

THE NEOPLATONIC PURSUIT OF GOD IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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ABSTRACT. This paper studies the differing approaches to pursuing God during the Middle Ages to show the latent Neoplatonism inherent to four prominent thinkers from the Early to High Middle Ages. Beginning with Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, God's darkness is equated with an ineffable light. Pseudo-Dionysius used darkness to describe God exceeding the bounds of the intellect; a metaphor also used to illustrate the non-objectifying imperative for union with God. In union, Pseudo-Dionysius outlines an apophatic process concurrently with a ladder of ascent. Eriugena appropriates Pseudo-Dionysius' darkness, albeit dialectically. In accepting the limitations of the intellect, Eriugena maps the boundaries of the intellect using binary oppositions between being and non-being and the created and uncreated. Eriugena concludes we can achieve union only by meditating upon God's theophanies. By distinguishing reason from faith, we observe the turn to reason in Anselm. In signifying the start of the High Middle Ages, Anselm makes the unprecedented claim that God is proveable through reason alone, although such proof requires arduous contemplative work. Anselm nevertheless understood prayer and faith as prerequisites for pursuing God. Anselm's view of the limitations of the intellect later becomes the backbone of his Ontological Argument, which Aquinas takes up and revises by focusing on Anselm's definition of contemplation. For Aquinas, the non-objective vision of God, which he calls a beatific vision, is the ground for union with God. The very limitations of the intellect for Aquinas prove the need for beatific vision as the prerequisite for bridging the infinite gap between God and intellect. Throughout this investigation, we uncover the intrinsic Neoplatonism in the Middle Ages philosophers exhibited in their pursuit of God.

KEYWORDS: Denys, Eriugena, Anselm, Aquinas, darkness, Neoplatonism, intellect, Middle Ages, beauty, non-objectifying thinking.

Introduction

Neoplatonic thought in the Latin Middle Ages traces its history to Augustine of Hippo's (354-430) appropriation of Plotinus' thought. Augustine's divine illumination, the relation between the One, God and beauty itself, among other themes,

played an integral role in influencing later Christian thought. Augustine's Neoplatonic sympathies are especially important for the Latin Middle Ages, considering Augustine wrote in Latin. The Eastern Church Fathers such as Origen of Alexandria (184-253) and Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) directly subsumed Neoplatonic thought since Greek was the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East. In the Latin West, however, it was not until the fifth-sixth Century Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (hereon Denys) and his Latin translator Eriugena (800-877) that Neoplatonism was absorbed into Latin Middle Ages thought. Thus, we take our starting point in this paper with Denys and his Neoplatonic pursuit of God. We show that Denys pursued God's divine darkness above the light, an expression meant to exemplify God's ineffable light and persistence outside the intellect. Denys' more overt Neoplatonic theme is God's manifestation of beauty in the world, a facet of divine illumination that draws all back to the One or God. In Eriugena's appropriation of Denys, darkness denotes God's creative action, which no intellect can apprehend. From this darkness, all intellects and the primary causes emerge, hence the impossibility of knowing God.

Eriugena's realisation here led to his sketching of the boundaries of the intellect. The result is the dialectical distinction between being and non-being, created and uncreated, as part of Eriugena's seminal work, the *Periphyseon*. Anselm reimagines Eriugenian darkness in the context of the nothing from the perspective of reason. Anselm's emphasis on the latter symbolises the beginning of scholasticism in the High Middle Ages. In Anselm, the nothing of God's creation is 'not anything' when considered by the intellect, but 'not nothing' from the perspective of God. The intellect cannot but remain blind to God's creative action. For Anselm, one's realisation of the limitations of the intellect and God's self-evident nature forms the ground of his Ontological Argument. While Anselm concludes that faith and prayer are the prerequisites for pursuing God, Aquinas grounds beatific vision as the foundation. Since God's unknowability is the starting point for the beatific vision, Aquinas sought to ground the infinite distance between God and the intellect in his cosmology. In so doing, Aquinas developed his beatific vision while appropriating core themes of Neoplatonism. In summary, this paper shows that despite the differing approaches to pursuing God in the Middle Ages, Neoplatonism was essential for developing the cosmologies found therein.

The Christianisation of Neoplatonism in the Early Middle Ages

The Dark Ages is commonly understood to have succeeded the Fall of Rome, which began with the King of the Visigoths Alaric the 1st sacking in 410 AD, culminating in the German chieftain Odoacer's disposal of the last Western Emperor of Rome,

Romulus Augustulus in 476 AD. The latter event symbolises the end of the Western Roman Empire for historians, leading to the loss of knowledge of the Ancients, i.e., sciences, philosophy, the overall collapse of post-Hellenic culture, and the transition to the Medieval period. However, some have characterised the encounter of the Visigoths with Christianity as the “Germanization” of the Early Middle Ages (Russell 1994). While Christianity developed further throughout the Middle Ages, Russell argues that the Indo-European warrior ethos preserved by the Germanic peoples throughout Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages heavily influenced this development (Russell 1994, 118).¹ This event marks what Russell called the “Germanic Transformation of Christianity” following Rome’s 476 AD collapse. Amidst this transition towards the early Middle Ages, the pagan Neoplatonists faced pressure from the growing tide of Christianity. As Marinus records in his *Life of Proclus*, Proclus (412-485) considered the last Greek philosopher in the tradition of Plato’s Academy, left Athens for Lydia for a year following pressure from the Christians (Guthrie 1986, 30).² Despite the Germanic takeover of Rome, the pagan persecution persisted unabated. The Christianisation inevitably influenced – how and which way remains unclear – Denys, a Neoplatonising Christian student of Proclus. Eventually, the Neoplatonism that began with Plotinus (204/5-270) of the third Century AD was suffused with Christianity in Denys’ writings, with no shortage of scholarly coverage of this historical interpolation.³ The *Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum*, therefore, represents the Christianisation of Neoplatonism after the Fall of Rome.⁴

¹ As Russell notes, despite the Germanic and Christian values being fundamentally opposed, the Christian missionaries sought to “redefine the Germanic virtues of strength, courage, and loyalty in such a manner that would reduce their incompatibility with Christian values, while at the same time “inculturating” Christian values as far as possible to accommodate the Germanic ethos and world-view” (Russell 1994, 120-21).

