The Purification of Love: Heavenly Ascent from Plato to Dante

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In this paper I attempt to show three things. First, that the common interpretation of Dante’s ascent to heaven is flawed in placing Dante’s deification at the beginning of the *Paradiso* when it actually, as I argue, takes place at the end. Second, that Dante’s ascent to heaven follows a traditional pattern derived from ancient Greek philosophy, and that by understanding his adherence to this pattern, my first claim becomes evident. Thirdly, I will demonstrate that Dante had access to this pattern by delineating one particular lineage of authors who transmitted it to him.

1. Dante, *Paradiso*, 33.142–45. [“Here my exalted vision lost its power. / But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving / with an even motion, were turning with / the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.”—Ed. All editor translation notes, where necessary for the reader’s convenience, are from the Princeton Dante Project, http://etcweb.princeton.edu/dante/pdp.]

2. I am very grateful to those who contributed their time and support to this paper. Professors William Cobb, Michael Minch and Mike Shaw all read various drafts and gave useful criticism. Dr. Keith Snedegar encouraged me to develop a little idea I had. And special thanks to Diego Jara, whose constant and selfless help with so many aspects of the research and writing was invaluable, and made it a far better study than it would have been otherwise.
This pattern of ascent consists of three parts: the purification of the individual, his or her illumination, and finally the achievement of union with God; this last step often signifies some form of deification. There are two aspects to the ascent: the microcosmic, in which the focus is on the individual’s struggle to purify his faculty of love in order to achieve illumination and union with the divine; and the macrocosmic, in which the process of ascent is seen as being inseparable from the cosmos itself, and, while the individual is still responsible for fitting him or herself into the larger scheme, there is considerable emphasis on the love which emanates from the divine and lifts all creation back to it. The various figures I examine will vary in the extent to which they emphasize the former or the latter doctrine, but aspects of both will be present in all those whom I treat.

The beginning of this study is Plato, who expounds his doctrine of love and ascent most fully in the Symposium. From him the doctrine passed to Plotinus who put it into the tripartite Neoplatonic form which would influence the later figures in the genealogy. Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite and Maximus Confessor developed and transmitted the doctrine, and the writings of both were translated by John Scotus Eriugena. It was in that form that it reached Bernard of Clairvaux and through him to Dante. I do not argue that this particular lineage

3. These two aspects can be viewed in terms of the Christian notions of “grace” and “works.” In all of the authors whom I treat, including Plato, the need for grace is never disregarded in spite of the emphasis placed on the responsibility of the individual to exercise his faculties to the utmost in order to achieve union with God. The “works” done by the individual open him or her up to the grace of God, making union possible.

4. The idea of ascent precedes Plato by millennia. The ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed in the ascent of the soul to heaven in the afterlife, and some have suggested that they practiced rituals by which they believed the soul could ascend in this life also. For Egypt, see Walter Federn, “Transformations in the Coffin Texts: a New Approach,” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 19, no. 4 (1960): 241–257, and Edward F. Wente, “Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt?” Journal of Near Eastern Studies 41, no. 3 (1982): 161–179; and for Mesopotamia, see Geo Widengren, “Aspetti simbolici dei templi e luoghi di culto del Vicino Oriente Antico,” Numen 7 (1960), 1–25, esp. 3–5. One influence on Plato was the Pythagoreans and their methods of ascent which were derived at least in part from shamanistic practices. See E.R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962). Shamanism itself was surely influenced by the ancient Near East. See Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). However, Plato was, as far as I am aware, the first to emphasize the role of love in ascent. This is, perhaps, a possible area for future research.

5. The fact that Augustine is absent from this lineage may be remarked upon. In spite of the
is the only one through which these ideas were transmitted, or even necessarily the most important one, but its significance lies most particularly in the fact that it provides clear and demonstrable evidence that these doctrines were preserved from ancient Greece to Dante.

To justify my selection of authors it may be helpful to explain how I came to link them. The starting point was Dante’s ascent. In reading various commentaries on the Paradiso I became convinced that they misinterpreted a central aspect of Dante’s experience. In the first canto of the Paradiso Dante was transformed by the light of the sun which flowed into him as he looked at Beatrice. He cannot describe his transformation and simply refers the reader to the experience of Glaucus, the deified fisherman of Greek mythology. The majority of commentators explain that through the Glaucus allusion Dante describes his own deification. However, Steven Botterill has argued persuasively that rather than deification, this experience corresponded to the medieval idea of excessus, which was a preparatory transformation. This being the case, Dante could not have been deified until the last canto of Paradiso. Evidence of this is that Dante described his final experience in much the same way that Bernard of Clairvaux described the experience of deification and, significantly, Bernard was his companion when Dante underwent this experience. Following this interpretation, the experience described in the Glaucus allusion becomes, therefore, a preparation for Dante’s deification, and not the deification itself. Significantly, just prior to the transformation described in the Glaucus allusion Dante had been purified in Purgatory. Thus Dante underwent a three-part process of purification, transformation, and deification. When interpreted this way the similarity between his experience and the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent is obvious and suggests historical dependence.

In investigating the way in which Dante may have become aware of this

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6. Botterill, Dante and the Mystical Tradition (see note 5).
pattern I begin with Bernard. As mentioned above, Dante describes his final experience in terms of a Bernardine deification, but while Bernard was an eloquent expositor of the ideas of ascent and deification, he was not their originator. Scholars have demonstrated his dependence on the writings of Maximus Confessor and possibly Dionysius in the translations by Eriugena. Maximus was the principal interpreter of Dionysius, who had in turn adapted the Neoplatonic ideas of ascent to a Christian framework. From Dante to Dionysius the chain is very clear and unambiguous, with each author being a seminal figure in the history of ascent and each one being directly dependent on the writings of his predecessor; however when we reach the Neoplatonists the situation is not so simple. Neoplatonism was a large and diffuse school of philosophical thought and, rather than attempting to provide a history of the development of ascent within it, I content myself with discussing the doctrine as outlined by its founder Plotinus. This provides a sufficient foundation for recognizing the principal steps of the Neoplatonic ascent in later authors without tracing its development through subsequent Neoplatonists such as Iamblicus and Proclus. I also omit an account of the doctrine from Plato to Plotinus and limit myself to examining those two key figures in the Greek philosophical tradition before moving to the Christian reception of the doctrine.

PLATO AND “THE LADDER OF LOVE”: ASCENT THROUGH THE CHANNELING OF DESIRE IN THE SYMPOSIUM

The desire for union with God did not begin in Greece with Plato. Festugiere has argued that it can be traced back at least to Heraclitus and the tragedians, and that it has its roots in the native Greek pessimism, which often led to a desire to escape this world. The remedy for this dissatisfaction with the world was a flight which would make one like the gods who lived in eternal bliss.

7. Another well known example is Heraclitus, who, like Plato, was an aristocrat who withdrew from public life and took refuge in philosophy. He first went to the sanctuary of Artemis and later to the mountains above Ephesus where he lived as a hermit. It was there that he developed his philosophy which explained how chaos was governed ultimately by God. Andre-Jean Festugiere, Personal Religion Among the Greeks (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), 34. See Festugiere for a justification of the term God in this context.
Since the earth is bad why not leave it? Why not fly to the place where the gods dwell, share their life and be happy like them? That is the original sense of this φυγή or flight to the gods, of this ὀμοίωσις or assimilation to the gods. It is a desire of escape, it is the homesickness for heaven, it is the aspiration to lose oneself, to pass from this world, into the unsounded depths of divine peace.8

Plato himself is an example of this withdrawal from the world. Born an aristocrat, he eventually gave up all public life and devoted himself to the consolations of philosophy. His well known passage in The Republic asserting that “when the affairs of his country become too corrupt[ed]” the “wise man” will prefer “the hidden life, the life in retreat,” is a personal one.9

When Plato develops his philosophy of ascent to heaven “the formula takes on a moral ring . . . But this is, as is so often the case with Plato, a transposition; Plato shifts to the plane of philosophy a preëxistent tendency which was not essentially an ethical principle. It was much more a fundamental aspiration of the human spirit.”10 While Plato, to a large degree, simply adapted to his own philosophy certain concepts that were already current in his time, they would become very influential in the form in which he cast them.

Plato’s most complete discussion of love and ascent takes place in his Symposium, a dialogue that takes place at a symposium, or after-dinner party, in which Socrates and other guests offer eulogies to love. The earlier discourses at the symposium set the stage for, and prefigure Socrates’s fuller account of love which he claims to have learned from a wise woman named Diotima. The first part of Socrates’s discussion concerns what Diotima terms the “Lesser Mysteries.” The earlier eulogies have concerned themselves principally with homosexual love and its justifications; however, in discussing the lesser mysteries Diotima conceives of love as desire of the good or beautiful and describes

8. Ibid., 21.
9. Ibid., 39.
10. Ibid., 20. More specifically this tendency contributed to the popularity of cults such as the Orphics and Pythagoreans which would greatly influence the way in which Plato conceived of the ideas of ascent and union with God. See Walter Will, “Orpheus and the Greek Spirit” in The Mysteries, ed. Joseph Campbell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 64–92, esp. 87–92.
its purpose as being the engendering of progeny, whether physical or intellectual. Diotima considers homosexual love as superior to heterosexual love because in its highest form it gives birth to what she calls “beautiful discourses,”\textsuperscript{11} which include laws, institutions, poetry, etc., which are more eternal than physical offspring.

The “Higher Mysteries,” however, concern the transformation of love from earthly desire to something very much more elevated. In discussing these mysteries, Diotima builds on her previous definition of love as desire of the beautiful or good, but now describes the process by which love can be channeled, not only to beget beautiful discourses, but to lead the lover to behold the pure form of beauty itself. The emphasis from this point forward will be on practice rather than doctrine, on the channeling of love which will lead the philosopher to an actual encounter with absolute beauty. This process is a mystery, therefore the primary goal is not that of understanding but of achieving an experience which will, of itself, bring understanding.\textsuperscript{12} It is an ascent to the realm of the ideas achieved by liberating the soul from its attachment to physical things, through the reeducation of its faculty of love.

