

## How Evil Happens to Be: Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite on the Origin of Evil

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### Abstract

In monistic metaphysics like that of Dionysius, in which the absolute One/Good is conceived as the sole principle, “evil” (κακόν/*kakon*) does not seem to fit in. Hence, there have been numerous attempts to locate evil within the Dionysian ontology. To research it is obvious that evil cannot be an ontological category at all. Rather, it is a purely ethical concept that points to the existential philosophical orientation of Dionysian thought. Dionysius emphasizes our own responsibility: we as human beings are the reason for the realization of evil. But how does the Good as the sole principle fit into this scheme? If the Good is nothing other than omnipotence, *how* can the genesis of evil be explained? In this paper, I wish to demonstrate that Dionysius answers these questions through a concept adapted from Proclus: the concept of πρόνοια.

### 1) Introduction

Translating the ancient Greek term κακόν (*kakon*) into English is not particularly difficult: it can be rendered as either “evil” or “bad.” Already here, however, the conceptual problems start: In the first case we seem to be confronted with a perfidious villainy, an evil that is knowingly and willingly committed. Examples of this are easily at hand, if one thinks of the so-called Third Reich and the atrocities that people commit against each other. “Bad,” on the other hand, can be used as a term when evaluating a paper that did not turn out particularly well. Here, κακόν serves as a quality judgment.

But no matter which translation we choose with regard to the term κακόν and, therefore, which valuation we decide on, κακόν seems like a foreign particle within monistic metaphysics. This is also true for the metaphysics of the thinker known to research as Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite.<sup>1</sup> We will likely never know for sure who this mysterious philosopher actually was.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the basic features of Dionysian thought have been deciphered: within Dionysian metaphysics, Christian content and Neoplatonic philosophy form an inseparable bond known as “Christian Neoplatonism.”<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, Dionysius was first and foremost an intellectual disciple of Proclus, the most influential scholar of the Platonic Academy.<sup>4</sup> Dionysius took up

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<sup>1</sup> I quote Dionysius according to the critical editions: Suchla 1990. Heil and Ritter 1991.

<sup>2</sup> See Ritter 2018. See also Dillon 2014.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Beierwaltes 2001. The central work on Dionysius is de Andia 1996. For further reading see Gersh 1978. Rorem 1993. de Andia 2006. Schäfer 2006a. Perl 2007. Suchla 2008. Ritter 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Possibly Dionysius’ thinking is close to Porphyry’s philosophy (Dillon 2014, 116. Halfwassen 1995. Halfwassen 2015, 307-314). – For Proclus’ philosophy see Beierwaltes 1979. Siorvanes 1996. Cürsgen 2007. Chlup 2012.

central aspects of Proclean metaphysics, especially the concept of transcendence, but transformed Proclus' philosophy in a Christian way: Dionysius' system can be conceived as a synthesis of absolute unity with the plurality of (i) Being, Life, and Intellect, or (ii) μονή, πρόοδος, and ἐπιστροφή.<sup>5</sup> Dionysius' synthesis of the One and the One-Being is well known to research since the work of Eugenio Corsini.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Dionysius maintained a monistic orientation, i.e. the assumption that being, thinking, and all concrete determinations depend on a singular principle of unity, which itself does not need any more justification. This absolute One is, in the Neoplatonic tradition and in recourse to Plato's *Politeia*, also called "the Good itself," τὸ ἀγαθὸν αὐτό.<sup>7</sup> For Dionysius, it performs πρόνοια, that is "care" (*caritas*) or "providence." This πρόνοια conditions or grounds Being, Life, Intellect, and, finally, our own human existence, our *selves*.<sup>8</sup>

Already based on this short description it is easy to see why the term κακόν must seem like a foreign particle in Dionysius' monism, not to mention that it massively challenges his system. For the sheer existence of κακόν in the world – no matter whether we translate it as "bad" or "evil" –, calls the δύναμις of the Good, that is its "power," which Dionysius conceives as omnipotence, into question.<sup>9</sup> In this regard, two things should be noted:

If *the Good* is the omnipotent and caring principle *par excellence*, how can anything bad or evil come to be realized at all? This question seems to be quite urgent, for not only are we surrounded by deficiencies of all sorts, κακόν conceived as evil is also frequently imagined as omnipresent. A denial of the existence of evil, at any rate, seems rather unrealistic against the background of past and present reports of war and atrocities. And even Dionysius does not go so far as to deny the existence of evil.<sup>10</sup> Secondly, the concept of κακόν might lead to postulate the existence of a counter-principle to the Good, denying its existence as the sole principle.

Remarkably, Dionysius was well aware of these two problems, and so he critically questioned his monism by asking precisely the question of interest: "How in general can there

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d'Hoine and Martijn 2017. Proclus' influence on philosophy in general has been made the topic of various publications. For a first glance, I recommend Gersh 2014. Butorac and Layne 2017.

<sup>5</sup> The background of the presented synthesis is a central passage from *On Divine Names*; Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 2.4; Suchla 1990, 127.1-2: God is ἡ πάντων θέσις, ἡ πάντων ἀφαίρεσις, τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν καὶ θέσιν καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν. See also Dion. Ar. *myst.* 1.2; Heil and Ritter 1991, 143.3-7. For Dionysius' use of triads see Schäfer 2006a. Schäfer 2006b.

