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Beauty and Divine Processions: Synthesizing Dionysius, Thomas Aquinas and their Interpretive Traditions

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Abstract

Dionysius' account of God's processions has been interpreted in a range of ways. Thomas Aquinas interprets divine processions as created likenesses of God. The Byzantine tradition interprets them as ἐνέργειαι in God. Neoplatonist readers of Dionysius read them as both divine self-differentiations and activities performed by creatures. Each reading can accommodate some of Dionysius' claims, but not others. After considering reasons for and against each interpretation, I show how Dionysius' texts on beauty, which present a phenomenological metaphysics of beauty, provide grounds for synthesizing significant aspects of each. The paper closes with a presentation of that synthesis.

Keywords

beauty • processions • Dionysius • Gregory Palamas

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Dionysius and Thomas Aquinas are important inflection points in the history of Western theology and philosophy.¹ Both offer syntheses of their Christian and non-Christian predecessors, and schools of interpretation of their texts and ideas were decisive for the subsequent history of Christian thought.² In this paper, I consider

¹ Since it was the focus of the symposium where this paper was first presented, all citations of Thomas' commentary on *The Divine Names* will be taken from the Latin text (Marietti edition) and English translation by Michael Augros, *An Exposition of The Divine Names, The Book of Blessed Dionysius* (Merrimack: Thomas More College Press, 2021). Citations of Dionysius' *Divine Names* are also taken from the Latin text (translated from the Greek by John Sarrazin) and English translation in that volume. The original Greek text is cited from the version found at the site of the Aquinas Institute, aquinas.cc/la/el/~DeDivNom, retrieved 10 August 2023, where I also consulted the recent translation by Urban Hannon. I also consulted the translation of the *Complete Works of Dionysius* by Colm Lubheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987). Citations of Dionysius' text as "*De Div. Nom.*" Page number citations are from the Augros translation, unless otherwise specified. All other citations of Thomas are from the Aquinas Institute at aquinas.cc.

² On Dionysius' influences, see Eric D. Perl, *Theophany: The Neoplatonic Philosophy of Dionysius the Areopagite* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007); David Bradshaw, *Aristotle East and West: Metaphysics and the Division of Christendom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 180, 186, 190, 270.

some interpretations of Dionysius on God's "processions" (πρόοδοι), which manifest God, flow into creatures, impart perfections, turn creatures towards God, and allow creatures to share in God and name God.³ While I am interested in how to interpret Dionysius correctly, I am even more interested in grasping what he and his interpreters guide us to see about reality; when we read their accounts of beauty, we should allow them to guide our own perception of beauty and see whether their insights can be practically applied to our own experience.

In this paper, I focus especially on Thomas Aquinas' interpretation of Dionysius on πρόοδοι, in which perfections come forth from God into creatures. Following the translator of Dionysius' texts into Latin, John Sarrazin, Thomas calls these "processions" (*processiones*). This is the same term that Thomas uses to denote the acts by which divine persons come forth from one another, and especially to denote the Holy Spirit coming forth from the Father and the Son.⁴ In his commentary on Dionysius' *Divine Names*, Thomas mainly uses this term to pick out those actions by which perfections come forth from God into creatures. Both in his commentary on Dionysius and elsewhere, Thomas sees the Trinitarian processions as analogous to, and the basis for, the processions from creatures into God.⁵ In this paper, my interest is in Thomas' reading of Dionysius on πρόοδοι, and on what that reading reveals about reality; my interest in this paper is not on Thomas' wider account of processions or on his account of the Trinitarian procession. In Dionysius, πρόοδοι are always those actions by which God's perfections go forth to creatures, not the acts by which Trinitarian persons come forth from others. On Thomas' interpretation, divine processions are created likenesses (*similitudines*) of God.⁶

After considering Thomas' reading of Dionysius, I put his interpretation into conversation with a Byzantine Patristic reading (from Maximus the Confessor, John of Damascus, and Gregory Palamas), on which God's processions are His many activities (ἐνέργειαι), and with a Neoplatonist reading (represented in contemporary literature in the work of Eric Perl), on which they are both divine self-differentiations and activities performed by creatures.⁷ These interpretations only partially resolve objections to Thomas' reading. How we resolve tensions among interpretations is

³ See, *inter alia*, *De Div. Nom.*, I.4.15, p.24-25; II.4.40, p.66-67; II.5.49-7.56; III.1.82-83, p.102-103; IV.4.113, p.136-137.

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [hereafter *STh*], I, q.27; q.28, a.4; q.36, a.1.

⁵ In *De Div. Nom.*, II, lect.1, 126-127, p.64-65; *STh* I q.45, a.6. cf. *STh* I, q.27, a.1; *Summa contra gentiles* II, c.1.

⁶ See, *inter alia*, *In De Div. Nom.*, I, lect.2, 70, p.36-37; II, lect.2, 135-143, p.68-71; II, lect.3, 158, p.76-77; II, lect.6, 215, p.98-99; V, lect.3, 672, p.308-309; IX, lect.2, 823-827, p.386-389; IX, lect.3, 833-834, p.392-395; XII, lect.un., 953, p.454-455; XIII, lect.2, p.462-465.

