

## *Lêxis* in Dionysius the Areopagite

José María Nieva

University of Tucumán, Tucumán, Argentina

In his *Commentary on Plato's Phaedo*, Damascius establishes a close relation between destination (*lêxis*), divine Justice, and life dignity (*kat'axían*) of every soul. Among several meanings of destination, the most relevant one is related to the condition of the soul after death. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to consider how this neoplatonic term is conceived in Dionysius Areopagite. For that purpose, the author will analyze such term widely used in the chapter 7 of *Ecclesiastic Hierarchy* in which Dionysius deals with the funerary rite and in which the notes of the dionysian eschatology are found. In other words, Dionysius' use of this term combines a spiritual and a metaphysic perspective. The former is part of the representation of the dionysian universe in which even the angels receive the name of *lexeis* and are distinguished by their never ending movement around the Thearchia; the latter is present among humans as a call to imitate such angelic condition. Such imitation is not possible without the effort needed to behave in agreement with an honorable lifestyle (*kat'axían*, neoplatonic expression also used by Dionysius) that opens the door to a condition or rank granted to man after death.

*Keywords:* Neoplatonism, destination, dionysian eschatology

### Introduction

Everyone that reflects on the hidden threads that forge the fabric of existence, of life, and of the human condition cannot stop recognizing that sooner or later one should be faced with the crucial question on the meaning of death as a turning point of a vital trajectory.

Undoubtedly, the application of a hyperbole or the reinforcement of a paradox in relation to the question of the meaning of death entails the question of the meaning of life as its counterpart. In other words, unraveling the meaning of life demands to consider death as a question of ethics. This consideration offers a broad perspective that turns the inquiry about the meaning of life more challenging, overwhelming, and moving. Questioning oneself about life leads to the inevitable question of what will happen to us, where that vital winding trajectory goes to, and sometimes it is difficult to find a lodge to make oneself comfortable. The feeling of unease due to the lack of certainties in search for responses can end in Nihilism, but in other cases, it may lead to expect that the journey of our life sails towards a secure harbor and "he may properly and worthily venture to believe; for *kalòsho kíndynos*, the venture is well worth while", as Socrates says the *Phaedo* 114 d.<sup>1</sup>

It is precisely in the Platonic *Phaedo* in which the proposal of death as an ethic question can be found. The

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José María Nieva, Ph.D., Department of Philosophy, University of Tucumán.

<sup>1</sup> Salviat (1965) and Brisson (2005), who point out following Salviat that the adjective *kalós* should be understood not in an aesthetic sense but in an appraising and profitable one. Reale (2001) also supports that "it is evident that it is about a risk that does not imply a leap into the unknown, since the logos have demonstrated there is another way of being metasensitive and that man's soul is in accordance with this type of being. In the same vein, the risk is truly beautiful in a Hellenic sense, i.e., good, gifted with great value. According to Plato, it is about the risk man has to face to become a perfect man" (Platon, 2001, p. 347; White, 1989; Ferrari, 2010).

dialog and the thought carried out in a dialectic way revolve around death, but in fact the stress is placed on the way the soul has lived, on the actions and decisions carried out to shape life. The question on the immortality of the soul is tightly linked to the question about the best possible human life (Rowe, 1995, p. 290; 2009, p. 117; Bossi, 2008, p. 169)<sup>2</sup>. The belief in the immortality of the soul as one of “the two pillars of Platonism” strongly held in this dialog by Socrates has not been considered in vain.

Like Socrates, the Neoplatonics did not believe that death was the end. Then, the comments on Plato’s dialogs not only challenged them to interpret a text but also to discover solid bases to assert that there is something of us that survives death: the soul. (Gertz, 2010, p. 1)

Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that in the Platonic tradition or better said, in Neoplatonism, there is no critical questioning as regards the soul immortality and that the positions of the different representatives of this approach differ in their considerations in relation to the soul. Thus, the differences found in the reflections from Plotinus to Proclus and Damascius show divergences in this school of thought as regards the nature of the soul. Plotinus’ thesis about the soul that has not descended from the intelligible world (Enn, IV 8, 8, 1-4; V 1, 10, 17) unfolds a mystic dimension since it implies that as the human soul always remains bound to the divine she does not need salvation. Such thesis is criticized by Iamblichus as Proclus points it out in his *Commentary on the Timaeus* (III, 323, 2-6) and he discusses it in elements of theology (prop. 211). According to Steel (1978)<sup>3</sup>, Damascius agrees with Proclus’ argument though, from the author’s point of view it is necessary to revise such arguments when reading paragraph 548 of *Commentary on the Phaedo*.<sup>4</sup>

Even though the aim of this paper is not to trace back the history of the conceptions of the soul in Neoplatonism or show the different metaphysical bases that support them, we need to recognize that the way in which the soul is considered is important when thinking of the destiny of the soul after death. Thus, the eschatological myths of Plato’s Dialog in the architecture of Neoplatonic reflection, especially in the myths of *Gorgias*, *Republic*, and *Phaedo* become relevant. In these myths Plato conceives death as the separation of the soul from the body and places the soul in a different spot to be judged. If the soul has behaved well, especially in a philosophical way of life she obtains an eternal award. If not, she is punished being able to be purified or not.

