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Dionysius, Derrida, and the Critique of  
Ontotheology

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# DIONYSIUS, DERRIDA, AND THE CRITIQUE OF "ONTOTHEOLOGY"

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*A Warm(ish) Welcome*

The question of Jacques Derrida's reception of Pseudo-Dionysius—and more broadly, of the hospitality deconstruction offers to or withholds from negative theology of the Dionysian tradition—can be traced back to Derrida's 1968 lecture, "*Différance*," in which he first sketched the contours of this notoriously slippery pseudo-concept. Marked by an inaudible "a," *différance* encodes equiprimordial processes of spatial differentiation and temporal delay. "In a conceptuality adhering to classical strictures," Derrida explains, "'*différance*' would be said to designate a constitutive, productive, and originary causality, the process of scission and division which would produce or constitute different things or differences."<sup>1</sup> Derrida claims, however, that "classical conceptuality" can never quite get a grip on this aboriginal *mouvance*, because *différance* gives rise to conceptuality in the first place. Neither a word nor an idea, *différance* opens the possibility of representations themselves, thereby exceeding and preceding all of them. This movement of difference and delay can therefore be said to be neither present nor absent, neither passive nor active; before darkness and light, beyond good and evil.

Particularly in the context of this particular collection of essays, Derrida's twentieth-century address to the *Société française de philosophie* seems positively haunted by Dionysius' sixth-century address (by way of Timothy) to the Trinity that dwells "considerably prior" to all oppositions, "beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion."<sup>2</sup> Like *différance*, the Trinity is "higher than any being, any divinity, any goodness."<sup>3</sup> Like *différance*, it exceeds the metaphysical distinctions of which it is the transcendent Cause. And indeed, Derrida acknowledges in the opening minutes of

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this lecture that *différance* does tend to collide strategically with apophatic discourse: “already we have had to delineate that *différance* is not, does not exist, is not a present-being (*on*) in any form; and we will be led to delineate also everything that it is not, that is, *everything*; and consequently that it has neither existence nor essence. It derives from no category of being, whether present or absent.” At one level, then, *différance* seems at times to be “indistinguishable from negative theology.”<sup>4</sup>

“And yet,” he goes on to say, “those aspects of *différance* which are thereby delineated are not theological, not even in the order of the most negative of negative theologies.” The reason Derrida is so intent upon making this distinction is that, as he understands it, negative theologies “are always concerned with disengaging a superessentiality beyond the finite categories of essence and existence, that is, of presence, and always hastening to recall that God is refused the predicate of existence, only in order to acknowledge his superior, inconceivable, and ineffable mode of being.”<sup>5</sup> Negative theology, in other words, ultimately services an ultra-positive theology. At the end of the day, even “the most negative of negative theologies” knows where it comes from, where it is going, and how to get there. *Différance*, by contrast, neither is nor has any arche-teleological anchor: no being above being, good beyond being, or God without being to govern the play of signs it unleashes. The clarity of this distinction notwithstanding, the first scholar to respond from the floor in 1968 insisted that *différance* could not be disentangled from the apophatic Creator: “It is the source of everything and one cannot know it,” he argued; “it is the God of negative theology.” Derrida’s infamous response: “It is and it is not. It is above all not.”<sup>6</sup>

As Derrida will acknowledge eighteen years later, however, such a disavowal gets him into a bit of a bind. If negative theology operates by means of denial, how exactly is one meant to go about denying that one is doing negative theology? If “the most negative of negative theologies” leads the apophatic voyager to God, then how is one meant to say, “no, I’m not heading for God”? Underscoring this difficulty, Derrida calls his most thorough treatment of the work of Dionysius in relation to his own, “How to Avoid Speaking: Denials [*Dénégations*].” On the one hand, he explains, deconstruction and Dionysius (and Eckhart, who is woven into the analysis) share a certain strategy of denial. Both assert that “predicative language is inadequate” to that which sets it in motion; both are marked by a series of neither/nors that provoke the collapse of binary language; and both can be named by nearly every name, but encompassed by none.<sup>7</sup> Recalling the initial reception of *différance*, Derrida reminds his audience that “very early, I was accused of . . . resifiting the procedures of negative theology,”<sup>8</sup> and of falling prey to the same errors to which apophaticism is purportedly inclined: atheism; nihilism; speaking without really saying anything; and worst of all, creating a “secret society”—a brooding “Mafia” of followers who speak a language no one else understands, as if possessed of some private revelation.<sup>9</sup>

Having given voice to all these strategic and accusative alliances, however, Derrida goes on to say—without footnote, qualification, or parenthetical remark—“No, what I write is not negative theology.”<sup>10</sup> Of course, it is tempting to recuperate even this denial under the apophatic tent, and Derrida concedes that “this reading will always be possible. Who could prohibit it? In the name of what?”<sup>11</sup> That having been said, the reason Derrida keeps trying to deny what might, in the end, be undeniable is twofold: first, he is attempting to shed the unfortunate image of Theoretical Mafioso. Deconstruction does not—or ought not to—gather a “secret society” around itself because, as John Caputo emphasizes, “the secret is there is no secret.”<sup>12</sup> There is no arcane language, practice, or revelation; no decoder ring; no need to purify oneself from the crowds before approaching the unspeakable A of *différance*.<sup>13</sup> By comparison, the Neoplatonic politics and rigid ecclesiology of Dionysius seems—from this perspective—unregenerately exclusivist and hierarchical.<sup>14</sup> Secondly, Derrida maintains that Dionysius, like Eckhart, only denies the predicates of God in order to attribute them to him even more strongly, so that for all its darkness and unknowing, the apophatic voyage retains a determinate *telos*, and is guided “unerringly”<sup>15</sup> by “the promise of a presence.”<sup>16</sup> For these reasons, while deconstruction has everything to do with negative theology, it also “has nothing to do with negative theology.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, “it is and it is not.”

