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Abstract
In his book The Darkness of God, Denys Turner claims that medieval mysticism was not based on mystical experiences. This view is called ‘anti-mysticism’; its opposite is ‘experientialism’. After giving a brief account of the theology of Dionysius the Areopagite, I argue that an experientialist interpretation of this theology is more plausible than an anti-mystical interpretation. Robert Forman’s classification of apophatic mystical states helps to understand the experiences behind the texts.

1 Apophatic and Cataphatic Mysticism

The term ‘apophatic’ is mainly used for negative theology, but it also denotes a kind of mysticism that often goes along with negative theology. This mysticism is assumed to be based on experiences of emptiness and silence. We need not be too ambitious as to the degree of emptiness. Robert Forman takes apophatic mystical states to be ‘oriented. . . towards emptying’, while some kinds of objects – in a very general sense of ‘object’ – may still play a role in the formation of the experience. These objects tend to be huge and homogenous, having no sharp borders or even comprising everything: a cloud, the sky, the sea, empty space, darkness, light. And some identify the object of their experiences as God.

To better understand apophatic mysticism, it is useful to contrast it with cataphatic mysticism. The objects of cataphatic mystical experiences are familiar elements of religious imagery. No one has to be a mystic in order to understand the religious meaning of deities, saints and spiritual symbols, or to be able to listen to voices and music that lead the mind to religious contemplation. Unlike ordinary believers, however, cataphatic mystics seem to encounter these things ‘directly’ in certain states of mind. Their experiences do not depend on the presence of material paintings and statues, of real voices and real musical performances. In addition, cataphatic mystical experiences may show a higher complexity and intensity than the experiences caused by objects of every-day religious life. Mystical sensations are often too rich to be integrated into a logical framework. They are sometimes described as fullness beyond the limits of comprehension and as causing overwhelming feelings of glory and joy.

2 Dionysius the Areopagite

In The Mystical Theology, a treatise on negative theology and apophatic mysticism, Dionysius the Areopagite (Pseudo-Dionysius) chooses the word ‘darkness’ to designate the ‘shadowy’, the ‘vague’ and the indescribable, the indescribable being the archetype of the ineffable. However, Dionysius also uses the word ‘darkness’ to designate the ‘shadowy’, the ‘vague’ and the indescribable. This is because the darkness of God is not a mere absence of light, but a light that is beyond all light. The darkness of God is not a mere absence of light, but a light that is beyond all light. It is a light that is not seen, but felt. It is a light that is not understood, but felt. It is a light that is not known, but felt. It is a light that is not felt, but known.

ness’ as the central metaphor for God. In particular, he combines this metaphor with the metaphor of light to form contradictory descriptions of God. In a prayer that opens the treatise, we find the term ‘brilliant darkness’, and in chapter two, God is called ‘darkness so far above light’ as well as ‘darkness concealed from all the light among beings.’ Though the latter formulations do not seem contradictory at first sight, the contradiction appears as soon as we realize that ‘light’ is just another name of God. Light is supposed to be God’s creation, therefore the term ‘light’ can be used to describe God as the cause of his creation – ‘to name God from his effects’, as Denys Turner writes in The Darkness of God. He adds that from this ‘it does not follow that the names of God signify only that causality.’ A name of God ‘tells us something, however inadequately, about what God eternally and in her nature is, it does not simply report on some act of the divine causality in time. . . ’

As physical light is understood as a symbol of its creator, this may be called the symbolic meaning of the term ‘light’. The reasons for choosing this symbol are obvious: according to the Bible, light was created on the first day, and it certainly is an extremely important part of creation. The symbol is also reminiscent of the allegory of the cave in Plato’s Republic, which has been one of the central references for Christian Neoplatonism. Turner explains in chapter one of his book how Neoplatonists combined Plato’s allegory with the biblical story of Moses’ encounter with God on Mount Sinai. Dionysius’ own account of this story can be found at the end of the first chapter of The Mystical Theology. I will come back to it below.

Since God is not only light, but also ‘darkness so far above light’ and even ‘concealed from all the light’, it follows that God is both darkness and light. Here it might be objected that these words do not really express a contradiction, because God is not darkness in the same sense in which he is light. The metaphor of darkness is associated with unknowing: in The Mystical Theology, God is said to be darkness because he ‘lies beyond all vision and knowledge.’ (1025A) But as I have just indicated, the word ‘light’ is associated with causality and creation: God is light because he is the cause of the light in the universe. So the claim that God is both darkness and light seems to merge two different semantic fields.

This objection would be valid if metaphorical ‘light’ had only a symbolic meaning. But it also has what Dionysius calls a ‘conceptual content’. In another treatise, The Divine Names, Dionysius writes that God is the Good and that the Good is light because ‘it illuminates the mind of every supra-celestial being with the light of the mind, and because it drives from souls the ignorance and the error

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squatting there.’ (700D) This passage shows that the metaphor of light – in its conceptual meaning – is associated with knowing. God is light because we know him, and he is darkness because we do not know him. We may conclude that God’s being darkness is in fact the opposite of God’s being light, just as unknowing is the opposite of knowing. The contradiction is based on the conceptual senses of ‘darkness’ and ‘light.’

