A Comparative Study of the Supreme Good of Plato's Republic and of the God of Dionysius' De Divinis Nominibus

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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE SUPREME GOOD OF
PLATO'S REPUBLIC AND OF THE
GOD OF DIONYSIUS'
DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS

BY
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To Mary,

Our Blessed Mother
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As one slowly turns the pages of the history of philosophy, the names of men who made exceptional contributions to the philosophical thought of their day and age stand out in large letters above the small print of the rest of the page. These are the names one is wont to remember; they leave an impression on one's mind; they influence man's innermost thought in one way or another.

Two such names, printed in the bold type of all the history of philosophy books, easily imprint themselves in the memory of every reader. The one, Plato, is a name found in the very early pages of every history book. He lived in the "weaning" age of philosophical thinking; he has left a definite mark on the character of philosophy. He was the beginning of a tradition; the beacon light that lit the way into
hitherto impenetrable philosophical realms of knowledge. As the pages of the history of philosophy are slowly turned, the names of countless philosophers, enlightened by this Platonic beacon, appear on page after page. Many more pages have to be turned -- more than eight centuries had gone by -- before the name of a man who exalted that tradition to heights unattained before his time appears. The man whose influence was as a guide post marking the completely finished course of the Platonic tradition was Dionysius the Areopagite.

Both these men, Plato and Dionysius, were interested in explaining not only the things they saw all around themselves, but even more than that, the ultimate cause of all things. They never rested and were never satisfied until their minds rested in an ultimate, a unity, that would be the keystone of their philosophical thought. Now both these men discovered these keystones and left in writing their decisions -- what the keystones are, how they came to the knowledge of them, and how they hold together the arch of their particular systems.

For Plato, the keystone was the notion of the Supreme

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Good; he built his system stone by stone until finally he was ready to put into its unique place the final stone, the Supreme Good. This is the treatment of Plato's philosophy as found in the now monumental work, the Republic. Centuries later, Dionysius, with a more keenly theological outlook, completed his arch in much the same way. In his work De Divinis Nominiibus he has left a blueprint of the architectural structure of his philosophy. The importance of this eight century gap between the lives of these two philosophers cannot be minimized, for during that time Christianity was born and grew to sturdy stature. Thus Dionysius, himself a Christian, had in Christianity a system of checks and balances, undreamed of in the age of his predecessor.

Because the influence of these two men was so unique, a comparative study of what each considered the apex of his work is apropos. Already many great philosophers -- their number is legion -- have made scholarly pronouncements about what Plato said and thought. Needless to say, all are not in perfect harmony. A review of the high points of their findings,  

3 F. Cayré, AA., Manuel of Patrology and History of Theology, Desclée & Co., Belgium, 1940, 93.  
4 Théry, 96.
merely with regard to the function of the Supreme Good, will be the aim of the first part of this paper.

To very many savants of philosophy, even though their interests may have carried them deep into the labyrinthine ways of philosophy, the name of Dionysius means no more than just the name of another little known philosopher. The few facts that can be gleaned from various recent sources about his life cast an obliterating shadow over the halo that had been placed above his head by many of the people of the Middle Ages. However, what little is known of his life is very interesting and augments considerably the interest that has been aroused by the few extant works we know are his. These few scattered facts, therefore, that are known about him will be a valuable asset to this study of Dionysius and a fitting introduction to the analysis of his philosophy.

After a very brief introduction to Dionysius the man, a synoptic sketch of his theodicy will be given with especial emphasis placed on "goodness" as the first name of God. This is not misplaced emphasis because, as shall be seen, the name "goodness" to Dionysius is the most fundamental of all the divine names.

Finally, after an analysis of the individual doctrines of the two men has been given, a comparison will be made
between the basic points of their works so that, if possible, the principle of identity can be found in the doctrine of the two men. This will be of special interest because it will lead to the clue that prompted Etienne Gilson to write: "The God of Dionysius, then, resembles the Idea of the Good of which Plato wrote in his work the Republic."5 This will lead, then, to the discovery of the point of identity between the two that provoked Gilson to write of the marked identity in their writings.

It would be impossible in the limited space of this study to give a complete, comprehensive analysis of these two men. Ideally, perhaps, this would be the most plausible way to establish the identity. What can be done, however, is to establish an identity in a very basic point that necessitates a similarity in a score of other points. Once this identity is firmly proved, the other points of similarity must be there because they follow of necessity.

Such is the plan of attack of this paper. The pivotal point of identity will be the idea of goodness in the works of

5 "Le Dieu de Denys ressemble alors à l'Idée du Bien décrite par Platon dans sa République," Étienne Gilson, La Philosophie Au Moyen Age, Payot, Paris, 1947, 82. (All the English translations in the following pages are the author's own, unless otherwise specified.)
the two men. For both these philosophers the idea of goodness is basic. The *locus classicus* for Plato's treatment is Book VI of the *Republic*; to this section of the *Republic* as far as is possible, this study will be limited. For Dionysius the treatment is not so succinct. However, most of what he says can be found in Chapter IV of the *De Divinis Nominiibus*. From these two limited sections, then, most of the comparison will be made.

A legitimate retort of all this introductory matter of discussion comes to mind almost immediately. Why all this discussion and weighing of opinions of two men who are just so many names in the history of philosophy? But both Plato and Dionysius are much more than just names in a history book! It must not be forgotten that Plato started a tradition that has not died even to this day and has inspired the minds of great men from his own time to the present. Plato may have passed away; to many he may be just another name in a history book. But Plato started a ball rolling, and because of the impetus he gave it, it is still rolling at the present time.

Now the tradition that Plato started was carried on for many years until time brought it a perfection that was undreamed of by Plato. This perfection of Platonic philosophy
was due to an amalgam of Platonic philosophy with a Christian theology. Quite evidently, this was not a perfect amalgam, nor did it answer all the difficulties that any such amalgamation would entail. But at least it was attempted. The success of the enterprise is still a matter of dispute among great thinkers. True, it was the result of many years of development and the work of many philosophers, all of whom played their parts in its development. The work of almost all these philosophers, called Neoplatonists today, influenced in varying degrees this final amalgamation.

Such an amalgam took place both in the Latin and in the Greek tradition. The former was due chiefly to the genius of Saint Augustine; his influence in clarifying the theology of the Catholic Church and of inspiring others is well known. Among the Greek Fathers the tradition is not so well known as the Latin tradition. By far the most important factor that influenced a Platonic tradition on the intellectual heritage of the Latin Middle Ages, was the corpus of Dionysian writings. Because this influence was from a Greek school, it was not as pronounced as the Latin influence. However, in the light of the detailed recent research, its importance is becoming more and more evident.6

Again, that this influence was of Platonic heritage is of importance. Often, because of the brilliant glow of Aristotelianism, the flashing brilliance of the Platonic luminaries is lost sight of. Yet, even the genius of Saint Thomas saw the importance of the Platonic teachings.

The two chief exponents of the Latin and of the Greek Christian branches of the indirect tradition, Augustine and Denys the Aeropagite, combine from the ninth century to form, as it were, an element which may be termed the Christian transformation of Neoplatonism, the effect of which is felt throughout the Middle Ages and which even in Saint Thomas is powerful enough to limit and counterbalance in a way his strict Aristotelianism.

Now when one considers to what extent Saint Thomas was able to carry the philosophical notions of Aristotle in his analysis of Christian theology, one is inclined to think that Saint Thomas' solution to the problem is the only perfect solution. This may or may not be true. The point that must be remembered is this. The reason why the great minds of the Middle Ages were able to get as far along the road of truth as they did was that they took up where the earlier philosophers had left off. If the earlier thinkers had already started off on a completely wrong road, even the greatest minds would have

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7 Ibid., 27.
had great difficulty to bring themselves to end on the right road. They might even have found this impossible. Medieval thought succeeded in bringing the earlier thought, especially the thought of the Greeks, to its point of perfection mainly because the earlier thought was already in many respects true. Christian thinkers took up these truths, and with the aid of Christian revelation, opened up new vistas and pointed to new horizons that the earlier thinkers never thought of. Christian thinkers progressed as rapidly as they did only because of this earlier groundwork. "When they raised the problem of the origin of being, Plato and Aristotle were on the right road, and it is precisely because they were on the right road that to go further along was progress." 

It was just such a task that Dionysius took upon himself. With a completely Platonic background, Dionysius made use of that background in a completely Christian theological milieu. Dionysius had taken the pagan notions of Plato which had been modified to a great extent by the Neoplatonists and lifted them out of their level of Hellenism into the healthy atmosphere of Christian theodicy. Whether Dionysius succeeded

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8 Étienne Gilson; *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Scribner's Sons, New York, 1940, 82.
10 Cayre, 93.
completely in his endeavors is open to question; his cryptical phraseology lends itself to various interpretations.\textsuperscript{11} That Dionysius made such an attempt is laudable and because this attempt was, as we now know, of importance, it is worthy of a comparative analysis.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 94.
CHAPTER II

THE SUPREME GOOD AS FOUND IN

PLATO'S REPUBLIC

The first look into the books, pamphlets, and articles written to explain the basic notions of the philosophy of Plato, makes one conclude that the plethora of material is seemingly overwhelming. Only after a careful analytic study is it evident that all the matter groups itself around a few central ideas. Over these ideas commentators take a pro or a con position. Once these basic notions and central ideas are understood quite well, the backbone of Platonism and the structure of Plato's work are evident.

One such basic notion is the idea of the good as found in the Republic. That it is the central metaphysical doctrine
of the Republic\(^1\) and the most extensive aspect of Plato's theory of ideas,\(^2\) there can be no doubt. Whether or not Plato changes his ideas in his later dialogues does not affect this study. The primary interest of this analysis is going to be centered on this doctrine of the good as found in the Republic. This dialogue, philosophers agree, presents an excellent conspectus of the early stages of Plato's entire philosophical system.\(^3\)

It is in this dialogue that the doctrine of the good, which rounded off Plato's own scheme of philosophy, was first expounded. It is this doctrine that has inspired philosophers since the day it first met the eager ears of Plato's followers.

A brief summary of the passage in which the idea of the good is explained in the Republic\(^4\) will make Plato's ideas of the good more intelligible. Socrates, the mouthpiece of Plato in this dialogue, is explaining his ideas to a few followers. He asks his listeners what the greatest study is and what study most properly belongs to the guardian of the state.

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4 Plato; *Republic*, 505ff. All quotations will be taken from Plato, *the Republic*, transl. by Paul Shorey; ed. by the Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1935. Whenever necessary, the Greek text will be added.
The answer he gives is the study of the idea of the good. This is clearly distinguished from the study of mere pleasure and from mere intellectual knowledge. On this one point, the nature of the Supreme Good, Socrates tells his listeners that most men are almost completely in the dark. This ultimate good is the one thing that the guardian of the state should know the most about.

Socrates has now succeeded in getting his listeners attentive. Their ears prick up; what is this good Socrates is talking about? For the moment, the most that Socrates can do is explain the conception of the good by an analogy. The comparison is very simple: The Supreme Good is to the intelligible order what the sun is in the visible world. Two main points of comparison are made. First, just as the sun is the source of vision in the eye and of visibility in the thing seen, so the Supreme Good is both the source of intelligence in the mind and intelligibility in the thing understood. Secondly, as the sun is the source of actual generation and of growth of the organic world, so the Supreme Good radiates truth and knowledge, and is actually the source of life and being in the world.5

5 Nettleship, 236.
In like manner, then, you are to say that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but their very existence and essence is derived from it to them, though the good itself is not essence but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power.  

