

# **Plotinus and Dionysius the Areopagite on the Participation in the Good <sup>1</sup>**

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Thank you Frederick. Good morning to all of you. It's a pleasure to be here. I don't know if the third day of the conference is the best for someone to be speaking, rather than the first. At least, what the participants in this conference have so far experienced are joyful presentations, like the last one. So, it seems to me that there is a sort of hard work to do; and I am not sure if I can offer equally joy to you, as previous speakers have succeeded to. Anyway, trying to do the best is always good. There is a handout, perhaps most of you already got it, but there are still some copies available.

What I will try to do today is not only to do justice to the intention of presenting a paper. The aim is at expanding some of the questions that rise up within this important, I believe, topic title. I should also add, that it appears to me to be a good and benevolent luck that we are having this discussion up here, at Tromsø University, in the Arctic Circle. For, both the concepts of participation and the good are admittedly attracting a lot of attention and cause considerable academic contributions, generally in Scandinavia and particularly in Norway <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the Research Training Conference 'Thinking through the Ages', held at the University of Tromsø, on December the 10th, 2014. The Conference was organized as part of the Project: 'History of Philosophy and History of Ideas from 600 BC until 18th century AD', implemented by the University of Oslo in cooperation with the Arctic University of Norway [Tromsø] and the University of Bergen.

<sup>2</sup> In support of this view, and in terms of secondary literature, there are significant works produced in Norway by Scandinavian scholars. As major scholarly contributions one can think of the just published book of Eyjolfur Kjalar Emilsson [*Plotinus, Enneads VI.4 & VI.5*, Parmenides Publishing, 2014], who discusses, among other questions, all the perplexities participation entails in Plotinus, focusing on the relevant Enneads VI.4 and 5 and offering both a smart translation into English and a detailed analytical commentary, accompanied by a thoroughly introduction to the treatises. Moreover, two years ago, in 2012, another rather influential publication was made, the second book in Oxford University Press of Torstein Theodor Tollefsen [*Activity and Participation*

The title of my paper is: '*Plotinus and Dionysius the Areopagite on the Participation in the Good*'. I must admit that there was a slight modification of the initial intention to speak of the concept of participation exclusively in Plotinus. At least, that was about in the abstract I had sent to Heine Holmen, few weeks ago. But then I decided to include Dionysius for some reasons I will briefly refer to.

As you can very easily see, my topic locates in Late Antiquity, since these two thinkers are dated, Plotinus on the one hand, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, while Dionysius the Areopagite, on the other, whoever really was<sup>3</sup>, -his writings appear in 533 in Constantinople, in a Synod- in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Hence, we have two persons who somehow formulate the mainstream of late Platonism, not to say, Neo-Platonism<sup>4</sup>. What is significant in the case of Dionysius is that he is standing at the borderline between Platonism and Christianity.

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*in Late Antique and Early Christian Thought*, OUP 2012], in which activity and participation are examined with respect to the concept of deification, hence considered as the ultimate goal of the former, both in Late Antiquity, early Christian times and up to the mature Byzantine thinking of St. Gregory Palamas, thus succeeding to expand both the continuity of Platonic ideas, their crucial transformations within Byzantine philosophy and their impact in east and western Medieval thinking. The fact that both authors are professors at the Department of Philosophy in the University of Oslo, just bears some additional evidence to the claim above.

<sup>3</sup> The parenthetic allusion addresses the question of the Dionysian authorship. This question has been, and is still being, at large discussed in the secondary literature on Dionysius, often being the very subject in many modern Dionysian studies. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that this topic is a no-less considerable -than the theme of the distinction between cataphatic-apophatic discourse in the Areopagite- pillar, upon which the Dionysian studies of the last four, at least, decades, have been built up. In my personal view, accepting that it suffices to be aware of the fact that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* follows Proclus' times, the expansion of the discussion on the authorship does not add anything influential to the substance of the *Areopagitica*' philosophical and theological topics. Rather, it highlights the need to focus on and deepen into the real questions that raise around the most important transformations of Platonism in the Early Christian times, appearing in the works of Dionysius and those of his major commentator and continuator, St. Maximus the Confessor.

<sup>4</sup> I agree with Professor Christia Mercer's view that supports the term Platonism instead of Neoplatonism, as she has put it during her lecture, earlier, at the beginning of our conference. I agree not only because of the fact that the term Neoplatonism is invented and introduced in the history of philosophy rather late, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but also, for the simple reason that, if we go back to time, those people were not thinking in terms of Neoplatonism. Neoplatonism would have been an empty word for them. They were just claiming and stating, in all occasions and by all means, that are students of Plato. Plotinus, Proclus, Dionysius, and many others, are referring to their master, Plato. So, yes, in this regard, I understand the preference in using the term Platonism instead of Neoplatonism.