<sup>6</sup> Corsini 1962.

<sup>7</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4; Suchla 1990, 143-180. See Steel 1989, 69-85.

<sup>8</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.5; Suchla 1990, 117.12; *d.n.* 1.7; Suchla 1990, 120.3-8; *d.n.* 1.8; Suchla 1990, 120.10.

<sup>9</sup> The whole passage *d.n.* 8.1-6; Suchla 1990, 200-204 is dedicated to God as power. Obviously, Dionysius' source is Proclus. For Proclus' concept of δύναμις and ἀπειροδυναμία see Saffrey 1996. Steel 1996. Van Riel 2001. Van Riel 2017. Cürsger 2007. Rohstock 2023, 94-106; 155-179. On Dionysius' use of these concepts see Rohstock 2023, 181-196. Furthermore, it is worth noting that δύναμις as power is not to be confused with mere possibility.

<sup>10</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.19; Suchla 1990, 164.4-21.

be evil [scil. κακόν] if there is providence [scil. πρόνοια]?”<sup>11</sup> The solution he proposes must deal with πρόνοια, i.e. the omnipotent, caring “providence,” and the hardly deniable existence of deficiency and corruption. In the following paper, I want to illuminate Dionysius’ answer on the basis of the fourth chapter of his treatise *De divinis nominibus* (*On Divine Names*). Although the concept of κακόν in Dionysius has attracted considerable scholarly attention,<sup>12</sup> it remains unclear *how* exactly the caring and omnipotent power of the Absolute, its πρόνοια, and the realization of κακόν are related. This paper seeks to answer this question, beginning with a discussion of two aspects:

(i) First of all, it should be noted here that the concepts of κακόν and πρόνοια were conveyed to Dionysius by Proclus: To be more precise, his understanding of κακόν refers to Proclus’ writing *De malorum subsistentia*, *On the Existence of Evil*.<sup>13</sup> According to Carlos Steel, Dionysius’ treatise shows little originality compared to Proclus.<sup>14</sup> Generally, there can be no doubt that Steel is right: there are no particular differences between these two thinkers in this matter and I am not going to compare their conceptions of evil in this paper. In one point, however, Dionysius’ metaphysics differs quite considerably from Proclus’. I believe that Dionysius alters Proclean metaphysics in an original manner: For Dionysius, the Absolute is itself the highest δύναμις of πρόνοια, whereas Proclus allows the Absolute to transcend even this highest form of activity. But what does πρόνοια exactly mean? Recently, I have tried to show that for Proclus and Dionysius πρόνοια denotes a primordial force (δύναμις) that is not concretely given, cannot be extinguished, and originally conditions and grounds every distinct object and definition: it is, to put it succinctly and sharply, the condition of the possibility of *all* realizations.<sup>15</sup> In the concrete realization of κακόν, however, the decisive responsibility lies with the human being acting in freedom. To be sure, Dionysius does not address human freedom as a separate topic. However, far-reaching statements on human freedom can be deduced speculatively from his monistic metaphysics. I believe I can show that κακόν is established in the field of tension between eternal, divine “providence” on the one hand and the human being and his freedom on the other.<sup>16</sup> But with that, the interplay of “providence” and free man is only stated *factually*. Still, the “how” of the origin of κακόν remains unclear. This “how” is crucial

<sup>11</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.33; Suchla 1990, 178.3: Πῶς ὅλως τὰ κακὰ προνοίας οὐσης; [Translation Jones 2011, 161; modified.] Obviously, here Dionysius cites Procl. *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* 26.

<sup>12</sup> Schäfer 2002, 380-472. Kavvadas 2009, 153-179. See also Stiglmayr 1895.

<sup>13</sup> Boese 1960. Opsomer 2014. Concerning Proclus’ discussion of evil see Opsomer and Steel 1999.

<sup>14</sup> Steel 1997.

<sup>15</sup> See Rohstock 2023, 162-179. On Dionysius’ adaptation of the Proclean doctrine of “providence” see Rohstock 2023, 189-196. An older discussion worth mentioning can be found in Beierwaltes 1985, 226-253.

<sup>16</sup> Human freedom can be assumed simply because πρόνοια does not force us (see below, section 4). As will be explained in the further course of this essay, Dionysius’ monistic metaphysics demands the freedom of the individual.

and, in my opinion, has not yet been fully clarified in research. This has to do with the fact that Dionysius' theory of principles has not yet been conclusively clarified. By taking a detour via the theory of principles, the aim here is to show "how" κακόν becomes reality. For only when the "how" of the connection becomes clear, the question can be answered in how far the realization of κακόν is at all possible within Dionysius' monism.

