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Divinization of Life in Roberto Mangabeira Unger's Philosophy of Religion¹

Abstract: The present article sets out to discuss some interesting possibilities of using Dionysius the Areopagite's thought in modern philosophical contexts, especially as relating to the idiosyncratic pragmatist project of Roberto Mangabeira Unger and partly also Jean-Luc Nancy. The article first focuses on his thought as presented in his earlier *The Self Awakened* and thus focuses on Unger as a pragmatist, who – even by taking a distance from pragmatism itself – sets out on a path of *the self-awakening*, a path also leading to the *divinization of life*. In this, some interesting parallels with the thought of both Dionysius the Areopagite and Jean-Luc Nancy are suggested. With both thinkers, as compared to Unger's idea of self-awakening, we interpret *life* as a symbol of the inconceivable difference between the finite/mortal and the infinite, or, the idea of the infinity of human spirit. In his last book *The Religion of the Future* Unger deals with his project of divinization of our ethical and political lives. In the last part of this paper, some ethical and political consequences of his thought are thus presented.

Key words: Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Jean-Luc Nancy, Dionysius the Areopagite, pragmatism, life, divinization

Povzetek: **Poboženje življenja v filozofiji religije Roberta Mangabeira Ungerja**

Članek razglablja o nekaterih možnostih uporabe misli Dionizija Areopagita v okviru sodobnih filozofskih kontekstov, posebej s poudarkom na misli ameriškega pragmatista Roberta Mangabeira Ungerja in v manjšem delu tudi na misli Jeana-Luca Nancyja. Članek se najprej osredotoči na njegov pragmatizem v delu *The Self Awakened*, ki – celo z nekoliko distance do pragmatizma samega – vzpostavlja pot do samoprebujenja ali prebujenja našega sebstva. V tem išče nekatere zanimive paralele z mislijo Dinonizija Areopagita in Jeana-Luca Nancyja. Z obema mislecema, kakor ju primerjamo v okviru Ungerjeve misli o samoprebujenju, interpretiramo življenje kot simbol neizrazljive razlike med umrljivim in neskončnim ali idejo neskončnosti človeškega duha. Unger v zadnji knjigi *The Religion of the Future* razglablja o projektu divinizacije ali poboženja naših etičnih in političnih življenj. V zadnjem delu se tako ukvarjamo z etičnimi in političnimi posledicami Ungerjeve misli.

¹ This paper is an enlarged and revised version of an original Slovenian paper *Bog, prihodnost, transcendenca: variacija na Dionizijevo temo* (Škof 2011, 369–381).

Ključne besede: Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Jean-Luc Nancy, Dionizij Areopagit, pragmatizem, življenje, poboženje

The present article sets out to discuss some interesting possibilities of using (pseudo) Dionysius the Areopagite's thought in modern philosophical contexts, especially as relating to the idiosyncratic pragmatist project of Roberto Mangabeira Unger and in part also to Jean-Luc Nancy.

When talking about making use of the Areopagite's thought, the word may at first sound harsh if considered only in terms of the everyday contexts in which we normally encounter it. But, since we speak as pragmatists, the term 'use' for me always implies that genuine stance that tries to create broader possibilities for the fulfilment of social hopes by drawing (con)texts, words – or, even better, conversation/communication – closer. Since its very inception, American pragmatism has in this sense been directed towards transcending everything that we already have in the search for alternative paths or visions in the service of social or ethical progress – or, in other terms, raising man's awareness of her self and his world. In his work entitled *A Common Faith*, Dewey refers to this search with the notion of an idea of God – and by that move, he points to the relationship between the actual and the ideal. Since we are »in a distracted age,« as Dewey (1971, 51) puts it, he finds the need for such an idea urgent for us. Moreover, for us pragmatists, any process of creating something new is experimental and gradual; it is only from a cautious yet persistent action or creation of new things that new 'values' spring forth (the latter are understood as broadly recognised habits or modes of action; we will subsequently refer to this process in terms of the *divinization* of humanity and understand it as a horizontal mode of transcendence).

If we may step back a little, then we would comment that in this process we are looking for new possibilities of connecting the yet-unconnected topics. Still, has the very relationship between idea and practice or ideals and the process of their implementation not always been one of the stumbling blocks of philosophers and theologians alike? We are convinced that pragmatism offers one of the most plausible approaches towards resolving this difficult question.