⁷ On the Neoplatonist reading, see Perl, *Theophany*, 30, 44-48, 59, 65, 78. On the Byzantine reading, see Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 181-183, 209-210, 270. For this view, I also draw on Christos Yannaras, Norman Russell (trans.), *Person and Eros* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2007), 216-219; Nikolaos Loudovikos, Elizabeth Theokritoff (trans.), *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Receptivity* (Brookline: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010), 217-222. I gloss over the differences among these interpreters' views, so as to focus just on their shared metaphysics and their reading of Dionysius insofar as it is shared and representative of their tradition.

important for debates on divine simplicity, immutability, and impassibility, on deification, and on relations between nature and grace, divine and creaturely freedom.

Dionysius' texts on beauty, however, provide grounds for synthesizing significant aspects of each interpretation. Dionysius provides a phenomenological metaphysics, an account of beauty in itself grounded in what is given experientially.⁸ By examining the experience of beauty, as he describes it, and thereby grasping aspects of beauty itself, we can see what is true in each interpretation. I use his account of beauty, rather than another divine name, because beauty is the most easily experienced divine procession, graspable even by the senses.⁹ In experiencing beauty, guided by Dionysius, we see the structure of divine processions—again, his account should have the practical effect of enabling us to perceive these things for ourselves.¹⁰ In showing what is true in each interpretation of Dionysius, and in synthesizing key points of each interpretation, I have a further ecumenical goal. Eastern Christian, Western Christian, and non-Christian Platonist approaches to God each reveal key features of the divine, and members of each tradition would do well to learn from the others and incorporate the others' insights into their own beliefs and practices, for the sake of greater participation in God, greater knowledge of the truth about God, and greater peace among these traditions.¹¹

⁸ cf. Thomas Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty: Metaphysics and Hermeneutics of the Image* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), 157-158

⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus* 250d. cf. *De Div. Nom.*, VII.2.309, p.326-327; In *De Div. Nom.*, VII, lect.2, 714, p. 330-331. Dionysius maps either Plato's Forms or Proclus' *henads* or both onto the divine processions, e.g., at *De Div. Nom.*, V.1.258, p.276-277. See also Perl, *Theophany*, 66-67.

¹⁰ My reading of Dionysius on beauty is partly inspired by aspects of three recent, phenomenologically influenced interpretations of his corpus, by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Jean-Luc Marion, and Brendan Thomas Sammon. See von Balthasar, Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (trans.), *Glory of the Lord*, vol.1, *Seeing the Form*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 114-126, 274-276, 529-540; von Balthasar, Andrew Louth, Francis McDonagh, and Brian McNeil (trans.), *The Glory of the Lord*, vol.2, *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Style* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 144-211; von Balthasar, Brian McNeil, et.al. (trans.), *The Glory of the Lord*, vol.4, *The Realm of Metaphysics in Antiquity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 397-407; Marion, Thomas A. Carlson (trans.), *The Idol and Distance: Five Studies* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2001), 139-195; Marion, Thomas A. Carlson (trans.), *God without Being* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 75-83; Marion, Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (trans.), *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 139-148; Sammon, *The God Who is Beauty: Beauty as a Divine Name in Thomas Aquinas and Dionysius the Areopagite* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2013); Sammon, 'Beauty and the Good in Dionysius the Areopagite', in: Alice Ramos (ed.), *Beauty and the Good: Recovering the Classical Tradition from Plato to Duns Scotus* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2020), 181-205.

¹¹ On the ancient and recently revised debate between Christian Platonism and monotheism, and pagan Platonism and polytheism, in this context. see, e.g., Edward Butler, 'The Gods and Being in Proclus', in: *Dionysius* 26 (2008): 93-114; Eric Perl, 'Neither One Nor Many: God and the Gods in Plotinus, Proclus, and Aquinas', in: *Dionysius* 28 (2010): 167-192.

1. Thomas' Interpretations of the *Πρόοδοι*

Thomas Aquinas gives an Aristotle-inspired reading of Dionysius,¹² on which our best account of God, the first principle of all things, is derived from arguments that show that principle to be pure actuality.¹³ As such, God contains no passive potentialities, parts, or really distinct properties, and is unchanging, unmoving, and simply one. On this reading, when Dionysius speaks of God as unchanging, He is speaking of God in Himself. But when Dionysius speaks of God as going out to creatures in processions, as acting ecstatically or erotically toward creatures, or as motion or otherness, he is speaking of God as the cause of ecstasy, eros, motion, or otherness in creatures, or of God as imitated by creatures.¹⁴ These things are not literally ascribed to God. Rather, on Thomas' reading, God's processions or manifestations in creation are created likenesses of God. (As I said above in the introduction, these processions in creation are not the same as the Trinitarian processions, of which Thomas speaks elsewhere.) God is a "supersubstantial ray" of goodness, a continual act of imparting perfections to others, without changing or differentiating.¹⁵

Thomas tells us that, as Dionysius says, God's essence is not "participated or communicated" (*incommunicata seu imparticipata*) in itself, that is, it is not given to creatures as their essence or as a part of them.¹⁶ Creatures participate in God insofar as they receive and share in perfections that God is in Himself. On Thomas' view, to participate is to "receive" and "take part" in something. Creatures share in God in the sense that effects participate in, or "take part of," their causes.¹⁷ In commenting on Dionysius' *Divine Names*, Thomas distinguishes three ways that creatures participate in God as their cause; these three kinds of participation are distinguished according to three of the Aristotelian modes of causality. First, God efficiently causes, or makes, likenesses of His perfections in creatures; created substances receive, and thereby participate in, the perfections created by God in them. They "take part" of God, not literally, but in receiving a likeness of formal (or intelligible) content that first existed in God; metaphorically, they take "part" of His content. Second, created perfections (like being, life, and wisdom) have formal content that imperfectly reflects content that

¹² On Aristotle as the key to Thomas' reading of Dionysius, see, *inter alia*, *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect.21, 559, p.252-253.