It is well to remember that what concerns this study most of all is the point of comparison and not whether the theory of light and vision of Plato as he conceived it was accurate or not. What should be particularly noted is the length to which Plato goes at this point of the dialogue to make the comparison between the Supreme Good in the order of intelligibility and the sun in the order of mere sense.

Once Plato has described both the position and function of the Supreme Good as he see it, he goes on to explain the steps through which the human mind passes from the lowest scale, which is complete ignorance of the Supreme Good, to the summit of the perfection of intelligence, which is the complete knowledge of the Supreme Good. Once again he compares his position to the degree of light that can illumine an object of sight, from complete darkness to the luminous brilliance of noonday sunlight. This he represents to his listeners by a very obvious scale of mental states which he tries to balance completely and perfectly

6 Republic, 509B.
with the scales of objects of thought. He says: "Represent them then, as it were, by a line divided into two unequal sections and cut each section again into the same ratio (the section, that is, of the visible and that of the intelligible order)." The four stages are represented by the divided line, and, as he goes on to say, are called ἑικασία, πότις, διάνοια, and νοήσις.

The first stage is mere conjecture — ἑικασία. It represents a state of mind, the objects of which are mere images — in contrast to the second stage — πότις — in which the mind has a deeper feeling of certitude about the actual tangible things around it. Plato explains his meaning clearly:

> By images I mean, first, shadows and then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth, and bright texture, and everything of that kind, if you apprehend ... As the second section assume that of which this is a likeness or an image, this is, the animals about us and all plants and the whole class of objects made by man.

To these two stages of the workings of the mind, then, are attributed quite a number of separate and apparently independent objects, each of which has a purpose and position all its own in the sensible world. These two states correspond to what would be called, in scholastic terminology, the world of particulars, including both the particular thing and the knowledge of that
The division more difficult to understand, and which is of more interest to this study, is the second and upper division of the divided line. This division consists of two parts, ἔκτος ὕποθεσις, and ἐπίγεια.

There is one section of it which the soul is compelled to investigate by treating as images the things imitated in the former division and by means of assumptions from which it proceeds not up to a first principle but down to a conclusion, while there is another section in which it advances from its assumptions, and in which it makes no use of the images employed by the other section, relying on ideas only and progressing systematically through ideas. 9

The distinction between these two stages is this. The former stage, ἔκτος ὕποθεσις, depends upon various principles, laws, theorems, and axioms, all called "hypotheses," by which the nature of the particulars known from the two former stages, ἐκασία and πίσεις, are better known. The final and highest stage of knowledge, ὑπόθεσις, is a perfect state of intelligence which would use the postulates of ἔκτος ὕποθεσις as mere starting points and go on to the discovery of more ultimate premises, or finally, to the real "principle of everything." Once this final principle had been deduced by this process of building up to it, the "way up" of the earlier philosophers, then, by another process, the "way
"down" of the earlier philosophers, all the consequences that would follow from such a first principle, which would be deduced. No appeal would be made to the sensible world, manifested in the former stages. Use would be made only of "pure ideas, moving on through ideas and ending with ideas." The object, then, of this highest stage of knowledge is the Supreme Good; to this Supreme Good all things are related. In this does the highest stage differ from the lower in which all things are related to assumed hypotheses. In the final stage there is a definite unity, the unity brought by the superiority of the Supreme Good. As a unity, the Supreme Good rises above the mere hypotheses of the former stage of knowledge and results in the perfect knowledge of all things for the human mind.

Plato goes on to relate the famous "Allegory of the Cave," in which he shows the position of the human race in regard to the stages of the divided line, the stages of knowledge. The allegory is important because of its real relation to the divided line discussed above. In the allegory

the prisoner set free from the cave and gradually accustomed to bear the strongest light passes through a series of stages

10 511C.  
11 Taylor, 291-292.  
12 Nettleship, 258.
which correspond generally to that which was symbolized by the divided line in the preceding section of the argument.\textsuperscript{13}

The final ascent from the cave is a turning to the sun as it is "in and by itself in its own place."\textsuperscript{14} Once again Plato has compared the vision of the sun in the sensible order to the knowledge of the Supreme Good in the intelligible order. For the prisoner released from the cave, the final ascent is to attain to the knowledge of the Supreme Good.

But, at any rate, my dream as it appears to me is that in the region of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly to be seen is the idea of the good, and that when seen it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause of all things, of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason, and that anyone who is to act wisely in private or in public must have caught sight of this.\textsuperscript{15}

Only a very few, and these with very much effort and struggle, ever rise to the vision of the sun and the contemplation of the Supreme Good.

Such is the schematic outline of Plato's treatment of the good. To understand its relative position in the scale of knowledge, it is necessary to study a little more closely the

\textsuperscript{13} Nettleship, 258.
\textsuperscript{14} Republic, 516B.
\textsuperscript{15} 517C.
importance of the Supreme Good in Plato's philosophical scheme. The first important fact that anyone who reads the Republic notices is the predominance of the Supreme Good by Plato. Why the Supreme Good should be the object of the highest stage of knowledge arouses one's curiosity. A cause of wonder, too, is how Plato gets into such a position philosophically as to have to draw such a conclusion. The nature of the Supreme Good and its relation to all the other causes is also of interest to anyone who wishes to understand Plato. Each of these problems, therefore, must be taken up individually if further understanding is expected.

It is not a mere matter of choice that leads Plato into assigning the primacy of his philosophical scheme to the Supreme Good. Quite the contrary! Plato's line of reasoning is this. The man who has attained real "wisdom" would see that the reason why anything is, and the reason why it is what it is, would be some cause. Now in the entire Republic Plato is interested in finding the ultimate cause of man's actions. What is it that should stimulate the best man, the philosopher, as an aim? Plato's conclusion is that the good is the desired aim of all men's actions. Nor does Plato limit this teleological concept to the actions of men. The very same idea he applies
more universally not only to the actions of men but to the very
nature of things, to all beings. Ethical action, then, was the
fuse that set off this explosive idea in the philosophy of Plato.
This basic, teleological conception of ethical action is the main
theme of the Republic.17 This idea enables Plato to explain why
all things -- not only the actions of men but also the very tan-
gible things that lie all around us in this universe -- strive
for an end. All things, therefore, for Plato strive for an end;
all things have "a longing (ἐρως) to maintain themselves in
their proper 'form' (ἐξίδοσ)."18

If the good is the cause of man's actions, Plato
argues, it must be the ultimate cause of all things, material and
immaterial as well.19 Plato never says that all things are at
all conscious of the Supreme Good; he merely says that all things
are so made as ultimately to be explained and to end in the high-
est good. This teleological approach as a possible solution to
the problem of being was the result of a long series of develop-
ments in Plato's philosophy; it was an idea that goes back and
finds its starting point in one of his earliest works, the
Phaedo.20

17 Taylor, 264.
18 Stenzel, 43.
19 Republic, 517C.
20 Taylor, 287.
This basic notion of a teleological principle is very important for an understanding of Plato's viewpoint. To understand why he made the Supreme Good so important in his philosophy is to understand that Plato had found the unity by which he could explain not only the immanent nature of things but also the unity that would make a thing knowable. For a long time he had been looking for just such a unity; his earlier dialogues are all evidence of this fact. Now in the Republic such a unity is finally discovered and applied to his supreme system of philosophy. That unity he had been looking for, he finally found in the idea of the Supreme Good.21 This idea answered and solved many of the difficulties he was not able to answer in his earlier dialogues.

But unknown to Plato at the time of his writing of the Republic, this solution was to bring with it many new difficulties that were equally instrumental in making Plato revise his position in later dialogues. However, his solution did, at least for the moment, solve his major difficulties.

At the moment it is difficult to see what connection there is in the mind of Plato between the Supreme Good, which for the present at least, seems to be something outside the thing itself, and the good which is immanent in the thing itself. For

21 Stenzel, 42.
Plato the bridge that links the gap between the world of real beings and the world of intelligible beings is a bridge suspended on thin, fragile, silk fibers. It seems to snap just as soon as anyone puts even a little pressure of analysis to it.

What Plato seems to say is this. All things in the world of phenomena around us strive for a good. The reason for this must be, quite evidently, that they all participate in some single archetype, which by the very nature of the case must be the Supreme Good. Since all things strive for the good and participate in the good, their very being must be explained by the good. Furthermore, as the source of all good, this final end and aim of all things must be the Supreme Good, distinct from all other things. But all things strive for the good, each in its own particular way. The philosopher comprehends this by a process of reasoning, the highest stage of human intelligence. This process leads him to the knowledge of the good of all things. Consequently, the Supreme Good is the cause of the being of all things, and over and above that, the cause of their intelligibility as well.\textsuperscript{22} It is, therefore, from the idea of the good that all reasoning about causes must start.\textsuperscript{23}

At this point it is not too difficult to see what,

\textsuperscript{22} Republic, 509B.
\textsuperscript{23} Stenzel, 43.
from all indications unknown to Plato, caused him so much difficulty. Modern critics, with all the writings of Plato before them, can readily say that Plato did not distinguish carefully between the real and the ideal orders and, as a result, can say that he ran into trouble in explaining satisfactorily the principles of causality. Quite obviously, Plato was confusing the good as the object of striving and that in the good which is the source of intelligibility. Such actually was the case, and for that reason, the Supreme Good played such a very important role in the Republic.

Earlier in this paper when an explanation was given of the famous divided line of Plato, the intimate connection between the objects of knowledge and the corresponding stages of knowledge that go along side them was clearly seen. Even though it is hard to find the clear-cut distinction between the real order and the intelligible order in the plan of Plato, still it is clear that for Plato it is through the good that all things are to be known. Until the good is known, the true nature of things is not really known, or at least the true nature is not known in its entirety and in its relationship with other things. Only an image or a conjecture is had of it. Until things are known through the Supreme Good, they are known only imperfectly.

The ultimate nature of this Supreme Good shall be seen
later. For the present it is enough to say that in the language of Plato, the Supreme Good must be known first and foremost.

The word "good" means that which anything is meant to do or to be. The use of the word implies a certain ultimate hypothesis as to the nature of things, namely that there is reason operating in the world, in man, and in nature; this reason shows itself everywhere in the world in this particular way, that whenever there are a number of elements co-existent, there will be found a certain unity, there is a certain principle which correlates them, through which alone they are what they are, and in the light of which they can be understood.

Such an interpretation is the logical explanation of what Plato means when he says: "The objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known, but they receive their very existence and essence which are derived to them from it." From such a statement the parallelism between Plato's teleology and the knowledge of a thing's essence is very evident.

One thing more in this connection must be mentioned because it throws more light on this Platonic doctrine. It is this. The prime importance of the teleological notion of Plato's interpretation when applied to man shows the very intimate link

24 Nettleship, 225.
25 Republic, 509B.
in the mind of Plato between what philosophers call morality and knowledge. The ideal for man can be explained as "perfect knowledge and understanding of himself and of his life, or as perfect performance of his true function in the world of which he is a part."26 Strictly speaking, and in the light of what are considered common moral acts, Plato is not involved in moral qualities at all. Men aim at an "object of desire -- that which we most want."27 The good life aims at the worthy end, the perfection of its being. This is its good; by this Plato means virtue (εὐρετής) -- that with which something is made good within its own species.