At this point, the question may be raised whether the contradiction of God’s being darkness and light has a chance of being true. Is it possible for something to be both darkness and light, to be not known and known at the same time? Here is not the place to go into this question, but the gist of the answer is this: Dionysius wanted to tell his readers that the only thing we know about God is that we do not know him. This is very close to agnosticism, but in fact it is the central thesis of negative theology, which, for Dionysius, is the best theology we can get. The word ‘darkness’ expresses this thesis metaphorically.

3 Turner’s Anti-Mysticism

The justification of negative theology is an issue of philosophical argument, of evaluating consistency, conceptual clarity, explanatory force, and so on. But it is probably more than that. The question of justification can only be settled by taking into account the experiences which the theology is based on. Once we have identified the experiences described in a theological text, we may ask if these experiences did occur in the mind of the author, or if they exist or have existed in other minds. The answer to these questions would influence our evaluation of the theory presented by the author.

In the present case, the contradictory descriptions of God chosen by Dionysius would be supported, to some degree, by the existence of the respective mystical experiences. Those parts of the text, on the other hand, which are not directly related to experience could be taken as a kind of theoretical framework for the experience-based statements. Of course, mystical experience alone cannot provide sufficient reason for accepting a theological theory, but it could increase the (at least subjective) probability that the theory is true. Thus we would encounter a structure that resembles the structure of empirical science, where theories are also supported by experiential statements.

This is what Turner has in mind when he notes, ‘Experientialism is, in short, the “positivism” of Christian spirituality.’ However, Turner denies that The Mystical Theology is an example of experientialism and that Dionysius believed in the existence of apophatic mystical experiences. Rather, he deprecates ‘a contemporary “experientialist” misreading’, a ‘profitless misinterpretation’ of

5. The Divine Names contains some further contradictions. Chapter nine, for instance, lists the following pairs: greatness and smallness, sameness and difference, similarity and dissimilarity, rest and motion. All of these, however, must be understood in a symbolic sense.


8. Turner, Darkness, 5 and 8.
medieval mysticism, claiming

that in so far as the word ‘mysticism’ has a contemporary meaning; and that
in so far as that contemporary meaning links ‘mysticism’ to the cultivation
of certain kinds of experience — of ‘inwardness’, ‘ascent’ and ‘union’ — then
the mediaeval ‘mystic’ offers an anti-mysticism. For though the mediaeval
Christian neoplatonist used that same language of interiority, ascent and
‘oneness’, he or she did so precisely in order to deny that they were terms
descriptive of ‘experiences’. And the central metaphor of this negativity, of this
restraint of ‘experience’, was the apophatic metaphor of ‘light’ and ‘darkness’,
of the ‘cloud of unknowing’.

Contrary to appearance, however, it is not easy to distinguish anti-
mysticism from experientialism. In the next section we will meet the notion of
contentless mystical experiences (‘pure consciousness events’). Experiences of
this kind can easily be confused with non-existing mystical experiences, especially
if the only evidence is textual evidence in need of interpretation. But even for the
experiencing person, it could be impossible to keep apart the absence of content
and the absence of experience — the ‘experience of negativity’ and the ‘negativity
of experience’, as Turner puts it. We must not forget that mystics usually do
not pay attention to phenomenological distinctions when one of these absences
occurs. Such distinctions are applied only in retrospect, after the experience (or
non-experience) has gone.

In view of these difficulties, it is hard to decide whether Turner's anti-
mystical interpretation of Dionysian theology is more adequate or less adequate
than an experientialist interpretation. However, some of what Dionysius has
written seems to be clearly related to experiences, if not to experiences of his
own. Consider the story of Moses at Mount Sinai. When Dionysius retells this
story in The Mystical Theology, he emphasizes the transcendence of experience.
Yet the experiences left behind by Moses are cataphatic experiences, including
experiences of ‘many voiced trumpets’ and of ‘lights, pure and with rays stream-
ing abundantly.’ (1000D) Dionysius thinks that cataphatic mysticism must be
abandoned in order to come closer to God.

But if this process did not go beyond the loss of certain experiences,
why would Dionysius write that ‘being neither oneself nor someone else, one
is supremely united to the completely unknown…’ (1001A)? An anti-mystical
interpretation would imply that the mental state which Dionysius ascribes to
Moses arises from the cessation of experience, but why should this cessation
jeopardize the very identity of Moses? After all, deep sleep, too, is the end of
experience, yet without changing a person’s identity. A unio mystica must be
more impressive than a mere non-existence of experience could ever be. Dionysius
writes that Moses ‘plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing.’
(1001A) If this darkness of unknowing would simply result from a cessation of
experience, how could it excite a unity with God? And again, why should it cause

Moses to be neither himself nor someone else? The darkness of unknowing must be a quite dramatic state of mind. Hence it seems to be more appropriate to understand it as kind of *experience*.