¹³ STh I, q.2, a.3; q.3, a.4.

¹⁴ *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lects.9-11, p.175-197; IX, lects.2-4, p.381-402. See also Peter Kwasiniewski, *The Ecstasy of Love in Thomas Aquinas* (Steubenville: Emmaus Academic, 2021).

¹⁵ *De Div. Nom.*, I.4.16, p.24-25; *In De Div. Nom.*, I, lect.2, 66-67, p.34-37.

¹⁶ *In De Div. Nom.*, II, lect.3, 158, p.76-77, interpreting *De Div. Nom.*, II.5.50-51, p.76-77. cf. STh I, q.3, a.8.

¹⁷ On participation, see Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio libri Boetii de Ebdomadibus*, lect.2, 23-24. The sense of participation on which effects participate in their causes is one of three broad kinds of participation. Creatures do not share in God in the sense of participation on which a narrower notion (like a species) shares in a broader notion (like a genus), or on which a subject participates in a form (as when matter shares in form or substances in accidents.) On these notions of participation, see the texts and secondary literature reviewed in John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 96-110.

is perfectly in God; God is their exemplary cause. Third, when God makes perfections in creatures, this turns creatures toward Him, at least inasmuch as they imitate Him; He is the final cause of that imitation.¹⁸ When a cause produces an effect, that effect (or, at least, its formal content or perfection) is already contained in the cause; for a cause to produce an effect just is for the effect to have a likeness of the cause, for the cause to be present to its effect, and for the effect to be turned toward, participate in, and be present to its cause. Without introducing change or difference into a cause, its extrinsic likenesses just are its processions, ways in which it (or, literally, its formal content) has “gone out” of itself; in this way, causes are ecstatically present in their effects.¹⁹ To receive a perfection is to exercise and manifest it, as can be seen in the fundamental perfection, *esse*, the act of existence, which is both received and exercised by each creature.²⁰ This responds to the objections raised by some Eastern thinkers on which Thomas is read as holding that creatures are only passive to God, rather than being in active, reciprocal “dialogue” with God.²¹

Thomas’ interpretation of Dionysius on God’s processions into creation is directly rooted in many Dionysian texts. Dionysius affirms that God gives to creatures a “likeness, image, or assimilation” (ὁμοιότητα, εἰκόνα, ὁμοίωσιν; *similitudo, imago, assimilatio*) of Himself, and that by the “power of that likeness” (δύναμις μιμήσεως; *virtus similitudinis*), He turns things to Himself.²² Dionysius also affirms the transcendence of God over change and multiplicity; in discussing how God “goes out” of Himself in His processions, Dionysius emphasizes that God turns creatures toward Himself and perfects them while remaining transcendent to them. God is like the center of a circle and creatures like the points of its circumference, terminating radii from the center; the points can be said to proceed from the measure or standard of the center—that is, they are what they are, points on a circumference, because of the center—without that center changing, and without radii literally shooting out from the center to constitute the circumference. The center defines the circumference, and the circumference proceeds from the center, without alteration or differentiation on

¹⁸ In *De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect.8, 391, p.172-173; V, lect.3, 672, p.308-309; IX, lect.3, 833-834, p.392-393; XIII, lect.2, 975, p.462-465. cf. STh I, q.4, a.3. On participation and causality, see Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 124-131, and the secondary texts cited there, and especially Cornelio Fabro, “The Intensive Hermeneutics of Thomistic Philosophy: The Notion of Participation,” in: *Selected Works of Cornelio Fabro*, vol.1, *Selected Articles on Metaphysics and Participation*, ed. Nathaniel Dreyer, 65-104 (Chillum: IVE Press, 2016).

¹⁹ In *De Div. Nom.*, I, lect.3, 86-88, p.46-47; II, lect.6, 215, p.98-99; IX, lect.2, 823-827, p.386-389; IX, lect.4, 841, p.398-399. The general principle in play here is that every agent produces what is similar to itself (“omne agens agit sibi simile.”) cf. STh I, q.8, a.1; q.14, a.5; q.19, a.4. See Fran O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 41-44.

²⁰ STh I q.18, a.2; *Sentencia libri Metaphysicae*, IV, lect 2, 558; *Expositio libri Boetii de Ebdomadibus*, lect.2, 23; *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3; *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia Dei*, q.7, a.2. For further texts from Thomas and the Thomistic tradition showing this, see my ‘The Personhood of the Separated Soul’, in: *Nova et Vetera* 12 (2014): 879-880.

²¹ See, e.g., Loudovikos, *Eucharistic Ontology*, 221-222.