The unity, then, that binds together intelligence and the intelligible is the good. It is the single archetype by which the mind comes to know the objects of knowledge and by which these objects receive their very existence and essence. The question that logically follows these statements is this. What is really the nature of the good that Plato thus conceived to perform this function? In the light of Plato's limited treatment this question shall now be treated.

To see all things and to study them in the light of

26 Nettleship, 229.
the good is the function of the fourth and last stage of knowledge. Such is the task of the true philosopher, Plato maintains. When Plato says that the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the good their being known as well as their essence and existence, he adds one more note. He affirms besides: "The good itself is not essence, but still transcends essence in dignity and surpassing power." But even before he makes this statement he asserts:

This reality, then, that gives their truth to the objects of knowledge and the power of knowing to the knower, you must say is the idea of the good (δε καὶ τῶν ἔγνωστο) and you must conceive it as being the cause of knowledge (εἰς ἡμᾶς περὶ εἰπωθήμενος) and of truth in so far as known.

Thus for Plato the idea of the good is the ultimate source of all things, the ἀρχή of the knowability of things and of their very being.

Even though Plato maintains this particular function of the good, namely that it is the source of both the objects of knowledge and their knowability, still the exact nature of this principle is elusive whenever Plato mentions it. Plato seems to be on a fence when he tries to explain the exact nature of the Supreme Good. At one point he says: "Nay, my beloved,

28 Republic, 509B
29 508E.
let us dismiss for the time being the nature of the good in itself; for it seems that to attain to my present surmise of that is a pitch above the impulse that wings my flight today."30 Then again he says in so many words that the idea of the good is a surmise, and whether I am right or not, God only knows."31 Later on he insists that the idea of the good is "very hard to believe -- yet from another point of view is harder still to deny."32 Just how the Supreme Good is the source of or the cause of being, whether it is a creative cause or not, how it exerts its causality on being -- these are questions that Plato does not answer in his treatment of the Supreme Good in the Republic. But they are problems that readers of the Republic have been asking for centuries.

The reality of the good is hard to deny because, as has been seen, Plato himself says that the good is not the same as being, but even beyond being and surpassing it in dignity and power. Such an explanation is the clue to the "transcendent" nature of the good.33 The good is a totality, an absolute plenitude. It is something more than being; it is a reality that rises above the notion of being and is more exalted by its very

30 506E.
31 517B.
32 532D.
33 Taylor, 286.
This notion of the "beyondness" and "transcendence" of the good is very fundamental to Plato's philosophy as seen in the Republic. The metaphysical consequences of such a conclusion will be studied more thoroughly in the final chapter of this paper.

The "transcendent" nature of this unique, metaphysical principle and its power to unify all reality has been a source of controversy since it first saw the light of day. The controversy can be epitomized in a question thus. Does the good which transcends all being, even the being in the world of ideas, this perfection which unites all things in a perfection, really exist outside the mind which conceives it as the end of all things? To answer this question many more questions would have to be answered before it. Because of the intimate, real relation between the good and the Platonic ideas, which are the objects of knowledge in the third stage of the divided line, the commentators are a bit hesitant to come to any conclusions. There is to be found no very clear and precise explanation from Plato in which he makes definite distinction between the ideas and the Supreme Good. He does make a distinction, however obscure:

... by the other section of the intelligible I mean that which the reason itself

34 Ibid, 286-287.
lays hold of by the power of dialectics, treating its assumptions not as absolute beginnings but literally as hypotheses, underpinnings, footings, and springboards so to speak, to enable it to rise to that which requires no assumption and is the starting point of all, and after attaining to that, again taking hold of the first dependencies from it, so to proceed downward to the conclusions, making no use whatever of any object of sense but only of pure ideas moving on through ideas to ideas and ending with ideas.35

Now whether this starting point to which all other things rise is something radically different from the ideas themselves, or whether it is just some supreme idea rising above the others in that it is the first idea in the logical order from which all others flow, is not immediately clear from the text of Plato. The first principle to which all other ideas rise is the idea of the good; of this there is little doubt. Commentators, working from this text of Plato, argue well that what is said of the good will ipso facto be true of all the other ideas or hypotheses which Plato makes so much of. If it should be proved that the good is itself a self-subsisting form, a reality substantially distinct from the rest of reality, then, it would seem that the same would have to be said of all the other ideas. Here one can recall what was said previously about the evident shortcoming of the Platonic system, namely that no very clear

35 Republic, 511c.
distinction was ever made between the objects of knowledge and the knowledge of objects. As a result of this confusion Platonism lends itself to the interpretation that the ideas are real, subsistant beings. On the other hand, it is equally plausible in the light of the textual interpretation of Plato to say that the Supreme Good of Plato held merely a logical supremacy in the realm of ideas while the real subsistence and existence of the Supreme Good was an idea never intended by Plato.

No attempt will be made in this inquiry to prove or to disprove the conclusions of commentators on this question. Arguments equally as strong for both sides can be formulated for the problem. But in spite of the apparent difficulty, many of the unique qualities of the Supreme Good were able to be pointed out. Nothing seen so far in this study excludes the possibility of the real existence of the Supreme Good, even though Plato himself may never have drawn that conclusion for himself. No real contradictory notions have been found that would make it impossible for such a Supreme Good to exist as a real being outside the mind that conceives it. Perhaps other philosophers would come along in the years and the centuries after Plato, and by making use of all his original and novel ideas, prove the real existence of such a being. But this is matter for another chapter of this thesis. Summarily, the study of Plato has led to a basic notion of the Supreme Good as a
unique, metaphysical principle which is the source of being for all things, both the objects of knowledge and of the knowledge of objects itself -- even though in Plato's explanation there is not a clear and evident distinction between the two -- and which itself transcends all being but yet includes the totality of all being.
CHAPTER III

DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE: THE "GOOD GOD"
AS PRESENTED IN THE DE DIVINIS NOMINIBUS

Slowly the many pages of the history of philosophy filled with the inspiring story of the genius, Plato, have been turned over. Many more pages have to be thumbed before the chapter of history headed with the name "Dionysius the Areopagite" appears. Though the story of his life is briefly told, still his influence in the philosophical and theological thought of the Middle Ages was greater than is commonly realized.

An interesting and yet decidedly confusing detail about the life of the author, Dionysius, has provoked widespread speculation. From internal evidence, as far as is known, the Corpus Areopagitum -- as the works of Dionysius are now called -- was composed at the end of the fifth century or at the
beginning of the sixth century.\(^1\) All authorities agree unanimously on this point. And yet this fact manifestly contradicts the statements that the author himself makes about his life. He seems, for instance, to say that he was present at the funeral services of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and that at the burial he had talked with the Apostles James and Peter.\(^2\) Besides this, he


2 Dionysius the Areopagite, *De Divinis Nominibus*, transl. by Balthasar Corderius, ed. by P. Migne, Paris, 1857, II, 2. Both the Latin and the Greek, when the author thinks it is necessary for a better understanding of the text, will be taken from the Migne edition. Some justification should be given for the use of the Latin rather than the Greek; the original language of Dionysius. In the first place, the remote interest of this paper in the author, Dionysius, lies in the fact of his influence in the West. This influence was through a Latin medium rather than through the Greek text. We are certain of this because of the great popularity of the many commentaries on his works among the Latins. Secondly, from all extant historical accounts on the point, Dionysius' principle influence seems to be in the West rather than in the East. "Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite can be included among the early Western masters by reason of the wide circulation of his writings and their influence upon the Latin world ... He thus became a Western by adoption." Maurice de Wulf, *History of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1935, 101. "They were popularised by the Latin versions of Hilduin and Scotus Erigena in the ninth century, and had a considerable influence in the Middle Ages, which put them in the forefront of the Apostolic writings." Cayre, 91. Therefore, it can be said that it was the Latin rather than the Greek text of Dionysius that made him a philosopher and a theologian of repute.
professes to be Saint Paul's Athenian convert, Dionysius the Areopagite.

The Mediaevals, from all appearances, accepted the statements and allusions of Dionysius at their face value, and for the most part, were unaware of the anachronisms. Only later shrewd scholarship began to see the discrepancy between the explicit statements of the author and the actual historical facts of his life. The considerable weight of such anachronisms on fixing the time for the writings of the works has led to the subsequent name of Dionysius, the author of the works, as the "pseudo-Dionysius" or the "pseudo-Areopagite." Often he is listed under the name of "Denys," the French form of Dionysius, and is thus confused with the apostle and first bishop of Paris, Saint Denys the Martyr.

Great scholars have been trying for a long time to solve the mystery of pseudo-Dionysius. Their attempts do not seem to have been very successful. From internal evidence authorities all agree that the author of the Corpus must have lived at the end of the fifth century or at the beginning of the sixth century. With such compelling evidence, it is difficult to explain Dionysius's Dissimulation. This should not, however,

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3 For a comprehensive study of this point see the Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique, 4131-4132.
lessen our estimation of the works. We may, quite legitimately and with the authority of many great scholars, consider the Areopagite's dissimulation as literary fiction; such a practice in his day was not only entirely permitted but was even considered laudable. 4 Dionysius, most likely, thought that writing with authority was the best means he could use to answer the problems that taxed the minds of thinkers of his day. His works have great intrinsic value; on this score most of all we should judge their merit.

Dionysius was mentioned as an authority for the first time in the religious conferences at Constantinople during the early part of the sixth century. Here his works were quoted as apostolic by the Severian Monophysites in defense of their peculiar Monophysite doctrines. "The very first citations of his works that one finds were made by the monophysite, Severus, patriarch of Antioch, at the Council of Tyre, which could not have been later than the year 513." 5 Though the Catholics rejected these writings as probably apocryphal, the works of Dionysius soon won the recognition of all great scholars. The influence they exerted was due chiefly to great writers of the time who

5 "Les premières citations qu'on en trouve, sont faites par le monophysite Sévère, patriarche d'Antioche, dans un concile de Tyr qui ne peut être postérieur à l'an 513." Godet, 431.
In spite of the fact that there was a contradiction between the life and the words of the author, all his writings continued to have considerable influence. This influence was due chiefly to the commentary on the works of Dionysius written by Maximus Confessor. The translator's own works had already been accepted as orthodox; this added to the favorable interpretation of the works of Dionysius. In the year 757 Pope Paul sent the Greek text of Dionysius' works to the Gallican Church. For almost a whole century they lay untouched, a hidden treasure, in the Abbey of Saint Denis. Finally, the century old dust was brushed off the volumes, and Hilduin, the Abbot of the monastery, with the aid of a few collaborators, translated the works of pseudo-Dionysius. Only a few years later John Scotus Eriugena, at the request of Charles the Bald, began his Latin translation of the Corpus. Through the translations of Eriugena, Dionysius became the chief exponent of the Greek tradition of the indirect Platonic influence upon Christian thinking. The effects of this translation were felt considerably during the Middle Ages, even

6 Cayre, 91.
8 De Wulf, 63.
more than we expect.9 Scholars began looking to Dionysius as the"culmen of Platonism."10

It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the great men of the Middle Ages wrote commentaries on the works. Men like Hugh of Saint Victor, Saint Albert, and Saint Bonaventure further enhanced the influence of Dionysius by their extensive commentaries on his works.11 Saint Thomas himself not only quotes Dionysius quite frequently but also wrote a commentary on the De Divinis Nominibus. In the light of this historical data, it is evident that the name of Dionysius was then not unknown to great men as it is today. "At that time, theologians, ascetics and mystics, liturgists and even artists, found inspiration in the works of the 'Areopagite.'"12