² Scholars note that notwithstanding Calcidius’ fourth or fifth-century translation of roughly two-thirds of the *Timaeus*, Plato’s dialogues were unavailable to the Latin West for around 800 years (Grant 2004, 93-4). It was not until Ficino’s (1433-1499) translations that Plato’s dialogues were available.

³ Scholarly literature on Denys’ Neoplatonic influence on Christianity is extensive; for a few reference points, see Finan and Twomey, 1992, McGinn 1994 and Edwards, Pallas and Steiris, 2022.

⁴ While some credence must be given to the earlier Church fathers, such as Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen, among others, Denys’ historical placement after Proclus and around the time of Justinian the Great’s closure of the Academy (529AD) is the more significant event. This concerns Denys’ historical placement at the culmination of Greek philosophy in Late Antiquity. As such, Denys’ writings appropriate core themes of Neoplatonism, from Plotinus to Proclus.

However, the subsequent proliferation of Denys' Christianised Neoplatonism throughout the Middle Ages is much more challenging to trace and understand.

Denys' Christianised Neoplatonism emerged perhaps for the first time in the Latin Middle Ages in John Scottus Eriugena, the first to translate Denys into Latin. Eriugena's Latin translation reached Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) and Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), the latter guided primarily by his teacher Albert Magnus (1200-1280). Anselm's Neoplatonism may be more difficult to discern than Eriugena's, especially since the former did not cite Denys in his writings. However, Eriugena's translation had already circulated in the West for two hundred years when Anselm composed his *Proslogion*, which bears significant Neoplatonic elements (Andrus 2014, 270). Anselm's Neoplatonism was influenced by Denys and other Christian Neoplatonists' in a broader sense, unlike Eriugena's rather overt Neoplatonism, i.e., degrees of emanation, progressive negation, etc. Eriugena's cosmology was indubitably Neoplatonist, underpinning his elaborate quinary scheme distinguishing being from non-being and a fourfold division between created and uncreated. Anselm's Neoplatonism is more general in his adoption of hierarchical cosmology, whereby all beings derive their essence based on their participation in the Divine (Charlesworth 1979, 23-4). While Anselm lacks a systematic cosmology comparable to Eriugena, they both share the Neoplatonic ideal of the unity of philosophy and theology.

Aquinas' Neoplatonism resulted from his tutelage under Albert Magnus, adopting many ideas from his teacher, such as the Light of Glory (*lumen gloriae*), a Dionysian concept Magnus himself adopted (Blankenhorn 2015, xxvi).⁵ Aquinas was also directly influenced by the Areopagite, with scholars showing that some 1702 citations to Pseudo-Dionysius are present in *The Summa Theologica*, with 899 specific references to the *Divine Names* (Torrell 2012, 25). Thus, along with Augustine, Denys was the other primary source for Aquinas' counterbalancing of Neoplatonism with Aristotle. Effectively, Neoplatonism, common to these Medieval thinkers, is traceable to the *Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum*. Central to this Neoplatonism is the ineffability of God, whether described as incomprehensibility by Anselm (*Mon*: 36), the unknown by Aquinas (*Sum. Th.* I: Q12. A1-13) or unknowable by Eriugena (*Per.* II: 525a). While Dionysius radicalises the unknowability of God as the "darkness of unknowing [γνόφον τῆς ἀγνώσιμας]" (*My. Th.* 1001a), what remains central to all the Medieval thinkers in question is the contemplative pursuit of God's ineffability. In other words, all see philosophy answering Plotinus' question: "what craft or procedure or practice will lead us up to that place where we

⁵ As Blankenhorn added, the proximity of Aquinas' exposition to Albert's *Commentary on the Pseudo-Dionysius' Mystical Theology* is striking (Blankenhorn 2015, 466-67).

must journey? (*Enn.* 1 (20) §1.3.1: [1]). However, the philosophical approach to pursuing God varies from one thinker to another. By observing these divergences, insight into the transformation of Neoplatonic thinking comes into clear view over some six hundred years by the time of Aquinas. Unless observed closely, the Neoplatonism of the Middle Ages may appear unrecognisable in Aquinas' writings. We begin by ascertaining a few central features of Denys' Christianised Neoplatonism to make this transformation recognisable.

Denys' Contemplation of Darkness

It is important to note that Denys's poetised language is crucial to his philosophy and has proven enormously influential on the Christian tradition.⁶ Denys' language aims to reflect God's self-separation as perfectly intertwined with beauty (Sammon 2014, 198). By separation, Denys means the feature of God that is unique to God alone. Thus, beauty is the defining feature guiding one's pursuit of God since the world must be "hailed as wise and beautiful because beings which keep their nature uncorrupted are filled with divine harmony and sacred beauty" (*Div. Na:* 592A). Denys' pursuit of God is a progressive removal of that which is not God or beautiful, a process he describes by reforming Plotinus' statue metaphor: "We would be like sculptors who set out to carve a statue. They remove every obstacle to the pure view of the hidden image, and simply by this act of clearing aside they show up the beauty which is hidden (*My. Th:* 1025A-B)."⁷ The statue represents Denys' apophatic process, whereby the ascending negations aim towards God's unknowability: the "darkness so far above Light" (*My. Th:* 1025A). Paradoxically, Denys correlates 'darkness above the light' with the "darkest darkness [ἐν τῷ σκοτεινοτάτῳ]" beyond all Beauty (*My. Th:* 1000A). This apophaticism conflates two

⁶ Some passages inspired entire treatises, such as the anonymously composed fourteenth-century treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing* that "can be seen as just as significant in the history of the development of Dionysian influence as the leap from Greek to Latin in the schools of the Latin West in the early Middle Ages" (Tyler 2022, 466-67).

