

Medieval Philosophy

Dionysius

I. Dionysius: 6th century Christian Neo-Platonist, influential in Eastern/Greek Orthodoxy and also on some prominent western Christian theologians and philosophers (e.g., Saint Thomas Aquinas).

II. Scripture and Philosophy: As a Christian thinker, Scripture is an authority for Dionysius, but its interpretation is governed by the fundamental insights of neoplatonism. Hence, basic Christian doctrines (creation, and the names, nature, and actions of God) are filtered through neo-platonist intuitions and arguments.

III. God is Super-Essential (hyperousia) Godhead

- A. Ousia (Gr., being): the term “ousia” refers to an individual existent or person.
- B. God is not ousia because God is an individual person or thing, but super-ousia, that is, above or beyond individual and personal existence.
- C. Dionysius, like all neo-platonist thinking, emphasizes the utter transcendence of God, to such an extent that God cannot be considered as a personal being, for personal beings (according to neoplatonist thinking) are finite, but God is not a finite being.
- D. Consciousness: As consciousness, God must be a non-individual or undifferentiated consciousness. Like Vedanta philosophy, in God there is no duality. (See Rolt, “Introduction,” pp. 4–5).
- E. Every “name” given to God must be qualified with the designation “super” since it is a way of communicating the utter transcendence of God with respect to everything quality ascribed to It. Hence, God is super-essential life, super-essential power, etc.

IV. Unknowing and the Via Negativa: Given that “God” refers to that which is super-essential, God cannot be known. All knowledge involves duality. God is behind this and thus cannot be an object of knowledge. No conception can be formed of God (pp. 51-52). We can only truly speak of God by denying of God things true of finite beings. This is the via negativa.

V. Scripture, Names, and Differentiation

Scripture gives names to God, specifically names that apply to things of sense experience. But these must ultimately be understood symbolically.

- A. Anthropomorphic Description: God is a magnified human with outward form. This is where people usually start. There is some truth in all such

descriptions, and the symbol points to this truth. But that truth must be approached by ascending to a second level.

- B. Via Negativa Description: God is described solely by way of negation. E.g., God is not material, not mutable, not individual, not in time, etc.
 - 1. Intellect (Discursive Reason): The intellect reasons about God as an immaterial, changeless person with great knowledge, power, and goodness.
 - 2. Intuition (Intuitive Reason): God is seen in simple unity. God is seen as having no composition, being wholly undifferentiated, but still distinct from the self (to some degree).
- C. Unknowing: Here there is a merging of self into God. The distinction between the super-essential Godhead and the individual ego is dissolved. (pp. 58–61). This strongly resembles Advaita Vedanta metaphysics.

VI. Scriptural Names:

- A. To give God many names is a symbolic human function that indicates that that which is named by us is nameless in itself. P. 61
- B. We give names to symbolically assert a positive truth (of sorts), namely that God is center, God is the cause or source of everything, their purpose, and their goal. The names fundamentally symbolize the truth of emanation: everything that exists flows out of God by the necessity of God's own nature. (pp. 62–64)

VII. Names of God and their Ontological Referents

- A. Many names of God refer to the whole Godhead, for example, "life." The reason for this is that there is no differentiation in that from which all things have life. (p. 65)
- B. Undifferentiated names are technically those names that refer to the whole Godhead and do so in the light of Its transcendent nature. Hence, God is not merely life, but super-life. (p. 68)
- C. Differentiated names are "father" "son" and "holy spirit." These indicate differentiation, but since there is no differentiation in God, these must designate the out-flowing from God. So the Christian Trinity is understood to refer to emanation, not just the universe itself.
- D. What is differentiated refers to emanations or manifestations of the undifferentiated in Itself. (pp. 69–73; see also pp. 79–81 for emanation process).

VIII. God's Goodness

- A. To call God "good" is to say that God is the cause of the existence of things. "Goodness" is a creative principle of out-flowing. Neoplatonist principle: Goodness is diffusive of itself. Hence, formless nature produces all form. God is said to be non-being because of its excess of being, which results in things that are differentiated. Pp. 86–87.

- B. Goodness is also an attractive power or back-flowing of all things to God. P. 92.

IX. God is Beautiful (pp. 95–96)

- A. God is beautiful means that God is the cause of beauty in things and hence the ground of every judgment that x is beautiful.
- B. God is beauty itself because It is super-essential beautiful. By contrast, no individual beautiful thing is beauty itself. But as super-essential beautiful, God is both transcendently beautiful and beauty itself.
- C. God is the archetype of beauty: beauty in things is found transcendentally in God as their ultimate cause. (p. 96)