Diotima compares this ascent of love to climbing a ladder, the first step of


\textsuperscript{12} In discussing the mysteries Aristotle says that the purpose is not to learn but to experience, to be put in a certain frame of mind if one can be.
which is the loving of a beautiful body. 13 It is necessary for him 14 who proceeds rightly to this thing to begin while still young by going to beautiful bodies; and first, if his guide guides rightly, to love one single body and beget there beautiful discourses.” 15 Elsewhere, Plato emphasizes the fact that the sight of this “god-like face or bodily form” causes “a shuddering and a measure of . . . awe.” 16 This then must give birth to beautiful discourses.

The second step is “to recognize that the beauty on any body whatever is akin to that on any other body, and if it is necessary to pursue the beautiful as it attaches to form, it is quite unreasonable to believe that the beauty on all bodies is not one and the same. Realizing this, he is constituted lover of all beautiful bodies and brings his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or no importance.” 17

The difficulty of the process of ascent is implied because here the lover is placed in a position where, having been attached to the beauty of one body, he is forced by logical argument to love all physical beauty wherever it is found, thereby breaking the hold that the love of one particular body has on him. By achieving this, the lover has made the first step towards the ability to appreciate beauty in all of its manifestations. 18

Next the neophyte “must come to believe that beauty in souls is more to be valued than that in the body.” He must then seek the “sorts of discourses that will make the young better, in order that he may be constrained in turn to contemplate what is beautiful in practices and laws and to see that it is in itself

13. Plato, Symposium, 211c. Diotima describes it twice, first in detail and then in summary. The last three steps are the same in both descriptions, but the first steps don’t seem to match exactly. However, the discrepancies are minor and will be noted in the footnotes.

14. The scheme as it is presented here seems to be applicable only to men.

15. Plato, Symposium, 210a.


17. Plato, Symposium, 210b.

18. In Diotima’s summation the second step is the love of two bodies and the third is the love of all beautiful bodies. This sequence is perhaps taken for granted in this account.
all akin to itself, in order that he may believe bodily beauty a small thing.”¹⁹ The first part of this step is the appreciation of beauty in souls over that of bodies. Allen points out that for Diotima the distinction between two types of beauty is a difference of kind and not of degree. No matter how beautiful a body may be, it cannot compare to any degree of beauty in a soul.

When the lover comes to love the beauty of his beloved’s soul he wants to improve it, therefore he seeks to create discourses on laws and practices which opens his mind to the beauty they have in and of themselves. The appreciation of laws and practices prepares one for the next step, which is the study of the “various branches of knowledge, in order that he may see their beauty too.”²⁰

At this point the lover has progressed from loving one individual body to loving beauty in its multitude of manifestations. He “no longer delight[s] like a slave . . . in the beauty of one single thing . . . but rather, having been turned toward the multitudinous ocean of the beautiful and contemplating it, he begets many beautiful and imposing discourses and thoughts in ungrudging love of wisdom.” Having gone from the one to the many he is now prepared to apprehend the “certain kind of knowledge which is one.”

At this point the philosopher has done everything possible and has finished his preparation for the vision of the actual form of beauty itself, which is the goal of the entire process. It is while one is contemplating (θεώρον) this vast “sea of beauty” that the pure form of Beauty is revealed. In Diotima’s words, “suddenly, in an instant . . . there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for.” The way that Plato describes this final revelation seems to emphasize that, in spite of the fact that one must struggle to purify one’s passions and prepare oneself mentally for this vision, one cannot achieve the vision through one’s own efforts. Instead, all of the preceding work seems to be only a means by which one opens one’s soul to receive what could be called divine grace.²¹

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¹⁹. Plato, Symposium, 210b–c.
²⁰. Ibid., 210d.
²¹. At this point Diotima describes the vision of beauty itself and in so doing gives an excellent
This is the end of all that has gone before: “when someone, ascending from things here . . . begins clearly to see that, the Beautiful, he would pretty well touch the end. . . . It is there if anywhere that human life is to be lived: in contemplating the Beautiful itself.”\(^\text{22}\) Not only does he see what true beauty is, but by touching it he begets true virtue, and “in begetting true virtue and nurturing it, it is given to him to become dear to god, and if any other among men is immortal, he is too.”\(^\text{23}\) In Greek thought becoming immortal can be considered equivalent to deification,\(^\text{24}\) and, while Diotima does not commit herself, she leaves open the possibility of the initiate becoming divine. This idea will be very important for later writers.

This entire process is conceived of in terms of an *askesis* (ασκήσις) or conscious discipline, a purging of the passions (as indicated by the statement “bringing his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or no importance”) in which one passes through various levels of desire and knowledge. This progression requires the initiate at each stage to forsake his or her desire for things of the lower order, until he or she reaches the “one single form of knowledge.” This progression implies a form of ascent, which is made explicit when Diotima uses the metaphor “mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung . . . until [one] comes to know what beauty is.”\(^\text{25}\) McGinn

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\(\text{22.}\) Here Diotima purposefully juxtaposes sight and touch. Allen points out that the reference to the sudden revelation of the Form of Beauty is analogous to the revelation of the sacred object in the mysteries, and Festugiere has alluded to the similarity between Diotima’s reference to “touching” and the rite of the mysteries which consists in grasping a holy object. The exact correlation between Diotima’s system and the mysteries seems to have been overlooked by both. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the penultimate experience was the “revelation” of a stalk of wheat which was then followed by the “touching” of the effigy of a womb. For a brief description of the mysteries see Wili, “Orphic Mysteries,” in *The Mysteries*, 81–82. Also, see note 25 below.

\(\text{23.}\) Plato, *Symposium*, 211d, 212a.

\(\text{24.}\) Festugiere, *Personal Religion*, 32.

\(\text{25.}\) Plato, *Symposium*, 211c. This passage is striking in its use of ascent language and serves as an illustration of the indebtedness of Plato’s thought to traditional conceptions. The ladder is a widespread image of heavenly ascent, the most famous of which is that seen by Jacob in the book of Genesis. The ladder would continue to symbolize ascent throughout the Middle Ages, John Climacus’s *Scala Coeli*, being one of the most representative texts. In Dante’s heaven the mystics
nicely summarizes Plato's views on ascent and deification:

Plato views the true human subject, or soul, as a searcher always restless\textsuperscript{26} short of permanent possession of the Absolute Good which beatifies. Such possession is achieved through \textit{θεώρια}, or contemplation, which is the fruit of an ascending purification (\textit{katharsis}, \textit{askesis}) of both love and knowledge and which reaches its goal when \textit{νοῦς}, the divine element in the soul, is assimilated to its supernal source.\textsuperscript{27}

It is important to note the various aspects of the quest: purification, contemplation, and assimilation to the ultimate good. There is some debate about the extent to which Plato conceives of this as solely a mental process or whether it is primarily a mystical experience.\textsuperscript{28} However, I think it is a mistake to separate

\begin{itemize}
\item (contemplatives) are located in the heaven of Saturn, the planetary sphere closest to the Empyrean, which has as its symbol a ladder upon which they are seen ascending. Dante, \textit{Paradiso}, 33.28.
\item Compare Dante's use of the word “vago” to describe someone filled with restless desire. See note 98 below.
\item McGinn, \textit{Foundations of Mysticism}, 25
\item For example, R.E. Allen argues that ratiocination is, for Plato's Socrates, a central part of contemplation. As evidence he adduces Alcibiades's description of Socrates's contemplation at Potidea being an inquiry into the answer of a problem for the space of a whole day. “If contemplation is allied to intellectual intuition . . . it also involved hard thought . . . [the] state of mind is not prayer but explicitly contrasted to prayer, nor is it trance-like, for the verbs used to describe it imply ratiocination.” This is all true but it ignores the fact that Socrates endorses Diotima's “mysteries” which lead to what can only be described as a mystic revelation. In trying to go around this, Allen emphasizes secrecy in the mysteries to an exaggerated degree: “[the word mystic] derives from \textit{muo}, to shut the mouth, to shut the eyes—the Indo-European root occurs in English \textit{mouse}. Slang, as often, preserves an archaic root in the expression ‘to keep mum’ that is, to keep one's mouth shut, and in the pleasant oxymoron ‘mum's the word.’ Mysticism suggests secret doctrines, that is, doctrines that ought not or cannot be communicated to others. The speech of Diotima, on the contrary, is born not of secrecy but of the intent to communicate, and contemplation involves intellectual apprehension of a first principle that is to be explanatory of the structure of the world; it is, that is to say, inherently rational.” R.E. Allen, “Comment,” in Plato, \textit{The Symposium}, trans. with commentary by R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 86. Allen is relying too heavily on etymology. His statement that secret doctrines cannot be communicated is itself oxymoronic since a doctrine is something taught. The mysteries were kept secret from the uninitiated, but not from the initiates. Socrates seems to be portrayed as one who was initiated into these mysteries, and it is indisputable that Diotima treats this as a mystery. The fact that Socrates—and Plato—speak of these things openly does not affect their purported origin. Allen is right in emphasizing the rational nature of the ascent, but Diotima emphasizes that once one has done the difficult mental work, which leads the mind to its summit, one “suddenly catches sight” of the pure form of beauty. Allen points out that the reference to the sudden revelation of the Form of Beauty is analogous to the revelation of the sacred object in the mysteries, and Festugiere has alluded to the similarity between Diotima's reference to “touching” and the rite of the mysteries which consists in grasping a holy object. The exact correlation between Diotima's system and the mysteries seems to have been overlooked by both. In the Eleusinian Mysteries the penultimate experience was the” revelation”
the two completely; one of Plato’s important contributions may be his emphasis on how rational thought can prepare the mind for mystical experience. Hence his emphasis on an askesis, which leads the mind to higher levels of knowledge and understanding until a revelation is received.\textsuperscript{29}

With Plato, all of the fundamental elements for Dante’s ascent are in place. Like Plato, Dante’s passions will be purified and drawn away from earthly things. This is the theme of Purgatorio. At the end of that experience he contemplates the face of Beatrice from which sunlight is streaming he is transformed and transported into Paradise. Once there he continues to ascend until he achieves the ultimate mystical experience: union with God.