I

Let us now turn to our first topics – i.e., the idea of God and divinization of self. According to John Dewey, the 'idea' of God is reflected in us through an imaginative conception of the future. These actions open an internal, transcendental space, which here consists of an experiential expanse that transcends anything we already possess. It concerns the relationship between us and the others, that is to say, a space of love between the self and the other. What initially confuses us here, though, is the word 'us.' The question that initially arises concerns how

it can be possible to think about such a space from the viewpoint of individual experience, in which the latter is delivered through a continuous process of self-transcendence towards a future time, and in which it is possible for a trace of transcendence to emerge, barely visible at first, which, both internally and externally, opens the border of one's finitude in a mysterious relationship to the infinite Other. Some might suggest that we want to profane the eschatological field of apophatism, in which God is described only in terms of what He is not.² But even here in this social context we can say, as a reminder of that same apophatism and in relation to its inherent future, that the mystery is preserved.

Now we would like to move on a little. As a Slovenian philosopher Gorazd Kocijančič says in his introduction to the complete Slovene translation of *Works* by Dionysius the Areopagite (2008, 32–33), we meet this philosopher today in his longing, in the *experience* that

»[w]e are always infinitely more than what we believe – and what others would like to believe – we are (...) That we are mystical, spiritual beings.«

This is a topic that can, of course, also be found in Indian (proto)philosophical and religious thought (*Vedas*, *Upanishads*); just before the end of this initial discussion we would also like to touch upon these texts. Then, at the same time, we shall also ponder on how we can understand the expression 'spiritual beings' in modern philosophy or ethics. But we are going to deal with that later, for the above passage offers me a nice cue to proceed to our, as it were, pragmatist 'variation.'

There are not many expressions in the history of pragmatism that would approach the fields of religion and religious experience the way Roberto Mangabeira Unger does. Up until now, Unger is the only pragmatist to have linked his thought to a great religious philosopher and ventured with it even into the fields of ethics and political philosophy. For him the philosopher in question is Nicolaus Cusanus, also indicating Unger's close affinity with the tradition or spirit of Dionysius in the history of philosophy (in key points he also mentions Plotinus and Indian philosophy). Unger (2007, 28) – much as Lévinas said of the *Talmud* in his *Totality and Infinity* – declares that »the philosopher with whose teachings the ideas of [*The Self Awakened*] have in certain respects the closest kinship was neither a pragmatist nor [his] close contemporary. He is Nicholas of Cusa, who lived from 1401 to 1464.«³ We know, of course, that Cusanus was a huge admirer of the Areopagite, so Unger's thought deserves a comment, since pragmatism has been traditionally immune or extremely allergic to such statements.⁴ According to Nietzsche, as

² See extensively on mystical knowledge of in Dionysius in Gombocz (2015, 305f).

³ The two comments in square brackets within this quote are ours.

⁴ According to Rorty, the vast majority of (neo)pragmatists were quite bothered by the presence of the so called 'vertical' metaphors of social life in philosophy – metaphors, such as 'deep,' 'spiritual,' 'divinized' etc. They were replaced by horizontal ones – metaphors that simply 'expand' our sympathies to ever-larger groups of people. In his essay *Ethics without Principles* Rorty claims that moral progress is a matter of increasing sensitivity to the needs of a growing multitude of people and things. »As I remarked earlier, they [i.e., the pragmatists] like to replace traditional metaphors of depth and height with

Rorty liked to say, truth is just a mobile army of metaphors, in which topics big and small are equally present. These are, of course, topics within 'the hermeneutics of suspicion,' which introduced the body into philosophy, but were in their reductions unable to redefine the meaning of 'spirit' (or 'spirituality'). The conversational ideal was thus in contemporary philosophy the most we could hope for. Rorty has even said that religion is a *conversation stopper* when we think about it or refer to it in social conversation. How then can we understand Unger here (2007, 29), who – even by taking a distance from pragmatism itself – sets out on a path of *the self-awakening*, as the title of his work reads, a path leading to a radicalization of democracy (which is, therefore, socially open) and at the same time to the related *divinization of life*?