Moreover, reading Dionysius through the Proclean concept of πρόνοια and its δύναμις offers a way out of a problem that has occupied research for decades. As already said, Dionysius engages in a synthesis of the One and the One-Being, which are always separated from each other in the Neoplatonic orthodoxy (Plotinus, Proclus). He synthesizes – in other words – in his concept of God the absolute and completely transcendent unity with the relationally structured One-Being, the so-called νοῦς or Intellect, whereby the seemingly fragile metaphysical concept of late antique Neoplatonism is once more charged with paradoxes: God is ἡ πάντων θέσις, ἡ πάντων ἀφαίρεσις, τὸ ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν καὶ θέσιν καὶ ἀφαίρεσιν.<sup>17</sup> How is Dionysius' God able to be both, the Absolute *and* Being, that is both supra-relational *and* relational, at the same time? Dionysius' adaptation of "providence" can shed new light on his conception of the Absolute and its first-principle-function. The problem is also known in research under the question of whether Dionysius' metaphysics is more oriented towards the Proclean or rather reformulates the Porphyrian synthesis of Plotinus' henology and noology. In contrast, I would like to emphasize Dionysius' closeness to the Proclean concept of "providence." By adopting this concept, Dionysius can more easily show that the Absolute has an activity, but without immediately ontologizing it and making it a concrete being. The act of the Absolute must, therefore, be understood in a de-categorialized sense.

(ii) Because Dionysius' approach to κακόν focuses primarily on the role of man in the question of the realization of κακόν, his metaphysics have an almost existential philosophical impetus.<sup>18</sup> Dionysius calls our attention to our own responsibility regarding the realization of κακόν and urges us to turn towards the ἀγαθόν, towards the "Good." Only by turning to the Good, Dionysius contends, can instantiations of κακόν be avoided.<sup>19</sup> Dionysius' concern here bears significance for our own spiritual well-being: only those who revert their souls, turn away from everything accidental and external, and turn to the one truth, are able to perfect their souls and gain beatitude. Dionysius thus harnesses his metaphysics to practical philosophy. Indeed, with its existential orientation, his metaphysics is itself nothing other than practical philosophy.

<sup>17</sup> Dion. Ar. d.n. 2.4; Suchla 1990, 127.1-2.

<sup>18</sup> See Schäfer 2002, 440-452.

<sup>19</sup> See Schäfer 2002, 442-443.

We will pursue these two points in the following sections 3 and 4. Before this, we must address the definition of κακόν (section 2). On this basis we will also be able to clarify the question of how best to translate κακόν (section 5).

## 2) Κακόν as an ethical category

The central problem of Dionysius is that he finds it difficult to grasp κακόν – especially with the background of his monism. Christian Schäfer, an established expert on Dionysius, has noted two crucial findings: “First, evil *per se* is not a substance. Nor is it otherwise ontologically possible: Thus, there is no αὐτοκακόν or evil *per se*. Secondly, however, none of the substances is evil, or qualifies as evil.”<sup>20</sup> Obviously, as Dionysius points out quite unequivocally, the Good does not generate κακόν.<sup>21</sup> Now, this does not mean that κακόν is simply non-existent. It is not a sheer nothingness, because a total privation is for Dionysius – following Proclus – an illusion of thought.<sup>22</sup> But if κακόν cannot come from the Good, and thus is not or does not exist in the proper sense, and at the same time cannot be mere nothingness either, its position is obscured. How can it be grasped?

Κακόν is to be understood as purely *accidental*. If it is not substantial, it cannot exist in itself and therefore needs a “host” to be able to be at all. It forms a pseudo-existence in this way. To mark this inauthentic mode of existence, Dionysius adapts from Proclus the term *παρυπόστασις*.<sup>23</sup>

However, these statements do not really solve the problem: while κακόν is not entirely erased, it has no place at all in Dionysius’ monistic system, which is governed by the One/Good. This tension is further magnified by a statement that at least *prima facie* causes astonishment: According to Dionysius, κακόν as *παρυπόστασις* does not possess or develop any power. For the Good is the source of all power. Against this background, Dionysius can only define κακόν as follows: “In general, as has often been said, evil is a weakness, impotency, and lack of knowledge, unceasing knowledge, trust [faith], desire, or activity towards the Good.”<sup>24</sup> For Dionysius, the term κακόν simply means corruption or privation – or more precisely: “privation of the Good” (*privatio boni*). Κακόν accordingly marks a *lack*.

<sup>20</sup> Schäfer 2002, 435. [My translation.]

<sup>21</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.19; Suchla 1990, 163.9-10: Τὸ κακὸν οὐκ ἔστιν ἐκ τὰγαθοῦ, καὶ εἰ ἐκ τὰγαθοῦ ἔστιν, οὐ κακὸν [...].

<sup>22</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.19; Suchla 1990, 163, 22-23. In the first proposition of his *Elements of Theology* Proclus shows that an actual privative infinity is implausible and impossible (*Inst prop.* 1.2.1-14).

<sup>23</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.31; Suchla 1990, 176, 16-177, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.35; Suchla 1990, 179.11-13: Καὶ ὅλως τὸ κακόν, ὡς πολλάκις εἰρήκαμεν, ἀσθένεια καὶ ἀδυναμία καὶ ἔλλειψις ἔστιν ἢ τῆς γνώσεως ἢ τῆς ἀλήστου γνώσεως ἢ τῆς πίστεως ἢ τῆς ἐφέσεως ἢ τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ. [Translation Jones 2011, 161; modified.]

