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**THE CONCEPTS OF LIGHT AND DARKNESS:
A MYTHOLOGICAL, PHILOSOPHICAL AND RELIGIOUS
PERSPECTIVE ON THESE PHENOMENA ***

Abstract: *This paper explores the concepts of light and darkness from ancient Greece to the 14th-century Balkans through the perspectives of several authors and traditions. The first part examines mythological, religious, and philosophical thought in Greek and Hellenistic contexts, while the second focuses on Plotinus's interpretation and the reflections of Augustine of Hippo and Gregory Palamas. The concluding section identifies similarities and differences in how light and darkness have been understood across these traditions. Rather than offering a comprehensive overview, the paper aims to highlight conceptual continuities and the ways in which these ideas were transmitted over time.*

Keywords: *light, darkness, Plato, Epictetus, Plotinus, Augustine of Hippo, Gregory Palamas*

The phenomena of light and darkness have been the subject of human reflection since the earliest periods of humankind, and long before the development of philosophical thought. In ancient Greek and Hellenistic religious and mythological thought, the concept of *light* (Greek: φῶς, Latin: lux) was often—if not predominantly—associated with life; with deities such as Zeus (Jupiter in Roman mythology), Helios or Heliος (Sol in Rome), and Apollo or Phoebus (=brightness); and in philosophical thought, with knowledge, sight, and virtue. In contrast, *darkness* and shadows were linked to death; to figures such as Chaos (or Chasm), Nyx, Hades (Pluto in Roman mythology), and sometimes Dionysus; and, in philosophy, to ignorance, blindness, and vice. In Christian religious and theological thought, *light* is associated with the Supreme Being or God, as well as with intellect and soul, while *darkness* is linked to the Fall, the body, and sin. For instance, in the biblical account of Saul's conversion, heavenly, brilliant Light shines when Christ appears on the road to Damascus.¹

The symbolism of light and illumination is found in the writings of numerous authors, extending from the Greek mythological and philosophical tradition to Christian religious thought, including Plato, Philo, Plotinus, Basil of Caesarea, Augustine, the Areopagite, Eckhart, Palamas, Ficino, among others.² Rather than offering an exhaustive historical overview, which would not even be possible, this paper aims to draw attention to conceptual continuities, and

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In this paper, I use established abbreviations for citing classical works, most of which can be found in the fourth edition of *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*.

¹ Ac. 9; 22; 26. For a more detailed analysis of the meaning of φῶς in Christian and religious contexts, see Friedrich & Bromiley 1974, Vol. 9, 310–358.

² Cf. Katsos 2023.

points of convergence that span several intellectual and theological traditions, focusing on some of the authors and traditions mentioned above.

In the first section of this paper, several important characteristics of light and darkness in ancient Greek, Hellenistic, and Roman mythology, religion, and philosophy will be presented. The second section will highlight certain aspects of Plotinus's thought and of Christian theology as articulated by Augustine of Hippo and Gregory Palamas, both of whom, although to varying degrees, were influenced by earlier Greek and Hellenistic mythology and philosophy, as well as by the later philosophical tradition of (Neo)Platonism.³ The concluding section will identify some of the central similarities and differences in how the concepts of light and darkness have been understood and interwoven throughout the centuries among the traditions discussed.

Reflections on Light and Darkness: Between Olympus, the Academy, and the Roman Forum

The association between *light* and *darkness* can be traced back to the earliest stages of Greek religious and mythological thought, and it remained present in Roman culture as well. Yet even though life was predominantly associated with light, darkness was also seen as necessary for birth and growth—phenomena that were often closely linked.

Greek mythology, or more precisely Hesiod in his *Theogony*, recounts that in the beginning, there was Chaos/Chasm, along with Ge/Gaia/Earth, Tartarus, and Eros, and these deities were self-created.