²² *De Div. Nom.*, IX.6.374, p.390-391.

the center's part. God is also like a seal impressing wax; impressions share in the perfection of the seal, and are processions from it, without the seal differentiating or multiplying.²³ Most helpfully for Thomas' reading, Dionysius says that it is when God makes many things like Himself that there is said to be "discrimination and multiplication" (διάκρισις καὶ πολλαπλασιασμός) of God, and that these discriminations *are* divine processions, but that God remains one and "not multiplied" (ἀπλήθυντος).²⁴ Thomas has textual and systematic grounds for interpreting the many processions to be created likenesses, and, as many, to not be literally in God. But this interpretation is also open to objections.

First, it deflates other Dionysian claims. Dionysius says that, out of an abundance of *eros*, God "becomes outside Himself" (ἔξω ἑαυτοῦ γίνεται) and even is, in a sense, "charmed" (θέλγεται) by beauty and goodness to be pulled down ecstatically to abide in all things.²⁵ Likewise, by his activities and processions, God is said to "move" into all beings.²⁶ On Thomas' reading, these are metaphors for how God "abides" in things inasmuch as His likenesses are in them.²⁷ Dionysius does qualify his claims, saying that God comes to dwell in creatures through His power to remain in Himself, and that He moves into creatures without change. But Dionysius makes both claims—that God remains in Himself *and* that He proceeds into all things—in the same voice, whereas Thomas takes the former to be literal, and the latter to be metaphorical.²⁸ This seems to deflate and misinterpret a key aspect of Dionysius' views.²⁹

Second, if processions are identical to God's likenesses in things, and God is entirely the same regardless of whether He causes or not, then it is hard to see how (as Thomas affirms) God is free to cause likenesses other than those He actually causes. In virtue of what does God cause one likeness distinct from Himself rather than another? Thomists tend to respond that God just directly (and freely) causes them.³⁰ But that one extrinsic effect comes about rather than another is generally explained by different acts in its cause. Here, though, there are no different acts in the cause. This leaves the effects unexplained.³¹ Furthermore, since all creaturely acts and even matter

²³ *De Div. Nom.*, II.5-6.50-52, p.76-77

²⁴ *De Div. Nom.*, II.11.75-77, p.96-97.

²⁵ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.13.171, p.186-187. The translation of 'θέλγεται' as 'charmed' is from Lubheid, p.82. Sarrazin has 'trahitur' and Augros 'drawn.'

²⁶ *De Div. Nom.*, IX.9.379, p.394-395.

²⁷ *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect.10, 437, p.190-191.

²⁸ See Kwasiniewski, *Ecstasy of Love*. Likewise, on Thomas' reading, Dionysius' claims about deification must be interpreted metaphorically: sharing in God is just receiving created divine likenesses, which fall short of the full divine power and perfection.

²⁹ See Christos Yannaras, Haralambos Ventis (trans.), *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (London: T&T Clark, 2005), ch.7.

³⁰ On this extrinsic model of divine agency, see W. Matthews Grant, *Free Will and God's Universal Causality: The Dual Sources Account* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), 53-98.

³¹ See my earlier posing of this problem in my "The Flexibility of Divine Simplicity: Aquinas, Scotus, Palamas", in: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 57:2 (July 2017): 123-139.

are likenesses of God, and all are efficiently caused by God, theological determinism could result, on which all aspects of creatures, even their acts of response, are directly caused by God, and creatures cannot respond to God apart from God creating acts of response in them.³²

2. Byzantine and Neoplatonist Interpretations

On a Byzantine reading of Dionysius, by contrast, divine processions towards creation are not effects extrinsic to God, but differentiated acts of self-manifestation that are one in being with God.³³ (Again, I am not concerned in this paper with the Trinitarian processions.) God is like the sun sending out multiple “rays” (ἁκτῖνες, *radices*) to different effects, where both sun and rays are aspects of the same light. The differentiated rays make the sun present to what they illumine, bestowing distinct effects on different things; similarly, God makes Himself distinctly present to different things by acts that are differentiated in Him.³⁴ That God transcends creatures and remains in Himself is signified by the ὑπερ- prefixed attributes that Dionysius ascribes to God. But God is also literally ecstatically and erotically present to creatures by His acts, such that His acts are present in creatures, and creatures can participate directly in Him. On this view, God’s οὐσία, God as He transcends all names, participability, and manifestations, is distinct from God’s ἐνέργειαι or πρόοδοι, God manifests and makes Himself available to creatures, including through contingent, free acts. However, God’s οὐσία and ἐνέργειαι are one in being.

This reading overcomes the first objection to Thomas’ view by literally affirming Dionysius’ claims both about God’s ἔρος and ecstasy *and* about God’s immutability.³⁵ It also overcomes the second objection by positing a differentiation in the cause, thereby explaining differences in the effects, and allowing creatures to also perform their own ἐνέργειαι or πρόοδοι, whereby they reciprocally respond to God, without God determining them.³⁶ However, this view downplays other Dionysian texts, especially those that identify divine processions with created likenesses. While the Byzantine view affirms that there are created likenesses of God, it does not identify them with divine processions, nor does it identify having those likenesses with

³² On matter as a likeness of God, see *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect.13, 463, p.202-205.

³³ See Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, ch.9.

³⁴ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.1.96-101. On God’s processions as “rays”, see also *inter alia*, *De Div. Nom.*, I.4.15, p.24-25; II.4.40, p.66-67; II.5.49-7.56; III.1.82-83, p.102-103; IV.4.113, p.136-137.