⁷ Plotinus' metaphor is as follows: "How, then, can you see the kind of beauty that a good soul has? Go back into yourself and look. If you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then be like a sculptor who, making a statue that is supposed to be beautiful, removes a part here and polishes a part there so that he makes the latter smooth and the former just right until he has given the statue a beautiful face. In the same way, you should remove superfluities and straighten things that are crooked, work on the things that are dark, making them bright, and not stop 'working on your statue' [πασηι τεκταίνων τὸ σὸν ἄγαλμα] until the divine splendour of virtue shines in you, until you see 'Self-Control enthroned on the holy seat' [σωφροσύνην ἐν ἀγνώι βεβῶσαν βάθρωι] (*Enn.* 1 (36) §1.6.9: [7-15]).

essential features of Denys' pursuit of God: God's unknowability and the darkness beyond all beauty. Denys' discourse on beauty is a matter of contention, with some directly equating Denys' God with beauty to distinguish his Neoplatonism from Plotinus and Proclus (Sammon 2014, 191-203). While this is a position worth considering, we must assume that Denys correlates God's being 'beyond all Beauty' with hidden darkness (σκότος ἀποκρυφῆν αὐτοῦ), the topic of the opening chapter of his *Mystical Theology* (1000A). Apart from 'darkness' signifying the occluded nature of God's beauty, it also represents the arduous process of pursuing God.

Denys adopts the Platonic ladder of negations to expound upon this difficult voyage leading to God: "That is why their preference is for the way up through negations [...] Such a way guides the soul through all the divine notions [...] the soul is brought into union with God himself (*Div. Na*: 981B)." For Denys, negations that move closer to God follow the formula of the less-knowable, the more beautiful, "for any thinking person realises that the appearances of beauty are signs of an invisible loveliness" (*Cel. He*: 121D). Invisibility again touches on the theme of hidden darkness that becomes increasingly more pronounced the further one advances by negation. Williams explained that despite Denys using darkness as a pervasive metaphor, "the end of union is not discontinuous with the way" (Williams 2000, 73). Effectively, contemplative work is needed to reach God, following the Neoplatonic hierarchy, particularly of the Proclean variant. The darkness beyond the light exceeds all contemplation, albeit necessitated by contemplation paralleling Proclus' distinction between One and Intellect, the former being beyond all thinking. As Denys elaborated in the *Divine Names*, God is "above and before perfection, and we posit intangible and invisible darkness of that Light which is unapproachable because it so far exceeds the visible light" (*Div. Na*: 869A). Denys, this way, explained that the "more we take flight upward," we will eventually "plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect" (*My. Th*: 1033B).

Carabine describes the Dionysian soul's plunge into darkness as the literal "movement of *ekstasis*, and corresponds to the loving *ekstasis* of God in his bountiful procession into all things" (Carabine 1995, 296). Denys' contemplation is apophatic and hierarchical, both being the prerequisite for union with God: "The thoroughness of sacred discipleship indicates the immense contemplative capacity of mind" (*Cel. He*: 121D-124A). This contemplation denotes the boundary between knowing and unknowing, intellection and union (Carabine 1995, 296). However, by focusing on Denys' apophaticism, further parallels with Neoplatonism emerge. Contemplation is a product of the Intellect; although it represents the pinnacle of all thinking, it is an entirely self-sufficient whole beyond time and separation. Following Proclus' scheme in the *Elements of Theology*, Denys is consistent with propositions nine and ten, that the Intellect is self-sufficient (αὐτάρκης) but

inferior to the unqualified Good (ἀπλῶς ἀγαθόν) (*El. Th.*: 9-11). In *Celestial Hierarchy*, Denys appropriates this Proclean insight in a Christian tone, describing the 'first beings' as 'contemplative' in their natural inclination towards God (*Cel. He.*: 208B-C). Here, Denys makes the crucial connection to beauty; the penultimate action of the first beings (*qua* Intellect) represents the "superior light beyond any knowledge and because they are filled with a transcendent and triply luminous contemplation of the one who is the cause and the source of all beauty" (*Cel. He.*: 208C).

By following this Proclean pattern, Denys advanced a Neoplatonic hierarchy with an ineffable darkness at the apex. Contemplation naturally belongs to this ascending cosmology in its role of receiving God's beauty. Contemplating God means to pursue the ineffable darkness. As such, contemplation and God's beauty dissipate upon reaching God's unknowable darkness. In other words, Denys saw contemplation as the starting point of pursuing God with beauty as the guide. Again, this beauty-guided contemplation remains apophatic in its pursuit of God. While Denys seldom used the term philosophical contemplation or speculation in conjunction with contemplation, he described in *Letter Seven* that true philosophy is the reception of the "wisdom of God" that uplifts one to God (*L. VII.*: 1080B).⁸ Denys repeated a similar sentiment in *Letter Nine*, describing the dual aspect of theology as the 'inexpressible' bound with the 'articulate,' i.e., philosophic (*L. IX.*: 1105D).⁹ As with the pagan Neoplatonists and consistent with the later Medieval thinkers, Denys did not separate philosophy and theology but saw a natural union. However, in its Christian rendition, Denys' God takes a more uniform character than the Neoplatonist One, although it remains closely aligned ontologically. Denys' ontology is then reimagined by Eriugena, to whom we now turn.

Eriugena's Darkness of God's Light

While we cannot know whether Eriugena read Plotinus and Proclus directly, among other pagan Neoplatonists, he does cite Plato's *Timaeus*, showing likely exposure to Calcidius' *Latin* translation (*Per.* I: 476C). Eriugena's hierarchical cosmology is a highly developed Neoplatonism where an unknown God transcends the

⁸ *Letter Seven* is addressed to Polycarp, a hierarch, regarding a discussion with Apollonophanes, a sophist. Denys counsels not to refute his opinions but to establish the truth as clearly as possible and let his explanations stand for themselves. There are references to the Mithraic cult and various Christian miracles.

⁹ *Letter Nine* is directed to Titus, a high-ranking ecclesiastical leader. The text discusses the symbolic meaning of the mixing bowl, food and drinks as representations of spiritual sustenance.

zenith. Furthering Denys' design, Eriugena's God's self-creates in "darkness," inaugurating the fundamental distinction between being and non-being. As Carabine notes in her seminal work on Eriugena, the latter frequently used the 'unapproachable light of divine glory' in *Tim.* 6:16 and the 'darkness as light' *Ps.* 139:12 to support Denys' equating God's darkness with an ineffable light (Carabine 2000, 118). God's act of self-creation is, in other words, a move from darkness to light, the dark reflecting the ineffable light that only appears dark due to its transcendent intensity (Carabine 2000, 34-5). Furthermore, 'outflowing' (*exitus*) comes with the 'return' (*reditus*), a strictly Neoplatonic principle more pronounced in Eriugena than Denys. Nevertheless, the procession of intelligibility mirrors Denys' characterisation, particularly the emergence of all intellects from God's darkness as the source.

