

GOD WITHOUT BEING AND THOUGHT WITHOUT THINKER

1. THE SOURCE OF BEING WHICH “IS NOT” (ON THE DIVINE NAMES V 5)

We have already said that for “late philosophy,” the history of philosophy is not a mere illustration, a sort of complementary addition to the development of discourse: a method of enriching and specifying a meaning otherwise completely expressed in itself. History is the diachronic dimension of philosophical process, an essential aspect of positioning new meaning. “The history of philosophy,” G. Deleuze wrote in his dissertation, “in our opinion, has to play a role similar in many respects to the role of collage in painting.”¹ The collage allows us to make a new meaning out of meanings already expressed and historically connected with a certain context; the new meaning then appears as a figure of meanings, an arrangement or rather a consonance of meanings. I think we are dealing here not so much with *collage* as with a polyphonic development of the perennial philosophical theme — *what is a being as being?* We shall begin with a graphical illustration, at first taking the term “textual collage” almost literally.

1.1. *What Never Was Nor Will Be; What Is Not*

Parmenides, fr. 8DK, 5–6:

οὐδέ ποτ' ἦν οὐδ' ἔσται, ἐπεὶ νῦν ἐστὶν ὁμοῦ
πάν ἓν, συνεχές. τίνα γένναν διζήσεται αὐτοῦ;

“It never was nor will be, since it is now, all together, one, indivisible. For what parentage of it will you look for?”

Plato, *Parmenides* 141e:

οὔτε ποτὲ γέγονεν οὐτ' ἐγένετο οὐτ' ἦν ποτὲ,
οὔτε νῦν γέγονεν οὔτε γίγνεται οὔτε ἔστιν,
ἐπειτα γενήσεται οὔτε γενηθήσεται οὔτε
ἔσται [...] Οὐδαμῶς ἄρα τὸ ἓν οὐσίας μετέχει.

Dionysius the Areopagite,
On the Divine Names V 4:

οὔτε ἦν οὔτε ἔσται οὔτε ἐγένετο οὔτε
γίνεται οὔτε γενήσεται, μᾶλλον δὲ οὔτε
ἔστιν.

“[He] has not been, will not be and never was,
He did not come [into being], does not and
will not; more than that — He is not.”

Apocalypse 4, 8:

ἅγιος ἅγιος ἅγιος κύριος ὁ Θεός ὁ
παντοκράτωρ, ὁ ἦν καὶ ὁ ὢν καὶ ἐρχόμενος.

¹ *Différence et répétition* (Paris: PUF, 1968), “Intodiction.”

"... it never came into being and never was coming into being and never was, it does not come into being now, and is not, and will not, and it will not be... So that the One in no way participates in being."

"Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come."

Parmenides' fragment speaks of τὸ εἶν. We are quick to pronounce the word "being," we are used to the fact that Western metaphysics is centred on this term. The tradition has taught us to define and position by means of this name the main (and essentially the only one) subject of thinking. Yet, as we have seen, the name itself, τὸ εἶν, was "established" by Parmenides in his "ontological revelation," it was revealed to him, was encountered by him on his wanderings "beyond the day and the night." For a philosopher, to wander means to question. In his wandering along the *way of being* (i. e., while asking what an entity is in its being, what it means for the beings to be), Parmenides finds many signs — σήματα πολλά — pointing to the "meaning of being."

One of these signs is τὸ ἓν, *the One*. This is the word taken up by Plato's Parmenides and it is the subject matter of the fragment cited above (*Parm.* 141e). This text, however, is only one of the subsequent steps of a dialectical argument, and can hardly be considered Plato's final judgment concerning the One. In the *Timaeus* it is said that the verb "to be" in the present tense (as opposed to "was" and "will be") expresses the eternal essence in an appropriate way (*Tim.* 37d — 38b).