The Corpus Areopagiticum which is extant contains four treatises and ten letters. Of the four treatises, two of them, the De Divinis Nominibus, and also the Mystica Theologia, are concerned with God and the knowledge of God. The other two, Coelestia Hierarchia and Ecclesiastica Hierarchia, deal with the twofold hierarchy. These works are entirely free from and avoid

9 Klibansky, 27.
10 Ibid., 42.
11 Cayré, 91.
12 Ibid., 91-92.
any controversial spirit in the manner of presentation of the
doctrine. This is the author's deliberate intent as is seen so
often in the works themselves. He was not interested in re-
futing the Greeks; his intentions were to expound the Christian
philosophy and theology in the light of the philosophy and theo-
logy he had learned from the Greeks. He seemed to want to show
his readers that the mere fact of proving something as wrong did
not establish his own views as true.\(^\text{13}\)

Dionysius uses his works as a means of showing us how
we can get to know God. He then goes on to tell us how we learn
who God is. In his writings he seems to establish three distinct
ways in which the human mind can arrive at the knowledge of God.
First of all Dionysius tells us that God is \(\pi\omega\nu\omega\nu\nu\omega\sigma\), the God
of many names. He says this because all these things that the
human mind knows and the things that the senses of man bring in-
to the scope of his consciousness, all are as so many manifesta-
tions of God. What can be said of inferiors can also be said of
the superior nature that is the cause of the inferiors.\(^\text{14}\) The
explanation of this point is the total theme of the \textit{De Divinis
Nominibus}. Because in this way all the perfections that are
found in the creatures are affirmed of their first cause, their
creator, this way of affirmation is called the \textit{Via Affirmationis}.

\(^{13}\) Gilson, 80.
\(^{14}\) \textit{De Divinis Nominibus}, I, 5-6.
And yet it is quite evident, Dionysius affirms, that these names can be equally denied of the first cause because it is so transcendent by nature. The first cause, so superior to all secondary causes and to all creatures, must have perfections that are far superior to these. Therefore, all the names that are given the first cause as the cause of all beings can also be denied of that first cause on the grounds of its transcendent nature. This denial of names in the first cause of all being is the basis of the Via Negationis. But we must be very careful when we say this. This denial of names does not get us ultimately to an indetermination as so many philosophers, ancient as well as modern, have been led to conclude. Rather it leads to a transcendent nature that contains all these perfections in a manner far superior to the way in which these perfections are found in the inferiors. For this reason our knowledge of the first cause does not stop at negations. After we have denied the perfections as found in inferior beings to the first cause, we then go up to a higher step. The knowledge of the first cause ends finally in the affirmation of the super-nature of the first cause. This way of knowing finally the super-nature of the first determining cause of all things is called the Via Excellentiae.15 These last two ways of knowing God are treated by Dionysius in the Mystica Theologia. Even though this threefold division is not so

15 De Divinis Nominitis, I,1.
clearly outlined as this in the writings of Dionysius, however, the basis of the division is certainly evident in all his works.

The interest of this paper lies first and foremost in the *Via Affirmationis*. Throughout the *De Divinis Nominibus* this affirmative way is most frequently marked by the use of the words *δυνάμεις* or ἰδακον. The significance of these expressions will be seen in a few moments. First of all will be studied the stages of knowledge through which the soul goes before coming to the highest knowledge, the knowledge of the cause of all things. Then will be seen the various attributes the soul affirms of this highest cause and also how it does this. Finally, the highest predicate of this as a final cause will be analyzed.

The soul, Dionysius goes on to show, has a threefold activity or motion (*κίνησις*). These motions are the three stages of knowledge. In the lowest stage the soul moves straight forward (*κατ' ἑλθειν θεία πλν*). In this motion it does not turn within itself but turns outward upon all the things around it and experiences the influence of the world all around itself. "Sed ad ea quae ipsi vicina sunt progreditur."16 The activity centers around things *ἐν καιρίαν ἐγείρω*. This activity never rises above a knowledge of the material, tangible things proffered the soul through the use of the senses by the world outside it. This ac-

16 IV, 9.
tivity of the soul can be called the sphere of sensation.

A second motion, an upward and spiral motion (ἐλεκτο-
κόδος) takes place when the soul is enlightened by great truths
in a process of discursive reasoning ("cogitando et discurrente").
When the soul acts thus it makes use of knowledge drawn from the
preceding activity but goes on to more universal conclusions.
"Oblique vero cietur animus, quando pro captu suo notionibus
divinis illustratur, non spirituali quidem unito modo, sed cogit-
ando et discurrente quasi permisit fluxisque actionibus."17

Finally the soul moves in a circular motion (κύκλική)
when it turns away from all things that lie outside itself (ἀπὸ
τῶν ἔξω) and centers its attention on the things that occupy and
are centered in its own mind. It concentrates on its own powers
and comes finally to the principle that gives unity to all things.
This principle of unity is the Good which is beyond all things.
It is one and is the same, without beginning and without end.
(τὸ ὑπὲρ πάντα τὰ ὀντα, καὶ ἐν καὶ ταύτων, καὶ ἀνάρχων καὶ ἀτελ-
eύτητον.) The highest and most perfect activity of the soul
is the contemplation and the mental activity centered about the
Good, the Beautiful, the One, all identified in the final prin-
ciple. Once the soul has reached this highest and most perfect
activity, once it concentrates on the Good as the highest prin-

17 IV, 9.
ciple of all things, there can be no greater activity possible for the soul. Therefore, in the language of Plato, the soul has reached its "\(\delta\varepsilon\tau\varepsilon\)". 18

Nor is it mere accident that the soul comes finally to the knowledge of the Good. All things are grounded in the Good; from it all things have received their being, have received all that they are, and by it they are being constantly preserved in their being. "Quin et earum firmitas hinc, et stabilitas et conservatio, bonorumque pabulum pendet." 19 Not only do they retain their own identity because of the Good, but all things are what they are because of the Good. They receive, in other words, their very being from the Good. Now this is true of all things, even of souls and of the activities of the souls. "Animae quoque ac quaelibet animarum bona sunt per bonitatem illam (\(\delta\iota\ \tau\iota\nu\ \iota\nu\tau\varepsilon\nu\tau\varepsilon\nu\)), quae omne bonum superat, inde provenit,illos intellectu praeditas esse, vitam habere substantialem, corruptionis expertem, ut esse habeant cum angelis commune." 20 From the Good and because of the Good all things have being and retain their respective being (\(\epsilon\kappa\ \tau\acute{\alpha}y\acute{\alpha}\sigma\omicron\nu\) and \(\delta\iota\ \tau\acute{\alpha}y\acute{\alpha}\sigma\omicron\nu\)). Because of this fact all things manifest the Good in themselves; by the very fact that they

18 We must be careful to distinguish because Dionysius does between the word "\(\text{mens}\)" (\(\nu\omega\upsilon\)) used to designate angels, and "\(\text{animus}\)" (\(\psi\upsilon\upsilon\kappa\acute{\iota}\)) used to designate the rational powers of man, and in a wider sense, the vital principle of man.

19 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 1.

20 IV, 2.
exist and are what they are, they point to and proclaim the existence of the Good, which is the cause of their very being. "Ipsamet forma bonitatis ipsis data est, concessumque, et ut latentem in se bonitatem valeant enuntiare." Thus through created things the soul rises to the knowledge of a cause that must exist from the very fact that all things exist. "Ζη δ' ἀόρατα τοῦ θεοῦ ἀπὸ κτίσεως κόσμου τῶν ποιήσας νοού μενα καθόριται." Thus in the mind of Dionysius the efficient creative and sustaining cause of all things was identified with the final goal of the soul's knowledge because the function of each of these causes taken individually had ultimately to be identified in one and the same cause.

We have seen how things receive their very being from the first cause, the first principle of all things. Now it is equally true to say that all things aim at the Good as their last end or at the perfection of their being. The good for each individual being is gathered up in the totality of the Good because the good as the cause of all things must already contain the perfection of all beings to which it is going to first give that perfection. All things strive for the perfection of their being; this is their proper end and is found in the final cause, the Good. Because of this all things strive for the Good as for their final end. "Bonumque illud est ex quo omnia constiterunt.
et veluti a perfectissima causa producta sunt, et in qua consistunt universa ... et ad quod omnia, tamquam ad finem quaeque suum convertuntur, quodque appetunt universa."\textsuperscript{23}

Dionysius goes on to say that a process to infinity in explaining participation is impossible by the very nature of beings which are finite. We must come, finally, to the Good which is good not because of participation but by its very essence and being. "Et sic quia essentia sua bonus est Deus, ut tamquam substantiale bonum, bonitatem in omnia porrigat."\textsuperscript{24} The Good, then, pours its goodness on all beings and then draws all things to itself by the very fact that it is goodness by its very nature. Because of the fact that it is the Good that gives being to all things and draws all things to itself as their final end, the Good is the principle and primal cause of all things.

Atque ut omnia bonitas ad se convertit, primaque, quae dispersa sunt, colligit, tamquam unifica divinitas et principium unitatis, omniaque ipsam ut principium, ut complexum, ut finem appetunt; bonumque illud est (ut Scriptura sacra testatur) ex quo omnia constiterunt.\textsuperscript{25}

Were there anything beyond the Good in the order of causes, therefore, that cause and not the Good, would be the end to which all things would aspire.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23} IV, 1.
\textsuperscript{24} IV, 1.
\textsuperscript{25} IV, 1.
\textsuperscript{26} IV, 31.
This statement that the Good is the goal onto which all things aspire, has far greater importance in the philosophy of Dionysius than is at first evident. The very fact that Dionysius’ attention was centered on the cause of all things (αἴτια παντίων) and the end of all things (τέλος παντίων) explains why Goodness because of what it is became the very foundation of his philosophical system. Upon the idea of the Good depended the ramification of his system of philosophy.27

So fundamental was this idea of the Good for Dionysius that within the scope of its extension lay not only being but non-being as well. "Siquidem nomen boni de Deo declarat Omnem emanationes auctoris omnium, et porrigitur haec nominatio Dei a bono tum ad ea quae sunt, tum ad ea quae non sunt, estque super ea quae sunt, et super ea quae non sunt."28 The Good, then, lies above being because both being and non-being are participations of it. Dionysius quite emphatically states that non-being is as much a participation of the Good as being, lest anyone misunderstand his meaning. He expresses this idea quite cogently when he writes: "Audebo etiam hoc dicere, id quod non est (τὸ μὴ ὁν), pulchrum et bonum participare."29 If the Good already contains both the good and the being of all things, and besides contains

28 De Divinis Nominibus, V, 1.
29 IV, 7.
all non-being, the "id quod non est," then, the Good is beyond the opposition that exists between being and non-being.