The reasons for which I have decided to discuss today with these persons and not, for instance, Proclus instead of Plotinus -who, in many regards is standing closer to Dionysius,- are two; one on the macro-level and one on the micro-level. On macro-level the reason is that, though we refer to two people that are Platonists, they appear to have significantly different premises. To make it explicit, both Plotinus and Dionysius use the same tools, philosophical ideas, linguistic mechanisms and metaphysical vocabulary, but Dionysius permanently states that he refers to the Scriptures, while Plotinus' source, explicitly and implicitly, is Plato. I will try to show what does this imply in the case of the topic, namely the participation in the good.

The other reason is that Dionysius extensively makes use of a rather complicate concept that is, as Eyjolfur Emilsson thoroughly points out in his just released new book, on Plotinus treatises VI.4 and 5, central in Plotinus' thought <sup>5</sup>. This is the concept of *ἐπιτηδειότης*, namely the concept of *receptivity of the beings according to their receiving capacity, or fitness*. Plotinus is the first who develops this idea as the doctrine of the receptivity according to the capacity of the recipient <sup>6</sup>. Hence, I will try to say a few things about that, what exactly does it mean, and why is it important.

Moreover, I think, I also owe an explanation on why do I include the concept of participation in the good in this paper. The good is perhaps the only idea, both literarily and metaphorically said, all philosophical discussions in Late Antiquity permanently pay attention to. Irrespectively of how is one classifying a thinker to be, a Platonist or an Aristotelian, one cannot omit to count the good. Daring a generalization, one could remark that the entire thinking of that period is based upon the good.

It is not hard to notice that Plotinus elucidates things in this regard by offering additional clarifications on what was stated in Plato's times, suggesting the mechanism of hierarchy, in which the good, identified with the One, is on the top of the metaphysical pyramid. Expanded downwards, we can see everything as

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<sup>5</sup> See above, footnote 2, and Emilsson (2014), p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> Emilsson regards Plotinus as 'the author of the phrase "reception according to the capacity of the recipient," and as him who 'first formulated such a doctrine'. For reading suggestions on the influence of this Plotinian doctrine in Medieval philosophy and up to Tomas Aquinas, see Emilsson (2014), p. 28.

overflowing out of the good. This hierarchical construction of everything seems to become more detailed with Plotinus than it was in Plato<sup>7</sup>. Nevertheless, what already was sharply established by Plato is that the good is 'beyond substance' (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας)<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, one could think also that the good is so unique that there is no word possible to speak of, to use, to employ for, it.

On the other hand, it seems that participation is that fundamental term and concept the entire Platonic language employs in order to ground and then secure the coherence of its ontological and metaphysical construction. So, what does it mean to participate in the good? How does Plotinus conceive of the good? As I said above and we all well know, Plotinus puts on the top of his metaphysical structure the One, which is so ultimately unique and so radically different comparing to the other beings, that it should be conceived of as *the* being. Around the One everything comes out: the Intellect, the Soul, and then the lower souls and the entire sensible world.

However, in Plotinus' system participation is not applying directly into the One. It seems that -and this might be one of the difficulties with Plotinus' understanding of participation- there are three levels of participation. Plotinus speaks of participation in three ways. Firstly, he speaks of participation within the sensible world, where the sensible beings, the particular beings, participate in their Ideas. Then, there is a second kind of participation, which is the participation of, or the participation in the classes and species, which is a sort of vertical understanding of participation. What that briefly means is that there are the lower beings of the sensible world, which participate in the soul. And then, there is the third type of participation, which is the participation in the One. In

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<sup>7</sup> One could rightly argue that hierarchy is a metaphysical structure that appears not just with Plotinus. Plato has already implicitly introduced it, when, for instance, in the *Timaeus*, presents the Creator God to assign to the lower Gods part of the formation of beings and the cosmos. Besides, it is also within this hierarchy of Plato's cosmology where evil appears, as a result of the less good way the lower Gods act in the formation of cosmos and/or as the deterministic factor the lower Gods cannot escape from in their work, seen as necessity. Nevertheless, I think that, in Plotinus, hierarchy becomes a core structural concept, the importance of which can be testified, if we take it into account as the alter ego of the concept of emanation, without which the Plotinian metaphysical scheme, certainly, cannot easily stand.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Republic* 6, 509b.

this case, what is indicated is that every being, in any level of his hierarchy, of the Plotinian hierarchy, participates in the One.