**PLOTINUS AND THE NEOPLATONIC CONCEPT OF ASCEND**

The centuries following Plato’s death would see continuous interpretation and reformulation of his ideas, but the most significant interpreter of Platonism would be Plotinus.\textsuperscript{30} He was born in Egypt in 205 CE and died in 270. The preceding century had been, for those in the Roman Empire, an enlightened one with wise rulers, a stable government, and a prosperous economy.\textsuperscript{31} However, beginning with the ascension of Commodus in the year 180, all that changed and Plotinus would live his entire life through the bleakest period of the Empire. The unstable and difficult conditions led many people to take refuge in philosophy, which was, at that time, the educated person’s religion. A.H. Armstrong writes: “Philosophy was for the men of his period both a full-time professional occupation and a religious occupation demanding withdrawal from the world.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} The allegory of the cave is also an example of an ascent, calling for transcending the realm of “shadows” and ascending to the “intelligible region”, through “divine contemplations” by means of the “eye of the soul.” Plato, Republic, 517b, 517d.

\textsuperscript{30} It should be remembered that Plotinus considered himself a Platonist. It is unlikely that he intended to change Plato’s philosophical system in any significant way. The term “Neoplatonism” would not be coined until the nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{31} See the first three chapters in Edward Gibbon, The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (New York: Macmillan Company, 1914).

\textsuperscript{32} “ . . . as we can see from the case of the senator Rogantius, for whom conversion to philosophy
Festugiere argues that one cannot separate this widespread desire to flee the world from the emphasis it receives in Plotinus’s writings.\textsuperscript{33}

Plotinus withdrew from public life and dedicated himself to explicating Plato’s doctrines. It is important to note that Plotinus would not have seen himself as an innovator developing a new philosophical system. It is more likely he would have viewed his enterprise as the systematization of elements in Plato’s doctrine that were not originally explicit. His goal, to a certain extent, was to meld the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle. One of the results of Plotinus’s systematization is the development of three hypostases: the One, which is the First Cause and absolutely simple; Intellect, which corresponds to Plato’s realm of Ideas; and the Soul, which links matter to intellect. Plotinus’s conception of the return of the soul, which is directly inspired by the dialogues of Plato, especially the \textit{Symposium}, is developed in this three part hierarchy. This format was taken up and developed further by succeeding philosophers, especially Proclus, who developed more triadic levels; but whether in the Plotinian scheme or otherwise, this triadic form will be of lasting importance.

\textbf{PLOTINUS’S HIERARCHY}

One of the underlying problems that Plotinus grapples with is the relationship between “the one and the many. According to Plotinus, the universe originated with “the One,” which is the “transcendent” cause of everything, above and before all else. It is this undifferentiated One that causes all individual entities to exist. In his own words, “It is by the One that all Beings are Beings. . . . For what could exist if it was not one? If beings are deprived of what we call unity they do not exist.”\textsuperscript{34}

The One “overflows” and creates the hypostasis or realm of intellect (\textit{νους}), in which are located the ideas or, as Plotinus prefers, the rational principles

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\item Festugiere, \textit{Personal Religion}, 64–65.
\end{enumerate}
which give both form and intelligence to all life. Intellect, then, is the first level of differentiation; in it exist diverse forms, but it should be noted that Plotinus is emphatic that although it contains many forms, Intellect itself is one. (This interrelationship of one and many persists on all levels of Plotinus’s thought.)

The Intellect in turn gives existence to the Soul. In the words of Andrew Smith, “Soul is the entity by means of which the incorporeal comes into effective contact with the corporeal and which lies, as it were, on the borderline of the transcendent and physical universe. It is, in Plotinus’ own words, ‘amphibious.’” The Soul has two purposes, which are to quicken corporeal things (humans, animals, and plants) and to link them to the Divine Mind (νους). Paradoxically, the soul performs the latter function best when it withdraws from the body and into itself in contemplation (theoria), thereby taking the individual soul back to higher realms. This contemplation is not inevitable. When the soul descends into a body, it is distracted by material things and forgets its divine origin, and most individuals never regain this divine state. The goal of the true philosopher is to discipline himself in the practice of contemplation in order to make this ascent back to his divine origin.

THE RETURN OF THE SOUL

As we have seen, Plotinus describes the ascent as a return of the individual soul to the One from whence it came, or in his well-known phrase, “the flight of the alone to the Alone.” Plotinus believes that the individual soul itself is divine, but when entangled with the material world its ability to exercise its divine nature is impeded and can only be regained by the process of ascent. In his own words, “For he himself is the god who came thence, and his own real nature, if he becomes what he was when he came, is there.” For Plotinus, deification consists

35. Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 40.
36. “What is it then that has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from his higher world and altogether belong to it?” Plotinus, *Enneads*, 5.1.1 in Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 5.
38. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.2.6,8ff, in Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 62.
in regaining the ability to function on a purely intellectual level. In order to do so, one must free the intellect from its entanglement in material attractions. The motive force behind the ascent is desire, and he is emphatic that the ability of the soul to return to the Good or the One is derived from the reality that desire is innate to the soul. These concepts are expressed eloquently in these words:

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent.  

This return ascent is part of a larger cosmological process in which emanations flow outward from the One and become Intellect, which in turn overflows and creates Being. This then overflows, becoming the World Soul, of which individual souls are composed. These souls are embodied in physical material, but yearn to return to their origin. The desire to return is due to the constant emanations coming from the One as illustrated in the following statement:

Every one of those beings exists for itself but becomes an object of desire by the colour cast upon it from the Good, source of those graces and of the love they evoke. The soul taking that outflow from the divine is stirred; seized with a Bacchic passion, goaded by these goads, it becomes Love . . . its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love . . . there is some glow of the light of the Good and this illumination awakens and lifts the soul.

There are two fundamental points to consider in this passage. The first is the way in which grace is fundamental to Plotinus’s philosophy. Living things exist in and of themselves but they become objects of love because of the grace

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39. Plotinus, *Enneads*, 1.6.7, in Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 67–68. The idea of putting on evils as one descends through the heavens was, perhaps, the root of the idea of the seven cardinal sins. Originally these would have been acquired in one’s passage to earth through the seven heavens and then shed as one returned. See H.J. Rose, *Ancient Roman Religion* (London: Hutchinson and Company, 1948), 131. Dante goes through an equivalent of the latter part of this process as he ascends through Purgatory shedding a ‘p’ (for peccatum, or sin) at each of its seven levels.

40. Smith, *Philosophy of Late Antiquity*, 63.

that flows into them from the One. When the soul feels intense love for things “it is not because they are what they are, but because they have taken on something from above, in addition to what they are by themselves.”42 This grace is almost inseparable from the love that it inspires, indeed, Hadot goes so far as to equate the two: “There is in love a ‘something more,’ something unjustified; and that which, in objects, corresponds to this ‘something more’ is grace, or life in its deepest mystery . . . Life and grace . . . are ‘something more,’ and this gratuitous surplus is everything. In it, Plotinus recognizes the ‘trace of the Good.’”43 This grace illuminates the objects of the soul’s desire, leading the philosopher from the mundane up through the forms of intellect until he or she44 reaches the absolute Good.

The second point is that, through this outpouring of grace, the very nature of the soul is changed and it becomes Love itself. Being love, it naturally ascends upward to the source from which all love comes.

Desire is what leads the soul upwards, but before that can happen it must be redirected away from physical objects and toward divine ones. A prerequisite to this ascent is the exercise of the so-called “political” virtues which regulate how one acts in society. Nevertheless, Plotinus takes these somewhat for granted, focusing instead on the ability of virtues to turn the soul away from its material attachments or affections.45 In this context he is drawing on the Platonic teaching that “the true moral ideal . . . is really a kind of purgation . . . and wisdom itself is a kind of purification.”46 This moral discipline constitutes the beginning of a three-step process of “stripping off what we put on in our descent.” Then,

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43. Hadot, Simplicity of Vision, 50.
44. Neoplatonism was very egalitarian as concerned the sexes, and apparently this went back to Plotinus himself. Ibid., 54. On a related note, Plotinus was horrified by “Greek love” and commissioned his student, Porphyry, to write a rebuttal to the idea that in order to acquire virtue a student should submit to the amorous advances of his master. Ibid., 53.
45. Hadot distinguishes these two forms as “social” and “purificatory” virtues. Hadot, Simplicity of Vision, 68.
46. Plato, Phaedo, 69c.
as Smith puts it, follows the “more positively inclined stage of reasoning where there is the first recognition of the higher realm, and last the so-called intellectual virtues representing our activity at the level of intellect.”

Plotinus emphasizes the ability of an individual to undergo this process of purification and ascent—this is something that one must do. However, while one is at the stage of pure intellect, he or she can only wait patiently for the final union with the One, which cannot be forced. Here again is this juxtaposition of “works” and “grace.” One is responsible for opening oneself up to the divine grace by “stripp[ing] off what we put on in our descent,” and if one is willing to undergo this discipline, then grace can lead one from this material world through the level of Intellect and back to the One. This final union with the One is described by Porphry in the following words:

He [Plotinus] was one himself then, with no distinction in him either in relation to himself or anything else; for there was no movement in him, he had no motion, no desire for anything else when he made the ascent, no reason or thought; his own self was not there for him, if we should say even this.