The One (ἓν) belongs to the series of *Divine names* discussed by Dionysius in his treatise *On the Divine Names* (XIII 2).² In chapter V, from which the fragment we are dealing with ("...[He] has not been...") comes, another name is spoken of, [*He/Who-is* (ὁ ὢν)]. The author calls this name, following his (and his time's) predilection for pleonasms, poetic repetitions and alliterations, "the truly existing God-naming essential name of Him Who truly is" (V 1). This name is the first in order of superiority (πρεσβύτερον)³ in the series of theological terms for God, because it is contained in the Scripture as God's own answer to the question "Who art thou?"

² "He is called *One* since He is singly all in one pre-eminence of unity; for he is (without becoming multiple Himself) the cause of the unity of all [multiple beings]. There is nothing among beings that is without participation in this One. [...] Whatever is a being is so by being one." The Greek text of the treatise *On the Divine Names* and the classical *Scholia* of John of Skythopolis and Maximus the Confessor (included in Migne's *Patrologia Graeca*) are cited after the edition by G. M. Prochorov: Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names and Mystical Theology* (St. Petersburg: Glagol, 1994). The text reproduces the critical edition: *Corpus Dionysiacum* I. Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagita: *De divinis nominibus*, B. R. Suchla, *Patristische Texte und Studien* 33 (Berlin-New York, 1990). The fact that throughout this chapter I write "Dionysius" and not "Pseudo-Dionysius" does not mean that I believe (against all contemporary philological evidence) in the authenticity of the authorship of Dionysius the Areopagite mentioned in *Acts* 17, 34. I am not at all occupied here with the problem of authorship. It is enough for me that the *Corpus Areopagiticum* has become one of the most influential theological treatises in the Christian East (and in Russia in particular), as well as in the West. Already this "external" circumstance, to say nothing about the content of the Treatise, justifies one more attempt to understand it. The treatise of Dionysius is cited hereafter as DN.

³ DN V 5.

(*Exodus* 3, 14).⁴ In it the essence itself, the *quidditas*, “what-ness” or, rather, the *quissitas*, “who-ness,” of God, is referred to (though, as we shall see further, not *shown*, nor *expressed*). It is not accidental that this name is connected with the *essential naming* or *naming of the essence*.

Yet besides that, the “supremacy” of this name is proved by the author with arguments of quite a metaphysical turn, which partly remind the reader of Aristotle’s reasons for establishing being *qua* being as the subject of “first philosophy,” and are borrowed in part from the Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophical armoury. Any other name, be it Good, Life or Wisdom, by creating a certain perspective for contemplation and by revealing God as being this or that, automatically reveals Him as an entity, for only an entity can be revealed or, rather, un-hidden. Even life itself and wisdom itself become entities through participation in being as such.⁵

Yet, in a wonderful way, the name *Who-is* (ὁ ὢν) impels the text in a direction where it “transgresses” itself — more precisely, since we are speaking of names, not of “concepts” in the usual sense, it would be more correct to say that it loses its naming ability. For if Parmenides says about being, “it has not been at any time and will not be, because it *is now*, whole, all at once,” and Plato states (*Tim.* 37c — 38a) that the expressions “was” and “will be” are legitimate in relation to *becoming* only, whereas “is” befits the *eternal essence*, Dionysius finds an insurmountable obstacle to a correct theology in the grammatical category of tense, in the fact that verbs *per definitionem* imply time.⁶ And then he says “He-Who-is is not.” Designating being by means of “is” already defines, i. e., limits being in a way.⁷ The grammatical terms for the forms of the verb themselves affirm it: “is” is a *verbum finitum*; the way to convey a meaning, proper to this verb, the grammarians call *modus finitus* (finite, i. e., limited, de-termined mode), whereas “to be” represents the *modus infinitivus*, infinitive, or rather undetermined, mode.