Now, together with participation comes the doctrine of receptivity according to the capacity of the recipient (*ἐπιτηδειότης*). What exactly does it mean? A simplified understanding could be reached through the following consideration: how should we answer to the question, for instance, why the lower beings in the hierarchy are lower? Given that the One is overflowing its same, unique, goodness, his goodness, so to say, why is there such diversity, qualitative and quantitative, among beings<sup>9</sup>? How this diversity among beings does occur?

First of all, one should remark that it is about twofold diversity; namely, Plotinus sees diversity both between the different levels of beings in the hierarchy and among beings in each level of the hierarchy. So diversity does occur for the simple reason that every being has a sort of –according to its nature– certain capacity in receiving what constitutes it as a being, through the Intellect and through the Soul. If one adds into the picture-frame of the analysis the perspective of the Plotinian two-side motion of procession and return (*πρόδος - ἐπιστροφή*), then one can say that the doctrine of fitness reflects on the one hand, the diversity of progression, of coming into being, as Heidegger would have put it. On the other hand, it also involves the actuality of conversion; return of beings towards Intellect and, at the end, towards the One, a conversion that seems to be regulated according to their capacity. This idea of Plotinus is, though not easily graspable, very well and in detail described in treatise 4 of *Ennead* 6<sup>10</sup>.

As constituting an important aspect of the topic herein, is worth to notice that Dionysius, who, nevertheless, should be reminded that, hastes to declare

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<sup>9</sup> The pronoun *his* alludes the Platonic Good God Demiurge as appearing in the *Timaeus*. We cannot enter here into the discussion on whether the Timean God Creator is a sort of a personal God, so this *his* can be justified, or not. There is plenty of secondary literature suggesting the view that the Demiurge is just a poetic metaphor Plato uses in order to facilitate his cosmological argument and construction, and if so, there is nothing personal in him (it). Nevertheless, there is no single passage in the entire Platonic work that explicitly declares, or argues for, the impersonality, so to speak, of God the Creator. Therefore, and for some additional intuitive reasons, I prefer to leave some room for a more personal understanding of Plato's Demiurge. Plotinus, on the other hand, is rather distant, from any possible personalistic view of the Demiurge and seems to favorite a neutral language of speaking of the remote One.

<sup>10</sup> *Ennead* VI.4, 1-3.

himself to be a Christian thinker, makes use of this Plotinian doctrine of participation according to the capacity of the recipient, in a different context <sup>11</sup>.

What is that context? The different context can be revealed if one takes into account the fact that the good, as Dionysius conceives of, is controversial from a Plotinian point of view. If we consider of what does Dionysius claim and take into consideration in the line of thought he claims to follow, then a contradiction occurs in that the good, which is the ultimate principle, which is the One, which is above everything and which is non-being comparing to beings, or is being in such a way that beings are not, becomes human. In this view, what seems to be argued on behalf of Dionysius, is that there is a complete overcoming of the Plotinian hierarchy, which causes a severe instability of the entire metaphysical (Neo) Platonic construction.

The formulation of the following question might be helpful in clarifying the above claim. Namely, how is it possible that the One, which is rather isolated, not because of imperfection, but because of perfection, penetrates, thus canceling, in a sense, the entire hierarchy and enters into the lowest level of the sensible world <sup>12</sup>? This entrance of the -beyond the intelligible realm- One into the -beneath the Soul- sensible realm alludes, for Dionysius, the concept of incarnation of Christ; rather, to be precise and correct, the conceptualization of the fact that God becomes also human in the person of Christ.

In view of the above, one might also point out another difficulty that appears. Briefly saying, the difficulty occurs together with the need to reexamine and reinterpret the way of thinking of participation in the good. We can think of participation as an activity, since the Greek term *metalepsis* (μετάληψις) definitely signifies a sort of activity <sup>13</sup>. One might wonder: what is the kind of activity that should be thought as participation? If we focus on the terminology, the term

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<sup>11</sup> Dionysius the Areopagite declares his Christian identity, implicitly though, several times in the *Corpus Areopagiticum*. His most favorite way of doing it is by referring to the Scriptures and the Letters of Apostle Paul. He does never refer to Plato as his master, let alone to Plotinus.

<sup>12</sup> Better say, not the lowest level, because the lowest is the Plotinian matter, which leads us to another story, but, at least, the lowest on the level of sensible beings.

<sup>13</sup> In the Plotinian account the terms that are rendered by *participation*, are, basically, two: *methexis* (μέθεξις) and *metalepsis* (μετάληψις). A third term *metoche* (μετοχή), which is also in use, is rather a derivative of *methexis*.