4 Pure Consciousness Events and Unitive Mystical States

Dionysius does describe mystical experiences. He ascribes them to Moses, but perhaps he had his own experiences, too. We may leave this question open, because the ascription to Moses suffices to show that Dionysius built his theology on experiential ground. But can we say more about the experiences he describes? What kinds of experiences did he know? Any answer to this question must be somewhat speculative. We read old texts and try to identify the experiences behind the words. This interpretation has to bridge great distances in history and culture, so it can easily miss the target.

On the other hand, the interpretation is made a bit easier by a threefold classification of apophatic mysticism which Robert Forman derived from a large corpus of literature, most of it belonging to medieval Christian mysticism. One type of apophatic mystical experience is the ‘pure consciousness event’. Forman defines it

as a wakeful but contentless (non-intentional) experience. Though one remains awake and alert, emerging with the clear sense of having had ‘an unbroken continuity of experience’, one neither thinks, nor perceives nor acts. Suppose a mystic is convinced, for reasons of faith and tradition, that such an altered state of mind, a pure consciousness event, is a link to God – that it is somehow an experience of God. Then it would seem natural to denote the object of this experience by the metaphor of *darkness*, particularly if the imagery of light and illumination is an established part of the tradition in which the mystic is embedded. There is a good chance that Dionysius’ usage of the word ‘darkness’ is motivated in this way. After all, *The Mystical Theology* says that ‘the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing’ is reached ‘by an inactivity of all knowledge’ and ‘by knowing nothing.’ (1001A) Both formulations suggest non-intentionality and mental inactivity, and therefore the existence of a pure consciousness event.

The second type of experience identified by Forman is the ‘dualistic mystical state’. It is characterized by ‘phenomenological dualism’: ‘a heightened cognizance of awareness itself plus a consciousness of thoughts and objects’. Forman’s classification is meant to apply to apophatic mysticism, but there seems to be no indication of phenomenological dualism as long as we confine our search to the apophatic experiences mentioned by Dionysius. However, phenomenological dualism is a typical feature of *cataphatic* mystical states. Dionysius acknowledges the existence of such states, for instance in *The Divine Names*, where he supposes that some names of God ‘have their origin in spiritual visions which enlightened initiates or prophets in the holy places or elsewhere.’ (597A) He also adds a list

of examples, most of which draw an anthropomorphic picture of the divine. It is noteworthy that, in these passages, Dionysius does not claim to have cataphatic visions himself. He ascribes them to other people, just as he ascribes apophatic mystical experiences to Moses in *The Mystical Theology*.

[18] Let us finally turn to the third kind of apophatic mystical experience, which Forman dubs ‘unitive mystical state’ and describes ‘as a perceived unity of one’s own awareness *per se* with the objects around one, an immediate sense of a quasi-physical unity between self, objects and other people.’ It seems that Dionysius did not assume such a unity between the self and external objects, provided that God does not fall under the latter category. But if we broaden the concept of ‘unitive mystical state’ to include also the unity with God, Dionysius gives an account of this experience in the story of Moses, and as well in the following passage from *The Divine Names*:

But again, the most divine knowledge of God, that which comes through unknowing, is achieved in a union far beyond mind, when mind turns away from all things, even from itself, and when it is made one with the dazzling rays, being then and there enlightened by the inscrutable depth of Wisdom.

(872AB)

[19] As we have already seen, this mystical union can also be understood as a pure consciousness event. But the two interpretations do not exclude each other. What we should say is that no sharp line can be drawn between contentless and unitive mystical states, as they are phenomenally and/or temporally continuous. The fact that boundaries between mystical experiences of different types are not clear-cut does not make our distinctions wrong or useless. Mental states are typically mixtures of many ingredients and they tend to change into one another gradually. Belief can be mixed with doubt, affection can become love. Any classification of mental phenomena would be in vain if it required sharp distinctions. This holds for folk psychological concepts as well as for scientific psychology and cognitive science.

[20] In sum, my interpretation on the basis of Forman’s classification is as follows: of the three types of mystical experiences mentioned by Forman, the first is a cornerstone of Dionysius’ negative theology and apophatic mysticism. The characteristic feature of the second type, phenomenological dualism, can be found in cataphatic mysticism, which, in Dionysius’ view, is an important source of theological knowledge, but must be abandoned by those who want to achieve the highest form of knowledge. The third type of mystical experience, probably


14. The examples given by Forman suggest that God is no external object in his sense. They mainly concern objects of nature (cf. Forman, ‘Mysticism’, 198–200).

15. A recently described example of such continuity is the ‘state of pure mind, of an awareness beyond object and subject’, which Andrew Newberg and Eugene d’Aquili call ‘Absolute Unitary Being’. They also assume that this state of mind – arguably a pure consciousness event – can be achieved through a mystical union. Cf. their book *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York 2001), 120ff.
forming a continuum with the first, is also part of Dionysian theology, if Forman’s definition is extended a bit.

[21] The Areopagite acknowledged the existence of mystical experiences and built a theory around them. This, of course, is a result of textual interpretation as there is no such thing as a direct access to the mind of Dionysius. We cannot even rule out the possibility that he himself never had the experiences he describes. After all, when a theory predicts or presupposes certain experiences, this does not necessarily mean that the theorist has gone through the experiences himself. There is theory and there is practice.