Because this disavowal of apophaticism remains persistently—almost comically—apophatic, it has prompted an outpouring of scholarship. There is an uncanny relationship, these studies suggest, between the deconstruction opened by the death of God and the *via negativa* guided by the living one.<sup>18</sup> Ranking among “the most negative of negative” theologians, Dionysius has been the focal point of many of these variously theological, post-theological, and a/theological perspectives projects. Unsurprisingly, critical theorists with an interest in keeping the *saeculum* secular have tended to overemphasize the prodigious differences between Derrida and Dionysius. Conversely, theologians with an interest in remaining relevant (and employed) in the midst of the ever-imminent ontotheological collapse tend to overemphasize the compelling similarities. It is with this latter “half” of the conversation that I will be most concerned here, mainly because its stakes are so high. If only the gap between these post- and pre-modern negativities could be closed, contemporary theology seems to say wistfully, then we could be assured once and for all that the Trinity is not a transcendental signified; that the God of revelation is not “the God of the philosophers”; that the dead God was never God to begin with. And yet, the sheer proliferation of these studies indicates that neither Derrida nor Dionysius provides such assurance. Is God really a hyper-essence? Is apophaticism really deconstructive? Is deconstruction really apophatic? After all the monographs, edited volumes, articles, lectures, and international conferences, the bottom line seems genuinely to be: “it is and it is not.”

At this juncture, it seems important to note that the peri-theological conversation between deconstruction and apophaticism has been almost entirely *linguistic*; that is to say, it has never quite entered the terrain of the ethico-political. This is striking, considering that in Derrida's later work, the political implications of deconstruction become clearer: by provoking the collapse of every totalizing pretension, deconstruction welcomes the emergence of that which totalities exclude. In this chapter, I hope therefore to accomplish two things: first, to set out the critique of ontotheology as groundwork for the conversation at hand, and secondly, to re-examine Dionysius through a more political Derridean lens. Ultimately, I will suggest that establishing a lasting consonance between these thinkers will depend on the relations to otherness in Dionysius; in particular, those grounded by hierarchy and teleology. Does hierarchy for Dionysius function strictly "vertically," bringing a few chosen souls into union with God, or does it also establish ethical relations between and among creatures? And whatever its vectorial specifics, does the *via negativa* draw the soul along a pre-determined path from hyperessence to hyperessence, or might it remain sufficiently indeterminate to welcome the unimaginable?

### *How Did We Get Here?*

Although the term "ontotheology" was brought into common philosophical usage through the work of Martin Heidegger, it first appeared in Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. For Kant, "ontotheology" designates the philosophical effort to prove God's existence *a priori*, as distinct from "cosmotheology," which endeavors to prove God's existence *a posteriori*.<sup>19</sup> As is well known, Kant accepted the validity of neither approach, dismantling the ontological, cosmological, and teleological proofs of God in fairly rapid succession.<sup>20</sup> This feat, for which Kant earned the title *Der Allzermalmende* (the All-Destroyer), relied on his conviction that reason can know things as they appear (*phenomena*), but can never know things in themselves (*noumena*). God, the archetypal "in itself," fell decidedly for Kant within the realm of the noumenal, and therefore could not be demonstrated through "pure," that is to say, speculative, reason. Justifying pre-emptively his refutation of every proof of God's existence, Kant wrote, "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>21</sup> What Kant did *not* write in the first Critique was that faith would not actually get all that much room; he had a different kind of knowledge, and a different kind of proof, waiting in the wings.

In the second Critique, Kant makes what might be called a controlled incursion into the noumenal by designating three "necessary postulates": human freedom, personal immortality, and God.<sup>22</sup> While inaccessible to pure reason, these three are indispensable to practical reason because, in Kant's view, it is impossible to behave morally unless one believes one has: 1) the capacity to choose a moral existence, 2) an infinite amount of time in which

to strive after it, and 3) a God who oversees the whole process. In his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, Kant parlays this final postulate into a "moral proof" of God's existence. To adhere to the moral law, he argues, any ethical subject needs an ethical commonwealth. Any ethical commonwealth needs a common law-giver. And any *moral* law-giver must be able to discern the intentions behind deeds and dispense rewards or punishments accordingly. "But this is the concept of God as moral ruler of the world,"<sup>23</sup> writes Kant, triumphant, having demonstrated that the basic requirements of morality open onto an absolutely necessary (if thoroughly circumscribed) God. With this "moral proof," Kant effectively fills in the space he had carved out for faith, gathering God, religion, and the noumenal itself under the confines of "reason alone." Unwilling to let the unknowable remain unknowable, Kant attempts instead to overcome it by reinstalling God as a (morally helpful) presupposition *a priori*. In short, he resorts to an ontotheological concept of God in order to guarantee the integrity of practical reason.