*metalepsis* indicates something that is to be taken, precisely, to be received. From this point of view, it seems easy to see why Plotinus does use the term *metalepsis* as a pair with the term *metadosis*. Namely, what can be a possibility is to claim that, what Plotinus wants to declare is the fact that the participant receives what is communicated or shared by the *participatum*, by that which is participated. This assumption could imply the remark that a participant cannot participate in something that is not enabling such a possibility of participation. This possibility is signified by the term *μετάδοσις*. *Metadosis* is a sort of transmission that opens the road for *metalepsis*, for communion. This reciprocity of activities between the participated and the participant helps to realize that, since participation involves activity in two directions, both from the participated and the participant, therefore, it cannot be just a certain status of being, without involving activity.

Furthermore in this regard, what I also think is that, the above claim could be a reason to explain why Plotinus makes room for the distinction between internal and external activity of the substance. The external activity is precisely the means of emanation, is that activity of the higher being which results into emanation, the latter seen as the source of all beings. For, as Plotinus clearly points it out, it is thanks to the external activity of the One that everything occurs and comes into being.

This external activity of each of the substances seen as the higher – comparing to the lower, in each case, levels- being of the hierarchy, the One, the Intellect, the Soul, the united soul, is responsible for the existence of the participants who become beings by receiving, so by participating, in a way, in the external activity of the higher principle. From this point of view, I think that it should be boldly underlined that the internal activity is not participated. To better understand this fact, we should think of the distinction between internal and external activity as a radical one, that has an impact also to the status of the lower being. So, the criticality of this distinction owes to the fact that the internal activity is, by principle, not *participatum*, is not participated. Only the external activity of the higher principle can be participated by the lower. This is the path Plotinus has to follow, in order to maintain the hierarchical structure and avoid perplexities and mixtures that would occur, if the internal activity was not singular in its scope, namely if it was participable and participated as well.

Plotinus, by establishing the dualistic concept of the internal and external activity, succeeds to develop a very suitable formula that fits well into the process of gradual transformation of (pagan) Platonism into Christian Platonism. This formula is much appreciated by the Christians and especially Dionysius, in our case, for the simple reason that can serve as the ground idea of what comes with Christianity as the doctrine of the distinction between substance (or essence) and activities (or energies) (*οὐσία - ἐνέργειαι*).

The basic point of this Christian doctrine is that when we speak of God we ought to make a distinction between His divine substance and His divine energies. No word can be articulated about the divine essence; the way God becomes known to us is only through His divine activities. The claim for the unknowability of the essence of God is in direct accordance with, and rather derives from, another crucial distinction that arises within Christian thinking, namely the distinction between created – uncreated (*κτιστὸ - ἄκτιστο*). According to this doctrine, which is constitutive of a principal difference between Platonism and Christianity, or the pagan and the Christian philosophy broadly speaking, the world is not eternal, since it has had a beginning as being created from God out of nothing, through God's divine energies <sup>14</sup>.

What is of importance for our analysis, is to keep in mind that the distinction between God's substance and activities derives as a consistent consequence from the fact that, since we, the human beings, are created by God out of nothing, we do not know anything –and is not possible to learn anything– about God's essence. In this regard, any reference to or relation of the human being with God is possible only through the divine activities, through which God communicates himself to us, as far as it is attainable for us to receive this communication. In the *Divine Names* the divine activities are depicted through many names. It is not possible to refer to this topic herein. However, what should be commented is that the multiplicity of names employed by Dionysius in the entire *Corpus Dionysiacum* has a common characteristic: it maintains that all

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<sup>14</sup> For an illuminating expansion of what the distinction between created – uncreated entails in the doctrine of creation in Dionysius the Areopagite, see Tollefsen (2008).



God's activities are, and should be conceived of as, gifts<sup>15</sup>. Though it is not in the scope of this paper to discuss further the above mentioned foundational doctrinal distinctions of the Christian tradition, they, however, must be taken into account, since it is upon them one should stand in order to realize the differences occurring in the Platonism of Dionysius with respect to participation in the good.

Given what has just been said, it is easier to see what exactly Dionysius and the Christian philosophers, in general, do. They take the Plotinean conception of the distinction between internal – external activity and attempt to adjust it into the basic Christian doctrine we referred to, namely the impossibility of approaching God in His substance and the possibility of approaching Him in His energies. Hence, God's energies, the divine activities, are corresponding to the external activity, while the divine substance remains unknown and forever impossible to be understood by the human being, as being beyond any knowledge of any knowable substance we can know in the sensible and the intelligible world<sup>16</sup>.