Here, however, we must stop short and ask why κακόν, insofar as it is understood as evil, should possess no power. At least for anyone who grew up in the Christian milieu, this definition is rather counterintuitive: Is evil not the corrupting power *par excellence*? Moreover, we seem to be surrounded by harming forces. Does not evil, for example in the form of illness or mental infirmity, *actively* prevent us from becoming happy or leading a successful life? Is it not possible to argue that evil has a damaging effect on us *from the outside*, as it were? We are after all, one might protest, its victims, who can fight against it but do not necessarily stand up to its power. The idea, in any case, that evil acts on us actively and, as it were, from the outside, is generally present in late antiquity. And also in research, evil is in a certain way granted an activity of its own, insofar as it is presented as a “Bremsen und Be- oder Verhinderer,” i.e. some sort of power that breaks, impedes, and prevents.<sup>25</sup> Dionysius, however, seems to break with the idea of an own activity of evil. Is he concerned with a change of perspective?

To fully understand Dionysius’ twist, we must first be aware of the fact that his theory is highly ambivalent. He accepts those aspects of life that we might call evil or bad and affirms their harmfulness, acknowledging the factual existence of diseases, physical, and mental infirmities. These he also thinks of as “defective good,” as *privatio boni*. But if Dionysius defines κακόν as a defect, and diseases in turn can be counted as defects, are we not compelled to conclude that diseases are to be characterized as evil? Dionysius seems to struggle with this conclusion. After all, he aims to detach evil from ontology and nature. We have to put it this way: Even if, for example, diseases present themselves to Dionysius as less good or as a deficiency, they cannot be conceived as evil in the strict sense of the word. He certainly accepts the factual existence of such hindrances. Yet, it is important to observe that he is not interested in these impediments as such. One almost gets the impression that this question downright annoys him. Certainly, it is possible that Dionysius did not solve the problem at hand. Perhaps, however, we can try to solve the problem speculatively: Dionysius’ conspicuous disinterest in the mentioned questions might indicate that the Pseudo-Areopagite is preoccupied with a fundamentally different question: He possibly wants to tell us that, when we speak of κακόν, we simply have to leave aside the Good itself and its principals – and consequently leave the sphere of ontology and nature altogether. The idea is, then, to shift our perspective and to understand κακόν as a purely ethical category. This ethical turn is nothing new to research and has already been emphasized.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Schäfer 2002, 439.

<sup>26</sup> See Kavvadas 2009, 161-164; 168-169; 177-179.

Thus, κακόν is a term that concerns the interior of man, that is our soul – or, in other words, our own self.<sup>27</sup> In asking about the origin of evil, Dionysius is concerned with looking at ourselves, our own *activity* and our own *behavior*. Consequently, when we speak of κακόν, it is precisely not in terms of nature or hierarchies supported by the Good, but in terms of our actions. Dionysius' search for κακόν in the hierarchies of his ontology thus ends with a turn, and from this turn follows an almost existential philosophical demand, namely to direct our focus to our own *responsibility*. With the turn towards understanding κακόν as an event in our self, our soul, Dionysius leads our gaze away from the assumption of a natural evil acting on us, away from the assumption of supposedly harmful aberrations of fate or demons harming us and away from the idea of a God whom we could hold responsible for our suffering.

### 3) The concept of πρόνοια and the realization of κακόν

The question of *how* exactly κακόν comes into the world remains. Its realization faces a twofold problem. (i) First, there is still a threat of corruption of monism: Thus, it must be clarified *how* the power of the Absolute is compatible with the fact that *we* as humans bring κακόν into the world. (ii) Secondly, the problem arises that humans can only intend what they imagine to be good, arguing that “no one in all his actions has his intention directed towards evil.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, for Dionysius, intentionally or willfully committed harm does not exist. But what, then, do we make of all the harmful deeds committed by humans? In order to solve these problems, we first have to look at Dionysius' theory of principles.<sup>29</sup>

(i) Dionysius adopts Proclus' theory of πρόνοια and his theory of henads.<sup>30</sup> In his *Elements of Theology* Proclus defined πρόνοια as *the* activity of the henads, by which they are conceived to be the ground of all intellectual entities and their activities.<sup>31</sup> Proclus even classifies henadic πρόνοια as ἀπειροδυναμία, i.e. as “infinite power.”<sup>32</sup> Dionysius largely adapts Proclus' concept of πρόνοια,<sup>33</sup> albeit with a critical change: he transfers the pronoteic activity of the henads to

<sup>27</sup> Ancient philosophy fundamentally focuses on the “inner man” (Kobusch 2018, 76-97). Moreover, ancient philosophy is, in its core, nothing other than “practical philosophy” (Hadot 2002).

<sup>28</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.31; Suchla 1990, 176.16: Τοῦ γὰρ ἀγαθοῦ ἔνεκα πάντα, καὶ ὅσα ἀγαθὰ καὶ ὅσα ἐναντία, καὶ γὰρ καὶ ταῦτα πράττομεν τὸ ἀγαθὸν ποθοῦντες, οὐδεὶς γὰρ τὸ κακὸν ἀποβλέων ποιεῖ, ἃ ποιεῖ. [My translation.]

<sup>29</sup> See now Rohstock 2023, 181-196.

<sup>30</sup> For Proclus' henadology see Saffrey and Westerink 1978, ix-lxxvii. Van Riel 2001. Van Riel 2017. Cürsgen 2007, 74-83; 136-152; 232-235. Tanaseanu-Döbler 2013. Drews 2017, 133-184. Rohstock 2023, 173-179.

<sup>31</sup> Procl. *Inst prop.* 120-122.104-108.