Plotinus makes two important contributions to the doctrine of ascent. First, the development of the tripartite hypostases will be very influential in shaping the conception of ascent as a three step process. Second, Plotinus makes love a cosmological force which exists independent of humanity. This love, which is also called “the light of the Good,” descends from above and inspires its objects to return to it. It is this idea that underlies Dante’s description of his first transformation which occurs when light from the sun is channeled through

47. Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 63.
48. Undoubtedly, Plotinus is much more mystical than Plato. Although he views the culmination of the ascent as the exercise of intellect on the level of intellect the process of ascent is a way of life illuminated by the grace which emanates from the Good. The purpose of philosophy is to teach one how to live in such a way. This is very different from the intellectual exercise that ascent seems to have been for Plato.
49. As noted above, this seems to be implied in Plato, but Plotinus emphasized it much more.
51. Ibid., 6.9.11, in Smith, *Philosophy in Late Antiquity*, 72. Plotinu’s student, Porphry, records that Plotinus made the ascent four times.
Beatrice into Dante and causes him to ascend into Paradise. And Plotinus’s cosmologizing of love also enables Dante to describe his deification in terms of cosmological love: “as a wheel moves smoothly, free from jars / my will and my desire were turned by love / the love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

**DIONYSIUS AND CHRISTIAN NEOPLATONISM**

In 529 CE, nine hundred years after it was founded by Plato and after years of conflict with the Christians, the Academy at Athens was closed down by the Emperor Justinian. In 532, with a proximity suggesting more than just coincidence, the writings of Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite (Dionysius) were first quoted. Long believed to have been the Dionysius mentioned in the New Testament, he is now dated to approximately the same period in which his writings first appeared. These writings\(^\text{53}\) expound aspects of Christian belief in a Neoplatonic framework. As Paul Rorem puts it, “consciously or not, the first champions of these writings preserved much of the banished Neoplatonism within a Christian system which then influenced centuries of theology and philosophy.”\(^\text{54}\)

Of course Dionysius was not the first one to mix Greek philosophy with Christian thought. Platonism had long been attractive to Christians for various reasons: “the doctrine of a maker of the universe; of a provident God; of the existence of an intelligible and divine world of which the sensible world is only an image; of the spirituality of the soul and its superiority over the body,” to mention only a few.\(^\text{55}\) Three centuries before Dionysius, Origen expressed many


\(^{53}\) Hereafter I will use Dionysius.

\(^{54}\) Paul Rorem, “The Uplifting Spirituality of Pseudo-Dionysius,” in *Christian Spirituality: Origins to the Twelfth Century*, ed. Bernard McGinn, John Meyendorff, in collaboration with Jean Ledercq (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1985), 133. Scholars have indicated that Dionysius was of Syrian origin, and after the Academy was closed the philosophers fled eastward, therefore he may have been a Christian who became exposed to these ideas in Syria by pagans who were moving out of the Empire.

\(^{55}\) Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), 93. Augustine was the most influential figure in the West. And while he incorporated Neoplatonism into a systematic Christian theology his influence would be two-edged. “Indeed, it may be that the apparently definitive nature of Augustine’s formulations inhibited, or at least retarded, further inquiry into deification in the Western Church, and helps to explain why it never became as
of the same ideas that Plotinus did and was later condemned for them. This condemnation was a reflection of the opposition to Neoplatonic thought that also manifested itself in the closing of the Academy. Ironically, it was at the same time that Dionysius’s writings, containing the same Neoplatonic influence and many of the same ideas, began to circulate. They escaped censure because Dionysius was a supposed convert of the Apostle Paul. That his writings show marked aspects of Neoplatonism should be apparent in the following citation:

> Inspired by the Father, each procession of the Light spreads itself generously toward us, and, in its power to unify, it stirs us by lifting us up. It returns us back to the oneness and deifying simplicity of the Father who gathers us in.\(^{56}\)

Seen in the light of the above discussion this quote should demonstrate the extent to which Dionysius depended on the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent and deification. It is not only the same pattern but its description is similar. The central a doctrine there as it did in the East. After Augustine, most Latin writers restate or rework his version of deification theology, rather than extending its boundaries significantly.” Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 205. This, in addition to the fact that he vigorously opposed the Platonic pattern of ascent, is the reason why he is not treated in this study.

image of light proceeding from God and lifting one up to reunion with him should be very familiar by now as should be the fact that this union deifies. Even the noun “simplicity” used in conjunction with the Father is evidence of his reliance on the Neoplatonic dogma that the One is wholly itself without any admixture.57

It follows then that, for Dionysius, deification is the result of a process in which one divests oneself of material conceptions that impede one from communing with God on a completely simple level—in other words, on a level that is purely spiritual, surpassing even thought itself. The traditional text justifying the Christian concept is 2 Peter 1:4, which states that the believers are “partakers of the divine nature.” This is the Christian definition of deification. Dionysius’s whole doctrine focuses on the way one can overcome one’s human nature and participate in God’s nature.

After this brief description of Neoplatonic ascent, Dionysius introduces a concept that illustrates the extent to which he is willing to adapt the Neoplatonic ideas to the needs of a Christian community:

However, this divine ray can enlighten us only by being upliftingly concealed in a variety of sacred veils which the providence of the Father adapts to our nature as human beings.58

These sacred veils, in which are hidden the divine rays, are for Dionysius the symbols found in the scriptures, liturgy and sacraments. In his system, symbolism constitutes the first part of the heavenly ascent. Symbols lead one into the realm of the intellect: to understand them, it is necessary to transcend through interpretation the meaning associated with the material world represented by the crude symbol and enter the world of the intellect where abstract ideas exist.

It is significant that Dionysius states that it is the Father who created these symbols, adapting them to human nature. One remembers that, in the Sympo-

57. Simple being the opposite of compound in Aristotle’s philosophy.
Plato describes the ascent as an initiation done under the instruction of a spiritual guide, and for the pagan in general, ascent and deification are achieved by the mastery of certain techniques, which by their very nature limit their acquisition to the few. Instead of this esoterism, Dionysius shows how, through God’s grace, the ascent is symbolized throughout the church (the sacred veils) and in this symbolism is evidence of God’s concern for his children.

59. The idea of a spiritual guide was banished with the church’s victory over the Gnostics. From then on it declared that salvation was to be found in the body of the church and not through hidden knowledge or techniques passed on from master to disciple.

60. A brief note on grace is, perhaps, appropriate. The modern Catholic Church has, in the main, adopted the Protestant view of grace, but that this was not always the case is evidenced by the fact that one of Luther’s principal gripes was the selling of indulgences. This rested upon a semi-Pelagian doctrine in which a person could acquire more merit than was needed for salvation and could then confer that on whomever he or she wished. The Church could also mediate that merit and sell it in the form of indulgences. This is contrary to the modern view that God’s grace is not only sufficient for salvation but is also the only contributing factor. Originally, the early church tended to see the gospel as a “new law” in spite of Paul’s protests (although he was not as adamant as Luther declared—cf. Phillipians 2:12 (King James Version): “work out your salvation with fear and trembling”) and this would be the case until the church accepted Augustine’s doctrine of human worthlessness and absolute need for grace in order to be saved, which he developed in his fight against Pelagius. After Augustine the medieval Church “saw a widespread inclination to semi-Pelagianism. This did not deny the importance of grace but also stressed the significance of human cooperation with it.” The medieval structure of sacraments, which Dionysius influenced, was an example of that inclination. See The Encyclopedia of Christianity, 3rd ed., ed. John Bowden (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), s.v. “Grace,” (by Alasdair Heron). The passage in Phillipians 2 should be quoted in full as it demonstrates the interconnectedness between grace and the need to act: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

61. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 184. It should be noted that Dionysius was not the first to describe the relationship of ascent and sacrament; however, he developed it to a greater degree than anyone had before him. Origen and Evagrius are his two notable predecessors. The following quotation provides an example of one class of Dionysius’s “holy veils”—the sacraments—and illustrates the way in which the Neoplatonic ascent was clothed in sacramental language: “The most holy ministration, then, of the Mystic Rites has, as first Godlike power, the holy cleansing of the uninitiated; and as middle, the enlightening instruction of the purified; and as last, and summary of the former, the perfecting of those instructed.” Pseudo-Dionysius, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 5.1.3, in The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, vol. 2, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1899), 125, http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/dio/dio63.htm.

Here it is easy to recognize the Neoplatonic elements of this process of ascent, i.e., purification, illumination, and contemplation. These abstract concepts are shown symbolically through physical ministrations, and, as symbols, help the Christian in his return to God. Here Dionysius explains the meaning of the rites by saying: “Let, then, the threefold power of the holy service of the Mystic Rites be exalted, since the Birth in God is exhibited in the Oracles as a purification and enlightening illumination, and the Rite of the Synaxis and the Muron, as a perfecting knowledge and science of the works of God, through which the unifying elevation to the Godhead and most blessed communion is reverently perfected.” Pseudo-Dionysius, The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, 5.1.3, in The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite, vol. 2, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker, 1899), 126, http://www.
After the first step, which is symbolism, follows an important dialectic that contrasts the ability to describe God with his ultimate transcendence of all categories. This dialectic is summarized in the following:

\[
\text{[God] possesses all the positive attributes of the universe (being the Universal Cause) yet, in a more strict sense, it does not possess them, since it transcends them all; wherefore there is no contradiction between the affirmations and the negations, inasmuch as it infinitely precedes all conceptions of deprivation, being beyond all positive and negative distinctions.}^{62}
\]

This statement also illustrates the nature of the positive and negative statements: the positive statements concern God’s nature as cause of all things in creation (and therefore present in them) and the negative statements concern his transcendence of all existence. Dionysius illustrates how the positive or catastrophic statements should be understood in his analysis of the “divine names” in a work of the same title. In this treatise, he explains what the various names and attributes of God (good, angry, merciful, etc.) found in the scriptures actually mean. In the third step, the initiate passes beyond what can be said of God, sheds these material conceptions, and comes to understand the way in which God transcends all categories. This is described in Dionysius’s exhortation:

\[
\text{Let this be my prayer; but do, dear Timothy, in the diligent exercise of mystical contemplation, leave behind the senses and the operations of the intellect, and all things sensible and intellectual, and all things in the world of being and nonbeing, that you may arise by unknowing towards the union, as far as is attainable, with it that transcends all being and all knowledge. For by the unceasing and absolute renunciation of yourself and of all things you may be borne on high, through pure and entire }
\]

sacred-texts.com/chr/dio/dio63.htm.