In truth, first of all Chasm came to be, and then broad-breasted Earth, the ever immovable seat of all the immortals who possess snowy Olympus' peak and murky Tartarus in the depths of the broad-pathed earth, and Eros, who is the most beautiful among the immortal gods, the limb-melter-he overpowers the mind and the thoughtful counsel of all the gods and of all human beings in their breasts.⁴

From Chasm, Erebus and black Night came to be; and then Aether and Day came forth from Night, who conceived and bore them, after mingling in love with Erebus.⁵

Earth first of all bore starry Sky, equal to herself, to cover her on every side.⁶

Chaos/Chasm was sometimes seen as “a jumble of disordered matter”, “the void, the abyss, the infinite space and *darkness*, unformed matter,” and could also be interpreted as “a gap or opening” or a cosmic womb that gave birth to Erebus (*Darkness*) and Nyx (*Black Night*), who, according to Orphic theogony, was the mother of Ge/Gaia (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven).⁷ Thus, for the Greeks chaos, or the “infinite space and darkness,” and black night and darkness, came before light. Nevertheless, light was essential not only for creation but even more so for the maintenance and flourishing of human life. The gods played a significant role in this flourishing, either by promoting it or by restricting it. This dynamic is reflected in Greek poetry as well, particularly in the works of Pindar, where we find the following lines:

Man lives for the day. What is he?
What is he not?

³ See, for example, Augustine, *Conf.* 7.13.

⁴ Hes. *Theog.* 116-122, trans. Glenn W. Most.

⁵ *Ibid.* 123-125.

⁶ *Ibid.* 126-127.

⁷ Rigoglioso 2010, 16; Hesiod 2006, 13; footnote 7 – commentary by Glenn W. Most.

A shadow in a dream
Is man; but when god sheds a brightness
Shining light is on men,
And life is as sweet as honey.⁸

As Pindar's lyrics proclaim, it is the god who shines light and illuminates humanity. Lightning, in particular, was regarded as a visible manifestation of Zeus's divine presence.⁹ After all, the Greek Olympian gods—except for Hades, the god of the underworld—“live in pure realms where there is no darkness but always light. In that glorious light, they often appear to men, usually at moments of crisis [...]”.¹⁰ This *crisis* (κρίσις) often evokes a distinct “event,” “decision,” “judgement,” “choice,” or “sudden change for better or worse”, and can therefore be applied to periods in which something urgent “has to be decided”.¹¹ These *brilliant* gods are particularly skilled at provoking and managing such moments of crisis, while at the same time offering guidance to human beings.

Pindar is no exception, as numerous examples associate the divine with light or even equate the two, as in the case of Zeus and Helios. The following examples illustrate this: in Homer, divine appearances are often revealed through *visual* cues, particularly the *radiant* eyes of gods and goddesses, which can expose their true identities even when they are in disguise. For example, in *Iliad* 3, Aphrodite appears to Helen as an elderly woolworker from Sparta, but her “sparkling” eyes¹² betray her divine nature.¹³ In *Medea*, Medea invokes Zeus, the Justice of Zeus, and the light of the Sun to bear witness to the vengeance she plans against her enemies.¹⁴ Ultimately, Helios, the Sun god, saves Medea, even though her actions are cruel and her soul tainted by *darkness*.¹⁵ Finally, *divine radiance* is also reflected in the golden light that covered the island of Delos when Apollo first set foot on it shortly after his birth by Leto—an aspect of brilliance that would later become closely associated with him.¹⁶

Conversely, some gods are associated with darkness or with forces that oppose light, such as Hades or Dionysus, who embodies intensity, madness, and altered states of consciousness. Despite being the child of the supreme Olympian god, Zeus, and the mortal Semele, Dionysus is not governed solely by the light of reason or ordinary awareness.¹⁷ His myth also illustrates that *divine light* can be overwhelming and even fatal for mortals, as in the case of Semele, who could not withstand the overpowering radiance of Zeus, her lover and the father of their child, Dionysus.¹⁸

⁸ Pind. P. 8.95–7, trans. C. M. Bowra; Constantinidou 2010, 91.

⁹ Graves 2017, 106: “The seven against Thebes”.

¹⁰ Constantinidou 2010, 93.

¹¹ Liddell & Scott 1940, Plećaš 2021b, 31.

¹² Hom. *Il.* 3.397.

¹³ Constantinidou 2010, 93.

¹⁴ Syropoulos 2010, 81; Eur. *Med.* 764.

¹⁵ See Plećaš & Đorđević 2023 for further discussion.

¹⁶ Homeric *Hymn to Apollo* 133–138; Constantinidou 2010, 93.

¹⁷ Paris 1998, 9.