Over a century later, Martin Heidegger will argue that it is not only Kant who capitulates to ontotheology; rather, the whole history of western metaphysics has refused to abide the unknowable. For Heidegger, metaphysics is *constituted* onto-theologically, by which he means two things: first, that the philosophical concept of "being" has meant nothing more than a property common to all beings, and second, that this fuzzily-conceived property is equated with a presumed "highest being" [*summum ens*], which metaphysics calls God.<sup>24</sup> Conflating being, ordinary beings, and a highest being in this manner, metaphysics has never actually managed to think being at all. Metaphysics thinks it represents being when it represents beings, but fails to realize that being conditions, and therefore eludes, representation itself. As Heidegger explains it, metaphysics represents beings in a certain light, without being able to see the light that allows beings to be in the first place.<sup>25</sup> Or, as he says elsewhere (and here we begin to sense a transition into Derrida), metaphysics calculates the differences between beings, but cannot calculate the incalculable difference that brings differences into being.<sup>26</sup>

What Heidegger argues less often, but no less insistently, is that by equating being with the general run of beings and then identifying this whole ontic mess with God, ontotheology does as much disservice to God as it does to being. Unlike the God who delivers his people from slavery or proclaims good news to the poor, the "God" of metaphysics is merely the first being in a causal chain, the *causa sui* that prevents some dreaded infinite regress. All told, this is a bloodless and boring God, before whom "man" can neither pray nor dance, to whom he would never feel compelled to make a sacrifice.<sup>27</sup> The reason that "man" would not be inclined to give anything over to the *causa sui* is that this "God" is nothing more than a narcissistic projection of "man" in the first place. The thinking self creates him, gives him his lines, and pushes him on stage at the right time: "the deity can come into philosophy

only insofar as philosophy, of its own accord and by its own nature, requires and determines that and how the deity enters into it."<sup>28</sup> Ontotheology, in sum, is bad ontology *and* bad theology.

Now Heidegger, at least if we take him at his word, is strictly concerned with rehabilitating the ontological component of thinking. As he insists numerous times in lectures and essays, being is not God; God is not being; and so he is not writing a theology; he has not written a theology; and, as he told an audience in 1951, if he ever *were* to write a theology, "the word 'being' ought not to appear there."<sup>29</sup> Heidegger's lifelong project, despite shifting emphases and fresh neologisms, was rather to recall the truth of being. To the extent that being remains metaphysically unthinkable, Heidegger was thus calling for a thinking of the unthinkable itself, a thinking that would open onto "another beginning" for thought. It is this call to which deconstruction can perhaps best be heard as a response. Like Heidegger, Derrida consistently looks toward a thinking of the unthinkable, in service of the possibility of the impossible.

### *Where Are We Going?*

Although Derrida (and probably Heidegger) would protest vociferously at the comparison, it is perhaps helpful to note the structural similarity between Heideggerian "being" and Derridean "*différance*."<sup>30</sup> In short, both bring into play that which *is*, thereby eluding is-ness itself. Neither can be grasped by the calculations and representations they enable. Both go by many names, but can be encompassed by none of them. And so both of these efforts to unhinge ontotheology lead thinking, once again, toward and away from the Dionysian *via negativa*, with its unknowable, unnameable God.

"I will speak, therefore, of a letter." Thus begins Derrida's lecture on *différance*. This letter, the object of his inaugural promise, is "the first letter": the letter that will set *différance* apart graphically but not phonetically: the letter "A."<sup>31</sup> In the beginning, then, we have an aleph, an alpha; the shadow of the biblical God instantaneously cast over *différance*. Perhaps preferring not to speak of this aleph,<sup>32</sup> Derrida notes instead the resemblance between the A and the shape of the pyramid (managing not to mention it also looks like a mountain). The pyramid is of particular relevance because *différance*, Derrida tells us, proclaims "the death of the tyrant."<sup>33</sup> *Différance*, in other words, sounds the death-knell of the ontotheological God, who nevertheless haunts its every move. This is the reason deconstruction has nothing to do with negative theology, and everything to do with negative theology.

Sympathetic readers of Dionysius—myself included—have been inclined to argue that the Dionysian thearchy bears very little resemblance to Derrida's dead tyrant; that is, to the ontotheological moral guarantor, *summum ens*, *causa sui*, or "transcendental signified" installed as a regulative *punctum* beyond the play of differences.<sup>34</sup> For while it is undoubtedly the case that

Dionysius calls God "being," a "supra-essential subsistence," and "totally undifferentiated," it is also the case that he unsays all of these attributes.<sup>35</sup> Granted, *all* names of God must eventually be unsaid, but good Neoplatonic terms like "being," "essence," and "undifferentiation" can be particularly misleading because the Dionysian God is triune; that is, self-identical only by means of differentiation and relation. Moreover, Dionysius tells us that this internally dynamic thearchy constantly pours itself into the created hierarchies, "carried outside of himself in the loving care he has for everything."<sup>36</sup> Far from remaining transcendently *in se* like a highest being should, "He is, as it were, beguiled by goodness, by love, and by yearning and is enticed away from his transcendent dwelling place and comes to abide within all things, and he does so by virtue of his supernatural and ecstatic capacity to remain, nevertheless, within himself."<sup>37</sup> Dionysius' God, in other words, refuses to stand still like a good metaphysical lodestone; in fact, it defies the logic of rest and motion, internality and externality. This is the reason the soul must abandon itself as a knowing self before it can be lifted to union with God. As Dionysius advises Timothy, "leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and . . . by an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow which is above everything that is."<sup>38</sup>

It is clear, then, that there is a significant conceptual difference between the God to whom Dionysius leads Timothy and the God of modern ontotheology; namely, the Dionysian God refuses to be conceptualized. Rather than securing knowledge, he disables it; rather than affirming human subjectivity, he dismantles it. Rather than performing the role of Archimedean Point, "the Trinity is not in any one location in such a manner as to be 'away from' one place or moving from 'one spot to another.'"<sup>39</sup> Nevertheless, while it is safe to say that Dionysius (at his most negative) stubbornly resists ontotheology, I would submit that he cannot so quickly be called *deconstructive* because of the persistent questions the kind of relations to otherness that Dionysian hierarchy and teleology seem to condone.