<sup>32</sup> Procl. *De decem dubitationibus circa providentiam* 10-14; esp. 11.1-3: *Unum quidem igitur providentie omni unione incorporea et corporea est unitius, apirodynamum (id est infinitas virtus) autem omni virtute infinita et finita infinitius.*

<sup>33</sup> An encompassing philological study is hardly feasible here and, fortunately, also not necessary. In fact, large passages from the first chapter of *De divinis nominibus* are paraphrases of Proclus' *Elements of Theology*, propositions 120-123. See, for instance, Procl. *Inst prop.* 123.108.29-32: Πᾶσα γὰρ ἡ διὰ λόγου γνῶσις τῶν ὄντων ἐστὶ καὶ ἐν τοῖς οὖσιν ἔχει τὸ τῆς ἀληθείας καταληπτικόν [...]. οἱ δὲ θεοὶ πάντων εἰσὶν ἐπέκεινα τῶν ὄντων. Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.4; Suchla 1990, 115, 16-18: Εἰ γὰρ αἱ γνώσεις πᾶσαι τῶν ὄντων εἰσὶ καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄντα τὸ πέρας ἔχουσιν, ἢ πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα καὶ πάσης γνώσεώς ἐστιν ἐξηρημένη.

the Absolute itself. It is the Absolute that performs πρόνοια, which is why Dionysius emphasizes several times that πρόνοια is among the names of God.<sup>34</sup>

“Providence” is endowed with a productive power, a δύναμις.<sup>35</sup> This power can be illustrated as follows: The act of the Absolute is a good or caring δύναμις because it pre-conditions any determination (and by implication, all entities). One can, therefore, understand πρόνοια as a caring active force that grounds being and thinking but itself transcends being and thinking. “Providence” means the act of caring conditioning of every distinction and is interpreted by Dionysius entirely in the Proclean sense as an “activity” that exists prior to the concrete multiplicity of Intellect, i.e. πρὸ νοῦ, that is “prior to Intellect.”<sup>36</sup> As pre- or super-intellect, the act of “providence” is, of course, not mere ignorance, but a kind of “foreknowledge,” which again must not be understood in the sense of concrete knowledge or comprehension. For πρόνοια is, after all, an activity that *transcends* Intellect. As Proclus observes, it is nothing other than a “hidden mode of knowledge” (γνώσις κρύφιος).<sup>37</sup> Completely in line with Proclus, Dionysius remarks:

[...] ἐν ᾗ πάντα πασῶν τῶν γνώσεων υπεραρρήτως προϋφέστηκεν, ἣν οὔτε ἐννοῆσαι δυνατόν οὔτε εἰπεῖν οὔτε ὅλως πως θεωρῆσαι διὰ τὸ πάντων αὐτὴν ἐξηρημένην εἶναι καὶ υπεράγνωστον καὶ πασῶν μὲν τῶν οὐσιωδῶν γνώσεων καὶ δυνάμεων τὰς ἀποπερατώσεις ἅμα καὶ πάσας υπερουσίως ἐν ἑαυτῇ προειληφυῖαν, πάντων δὲ ἀπεριλήπτῳ δυνάμει καὶ τῶν υπερουρανίων νοῶν υπεριδρυμένην. Εἰ γὰρ γνώσεις πᾶσαι τῶν ὄντων εἰσὶ καὶ εἰς τὰ ὄντα τὸ πέρας ἔχουσιν, ἡ πάσης οὐσίας ἐπέκεινα καὶ πάσης γνώσεώς ἐστιν ἐξηρημένη.<sup>38</sup>

In this ray [i.e. God or the Absolute] the limits of all knowledge have pre-subsisted in a more than ineffable way. It is not possible to conceive, to speak, or in any way to contemplate this ray; for it surpasses everything, is beyond unknowing, and is at once the completing ends of all essential knowledge and powers [τῶν οὐσιωδῶν γνώσεων καὶ δυνάμεων]. It has anticipated, beyond every manner of being, all in itself and is founded beyond all the supercelestial intellects by its unencompassed powers. For if all knowledge is of Beings and has its limits in the realm of Beings [ὄντα], then that beyond every Being [οὐσίας] also transcends knowledge.<sup>39</sup>

This “providence,” which is indeed difficult to understand, is often made more accessible in the Neoplatonic tradition by the well-known metaphor of light:<sup>40</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.5; Suchla 1990, 117.12. See Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.7; Suchla 1990, 120.3-8; *d.n.* 1.8; Suchla 1990, 120.10. – On the question on how to name the unnamable God see Stock 2021. See also Nientied 2010, 46-102.

<sup>35</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 8.1-6; Suchla 1990, 200-204.

<sup>36</sup> Procl. *Inst* prop. 120.104.3-106.9.

<sup>37</sup> Procl. *Inst* prop. 121.106.11.

<sup>38</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.4; Suchla 1990, 115.9-18. See Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 1.7; Suchla 1990, 120.5-8: Πάντα δὲ ἀπλῶς καὶ ἀπεριορίστως ἐν ἑαυτῇ τὰ ὄντα προεἴληφε ταῖς παντελέσι τῆς μᾶς αὐτῆς καὶ παναιτίου προνοίας ἀγαθότησι καὶ ἐκ τῶν ὄντων ἀπάντων ἐναρμονίως ὑμνεῖται καὶ ὀνομάζεται.

<sup>39</sup> Translation Jones 2011, 112; modified.

<sup>40</sup> Ritter 1999.