In Book II of the *Periphyseon*, Eriugena dialectically unfolds Denys' darkness, whence the primary causes (*causae primordiales*) emerge, and no intellect can penetrate. Eriugena here resembles Denys' writings by being poetic and cryptic, making the arguments challenging to decipher. One selection, however, conveys the *causae primordiales* place in Eriugena's cosmology clearly:

Is it not most appropriate that they should be called by the Holy Spirit by the name of a dark abyss [*tenebrose abyssi*]? For they are called "abyss" on account of their unfathomable depth and their infinite diffusion through all things, which is perceived by no sense (and) comprehended by no intellect; and they have earned the name of "darkness" because of the ineffable excellence of their purity. For even this sensible sun often brings darkness upon those who look into it, since they are unable to face its excessive brilliance. Thus there was darkness over the abyss of the primordial causes. For before they entered into the plurality of the spiritual essences no created intellect could know of them what they were, and darkness is still over this abyss [*Tenebrae itaque erant super causarum primordialium abyssum*] because it is perceived by no intellect except that which formed it in the beginning. But from its effects, that is, from its processions into intelligible forms it is known only that it is, but not understood (as to) what it is (*Per.* II: 550C-551A).

The *causae primordiales* emerge out of darkness through the outflowing of beings – all the while remaining incomprehensible, whether to the senses or intellect. The facing of the sun, perhaps an analogue to Plato's cave allegory, is Eriugena's distinction between the emergence of light and the source itself, the latter being unseeable. Eriugena also parallels Denys' ineffable light, which appears 'dark' in comprehension. Hence, Eriugena described the imperceptible outflowing of the primordial causes as the 'darkness over the abyss'.

Thence, in a dialectical process of questions and answers with regular reference to biblical scripture, Eriugena explains that the primary causes of all beings proceed into the beings they cause without departing from the “Wisdom of the Father” that is, “invisibly by being eternally concealed in the darkness of their excellence” (*Per.* II: 552A). We gather from this that Eriugena’s *causae primordiales* are the first ‘manifestation’ out of the unknowable darkness. The fundamental dichotomy in Eriugena’s explication exhibits the boundaries of dialectics, but, more importantly, contemplation cannot revert itself to exceed itself. In other words, the intellect is ultimately posterior to the primary causes whence it emerges. The dark abyss precedes all intellect and, thus, is inaccessible by contemplation, whether through dialectics or otherwise. Like Denys, who distinguishes between darkness and intellect, Eriugena mirrors Proclus’ distinction between the unparticipated One and all unities that arise posterior to the One (*El. Th.*: 23-24). Eriugena followed by mapping the contours of the intellect through five modes of being and non-being. The first and most fundamental mode represents the distinction between God and all else, the former being “known not as to what it is but as to that it is” (*Per.* I: 443C).¹⁰ While the five modes draw the boundaries of intellect, the distinction between being and non-being itself demonstrates thinking’s limitations.

Eriugena repeats this formula throughout his cosmology, which he used to construct his so-called division of nature (*natura*), hence the title *Peryphyseon*.¹¹ Eriugena effectively elaborates further than Denys by insisting that all intelligibility is founded on the bedrock of being and non-being, meaning that even the earth is unknowable. A prominent example Eriugena gives is between the “mystical invisible earth [*mystica illa terra invisibilis*]” and the “dark intelligible abyss [*tenebrosa abyssus*]” of the primordial causes (*Per.* II: 551A). The latter denotes the utter incomprehensibility given its persistence outside of the intellect. Eriugena unveils his *natura* by describing the function of ‘mystical earth’ as obscuring “the primordial causes of the corporeal creature not yet manifest by any light of colour (or) distinction of forms (and) moreover surpassing even the purest intellects” (*Per.* II: 550b). This distinction signifies the third mode of being and non-being, the oppo-

¹⁰ Eriugena further delineates a ternary hierarchy of participation in God, who is the One Cause of all things (*Per.* III: 622C-623C).

¹¹ *Peryphyseon* is a creation of later scholars, derived from Greek to reflect the content of Eriugena’s work. The original Latin title is *De Divisione Naturae* (On the Division of Nature). The term *Peryphyseon* itself is a compound word, with *peri* (περί) meaning around or concerning and *physeon* (φύσεων) from *physis* (φύσις), meaning nature. Thus, *Peryphyseon* can be loosely translated as “concerning nature” or “on the division of nature,” which aligns with Eriugena’s cosmology and the division between the created and the uncreated.

sition between the natural world and the “most secret folds of nature [*in secretissimis naturae sinibus*] which precede them” (*Per.* I: 444C). One may perhaps see echoes of Heraclitus here: “Nature loves to hide [φύσις κρύπτεσθαι φιλεῖ]” (Kahn 1979, 32-3). In any case, Eriugena sought to advance fundamental oppositions to convey the limitations of the intellect, which is nonetheless indispensable for pursuing God. The intellect’s limitations come with his fourfold division of *natura*: created and creates, created that creates, created that does not create, and the uncreated that does not create (*Per.* I: 442a). Here, the opposition is between the created and the uncreated, with two intermediary principles: nature and intellect.

Given that the intellect cannot reach God and the return process is fundamental to Eriugena’s cosmological order, one must consider that reaching God involves abandoning thinking at some point. The difficulty of this pursuit is, like in Denys, accepting the decisive gap en route to God’s unparticipated nature. Despite not having a ‘causal’ relation to the world, God somehow gives rise to all things:

He is created by Himself in the primordial causes and becomes the beginning of all essence [...] descending from the primordial causes which occupy a kind of intermediate position between God and the creature, that is, between that ineffable superessentiality [*ineffabilem superessentialitem*] which surpasses all understanding and the substantially manifest nature which is visible to pure minds, He is made in their effects and is openly revealed in His theophanies [*theophaniis*] (*Per.* III: 683A-B).