### *Lêxis* as Destination

In his *Commentary on the Phaedo*, Damascius states that “a destination (*lêxis*) is the position in this

<sup>2</sup> Bossi (2008) sustains that when analyzing the *Phaedo* that “the central topic is enlightenment of the meaning of life from the impending presence of death”.

<sup>3</sup> For Iamblichus’ conception of the soul, see Iamblichus (2002), Steel (1993), and Shaw (1995); For Proclus, see Trouillard (1972) and Gritti (2008).

<sup>4</sup> “On the other hand, how can Iamblichus sustain that there is a permanent return to the original state?”... or third an account of an ideal life that leaves its descent free from the influence of the material world and its contact with the other intact world; this is what Iamblichus himself writes in his Letters where he supports his perspective in the third way mentioned” (*Phaed* I, p. 548) “It is impossible for a soul to remain in the intelligible world as Iamblichus believes it could be (if it has descended then, it should be in its nature to descend in some occasions) or to remain always in the Tartarus, ... because it is in its nature to be sometimes above it” (*Phaed* I, p. 492). According to Gertz (2010), Iamblichus held that the souls that would escape to the genesis would be those which practice theurgy (p. 188). See also Gerson (2004): “So then, since man’s true essence lies in his soul, and the soul is intelligent and immortal, and its nobility and its good and its end repose in divine life, nothing of mortal nature has power to contribute anything towards the perfect life or to deprive it of happiness. For, in general, our blessedness lies in the intellectual life; for none of the median things has the capacity either to increase or to nullify it. It is therefore irrelevant to go on, as men generally do, about chance and its unequal gifts” (Iamblichus, Letter to Macedonius, On Fate, fr. 7). Gritti (2008) observes that Bussanich supports, contrary to communis opinio, that the differences between Iamblichus and Plotinus have been exaggerated if it is considered that the theory of the divinized souls is the Iamblichean version of Plotinus’ superior self. She also sustains that Proclus remains in Plotinian philosophical perspective (p. 70, n. 7).

universe assigned (*apoklerouménē*) by Justice to each one according to one's dignity (*kat'axían*)" (*Phaed.* I, 1977, p. 467). Such consideration is revealed in a particular way in the third part of the piece of work devoted to the interpretation of the Platonic myth.

According to the commentator, it is not pure and simply about a myth but it is believed that the state of the soul in the Hades is something like that or the like. This implies understanding the myth as telling something true. And such truth is not other than a divine truth. Then, if the notes in Damascius' commentary often aim at summarizing and discussing Proclus' commentary as Westerink (1977, pp. 16-17) observes "these notes are only digressions on a text of Proclus, that remain always as a point of arrival and departure" (Westerink, 1971, p. 254), if Damascius' notes "complete Proclus' commentary critically" (Pépin, 1990, p. 276) then, Proclean understanding of the myth should be considered to unravel what is stated here.

From the two interpretations of the myth for Proclus, the pedagogical and the hieratical, the latter is the most relevant in the *Phaedo* because it belongs to the most secret initiations with which Plato reinforces the credibility of his doctrines (*Commentary in the Republic* I, 1970, pp. 84.26-85.12). This second mode has higher efficiency because "it unfolds the landscape of an action that deifies because it invites to improve it by the theurgy" (Trouillard, 1982, p. 249; Beierwaltes, 1993, p. 267). This interpretation is justified by Proclus, by means of the same Socratic words that his account considers "the rites of sacrifice and ceremonial practices that prevail here" (*Phaedo*, p. 108a).

In line with Proclus, Damascius specifies such meaning by explaining that the speech about the destiny of the souls rests on the assumptions of its immortality and the belief in the Gods' providence (*Phaed.* I, 1997, p. 469). Therefore, Damascius understands that the myth expresses the basic idea supported throughout the dialog: the immortality of the soul and the cosmic value of justice. He also shares with Proclus the tight interweaving stated by Proclus himself, among the Myths of the three dialogs mentioned above which results in a "masterpiece of a Neoplatonic interpretation of a Platonic text" (Finnamore, 1998, p. 50). This allows us to understand the close connection between the destiny of the soul and Divine Justice.

