysian corpus does not criticize, but rather proffers, a metaphysics of divine things, it also does not support any anti-onto-theology that turns away all attempts to reason about the nature of the divine.

In light of these misinterpretations and misappropriations of the Dionysian corpus, it is tempting simply to say that we should just let the Dionysian corpus be, that we should respect its alterity, refraining from compelling it to testify on behalf of our (post)modern agendas. But I believe that to hear it in its otherness, rather than collapsing it into our sameness, is to allow it not only to speak but also to teach. And I believe that what it has to teach us most concerns those very ways in which we have misinterpreted and misappropriated it worst—religious pluralism, anti-onto-theology, and the notion that often stands behind them: absolute ineffability.

Simply put, the notion of absolute ineffability is not only incoherent but also useless. Incoherent, because nothing that is in some way something for us—even something that is beyond things—can be absolutely and unqualifiedly ineffable. Absolutely ineffable gods cannot be gods, not even ones beyond divinity or causality or being; absolutely ineffable experiences cannot be experiences, not even ones beyond experience or event or mediation. The notion of absolute ineffability is therefore absolutely useless, because that which isn’t anything can’t do anything. Insofar, then, as the (post) modern programs of religious pluralism or anti-onto-theology require the notion of an absolutely ineffable God either as a common religious core or a rationally inscrutable other, these programs will fail.

Ineffability, rather, is always relative—some particular “thing” that cannot be spoken in some particular respect for some particular reason toward some particular end. Philosophy of religion is well advised to pay attention to these details. They matter. Without them we cannot hope to know the precise ways in which ultimate realities and experiences are and are not putatively ineffable and therefore the precise ways in which ultimate

3. See the following note.
realities and experiences are similar and different. Without them we cannot hope to know anything about the ultimacies that are ultimized or the ultimizers that ultimize them.

Let me finally clarify a few points about the book you are about to read. Regarding its organization: each of its four chapters will begin with an explanation of the strongest types of arguments for the apophatic abandonment of the Dionysian ideas and practices in question, then go on to offer textual evidence against these arguments. This means, on the one hand, that I will be arguing more against arguments than against arguers. The aim of this book is to offer a textually compelling critique of and counter to a general picture of the Dionysian corpus, not to defeat any one Dionysian scholar’s claim about any one Dionysian issue. And on the other hand, it means that my focus will be squarely on the text itself, not its supposed historical-cultural context or its author’s conjectured motives and agendas. I would like to allow the Dionysian corpus to “speak for itself” as much as possible, insofar as possible, in

4. When such a picture is drawn, it is usually drawn by generalist philosophers of religion, one leading example of which is John Hick. About Mystical Theology 5 in particular, Hick asserts: “Here and elsewhere Denys says in as emphatic and unqualified a way as he can that the Godhead, the ultimate One, is absolutely ineffable, eluding all our human categories of thought” (“Ineffability,” 38). See my “Three Misuses of Pseudo-Dionysius for Comparative Theology” and “Ineffability Now and Then” for a critique of Hick’s appropriation of Dionysius. Note that Hick has, in private correspondence, identified Denys Turner as the source of his interpretation of Dionysius. Interestingly, though, whereas Hick marshals this interpretation for the ends of combating religious pluralism, Turner’s ends are more “anti-onto-theological” in nature. See Turner’s The Darkness of God and “The Art of Unknowing”; but see also Turner’s more recent “How to Read the Pseudo-Denys Today?” in which he says he “will no longer misrepresent the pseudo-Denys as a derridean deconstructionist avant la lettre” (438). The list of anti-onto-theological appropriations of Dionysius is considerable—Christos Yannaras, Jean-Luc Marion, John Caputo, Kevin Hart, Thomas Carlson, Mary-Jane Rubenstein, and even, depending on whose opinion it is, Jacques Derrida himself. But for a clear example of an (Heideggerian) anti-onto-theological appropriation of the Dionysian corpus by a Dionysius scholar, see John D. Jones’s introduction to his translation of the Divine Names, Mystical Theology, and Epistles 1–5. In brief, Jones maintains that the mystical negative theology espoused by Dionysius constitutes a “radical denial” of both affirmative theology in particular and metaphysics in general insofar as it denies of God all reference to being, not in order to affirm God’s preeminence over beings, but rather to deny of God all eminence and causality/support in general (“Introduction,” 25, 20 n. 20, 97). (Note that I use “onto-theology” in this wider, more distinctly postmodern sense, not as “a theology that subordinates God to a more fundamental category of being.” Pseudo-Dionysius would certainly oppose that kind of onto-theology. My thanks to Professor John Milbank for suggesting that I clarify this distinction.) I will have much more to say about both Hick’s and Jones’s appropriations of the Dionysian corpus below, particularly in my introductions to chapters 1 and 2.
all of its possibility; for all too often is it overwhelmed by strong interpretive rubrics, be they historical or personal in nature.\(^5\)