What now, in this context, come up, as questions are the following: first of all, is there any difference in what Plotinus and Dionysius signify by the term *deification*? Both Plotinus and Dionysius speak of deification. They both regard participation in the good as the final stage of the human upraising, which aims at deification<sup>17</sup>. Plotinus, on the one hand, in his amazingly beautiful *Ennead*, the second in the first book of *Enneads*, namely "*On Virtues*" says the following:

"Ἐπειδὴ τὰ κακὰ ἐνταῦθα καὶ τόνδε τὸν τόπον περιπολεῖ ἐξ ἀνάγκης, βούλεται δὲ ἡ ψυχὴ φυγεῖν τὰ κακὰ, φευκτέον ἐντεῦθεν. Τίς οὖν ἡ φυγή; θεῶ, φησιν, ὁμοιωθῆναι. Τοῦτο δέ, εἰ δίκαιοι καὶ ὄσιοι μετὰ φρονήσεως γενοίμεθα καὶ ὄλως ἐν ἀρετῇ. Εἰ οὖν ἀρετῇ ὁμοιοῦμεθα, ἄρα ἀρετὴν ἔχοντι; Καὶ δὴ καὶ τίνοι θεῶ; Ἄρ' οὖν τῷ μᾶλλον δοκοῦντι ταῦτα ἔχειν καὶ δὴ τῇ τοῦ κόσμου ψυχῇ καὶ τῷ ἐν

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<sup>15</sup> Dionysius employs the concept of gift both in verbal and nominal terms. The verb δωρέομαι, or δωρέω (to offer as gift) appears 60 times in the entire Corpus, whereas the noun δωρεά (gift, offer) more than 20 times. See also, *Thesaurus Pseudo-Dionysii Areopagitae*, p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> This view could be considered as a *mutatis mutandis* interpretation of what Plato proclaims in the *Republic* book 6, that the good is beyond substance, as we have seen earlier, and in the *Timaeus*, that God the Creator proceeds into the creation of the cosmos.

<sup>17</sup> There is, however, a difference between them in the terms they use. As we see in the texts, Plotinus employs the Platonic term of resemblance of God (θεῶ ὁμοιωθῆναι), while Dionysius employs the term deification in its strict meaning, as (θέωσις).

ταύτη ἡγουμένω ᾧ φρόνησις θαυμαστὴ ὑπάρχει; Καὶ γὰρ εὐλογον ἐνταῦθα ὄντας τούτῳ ὁμοιοῦσθαι.”<sup>18</sup>

‘Since it is here that evils are, and “they must necessarily haunt this region,” and the soul wants to escape from evils, we must escape from here. What, then, is to escape? “Being made like god,” Plato says. And we become godlike “if we become righteous and holy with the help of wisdom”, and are altogether in virtue. If then it is virtue which makes us like, it presumably makes us like a being possessing virtue. Then what god would that be? Would it be the one that appears to be particularly characterized by the possession of virtue, that is, the soul of the universe and its ruling principle, in which there is a wonderful wisdom? It is reasonable to suppose that we should become like this principle, as we are here in its universe’.<sup>19</sup>

What Plotinus claims for in this passage is resemblance to God as the ultimate goal of the human being<sup>20</sup>. He sees the possibility of the human being to become god-like. One should not omit to take into account what for Plotinus is a necessary condition in this process of resemblance. That is the release of the soul from the captivity of bodily bonds<sup>21</sup>. The body is definitely something that has nothing to do with the ascension of the soul towards freedom, towards the divine.

There seems to be another difference at this point, between Plotinus and Dionysius. As we know, for Plotinus, as for Plato, likeness and resemblance to God is the necessary way-out and the necessary path to salvation from, again, the necessary existence of evils. Whereas for Dionysius it is not the case that

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<sup>18</sup> Πλωτίνου, *Περὶ ἀρετῶν*, I.2 [19], 1.1-10. The original text is from the edition of the *Enneads* in the Loeb Classical Library series.

<sup>19</sup> I use Armstrong’s translation in Harvard LCL Series.

<sup>20</sup> As is known, Plotinus at this point bases himself on Plato’s *Theaetetus*. *Theaetetus* serves, as in other places as well, i.e., in *Ennead* I.8 where Plotinus expands his questions on the nature and origin of evils, as the source, the solid ground upon which the concept of evil is expanded as the reason the soul seeks for freedom through ascension towards the (hyper) celestial sphere.