There is reason to wonder how Dionysius explains the way in which non-being participates in the Good. The explanation given is quite simple; it is easy to see how Dionysius was forced to draw this conclusion in the light of the rest of his philosophy. He explains it thus: "Illud ipsum quod non est (zò μὴ ὄν), illius quod supra res omnes est, boni desiderio tenetur, quin etiam in bono (ἔν ἐγγύς) vere superessentiali per omnium aisationem esse contendit."30 From this statement we conclude that non-being is what it is because of some desire or striving (desiderio) for the Good. By its very nature non-being could not participate in being; it is directly opposed to being. Yet, Dionysius affirms, it can aim or strive for the Good because it can strive for the particular good that it can have and yet does not have. Dionysius gives us another clue to the nature of non-being when he goes on to say: "Desiderat enim illud etiam id quod non existit, ut dictum est, et aliquo modo in ipso esse contendit, quoniam ipsum est quod formam rebus forma caretibus tribuit, et in ipso etiam id quod non est, supra essentiam dicatur, et est."31 From this quotation it can be said that Dionys-

30 IV, 3.
31 IV, 16.
Dionysius considers the Good as that which gives form to that which does not have form. Non-being, which as yet does not have form, aims at or has a desire for the form which it can have from the Good. This striving for or desire for a form makes of non-being a participation of the Good. Non-being is that which is formless but still has a desire for the Good. Therefore, the participation in the Good extends to being as well as to non-being, to that which has form as well as to that which lacks form. The Good, therefore, standing above both being and non-being, has the highest position, the primacy, in the ontological order. From it proceed by participation all being and all non-being.

When Dionysius uses the word non-being, he means one of these three things. First of all, he could be referring to the non-being of God, which he often makes mention of when he speaks of the *Via Negationis*. This restricted use is always very evident from the context. Secondly, it can refer to the non-being of evil. Evil as evil cannot exist on the plane of being; it exists -- if this word can be used when speaking of evil -- only with an affinity with the Good. Evil *qua* evil neither has nor confers being, and is neither good nor confers good. "*Ipsum enim malum neque est neque bonum est.*" It is only because of its

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32 IV, 20.
affinity with a good that evil can be said to be positive and productive at all. When non-being, therefore, is used in the place of evil, it is used in a sense, strictly speaking, even lower than non-being because, whereas non-being participates in the Good and desires the Good as its end, evil neither participates in the Good nor desires an end, and is always admixed with being. Where the is "no being" there is no evil. Evil is absolute non-existence. "Malum autem nec in eis quae sunt, nec in eis quae non sunt, sed eo etiam non est, remotius est a bono." Therefore, the term non-being is used of evil only in a very broad sense. For all practical purposes, this idea of the non-being of evil has for Dionysius the same meaning as "privatio" has for later philosophers. However, Dionysius never makes use of that word.

More properly non-being refers to matter which is the formless stuff that seeks or has a yearning for a form in the Good. In very simple terms Dionysius argues in this way. Matter is that which is formless and seeks a form. But that which is formless is non-being. Therefore, matter is non-being.

Saint Thomas explains quite well how Dionysius comes

33 IV, 19.
34 IV, 18.
to this conclusion. Dionysius fails to distinguish between a privation and what he means by matter. Consequently, matter becomes a non-ens which participates in the Good in so far as it seeks its formation in the Good. By its very nature it does not seek participation in ens because "nihil enim appetit nisi sibi simile." Since matter is a non-being, it cannot seek the information of being, which is its opposite. Now the obvious conclusion for Dionysius to draw from this thesis is that the extension of the Good is greater than the extension of being.

We can look upon this interpretation in another light. In the system of Dionysius it is not in the line of predication but in the line of causality that the Good extends itself both to being and to non-being. Consequently, our notion of non-being does not mean simply that which does not exist -- "non ea simpliciter quae penitus non sunt." -- but, instead, that which is in potency and as yet not in act. But it is necessary to make the distinction that Dionysius was careful to make. The potency which is non-being in this system is in potency to the act which can be given it by the Good alone; it is not in potency

36 Ibid., I 5,2.
38 Ibid., 758.
to the act which is already realized. Therefore, the potency of non-being, as far as Dionysius is concerned, does not aim at or strive for the act contained in being but for the act contained in the Good. The Good, then, in so far as it implies the notion of final cause, draws to itself both that which is in act as well as that which is in potency. Then again, that which is in act has form. It has already been seen how Dionysius makes that which has form, being. On the other hand, that which is formless is what is in potency to act; for Dionysius this is the fundamental meaning of non-being. Summarily, then, both being and non-being, the formed and the formless, act and potency, strive for and aim at the Good as their own particular good. As such the Good is the fundamental ontological principle and ultimate goal of all things.

As has been seen from the various quotations already cited from the writings of Dionysius, the Good in his philosophical system is identified with the God of his theological system. All that has been said of the Good is to be said of God because the two are really identical. "Quia sic essentia sua bonae est Deus, ut tamquam substantiale bonum (ὅσι τῷ εἶναι τῷ ἀγαθῷ, ὡς ὀῦσα ὅτι ἄγαθων.)" 39 What has been said of the Good is ipso facto true of God because the Good is that which pours out its

39 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 1.
goodness by participation on all things, while it itself does not participate in goodness but is goodness itself. This is exactly what is meant by the word God. Every good that is not its own goodness is good by participation. But God, being the source of all things cannot and does not participate either in goodness or in anything else. By His very nature He is goodness. So too, the Good is perfect goodness; it does not participate in goodness but is goodness by its very nature. Therefore, Dionysius identifies the words God and Good, which are identical in reality. Because the Good is the summit of perfection and because the Good is identified with God, Dionysius concludes that the highest name of God is "the Good." "Ac primum perfectum et quod omnes Dei emanationes manifestat, boni nomen expendamus." For this reason we can readily see why Dionysius uses the two words interchangeably throughout his entire work.

In the light of the knowledge of the Good, it is easy to see why Dionysius insists that the "He who is" of Scripture must be applied in a very special way to God. Being is predicated of God in a causal and participating way. God embraces all being and produces all being in the very same sense that the Good gives being to all things. God is not being in the strict sense any more than the Good is being. But being is the first
participation of the Good; for this reason the Good is said to be being. So also being is the first participation of God. Therefore, God is said to be being in so far as being is His first participation. "Deus enim non quovis modo est ens, sed simpliciter et infinite in se pariter complexus et anticipans." 43

But then again he says: "Primum igitur donum per se esse cum per se illa supraquam (sic) bonitas producat merito ab antiquiore et prima omnium participationum laudatur, et est ex ipsa et in ipsa ipsum per se esse." 44 God is being in the sense that being is the first participation of His divine nature.

Strictly speaking, just as God is not being, so also being is not God; it is only the first of all the participations of God, and as it was just said, the condition of all the other (participations). 45

The importance of this conclusion is not immediately evident. Examination of the doctrine leads to the conclusion that Dionysius has a scale of being starting with per se being, which is absolute being and the first participation of the Good, then universal being, which is the being found in the various modes of participation (e.g., the mode of being that is found in all rational beings, in animal life, or in plant life), and

43 V. 4.
44 V. 6.
45 "A proprement parler, de même que Dieu n'est pas l'être, l'être n'est pas Dieu; il n'est que la première de toutes les participations à Dieu, et comme il vient d'être dit, la condition de toutes les autres." Gilson, 84.
finally the being that is found in a particular being (e.g., in this particular man, or animal, or plant). \(^4\) Nor is this scale limited to the participation of being alone. The very same modes of participation are equally applicable to the various degrees of life, wisdom, intelligence, light, truth, power, justice, and all the other qualities wherein all creatures that participate, finally, in being also participate. \(^4\) Each of these scales of participation has a definite place in the hierarchy which culminates in and ramifies from the Good.

Because the most universal of all the participations is being, it is considered the first participation that proceeds from the Good. The more universal the extension of a particular participation, the higher it is in the scale of participation.

The importance of this scale of participation for Dionysius is this. He has to conclude that because being is the first in the scale of participations, for that reason it must be the first and the most important name given to the Good. So also with all the other participations. Each can be predicated of the Good, and therefore of God, because it is a mode of participation. The importance of each of these is proportioned to its place in the scale of participation. That is why it can be said

\(^4\) Corderius, 958.
\(^4\) De Divinis Nominebus, V, 5.
that all things form a definite pattern of participation that leads to the knowledge of the Good. All nature is a definite "theophany." 48

Dionysius compares this ramified participation of the Good to the sun shining down on all creatures. Just as the sun by its very nature pours out its light on all things, so also the Good pours out the rays of its goodness upon all things.

Quemadmodum enim sol ille noster non cogitatione aut voluntate, sed eo ipso quod est, illuminat universa quae ququo modo lucis ejus sunt capacia; sic enim ipsum bomum ipsamet substantia sua, rebus omnibus, pro cujusque captu, totius bonitatis suae radios affundit. 49

This comparison, so very typical of Neoplatonic philosophy, 50 reveals that the "bête noir" of Platonism, that a higher power in the hierarchy of participation transmits power to and influences directly a lower power, has been incorporated into the philosophy of Dionysius. If Dionysius really held this doctrine, it would mean that he believed that a living being, for example, would be able to pass on life to another by its own power without the direct influence and causality of the Good. 51 Yet this is true only if Dionysius subscribed to all the consequences of the comparison he used. We do know that he used the comparison; it is not evi-

48 Gilson, 82.
49 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 1.
50 Martin, Clark, and Ruddick, 264.
51 Gilson, 82.
dent immediately whether he was willing to admit all the consequences of this comparison. Because the comparison was apropos to the ideas he was explaining, he made use of it. It may have meant no more to him than just that. The comparison summarizes quite well his ideas, but should be taken, from all appearances, only as a comparison.

It is upon this idea that the entire system of Dionysius' philosophy really rests. To use a figure, this idea establishes the framework of his philosophy; at the summit of the whole world is God, who can be imagined as an immense source of light, and even as the light itself; and from this blazing fire radiate countless rays, quite distinct, but harmonious, and with a hierarchical pattern, and the more brilliant and perfect as they get closer to their uncreated source; this emanation of the light radiating from God -- an effect of the divine goodness -- diffuses itself without interruption down to the very last degree of the hierarchy of beings. In our return movement we are able, as we climb step by step, to reach the very wellspring of our being, our first principle. 52

Yet despite the fact that so much of human knowledge indicates

52 "C'est sur cette idée que repose en réalité toute la philosophie Dionysienne, que en détermine pour ainsi dire, le cadre; au sommet du monde il y a Dieu, conçu comme une immense foyer de lumière, comme la lumière même; de ce foyer jaillit une multiplicité de rayons distincts, mais harmonisés, hiérarchisés, d'autant plus brillants et plus parfaits qu'ils se rapprochent de leur source incurée; cette émanation -- à partir de Dieu -- de la lumière effect de la bonté divine, se propage sans interruption jusqu'au dernier degré de la hiérarchie des êtres, et dans notre mouvement de retour, nous pouvons, en nous élevant de degré en degré, monter jusqu'à notre source et notre principe." Théry, 103-105.
the existence of the Good, and despite the fact that creatures manifest the nature of the Good, Dionysius finally says that the human mind cannot know the Good God as He really is. "Etenim cum notiones omnes sint entitatum, et ad entitates (כִּי תְּנקֵי בַּעֲבָדָה) terminentur, is qui omni entitate sublimior est, omnis quaque effugit cognitionem."53 Since God is Himself so far superior to the effects of His goodness that are manifest in all things, Dionysius concludes that God is for that reason really nameless. After all the names of the qualities found in creatures have been predicated of God, finally the human mind must conclude that it can know nothing of the true nature of God. God possesses all names because He is the cause of all things; He is without name because He transcends altogether all the effects of His goodness that the human mind knows. "Hoc igitur cum scirent theologoi, Deum laudant et tamquam nomine carentem, et ab omni nomine."54 In the writings of Dionysius the affirmative theology, which attributes to God all the names attributed to creatures that He causes, thus finds its counterpart in the negative theology, which denies all the names thus given. The negative theology thus leads to a higher knowledge of God.