Regarding Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: I am not going to spend much time here or elsewhere puzzling over possible identities.\(^6\) Suffice it to say that although the author of the Dionysian corpus claimed to be the first-century Dionysius, whom the book of Acts reports converting to Christianity after hearing the apostle Paul's sermon about the unknown God at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17:34), contemporary scholarship has definitively dated this unknown author's work to the late-fifth or early-sixth century and conclusively established its dependence on both late Neoplatonic and patristic texts and motifs. (I see no merit in agendas that champion one such dependence to the neglect or dismissal of the other.)

Regarding the Dionysian corpus: a little more needs to be said up front, and much more as I go along. The extant works include four treatises—\textit{Celestial Hierarchy (CH)}, \textit{Ecclesiastical Hierarchy (EH)}, \textit{Divine Names (DN)}, and \textit{Mystical Theology (MT)}—and ten epistles (\textit{EP}).\(^7\) Of these four treatises, the former two are usually underappreciated, if not outright ignored, resulting in an apophatic-centric understanding of the corpus. It will be the burden of chapter 3 to argue that it is in fact these hierarchical treatises that address the matter of how humans make their “return” to God. Without the ranks and orders of angelic beings and ecclesiastical offices as well as the

5. Due to the literal inaccuracy of Colm Luibheid's Paulist Press translation of the Dionysian corpus, I have translated all quoted passages from the Dionysian corpus directly from the critical edition of the Dionysian corpus. (See Eric Perl's \textit{Theophany} [ix] for the charge that the Paulist Press translation is more paraphrase than translation.) In doing so, I have worked closely with the 1897–99 translation of John Parker, which, despite using outdated language, usually preserves the grammatical structure of the Greek. I have also consulted the translations Thomas Campbell, John D. Jones, Ronald Hathaway, and Colm Luibheid.


7. Note, though, that these works mention an additional seven works, all of which are likely fictitious though possibly lost: \textit{Symbolic Theology, Theological Representations, Conceptual and Perceptible, Divine Hymns, Concerning Justice and the Judgment of God, Properties and Ranks of the Angels, Concerning the Soul}. Many scholars assume these works fictitious since their omission does not significantly hinder comprehension of the overall corpus.
sacramental rites and symbols there is no such return—union is accomplished by hierarchical mediation and liturgical ritual, not by apophatic abstraction and solitary meditation. But chapter 3 will also hypothesize that the theological positioning and removing of divine names that occurs in the latter two treatises (Divine Names and Mystical Theology, respectively) in fact function as both theological preparation for and ritual component of the sacramental rites. To repeat: negative theology is a means by which one prepares for and performs the sacraments, not the means by which one negates and overcomes them.

Finally, regarding my intended audience: that I have been so brief with my introduction to the author and contents of the Dionysian corpus indicates that my model reader comes to this work with a basic familiarity of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite. Still, I write this book more for generalist philosophers of religion than Dionysian scholars. More particularly, this book is for those philosophers of religion who have read some of the English-language scholarship on the Dionysian corpus or have read the Dionysian corpus itself in English-language translation, but who have not had the opportunity to spend time with the Greek critical edition of the corpus. And this is because my primary concern is with the appropriation of the Dionysian corpus in contemporary philosophy of religion. In short and in closing, I would like to see such scholars think twice before reading Dionysius with apophatic abandon.