

Chapter 1

The Divine Names Are Not Names

THIS CHAPTER IS ABOUT names that are not names—divine names, which, despite appearances, are not merely or primarily names for God. Dionysian divine names are much more than this. They are divine processions that source and sustain the basic properties of the cosmos. The divine name *being* is the cause of being in all that exists; the divine name *power*, of all capacities to act in existing beings; the divine name *unity*, of all activities by which existing beings enjoy degrees of internal and external unification. Thus it is only because divine names are firstly and primarily *causes of properties* that those properties can be attributed to or denied of those beings that do or do not participate in them.

Not unsurprisingly, this is one of the more common misunderstandings of the Dionysian corpus. The casual reader fails to notice that Dionysius restricts the application of the technical term *divine name* (*theōnumia*) to intelligible names (e.g., being, power, unity) and does not use it of perceptible symbols (e.g., a fire, a rock, a worm). Such a reader therefore overlooks the fact that whereas perceptible symbols are metaphors drawn from the realm of sensation, intelligible divine names are divine causes of intelligible properties. Worse, this reader assumes that by *names* Dionysius means something similar to what we (post)moderns do—arbitrary signifiers that arbitrarily denote some arbitrary signified. Thus this reader takes the divine names to be in the eye of the beholder—a means of naming God among other means of naming God, a means of naming God that serves

Negating Negation

some particular time and place but not other times and places, a means of naming God that is soteriologically useful but not metaphysically true, a means of naming God that says more about the humans who use those names than it does about the God that is so named.

Some of these claims are in fact quite prevalent in the writings of those who deploy one of the arguments for the apophatic abandonment of the divine names.¹ This argument begins with a textual conundrum—how can the Dionysian God be all the things that Dionysius says it is and still be absolutely and unqualifiedly ineffable? To this conundrum, it offers a stark solution: all of Dionysius' affirmations about God fall into the realm of the non-literal—that which is literally false though metaphorically apt or soteriologically useful. Here, this argument partially blurs, if not entirely expunges, the distinction between perceptible symbols and divine names, drawing on passages that address the “metaphorical” nature of the former to generalize over *all* “names” of God (including not only intelligible divine names but also individual Trinitarian persons and general thearchic functions).² Then, it goes on to suggest that since Dionysius states that anything caused by God can be taken to name God, Dionysius' “names” for God enjoy no special privilege; they are but one of many ways

1. See, for example, John Hick, who has maintained such an interpretation of the divine names in a series of writings since 1999 (*The Fifth Dimension*, “Ineffability,” *The New Frontier*, and *Who or What is God?*). (Note that Dionysius appears only once—and there in a note—in Hick's 1986–87 Gifford Lectures, *An Interpretation of Religion* [250 n. 5].) Hick's “Ineffability” in particular maintains that it is only by calling the language of Scripture metaphorical—and *language of Scripture* is here inclusive of both perceptible symbols and intelligible names—that Dionysius avoids the “direct contradiction” of asserting both God's absolute and unqualified ineffability and God's positive revelation in Scripture (“Ineffability,” 38, 39). Dionysian divine names are not therefore “eternal truths” but rather “useful means” of uplifting humans to God (*ibid.*, 39). Of course, Hick is not a Dionysian scholar *per se*. He has, though, in private correspondence, defended his interpretation of Dionysius as inspired by Denys Turner, whose *Darkness of God* (1995) predictably commits a similar apophatic abandonment of the divine names. Unlike Hick, Turner does, at times, draw a distinction between divine names and perceptible symbols. This distinction, though, is chalked up to degree of similarity to God: divine names are more similar to God (“similar similarities”), whereas perceptible symbols are less similar to God (“dissimilar similarities”) (*Darkness of God*, 26–27). Nowhere is there a whiff of the causal function of the divine names. Moreover, Turner maintains that since all things preexist in God, any name at all can possibly serve as a divine name: “to name God adequately, we not only may, but must, name God by all the names of creatures” (*ibid.*, 23–24, 24). *Every* name is here equally true *and* equally false of the Dionysian God.