<sup>21</sup> When Plotinus refers to the resemblance of the human being to God, he takes the human being without its body; he precisely means it as soul, human soul. At the end of treatise 7 of the *Ennead I* [*On The Good*], which, as Porphyry informs us, was the last writing Plotinus finished before he died, he ends up by concluding that death is good for the reason that what actually continues living is the soul, while the body is rejected. This freedom from the bonds of the body is the very reason that explains why, for Plotinus, death is not about experiencing something evil, but on the opposite, good.

resemblance of God is subject to such a necessity. There is no necessity in Dionysius concept of *theosis* in the way Plotinus understands it<sup>22</sup>. If we had to maintain any instance of necessity with respect to deification in the Dionysian picture, that would have seen, metaphorically speaking, as a presupposition, for the human being to exercise its own free will, as a necessary precondition in order for the human being to start moving towards God. For, for Dionysius, resemblance to God involves an exercise of free will the human being disposes as a faculty. This exercise is a necessary one, though, still, not efficient for deification.

Why is it not efficient? For the simple reason that when Dionysius speaks of deification he includes the human body. One might wonder about two things. First, is there any evidence in the *Corpus Areopagiticum* that deification process explicitly involves the body? Or is this something one should take as implicitly assumed in the Christian tradition Dionysius is part of? Secondly, whence the concept of deification of the human being as a totality, as a unity of soul and body, does derive? Another way to put the last question is to wonder, whether the fact that, as the Christians believe, God becomes human does determine the ground on which Dionysius the Areopagite speaks of *theosis*.

And, why would it have been impossible? Or, in other terms, it would have been impossible to speak of participation in the good as a completion of human nature. It would have been impossible, because in the understanding and the thinking of the Christian Platonists the gap between the divine and the human nature cannot be bridged. Perfection of virtues, seen in the Platonic context, cannot be equalized with becoming god-like in the way the Christian Platonists conceive of it. This seems to be a reason for why does Dionysius feel the need to declare the non-*ἀκοινωνησία*, the 'non-uncommunicatedness', so to speak, of the good.

More explicitly, the issue Dionysius has to deal with is, is how to show that is possible for the human being to become identical to the One. This could have never been a possibility for any (non-Christian) Platonist. So, what he tries to say is that, even though one accepts Plato's claim that the good is beyond everything,

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noticed that the term *theosis* (*θέωσις*) is never employed by Plotinus. The way he speaks of resemblance to God is through the words *theo homoiousthai* (*θεῶ ὁμοιοῦσθαι*) and its derivatives.

beyond substance, beyond thinking, beyond knowledge, beyond all, it is possible to be seen. For, as he puts it, the One as the good is not standing without being communicated:

*Οὐ μὴν ἀκοινώνητόν ἐστι καθόλου τάγαθὸν οὐδενὶ τῶν ὄντων, ἀλλ' ἐφ' ἑαυτοῦ μονίμως τὴν ὑπερούσιον ἰδρῦσαν ἀκτῖνα ταῖς ἐκάστου τῶν ὄντων ἀναλόγοις ἐλλάμψεσιν ἀγαθοπρεπῶς ἐπιφαίνεται καὶ πρὸς τὴν ἐφικτὴν αὐτοῦ θεωρίαν καὶ κοινωνίαν καὶ ὁμοίωσιν ἀνατείνει τοὺς ἱεροὺς νόας τοὺς ὡς θεμιτὸν αὐτῶ καὶ ἱεροπρεπῶς ἐπιβάλλοντας καὶ μήτε πρὸς τὸ ὑπέρτερον τῆς ἑναρμονίως ἐνδιδομένης θεοφανείας ἀδυνάτως ἀπαυθαδιζομένους μήτε πρὸς τὸ κάταντες ἐκ τῆς ἐπὶ τὸ χεῖρον ὑφέσεως ἀπολισθαίνοντας, ἀλλ' εὐσταθῶς τε καὶ ἀκλινῶς ἐπὶ τὴν ἀκτῖνα τῆν αὐτοῖς ἐπιλάμπουσιν ἀνατεινομένους καὶ τῶ συμμέτρῳ τῶν θεμιτῶν ἐλλάμψεων ἔρωτι μετ' εὐλαβείας ἱερᾶς σωφρόνως τε καὶ ὁσίως ἀναπτερουμένους.* <sup>23</sup>

"The Good indeed is not entirely un-communicated to any single created being, but benignly sheds forth its super-essential ray, persistently fixed in Itself, by illuminations analogous to each several being, and elevates to Its permitted contemplation and communion and likeness, those holy minds, who, as far as is lawful and reverent, strive after It, and who are neither impotently boastful towards that which is higher than the harmoniously imparted Divine manifestation, nor, in regards to a lower level, lapse downward through their inclining to the worse, but who elevate themselves determinately and unwaveringly to the ray shining upon them; and, by their proportioned love of permitted illuminations, are elevated with a holy reverence, prudently and piously, as on new wings." <sup>24</sup>

Is the above passage offering any substantial information on the good and the participation in it, apart of being a nice poetic, not necessarily more successful than the Plotinian, depiction of the relation between the beings and the One?