The “Birth in God” (baptism) is a purification, which, of course, is the first step in the ascent for Plotinus, and Dionysius specifies that it is also the beginning of illumination. This illumination is then transformed into perfect knowledge through the Synaxis (Eucharist) and this knowledge corresponds to Plotinus’s realm of the intellect. Union with God is again the third step for both mystics which is “reverently perfected” in the Muron (anointing).

self-abnegation, into the superessential Radiance of the Divine Darkness.\(^6\)

Various aspects of Dionysius’s thought deserve comment. First, he shows a marked departure from the earlier philosophers in his emphasis on the non-intellectual nature of the ascent. Whereas Plotinus conceives of union as the perfect exercise of intellect on the level of intellect, for Dionysius it requires the active excision of intellectual processes. In the *Enneads*, Plotinus asserts that the mystic must be a spiritual sculptor who carves away all material things from oneself, leaving only the divine soul that is then able to unite with God. Dionysius uses the same metaphor in his *Mystical Theology* but changes it to say that one must actively carve away all of one’s materialistic conceptions of God leaving only a transcendent nothing.\(^4\)

Negative theology had been present in Christian thought for centuries (going back at least to Origen) but the positive aspect had typically been emphasized.\(^5\) Dionysius is unique because he emphasized the apophatic nature of God to such a degree that it became a central aspect of the mystical experience. In fact, Dionysius is so consistent in his apophaticism that he even negates negation: “the all-perfect and unique Cause of all things transcends all affirmation, and the simple pre-eminence of Its absolute nature is outside of every negation—free from every limitation and beyond them all.”\(^6\)

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63. Ibid., 203, [http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html](http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/MysticalTheology.html).  
64. Ibid. In addition to his emphasis on apophaticism, another example of Dionysius’s departure from the Neoplatonic tradition is his use of the phrase “Radiance of the Divine Darkness” in referring to God, which is not only an example of his preference for apparent paradoxes, but also indicates that he consciously reacted against the Neoplatonists who conceived of God as light.  
66. The extent of his apophaticism is further illustrated in the following quote: “Again, ascending yet higher, we maintain that it is neither soul nor intellect; nor has it imagination, opinion reason or understanding; nor can it be expressed or conceived, since it is neither number nor order; nor greatness nor smallness; nor equality nor inequality; nor similarity nor dissimilarity; neither is it standing, nor moving, nor at rest; neither has it power nor is power, nor is light; neither does it live nor is it life; neither is it essence, nor eternity nor time; nor is it subject to intelligible contact; nor is it science nor truth, nor kingship nor wisdom; neither one nor oneness, nor godhead nor goodness; nor is it spirit according to our understanding, nor filiation, nor paternity; nor anything else known to us or to any other beings of the things that are or the things that are not; neither does anything that is know it as it is; nor does it know existing things according to existing knowledge; neither can the reason attain to it, nor name it, nor know it; neither is it darkness nor light, nor the
Many mystics prior to Dionysius had emphasized the ineffability of the mystical experience (St. Paul and Plotinus are obvious examples), but Dionysius takes it even further and states that union with God goes beyond thought itself:

The higher we soar in contemplation the more limited become our expressions of that which is purely intelligible; even as now, when plunging into the Darkness that is above the intellect, we pass not merely into brevity of speech, but even into absolute silence of thoughts and of words.67

It may seem from the above that Dionysius departs from the tradition that places love or desire as the foundation of ascent; however, for Dionysius love is still its motive power. The difference is that for him, love is purely cosmological. In his system God is love, and because of love he goes out of himself in ecstasy and creates the universe. The ascent is possible because by its very nature the universe and all living things desire to return to God.68 “He is yearning (eros) on the move, simple, self-moved, self-acting, preexistent in the Good, flowing out from the Good unto all that is and returning once again to the Good.”69

Dionysius is a key turning point in the development of the doctrine of ascent. Writing under the pseudonym of a disciple of St. Paul his authority was unassailable. Even though the Neoplatonic doctrines were but thinly covered in a veneer of Christian language, they would be accepted into the mainstream and become fundamental to Eastern Orthodoxy and eventually influence the

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68. Plato, although holding that love was not an attribute of the gods, opened the way for this doctrine when he taught that eros is the desire to create beauty. McGinn, Foundations of Mysticism, 166.
69. Pseudo-Dionysius, The Divine Names, 4.14 (712c), in Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works, trans. Colm Luibheid with Paul Rorem (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 82–83 (emphasis added). In this connection it is interesting to note that the word grace is related to the Sanskrit har-jami, which means love, or desire. From the same word comes the Greek charis, gift or endowment. See Encyclopedia of Christianity, 3rd ed., s.v. “Grace” (see note 60).
West as well. His emphasis on apophaticism, and the corresponding ineffability of mystical experience would influence later writers in our chain. In fact, Dante will, in both the first and the last cantos of Paradiso, refer to the ineffability of his own experiences.

**MAXIMUS CONFESSOR**

In 451 CE, at Chalcedon (Asia Minor, now Turkey), a council of nearly 600 bishops was convened to draft a statement of faith concerning the nature of Christ. This statement declared that Christ had two natures, one human and one divine, which are “united, unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably.”70 This definition would eventually become widely accepted; however, during the following two centuries it was vigorously opposed by the Monophysites, who declared that Christ had only one nature.

Maximus Confessor was born in Byzantium, ca. 580 CE, in the midst of this theological warfare which was threatening to tear Christendom apart. Although born into the Byzantine aristocracy, he chose the monastic life and became a fierce defender of the definition of Chalcedon, directing many dogmatic treatises against the Monophysites. He was also an important interpreter of Dionysius. These two interests are joined in his description of the three-part ascent to union with God.

The first step in Maximus’s process of ascent is rooted in the *praxis* or ascetic discipline of monastic life, which, for Maximus, has the goal of eradicating the passions. This corresponds to the stage of purification already discussed. He follows the Neoplatonic pattern in deriving the evils of human nature from the perversion of love, and further develops the idea by emphasizing that one’s will is at the very root of the problem. As Elena Vishnevskaya explains, “human will needs to be reoriented towards divine will, for ‘only God is by nature, and only the one who imitates God is good by His will.’”71 This reorientation eradicates

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71. Elena Vishnevskaya, “Divinization and Spiritual Progress in Maximus the Confessor,” in
the passions that Maximus defines “as a movement of the soul contrary to nature, either toward irrational love or senseless hate.”\textsuperscript{72} In order to achieve this passionless state, Maximus advocates apathy (\textit{απαθεία}), “a peaceful state of the soul, in which it becomes resistant to vice.”\textsuperscript{73} In this state, one is prepared to exercise the virtues, especially love, which binds one to God and to one’s fellow beings.\textsuperscript{74} This begins the process of uniting one’s will with God’s through love; upon completion of this process one is deified.

Maximus’s second step is contemplation of the natural world, which reveals the way in which nature is patterned after heavenly archetypes, and sustained by the divine energies that constantly flow down from God.\textsuperscript{75} Vishnevskaya points out, “Maximus’ idea of natural contemplation ‘as an experience of a merely symbolic reflection of the divine realities’ reinforces his stress on apophaticism and betrays an influence of Pseudo-Dionysius.”\textsuperscript{76} This contemplation gives one “a growing nourishment of the intellectual through the sensible and transformation of the sensible into the world of the mind.”\textsuperscript{77} Having achieved knowledge of the divine forms, one is prepared for the vision of the essence of God. Maximus describes this process:

\begin{quote}
The human mind is deemed worthy of the grace of theology, when on the wings of love it has passed beyond all the preceding realities, and being in God it will consider the essence of himself through the Spirit, insofar as it is possible for the human mind.\textsuperscript{78}
\end{quote}

Maximus declares that, in this final state, having seen God’s essence, the saved are “now divinized by love and made like Him by participation in an


72. Ibid.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., 140
75. Ibid., 141
76. Ibid.
77. Ibid., 142
78. Ibid.
indivisible identity to the extent that this is possible.” Elsewhere, he writes, “for what is more desirable to God’s precious one than to be divinized, that is for God to be united to those who have become God and by His goodness to make everything His own?”

A fundamental aspect of Maximus’s doctrine is that deification consists of a union of human and divine in which both substances join without losing their separate nature. The emphasis that he places on this doctrine is the direct result of the theological conflicts of his time. Being a firm defender of orthodoxy, Maximus’s theory of deification was based on the Christology stated in the definition of Chalcedon, which declared that Christ was of two natures. Maximus restates this:

And what could be more amazing than the fact that, being God by nature, and seeing fit to become man by nature, He did not defy the limits of either one of the natures in relation to the other, but instead remained wholly God while becoming wholly human? . . . He remained wholly one amid both, since he preserved both natures and was truly existent in both natures at once.

Maximus was sufficiently perspicacious to realize that if a divine nature and a human nature were unified in the person of Christ, then Christ provided the perfect archetype for human divinization. It had long been declared that Christ put on human nature in order to deify human beings; in the traditional formulation, “God became man so that man could become God,” but Maximus developed the idea further, describing the way in which an individual’s human nature could be joined to God’s nature, with both preserving their separate substances. He used the example of molten iron in a fire that has taken on the characteristics of the fire without changing its essence and summarizes the process:

79. Ibid., 142.
80. Ibid., 144.
82. Athanasius, De Incarnatione, 54.3.
[God] abolishes and dims all their particular relations considered according to each one's nature, but not by dissolving or destroying them or putting an end to their existence. Rather, [he] does so by transcending them and revealing them as the whole reveals its parts.84

For Maximus, this union is achieved through the melding of love and will between God and the individual. As we saw above, love and will cannot be separated because will is at the root of love and through one's will love is purified and returned to its divine state. Vishnevskaya summarizes the importance of the will: “The soul’s going out [ἐκστάση α or ecstasy; Latin excessus] toward the object of its ultimate desire is humanly willed, and the believer’s resolve to abandon the self for the sake of the supra-logical union with God is indispensable for the authentic divine-human reciprocity.”85

Maximus made various important developments in the traditional conception of ascent, among them his restating of the process of ascent and deification in less blatantly Neoplatonic and more traditional Christian language. His emphasis on the dual nature of Christ and the way in which that provides a framework for humanity’s union with God is also a vital contribution. This provides the foundation for the doctrine of deification through the accord of wills, which is the way in which Dante conceives of deification. This will be discussed below. It is not surprising that Maximus’s doctrine of deification would become very influential in the East; what is more remarkable is its subsequent adoption by the West.