As I have mentioned, scholarship on Dionysius and Derrida tends to focus on the "early," "linguistic" period of Derrida's work, rather than on the "later," more explicitly political period. In the "*Différance*" lecture, Derrida had already explained that insofar as deconstruction reveals the inherent instability of all concepts and identities, it unsettles all configurations of domination.<sup>40</sup> What he begins to suggest in his later work is that this structural dismantling opens up possibilities that are, within the reigning structure of things, unthinkable. By revealing the irreducible ambivalence of everyday words, such as hospitality, democracy, and decision, deconstruction pushes ever outward toward a more hospitable hospitality, a more democratic democracy, and a decision that actually decides—all in service of "the undeconstructible" promise of justice.<sup>41</sup> To the extent that justice is never

done, but always still to-come (*à-venir*), deconstruction functions as “the very experience of the (impossible) possibility of the impossible,”<sup>42</sup> welcoming the coming of the “wholly other” that “the possible” excludes. In this light, deconstruction takes on what Derrida comes to call a “messianic” quality, but “without messianism”; that is to say, without knowing in advance who or what the *à venir* might be, where or when it might come, or for whom.<sup>43</sup>

The relevance of this deconstructive “messianism” to a broadly conceived “religion” has been treated most notably by John Caputo in his *Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida*. The relevance of Derrida’s later work to *apophaticism*, by contrast, has been all but completely neglected—and perhaps partly owing to Caputo’s own strategic fission of the two. “Derrida’s religion,” Caputo suggests, “is more prophetic than apophatic, more in touch with the Jewish prophets than with Christian Neoplatonists, more messianic and more eschatological than mystical. His writing is more inscribed by the promise, by circumcision, and by the mark of father Abraham than by mystical transports, more like Amos and Isaiah than Pseudo-Dionysius, moved more by prophetic-ethico-political aspiration than by aspiring to be with the One.”<sup>44</sup> This separation of the mystical from the political echoes a common enough perception of the apophatic voyager. Traditionally, the “mystical subject” has been construed as individualistic at best and elitist at worst, dragging itself (and a few worthy disciples) up the celestial ranks only to disappear into the divine darkness and leave the rest of the world to its own pathetic devices. Given this set of concerns—seemingly justified by the irreducibly hierarchical constitution of Dionysius’ world—it could be the case that any anti-ontotheological retrieval of the Areopagite’s work might have the unfortunate side-effect of compromising the sort of justice to which the Algerian calls thinking. This is especially threatening considering Dionysius’ instruction to an unruly monk that “justice is pursued when each wishes to give every one his due. And this must always be pursued justly by all, *not beyond their worth and order*.”<sup>45</sup>

This irreducibly hierarchical nature of Dionysian justice forms the basis of Derrida’s attempt to distance himself from apophysis. *Différance*, he argues, neither establishes nor rules any ontological order; to the contrary, it unsettles all structures of domination, however benevolent they might be. “[*Différance*] governs nothing, reigns over nothing, and nowhere exercises any authority . . . Not only is there no kingdom of *différance*, but *différance* instigates the subversion of every kingdom.”<sup>46</sup> Because there is neither king nor kingdom, there is furthermore no “way” to get there. For while Derrida admits that the *via negativa* is a dark and unsettling path, he maintains it is nevertheless a *path* (down the hierarchy and then back up), “leading to union with God.”<sup>47</sup> In work on the messianic, Derrida explains that the problem with any such “calculable programme” is that it closes off any opening to something new and unexpected. “Paradoxically,” Derrida claims, “the absence of horizon conditions the future itself.”<sup>48</sup> For this reason, deconstruc-

tion moves without a destination, functioning as a "strategy without finality," or a "blind tactics."<sup>49</sup> And it is precisely this indeterminacy that awaits the coming of the unexpected. The question to be addressed, then, is whether or not these are exhaustive readings of Dionysius. Is it the case that hierarchy can *only* buttress the vertical dominion of certain creatures over others, and of God over all? Does the world-in-the-image-of-the-triune-God simply reaffirm elitist configurations of power? Or might it, in a different light, condition the possibility of unimagined horizontal alliances? Does the cosmic hierarchy invariably serve as a fixed horizon, obstructing the emergence of something genuinely new? Or might the total *agnosia* of the apophatic voyage prepare the way of the *tout autre*?

### *Hierarchy, Teleology, and the Problem of the Political*

It was Dionysius who coined the term "hierarchy," positing it as "a sacred order, a state of understanding, and an activity approximating as closely as possible to the divine."<sup>50</sup> Perhaps for this reason, the Dionysian hierarchies are always articulated in threes: the cosmos is differentiated into spiritual, ecclesiastical, and material orders, themselves triune.<sup>51</sup> So the nine ranks of angels are classed in three groups of three;<sup>52</sup> the Church is arranged into deacons, priests, and bishops; the sacraments into baptism, Eucharist, and chrism; the life of prayer into purification (*katharsis*), contemplation (*theoria*), and union (*henosis*);<sup>53</sup> and the individual soul into appetite, emotion, and reason.<sup>54</sup>

In order to consider the kind of "justice" these hierarchies establish, it is important to note that the Dionysian cosmic order is different from Neoplatonic emanation schemes in two fundamental ways. First, in the same way that God does not rest in himself ontotheologically but rather *is in-ecstasis*, the triune orders in God's image do not simply sit "below" him. Rather, like the Trinity itself,<sup>55</sup> they move in loving relation to one another, both within and between different ranks. For this reason, Dionysius describes the divine intelligences as circling around the Good, diving into creation, and spiraling through all realms, "providing for those beneath them [as] they continue to remain what they are."<sup>56</sup> Similarly, bishops only serve and circle around the Good insofar as they offer guidance to the priests and deacons below them. Likewise all the clergy with respect to the sponsors and catechumens. And so, this constitutive movement and relation within and among striations opens classic emanation onto a different dimension entirely, where motion and rest, identity and difference are non-exclusive.