³⁵ Likewise, in deification, on this view, creatures literally share in God Himself by receiving and sharing in His processions.

³⁶ Bradshaw, *Aristotle*, 180-183, 190, 206, 209-210, 237-241, 270. On some texts of Palamas, “ἐνέργειαι” is a broader category than “πρόοδοι.” There, πρόοδοι are just the providential acts of God, while ἐνέργειαι are all of his acts. This distinction, on which all πρόοδοι are ἐνέργειαι but not vice versa, does not affect the interpretation given here, since πρόοδοι are ἐνέργειαι and have the metaphysical structure of all ἐνέργειαι, even if the term only refers just to the members of a certain subset of the ἐνέργειαι. See Tikhon Pino, *Essence and Energies: Being and Naming in St Gregory Palamas* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 70-72.

participation in God.³⁷ This excludes the sense of participation described by Thomas, building on Dionysius, on which we share in God more by receiving a greater likeness to Him.

The Neoplatonist reading overlaps each of the earlier two interpretations in a few ways, and for this reason it is the closest to the synthesizing interpretation I present below.³⁸ As on Thomas' view, so here God is "identical" to or the "same" (*idem*) as His effects inasmuch as they have the same content. Those effects *are* God's self-unfolding and self-presentation in multiplicity. In this sense, God's *πρόοδοι* just are creatures and their perfections. But, as on the Byzantine view, God's processions, in another sense, are identified with His differentiated presence to things, God insofar as He is participable, which is distinct from God in Himself. There is one sense in which the many divine processions *are* in God, and another sense in which they just are creatures.³⁹ Such a view can be made sense of, if we distinguish, with Thomas, between being one (*unum*) and being identical or same (*idem, identitas*). To be one is to be undivided from oneself; to be the same is to have shared content with oneself or another. While God and creatures are not one, they are the same in certain respects.⁴⁰

Unlike the two previous interpretations, this reading does not downplay any Dionysian texts. But it could have greater precision regarding the exact way that each of these things are the divine *πρόοδοι* and regarding the relations among the different senses of *πρόοδοι*. It also does not fully respond to the second objection to Thomas' view. God here is pure generosity or overflow, transcending freedom and necessity.⁴¹ This claim downplays the view, held by both Thomas and the Byzantines, that freedom is a perfection of persons, and so God is free to create other things than what He in fact creates. Likewise, this view risks theological determinism: if creatures are the "unfolding" of God, then it is hard to see how we could exercise freedom on our own initiative, without that also being directly caused by God. It is hard to see how proponents of this view have the resources to affirm (as they and Dionysius do affirm) that we have freedom, including to reject God's gifts of the activities constitutive of what we are.⁴²

3. Beauty in Dionysius

Each interpretation highlights key aspects of Dionysian claims about divine *πρόοδοι*, while downplaying or being unable to account for others. Each can overcome some, but not all, of the problems with the other readings. In his account of beauty,

³⁷ Alexandros Chouliaras, *The Anthropology of St Gregory Palamas: The Image of God, the Spiritual Senses, and the Human Body* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020), 35-123.

³⁸ I owe some of this point to Michael Wiitala.

³⁹ Perl, *Theophany*, 25-26, 30, 74-79, 96-98.

⁴⁰ *In De Div. Nom.*, XI, lect. 2, 911, p.428-431.

⁴¹ Perl, *Theophany*, 49-51.

⁴² Perl, *Theophany*, 42.

Dionysius provides a key for overcoming this impasse among interpretations, for synthesizing each set of claims, and for training ourselves to see reality through the lens of aspects of each of the interpretations.⁴³ (Again, my purpose in this paper is to arrive at a good interpretation of Dionysius on the divine *πρόοδοι*, and thereby better see what his account reveals about reality.) While his account of beauty is presented in rather abstract terms, Dionysius is giving an analysis of the ordinary experience of beauty (*pulchritudo*, κάλλος) and the beautiful (*pulchrum*, καλόν).⁴⁴ I propose that, following Jean-Luc Marion, we approach Dionysius' account of beauty phenomenologically, that is, I propose that we think of Dionysius' account of beauty as an account of what is given in ordinary experiences of beauty.⁴⁵ Dionysius' account of beauty is meant to be applied to our own perception, both as an interpretation of what we already perceive and as a guide to helping us perceive reality more fully. We will grasp what Dionysius means if we focus on salient examples of beauty from our own lives, like the beauty of something in nature, of a beloved artwork, or of a spouse, lover, or friend. Consider, for example, the beauty of Rainer Maria Rilke's poem "Archaic Torso of Apollo" and of the broken Greek statue it describes, in which the sculpture "glows like a lamp" and "dazzles," "burst[ing] like a star," such that the whole statue "see[s] you" and says "you must change your life."⁴⁶ When we call something beautiful, we mean that it has this dazzling, summoning, excessive quality. According to both Dionysius and Thomas, the beautiful is what is harmonious or ordered, what is brilliant or shining, and what calls attention to itself.⁴⁷ To see something good—that is, perfect, self-giving, gift-bestowing, and desirable—just is to see beauty and something beautiful;⁴⁸ beauty is the conspicuousness and determinate presence of goodness.⁴⁹

We can distinguish beautiful creatures from their beauty; Dionysius says that a beautiful thing is what "shares or participates in beauty" (κάλλους μετέχον).⁵⁰ As the theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar says, a beautiful thing presents itself as having

⁴³ Earlier versions of some aspects of this analysis of beauty can be found in my paper "Classical Theism, Divine Beauty, and the Doctrine of the Trinity," in: Rob Koons and Jonathan Fuqua, eds., *Classical Theism: New Essays on the Metaphysics of God*, (New York: Routledge, 2023): 285-302.