Consequently, the way in which man takes care of his soul or worries about her while bringing about an honorable way of life has a deep effect when descending to Hades.

One of the meanings of the term *lêxis*, which entails the notion of section, plot, lot, i.e., a territory assigned or sorted out by fortune, becomes important here. Nevertheless, when this notion is absent, i.e., when a distribution of territory is not mentioned it becomes an assigned position. According to Neoplatonism, it is an assigned position due to the condition of the soul after death in accordance with Divine Justice. Then, it is a place one arrives after having been worthily judged. In other words, it is not possible to take that place if one has not lived correctly or acted justly. The expression *kat'axían* allows to reinforce the ethical sense of the destiny of the soul and to understand the term "destination" as the point of arrival of a trajectory, as the end point of a journey or as the aim to which all the efforts required to take care of the soul are directed. The expression *kat'axían* restricts the sense of space and place of *lêxis* suggested in his eschatological sense. This condition has been obtained according to the way in which life has been carried out here in temporality or in the sea of unlikeliness in Proclean terms. The decision of a way of life does not circumscribe only to a definite time span but also to the whole time as Damascius points out following the Platonic Socrates since the Divine Justice does not allow everyone to share the same place or have the same destination if they have not lived worthily.

### Dionysian Eschatology

In chapter VII of *About the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* by Dionysius, the ideas above become familiar. The funerary rites of the ones who are asleep are described here according to the place of their bodies in the temple whether they belong to priest, monastic, or lay order. Such hierarchy in the material arrangement symbolizes the different ways in which they carried out their life and consequently this “saintly shows—according to Dionysius—that in the new birth they will receive the correspondent legacies” (*tàs apokleróseis*) in agreement with the ones to which they assigned (*apeklérōsan*) their life here (p. 557a)<sup>5</sup>.

One of the main objections to Dionysian thought lies in highlighting its vague interest in anthropology. However, even though there is not a deep reflection upon the human condition in his writings, a clear interest for what we can call the meaning of human life can be appreciated in some passages<sup>6</sup>. One of these passages has been just quoted.

Does not he clearly show that it is not possible to live without any concern in relation to the end of life? Do not these lines reflect that our life demands taking decisions that imply the search for a blessed life? Does not this text suggest that the *éshaton* of our own activities is beyond the space-time condition and its occasional pleasures?

In Chapter II of the work mentioned in order to highlight that our hierarchy is found in the assimilation and union with God, Dionysius (1991b) asks:

Which is the principle of the sacred practice of the most venerable commandments, the one that shapes our soul habits in relation to the reception of the other sacred oracles and sacred operations, the one that leads our way towards elevation of the super-celestial condition? (... *hē pros tēn tēs hyperouranías léxeos anagōgēn hemōn hodopóēsis*). (p. 392a)

Two aspects deserve relevance here. First, the soul requires a certain shape when she starts to live according to a certain mode. Such mode implies the practice of the commandments granted by baptism, which purifies and illuminates. Thus, a way of dignified life starts to show in continuous fight against the passions that disfigure the own capacities of the soul. That is to say, the election of a mode of life in which one gets stronger as long as one acts according to the aim proposed by the hierarchical activities. It is about acting according to dignity to receive the rewards granted by Divine Justice. It is in the chapter VIII of *About the Divine Names* that deals with the divine denomination of Justice, Salvation and Redemption where Dionysius states clearly that those who have chosen a pious way of life are not abandoned by Divine Justice which in its “function of cosmic and ontological principle” (Jones, 1999, p. 64) distributes to each one of the beings what is proper *kat’axían* because they passionately look for what it really exists. And as they tend towards that aim “don’t they approach to the evangelic virtues every time it is possible due to the divine things that distance from the passion for material things and act manly concerning good?” (Dionysius, 1990, p. 896c). In this way, those who live piously are “truth lovers” and thus:

<sup>5</sup> Dionysius (1991b) said at *About Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: “... we, on our behalf with sensitive images are elevated as much as possible to the divine contemplations and to tell the truth, to only one thing towards those who are like the one and they participate by themselves of what is similar and one but they give the divine yoke to each one according to dignity, the “correspondant” inheritance (*tà theía dsygà dianémeikat’axían tēn apoklérōsin*)” (p. 373c). The author quotes Dionysius texts according to the critical edition of *Corpus Dionysiacum I-II* (1990-1991), the translation from Greek belongs to the author.