Light is not visible as a distinct object, because it is pure transparency and, therefore, cannot be looked at like a concrete object. Rather, it contours concrete objects with its sheer presence. Every concretization, we can see from this imagery, is carried by a horizon which itself transcends all concretions and determinations but can act everywhere as a principle. In other words, in the image of light, the Absolute is illustrated as the de-categorized or de-ontologized condition of possibility for all realizations or actualizations. A recent paraphrase of the power of absolute grounding was formulated by German epistemologist Wolfram Hogrebe, who proposed to speak of a “dimension of distinction” (Distinktionsdimension). Although this dimension is “claimed by every distinction,” it “can no longer be distinguished against anything. It remains the completely diaphanous background of all semantic contrasts, which itself can no longer be contrasted with anything.”<sup>41</sup> He describes it as an “anonymous règlement” that supports or “directs” our “efforts of semantic explication.”<sup>42</sup>

By adapting Proclus’ concept of *πρόνοια*, Dionysius intended to solve the problem of the synthesis of the Absolute and Being, Life, and Intellect mentioned at the beginning of this discussion. By describing the Absolute as caring or pronoteic light, it is possible for him to deviate from Proclus’ strict henology and instead ascribe to the Absolute an activity of its own that may no longer be concretized or objectified, i.e. may no longer be understood in a categorical or ontological sense. God need not to be reduced to *νοῦς* (*intellectus*) concerned with concrete intelligible *εἶδη*. Thus, Dionysius’ concept of God prefigures later conceptions of absoluteness, such as John Eriugena’s *nihil omnium* or *summa sapientia*, Master Eckhart’s concept of *indistinctum*, and Nicholas of Cusa’s concepts of God, especially *non aliud* and *posse ipsum*.<sup>43</sup> By adapting and transforming Proclus’ metaphysics, Dionysius constructs a system that centers around *the absolute condition of the possibility of all realizations*. Yet, as *πρόνοια*, the Absolute is not directly *responsible* for the concrete realization of *κακόν*. To be sure, absolute *πρόνοια* is not diametrically opposed to *κακόν*: it allows it to subsist. In this respect, *πρόνοια* is no longer in opposition to the realization of bad events.<sup>44</sup> But that which we grasp as evil, is the result of an action of the freely acting human being:

(ii) It should be noted here that, according to Dionysius, man is indeed *free*<sup>45</sup> and not determined by the omnipotent Absolute. It does not determine our way of life and our decisions *a limine*, does not fix our actions, as we are not its puppets. “Providence” would never “lead us

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<sup>41</sup> Hogrebe 2006, 339. [My translation.]

<sup>42</sup> Hogrebe 2006, 338. [My translation.]

<sup>43</sup> See Rohstock 2023, 181-256.

<sup>44</sup> Therefore, metaphysical transcendence means “superoppositeness” (see Halfwassen 2015).

<sup>45</sup> The fact that Dionysius conceived a theory of freedom was convincingly demonstrated by Christian Schäfer and in distinction to Paul Rorem (Schäfer 2002, 446 n. 193).

against our will to virtue [ἀρετή; scil. the best form of the soul].”<sup>46</sup> Precisely through freedom, however, an uncertainty comes into play, whereby the question of how evil is realized can be clarified.

The Absolute conditions not only objects, but also concrete acts or actions. The absolute light, to stay within our previously established metaphor, is the condition for our independent realization of the act of seeing. But whether we actually perform the act of seeing is up to us, insofar as we can refuse to realize concrete acts of seeing by merely closing our eyes. Thus, the human eye is prevented from the execution of its inherent ability and finds itself in the state of privatization. It is, therefore, our use of freedom that accounts for the realization of the κακόν in interaction with the omnipotence of πρόνοια.

However, Dionysius does not stop at this insight. Even if we were to open our eyes and realize the act of seeing, a deficiency can occur. Going wrong and missing are not just possible but they remain a permanent challenge to human endeavors. Even everyday actions may illustrate this: If we do not act or work in a concentrated way, we simply do not realize the full potential of the intended action. Mistakes creep in quickly and before we know it, we have produced something mediocre. If we apply this analogy to the human soul, the following picture arises: Soul is founded by the absolute principle, but in order to realize its highest possibility and best state, namely its ἀρετή, that is its *best state* (also perceived as bliss), the soul itself must take action: Only if the soul, according to Dionysius, turns to the one Good and grasps it, it can perfect itself and become blissful. If it fails to turn to the truth fully and completely, it will necessarily miss itself. Under these circumstances the realization of the “best state” of the soul (ἀρετή) can simply not occur. On the contrary, we realize ἔλλειψις, a “deficiency.” The event of mental deficiency or failure is, we can now specify, what Dionysius calls κακόν. It is upon us to refrain from realizing this bad version of ourselves. In this vein, humans are solely to blame for the realization of κακόν.

#### 4) The existential demand for inner transformation

As shown, Dionysius requires us to question the factual level of the event of the κακόν in order to find out *how* the defective occurs through us. How does the genesis of defective actions on the one hand and the consummation of weak actions on the other occur? Nestor Kavvadas aptly proposed the interpretation that κακόν is actualized by a “defective ‘cognitive’ act.”<sup>47</sup> However, there is more to uncover. First and foremost, we must ask ourselves how human error can be prevented.