Eriugena uses the term *theophaniis* in pursuing God, drawing on Denys’ approach to discuss the *ineffabilem* of God. Harking back to Denys, one cannot know God through the intellect but through God’s divine manifestations θεοφάνεια (*Div. Na.*: 869C-D).¹²

For both, all oppositions only reinforce the prerequisite for theophany. The only way to God’s transcendence beyond all dichotomies is through God’s infinite manifestations: theophanies.

Then we shall not see God Himself in Himself, for not even the angels do so — since this is impossible for every creature. For “He alone”, as the Apostle says, “possesses immortality and dwells in inaccessible light —”; but we shall contemplate certain theophanies which are made in us by Him (*Per.* I: 448C).

¹² Theophany comes from the Ancient Greek words θεός, meaning god, and φαίνειν, meaning to show or appear. Thus, θεοφάνεια translates to the appearance of a god or god showing. *Theophaniis*—the plural form—refers to instances where God reveals himself to a person or group of people through many appearances.

Only by meditating (*medietas*) upon God's theophanies are we effectively returning to God, enacting the cosmological order as Eriugena described. While this may give some precedent to human will, the entire process is the manifestation of God's hiddenness *occulti manifestatio* (Carabine 1995, 360). As Carabine adds, the emergence of being out of the darkness of God is implied: "The paradox of creation is that the original darkness of God, which is no thing, becomes light, becomes some thing. God's fullness above being is the "nothing" that is the negation of something, but through its becoming, it becomes the negation of the negation: the divine nature becomes "other" than itself: God becomes not-God through the process of *ex-stasis*, literally, God's *going out from God*" (Carabine 2000, 35).

Thus, the five modes of being and non-being delineate the threshold of contemplation in pursuing God. The fifth mode decisively distinguishes between the human being's divine image *qua* reason and sin; the latter results in the renouncing the former and "deservedly lost its being and therefore is said not to be" (*Per.* I: 445A). Said differently, the human being's capacity to reason emblemises the image of God and so must be exercised free from sin. Therefore, faith is the missing link for understanding contemplation concurrently with theophany: "those who in the first man were lost and had fallen into a kind of non-subsistence God the Father calls through faith" (P.I:445C-D). Faith and reason must be practised together for the reception of God's theophanies, thereby completing Eriugena's philosophy. By appropriating Denys' θεοφάνεια, Eriugena's theophany becomes the preeminent approach for pursuing God (Grigoras 2020, 297). Creation would be incomprehensible without theophany, with no possibility of union with God. Akin to the faithless or sinner, human beings become non-being without theophany. This way, Denys' formula is revised with the ineffable darkness preceding God's creations, incurring a comprehensive metaphysic. From a strictly rational or perhaps secular perspective, Eriugena and Denys see the highest act of thinking as meditating upon this ineffable darkness. However, only with faith can we understand the connection of God's darkness with theophany. It is not until three centuries later, at the beginning of the High Middle Ages that reason will be approached differently.

Anselm's Turn to Reason

As covered earlier, 'The Father of Scholasticism' Anselm was likely influenced by Denys and Neoplatonism. However, despite no textual evidence linking Eriugena with Anselm, we know Anselm's circle was aware of Eriugena's work (Moran 1989, 272). Although generally consistent, Anselm's approach to God's unknowability is not as systematic as Eriugena's. Some even consider Eriugena's discussion of darkness in the *Periphyseon* a prominent influence on Anselm's formulation of 'the

nothing,' specifically in the context of *ex nihilo* (Moran 1989, 228). Anselm mentions the nothing more than 124 times through chapters three to nineteen alone, an average of more than seven times per chapter (Novak 305, 2008). Before discussing the nothing, Anselm's strategy was clear: to prove one supreme nature among all things. This pursuit of the supreme nature in God necessitates Anselm's commitment to exploring faith; hence, he described the aim of the *Proslogion* as: "faith seeking understanding [*fides quaerens intellectum*]." By setting the stage in the *Monologion*, Anselm opened the first chapter with the argument: "That there is something that is best and greatest and supreme among all existing things" (*Mon*: 1), showing his commitment to proving God's existence. From hereon, all cosmological arguments Anselm advanced were consistent with God's supreme nature.

The role of reason is a feature of Anselm's investigations that Aquinas will later resemble, which distinguishes both from Eriugena and Denys. For Anselm, God's existence can be proven by "reason alone," even if one is "moderately intelligent" (*Mon*: 1). While Anselm conceded many proofs of God through reason, in the first chapter, he described the 'easiest way' as follows: "it is certain that all goods, if they are compared to each other, are either equally or unequally good, it must be that they are all good through something that is understood to be the same in diverse good things, even though it seems that sometimes different goods are said to be good through different things" (*Mon*: 1). The prominent feature of this argument that brings Anselm closer to Eriugena and Denys is the Platonic idea of goods existing *through* something. Hence, Anselm considers that no one doubts that all goods exist through one Good, which "he alone is good through himself," a good which no other is equal to or greater than (*Mon*: 1). In essence, Anselm's supreme Good does not just draw on the Platonic Good, but also Plato's "created order imaging an uncreated order" (Hogg 2016, 76). Based on his Platonist predisposition, Anselm establishes the one source for all good in the world that all can understand.

Anselm further elaborates upon this proof of God in three subsequent chapters, culminating in the fourth chapter, where he surmised that the supreme Good is "good and great through himself" (*Mon*: 4). In his translation of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, Dodds found another important Platonist (or Neoplatonist) parallel; that Proclus' proposition 22: "All that exists primitively and originally in each order is one and not two or more than two, but unique" resembles Anselm's argument in chapter 4: "On the same thing" (*El. Th*: 210). In brief, Anselm's one supreme being can only be truly good through itself, echoing Proclus' argument that there cannot be a multitude of first causes ἀρχῆ. Early twentieth-century French scholars suggest seeing such examples as a link between the Neoplatonists, Plotinus, Proclus, Eriugena, St Augustine and Anselm (Charlesworth 1979, 24). Others insist Anselm's Neoplatonism is of an Augustinian variety (Rogers 1997). Influences aside, from

chapter three onwards, Anselm begins working out the Neoplatonic idea of how beings exist through the supreme good while the supreme Good exists through itself.