<sup>6</sup> An interesting reading about this absence of anthropological reflection is supported by Stang (2012), who deals with an apophatic anthropology.

They distance from the passion for material things and they love peace and sanctity free from evil and with a divine *éros* for all the possessions; and they already enjoy in this life the novelty of a future one, acting among men as angels, enjoying the appellative of divine beings, kindness and of all the other possessions with complete impassivity. (Dionysius, 1991b, p. 1117b)<sup>7</sup>

In that way, they are:

Followers and journey companions of good angels here and there, (and) peacefully and free from the evil they will inherit the blessed conditions (*tàs makariotátasapoklerósontai lēxeis*) in the ever existing eternity and they will always be with God, the greatest of all possessions. (Dionysius, 1991b, p. 1097a)

In the fight against passions, in the ideal of the *apáthei*amen have access to a different mode of life. An echo of the patristic spirituality for which angels lack passions, i.e., they are impassible by nature can be found here. With this model as a guide through the *apáthei*amen become celestial beings, *isággelos*, imitating the angelical purity (Colombás, 1958, pp. 184-200; Rist, 1992, p. 155; Lossky, 2009, p. 151)<sup>8</sup>. Such denomination is apparently applied here by Dionysius with certain restriction to the hierarch who “participates according to his own possibilities of the interpretative characteristics of angels and rises to the revealing likeness with them according to what is accessible to men” (Dionysius, 1991a, p. 293b).

Having said that how this is equality among angels understood, is it possible to abandon our own mode of being for a totally different one? Is it possible to become another being? Is death from a Platonic conception conceived as the separation of the soul from the body so as to recover a pristine condition darkened by our carnality? Does not the qualification of this divine and pious man as truth lover resemble significantly the image of the Philosopher as described by Plato in the *Phaedo*, who certainly obtains through his own way of life, a destination, a condition, and a blessed *lêxis*? Isn’t it only the demand of elevation to a certain ideal of life and so, does not this equality imply the promise of future change in our way of being? (Golitzin, 1994, p. 97, n. 155; Lilla, 2002, pp. 37-38). If this is so, what does this new way of being consist of?

At the beginning of *About Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, Dionysius (1991b) points out that Thearchy has turned hierarchy into a gift to save and deify all the rational and intellectual essences and that as a special gift has been given *taís hyperkosmioís kai makaríaís lēxessin* in a more immaterial and intellectual way (p. 376b). A few lines above, Dionysius emphasizes that the same Thearchy has granted us the priest function thanks to which we are closer to these superior essences making us alike, according to our possibilities and to the stability and inalterability of its sacred foundation.

Here arises the second aspect that deserves to be highlighted. In the use Dionysius makes of the term *lêxis* to connote both the angelical essences and the condition to which a pious man accedes, there is a linking point that reveals not only the coherence of thought but also its Christian depth.

In other words, the use Dionysius makes of this term is combined in a metaphysical and spiritual perspective. The former is within the context of the representation of a Dionysian universe in which the angels

<sup>7</sup> Dionysius said (1991b) at *About Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*: “If it is true that the totally divine man, worthy companion of the divine being, elevated to what is Godlike, according to him in a totally perfect contemplation is not going to carry out the performance of the flesh—but only what is necessary according to nature and this is so, if it is carried out superficially—he will be at the same time temple and companion of the extreme contemplation according to him and the Thearchic spirit” (p. 433c). The notion of the divine man or *theiós anér* has deep roots in Greek Philosophy and meaningful repercussions to posterity (Hernández de la Fuente, 2011, pp.19-28, 43-74).

<sup>8</sup> In Dionysius, the angelic imitation means sexual renunciation as stated by the primitive monastic life. On the subject sexual renunciation, see Brown (1993).

also receive the denomination of *lêxeis* and they are distinguished by their incessant movement. This never-ending movement draws a choral dance of celestial liturgy around Thearchy (Dionysius, 1991a, pp. 205b-212a; Dionysius, 1990, p. 704d). In chapter VI (p. 856c) of *About Divine Names* they are called *hyperouraníais dsqaís*. Is it mere coincidence that such characterization also applies to the condition to which man yearns for his initiation in the mysteries of liturgical life? For our author, does not this characterization reveal that the aim of our lives is to imitate such movement? There is no doubt that this is Dionysius' thought. In fact, he later emphasizes that Thearchy gives men this life similar to angels "as much as it can be received by them, mixed beings" and that "it has promised us the certainly most divine because it will lead us towards the totally perfect life and immortality: souls and bodies bounded" (Dionysius, 1990, p. 856d).