Unger claims that every page of his work resounds with »the idea of the infinity of the human spirit, in the individual as well as in humanity.« (26) That is why many commentators no longer count Unger among the pragmatists. We, on the contrary, believe that if we need philosophy in this day and age, we should be looking for it precisely within the described framework located between the experience of an individual, her self and social hopes, on the one hand, and infinity in them and in the world surrounding them, on the other. 'Learned ignorance' (*docta ignorantia*) can become an expression of the pragmatist credo on the path of 'awakening in the everyday,' as Douglas R. Anderson (2003) would say,⁵ while 'the coincidence of the opposites' (*coincidentia oppositorum*) according to Cusanus can be the main guideline in Unger: we can see it in the contrast between the prospect of our common future (i.e., infinity in us, which, in its practical sense, is close to Dewey's common faith and Rorty's (2005) late eschatological projection of the sacred) on the one side, and the prospect of our finitude/mortality, on the other. The task of pragmatism thus lies in

»[reconciling] the two projects (...) the empowerment of the individual – that is to say, his raising up to godlike power and freedom – and the deepening of democracy – that is to say, the creation of forms of social life that recognize and nourish the godlike powers of ordinary humanity, however bound by decaying bodies and social chains.« (Unger 2007, 27 ff)

Unger is thus opening the path leading from an awakened self to the divinization of life. If we wish to reach love as a de-finite expression of a divinized human(ity), we should first deal with Unger's concepts of self and soul as well as their finitude and infinity. Unger (26) says:

»The single idea that resounds on every page of this book is the idea of the infinity of the human spirit, in the individual as well as in humanity. It is a view of the wonderful and terrible disproportion of that spirit to eve-

metaphors of breadth and extent.« (Rorty 1999, 86f.; our comment)

⁵ This is a common ground for transcendentalists, American Puritans, and pragmatists. Preacher Jonathan Edwards, for instance, has admitted that: »In living through the transitions, [he has come] to see that experiencing the religious requires [his] strength to be in league with that which defines the finitude.« (Anderson 2003, 144)

rything that would contain and diminish it, of its awakening to its own nature through its confrontation with the reality of constraint and the prospect of death (...).«

II

Now, these words remind us of the contexts we can find in Heidegger (being-towards-death) and particularly in Jean-Luc Nancy (in his important work *The Inoperative Community*). In one of our recent treatises on the relationship between the revolutionary and anti-democratic politics-ethics of Žižek and Badiou, on the one hand, and the experimentalist conception of alternative politics involving political morality in Unger, on the other, we called attention to the possibility of reading the latter in this particular key.⁶ Let us briefly present the mentioned interpretation. If we want to raise the human(ity) up to godlike power and freedom, as Unger would say, we have to see beyond the limits of what we already have. And we have to start with ourselves. Intersubjectivity is external to subjectivity – but, the question is, how do we stay within ourselves, with ourselves, and at the same time step outside ourselves through the process of divinization, imagining a new, broader community with the other(s)? The self in this process searches for itself by affirming its own infinity (Unger 2007, 215), and in this motion it is confronted »with [its] mortality and ignorance.« (219) Speaking with many predecessors of European (and the leading part of the Indian) thought, Unger sees the awakening of the self in a deepening or, better, expansion of its limits. This awakening is always associated with the risk, on the one side, of losing one's sense of self through dealing, for example, with the relationship between the self and the body (in certain types of meditation or yoga, for instance) or, on the other side of that risk, by dedicating ourselves exclusively to the world around us (through, say, some kind of external phenomenological observation). The second awakening is crucial and more radical: with it we make »the discovery within us of the demand for the infinite,« (225) which is connected to the realisation that there resides in us an infinite longing for the other. How can we come to an experience like that? According to Dionysius (1897, 29), in our ascent to *theōsis* we rely on three spiritual modes or, in other words, undergo the following processes: purification, enlightenment, and perfecting. Analogously, Unger (2007, 227) emphasises there are three values (purification, connection, divinization) making up the second awakening: divinization is now that which leads man to God and turns the respect in us into compassion and fairness into mercy. The self renews itself in such a way that instead of 'keeping out of trouble' it looks for it in order to affirm its own in-

⁶ See Lenart Škof's *Pragmatist Variations on Ethical and Intercultural Life* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), ch. 8 (Unger vs. Žižek: Pragmatism and the Limits of emancipatory Politics). Here the author points out Žižek and Badiou's incertitude about ethics as *prima philosophia* in view of their apotheosis of the idea of communism, and advocates the pragmatist idea of (deepened) democracy. Here the author points out Žižek and Badiou's incertitude about ethics as *prima philosophia* in view of their apotheosis of the idea of communism, and advocates the pragmatist idea of (deepened) democracy.