THE INTRODUCTION OF EASTERN MYSTICAL THEOLOGY INTO THE WEST

In the latter half of the eighth century and beginning of the ninth, Charlemagne established a tradition of learning in the court of the Holy Roman Empire, which continued to a certain extent with his son, Louis the Pious and grandson, Charles the Bald. Part of this Carolingian Renaissance was due to the monastic learning brought from the British Isles.

85. Ibid.,135.
John Scotus Eriugena was a part of this Carolingian renaissance. At the Carolingian court he translated the Dionysian corpus, which led him to the writings of Maximus, some of which he also translated. This was a pivotal moment because for the first time in centuries the rich tradition of Eastern mystical theology became available to the West. However, while other aspects of Dionysian thought become immediately popular, such as his angelology—Dante, in fact, calls Dionysius the teacher of the angelic ranks—we do not see an increase of interest in ascent and deification theology until these writings reach Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth century.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) decided at an early age to become a monk at the very strict monastery in Citeaux, France. He was soon assigned to open a new monastery at Clairvaux to accommodate the droves of people who were flocking to Citeaux, many of whom had recognized his leadership and devotion and wished to be under his direction. Bernard’s objective was to provide a place where monks could strictly adhere to the Rule of Benedict, a collection of principles and practices which monks were to follow, largely inspired by the holy lives of the Egyptian Desert Fathers, who were known, not only for their remarkable asceticism, but also for the ecstatic mysticism that was associated with it.

The influence of Bernard on the idea of celestial ascent derives from the power with which he framed these ideas in his sermons and letters. He was the first important theologian since John Scotus to draw on the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor. As Gilson wrote, “in his mind the Latin theology of Augustine found itself confronted, for the first time since Erigena, with the Greek theology of . . . Denis. Only instead of being carried away

86. Etienne Gilson, *The Mystical Theology of Saint Bernard*, trans. Alfred Howard Campbell Downes (London: Sheed and Ward, 1940), 18. Gilson points out that it is not absolutely certain that Bernard read Dionysius because he does not use his language or distinctive concepts. However, William of St. Thierry was a close friend of Bernard’s and he did use language and imagery borrowed from Dionysius so it likely that Bernard was familiar with him to some degree. Bernard was very traditional and may have preferred not to use the Neoplatonic vocabulary of Dionysius.

by his discovery, Bernard achieved a synthesis of the two traditions." Maximus in particular provided him with analogies, vocabulary, and to a great degree the conceptual foundations for his doctrine of deification. From him Bernard borrowed the word *excessus* or ecstasy, which is central to his theology. He employs it to describe how the soul changes from its current state of being into one that is surrounded by the love and light of God and is also drawn towards him. This process is treated in chapter 10 of *De Diligendo Deo*, which is the most important of Bernard’s writings on this subject.

In chapter 10, Bernard explains the fourth stage of love, in which one loves oneself only in God. When one reaches that point, he or she is open to the changing power of God’s love:

> When shall my soul, rapt with divine love and altogether self-forgetting, yea, become like a broken vessel, yearn wholly for God, and, joined unto the Lord, be one spirit with Him? . . . I would count him blessed and holy to whom such rapture has been vouchsafed in this mortal life, for even an instant to lose thyself, as if thou wert emptied and lost and swallowed up in God, is no human love; it is celestial.\(^{89}\)

Here he describes the soul as “rapt . . . joined unto the Lord,” and “swallowed up in God.” This is the effect of ecstasy and is the precursor to deification. It is important to note that Bernard indicated this is a process that happens in this life, even if it is only for an instant. Elsewhere he describes this type of experience with the epigram “*Rara hora, parva mora*” meaning it “the moments are rare and quickly pass.” Bernard goes on to clarify exactly how this process comes about and he emphasizes that it comes about through the accord of human and Godly wills:

> [God’s] creatures ought to conform themselves, as much as they can, to His will. In Him should all our affections center, so that

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88. Ibid. Botterill states, “The decisive factor for the development of deification doctrine in general and for Bernard’s understanding of it in particular, was the marriage of the Greek and Latin traditions brought about by John Scotus Erigena’s translations of pseudo-Dionysius and Maximus Confessor.” Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 207.

in all things we should seek only to do His will, not to please ourselves. And real happiness will come, not in gratifying our desires or in gaining transient pleasures, but in accomplishing God’s will for us: even as we pray every day: ‘Thy will be done in earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6.10).  

In this short paragraph Bernard uses the word “will” three times, following the scriptural practice of repetition in order to emphasize to the reader the importance of subjecting one’s will to God. He then describes the effects of such a submission. “O chaste and holy love! O sweet and gracious affection! O pure and cleansed purpose, thoroughly washed and purged from any admixture of selfishness, and sweetened by contact with the divine will!” 

Here Bernard mentions two key aspects: The first is lack of selfishness and the second is contact with the divine will. The prerequisite of selflessness, which is here equated with purity, is characteristic of Bernard’s thought, and it is the purging of selfishness that he terms *excessus*, and this, as we saw above, is the preparation for deification.

To enjoy this feeling is to be deified [*deificari est*]. As a drop of water poured into wine loses itself, and takes the color and savor of wine; or as a bar of iron, heated red-hot, becomes like fire itself, forgetting its own nature; or as the air, radiant with sun-beams, seems not so much to be illuminated as to be light itself; so in the saints all human affections melt away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God.  

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90. Ibid.
91. Ibid.
92. Ibid. The examples of the iron and the air are taken almost verbatim from Maximus’s writings (see Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 210), but the analogy of mixing the wine and the water is Bernard’s addition. It is curious, because, as mentioned in an earlier note, wine was anciently associated with ecstasy and deification, and it was mixed in a *krater*. This would become, in Latin, *cratера* (fem.), then *gradale*, which is the origin of the word *grail* (the chalice in which wine and water were mixed in during the Middle Ages). Kahane and Kahane, *The Krater and the Grail: Hermetic Sources of the Parzival* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985). Bernard was the patron of the Knights Templar, and at the Synod of Troyes (1128) convinced the Pope to grant them a charter. He then wrote the eulogy “In Praise of the New Knighthood.” The Knights Templar were, from very early on, the brotherhood associated with the search for the Holy Grail. (Cf. *templeis*, in Wolfram’s *Parzival*.) Bernard’s allusion to mixing wine and water in conjunction with this background is most likely pure coincidence, and a tenuous coincidence at that, but it is interesting. The mixing of wine and water, and its corresponding association with deification persists in the Mass. The priest places a few drops of water in the wine and prays: *Per huius aquae et vini mysterium eius efficiamur divinitatis*.
Bernard clearly says that this union is deification, which takes place by contacting the divine will. It is important to note that for Bernard the individual does not change his physical nature; it is only the “human affections” which are changed, not the substance. This is emphasized by the examples he gives: the iron, for instance, is indistinguishable from the fire but it is still iron. He goes on to emphasize that humans cannot achieve this through their own efforts, because, even though one may hope for it, “it is in God’s power to give it to whom He wills.” In addition, deification is only temporary in life due to life’s demands and distractions; however, if it were possible to maintain one’s will in harmony with God’s, then one could remain in this state permanently. As we shall see, that is exactly how Dante conceives of the state of the beings in heaven.

DANTE AND THE ASCENT OF LOVE

Dante was born into Florentine aristocracy during a tempestuous time. The political parties in Florence were violently struggling for power and, when the opposing party came to power, Dante was exiled. It was during this exile that he composed his *Commedia*. We do not know exactly how Dante gained familiarity with the vast array of philosophers and theologians whose ideas, as well as their personas, appear in the *Commedia*. Dante tells us that he spent a long period studying philosophy, and in addition to his studies he must have imbibed much of it through the intellectual culture of his time.  

This culture of philosophical and theological discourse coexisted alongside the tradition of courtly love, which also influenced Dante. However, I will attempt to show that it is the Neoplatonic tradition of ascent and deification that provided the fundamental structure for the *Commedia*.

*consortes, qui humanitatis nostrae fieri dignatus est particeps.* (By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.) http://laudatortemporisacti.blogspot.com/2004/10/wine-and-water.htm.

PURIFICATION

The preparation for Dante’s heavenly ascent begins in Purgatory. After surviving his descent into Hell, Dante finds himself at the gate of Purgatory. An angel appears and with his sword engraves the letter “p” (for peccatum, Latin for “sin”) on his forehead seven times and admonishes him to wash the wound from the inside. Purgatory itself consists of seven terraces, each of which is associated with a certain sin and, upon passing through each level, a “p” is removed from his forehead symbolizing his progressive purification. The seven sins are: Pride, Envy, Wrath, Sloth, Avarice, Gluttony, and Lust. On entering the lowest terrace Dante sees a wall of flame through which every soul must pass regardless of the particular sin for which it is in Purgatory. The seventh sin is lust, and here Dante introduces the theme that unites all the seven sins. “Poi fummo dentro al soglio della porta / che ’l malo amor dell’anime disusa, / perche fa parer dritta la via torta, / sonando la senti’ esser richiusa.” It is misused love, Dante declares, which leads the soul to commit sin. The purification of the soul will, therefore, in striking similarity to the Neoplatonic pattern, consist in the redirection and reeducation of love.