In so doing, Anselm's description of the supreme Good unravels the function of 'the nothing' and its relation to God. Anselm's realisation of the complexity of understanding God's creation *ex nihilo* later motivated his celebrated Ontological Argument. Before we get to the latter, we turn to the third chapter of the *Monologion*, where Anselm describes a relatively simple view reminiscent of Eriugena's distinction between being and non-being:

For every existing thing exists either through something or through nothing. But nothing exists through nothing [*nihil est per nihil*]. For it is not so much as conceivable that any existing thing does not exist through something. So whatever exists, exists through something. Since this is so, either there is one thing, or there are several things, through which all existing things exist (*Mon: 3*).

Here, we can focus on the phrase "nothing exists through nothing," which Anselm resounds in chapter eight: "Nothing comes from nothing [*de nihilo nihil*]" (*Mon: 8*). While such discussion of the nothing may sound nonsensical, as Anselm later admits, he nonetheless explains its importance for determining God's creation. Anselm's tentative solution is to consider that God created beings from 'not anything,' that is, they were nothing before emerging into being (M.8).

It is not until the following chapter that we see the parallels with Eriugena's darkness:

Therefore, it is clear that the things that were made were nothing before they were made, in the sense that they were not what they now are [*non erant quod nunc sunt*] and there was not anything from which they were made [*nec erat ex quo fierent*]. Nonetheless, they were not nothing with respect to the reason of their maker, through which and in accordance with which they were made (*Mon: 9*).

Darkness for Eriugena and Denys symbolises the Intellect's lack of ability to penetrate beyond itself into God's creation. While not adopting the darkness theme, Anselm stressed that beings created were not a 'nothing' for God, but only nothing when considered by intellect, that is, 'not what they now are.' In other words, like the darkness obscuring God's creative power, *apropos* Eriugena and Denys, God's action is ineffable only insofar as we seek to understand it through reason. Again, Anselm's God is inaccessible directly but indirectly knowable *per aliud* (Visser and Williams 2009, 118-21). By direct inaccessibility, the not-nothing represents God's unpenetrable mystery outside the bounds of the intellect.

However, God's 'not-nothing' is not inaccessible just because it is beyond the power of the intellect; as Anselm writes in chapter nineteen, "if this interpretation of 'nothing' that I have offered is carefully examined, it is most truly concluded that neither something nor nothing either preceded or will follow the supreme essence and that nothing existed before it or will follow it" (*Mon*: 19). Anselm's God persists beyond all dichotomies, including between something and nothing. We are now better positioned to recognise the Neoplatonic theme in Anselm's Ontological Argument:

Now we believe that you are something than which nothing greater can be thought [*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit*]. So can it be that no such nature exists, since "The fool has said in his heart, "There is no God'?" But when this same fool hears me say "something than which nothing greater can be thought [*aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari potest*]," he surely understands what he hears; and what he understands exists in his understanding, even if he does not understand that it exists [in reality] (*Pro*: 2).

Here, we must focus on what Anselm means by the fool's understanding that which 'nothing greater can be thought.' The crucial point is not that the fool grasps (in understanding) the greatest thing that can be thought, i.e., God, but rather understands the limits of understanding for which God transcends. In other words, that 'which nothing greater can be thought' *belongs* to the fool's understanding and, by correlation, all intellect.¹³ It is important to note here that Anselm's argument was not intended solely as argumentative proof of God but a reflection on how God became self-evident to him.¹⁴ Aquinas systematically develops this 'belonging' as we will soon see, but Anselm's reason must be explicated further.

¹³ Anselm advanced a Neoplatonic conception of the Intellect, in that one human being is representative of all human beings on the intellectual level, which in turn is subordinated to God: "For they do not yet even understand how the plurality of human beings in the species are one human being. How, then, will they comprehend how the plurality of persons in that most hidden and most exalted nature [*secretissima et altissima natura*]—each of whom individually is perfect God—are one God?" (*Ep. Div.* I: 10).

¹⁴ Williams described Anselm's discovery of the Ontological Argument during the years of 1077-1078 as follows: "What he wanted was a single argument that would do everything at once: one argument that 'would by itself be enough to show that God really exists...and whatever we believe about the divine nature'. He became obsessed with the struggle to find this single argument: sometimes success felt just out of reach, sometimes the whole project seemed hopeless. The thought hounded him, try as he might to banish it; he lost his appetite, couldn't sleep, and was too distracted to pay attention during the Daily Office—surely a sign that the whole enterprise was a temptation from the devil. At last, however, the argument came to him (during the Daily Office)" (Williams 2022, 38).

Anselm's innovative use of reason perhaps earned him the title of the inaugurator of scholasticism and a vital figure of the High Middle Ages. While understanding God cannot be achieved solely by reason, this limitation became the ground for all reason in Anselm. In other words, all human beings intuit the limitations of their intellect. The bifurcation between the unknowability of God's creation and the intellect that Eriugena and Denys see as a cosmological imperative – Anselm narrows down as intrinsic to human reasoning. As Anselm noted in *The Letter on the Incarnation of the Word*, the *Monologion* and *Proslogion* aimed at proving God's existence through necessary reason independent of the authority of scripture (*Ep. Div.* VI: 20). Despite this, understanding of the limitations of the human intellect remains insufficient:

There is no room for doubt about what I say: one who has not believed [*non crediderit*], will not understand [*non intelligent*]. For one who has not believed will not experience [*non experietur*], and one who has not experienced will not know [*non cognoscet*] [..] not only is the mind forbidden to rise to understanding higher things apart from faith and obedience to God's commandments, but understanding once granted is taken away and faith itself is destroyed if one does not take care to preserve a good conscience (*Ep. Div.* I: 8-9).

Hence, in line with his predecessors Denys and Eriugena, Anselm affirmed the place of faith and commitment to spiritual practice. In spiritual practice, Anselm aimed to unite faith together with reason to venerate the beauty of God's creation in prayer (Hogg 2016, 31). To be clear, while Anselm elevated the powers of reasoning within the theological context, he nonetheless maintains that all this is for naught should one reason without faith: “that no one will venture to investigate the most exalted questions concerning the faith before he is ready—or so that if he does venture to do so, the difficulty or impossibility of understanding them will not dislodge him from the truth to which he has held fast by faith” (*Ep. Div.* I: 10).