finitude. This brings us to the crucial point: when we demand for more than is already within us, what appears to be most radical is *life* itself. Life is a symbol of the inconceivable difference between the finite/mortal and the infinite. With this we would like to open the earlier anticipated interpretation and link it too to Dionysius: in his work *On the Mystical Theology*, God is what »neither lives, nor is life; neither is essence nor eternity, nor time.« (1897, 137) The passage from which this statement is taken calls to mind an Indian hymn about the beginning (*Bhava-vrittam* or *Nasadiya*, a cosmogonic hymn), in which ancient Indians through negation (later, in the *Upanishads*, this will be the '*neti neti*' or 'neither this, nor that' mode) and paradoxical speech simultaneously approach the basis of everything, the One, which is beyond being or nonbeing, which precedes life and death, but *is* – like the breathing, which again breathes or pulses without any sign of breath(ing). Let us take a look at the first three stanzas of this ancient cosmogonic hymn (*The Hymns* 1995, 633):

- »1. Then was not non-existent nor existent:
then was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.
What covered it?, and where? and what gave shelter?
Was water there, unfathomed depth of water?
2. Death was not then, nor was there naught immortal;
no sign was there, the day's and night's divider.
That One thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature:
apart from it was nothing whatsoever.
3. Darkness there was: at first concealed in darkness
this All was indiscriminated chaos.
All that existed then was void and formless:
by the great power of Warmth was born that Unit.«

The comparison is interesting because it raises the question of how a mortal being, as a *singularity*, through opening up towards the other, sees life and through life that infinite other or its transcendence. The speech we observed in Dionysius and in the Vedic hymn is a speech leading us into the twilight of ignorance, the mystery of secrecy. Even ancient Indians observed the following: *parokshapriya iva hi devah pratyakshadvishah* – i.e., that »gods seem to love the mysterious and hate the obvious« (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* 4.2.2.; *The Upanisads* 2003, 65); similarly, Dionysius (1897, 131) says »But see that none of the uninitiated listen to these things«. So, within us there must already pulse a cosmic being or dwell the One who came to life. For Nancy (1991) this ecstasy towards the other happens precisely to the singular being to whom *transcendence* is first revealed (not through the modes of the mind, but as an instantaneous vision of this ecstasy) through the death/absence of the other before it, that is, through a radical and definitive absence of the breath/pulse of life in the dead other before me ('before' in the sense of temporal and spatial coordinates), in the way of reflection, i.e. that which could not be seen in the other any more; also as a con-

ception of our own finitude, as Heidegger thought. St. Paul says, and Cusanus after him: »For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face« (1 Cor 13,12; Holy Bible 1990) – and we can see that it is this *glance* (away from God) which hides the key to the awakening that finally confers on the self the first impulse, the first pulsation of *this* transcendence –, of the One that gives life without living itself (this is the mystery of Easter), the energy that gives one breath, without breathing or being breath itself (this is the mystery of the Holy Spirit), and all there *is*, yet only as the eternal beyond being (God/dess).

To return to singularity and the infinity within it: only this way can we round off the thought that the cosmos is revealed to us as 'an infinite circle,' a symbol of the merging of the singular and its absolute other, its transcendence. For Nancy, community (society) is always revealed in the death of others, their radical absence, defunctness, »[c]ommunity is what takes place always through others and for others.« (Nancy 1991, 15) Nothing can deny this radical absence, no purpose, no idea; all that we have is the realisation that

»these deaths are not *sublated*: no dialectic, no salvation leads these deaths to any other immanence than that of ... death.« (13)

Community is born precisely where individuals are no longer individuals, but – using Unger's metaphor and method – where they are each their own awakened selves. Awakened, that is, to the extent of being aware of the impossibility of their own existence as individuals in a community. Only this way can men be conscious of the demand of the infinite within themselves, of the future and the path to the limit (as 'God'): *our death is at the same time our birth*, Nancy would say.

III

In the beginning of this paper, we reflected upon a pragmatist thought on a process of creating something new in an experimental and gradual way; and claiming that it is only from this persistent creation of new things that new values can spring forth: in this we referred to the *divinization* of humanity and understood it later as a horizontal mode of transcendence.