94. Dante’s descent into Hell also parallels the Neoplatonic scheme in which the ascent to God is necessitated by the prior descent of the soul into this world. However to include that aspect of the pattern in this paper would swell it even further, straining even the most forgiving reader’s patience.

95. Dante, Purgatorio, 10.1–4. [“Once we had crossed the threshold of the gate / not used by souls whose twisted love / tries to make the crooked way seem straight, / I knew that it had shut by its resounding.”—Ed.]

96. For example, Pride is the inordinate love of honor, Envy is the desire for what others possess, and Wrath is a misdirected love of justice.
Upon passing through the wall of flame and being purified of all sin, Virgil, who has been his guide up to this point, leaves him with the following words: “Tratto t’ho qui con ingegno e con arte; / lo tuo piacere omai prendi per duce. . . . / libero, dritto e sano e tu arbitrio, / e fallo fora non fare a suo senno: / per chi’io te sovra te corono e mitrio.” Dante can now follow where his desire leads because it has been purified and redirected. From this point on, desire will lead him closer and closer to God. In conjunction with this, Dante’s will is now “free, straight, and whole,” and the scene ends with Virgil investing him with a crown and scepter.

Dante now finds himself in the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise in which sin does not exist and desiring to take in all its beauty, he begins to explore. After a while he encounters a procession in which he sees Beatrice, at which point, she becomes his guide. Her first action is to rebuke him:

When I had risen to spirit from my flesh,
As beauty and virtue in me became more rich,
To him I was less dear and less than pleasing . . .
Useless the inspiration I sought and won for him,
As both with dreams and other means,
I called him back, so little did he heed them.

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97. Dante, *Purgatorio*, 27.130–41. [“I have brought you here with intellect and skill. / From now on take your pleasure as your guide. . . . / Your will is free, upright, and sound. / Not to act as it chooses is unworthy: / over yourself I crown and miter you.”—Ed.]

98. It this coronation makes Dante a king and, at least to me, invokes an image of God as king of kings, and, inasmuch as it does so, it points toward the final scene of the *Commedia* in which Dante’s love and will are joined to God, in a final if not explicit coronation.

99. The canto begins “Vago gia di cercar dentro e dintorno la divina foresta.” Sapegno draws attention to the word “vago.” He writes: “Vago: desideroso. Il vocabolo esprime, come gia altrove (Inf. 8.52; 29.3; . . .ecc.) un desiderio intenso, e al tempo stesso indeterminato, non circoscritto in un oggetto preciso e preveduto; sottolinea insomma quello stato di estrema disponibilita e di sospesa aspettazione, che aderisce alla condizione di liberta ricuperrata del Pellegrino, in un’autor stupefatta ed intent, gravid di rivelazione e di prodig.” Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*, ed. Natalino Sapegno (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1956), 305. In light of this definition it is significant that from this point on Dante does not describe himself as “vago.” Apparently after encountering Beatrice, his desire has a precise object.

Beatrice reprimands Dante for his hitherto purely physical love for her, stating that in her spiritual state she was “less dear and less than pleasing” to him than she had been in life. She complains that the spiritual means by which she had tried to influence him were useless because “he [had sunken] so low.”¹⁰¹ Beatrice shows him her spiritual body (previously she had been veiled) which, now that his faculty of love has been purified, he recognizes as far surpassing the physical one: “she seemed to surpass her former self in beauty / more than she had on earth surpassed all others.”¹⁰² Upon seeing her spiritual body Dante expresses remorse and acknowledges his folly, and at this moment his affections start to change:

The nettle of remorse so stung me then
That whatever else had lured me most to loving
Had now become to me most hateful
Such knowledge of my fault was gnawing at my heart
That I was overcome, and what I then became
She knows who was the reason for my state.¹⁰³

This was the beginning of his purification, which was completed when Beatrice led him into the river and pushed his head under the water. Just before his head was submerged, Dante heard the hymn *Asperges Me*, which is sung to accompany the sprinkling of the altar and the congregation as they entered the church for mass. This hymn concerns purification, and that, in conjunction with its association of entering a holy space (Dante is about to enter Heaven), reinforces the significance of the event as the final rite of Dante’s purification. Lastly, the following lines confirm that this purification is not an end in itself, but a step in the process of ascent:

From those most holy waters

¹⁰¹. Ibid., 30.136.

¹⁰². This is an interesting parallel to Plato’s doctrine that the “beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul.” Plato, *Symposium*, 210a.

¹⁰³. Ibid., 85–90. The first three lines are reminiscent of Plato’s statement that the initiate “will relax his intense passion for just one body, despising this passion and regarding it as petty.” Plato, *Symposium*, 210b.
I came away remade, as are new plants
Renewed with new-sprung leaves,
_Pure and prepared to rise up to the stars._\(^{104}\)

**ILLUMINATION**

Now we come to the _Paradiso_ proper, which Dante introduces by stating that he has been in the Heaven that receives the greatest portion of God’s light, and, while it is difficult to remember and tell all that he saw, he will do all he can to communicate his experience. At this point Dante is still on Mount Purgatory. He recounts that he turned and found Beatrice staring into the sun. Dante himself also began to gaze at the sun, but finding himself unable to stand the sight for very long,\(^{105}\) looked at her instead, describing her as “a second sun.”\(^{106}\)

Upon doing so a change came upon him:
As I gazed on her, I was changed within,
as Glaucus was on tasting of the grass
that made him consort of the gods in the sea.
To soar beyond the human cannot be described in words.
Let the example be enough to one for whom
grace holds this experience in store.\(^{107}\)

The allusion is to Glaucus the mythological fisherman, whose story is told in Ovid’s _Metamorphoses._\(^{108}\) Because this mention of him in the _Paradiso_ is, in

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104. Dante, _Purgatorio_ (see note 99), 33.142–145 (emphasis added).
105. Dante does clarify, however, that in the brief time that he gazed at the sun he was able to see it sparkling as if it were molten iron in a fire. To my knowledge it has not been pointed out, to my knowledge, that this may be a reference to a statement of Bernard of Clairvaux cited on page 33 above, cf., note 91. If this is the case then it may also be a subtle foreshadowing of Bernard’s involvement in, and significance for, the final canto of _Paradiso._
106. Dante, _Paradiso_, 1.63.
108. Glaucus fell in love with a nymph named Scylla to whom he relates his story. He tells her that he is a god as powerful as Proteus or Triton but before becoming a god he had been a mortal...
my opinion, the source of a fundamental misreading of the *Paradiso* as a whole, I will analyze the Glaucus allusion in some detail.

One day while fishing Glaucus ate magical grass, which changed his nature and caused him to leap into the ocean. There he was received by the sea gods who, accompanied by hymns, bathed him with the water of a hundred rivers and changed him into a god. Most commentators have concluded that by referring to Glaucus, Dante is indicating that he himself has been deified. This error began with the *Trecento* commentaries¹⁰⁹ and it is still an interpretation commonly followed today.¹¹⁰

Much of the confusion about the interpretation of Dante’s experience as described in these verses stems from the word *trasumanar*, a neologism that translates into “going beyond the human.” It would be natural to suppose that going beyond the human necessarily signifies deification, were it not for the fact that the second step in the Neoplatonic tradition is midway between the normal human state and a deified state. In his important study, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, Steven Botterill argues that the identification of trasumanar with deification is mistaken, and that the term most closely corresponding to trasumanar is excessus. He bases this on the following definition by Etienne Gilson:

> A generic term signifying, in a general way, any exceeding of the limits of a state in order to attain to another. To free oneself of

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¹⁰⁹. Soon after the *Divine Comedy* was finished it began to be commented on, and these commentaries are collectively known as the *Trecento* (Thirteen Hundreds) commentaries. Among the most illustrious of these commentators are Francesco da Buti, Benvenuto da Imola, and Giovanni Boccaccio.

one’s passions is already an *excessus*. However the word takes on a mystical sense only when it indicates the passage from a normal state, even were this attained by the aid of grace, to a state that is more than human.\textsuperscript{111}

The last phrase, “a state that is more than human,” is clearly the meaning of trasumanar, and as Gilson points out *excessus* is not deification, instead it is the state through which one must pass in order to experience this deification. Thus the transformation that Dante underwent at the beginning of *Paradiso* is a preparation for what is to come. Interpreting it in the light of the Neoplatonic pattern, nearly the whole of *Paradiso* comprises Dante’s experience on the level of illumination and is therefore a precursor to his union with God and deification.

It is important to note that what has been lacking in the previous analyses of this allusion is a close reading of both Dante and Ovid. The Trecento commentaries did not sufficiently distinguish between the various aspects of Glauceus’s transformation. Benvenuto da Imola is perhaps the most perspicacious\textsuperscript{112} when he explains that when Glauceus first left the land he was only a partial-god (*primo semideus*); but when the sweet and perfect ‘waters of paradise’ (his interpolation) washed over him he was transformed into a ‘sea god’ (*deus in magno mari*).\textsuperscript{113} Most of the Trecento commentators pay less attention to detail and conflate the two parts. More typical than Benvenuto is the influential Francesco da Buti. He summarizes the myth thus: “Glaucus the fisherman became a god by eating of the herb.”\textsuperscript{114} This interpretation has been followed by the vast majority of commentators since then. As mentioned above, Botterill is perhaps the first to persuasively argue that this cannot be correct.


\textsuperscript{112} See Steven Botterill, chapter 6, “From *deificari* to *trasumanar*? Dante’s Paradiso and Bernard’s De diligendo Deo,” in *Dante and the Mystical Tradition* (see note 5), 223, 233. In this chapter he has amassed a wealth of information.


\textsuperscript{114} Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition*, 223.
I have followed Botterill thus far, but at this point he argues that the Glaucus allusion is included in order to illustrate the ineffability of mystical experience.

The central point about ‘trasumanar’ is its ineffability; and the relevance of the Glaucus story here is that it describes a transformation that is ultimately ineffable. Only in this respect are the situations of Dante personaggio and Glaucus truly identical . . . . It is, then, not because Glaucus recounts an identical, or even an analogous, experience to his character’s that Dante poeta cites him here, but precisely because he does not; after his transformation Glaucus’s powers of memory and expression fail him, just as do Dante’s when he attempts to describe ‘trasumanar.’