⁴⁴ cf. Sammon, *God Who is Beauty*, 126.

⁴⁵ Marion, *Idol and Distance*, 148, 187-188. I am not claiming that everyone, prior to reflection, experiences beauty in these ways. Rather, Dionysius' ideas guide us to a particular experience of beauty, which is available to anyone.

⁴⁶ Rainer Maria Rilke, Edward Snow (ed.), *The Poetry of Rilke* (New York: North Point Press, 2009).

⁴⁷ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.135, p.150-151; *In De Div. Nom.*, I, lect.2, 59, p.32-33. This account of beauty has Platonic roots in *Cratylus* (which Dionysius quotes without attribution in the text just cited), *Symposium* (which Dionysius quotes without attribution at *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.137, p.150-151), *Phaedrus*, *Alcibiades*, *Republic*, *Hippias Major*, *Philebus*, and other dialogues. See also, e.g., *Wisdom* 13, for some Biblical (albeit also likely Platonically influenced) roots to this account of beauty. On Thomas' analysis of the metaphysical structure of beauty, see *In Is.*, c.53, 958 (commenting on Isaiah 53:2); *STh* I, q. 5, a. 4; q. 39, a. 8; I-II, q. 27, a. 1, ad 3; II-II, q. 141, a. 2; q. 145, a. 2.

⁴⁸ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.132, p.150-151. On goodness, see *De Div. Nom.*, IV.1-2, p.118-121.

⁴⁹ *In De Div. Nom.* XII, lect. un., 947, p.450-451. See Sammon, *God Who is Beauty*, 138.

⁵⁰ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.134, p.150-151.

“splendor”—in other words, it shows itself, shining forth, calling our attention to it. Each beautiful thing shows its own quality of beauty—that is, there is a distinctive kind of beauty in each particular beautiful thing, in virtue of which that thing in particular is beautiful.

But the splendor of each beautiful thing reveals a greater depth beyond that thing’s particular beauty. The particular beauty of any beautiful thing—like the beauty of Rilke’s poem or of the statue of Apollo—calls our attention to a depth of beauty, of splendor and harmony, which both appears and is hidden in *any* particular beauty.⁵¹ The beauty that appears particularly *in* the beautiful thing points to an even greater depth of *beauty as such*; all beauty has this double structure. When I look at something of great beauty, like a sculpture of Apollo, I am amazed that mere stone, so low in the ontological hierarchy, could bear such lofty, transcendent beauty. It is as if, as phenomenologist Dietrich von Hildebrand describes, the beauty merely rests upon the stone, descending upon it from above, rather than really belonging to it.⁵² In wonder, we feel how beauty appears *bestowed* on or *given* to beautiful things by an unnecessary, unmerited “grace.”

The beauty of the beautiful thing reveals (though not fully) a gracious giver or bestower of that beauty. The presence of this giver is *given* and *directly perceived* in the perception of beautiful things; we do not just conclude to this giver’s presence by reasoning about the causes of beautiful things. Like light, this giver of beauty seems to “shine” beauty upon beautiful things. As Dionysius analyzes it, the beauty of each beautiful thing is given in perception as a “participation of the beautifying cause of all beautiful things [or wholes]”.⁵³ The beauty received by a beautiful thing, Dionysius says, is “beautifying” (καλλοποιου, *pulchrificae*) and “graciously received” (*gratiosae habitae pulchritudinis*) or “the flowering of what is full of grace” (κεχαριτωμένης ὡραιότητος).⁵⁴

In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius positions his account of beauty between his accounts of light and *eros*, because beauty unifies them.⁵⁵ To experience beauty in something is to experience a ray of perfect beauty shining through it—this is another

⁵¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol.2, 164-167. As Marion says, there is a play of the visible and the invisible, the revealed and the concealed, the immanent and the transcendent, anytime that something beautiful is given; see Marion, *Idol and Distance*, 148.

⁵² Dietrich von Hildebrand, Brian McNeil (trans.), *Aesthetics*, vol. 1 (Steubenville: The Hildebrand Project, 2016), 207-214. Hildebrand thinks this lofty beauty, which he calls “beauty of the second power,” is only found in some beautiful things, but Dionysius implicitly holds that it is found in all beautiful things—that is, in all things.

⁵³ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.134, p.150-151: “κάλλος δὲ τὴν μετοχὴν τῆς καλλοποιου τῶν ὅλων καλῶν αἰτίας.” Lubheid (p.76) translates this by saying that this cause is the cause of “beauty in everything.” This passage is a key text for considering whether beauty is a transcendental property of all beings. See my “Beauty, First and Last of All the Transcendentals: Givenness and Aesthetic, Spiritual Perception in Thomism and Jean-Luc Marion,” in: *The Thomist* 82 (2018): 157-187.

⁵⁴ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.132, p.150-151. This is an Incarnational and Marian image of beauty, evoking Luke 1:28: the beautiful is full of grace, like Mary.