¹⁸ The story unfolds as follows (Paris 1998, 9): Zeus, disguised as a human, seduces Semele and eventually reveals his divine identity, leading to her pregnancy. However, Hera—Zeus's wife and queen of Olympus—refuses to ignore the affair. Disguised as Semele's nurse, she approaches the young woman with a sinister plan:

“Really, you believed that handsome lover who pretends he's a God? You're very naive, my dear, and now you're pregnant. The next time he visits you, ask him for some proof. If he's really the all-powerful Zeus, let him show himself in all his splendor!” (Paris 1998, 9).

One of the punishments the gods inflicted upon mortals for their disobedience was not always fatal as in the case of Semele but was instead blindness, a condition closely associated with darkness. This form of punishment was particularly reserved for instances in which humans beheld the gods in their full power and radiance. The examples are varied, but in each case, the boundary of divine law was transgressed, often with consequences that extended into the human moral order. Among the most well-known examples is that of Oedipus, who blinds himself after discovering the full extent of his transgressions.¹⁹ However, blindness was also imposed directly by the gods. According to myth, Tiresias was struck blind by Athena in accordance with the ancient laws of Cronus, and later became Apollo's prophet in Thebes. In Callimachus's poem dedicated to the goddess Athena (often referred to as *The Bathing of Pallas*), Tiresias accidentally glimpses the goddess naked. Athena then justifies his punishment in a conversation with his mother (lines 98–102):

It was not I who blinded your son
It is not Athena's pleasure to snatch children's eyes
This is what Cronos' laws ordain:
Whosoever gazes upon an immortal without the god choosing
This man pays a terrible price for seeing the god.²⁰

Like the tale of Semele and Dionysus, this myth underscores the idea that mere mortals cannot endure direct, unmediated contact with divine nature and its radiant light. While such brilliance and pervasive illumination are intrinsic to the gods, they remain overwhelming and even destructive for humans. Blindness, then, serves as a fitting punishment for those who witness what mortals are forbidden to see. This penalty is enforced by deities such as Zeus, Hera, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Athena—gods who uphold the divine order established under Zeus's rule. By imposing blindness, the gods reinforce the boundary between the human and divine realms, thereby maintaining cosmic order and curbing human transgression.²¹

This notion of divine order was also central to the ancient Greek philosophical thought. As Plutarch records, Heraclitus famously declared: "The sun will not overstep its measures; otherwise, the Erinyes, helpers of Justice, will find it."²² This statement reflects the fundamental principles of law, punishment, and cosmic balance not only among humans, but among the gods themselves.

Dionysus's counterpart, Apollo, represents "daylight knowledge"—a form of understanding grounded in direct evidence and clear expression.²³ Associated with a rational and often monotheistic impulse, Apollo seeks to explain the world through science and reason, dismissing "moonlight" as mere darkness. In contrast, Dionysus, especially in his Orphic aspect,

Mistaking Hera for her trusted nurse, Semele begins to doubt Zeus's identity, fearing she has been deceived by a mortal. When Zeus next visits, she demands a favor. Bound by an oath to grant her request, he complies when she insists on seeing his true divine form. Despite his warnings, Zeus reveals himself, and the *overwhelming radiance* of his full divinity proves *fatal* to the mortal Semele. To save their unborn child, Zeus swiftly implants the fetus into his thigh, sealing it with golden clamps. When the time comes, Ilithyia, goddess of childbirth, assists in the delivery of Dionysus—the "twice-born" god (Graves 2017, 14: "Births of Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, and Dionysus").

¹⁹ See Soph. OT; Graves 2017, 105: Oedipus.

²⁰ Tatti-Gartziou 2010, 181.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

²² D89 [B94], Plut. *Exil.*; Laks & Most 2016, 180–181.