The other major distinction between Dionysian and Neoplatonic hierarchies is that God does not "trickle down" from seraphim to thrones, from angels to bishops, monks to charging bears, and worms to stones. Rather, as Eric Perl has argued, each creature is, by virtue of the hierarchies, related *directly* to God, who "dwells wholly and immediately in every creature, but in

the undifferentiated way which is proper to and constitutive of each one."<sup>57</sup> At the same time, the triune movements within the hierarchies prevent this relation between God and "each one" from collapsing into spiritual solipsism. "There is no opposition between 'direct' and 'mediated' participation in God," Perl explains. "It's one and the same light, that is God himself, which is directly present in the appropriate way at every level."<sup>58</sup> For this reason, each creature becomes fully itself in relation to other creatures *and* to God, "participat[ing] directly in God precisely by occupying . . . its own proper position in the cosmic hierarchy."<sup>59</sup> Or, as Alexander Golitzin puts it, "one does not so much climb *up* our hierarchy, the Church, as enter more fully *into* it."<sup>60</sup> And insofar as the hierarchy images and participates in the thearchy, "entering more fully into hierarchy" amounts to entering more fully into God.

In the language of *The Divine Names* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*, God draws the soul into fuller participation in the hierarchy through love. "Beguiled by goodness,"<sup>61</sup> God pours Godself excessively into creation (*proodos*), which, in turn, is drawn erotically back into God (*epistrophe*). The souls that are drawn into this love become "clear and spotless mirrors reflecting the glow of primordial light and indeed of God himself."<sup>62</sup> Loving divine love by means of divine love, such souls participate in the primordial *generosity* of God: "when its members have received this full and divine splendor they can then pass on this light generously and in accordance with God's will to beings farther down the scale."<sup>63</sup> Granted, this final phrase seems to reinscribe a unidirectional account of relation, "down" the stratified cosmos. But here we should recall the three interwoven movements of all beings, by virtue of which "down" is at the same time up, out, around, and through. "Hence the interrelationship of all things in accordance with capacity. Hence, the harmony and the love which are formed between them but which do not obliterate identity. Hence, the innate togetherness of everything. Hence, too, the intermingling of everything, the persistence of things, the unceasing emergence of things."<sup>64</sup>

Taken on its own, this radical interconnectedness of God and all things might seem to put to rest any concerns about the apophatic subject's purported elitism; to dismantle forever the familiar image of the mystic as "self-absorbed, solitary, narcissistic, and world-renouncing."<sup>65</sup> With his account of the "intermingling of everything" Dionysius clearly indicates that, as Thomas Carlson writes, "proximity to the other and proximity to others" are "inextricably bound."<sup>66</sup> Along this interpretation, there could be no question of the self's abandonment of the wretched world for God, for the wretched world is the means by which we are related to God. Moving more deeply into this possibility, one might even be inclined to draw Dionysian theology into the register of Levinasian ethics, according to which "God" names the infinitely Desirable, who continually redirects our love to the infinitely *undesirable*: the poor, huddled masses around us. This is what

"transcendence" means for Levinas: not merely a stubborn inaccessibility to ontology, but more importantly, "A turning around by which the Desirable escapes Desire. The goodness of the Good . . . inclines the movement it calls forth to turn it away from the Good and orient it toward the other, and only thus toward the Good."<sup>67</sup> Might such an "inextricability" of the other and the Other be the ethical outcome of Dionysius' spotless mirrors?

It might and it might not. But Derrida at least entertains the idea. Noting that the apophatic voice "multiplies itself: it says one thing and its contrary,"<sup>68</sup> Derrida writes "Sauf le nom: Post-Scriptum" as a dialogue between two of him. One voice begins by saying that *The Mystical Theology* has a double-addressee: "Dionysius the Areopagite . . . articulates a certain prayer, turned toward God; he links it with an address to the disciple, more precisely to the becoming-disciple of him who is thus called to hear." What this means is that the apophatic address binds the soul to God through other people—specifically, through Timothy and Dionysius' (properly initiated) readers. The first voice continues, "An apostrophe (to God) is turned toward another apostrophe in the direction of him . . .," at which point his alter-ego interrupts, "—Never of her."<sup>69</sup> No; never of her. As the *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* warns, "Let your sharing of the sacred befit the sacred things: Let it be by way of sacred enlightenment for sacred men only."<sup>70</sup> This is a significant delimitation. It is nevertheless important to note that Derrida locates in the apophatic apostrophe a relation that is at once vertical and horizontal. Much like the redirection of the Levinasian Good, "This conversation turns (itself) toward the other in order to turn (it) toward God, without there being an order to these two movements that are in truth the same, without one or the other being circumvented or diverted."<sup>71</sup> And so, even in the seemingly churchless, unchristological *Mystical Theology*,<sup>72</sup> there is no way up to God except out through (male) others. Levinasians and social gospelers alike might be tempted at this point to overlook the misogyny as an unavoidable cultural remnant, open the sphere of addressees across lines of sex and gender, and proclaim the thoroughly ethical nature of Dionysius' theology. Except—and this is where Derrida always pulls back from Dionysius—except for the repeated insistence that divine things only be shared within an exceedingly limited circle of friends.