Aquinas' Beatific Vision

Aquinas agreed with Anselm that proof of God is attainable through reason alone, and he also adopted Denys' characterisation of the beauty intrinsic to contemplating God's creative power. Aquinas accepted Denys' conflation of beauty and goodness with God as the most beloved (*Sum. Th.* III: Q98.A5.arg.1) and repeated the latter's characterisation of God: “God is not something existing; but He is rather super-existence, as Dionysius says. Therefore God is not intelligible; but above all intellect” (*Sum. Th.* I: Q12.A1.arg.3). In so doing, Aquinas compounded an increasingly intensifying contemplation of God with an escalating apprehension of

beauty. Thus, Aquinas' Neoplatonic imperative is clear: contemplation draws one toward the beauty of God. By drawing on Aristotle, Aquinas saw the intellect as the most divine aspect of human beings and as something that must be exercised to the greatest of our abilities (*Met.* [7].1177b29-31). In other words, for Aquinas, accepting the limitations of reasoning and affirming God signifies the starting point for union with God. Anselm's proof of God can only be fully actualised through overcoming the intellect in beatific vision.

To understand the role of beatific vision, Aquinas outlined the limitations of the intellect:

Further, there must be some proportion between the knower and the known, since the known is the perfection of the knower. But no proportion exists between the created intellect and God; for there is an infinite distance between them. Therefore the created intellect cannot see the essence of God (*Sum. Th.* 1: Q.12.A.1.arg.4).

For Aquinas, contemplation must supersede itself to overcome this infinite distance, achievable only in the beatific vision of God, a non-objectifying thinking rooted in Neoplatonism that Aquinas sought to develop throughout his *Summa Theologica*. For this reason, Aquinas thought cosmology necessary; one must understand the implications of the intellect's limitations within the broader perspective of the cosmos.

Aquinas presented his Neoplatonic angle in his commentary on the *Book of Causes*, a Latin translation of the Arabic *Elements of Theology*.¹⁵ The intellect's limitations show that God does not mix with his creations – meaning God's unity never weakens irrespective of emanation:

Hence it does not act through any additional relation or disposition through which it would be adapted to and mixed with things. And such a "relation [*habitus*]" is called here a *connecting link* [*continuator*] or mediating thing [*res media*] because through such a disposition or relation an agent is adapted to a recipient, and is in a certain sense a mediating thing between the essence of the agent and the patient itself. So, because the first cause acts through its being, it must rule things in one manner, for it rules things according to the way that it acts. Hence it is clear that its rule is the best and the most beautiful [*est optimum et pulcherrimum*] (*Ldc. Exp.* Pr.20. 12-21).

¹⁵ Aquinas was the first to identify the *Book of Causes* with Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, a product of an anonymous Arabic author's recycling with some original ideas. Aquinas wrote his *Commentary on the Book of Causes* in the early months of 1272, towards the end of his life, showcasing his Neoplatonic philosophy as an interpretative lens through which his metaphysical framework can be understood.

The first cause does not act through relation since that would imply a mixture; instead, the first cause's action mediates between the agent's and recipient's essence. Therefore, the first cause remains 'within itself' as this mediation's best and most beautiful rule.

From Aquinas' understanding of mediation remaining within itself, we may infer, among other reasons, why he described Anselm's proof of God as insufficient on five occasions (Cosgrove 1974, 513-14). While Anselm's intellect knows its limitations, this does not imply that the intellect can apprehend God's 'divine rule.' For Aquinas, the divine rule of God is not subject to any contemplative process; the pursuit of truth "has no place in God." Instead, the intellect that attains the "form of truth, does not think, but perfectly contemplates the truth. Hence, Anselm takes "thought" in an improper sense for "contemplation" (*Sum. Th. I: Q34.A1.ad.2*). Aquinas has a purified intellect in mind, not the abstraction of ideas or concepts. Gorman explains that Aquinas' purified intellect is the divine truth of Christ's beatific vision, which is as complete as any human knowledge could allow; it is a "full infused knowledge, and full acquired knowledge" (Gorman 2012, 430-1)." This acquired knowledge serves as the platform for beatific vision.

Thus, in virtue of his humanity, Christ's beatific vision became what Aquinas deemed the highest form of truth attainable by man:

besides the Divine and uncreated knowledge in Christ, there is in His soul a beatific knowledge, whereby, and things in the Word; and an infused or imprinted knowledge, whereby He knows things in their proper nature by intelligible species proportioned to the human mind (*Sum. Th. III: Q9.A3.co.1*).

Aquinas appropriates Anselm, Denys and Eriugena by focusing on Christ's beatific vision. The person of Christ in incarnation reflects God's earthly truth, an incarnation of beatific knowledge. Hence, one must emulate Christ's beatific vision in pursuit of God. Aquinas thus draws from the Christian narrative, especially the incarnation of Christ, to enforce his Neoplatonism concurrently with his theory of beatific vision. As Blankenhorn explains, Aquinas compared the human being "with the Proclan-Dionysian notion of the "boundary creature," a being on the frontier between the material and immaterial realms" (Blankenhorn 2015, 222).