2. Among such passages are *CH* 1.2, *CH* 2.1–3, and *EP* 9.1.

of inadequately naming an unnamable God.³ In sum, the divine names are but human attempts at naming an unnamable God—literally false and infinitely inadequate, historically accidental, and culturally relative. In the words of one proponent of this argument, kataphatic theology is here but a “verbal riot, an anarchy of discourse in which anything goes.”⁴

At first glance, the second argument for the apophatic abandonment of the divine names appears not to fit the mold, maintaining, on the contrary, that the divine names in fact are real divine attributes.⁵ Now what is meant here by *attribute* is not entirely clear. But what is clear is the repeated refrain that *qua* attributes, the divine names are qualitatively different from the henads of pagan Neoplatonism.⁶ And this, according to at least one proponent of the argument, is but one flank of Dionysius’ two-pronged assault on the Neoplatonic doctrine of emanation. Thus we find such a Dionysius “insisting” not only that divine names are merely divine attributes but also that God creates out of nothing and without intermediaries.⁷ As I will explain later, I do not find either of these claims convincing—like divine names, henads are attributes of the first principle; like henads, divine names play a role in the procession of being and its most basic properties. But my concern here is with how this argument sometimes ends up resembling

3. Among such passages are *DN* 1.6, *DN* 1.7, and *EP* 9.1.

4. Turner, *The Darkness of God*, 20.

5. See especially Andrew Louth’s *Denys the Areopagite*, about which more will be said below. But see also Paul Rorem’s *Pseudo-Dionysius* and Christian Schäfer’s *The Philosophy of Dionysius Areopagite*.

6. The henads of late or “pagan” Neoplatonism are pluralizations of the One (that were often identified with the Greek gods). See section IV for more on Neoplatonic henads and Dionysian divine names.

7. Louth, *Denys*, 85, 86. In the former case (viz., divine names are just divine attributes) Louth quotes *DN* 11.6, 953C–956A in text (*ibid.*, 86) and also cites *DN* 2.1, 636C–637C and *DN* 5.2, 816C–817A (*ibid.*, 97 n. 15); I’ll spend time with all of these passages below. In the latter case (viz., God creates out of nothing and without intermediaries) Louth admits that Dionysius does not speak much of creation in general and never speaks of creation *ex nihilo* in particular. (Louth instead argues for the doctrine of creation on theological grounds, asserting that it is necessary to Dionysius’ understanding of the world as theophany since if the cosmos emanated from God [via “lesser beings”], then the cosmos could not serve to display God’s glory and draw everything into contemplation of God’s beauty but rather would serve as an “obstacle” to such ends [*ibid.*, 85–86].) Still, Louth provides two pieces of textual evidence for the claim that the Dionysian God creates all being immediately: *DN* 2.11, 649BC and *DN* 5.4, 817C. I’ll spend some time with the first of these passages below; the second—a discussion of the divine name *being-itself*—doesn’t seem to support Louth’s position.

Negating Negation

the previous argument for the nominal nature of the divine names. Such resemblance is born in two stages: first, *qua* attributes the divine names are removed from God's nature to God's activity in the world (and, at that, to activity that is illuminative, not causal); second, *qua* illuminative activities the divine names are relegated to the domain of human meaning rather than divine truth. Granted, unlike the argument of the last paragraph, this argument does not go so far as to say that the divine names are, for Dionysius, one among many ways in which humans name God, each of which is literally false though metaphorically apt or pragmatically useful. Such a conclusion might, however, be a short step from the position that divine names are merely means by which meaning is conveyed. For in both cases divine names are no longer sown into the fabric of reality; they are, rather, in the eyes of their beholders. And even if not so subjective, divine names are in the very least not part of the nature of God; they are, rather, merely a way in which God chooses to relate to creation.

This chapter argues instead for a "positively different" understanding of the Dionysian God, one that does not sacrifice God's divine names at the altar of apophatic abandon as inadequate metaphors or impotent attributes, one that instead locates the divine names in God as the pluralized divine unities and transcendent divine causes that they are. To do so, it develops the following four points, each in one of the following four sections of this chapter. First, divine names are not perceptible symbols; rather they are divine causes of intelligible properties and therefore are neither primarily linguistic nor thoroughly metaphorical in nature. Second, the organization of the divine names in the *Divine Names* is not arbitrary and vague but rather purposeful and exact; indeed divine names must be of a precise number and order if they are to account for the most basic properties of participating beings. Third, both the divine names and the properties they source are pre-contained in God in a *hyper*-unified and *hyper*-existent manner; thus there are important respects in which the divine names are true even of the transcendent God. Finally, although Dionysian divine names are not pagan deities, they are in many other ways remarkably similar to the henads of pagan Neoplatonism; notably, as processive causes and divine unities, divine names are much more than mere "attributes" of God.