There are certain expressions that argue for a positive answer to the question. It seems that Dionysius conceives of the One as having a sort of personal wish for the beings to be attracted and up brought towards it. It seems not without a good reason to claim that Dionysius attempts here to adjust a certain Platonic terminology in order to speak in this language of how does God

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<sup>23</sup> Suchla (1990), *DN*, I.2, 11-21 [110.11 – 111.2].

<sup>24</sup> Parker (1897), p. 13.

act in human's lives. The communion of, this communication to, God, seems to indicate the possibility for the human being to participate in the good, which is God himself, in a completely different way than Platonic thinking had suggested. The careness, the providence of the good for the beings is stated right after the above passage of the DN, as following:

"Καὶ οὐκ ἔστι τι τῶν ὄντων, ὃ μὴ μετέχει τοῦ καλοῦ καὶ ἀγαθοῦ" <sup>25</sup>

"And there is no single one among beings, which does not participate in the Beautiful and the Good" <sup>26</sup>

Certainly, one could remark, that Dionysius does not say anything new here. Plotinus also sees this form, that all beings are participating in the good and the beautiful. However, the difference here is that this attribute, *kalou* (καλοῦ) Dionysius adds to the good, is serving his purpose to show that the good is participable by the beings, also for the reason that it is beautiful. And soon after, he plays with the etymology, as an original student of Plato, by proclaiming why does he say beautiful; for, beautiful is rendering the term *kalos* (καλός) and *kalos* comes from *kallos* (κάλλος). Then he says, that *kalos*, beautiful, is him who participates in *kallos*, and so *kallos* is the *participatum*, so *kallos* is *metoche* (μετοχή). He defines *kallos* as *metoche*. And, of course, *kallos* is beauty.

For Dionysius, beauty is identified with the good or the One in a sense that any thing which is beautiful it is by participating in beauty. And why is it that the good is identified with beauty? Better say, why beauty is an attribute of the good, so that the good is called *kallos*? It is called *kallos* because it invites, it calls (καλεῖ). What does it call? It calls beings towards itself, towards himself. So, somehow, again, we have an interpretation of the conception of Plotinus, namely this pair of *metadosis* (μετάδοσις) - *metalepsis* (μετάληψις). Plotinus, as I said before, shows that there cannot be *metalepsis* without *metadosis*, whereas *metadosis* is precisely understood as the address of this invitation. In this respect

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<sup>25</sup> Suchla (1990), *DN*, IV.7, 8-9 [152.8-9].

<sup>26</sup> This is a proposed translation, which seems to me to fit better than Parker's.

it is also that, the participant responds in accordance to its capacity of responding and, thus, participating.

Now, the receptivity of the recipient according to its capacity, its fitness (*ἐπιτηδειότης*), receives a particular value of importance, when one turns from metaphysics to epistemology. Dionysius sees that participation is the only way to obtain any knowledge on the One, on God. This is clear in the *Divine Names* again, where he says that:

"Πάντα γὰρ τὰ θεῖα, καὶ ὅσα ἡμῖν ἐκπέφονται, ταῖς μετοχαῖς μόναις γινώσκεται. Αὐτὰ δὲ, ὅποιά ποτε ἔστι κατὰ τὴν οἰκείαν ἀρχὴν καὶ ἴδρυσιν, ὑπὲρ νοῦν ἔστι καὶ πᾶσαν οὐσίαν καὶ γνῶσιν".<sup>27</sup>

"For all the Divine properties, even those revealed to us, are known by the participations alone; and themselves, such as they are in their own source and abode, are above mind and all essence and knowledge."<sup>28</sup>

It could be concluded from the above that one possibility of viewing what Dionysius tries to do, is to see that he attempts to solve a paradox. This paradox is created on the basis of the metaphysical distance between the good and the beings, which appears with Plato who said the good is *beyond substance* (*ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας*). For Plotinus, as, besides, for Plato, the remoteness of the good is evident and implies the impossibility of knowledge about it. The fact that Plato speaks, nevertheless, very detailed of the good, prompts us to think that the problem of distance between the good, which is beyond substance, and the beings that have a substance can be solved. At least, this seems to be an ambition Dionysius has, namely to solve this problem. How can we have knowledge of the good? Dionysius takes the question further: How is there any possibility to speak of a method, in the literary sense of *μέθοδος*, a pathway that directs towards the good?