I disagree. Dante specifically refers to the part of the Glaucus myth that is concerned with Glaucus’s preliminary transformation: Glaucus eats the grass, which effects some internal change in him, impelling him to dive into the ocean and enabling him to survive in that environment and mingle with the sea gods. Since Dante refers to the first part of the myth, and not the following section in which Glaucus is deified, in order to illustrate his own experience of transformation, I am justified in supposing that the reason for the mention of Glaucus is that his experience at this point is analogous to Dante’s own. In gazing upon Beatrice, Dante is changed and immediately carried into another realm—in this case, Paradise—in which he is also surrounded by heavenly beings. This matches Glaucus’s itinerary closely, and, Dante will, like Glauce, experience a form of deification.

Instead of declaring that his experience was ineffable and that the reader should look at the Glaucus myth for another example of an ineffable experience—as Botterill would have it—Dante is actually saying, “I cannot describe the experience of trasumanar, instead I refer the reader to the Glaucus myth which describes a similar experience of going beyond the human.” This seems

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115. Ibid., 238.
116. That Glaucus is eventually deified prefigures Dante’s own deification in the last canto of Paradise.
the plain sense of “trasumanar significar per verba / non si poria; però l’esempio basti / a cui esperienza grazia serba.”

Additionally, with an understanding of the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent, it is clear that in this canto Dante is describing an excessus, or ecstatic experience, an ascent, or “illumination.” Indeed illumination is a central aspect of the rest of Paradiso: throughout this cantica, Dante is continually involved in a process of learning or increasing in the knowledge of the divine. His entire journey consists of encounters with heavenly beings, including Beatrice, whom he questions, gaining knowledge about the various realms and hierarchies of heaven. More striking is the correspondence between the fact that Dante’s ascent to heaven begins when light from the sun flows into him through the medium of Beatrice, and the Neoplationic tradition in which it is the light that flows down from the highest realm that “stirs the soul” leading it upwards.117

**UNION**

Perhaps the most surprising event in the Paradiso is when, near the end of his journey, Dante turns to speak to Beatrice and instead finds an old man. This old man, whom we find out later is St. Bernard, declares that Beatrice has sent him to terminar lo [s]uo disio.118 This emphasis on desire, which runs through Paradiso, should remind us of the way in which love and desire have formed the foundation for ascent and union with God in the writers whom we have already discussed.

It will be remembered that Plato’s ascent of the mind is through the broadening and refining of love until one receives the final vision of beauty. In Plotinus’s scheme, love originates with the “One,” overflowing through the various levels

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until it touches one’s soul, motivating it to return to its origin. He states, “every soul desires” to return to the Good, and when the soul receives the emanations from it, “it becomes Love . . . its very nature bears it upwards, lifted by the giver of that love.” Love is also central for Dionysius, being the reason for which God goes out of himself to cause the creation, and it is for that same love that all things want to return to him. Maximus states that the “wings of love” carry the soul to God who then “divinizes the soul with love.” For Bernard the “soul, rapt with divine love . . . [is] joined unto the Lord, [and] one spirit with Him.” Having seen how this love or desire leads one to union with God, we can recognize that Dante is mentioning desire in order to foreshadow his union and deification. Indeed, the very last verse of the Paradiso describes how God’s love worked upon Dante’s desire: “But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving/ With an even motion, were turning with/ The Love that moves the sun and the other stars.”

That Dante mentions specifically his will and love, indicates that he conceives this moment of union as consisting not of a union of substance, but rather of a union of the affections. Maximus, as we have seen, described deification as the union of will and love between God and humans instead of a union of sub-

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119. Dante, Paradiso, 33.143–145. There is a certain apophaticism in Dante’s experience which is made more apparent by the preceding lines in which he states that “la mia mente fu percossa”; in other words, he passes beyond the intelligible before uniting with God.
stance, and Bernard elaborated more fully on these ideas. He described deification as the result of “our human affections [melting] away by some unspeakable transmutation into the will of God,” which is achieved through “celestial love.” It is this elaboration of the doctrine by Bernard that seems to be that which Dante describes in the Paradiso.

The Bernardine conception of deification in terms of love and will is described earlier in the Paradiso when Dante learns from Piccarda Donati that in heaven:

Our love . . . is like the Love that would have
All its court be similar to Itself . . . .
To live in love is–here–necessity,
If you think on love’s nature carefully.
The essence of this blessed life consists
In keeping to the boundaries of God’s will,
Through which our wills become one single will.\textsuperscript{120}

Again it is through love that the wills of God and humans are joined, implying, in this case, that through the accord of wills, the souls in heaven maintain a continued state of deification.

The interpretation of Dante’s experience as a Bernardine deification is of course strengthened by the fact that it is Bernard, in particular, who is guiding Dante through this experience. Dante calls Bernard “quel contemplante” and describes him as “him who, still within the confines of this world, in contemplation tasted of that peace [which is the state of union with God].”\textsuperscript{121} Since Bernard was well known for having both experienced the divine union in this life and describing the way in which it can be attained, he was eminently fitted for assisting Dante.

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 3.43–45, 76–81. The Bernardine nature of this statement seems to have been first pointed out by Rosetta Migliorini Fissi in her book Dante. Rosetta Migliorini Fissi, Dante (Firenze [Florence]: La Nuova Italia, 1979), 85.
\textsuperscript{121} Dante, Paradiso, 31.110–11.
Taken as a whole it seems indisputable that the itinerary of the *Commedia* is inspired by, and closely follows, the pattern of ascent and deification expounded in the Neoplatonic doctrines preserved and developed by Christian theologians. From the broad pattern of purification, illumination, and union with God, to more particular details such as the reeducation of desire and the accord of wills, Dante throughout shows his familiarity with, and dependence on, the Neoplatonic ascent. In addition, it seems clear that it is not until the final scene of the *Commedia* that Dante is deified and that this deification is couched in terms taken from Bernard.

Rosetta Migliorini Fissi, in her book *Dante*, first pointed out the pervasiveness of Bernardine deification in the *Paradiso*. She recognized it in the speech by Piccarda Donati quoted above, in the final scene of the *Paradiso* and in several other places not discussed in this paper. However, she also saw it, somewhat contradictorily, in the first canto when Dante gazes upon Beatrice. This was the starting point for Botterill’s rebuttal of the equation of trasumanar and deificatio. He took issue with her interpretation of the *Paradiso* in general, but conceded that:

[H]er suggestion of a direct influence on the Piccarda episode—and thus, by extension, on the definition of the situation of the blessed as a group, since that, in theological terms, is what Piccarda undertakes—is potentially more stimulating. For if the state of the blessed is indeed identifiable as *deificatio* in the Bernardine sense, and if it may thus be surmised (though not, I think, proved) that contact with the historical Bernard’s work played a part in determining the conceptual boundaries of Dante’s thinking about that state, then we may have, perhaps, another clue to Bernard’s problematic presence in the *Commedia*, and to the significance of his role as a character within it.122

Botterill goes on to restate the distinction between trasumanar and deificatio and admits that the theological foundations for “the deifying vision that ends the journey of [Dante are] … laid in the historical Bernard’s own writings.”123

123. Ibid., 241.
This may seem definitive, but we still find in the latest comprehensive commentary on the Commedia, that of Robert Hollander, the equation of trasumanar and deification. It is for this reason that I believed that an in depth analysis of Dante’s experience and the Neoplatonic tradition on which it is based was called for. In the course of this study I have developed my own interpretation of the Glaucus allusion, finding in Glaucus’s experience a close structural parallel to that of Dante. I believe that when it is recognized that by gazing upon Beatrice and being filled with light Dante undergoes a transformation, the purpose of which is to enable him to ascend through Paradise in preparation for his deification, itself taking place in the same way that is described by Bernard, the nature of his experience in the Paradiso becomes clear. Additionally, when we find that closely preceding his transformation he is thoroughly purified and his desire is redirected from earthly to heavenly things, we can see that he described a three-part journey which corresponds exactly to the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent.

The main purpose of this paper, therefore, has been to show that Dante’s experience parallels the Neoplatonic pattern of ascent not only in some particulars, but also in the overarching structure of Dante’s experience as a whole, and that this pattern can be traced as far back as Plato’s Symposium. Also I have attempted to illustrate the way in which the core of this tradition was preserved even as it was modified and handed down by generations of mystics and theologians from Plotinus to Dante. One key in establishing the extent to which this tradition influenced Dante is the recognition that trasumanar is not deification as has traditionally been believed, but that it is instead a stage preceding deification.

CONCLUSION

The influence of the doctrine of celestial ascent developed by Plato has proven to be remarkably widespread and long lasting. Put into a three-part form of purification, illumination and union/deification corresponding to the three hypostases, World-Soul, Intellect, and the One developed by Plotinus, it was adopted by Greek speaking Christians and became a central part of Orthodox
Christianity. In the ninth century the Dionysian and Maximian *corpora* were translated from Greek to Latin and thus made available to the West. Bernard of Clairvaux, with his devotion to the rule of St. Benedict and inspiration from the examples of asceticism and ecstatic mysticism that it contained, was pre-disposed to mystical thought, which was given a framework and justification in the writings of Dionysius and Maximus. Bernard’s voice, which had dominated the twelfth century, would still be echoing in the fourteenth. This *contemplante* inspired Dante with his doctrine of the ascent of love and the accord of wills, and Dante immortalized them in one of the greatest poems in any language.

In terms of the history of ideas, this tradition is an example of the synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christian dogma, but, on another level, it is an example of the way in which ideas are dependent on, and find their expression in, a way of life. Indeed, as Bernard said, these ideas are based on and inseparable from experience. This is not to say that every expositor of these ideas underwent the same experience or even an experience at all, but these ideas are rooted in experience, and seem to flourish when certain conditions are present.