There is no denying the fact that for Dionysius the *Via Negationis* seemingly takes all meaning away from the *Via Af-

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53 *De Divinis Nominibus*, I, 4.
54 *I*, 6.
When Dionysius explains the *Via Negationis*, he makes God merely the unknown cause of all things. Thus the perfections in God are not known; God, as a cause of all things, is perfect and has perfections only in so far as He is a cause of all perfections in things. Dionysius never stopped to make a clear-cut distinction between the perfection which is known and the limited manner in which that perfection is found in creatures. Thus it was rather difficult for him to predicate these perfections found in creatures as perfections found also in the Good God.

Nor yet does the mind of Dionysius rest in the quest for the knowledge of God. Dionysius goes on to show that there is still a higher way, the way of mystical theology, which unites us more completely with the Good. The way of affirmation leads us to know the nature of the Good as the cause of all perfections in creatures. The way of negation shows that the nature of the Good is not the same in any way as that found in the effects of that Good found in creatures. Finally, the way of superexcellence or supereminence leads to the mystical insight into the true nature of the Good. Through the mystical way of superexcellence the human soul is united to the transcendent nature of God. The only way in which the soul can be united to God in this mystical way is by excess of love; since love is the cause of this union, Dionysius explains the place of love in his philosophy. Love alone is the way to the last, the highest, the most perfect,
the most profound knowledge of God.55

In so far as He is transcendent, He cannot be named; He is the great "Unnamed." But the names that we give to God never attain the lofty sublimity of God. Our knowledge -- intellectual as well as our phantasms -- are far short of God's utter super-excellence; love, and love alone, is able to unite us with the divine.56

Thus for Dionysius the third way in the line of knowledge of man leads to the supereminent, transcendent, divine nature of God. For him there is a definite progression that ultimately terminates in this supereminent nature.

Every being is a good. Therefore, we say that the cause of it is the Good; next we deny that the cause is the Good; but this negation becomes in its turn an affirmation, for if God is not the Good, it is because He is the Supergood.57

Thus in the language of Dionysius, God as the cause of all things would be the Good. But then the Good would be denied

55 Cayré, 99.
56 "Comme transcendant, il est innommable, le grand 'Anonyme'; ... Mais les noms que nous donnons à Dieu n'arrivent jamais à la hauteur de la transcendance divine; nos connaissances -- les intellectuelles aussi bien que les imaginatives -- échouent devant la superéclat de Dieu; seul l'amour est capable de nous unir au divin." Théry, 93.
57 "Chaque être est un bien; nous dirons donc que sa cause est le Bien; puis nous nierons qu'elle soit le Bien; mais cette négation deviendra à son tour une affirmation, car si Dieu n'est pas le Bien, c'est qu'il est l'Hyperbien." Gilson, 32.
of Him because He is merely the cause of all things. Finally, He would be said to be not only the Good but even the Super-
good.
CHAPTER IV

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF PLATO'S
SUPREME GOOD AND DIONYSIUS'
GOOD GOD

If someone were to take up a portrait of a friend painted when he was about five years old and compare it with a portrait drawn thirty years later, he might find striking resemblances between the features of the two. No one would say that the two portraits are identically the same. The gleam in the eye, the aquiline nose, the little twisted smile on the cheeks -- all these might still be there on the portrait of the mature man. But yet they would not be the same. The older features would resemble the youthful features, but their proportion would be much greater. Both pictures would portray one and the same man but at different stages of his life.
A similar comparison can be made between the philosophy of Plato -- the portrait of a youthful philosophy -- and the more mature and more completely developed philosophy of Dionysius -- the portrait of a mature philosophy. Even though there is a resemblance, a marked similarity, between the two men, still they are not identical. Whereas Plato suggested or pointed to a possible solution or merely hinted at an idea, Dionysius certified, drove on to a logical conclusion, and explained his ideas as much as he was able. The portrait of the youth and the portrait of the man show marked resemblances. But many changes had taken place from the time that Plato started his career to the time that Dionysius completed his work. The thought of Plato had passed through the minds of many great thinkers, and as a result had become much more profuse and more developed than when Plato had expressed his ideas for the first time. Yet despite this tremendous change and despite the fact the Dionysius was so greatly influenced by the followers of Plato, the Neoplatonists, the resemblance is nonetheless there. However, it must be remembered that the more mature thinker, Dionysius, had at his hand the fruits of many great minds that had added in some instances clarity and depth to the thought of their master, Plato, and in other instances, obscurity and superficiality.

First of all, we can see a marked similarity between the stages of knowledge of Plato and the motions of the soul in
Dionysius. In both these is definite scale starting with sense perception and concluding with the knowledge of the ultimate principle, the Good. Plato divides the lower division of his line into two parts — *eikásia* and *písteis*. The former stage refers to the "shadows and then reflections in water and on surfaces of dense, smooth, and bright texture, and everything of that kind."¹ The latter refers to the "animals about us and all plants and the whole class of objects made by man."² The corresponding stage in the system of Dionysius is the movement of the soul "directe." This one movement in Dionysius' plan includes the two lowest stages of Plato's scale. Dionysius sums up the two lowest stages of Plato by using the general phrase *διὸ τῶν ἔξω* or again *ἔξω θεόν*. Thus he includes both *eikásia* and *písteis* in one motion of the soul.

Directe vero movetur, quando non ad se-ipsam ingreditur, neque singulari motu spirituali fertur, sed ad ea quae ipsa vicina sunt progreditur, et a rebus externis, non secus ac signis quibusdam variis ac multiplicibus. (*διὸ τῶν ἔξω θεόν ῥοΖ οπέρ ἔπει τίνων σύμβολων)³

Because of this synthesis, the second motion of the soul for Dionysius corresponds to the third stage — *διάνως* — of Plato's divided line. Dionysius calls this motion an

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¹ Republic, 510A.
² 510A-B.
³ De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 9.
"oblique" motion of the soul. In this stage for Plato the soul must "investigate by treating as images the things imitated in the former division, and by means of assumptions from which it proceeds not up to a first principle but down to a conclusion." The movement of the soul is the same for Dionysius: "Oblique vero cietur animus, quando pro captu suo notionibus divinis illustratur, non spirituali quidem unito modo, sed cogitando et discurrendo quasi permistis fluxisque actionibus." Finally, the highest stage of Plato brings the soul to the knowledge of the highest principle.

It advances from its assumptions to a beginning or principle that transcends assumption, and in which it makes no use of the images employed by the other section, relying on ideas only and progressing systematically through ideas.

Dionysius, on the other hand, expands and explains the highest movement of the soul a little more fully.

Animi autem motus orbicularis est ejus ab extraneis in semetipsum introitus, spiritualiumque ipsius facultatum unimoda inflexio, quae quasi in circulo fixum et ab omni errore liberum motum ei tribuit, et a multis rebus extraneis ipsum convertit ac colligit primum ad se, deinde, quasi jam unius modi effectum, conjunctis uno modo facultatibus, conjungit, atque ita demum ad pulchrum ac bonum manuducit, quod supra omnia quae sunt et unum et idem, et sine principio et sine fine est.

4 Republic, 510B.
5 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 9.
6 Republic, 510B.
7 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 9.
Hence for both philosophers the final stage of cognition leads to a unity, a principle of being by which everything else is unified. For both men the final stage consists of a simple grasp and an intuition of an immaterial nature which is intelligible in itself. Despite the fact that for Plato the object of this intuition is the ideas, which are distinct from the soul, while for Dionysius the object is the soul itself and its own powers, still both philosophers ultimately terminate in the intuition of the principle of unity, the idea of goodness.

But before the comparison of this first principle in the works of the two men is made, a word must be said about the stage of knowledge that is just below the final stage. It has been shown that between the sphere of sensation and the ultimate sphere of knowledge, Plato puts an intermediate, the sphere of ideas. In these ideas the beings of the lower stages participate in greater or less degree. Although a few commentators interpret Plato as meaning that these ideas have existence only in the mind conceiving them, the much more common interpretation, and the one that follows the most obvious sense of the text, is that they have real existence independent of the mind. In any case this much is certain. Plato explains the perfections in the lower stages by means of the ideas. Of this we are certain whether the ideas exist outside the mind or not.

An analysis of Dionysius shows that he holds a very
similar doctrine of ideas. Between the highest principle, the first cause of all things, and the particulars which are found in the lowest stage of beings, Dionysius places the universal ideas as forms. "Quaeris autem quid prorsus dicamus per se esse, aut per se vitam, aut quaecunque absolute et principaliter esse, et ex Deo ac primo creata esse ponimus." He answers the question by saying that these ideas including the idea of being are predicated of the first cause in so far as they also participate in the first cause. Just as all particulars are participations of the first cause, so also are the ideas participations of it. Hence the Good, which is the first cause, is the author of these ideas and of all particular beings as well. "Quamobrem bonum ille et ipsorum quae prima sunt auctor esse dicitur, inde eorum quae generatim et universe illa participant, postea eorum quae in parte." Thus the ideas are the first and the highest participations of the Good. "The Dionysian forms are the very first beings, τὰ πρῶτα ὄντα, the very first to receive existence, which they possess in this way πρῶτον, ἀπολύτως καὶ ἀρχηγικῶς."
Yet for Dionysius there is no question of the real existence of the ideas. Where Plato is obscure and open to such an interpretation as so many commentators have of his fantastic conceptions, Dionysius is much more definite and more easily comprehensible. He ridicules those who would make gods or creators of these ideas, as so many of the ancient philosophers had done even before the time of Plato, and himself insists that they do not exist: "quippe cum non essent."\[12\]

In this treatment of the ideas can be recognized the doctrine of the divine ideas. With Dionysius these ideas are like the lines radiating from the center of a circle. Just as the lines are unified by the point in the center, so are the ideas unified by the source from which they come. The Good is the center from which radiate the many lines which are compared to the ideas.

Et est ex ipsa et in ipsa ipsum per se esse, et rerum principia, et omnia quaecunque sunt, et quae quomodocunque sunt; idque incomprehense, et copulata, et singulariter ... Et in centro omnes lineae circuli una copulatione simul existunt; et punctum habet omnes rectas lineas uniformiter copulatas inter se, et cum uno principio a quo exierunt, et in ipso centro omnino copulatas sunt.\[13\]

But this must be remembered in the consideration of this comparison. The ideas as compared to the radiations from their center,

\[12\] De Divinis Nominibus, XI, 6.
\[13\] V, 6.
the Good, are really distinguished from that center and are also subordinate to it because all depends on the position and the existence of that center. Thus all ideas depend on and exist because of the existence of the Good. "The ideas, then, represent so many divine rays, hardly separated from their center, although they are already quite distinct from it."14 In his treatment of the ideas, therefore, Dionysius, so it seems, has taken a position midway between an exaggerated interpretation of the Platonic ideas -- the interpretation which would make the ideas entities that are really existing outside the mind of the one conceiving them -- and the position of Saints Augustine, Bonaventure, and Thomas which identifies the divine ideas, which are the exemplary forms for all things whether actual or possible with God.15

The final stage of cognition for both Plato and Dionysius leads to the knowledge of the first principle of all things. For the one it is the Supreme Good and for the other the Good God.16 As the first principle and beginning it is the cause of all things; this both philosophers teach very clearly. Yet once

14 "Les idées représentent donc autant de rayons divins, à peine éloignés de leur centre, mais qui s'en distinguent pourtant déjà." Gilson, 84.
15 Ibid., 83.
16 Hereafter, when the good refers to the ultimate principle in the philosophy of both men, the word will be written with a capital letter.
again the paucity of words on this point and want of clearness of expression on the part of Plato is in marked contrast to the superabundance of words and clarity of explanation by Dionysius. Plato very simply states the fact that the Supreme Good is the cause of all things. In the first instance of such a statement he makes a comparison of the causality of the Supreme Good with that of the sun:

... the Sun is not vision, but it is the cause of vision and also is seen by the vision it causes. It was the Sun, then, that I meant when I spoke of that offspring which the Good has created in the visible world, to stand there in the same relation to vision and visible things as that the Good itself bears in the intelligible world to intelligence and to intelligible objects.