According to Neoplatonic hierarchical cosmology, humans hold the potential for beatific vision, albeit to varying degrees of potentiality. The human being can refine the intellect and impart greater power to the soul's vision of the divine in nature, humanity, and Christ (Llizo 2019, 20). Hence, Aquinas' contemplation is a progressive hierarchy in the tradition of Neoplatonism and Platonism more generally. Aquinas is, however, explicit regarding his Christian commitments, namely,

the confluence of suffering and progress. Further, the human being's emulation of Christ's beatific vision is suffering, which springs "from Christ's active intellect, which is natural to the human soul" (*Sum. Th.* III: Q9.A4.co.1).¹⁶ Therefore, it is here that Aquinas' break with Anselm is most apparent. Anselm's natural awareness of the limitations of the intellect must include the simultaneous awareness of the beatific vision of the soul for Aquinas. Aquinas' awareness is the awareness of Christ's divine knowledge of the soul that is natural to us all. In other words, just as the intellect's limitation is intrinsic to the human being, beatific vision is 'natural' to the human soul. Therefore, contemplating God in unison with faith consummates in a non-discursive vision of God. Suffering reflects the contemplative struggle for the beatific vision of God, a debt Aquinas owes to Neoplatonism. Hence, Aquinas' purified intellect of the beatific vision reflects a Neoplatonic 'simple insight' *intuitus simplex* (Nieuwenhove 2017, 39).¹⁷

In sum, Anselm advocated prayer and theophany to overcome thinking but did not explicitly ground them in a cosmology compared with Aquinas. The intellect that affirms God must include the pathway to a simple and non-discursive beatific vision. The human being is inextricably bound to God through the intellect; God's infusion of the theological virtues directs the human being to God as the beatifying end (Wawrykow 2012, 287-88). In other words, Aquinas' pursuit of God is predicated by the simple intellect, which is to be exercised or 'suffered.' The perpetual struggle mediated by human weakness "does not entail a cosmic fallenness from pure unity, but the way of life that God's wisdom assigns to us" (Blankenhorn 2015,

¹⁶ Aquinas explained by citing the Hebrews 5:8: "Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (*Sum. Th.* III: Q9.A4.s.c.1). This notion parallels Denys' description of 'suffering' the sacred scriptures, as he claimed the author of the *Elements of Theology* had done: "I have said enough about this elsewhere and my famous teacher has marvelously praised in his *Elements of Theology* whatever he learned directly from the sacred writers, whatever his own perspicacious and laborious research of the scriptures uncovered for him, or whatever was made known to him through that more mysterious inspiration, not only learning but also experiencing [παθών] the divine things" (*Div. Na:* 648B). The author here is named Hierotheus, but this is likely a pseudonym for Proclus.

¹⁷ Here, Aquinas' reference is to both Aristotle's *On The Soul* ([4].429b22-27) and numerous references in Neoplatonism, i.e., *Enn.* 2 (12) §2.4.2:[5-8]. One passage in Proclus' *Commentary on Parmenides* is particularly noteworthy: "The one is like intellect, for it belongs to intellect to contemplate Being since primary being is the object of the highest intellect; the other is like science, for it is its function to consider contradictories together and to admit the true and reject the false. One of them has "advanced proofs in beautiful and goodly fashion," and he who has been led up to real Being itself necessarily has his soul filled with the beauty and goodness there; and this is the "beautiful and goodly fashion"" (*Parm. Com.* 704-705).

223). Suffering is incumbent upon human beings' intellectual power, reflecting the struggle for the beatific vision of God. In this way, Aquinas advanced further than his predecessors in pursuing God. Aquinas' beatific vision represents the human being's direct access to God "without mediating theophanies" (Blankenhorn 2015, 299). While God's essence remains beyond reasoning or contemplation, for Aquinas, God's beauty nonetheless incites human beings' natural desire to pursue God. Hence, Aquinas' non-discursive culmination of thinking reflects the most divine aspect of the human being, an Aristotelian insight coupled with a Neoplatonic emanationism.¹⁸

Conclusion

The *Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum* instigated the beginning of philosophical theology in the Middle Ages. It reached its apotheosis in Aquinas, a key figure immediately preceding the separation of philosophy and theology (Kerr 2002, 93). This paper observed the varied approaches to pursuing God between Denys and Aquinas, including Eriugena and Anselm as intermediaries. Our investigation shows a decisive philosophical shift from the Early Middle Ages (476-1000 AD) to the (1000-1300 AD) Higher Middle Ages. Despite the transformation over several centuries, core Neoplatonic themes remained consistent. Most importantly, overcoming the intellect to reach God was essential to all thinkers despite differing methods. With Denys' contemplation of darkness, apophaticism is advanced, carving away what is not beautiful and, by correlation, not God. In following a Platonic ascent, for Denys, the higher the climb, the less is known and the more beautiful; the process is simultaneously hierarchical and negative.

Eriugena is mostly consistent with Denys, although signs of scholasticism virtually nonexistent in the latter emerge in the former. Eriugena systematically developed his cosmology based on Neoplatonism, including expanding on Denys' darkness to draw the boundaries of the intellect. In so doing and using dialectics, Eriugena drew from Christian theology and Neoplatonic philosophy, with the dichotomy between being and non-being holding a central place in his thought. For Eriugena, the relationship between intellect, the divine creation and the ultimate return of all things to God is grounded in his cosmology. The turn to Anselm revealed the first explicit attempt at the proof of God without faith, emblematic of

¹⁸ For example, Aristotle's description of the divine science in his *Metaphysics* ([2]. 983a4-10). One can also directly compare Aquinas' beatific vision with Denys' theurgy (*Ecc. He*: 372B). Denys' theurgy completes the pursuit of God's beauty, where descriptions are no longer possible beyond "all vision and knowledge" (*My. Th*: 1025A).

the beginning of the High Middle Ages. At the same time, also regularly employing Neoplatonic themes such as overcoming thinking in prayer, Anselm subjected reason's relation to faith to inquiry, perhaps earning him the title of the Father of Scholasticism.

Anselm's self-evident proof of God was the starting point for his arguments in the *Proslogion*, that is, supporting said self-evident truth. Anselm concluded by clarifying the necessity of faith and spiritual practice in reaching God, which then receives a comprehensive development in Aquinas. Drawing on Neoplatonism and Denys' writing, Aquinas systematically supplanted non-objectifying thinking into his metaphysics, symbolising the peak of the High Middle Ages. Aquinas' deep engagement with the *Book of Causes* demonstrates a deeper engagement with Neoplatonism than Anselm. The resulting distinction is in Aquinas' emphasis on the intellect's limitations as the ground for beatific vision, a direct and simple experience of God. In other words, only in beatific vision can God be reached, a Neoplatonic approach to overcoming the intellect rendered in Christian terminology. In conclusion, this paper explored the Neoplatonism underpinning thinkers of the early to High Middle Ages. We show that Neoplatonism was crucial for engaging with God's unknowability. However, the *Corpus Dionysiacum Areopagiticum* remains the dominant influence on the thinkers discussed in this paper, an already Christianised Neoplatonism.

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