Let us now raise one last question: what does the idea of the infinity of human spirit then comprise? What is the spirit itself or the spiritual if we think it following the tradition described and through contemporary thought? How is *divinization* revealed to us? Which ethical consequences ensue from the above-described relationship between the self and its spiritual primordial ideal? These may already be too many questions. We said that the key to divinization was hidden in the *mirror* of life, the riddle of all riddles, which takes the future out of the past and hands it – and the God in it – over to us. There were two kinds of transcendence laid out in front of us: the first one we found in the demand to be more than we can be, while the second pointed at the limit of God's glance, elusive and delive-

ring us to the eternal dusk of ignorance, unseeing and unknowing. But they were one – for, in giving and accepting life, they touched where the individual as a singularity was met by the defunct other appearing as their incomplete essence, the other, who is like a *cut* in my flesh and my spirit. We would finally like to return to Unger now: as a pragmatist he believes that we (as selves) are infinite in relation to our imperfection or indefiniteness, that is, in the context of past and future incompleteness of our own selves. We expanded this into the thought that life is what is imposed on the self as an eternal lack of transcendence, an unfulfilled task which, like a motor (longing, will, ethical wish) conveys us into the future on the path to divinization. On this path, we silently turn our glance, prayer and thoughts to everything that surrounds us. We grow into *spiritual* beings. Life can then eventually be seen as the purpose of the secrecy that can be reached by absolute ecstasy or directing one's self outwards (*ekstasis*) (Dionysius the Areopagite 1897, 131), as a prospect of fulfilling our spiritual selves, i.e. as love towards the beings of the world, our greatest hope.

What ethico-political consequences this thought might have for us mortals, as being part of communities of hope that shape our ethical and political lives? In his last book, *The Religion of the Future* (Unger 2014), Unger sets up a new proposal for Christianity – as a religion of the future. For Unger, as a genuine pragmatist, »our efforts at solidarity are penetrated and transformed by our rebellion against belittlement and by our longing for the infinite« (353). This relates to our inherent ethic of solidarity and fellow feeling. This ethics springs from our incompleteness and mortality, and our sense for the others – as vulnerable and essentially or ontologically fragile beings. Based on his original concept of virtues from *The Self Awakened* (i.e., purification, connection, and divinization – as making up the so called »second awakening«; Unger 2007, 225), Unger now enlarges this proposal with a new vision of our religious and ethico-political life, as being based on his earlier three pragmatist virtues. It is our task to analyze the third set of values – those of divinization as proposed by Unger.

Virtues of divinization consist of three parts, mirroring three classical Christian virtues – faith, hope and charity or love. Faith is related to our »acceptance of the vulnerability«, charity to »openness to the other person«, and hope to our »openness to the new« (383). The first virtue is described by Unger in a radicalized way – if we keep in mind recent studies in vulnerability (Gilson 2014). For Erin Gilson (her book is without doubt one of the most comprehensive studies on vulnerability we have) the ethics of vulnerability is related to the sphere of our duties and responsibilities towards others. As we ourselves are always already vulnerable, it is our basic vulnerability that »compels or motivates ethical action« (16) and thus transforms our vulnerability into an ethical norm. So direction here is from ourselves towards others. Unger radicalizes this point. For him, vulnerability is an equivalent to faith, we have seen. Moreover, our vulnerability also is all that we have – but it is from us as mortal and vulnerable beings that we act towards others – but now, as it were, in another direction – and this is a specific Christian character of Unger's motivation for action – namely, with vulnerability we have to accept

more risks for ourselves, and thus become more vulnerable. This is the core of Unger's divinization and also a first precondition for the religion of the future. Vulnerability is not a virtue leading to some kind of normativity: in its radicalized form, it searches within ourselves for our bigger self, and, as it were, in an Emersonian way, enlarges it back towards others. Divinization thus is faith: our faith that with »more engagement, more connection, more risk, more vulnerability« (Unger 2014, 384) we are moving towards *life* – of a community. This structure can now lead towards the other two virtues – openness to the other and openness to the new. Openness to the other (charity, love, compassion) has to operate among equals. It compels us towards a future world where our divinized selves will shape a new – patient and nonviolent – if we may add, culture of love. Openness to the new now means that, in a genuine pragmatist and experimentalist manner, we always unsettle and modify our present contexts of life: we wish to live greater lives, both ethically and socially, and we want to know that there is more in us that we are willing to admit.

Let us wind up this paper with Unger's compelling words from the concluding chapter of his *The Religion of the future* – titled Life itself:

»Our religion should begin in the acknowledgement of these terrifying facts rather than in their denial, as religion traditionally has. It should arouse us to change society, culture, and ourselves so that we become – all of us, not just a happy few – bigger as well as more equal, and take for ourselves a larger share in powers that we have assigned to God. It should therefore, as well, make us more willing to unprotect ourselves for the sake of bigness and of love. It should convince us to exchange serenity for searching.« (444)

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