God is not somehow be-ing (ὢν), but simply and unlimitedly be-ing, comprehending and anticipating the whole being in itself... [He] is the Being for beings. Not only beings but even the Being itself for beings is from the be-ing before eternity. For God is the eternity of what is eternal, the One whose being precedes eternity. (V 4)

We see that in the text the distinction between being and beings is asserted (the ontological difference). More than that: as it seems, the author of the treatise distinguishes the being of an *entity* from a primordial and undetermined source of being. Any finite (created) entity *is* “somehow” (πῶς ἐστίν ὢν); for it, “to be” means “to

⁴ It goes without saying that Dionysius in his speculations leans upon the text of the *Septuagint*. The answer of God to the second question of Moses (“[If] they ask me, ‘What is his *name*?’ what shall I say to them?”) reads in Greek: ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν. ὁ ὢν is the participle of the masculine gender derived from the verb “to be.” In order to render the structure of this word in English I use sometimes the expression “[He] Who is,” and sometimes an artificial construction “be-ing.”

⁵ DNV 5.

⁶ This is the definition of the verb in general, given by Aristotle in *De interpretatione* 3.

⁷ This is a sort of explanation that can be traced back to Plato’s *Parmenides* and can be found in an explicit form in connection with the problem under consideration in the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Cf. Francis Ruello, *Les “noms divins” et leur “raison” selon St. Albert le Grand, commentateur du “De divinis nominibus”* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 1963), p. 51.

be present," whereas the *pre-eternal* Being (is) simple and unlimited (un-determined). Yet whatever the mode (sense) of being spoken of, we cannot say "being is," for *what is* is an entity. In particular this means that although present being is correctly *expressed* by the verb "is," "is" cannot *be predicated of* being (*esse*) as such. Yet here a kind of hermeneutical ἐποχή is to be accomplished and the temptation overcome to interpret Dionysius in the sense of Hegel's logic, which distinguishes between pure being (*Sein*) as "the simple immediacy" and being-extant (*Dasein*) as a result of mediation. We have to let the text speak for itself, and to do this we have to understand *how it speaks* and *how the Divine names name*.

1.2. *On the Poetic Way of Naming*

The expression "divine names" (τὰ θεῖα ὀνόματα) as a designation of a philosophical topic originated in *Cratylus* (401b and further). It was the wisdom, Plato's Socrates says, of the first name-giver,⁸ i. e., of the first poet, of the proto-poet, to give names to the gods which in one way or another articulate, show, express their essential features. Dionysius' assertion is quite the contrary:

The aim of our discourse (including naming God — *A. Ch.*) is not to manifest (ἐκφάνειν) the Being beyond being as beyond being⁹ for this is ineffable, unknown, and completely non-manifest... [but] to celebrate (ὕμνησαι) the being-producing procession of the thearchic source of the essence in all beings. (V 1)

For Dionysius naming is not the same as predication, i. e., logical clarification or *apophansis*. Certainly naming is a special method of showing, and consequently of manifesting, discovering, laying bare the thing named, making it accessible to the mind's eye. It seems that the Divine names are designed, by naming God, to display (ἀποφάνεσθαι) Him as being the Good, Life, Wisdom, the Word... A name refers to something else as itself, it names *the thing named* (for otherwise, Plato says, it would be the name of a name);¹⁰ and so it seems that the name somehow retains the formal structure of predication: *something of or about something* (τὶ κατὰ τινος). Yet the paradox of using the Divine names is that the "thing" named is never present as

⁸ ὁ θέμενος πρῶτος τὰ ὀνόματα (436b).

⁹ ὑπερούσιος οὐσία. I avoid rendering the prefix ὑπερ- traditionally as "super-," because by doing so we lose the negative, *apophatic* character of many of Dionysius' terms. ὑπερ- as "over" and "above" refer not only to excess, surplus, preeminence, superiority etc., but alludes also to "beyond," "outside the limits." In this case ὑπερ- has the same meaning as ἐπέκεινα (*praep. cum. gen.*). The relationship between the ὑπερούσιος οὐσία of Dionysius and Plato's ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας (*Resp. VI, 509b*) is rather obvious and perfectly explicable historically. Another morphological part of the adjective ὑπερούσιος is derived from οὐσία. The latter is not to be understood in a too technical Aristotelian sense as *essence* or *substance*. It signifies just being-ness of beings. That is why I refrain from translating ὑπερούσιος as "superessential" or "supersubstantial." Calling the divinity "superessential essence" would mean that the divinity transcends every finite being and is preeminently essential or substantial. In my opinion, this is not what Dionysius intends to say. The ὑπερούσιος οὐσία is rather "beingness beyond being," "otherwise than being or beyond essence" (to reproduce the title of one of Levinas' books). Of course, all these attempts to find English counterparts of the main terms in Dionysius can only provide a space where interpretation *begins* its work.