"But see to it that none of this comes to the hearing of the uninitiated," Dionysius admonishes Timothy.<sup>73</sup> In *The Mystical Theology*, this unworthy throng is divided into just two types of people: ontotheologians ("those . . . who imagine there is nothing beyond instances of individual being and who think that by their own intellectual resources they can have direct knowledge of him who has made the shadows his hiding place") and idolators ("those others . . . who describe the transcendent Cause of all things in terms derived from the lowest orders of being").<sup>74</sup> In *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, however, the ranks of the undesirable multiply considerably. During the mass, it is the unfortunate lot of the deacons to rid the church of those

who are not suited for Holy Communion, including the possessed, the uninitiated, the incompletely initiated, the previously-initiated-but-now-degenerate, the intemperate, the intemperate-yet-resolved-not-to-be-intemperate, and finally, "those who . . . are neither completely unblemished nor completely unstained."<sup>75</sup> (One wonders if there would be anyone left!) There are similar warnings in *The Divine Names* and *The Celestial Hierarchy*, where half of the function of Scriptural imagery is to ensure "that the sacred and hidden truth about the celestial intelligences . . . be inaccessible to the *hoi polloi*. Not everyone is sacred and, as scripture says, knowledge is not for everyone."<sup>76</sup>

But surely, one might ask, mindful of Matthew 25, surely the things of God *ought* to be for everyone? In particular, for the lowest and hungriest and poorest of all?<sup>77</sup> Did the Nazarene reject the possessed and blemished? Did the Sermon on the Mount not suggest that the *hoi polloi* are beloved of God? I imagine that Dionysius would respond by suggesting that the possessed and blemished masses be initiated and purified. I should clarify: this would be Dionysius in a particularly expansive mood; for while the bulk of his writing is not nearly so universalizing, he does make a few significant gestures toward such a possibility. For example, he attributes to bishops the Pauline desire for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."<sup>78</sup> Because the bishop images the divine so clearly, he "pours out on everyone the shining beams of his inspired teaching . . . ready to give light to whoever approaches . . . He displays neither a grudge nor profane anger over previous apostasy and transgressions."<sup>79</sup> While it is clear, then, that different people occupy different stages along the Dionysian way, it seems at times that that way is open to all. The deacons purify the catechumens so that the priests might illuminate them and the bishop might perfect them. Every man, it seems, can *eventually* be led "to embark upon the illuminated contemplation of and communion with the most lustrous sacramental rites."<sup>80</sup> Most democratically of all, despite Dionysius' repeated attempts to ward off the *hoi polloi* through spoken warnings, he is, after all, *writing*—disseminating the holiest of holies utterly indiscriminately to God knows who.

On the one hand, then, Dionysius is almost obsessively worried about contamination; on the other hand, he opens the door to "whoever approaches." "Two concurrent desires divide apophatic theology," Derrida explains: "The desire to be inclusive of all, thus understood by all (community, *koine*) and the desire to keep or entrust the secret within the very strict limits of those who hear/understand it right, as secret, and are then capable or worthy of keeping it."<sup>81</sup> So the political vision that emerges from the work of Dionysius is either radically elitist or radically welcoming, which means it becomes important to choose one's interpretations carefully.

Yet even if one were inclined to follow the "whoever approaches" line as far as it goes in Dionysius, one would run up against the problem of the *approach*. To the extent that any and every other is welcome in Dionysius, he

is welcome not only insofar as he is a he, but also insofar as he undertakes a specific—one might say prefabricated—journey: from purification to illumination to perfection; from baptism to Eucharist to chrism. At the risk of stating the obvious, those who would prefer not to follow the Christian *via* are therefore excluded from the outset; the welcome is significantly qualified. But the problem of the path is broader than the concerns of liberal ecumenism. As Derrida teaches us, a determinate path, by definition, closes off any relation to the indeterminate. This is a significant concern, considering the apophatic God's transcendence of all determinations. If the *via negativa* knows where it is going and how to get there, is its unknown God truly unknown?

By now, it should be clear that Derrida's critique of teleology stems neither from intellectual snobbery nor from a "postmodern" commitment to "play." Rather, it is attuned to the violent and exclusionary politics of certainty. The moment I know who the Messiah is and when he is coming, I know who is in the kingdom and who is out—and will behave accordingly. This is the reason Derrida tries to imagine a messianic opening "with no way out or any assured path, without itinerary or point of arrival, without an exterior with a predictable map and a *calculable* programme . . . The emergence of the event ought to puncture every horizon of expectation."<sup>82</sup>

Is there a "horizon of expectation" in Dionysius? Well . . . there is and there is not. On the one hand, there is an incontrovertible order to the sacraments (and the clergy and the laity), mirroring the incontrovertible order of the cosmos. On the other hand, this cosmos refuses to stand still—circling, diving down, and spiraling in all directions. On the one hand, the *via negativa* begins with assertions (from first to last) and then moves onto denials (from last to first): "So this is what we say," Dionysius instructs us, as if it were a formula.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, this determinate path down and up the hierarchies culminates in a negation of the path itself: in silence. On the one hand, the apophatic subject knows it comes from God and knows it is headed to God. On the other hand, the road to God leaves it emptied of any idea of what or where it or God might "be." On the one hand, the highest things most fully image God, while the lowest do so with limitations.<sup>84</sup> On the other hand, the most "inadequate and ridiculous" names are "more suitable for lifting our minds up into the domain of the spiritual than similarities are."<sup>85</sup> So although a man is hierarchically "nearer" to God than a worm (or a woman), this "lowliest and most incongruous of all" is more likely to point the soul to God.<sup>86</sup> And so even hierarchy, determinacy, and certainty unsay themselves.