<sup>46</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.33; Suchla 1990, 178.11-12. [My translation.]

<sup>47</sup> Kavvadas 2009, 175.

Dionysius' answer is simple: we are always missing out on ourselves when our ethical education (παιδεία) is imperfect.<sup>48</sup> The task of our free existence is precisely to realize our own spiritual perfection. However, according to Dionysius, we may experience perfection only if we orient ourselves fully and completely towards the Good.<sup>49</sup> Only under the condition of intensified agathological striving is “going wrong” (ἀμαρτάνειν) no longer possible. For then, the soul has reached its best form, that is ἀρετή. Already in Plato, ἀμαρτάνειν, which can also be translated as “sinning,” is conditioned by insufficient παιδεία, or more precisely, by a “lack of knowledge.”<sup>50</sup> This lack of knowledge can be eliminated by the discovery of the “Idea of the Good” alone:<sup>51</sup> Only the one who has recognized the “Idea of the Good,” the highest μάθημα,<sup>52</sup> that is the highest “object” of learning, is able to lead a good life, which also consists in setting others on the path and guiding them to behold the blissful Good. This “ethical intellectualism”<sup>53</sup> is typical of Platonic philosophy as a whole and also present in Dionysius. Strictly speaking, Dionysius uses it as the basis for his theory of supreme insight. Like Plato, Dionysius speaks of a supreme *knowledge* – but also of an *experience*. He exhorts us that we should not only know about the Good, but also experience it: οὐ μόνον μαθὼν, ἀλλὰ καὶ παθὼν.<sup>54</sup> Dionysius wants to draw our attention to the fact that *supreme* insight is not a conventional or everyday knowledge and not an arbitrary object-knowledge. Supreme insight is nothing other than a *transformative experience*, that is an experience (or “Ereignis”) that inscribes itself deeply in our self. It is only through this that we become fully purified, something that is required of us. This is, once again, an almost existential philosophical maximum demand. Additionally, Dionysius can even speak of a “self-denial” if the devotion to the Good is not complete:<sup>55</sup> if our “knowledge” of the Good, our “faith” in the Good or our “desire” for the Good are deficient, we begin to *sin*:

Ἐν γνώσει δὲ ἀμαρτάνοντας καλεῖ τὰ λόγια τοὺς περὶ τὴν ἄληστον τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ γινῶσιν ἢ τὴν ποίησιν ἐξασθενοῦντας καὶ τοὺς εἰδότας ‘τὸ θέλημα’ καὶ μὴ ποιοῦντας, τοὺς ἀκηκοόντας μὲν, ἀσθενοῦντας δὲ περὶ τὴν πίστιν ἢ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>48</sup> To be sure, the realization of κακόν is necessarily tied to responsibility, and responsibility is tied to our ability. We can only take responsibility if we have the mental capacity for insight: and only those who are responsible can realize κακόν.

<sup>49</sup> See Schäfer 2002, 442.

<sup>50</sup> Pl. *Men.* 77d-e; *Grg.* 488a; *Ap.* 25d-26a.

<sup>51</sup> Pl. *R.* 504a-511e.

<sup>52</sup> Pl. *Ep.* 7 341c-d.

<sup>53</sup> Schäfer 2002, 451.

<sup>54</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 2.9; Suchla 1990, 134.1-2.

<sup>55</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 8.6; Suchla 1990, 203.12: Ἡ γὰρ ἑαυτοῦ ἄρνησις ἐκπτώσις ἀληθείας ἐστίν. See Schäfer 2002, 447.

<sup>56</sup> Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.35; Suchla 1990, 179.5-8.

Those who sin with knowledge are called in Scripture those who prove too weak in the unceasing knowledge or desire of the Good, or those who know what it wills but do not do it: these persons heard but are weak according to their faith or exercise of the Good.<sup>57</sup>

But does this mean that only and exclusively defiance is sin? Certainly, for Dionysius, as the cited quotation shows, sinning is possible even when we possess a certain knowledge of God: one can know about the Christian message, but defiantly not follow it. However, this knowledge of God mentioned here by Dionysius is already deficient, because it is provisional and does not correspond to the highest insight, which alone has a transformative power capable of liberating us from the stage of sin. Until we attain this most sublime experience, we remain unenlightened and entrenched in sin, regardless of our upbringing in Christianity or exposure to revelation. Moreover, Dionysius also considers unintentional sin. We may sin without awareness of wrongdoing, namely when we fail to strive towards the Good. Mistaking this or that object or achievement for the absolute Good constitutes sin. In emphasizing the continuous sinfulness of human life, Dionysius underscores the notion that transformation can only occur through a complete agathological orientation towards the Good.<sup>58</sup>

Against this background, it becomes clear why Dionysius demands a radical self-enlightenment: we are to realize that we are responsible for the genesis of *κακόν*. Accordingly, if we want to prevent its realization, we must fully orient ourselves towards the Good. Only in this way man can realize good and lead a successful life. Only in this way the genesis of bad actions can be prevented *a limine*.

The way to achieve this transformative experience cannot be explored in detail here due to its complexity. However, I can briefly point out that Dionysius paves the way by means of negative theology, i.e. the method of abstraction originating from late Neoplatonism.<sup>59</sup> Rigorous anagogy, when approached earnestly, culminates in a transformative experience, but it cannot be brought about by force. It is indeed an urgent question whether we can redeem ourselves: Can we come to the highest beatific experience by means of our own act(s)? Yes,

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<sup>57</sup> Translation Jones 2011, 161; modified.