⁵⁵ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.4.113, p.136-137; IV.12.167, p.176-177.

way of describing the experience of the depth of beauty being bestowed upon the beautiful thing by a giver of beauty, which I described above.⁵⁶ It is also, as Hildebrand says, to experience myself being loved through the beautiful thing.⁵⁷ By seeing the gracefulness or loveliness of something beautiful, I feel graciousness—unmerited happiness and a call to become beautiful—being bestowed *on me*. In experiencing something beautiful, the giver of beauty seems to stand above the beautiful thing, loving it, but also loving me through it. As Rilke says, in seeing something beautiful, I experience myself to be seen and called to change my life; Dionysius describes this too.⁵⁸

I also experience a beautiful thing's beauty in its order and harmony.⁵⁹ When something is beautiful, its parts and aspects fit together; a thing *is* one or unified, and *appears* unified, because of its beauty. Likewise, Dionysius says, the thing only exists and has its nature insofar as it is unified and harmonious. Beauty appears as the basis of the unity, existence, and essence of things. The giver of beauty appears as the giver of those properties too, lovingly bestowing them upon the beautiful thing and so drawing it toward Himself. Beauty “gathers” (συνάγον) a thing into existence and unity, and, through the beautiful thing, “calls” (καλοῦν) me to attend to it, to be more unified in myself, and to love it, and, through it, the giver of beauty.⁶⁰ Beauty and the beautiful address themselves to me, and the appropriate response is to praise them and request more of them. I only fully experience beauty by participating in it and entering dialogue with it.⁶¹ In experiencing beauty in this way, I also come to see how (as both Dionysius and Thomas affirm) something analogous to desire animates all things, such they can respond to the call of divine beauty and so emerge into existence and unity.⁶²

The ultimate giver and source of beauty must itself be *beauty* and contain all beauty, since it bestows beauty on other things, and nothing can give a perfection that it does not have. But that giver must also be *a beautiful thing*, since no mere property can bestow gifts on others.⁶³ As Dionysius says, this giver and container of all beauty is “all beautiful” (πάγκαλον) or “most beautiful” (*pulcherrimum*) but also “beyond beauty” (ὑπερρούσιον καλόν, *supersubstantiale pulchrum*), at least, beyond the beauty that belongs to particular beautiful creatures. For these same reasons, this giver must

⁵⁶ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.135, p.150-151. See O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 138.

⁵⁷ Hildebrand, *Aesthetics*, vol.1, 451.

⁵⁸ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.135, p.150-151.

⁵⁹ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.135, p.150-151.

⁶⁰ *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7.135, 139, p.150-153; IV.7.143-144, p.158-159; *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect. 5, 340, 349, p.154-157; IV, lect. 21, 554, p.250-253. See O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, 273.

⁶¹ See Marion, *Idol and Distance*, 187-188; Nikolaos Loudovikos, 'Striving for Participation: Palamite Analogy as Dialogical Syn-energy and Thomist Analogy as Emanational Similitude', in C. Athanasopoulos, C. Schneider (eds.): *Divine Essence and Divine Energies: Ecumenical Reflections on the Presence of God in Eastern Orthodoxy* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2013).

⁶² I am grateful to Emily McCarty for calling my attention to this importance of this point.

⁶³ Sammon, *God Who is Beauty*, 302, drawing on Albert the Great, *De pulchro et bono* 2.1 ad 2.

be both *eros* itself and a lover, loving each beautiful thing in a way particular to it. Since all things have existence and unity only insofar as they are beautiful, all things are beautiful, and imitate and come forth from that source which is beauty and love itself; that is, all things are exemplarily, efficiently, and finally caused by that which is beauty and love itself. Beauty appears in every cause, even the material or “elemental cause” (ἀρχὴ στοιχειώδης), inasmuch as beauty is constitutive of every property insofar as it exists, is one, and is of some kind, and so is related to each property as its “matter,” that is, as what constitutes it. The beautiful giver is unchanging in its perfect beauty, but it also appears as uniquely present in its loving causing of each beautiful thing.⁶⁴

But it is not *only* the giver of beauty, God, who is rightly called “beauty itself” (αὐτοκάλλος, *per se pulchritudo*). God is also the giver of *beauty itself*. God’s “beautifying outpouring”—the rays of grace-bestowing beauty that shine on each beautiful thing—are also rightly called “beauty itself”, as is the beauty found universally in all beautiful things. *Beauty itself* is really found in creatures, not just in God. Likewise, Dionysius says, the particular beauty in each beautiful thing just is beauty itself. Beauty itself is genuinely found in each of these things; it is found in things that are wholly beautiful and things that are only partly beautiful. In Thomistic terms, the very subsisting act of existence (*esse*) that God is, is best grasped as beauty, as is the *esse* of each individual being.⁶⁵ For all beauties distinct from himself, God not only appears in all of them, but is their “substantiator” (ὑποστάτην, *substantiator*) the one who makes them really existing (and, so, really beautiful) in their own right, and his rays or processions are “that which makes things real” (αὐτοουσίωσιν, *per se substantiationem*).⁶⁶ Beauty, as Brendan Sammon says, is “between” all of these things, or, as Thomas Pfau put it, it is an analogical phenomenon that both exists with its own proper content at each level of being and ties those levels together.⁶⁷

4. Synthesizing the Three Interpretations

While more could be said about Dionysius’ phenomenological metaphysics of beauty,⁶⁸ this is enough for synthesizing the three interpretations of divine

⁶⁴ The ideas in this whole paragraph are drawn from *De Div. Nom.*, IV.7-10.136-140, 142-146, 153-155, p.150-153, 158-159, 168-169.