This sense of the term *lêxis* has not been appreciated by Roques, De Gandillac, Scazzoso and Caballero who translate it as a derivation of the verb *lêgo* meaning rest, peacefulness, and not from the verb *lagcháno*, that means to obtain something by means of luck or destination, being lucky, being appointed by luck and that denotes the idea of a condition or position assigned after death in a figurative sense used by Neoplatonism.

The author believes that the anthropological implications present in the Dionysian eschatology can be traced in the second meaning of the term, in which it is merely unexpected or distributive connotation is moved as it has been observed in Damascius to imply a condition or state of the soul. Actually, this Dionysian eschatology is revealed as clearly orthodox because the state of eternal bliss for man does not mean neglecting his corporality. It is true that our author does not state clearly the role of the body in the future state of the new birth. Nevertheless, Dionysius is highly consistent when he points out that our future condition continues being a compound condition. Thus the imitation of the angelical condition has a far reaching spiritual meaning and I believe it is not merely an occasional reference as Kharlamov (2009) sustains.

Such spiritual meaning is observed when emulating the incessant and unavoidable movement of the essences superior to us as regards Good. This choral dance image about Thearchy reflects the final aim our life expects to reach.

It is worth pointing out here the reception that Neoplatonism may have if it is considered that such image is fundamental in Proclus (Trouillard, 1977, pp. 162-175; Beierwaltes, 1991, pp. 252-255) who believes that the perfect movement of intelligence is present in the circular movement, in the choral movement about the One. This image is restated by Damascius in his *Commentary on the Phaedo* who explains that the perfection of intelligence is present when it tends towards what is intelligible and when it settles in its own action carrying out a truly intellective justice (p. 86).

## Conclusions

Dionysius' Neoplatonic roots are always or nearly often highlighted here neglecting those passages that show him as a real believer. This unilateral vision can only be reflected in Hornus' judgement when he points out that:

The price of holiness is the divine communion, then the body of the just will be part of this communion. The church announces everywhere a complete and total resurrection. There is a Christian hint which is totally strange to the general structure of the Dionysian world beyond its philosophical system as an assertion of faith. (Hornus, 1946, p. 54, n. 54)

Is this assertion of faith totally strange to the deepest concerns of the Dionysian's thought? On the contrary, such assertion of faith supports Dionysius' effort to think of his faith in an unyielding manner.

Such judgement can only be admitted if texts such as the following are not considered:

On their behalf, others I don't know how, lost in materialistic modes of thinking, have said the *hagiotátēn kai makaristēn lēxin* promised to the pious, is similar to life here and they threw away illegally nourishment typical of a changing life to those who are equal to angels. But none of the sacred men will ever fall in such error, but considering that all of them will receive the *Christoeidē lēxin*, when they reach the end of their life here, they will see the magnificent way towards what remains uncorrupted as something close to them and they will praise with hymns the kindness of Thearchy. (Dionysius, 1991b, p. 553d)

The configuration to Christ starts with the first steps of the initiation of the mysteries of liturgical life to consummate it definitely at the end of a vital trajectory that has lived under the image of an athlete of faith. This is clearly the message of the first chapters of *About Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*. Actually, this confession of truly ecclesiastical faith is not merely occasional or added to a Neoplatonic dominant structure which becomes a simple linguistic or formal vehicle without any relation with the foundation of its thought.

To give another example there is a text that shows clearly the fundamental role of Christ in the life of the thinker who is a believer and that objects perspectives as the ones mentioned above. In *About the Divine Names I 4*, Dionysius (1990) said:

... when we become uncorrupted and immortal and we reach *tēs christoeidoûs kai makariotátēs léxeos*, we will always be—according to the Oracle—with God, on the one hand satisfied, with totally pure contemplations of its visible teophany that irradiate us as well as disciples with luminous brightness in that divine transfiguration; on the other hand, participating of its intelligible donation of light in an impassible and immaterial intelligence, and taking part of the union beyond the intelligence in the unknown and blessed emissions of luminous rays. *In a divine imitation of super-celestial intelligence*, we will be similar to angels and sons of God as beings of resurrections, as it is said in the truth of the Oracles. (p. 592c)

This truth from which Dionysius has taken the pseudonym of the converse of Areopago is proclaimed by Pablo in his speech, not only as the unknown God but also as the resurrection of the dead and, is not this last truth the one that gives name to his work and identity? Is not this last truth the one that turns him into a thinker that deepens the mystery of the resurrection of the dead? And in line with the Platonic Socrates he believes that the advantageous risk of life does not lead us to the non existence but we rather go through it with the hope that we might inherit something according to the worthy mode in which we have assumed our life.

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