A popular joke in Derridean circles is set in a temple on the highest of holy days. "On Yom Kippur," the story goes, "the rabbi stops in the middle of the service, prostrates himself beside the bema, and cries out, 'Oh, God. Before You, I am nothing!' Saul Rosenberg, president of the temple, is so moved by this demonstration of piety that he immediately throws himself to the floor beside the rabbi and cries, 'Oh, God! Before You, I am nothing!' Then Chaim

Pitkin, a tailor, jumps from his seat, prostrates himself in the aisle and cries, 'Oh God! Before You, I am nothing!' Rosenberg nudges the rabbi and whispers, 'So look who thinks he's nothing.'<sup>87</sup>

It is a profound contradiction in the works of Dionysius that the soul must prove itself worthy of realizing it is nothing. Not just anybody can know nothing, and not just anybody can become nobody. To the extent that deconstruction can be said to "receive" Dionysius, then, it receives him with the most respectful kind of critique: by reading him through, and against, himself. For if it is the case that the order of things is a creative disorder, that the path obliterates the path, and that the lowest is most highly reflective of God, then we have in Dionysius a theo-ethic that unsettles the very hierarchy and teleology it posits. It would therefore be the task of any anti-ontotheological retrieval of Dionysius to hold him to his own word(s). "Knowing beyond the mind by knowing nothing," apophatic voyagers could not distinguish worthy from unworthy; high from low; or pure from impure. Or, for that matter, the Messiah herself from the hungry we feed, the naked we clothe, and the stranger we welcome.

## NOTES

- 1 Jacques Derrida, "Différance," trans. Alan Bass, in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 8–9.
  - 2 *MT*, 1.2, 100B.
  - 3 *MT*, 1.1, 997A.
  - 4 Derrida, "Différance," p. 6.
  - 5 *Ibid.*
  - 6 "The Original Discussion of *Différance*," in David Wood and Robert Bernasconi (eds), *Derrida and Différance* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1985), p. 84.
  - 7 Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking: Denials," trans. Ken Frieden, in Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 74.
  - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
  - 9 *Ibid.*, p. 88.
  - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
  - 11 *Ibid.*
  - 12 John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), p. 34.
  - 13 Cf. Moses's ascent in *MT*, 1.3, 1000C–D.
  - 14 Derrida acknowledges Jean-Luc Marion's claim that it is "vulgar" to align ecclesiastical hierarchies with modern political hierarchies, but adds that at the same time, "it is also necessary to see . . . the historic, essential, undeniable, and irreducible possibility of the aforementioned perversity which is perhaps only considerable by first having been observable, as one says, 'in fact'" (Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 134, n. 9).
  - 15 *DN*, 4.14, 712D.
  - 16 Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 79.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, p. 108.
  - 18 Derrida's most thorough (non-)discussion of his own work in relation to Dionysius' can be found in "How to Avoid Speaking." See also his reconsideration of this question in relation to the work of Angelus Silesius in "Sauf le nom: Post-Scriptum," trans. John P. Leavey, Jr., in Thomas Dutoit (ed), *On the Name* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 35–85.
- Secondary studies of Derrida in conversation with Dionysius include: Kevin Hart, *The*

*Trespass of the Sign: Deconstruction, Theology, and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997); Denys Turner, "The Art of Unknowing: Negative Theology in Late Medieval Mysticism," *Modern Theology*, 14/4 (October 1998), pp. 473–488; Thomas A. Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Jean-Luc Marion, "In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of 'Negative Theology,'" in John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (eds), *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1999), pp. 20–42; idem., *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001); and Mary-Jane Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself: Apophaticism, Deconstruction, and Theology after Ontotheology," *Modern Theology*, 19/3 (July 2003), pp. 387–417.

Broader studies of deconstruction, the anti-ontotheological gesture, and negative theology include Thomas J. J. Altizer, et al. (eds), *Deconstruction and Theology* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982); John Dominic Crossan, "Difference and Divinity," *Semeia*, 23 (1982), pp. 29–41; Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Harold Coward and Toby Foshay (eds), *Derrida and Negative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992); John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange* (London: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 36–52; Ian Almond, "How Not To Deconstruct a Dominican: Derrida on God and 'Hypertruth,'" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 68/2 (2000), pp. 329–44; Arthur Bradley, "God Sans Being: Derrida, Marion, and 'A Paradoxical Writing of the Word Without,'" *Literature and Theology*, 14/3 (2000), pp. 299–312; Ilse N. Bulhof and Laurens ten Kate (eds), *Flight of the Gods: Philosophical Perspectives on Negative Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000); Merold Westphal, *Overcoming Onto-theology: Toward a Postmodern Christian Faith* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2001); Jeffrey W. Robbins, "The Problem of Ontotheology: Complicating the Divide Between Philosophy and Theology," *Heythrop Journal*, 43 (2002), pp. 139–151; Björn Thorsteinsson, "Possibilities of the Impossible: Derrida's Idea of Justice and Negative Theology," *Svensk teologisk kvartalskrift*, 78/3 (2002), pp. 121–31; Jeffrey Bloechl (ed), *Religious Experience and the End of Metaphysics* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003); Denys Turner, "Atheism, Apophaticism and 'Différance,'" in J. Haers and P. De Mey (eds), *Theology and Conversation: Toward a Relational Theology* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2003), pp. 689–708; Martin Laird, "The 'Open Country Whose Name is Prayer': Apophasis, Deconstruction, and Contemplative Practice," *Modern Theology*, 21/1 (January 2005), pp. 141–155.

19 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A632/B660, p. 584.

20 See *Ibid.*, A583/B661–A642–B670, pp. 559–589.

21 *Ibid.*, BXXX, p. 117.

22 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2002), esp. 2.2.4–2.2.5, pp. 155–170.

23 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1960), 3.1.3, p. 90.

24 See Martin Heidegger, "The Way Back into the Ground of Metaphysics," trans. Walter Kaufmann in Kaufmann (ed), *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York, NY: Meridian Books, 1956), p. 218.

25 See Heidegger, "Way Back," p. 207.

26 Martin Heidegger, *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 62ff.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 56.

29 Cited in Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," pp. 126–127. By insisting upon the non-identity between being and God, Derrida wonders, is Heidegger perhaps un-saying a particularly calcified name of God, in apophatic service of a more authentic revelation of God? Yes. No. "With and without the word *being*, he wrote a theology with and without God" (p. 128).