In the analogy Plato seems to have obscured the nature of the causality of the Supreme Good. Once again he says that the Supreme Good is the cause not only of the knowledge of things but also of their very essence and existence. "The Objects of knowledge not only receive their being known from the presence of the Good, but their very existence and essence is derived from

17 Republic, 516C. 18 Republic, 508B. The translation of this section is from Francis Cornford, The Republic of Plato, Oxford University Press, New York, 219. Shorey's translation of the clause ἐν τῇ ἔγεννῃ ἁνάλογον ἐστὶν ὡς which the good begot to stand in a proportion with itself. The translator has missed the "analogy" in order to preserve the Greek word order.
Finally, he again makes the comparison with the sun. "Once it is perceived (the Supreme Good), the conclusion must follow that, for all things, this is the cause of whatever is right and good; in the visible world it gives birth to light and to the lord of light, while it is itself sovereign in the intelligible world and the parent of intelligence and truth." Plato, then, merely keeps affirming that the Supreme Good is the cause of all things —πάντων διίτον— without saying much more.

When Dionysius explains the causality of the Good — and he does it quite frequently — he penetrates to the problem a little more thoroughly. He does not merely say that the Good is the cause of all things —πάντων διίτον— but that it is the efficient cause —ώς ποιητικὸν διπολον — as well as the cause of the motion of all things. Here he uses the expressions κενῶν τὶ ὡλα. Besides, it is the final cause of all things —ώς τελικὸν διίτον — and the exemplary cause as well —παράδειγματικὸν. Dionysius is quite emphatic about the causality of the Good; he repeats the idea over and over again. Not only that, but he gives examples of each kind of causality the Good exercises.

19 509B.
20 Republic, 517C. This passage is also taken from Cornford. Once again Shorey follows the strict Greek word order and loses the force of the thought.
21 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 7.
... et cuncta in ipsum intuentur, et ab ipso moventur et conservantur, et ipsius gratia et propter ipsum et in ipso omne principium exemplare, finale, efficiens, formale, materiale, et denique omne principium, omnis conservatio, omnis finis, et, ut summatim dicam, omnia quae sunt, ex pulchrò et bono existunt, et omnia quae non sunt in pulchro et bono sunt, supersubstantialiter; et est omnium principium (omniae) supraquam principale et finis supraquam perfectus.22

Not only is the Good the cause of things (diitos διίτων),23 but more specifically it is the cause of all good things just as thoroughly as it is not the cause of evil things.

Jam vero pro modulo nostro satis laudatum est bonum, in quantum vere admirandum, ut principium et finis omnium, ut rerum omnium complexus, ut formans res non existentes, ut causa bonorum omnium (omniae) supraquam principale et finis supraquam perfectum est.24

The reason why Dionysius introduces this idea of the Good as a non-cause (diaittov) is that the negation or the negative side of the causality exercised by the Good and its very nature as a cause superior to all its effects is the basis of the Via Negationis. In other words, a further insight into the nature of the Good can be had by the negation of all the qualities found in in-

22 IV, 10.
23 I, 3.
24 IV, 35.
ferior beings, the effects of the Good.

The exercise of the causality of the Supreme Good in the works of Plato is such that "the objects of knowledge not only receive from the presence of the Good their being known, but their very existence and essence (καὶ τὸ εἶναι τὲ καὶ τὴν ςοῦσίαν) is derived to them from it." Even if it is granted that in the Platonic concept of being the notion of existence is not used to mean the exercised act of existence for a real being but rather the mere intelligibility which saves the being in becoming from non-being, still the Supreme Good exercises complete and ultimate causality. From all indications neither Plato nor, for that matter, any of the Greeks, arrived at the concept of existence as an exercised act, as did the later Christian philosophers.

Dionysius uses a terminology identical with that of Plato. He says that "dum illam appetunt, tam ut sint quam ut bene sint (καὶ τὸ εἶναι καὶ τὸ ἐὰν εἶναι), obtinent, nec non illi quantum fas est, conformantur." Then again he becomes more effusive. "Ex eo qui est, aevum, et substantia, et existentia, et tempus, et generatio, et quod significatur." These are but a

25 Republic, 509B.
28 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 1.
29 V, 4.
few examples of a theme Dionysius repeats constantly; the whole
of the fifth chapter in a discussion of the nature and partici-
pation of being in the Good is on this topic. Though Dionysius
does use the terminology of Plato, and even though the logical
conclusion with regard to the notion of existence should be the
same as the conclusion of the earlier Greek philosopher, still
he did not himself draw such a conclusion. With the aid of the
Christian background that was his, he was able to see the nec-
essity of some interpretation of the Platonic and Neoplatonic
ideas. A more thorough study of his notion of being would have
to be made before the conclusion could be drawn that he has made
the same mistake as was made by Plato. To go into a thorough
study of being would take us into considerations of contingency,
analogy, and participation, all of which would take us too far
afield of our present interest.

However, a few ideas about Plato's and Dionysius' con-
cept of being will help in our understanding of their idea of
the Good. For these philosophers the notion of being certainly
does not mean the ordination of an essence to an existence. Such
a doctrine leads to the conclusion of a Being in whom essence is
identified with existence; such a being is God. For both Plato
and Dionysius all differences in the notion of being lay outside
the notion of being. Therefore, the notion of non-ens, which
ramifies from the notion of the Good, takes on the meaning of a
potential ens. The notion of being takes on the meaning of the amount of participation of a creature in being. Pure being, that is complete being, is not, then, identified with God, for pure being does not carry the notion of full existence. Since being is limited in some respect by non-being, something of greater extension must stand above both of them. This is the Good which ramifies into being and non-being.

Even though both Plato and Dionysius maintain that from the Good comes being, they also hold that the Good is not being. Plato insists that "the Good is not the same thing as being," even though it gives being to all things. Dionysius, on the other hand, says almost the same thing when he shows that being is predicated of God in the sense that He is the cause of all being and that, therefore, being is rather the first participation of God, and thus God gets the name of being through participation. God is being in the sense that all being is pre-contained in His nature and through Him all things receive their being. God then is pre-Being in the sense that He is the cause of all being.

Neither philosopher stops at this negative side of the nature of the Good. Both of them go on to show that the Good,

30 Republic, 509B.
31 De Divinis Nominibus, V,5.
even though it is not being strictly speaking, has a nature that transcends all being and thus lies beyond the range of human intelligibility. Plato expresses this idea when he explains the nature of the Good: "The Good is not the same thing as being but even beyond being, surpassing it in dignity and power."32 To express the transcendent nature of the Supreme Good, Plato uses the Greek word "*πέκλημα.*" Dionysius uses the very same word in expressing the transcendent nature of the Good God: "Summa omnium (απάντων) ejus quae supra omnia (*πέκλημα Πάντων*) est totius proprietatis identitas."33 Thus by its very nature the Good transcends all things, stands above being in the sense that it gives being to all things, and transcends even non-being, which strives for it as for an end.

When Plato once again mentions the Supreme Good, he speaks of it as a principle or "beginning that transcends assumptions (ἐν ἡρῴν ἦν ὑπὸ Θεόν)."34 The idea that Plato seems to be trying to get across is that the nature of the Supreme Good is so very far above the things cognized by the human mind that the mind cannot really attain to true knowledge of it. Once again he hints at this inability of the human mind. "In the re-

32 Republic, 509B.
33 De Divinis Nominibus, II, 4.
34 Republic, 510B.
gion of the known the last thing to be seen and hardly to be seen
(μόνει δὲ συνάσθεται) is the idea of the Good." Plato is hinting at
the fact that even though the mind does come to the first prin-
ciple of all things, the nature of that first principle so trans-
cends all knowledge that only a very little can be known about it.

As always, Dionysius expresses the very same idea with
superlative force. The principle or beginning of all things is
for him not only the nature that transcends assumption, but it is
the superessential, superoriginal principle of all things: "Omnis
principii superessentialiter superoriginale principium (ἀπίστως ὑπερουσιῶς ὑπεράρχως ἀρχή) ." The fact is that Diony-
sius so often mentions the "absolute no-thing which is above
reality" and the "all-transcending hiddenness of the all-trans-
cending superessentially superexisting super-Diety," that one
begins to suspect that either agnosticism or scepticism should
be the logical result of his insistence. So strong and persist-
ent is the idea of the transcendence, ineffability, and incom-
prehensibility of the Good God that "one should not say anything
nor even think anything about God."38

35 517B.
36 De Divinis Nominibus, I, 3.
37 Inge, 112.
38 "Il ne faut rien dire, ne même rien penser de Dieu," X. Le
Bachlet, "Dieu, Sa Nature d’après les Pères," Dictionnaire
de Théologie Catholique, ed. by A. Vacant et E. Mangenot,
Librairie Letouzey et Ané, Paris, 1933, IV, col. 111B.
Another point should be mentioned here while the idea of the transcendent nature of the Good is being discussed. As shown, Dionysius first of all admits that the perfections found in creatures can be predicated of God. Then he comes right back and denies that such a predication can be made because of the transcendent nature of the Good God: \( \text{oikēion kyriou Theou} \)."  

Though at first sight the argument seems to be a vicious circle and a contradiction, it has to be interpreted as Dionysius meant it to be. The basis of the distinction is the idea of analogy between the perfections found in creatures and the perfections of God. The similarity of the analogy is the foundation of the way of affirmation; the dissimilarity is the way of negation.

In truth, there is only an apparent contradiction since the terms do not have exactly the same essential meaning in the way of affirmation as in the way of negation. God is not a living being like those we know through our experience, and yet He is living in another way. Transcendent to the categories in which we call all beings, He is not, however, completely alien to them, for their perfection comes from Him. He resembles them and yet He does not resemble them.  

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39 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 1.

40 "En réalité, il n'y a contradiction qu'en apparence, parce que les termes n'ont pas exactement le même sens dans l'affirmation et dans la négation. Dieu n'est pas un être vivant comme ceux que nous connaissons par expérience et, pourtant, il est vivant autrement. Transcendant aux catégories où nous classons les êtres, il ne leur est pourtant pas tout à fait étranger, car leur perfection vient de lui. Il leur ressemble et il ne leur ressemble pas." Arnou, col. 2374.
Dionysius insists as much on the negative way as on the affirmative way because for him the negative way means that in God there must be a superabundance of being, life, intelligence and so of all the other perfections found in creatures.