¹⁰ *The Sophist*, 244d.

something, it is beyond essence and *a fortiori* beyond *whatness* (it has no “what” of its own, it is without a “what,” ἄνευ τοῦ τί). The naming *apophansis* is only a reference to, or a designation of, the *locus* of what forever remains hidden in its essence.

We must, with all possible earnestness, consider the word ὑμνήσαι, “to celebrate,” “to glorify in words,” as the designation of a *method*. Dionysius speaks of a poetic clarification, a *poetic apophansis*. Is not *glorifying* and *glory*, in the sense of the Greek δόξα θεοῦ, actually the primary way of showing, manifesting, bringing to light? In Plato’s *Cratylus* the name is a tool in the hands of the person who seeks and attains knowledge, which enables him “to catch up with” (440a) the object of his investigation. The name enters as it were into conversation with beings and charms them by the very fact of being enunciated: an entity stands still then, “without transcending the boundaries of its idea,” its meaningful aspect, *eidos*, is moulded into a firm and immutable shape, and now the entity is accessible to the mind’s eye. “How can a thing,” Plato’s Socrates asks, “which never remains in the same condition, be *something* (τί)?” Such an entity “leaks like a cracked pot”¹¹ and is just like a person with a cold in his head” (440c). Only a *something* (τί) always-remaining-in-itself can be named, and, conversely, to be named means for an entity to keep in itself an *eidos* accessible to the mind, and this means to attract and to keep directed to itself mental vision, the *noesis*. *He Who is*, however, has no “what” of His own (He is ἄνευ τοῦ τί). That is why for Him to be named is to remain in glory; this is a latent method of revealing and being revealed for a “content,” which eludes the direct vision.

Establishing names is the eternal task of poets. “What remains, is established by the poets,” Hölderlin says.¹² The art of giving poetic names has a nature of its own. The poet frees the entity out of the indifference of common sense, by calling it *not by its own name*, but by using a *metaphor*, remarking and establishing ὁμοίωσις, similarity. The metaphor manifests *this* through *something other*, and *the one* through its connection with *the other*; it weaves the thing into the world’s whole. The metaphor, according to Aristotle, the author of the first *Poetics* in history, is a *transfer*, “giving the thing a name that belongs to something else” (*Poet.* 1457b6f.). The metaphor allows the poet to name by analogy, in a special way, even things which have no name.¹³ Yet the not proper, the alien (ἄλλότριον), exists only in opposition to the proper (τὸ ἴδιον). Of course, Aristotle is interested not in the habit or rules of *usage*, but in an ontological understanding of an entity’s proper *logos* (λόγος οἰκεῖος). This *logos* must express the *ontic* foundation of the entity, that is τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, the true “what,” the internal form of the thing. To express in discourse the being of an entity in its proper *logos* is to express τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι, to express *what* it means (and has always meant, and always will mean) *to be this thing*. A person skilled in logic expresses the essence in words, brings it to light, not merely by giving a *name* to the en-

¹¹ Plato imitates here the famous πάντα ῥεῖ ascribed to Heraclitus and says: πάντα — ὥσπερ κεραμεία — ῥεῖ, “everything leaks like cracked pottery.”

¹² “Was bleibt aber, stiften die Dichter.” *Andenken*. See F. Hölderlin, *Gedichte*, hrsg. v. J. Schmidt (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1992), pp. 360–362.

¹³ Aristotle refers to the verse: “the sun sows the god-given light.” The action of spreading the light and warmth has no proper name, but it bears the same relation to the sun as sowing to the sower, and thus acquires its poetical name (*Poet.* 1457b25–30).

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