30 See Derrida's attempt to dissociate *khora* from being and the *es gibt* in "How to Avoid Speaking," pp. 106–107.

31 Derrida, "Différance," p. 3.

- 32 See Derrida's discussion of Abrahamic secrecy in relation to Bartleby the Scrivener's "I would prefer not to" in Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 74–75.
- 33 Derrida, "Différance," p. 4.
- 34 See Rubenstein, "Unknow Thyself," p. 403.
- 35 *DN*, 2.10, 648C; 2.4, 641A; *MT*, 5, 1048A.
- 36 *DN*, 4.13, 712A-B.
- 37 *Ibid.*
- 38 *MT*, 1.1, 997B-1000A.
- 39 *DN*, 3.1, 680B.
- 40 Derrida, "Différance," p. 21.
- 41 On hospitality, see Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. Rachel Bowlby (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000); on democracy, see idem., *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), p. 87; on the undecidable decision, see idem., "Afterword: Toward an Ethic of Discussion," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Limited Inc.* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), p. 116; and on the "undeconstructability" of justice, see idem., "Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority,'" trans. Mary Quaintance, in Gil Anidjar (ed), *Acts of Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), p. 243.
- 42 Derrida, "Sauf le nom," p. 43.
- 43 See Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in Anidjar (ed), *Acts of Religion*, p. 56.
- 44 Caputo, *Prayers and Tears*, p. xxiv. Later on in the book, despite numerous reiterations of this separation (pp. xxvii, 28, 336–337), Caputo articulates deconstruction as "a certain negative propheticism, a negative or apophatic messianic, whose most vivid and perfect illustration or exemplification (or repetition) is to be found in the biblical, prophetic notion of justice, so long as we add the little proviso which throws everything into undecidability" (p. 196). This project is deeply indebted to his insight.
- 45 *Letter 8*, p. 3, 1092C-D; emphasis added.
- 46 Derrida, "Différance," p. 22.
- 47 Derrida, "How to Avoid Speaking," p. 79.
- 48 Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," p. 47.
- 49 Derrida, "Différance," p. 7.
- 50 *CH*, 3.1, 164D.
- 51 See Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1994), p. 164. It should be emphasized that although the hierarchies "approximate," and even "reflect," "image," and "mirror" the triune God (*CH* 3.1-2, 164D-165D), this does not mean that the three persons of the Trinity exist in hierarchical relationship to one another; Dionysius held the full equality and equiprimordiality of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This means, furthermore, that the persons cannot be mapped onto created hierarchies (it is *not* the case, for example, that bishops are like the Father, while clergy imitate the Son, and deacons serve as created functionaries of the Spirit).
- 52 These are: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominions, Virtues, Powers; Principalities, Archangels, and Angels (*CH*, 160-1).
- 53 See McGinn, *Foundations*, p. 174.
- 54 *Letter 8*, 4, 1093C.
- 55 See note 51.
- 56 *DN*, 4.8, 704D.
- 57 Eric Perl, "Hierarchy and Participation in Dionysius the Areopagite and Greek Neoplatonism," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 68 (1994), p. 19.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 59 *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- 60 Hieromonk Alexander Golitzin, "The Mysticism of Dionysius Areopagita: Platonist or Christian?" *Mystics Quarterly*, 19 (1993), pp. 98–114.
- 61 *DN*, 4.13, 712B.
- 62 *CH*, 3.2, 165A.
- 63 *Ibid.*

- 64 DN, 4.7, 704C.
- 65 Kevin Corrigan, "'Solitary' Mysticism in Plotinus, Proclus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Pseudo-Dionysius," *The Journal of Religion*, 76/1 (1996), p. 28. In this essay, Corrigan argues that, insofar as the relationship between the apophatic self and its God is constituted by *mutual* desire, it disrupts the presumed inviolability of the apophatic subject. He goes on to argue the same of the Plotinian "Alone to the Alone" (p. 32). Corrigan does not, however, mention relations between and among creatures.
- 66 Thomas Carlson, *Indiscretion: Finitude and the Naming of God* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 167.
- 67 Emmanuel Levinas, "God and Philosophy," trans. Bettina Bergo, in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 69.
- 68 Derrida, "Sauf," p. 35.
- 69 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 70 EH, 1.1, 372A.
- 71 Derrida, "Sauf," p. 38.
- 72 For an account of these views, as well as a careful interarticulation of the mystical, ecclesiastical, and Christological throughout the works of Dionysius, see Bernard McGinn, *Foundations*, especially pp. 170–181.
- 73 MT, 1.2, 1000A.
- 74 *Ibid.*, 1000A-B.
- 75 EH, 3.3.7, 436A-B.
- 76 CH, 2.2, 140B; Cf. EH, 1.4, 376C. The other half, of course, is to raise souls up to God.
- 77 "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Matthew 25:40).
- 78 EH, 2.2.1, 393A; cf. 1 Timothy 2:4.
- 79 EH, 2.3.3, 400B.
- 80 *Ibid.*, 6.1.1, 532A-B.
- 81 Derrida, "Sauf," p. 83.
- 82 Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge," p. 47.
- 83 MT, 4.1, 1040D.
- 84 See *Letter 8*, p. 2, 1092B.
- 85 CH, 2.3, 141A.
- 86 *Ibid.*, 2.5, 145A.
- 87 This joke, illustrating the irony of "Derridean circles" themselves, was told at a memorial service for Derrida at Columbia University in the fall of 2004. The version cited here can be found at: [http://www.jewishstudies.com/jewish\\_humor/punchlines\\_and\\_their\\_jokes/2006-06-01-Number%2054.htm](http://www.jewishstudies.com/jewish_humor/punchlines_and_their_jokes/2006-06-01-Number%2054.htm).