⁶⁵ See my “Beauty, First and Last of all the Transcendentals.”. However, while *esse* is beauty on this view, not all beauty is *esse*; some things, like beings of reason, can be beautiful, even though they properly lack *esse*, because of their relationship to really existing things. I am grateful to Emily McCarty and Patrick Zoll for these points. See also my “*Omnis categoria pulchra est: A Neutralist Account of Beauty*,” in: Robert A. Delfino, William Irwin, and Jonathan J. Sanford (eds.), *The Philosophical Legacy of Jorge J.E. Gracia* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022): 169-180.

⁶⁶ *De Div. Nom.*, XI.6.422-426, p.438-441.

⁶⁷ Sammon, *God Who is Beauty*, 38, 357-369; Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty*, 160. cf. Baltahsar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol.2, 170-178; William Desmond, *The Gift of Beauty and the Passion of Being: On the Threshold between the Aesthetic and the Religious* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2018).

⁶⁸ See *In De Div. Nom.*, IV, lect.3-11; Sammon, *God Who is Beauty*, 240-369.

processions. The experience of beauty allows us to perceive the aspects of divine processions on which each interpretation focuses. As Dionysius describes the experience of beauty, we experience both beauty in beautiful things and the giver of beauty acting on and through that beauty. We perceive the beauty in beautiful things to be a likeness to divine beauty, which is given as a depth behind the beauty in beautiful things. Inasmuch as we experience the shared content between the beauty in beautiful things and the depth of divine beauty, we directly perceive the beauty in the beautiful thing—the divine likeness—to proceed from God, from divine beauty. We experience them to have some of the same content. To share in created beauty is to share in a likeness of God, which in its content is divine, and so to share in a divine likeness *is* to share in God. The likenesses of divine beauty in creatures unfold and manifest the one unchanging divine beauty. This corroborates aspects of the Thomistic and Neoplatonist readings; by emphasizing these Dionysian points, we avoid the tendency of the Byzantine interpretation to downplay Dionysian texts about divine likenesses.

But in perceiving beauty we also perceive the particular, gracious acts by which God beautifies that particular thing and loves us through it. God is a lover, literally moved to go out of Himself to bestow beauty upon particular things, call beautiful things together, and draw their beauty back to himself, as well as call us to Himself through them. These divine acts of beautifying individuals are really acts of God; they are God made manifest in particular ways, and they are not the same as the likenesses of God that they cause in creatures. Without these distinct beautifying acts, there would be no likenesses of God in creatures; those likenesses and their contingent existence would, as the second objection to Thomas' view had it, remain unexplained. In all of this, God is also revealed to be unchanging beauty in Himself. This corroborates aspects of the Byzantine reading and avoids the tendency of the Thomistic view to downplay Dionysian texts about divine ecstasy, *eros*, motion, and otherness.

God's beauty in itself, His many beautifying acts, and the created beauty in beautiful things are the same insofar as they have the same content. But that content is had analogically, in similar but different ways. Both divine acts and divine likenesses are divine *πρόοδοι*: God unfolds Himself in beautifying acts, which are one in being with Him, and these bring about beauty as a divine likeness in creatures. But beautiful beings really receive beauty itself, such that it is at their disposal, and they can manifest it. This distinction of different, analogically related forms of beauty, all of which are processions and manifestations of God, allows for both God and creatures to act freely, overcoming worries about theological determinism. The beauty that descends upon beautiful things both is the source of all the positive properties in

that thing, and sets those things free to be beautiful, and act on their own, as all three traditions affirm.⁶⁹

The upshot of all of this is that ‘procession’ is, on the best reading of Dionysius, said in many senses. It refers, like ‘beauty itself’ to different aspects, at different ontological levels, of God’s self-manifestation. If we attend to all the different aspects of the structure of *any* given beautiful thing and its beauty, we can *perceive*—not just conceptually or rationally grasp—these different aspects of processions: this is what Dionysius guides us to grasp about reality. This lays a basis for beginning to reconcile the interpretive traditions that stemmed from Dionysius, and, in an ecumenical vein, to reconcile the strands of philosophical and religious thought and practice that have for too long been in conflict.⁷⁰

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<https://dionysiuscircle.org/>

⁶⁹ For more on the account presented here, and for how the divine *πρόοδοι* are related to the divine ideas and divine intentions, see my paper, co-written with Matthew Kirby, “The One Has the Many: A Further Synthesis of Aquinas, Scotus, and Palamas,” in: *International Philosophical Quarterly* 62:2 (June 2022): 161-187.”

⁷⁰ An earlier version of this paper was presented at the online Dionysius Circle Symposium on Thomas Aquinas’ *Exposition of the Divine Names* on October 7, 2023. I am grateful to Samuel Bennett and the other organizers for inviting me to give this paper, to Emily McCarty for her helpful comments on my paper, and to the other participants at that symposium. A few of the ideas in this paper also appear in my review of Augros’ translation of Thomas’ commentary on the *Divine Names*, in: *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 98-1 (2024), 117-120.