For Dionysius the negative way is the negation of imperfection. It is because of the negative way that the human mind finally comes to the highest and most perfect way of the knowledge of God, the way of excellence already mentioned, characterized by the use of the word "יְנֶרֶפֶּה." Yet, in spite of all his enthusiastic expression, Dionysius has opened the door to an agnostic interpretation of his philosophy.

The term 'יְנֶרֶפֶּה' so characteristic of the language of Dionysius indicates that absolute transcendence that makes of God the great unknown — as Scotus says, 'The Unknowable' — but not, entirely inaccessible; for indeed love penetrates right into those regions which are impenetrable to reason and the intelligence; and it is due to the very fact that God is transcendent to all realities which can become the objects of our human intelligence, that in speaking of Him our negations will be more correct than our affirmations. Nonetheless, in this event our negative concepts do not indicate in God the absence of being or of goodness ... This notion of the negative theology, based on the principle of the transcendence of God, is preeminently a vital thought ... but it is, nonetheless, dangerous in its terminology and

41 De Divinis Nominibus, IV, 3.
in its proximity to agnosticism.\textsuperscript{42}

Although Dionysius' seeming agnosticism can be explained in a way that frees him of such a charge, another difficulty can be proposed which is a bit more difficult to get around. Earlier in this study it was shown that Plato compared the overflow of the Good upon all things to the radiation of the sun upon all visible creatures.\textsuperscript{43} Now such a comparison, which is so characteristic of the Platonists and the Neoplatonists, is unfortunate for Dionysius. When Dionysius uses it, he adds a note that Plato does not himself add when he makes the very same comparison. Dionysius says this:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Quemadmodum enim sol ille noster non cogitatione aut voluntate, sed eo ipso quod est, illuminat universa quae quapro modo lucis ejus sunt capacia; sic etiam}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{42} "Le terme \textit{\textit{vincip}} si caractéristique de la langue dionysienne, indique cette absolue transcendance qui fait de Dieu le grand inconnu -- Scot dit: l'inconnaissable -- mais non toutefois l'inaccessible; car l'amour pénètre dans des régions fermées à la raison et à l'intelligence; et c'est parce que Dieu est transcendant à toutes les réalités qui peuvent faire l'objet de nos connaissances humaines, qu'en parlant de Lui nos négations seront plus justes que nos affirmations; mais dans ce cas nos concepts négatifs, ne voudront pas signifier en Dieu l'absence d'être ou de bonté ... Cette conception de la théologie négative, fondée sur le principe de la transcendance de Dieu, est par excellence un concept vital, ... mais dangereuse cependant dans ses expressions et par son voisinage avec l'agnosticisme." Théry, 105-106.

\textsuperscript{43} Republic, 508B-C.
This very comparison has been the source of much controversy over the doctrine of Dionysius. If he means that God pours out His goodness upon things just as the sun pours out its light "non cogitatione aut voluntate," then there is serious question of the liberty of God. Now Dionysius may have been interested in only one part of the comparison and did not realize all its consequences. As much can be suspected when the phrase "non cogitatione aut voluntate" is seen. Perhaps he means the "non cogitatione aut voluntate" to refer to the sun and not be carried over with the comparison to mean that the Good "non cogitatione aut voluntate" pours out its goodness on creatures. The example may be just another case of Dionysius' superlative language that has given grounds for such misinterpretation. But if by this expression Dionysius really means to say that the Good God "without reason or will" pours out His goodness, then it seems that God would be necessitated in sharing His goodness with creatures. It would follow, then that the Good God is forced by His very nature, since His nature is goodness itself, to follow the law that goodness must reproduce itself. If that is what Dionysius means, then God must of necessity pour His goodness on creatures. "The danger was to enter into the spirit of the primitive

44 De Divinis Nominibus, 508B-C.
thesis even to the point of denying the liberty of God and of making the creation of the world a necessary radiation of the divine and sovereign perfection. It does not seem, in the light of the Christian background of Dionysius, that he would admit limitation in the Good God even though he leaves himself open to such an interpretation.

From what has been said so far, it is very evident that both Plato and Dionysius hold the primacy of the Good in their metaphysical systems. Because of the goodness of this first principle and because of the fact that it is good by its very nature, all beings are what they are. "It is from the very fact that He is goodness by His essence, ως ὁσιότερος ὁμοίως, that at all times He by His very nature pours out His goodness upon

45 "Le danger était d'entrer dans l'esprit de la formule primitive jusqu'à nier la liberté divine et à faire de la production de monde un rayonnement nécessaire de la soveraineté perfection." Arnou, col. 2361.

46 It is important to remember that this is but one small passage from out of an entire treatise. If this question is judged in the light of the entire treatise, Dionysius' orthodoxy on the question is established. "S. Dionysium non voluisse excludere a Deo electionem simpliciter, ac si Deus non libere sed necessario res creatas produxisset, sed electionem secundum quid, in quantum scilicet non tantum quibusdam creaturis bonitatem suam communicat, sed omnibus, prout scilicet electio discretionem quamdam importat; nam alloquin, ut ibidem bene probat D. Thomas, Deus, cum sit primum agens, per intellectum et voluntatem cuncta causare dicendus est." Corderius, 753.
all creatures. In spite of the fact that both hold to the primacy of the Good, they do not seem to see in it any grounds of limitation. Yet, God must be perfection, its fulfillment, and complete realization; God must be infinite perfection.

To insist on the primacy of the Good -- as both Plato and Dionysius do -- means the insistence on the idea of a perfection which implies limitation in God. For if God is good, first and foremost and before He is being, what in the Good is the object of God's desire in the creation of beings which participate in His goodness? Obviously, if goodness is in the primacy, there would be no reason within itself to communicate its goodness to others. The object of God's desire, similarly, would be outside Himself. God, then, would not create freely. However, such limitations would not be in God if Being is the first and in the primacy, for Being is at once both act and the good -- act defines the intrinsic nature of God and good defines the object of His desire. God as Being has, therefore, within Himself a reason for the exercise of His causal power. God as goodness would have a reason outside Himself.

Then again, if the Good is the ultimate reason for all

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47 "Et c'est parce qu'il est la bonté par essence, ὡς ἀρεάκτης ἰδοὺ, qu'il lui appartient de répandre la bonté sur tous les êtres." La Bachlet, col. 1125.
things, what explains the nature of the Good itself? If it is Supreme Goodness, it must have perfection of itself and not received perfection. Otherwise it would be limited by the perfection from which it receives perfection. Now existence is a perfection. What, then, explains the existence of the Supreme Good if Being is but the first participation of the Good? Is existence, then, something completely foreign to the notion of Being? Plato does not answer these questions; the Supreme Good for him transcends all assumptions and that is all we know about its nature. Nor does Dionysius answer this question. Instead, he finds refuge in quoting Scripture and thus relies on authority for his argument. "Penetrated through and through with Platonism as he was, this Christian never rose above the idea of the primacy of the Good, never grasped the primacy of Being."\(^{48}\) Since Dionysius discusses this idea as frequently as he does, we can be almost sure that he did not see in it the grounds for limitation of God.

Since this idea of the "beyondness," of the transcendence" of the Good, is so very fundamental to these two philosophers, the traditional use of non-being has to be modified. As has been shown, the Good lies beyond being, yet it is the

\(^{48}\) Gilson, *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosphy*, 93.
source of being. It is only natural to ask in what way the Good differs from being. In other words, what enters into the notion of the Good to distinguish it from being? The difference that arises from the Good and being must also have its ultimate source and end in the Good, or else the Good is not the final principle.

Now, the only thing opposed to true being is non-being. And if non-being is the difference that exists between the Good and being, then non-being has a nature as well as being. Therefore, non-being cannot mean nothingness; rather it must have the meaning of "otherness," and thus would not fall within the concept of being. Non-being must have a very definite sense. For both Plato and for Dionysius non-being must be something having "meaning and substance." 49

The similarities between Plato's Supreme Good and Dionysius' Good God are many and striking, as this study has brought out. Yet in the light of the discussion can the conclusion be drawn that Plato really meant the Supreme Good to be the very same reality that Dionysius calls his Good God? The resemblance seems so striking that such a conclusion seems quite tenable. Although the eminent Platonic scholar, Professor Taylor writes: "The transcendent source of all reality and intel-

49 Sterzel: 110. (The author, obviously, does not use the word substance in the philosophical sense of substance as opposed to accident. He uses it merely as a synonym for the word "meaning" or "value."
ligibility of everything other than itself corresponds to the ens realissimum of later philosophy and its God," is he not, with a knowledge of philosophical history in his favor, reading his own mind into the pages of Plato's philosophy? Professor Hardie treads a bit more softly in the hallowed sanctuary of the Supreme Good when he writes: "I should like to say that it (the Supreme Good) may nevertheless be fairly thought of as 'the god recognized in Platonic philosophy.'" A slightly different interpretation is given by Stenzel: "Although we have no right to identify the idea of the Good in the Republic with the God of the Timaeus, some blend of religious elements with his philosophy was essential to Plato in working out the view of the Idea as transcending experience." It may be true that for the convenience of the Plato scholars, this unification of ideas, so easily made, may be a clarification of their ideas, but to conclude that such was the mind of Plato is not licit. Everyone can see the similarity between the Supreme Good of the Republic, the Beauty of the Symposium which is "eternal, unproduced, and indestructible," and the "τὸ ἄγαλμα" of the Phaedo, which is a certain abstract beauty and goodness and magnitude. But it is

50 Taylor, 289.
52 Stenzel, '45.
53 Republic, 509B.
54 Benjamin Jowett, The Dialogues of Plato, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1899, 210-212.
55 Ibid., 100B.
altogether another thing to say that Plato himself saw and acknowledged this similarity or intended to identify these similar principles.

Another student of Platonism takes a different view of the question; he does not seem to want to commit himself. "On the whole we may say that the question as to the relation in Plato's mind between God and the Ideas, especially the Idea of the Good, cannot be answered because the Platonic writings do not supply materials for judging." Finally, in Shorey's opinion, the pans of the scale tip to the very opposite position from that which they had for Taylor. "God and the Good, then, are associated ideas that may seem to be identified in the language of poetry and mystic devotion. But the statement that the idea of the Good is God is meaningless."57

What then should be said finally about the Supreme Good of Plato? The finest definite expression on this topic seems to be the conclusion of Gilson; his words seem to be the most logical conclusion to all the facts pointed out in the study of Plato's Supreme Good. The force of his words and the definiteness of his decision show the determination of his con-

"Assuredly, nothing more closely resembles the definition of the Christian God than this definition of the Good. Yet, when all is said, the fact remains that Plato himself has never called the Good a God." 58

Finally, one added point must be stressed lest this study of Dionysius give rise to a constant misconception of his philosophy. In this study the similarities between Plato and Dionysius have been brought into the limelight. Yet, the number of dissimilarities is legion and also very remarkable. Greatest of all is the fact that Plato was a pagan, Dionysius a Christian. And that makes all the immense difference in the world. When Dionysius speaks of love, union with God, prayer, and spiritual light, he is speaking of realities Plato never dreamed of. When he speaks of God, he has the revelation of the New Testament to help him to realize who God is. Plato had only the findings of the earlier Greek philosophers who were still chained down to the tangible things of this earth. So even though the similarities are what they are, the dissimilarities keep the two men apart in thought as much as the eight centuries of time keep them apart in the pages of our history books.

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