The answer Dionysius proposes and expands is, participation as far as it is attainable. It is through participation in its external activity that the good

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<sup>27</sup> Suchla (1990), *DN*, II.7, 5-7 [131.5-7]

<sup>28</sup> Parker (1897), *DN*, II.7, p. 22.

voluntarily communicates knowledge about it. Here is where I think a difference with regard to Plotinus appears. I don't think that Plotinus would say that the One is voluntarily communicating knowledge about himself, about itself. I think, and this seems to be rather crucial point, that, for Dionysius, as for all Christian Platonists, the One, the Good, is actively proceeding into communicating himself and thus granting beings with the possibility of obtaining knowledge of it. That is what exactly Dionysius indicates with the term *εκπέφανται*, namely *revealing* <sup>29</sup>.

The etymology of the term indicates that something is revealed, precisely comes into light, by a source responsible for this revelation. If we compare this Dionysian expression to the Plotinian 'aretology', Plotinus' discussion on virtues, it seems that a slight difference from what Plotinus would have said, namely that only through virtues we can have access to knowledge, occurs. For, for Dionysius virtues themselves are not providing efficiently way to knowledge of the good. It still remains for the good itself to reveal something about it, out of it. I think that, in this regard, this is the main divergence between two concrete versions of Neoplatonism. Otherwise, in terms of the attributes of the Good, there is no significant difference. Both Plotinus and Dionysius adopt the attribute of the sufficiency of good, which, as Aristotle has pointed out, is *ἄταρκες*, not in need of anything <sup>30</sup>. They both sustain the idea that the good is that which is attracting everything towards it <sup>31</sup>.

The similarities in the way of conceiving good's attributes, which, nevertheless lead to divergent endings, makes bolder the fact that what Dionysius suggests would have been perfectly controversial for Plotinus, and therefore rejected. In the Dionysian thinking, the reality of good as God, the One, who becomes human, would correspond to a controversial being for Plotinus, so when we speak of the good in the Christian tradition, we actually speak of a human being, in such a way that results to a foolishness: namely, that the primary good is identical to a certain human being, the person of Christ, as *the* good, so to the secondary or third and so on good, if one does conceive of the human being as Neoplatonic ontology does.

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<sup>29</sup> Cf., fn. 27.

<sup>30</sup> Both Plotinus and Dionysius are following Aristotle at this point.

<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *EN*, 1094a, 1-3

Madness (*μωρία*) occurs not only for Plotinus, but for the Greek thinking in general. On this basis one could understand the reason why, when for instance, Apostle Paul went to Athens and tried to show to the Athenians, that he is there in order to declare the, consistently platonically speaking, unknown God, whom claimed to be known to himself. Few of the Athenians agreed, while most of them responded that they will rethink about that. One might wonder: why did the Athenians respond in this way? An answer is that, for, what Paul was suggesting and declaring could not be regarded as realistic. It is hard for Platonism to accept that the primary good becomes identical to the secondary, so to speak. For, in this case the entire system of Greek metaphysics would collapse.

This seems to be a good reason for the appearance, since that time of late antique Platonic philosophy, of two distinct lines of thought. In this frame one could also seek for the conceptual foundations, in a broad sense speaking, of the distinction between theology and philosophy. In this regard one also can see an additional reason for why late antiquity is a crucial period, a decisive one for the history of philosophy. For, it is in those times when the distinction between philosophy and theology substantially starts to be established. There was no reason for such a distinction earlier. In Plato's mind philosophy is about theology and vice versa <sup>32</sup>.

Concluding, I would remark again that good and participation in the good are the major concepts upon which is based the most radical divergence between Platonism and Christian Platonism, Pagan Platonism and Christianity: namely, the no longer remoteness of the One or the Good from the intelligible and sensible beings, for the sake of the providential and economical identification of it with the human being, which opens the road to deification for the soul and the body together as a union, as a unity. Thank you.

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<sup>32</sup> It is much later on, in the 8th century AD, when a clear distinction between philosophy and theology is expressed out. John of Damascus is the first who places philosophy to be the servant of theology. The idea was maintained by Tomas Aquinas who much later regarded philosophy as *ancilla theologiae*. See also, Couloubaritsis (1998), p. 1180.



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