<sup>58</sup> Dionysius' concept of sin allows to draw a connection to modern existential philosophy, which could be of interest for further investigation: It is well known to research that Søren Kierkegaard discusses sin as a central characteristic of human existence. In his *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard states, like Dionysius, that the one who has not realized the highest possibility of self-realization and self-perfection – which can only be accomplished with regard to God alone – remains in the stage of sin (Hong and Hong 1980, 82 (see 14; 131). According to Kierkegaard, only in the highest experience of self-realization before God do we become aware that we have always sinned up to now. Kierkegaard makes it clear that despair is sin (Hong and Hong 1980, 81-82). Even if one does not know that one is in despair (Hong and Hong 1980, 22-28), according to Kierkegaard, one remains in despair as long as one has not leapt into faith (Hong and Hong 1980, 14; 131). Structurally, Kierkegaard's thinking here resembles Dionysius' metaphysics. For deficient knowledge and also sheer ignorance are indications of weakness, which, however, must be overcome.

<sup>59</sup> See, for instance, Plotinus famous "sculpting example" in *Enn.* 1.6.9. It is also present in Dion. *Ar. myst.* 2; Heil and Ritter 1991, 145.

we may answer in a nutshell, we can, *but not directly*. First of all, it is important that we are not the absolute light by which we are enlightened. We do not dominate it or summon it at will; we do not always have it at hand. We also do not ignite it *a priori*, because wherever we are, it already burns – and independently of us. Instead, we must uncover it, or rather, open ourselves to the absolute light. This can only succeed *via negationis*. The light can only shine within us when we free ourselves from all objectifications and finite personal aims.

To be sure, negative theology cannot be interpreted as a “Pelagian” method, mainly because the light dominates and conditions us. From this follows the eradication of any hubris towards the absolute principle, because we subordinate ourselves to it and understand that we cannot dominate the absolute light. We do not know positively when the light illuminates us, because this happens ἐξαίφνης, that means “suddenly.”<sup>60</sup> We can only continue working steadfastly to uncover it, but we do not determine the exact moment of enlightenment.<sup>61</sup>

The point of this experience is, again, that according to Dionysius the Absolute is recognized as a supporting horizon: This experience has a beatifying effect, thus, it is the fulfillment of every existential search for meaning. It is fulfilling because through this experience we gain the awareness that the Good surrounds us everywhere, is present at all times, and enables us to perfect ourselves.

Furthermore, our individual perfection carries ethical implications. Due to the limited scope of this paper, only a short insight can be provided: The transformative experience reveals, among other things, the *importance of personal freedom* to us. Our journey towards self-actualization relies on freedom; conversely, we must not deprive others of their freedom. Without freedom, individuals cannot embrace the task of self-realization. Additionally, we ought not to force others to undergo κάθαρσις, because each person bears responsibility for themselves and their own growth. The enlightened philosopher may at most offer mere “instructions.”<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, we have seen that even the Absolute “respects” our freedom.<sup>63</sup> In the light of this, it is clear that humans should avoid behaving as “Herrenmenschen” or autocrats, thus refraining from restricting the freedom of others. This *modest* habitus stems from an insight into the absolute Good.

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<sup>60</sup> Dion. Ar. *ep.* 3; Heil and Ritter 1991, 159.

<sup>61</sup> The Neoplatonic method of abstraction is demonstrated more explicitly in Kobusch 1992. Halfwassen 2006. Stróżyński 2021. Rohstock 2023, 41-196.

<sup>62</sup> This was pointed out by Johann Gottlieb Fichte: see Lauth and Gliwitzky 1995, 94.

<sup>63</sup> See again Dion. Ar. *d.n.* 4.33; Suchla 1990, 178.11-12.

## 5) Result

We can conclude the following three points:

(i) By analyzing the connection between absolute condition and the concrete action of the free agent, it was possible to clarify the genesis of κακόν in Dionysius' strict monism: Absolute "providence" is not diametrically opposed to κακόν insofar as it allows its presence. "Providence" transcends oppositeness in general and is in this respect no longer in opposition to κακόν. In general, metaphysical transcendence means "superoppositeness." In the final analysis, the concrete realization of κακόν depends on us and owes to our defective spiritual and ethical state.

(ii) To prevent the emergence of κακόν, we are required to achieve self-fulfillment. I would like to highlight that Dionysius confronts us with the existential demand of responsible self-realization. Therefore, his discussion of the concept of κακόν turns out to be existential philosophy *avant la lettre*, suggesting that his metaphysics of the Good is essentially practical philosophy. For Dionysius integrates the question of how we can reach the "best form" (ἀρετή) of our soul into his metaphysical reflections.

(iii) Finally, it may well be said that the state of human soul must be characterized as "bad," if it has not undergone the process of perfection through reversion towards the Good. However, it should not be understood as "evil" in the sense that individuals intentionally seek destructive things. Basically, humans act in accordance with what they perceive as "good." Only in the orientation towards the Good itself, the soul is liberated from its "bad" state of deficiency. It is important to differentiate here between ethical deficiency and ontological deficiency. The former pertains to human responsibility and is a deficiency that ought not to be.

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