²³ Paris 1998, 113; see also Graves 2017, 14: "Births of Hermes, Apollo, Artemis, and Dionysus", 21: "Apollo's nature and deeds."

becomes a singular source of ecstatic knowledge and mystical experience for his followers.²⁴ Moreover, while Dionysus represented freedom, Apollo “promised security”.²⁵

Yet Apollo was not confined strictly to rationality, which was specifically emphasized by Dodds in his classic study *The Greeks and the Irrational*.²⁶ After discovering the secret of prophecy, Apollo transmitted it to his priestesses at the Delphic oracle, where he was also linked with a form of inspiration that transcended pure reason. Although the Delphic maxim “know thyself” was said to be ever on Apollo’s lips, his priestesses acted primarily as instruments of the sanctuary—his prophetic “mouthpieces”.²⁷ These women were described as “mad” and possessed by the god himself; thus, Apollo became associated with prophetic madness.²⁸

In this way, the boundary between darkness and light begins to blur. Neither domain can be reduced simply to the rational or the irrational, especially since the irrational domain was quite present in Greek culture and society.²⁹ Nevertheless, madness as mental illness was more frequently associated with Dionysus and was often interpreted as a form of divine punishment, alongside death and blindness, as we have seen.

To conclude, light and darkness were not always easily distinguishable, as these phenomena often coexisted and were attributed to the same deities. The realm of the gods and that of humans, by contrast, were clearly divided: while humans could perceive the gods, they were not permitted to witness their full radiance and power without consequence. Divine punishment often followed acts of disobedience or transgression. Yet the gods also served as caregivers and providers for humankind.

In ancient Greek and Roman philosophy, light was also a significant concept. Socrates—sometimes regarded as a servant of Apollo—was closely linked to the god, whose enduring association with the Platonist school may be traced to Apollo’s recognition of Socrates as the “wisest of men”.³⁰ Socrates was a *primus inventor*, a philosopher who discovered a world “closest to men,” a world that had “never before [been] glimpsed”.³¹ This was a human world, one in which ethical questions and the dilemmas of fellow Athenians, and of humanity in general, took precedence over purely cosmological theories. Socrates was thus associated with Apollo and the relentless pursuit of truth, wisdom, and self-knowledge. After all, in the Socratic tradition, virtue was equated with knowledge.³² In this way, the presence of the Greek pantheon extended beyond the boundaries of mythology, shaping philosophical and ethical thought in antiquity and, to varying degrees, influencing later traditions, including Christianity.

One enduring example in which *light* is associated with *life*, and mythology with philosophy, is the myth of Prometheus, whose defiant act has captured the attention of thinkers from early Greek poets like Hesiod to philosophers such as Plato. Etymologically, Prometheus is linked to foresight and cunning, he is literally “one who thinks ahead”, in contrast to his brother Epimetheus, who acts with hindsight. In myth, Prometheus defies the gods by granting essential gifts to humanity. As Plato recounts in the *Statesman* (274c6–e1), these include fire from Prometheus, the crafts from Hephaestus and his collaborators, and agricultural tools and resources, all of which became necessary for human survival once divine protection was withdrawn, and humans were left to sustain themselves. In the *Protagoras* (321d5), Plato further

²⁴ For further discussion, see Paris 1998, 114.

²⁵ Dodds 1951.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, Ch. 3: “The Blessings of Madness”.

²⁷ Graves 2017, 21: “Apollo’s Nature and Deeds”; Dillon 2017, 9; Plečaš 2021b, 22.

²⁸ Pl. *Phdr.* 244b.

²⁹ For further discussion, see Dodds 1951.

³⁰ Kenney 2005, 18.

³¹ Cf. Sassi 2018, 2.

³² For further discussion, see Dobrijević 2021.

notes that Prometheus stole both fire and technical wisdom from Hephaestus and Athena, thereby enabling humans to acquire practical skills, although they continued to lack political wisdom. Through fire, Prometheus bestows *vision, knowledge*, art, and the capacity for education. As the sophist Protagoras declares, Prometheus’s intervention ultimately saves civilization, to whom he is deeply devoted. Finally, Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* serves as a philosophical echo of Promethean enlightenment and profoundly influenced his successors, particularly the (Neo)Platonic tradition.³³ After all, for Plato, vision or sight was the most valued of all the senses, closely connected to the pursuit of truth and associated with contemplation or θεωρία. Plotinus later draws extensively on the sun analogy from Plato’s *Republic* to articulate the contemplative nature of metaphysical inquiry, consistently presenting Intellect as oriented toward θεωρεῖν.³⁴ Yet the mythological roots of this narrative should not be mistaken for mere metaphor: they reflect the ancient view that mythology and philosophy often coexisted and intertwined. Additionally, various scholars regard Aristotle’s analogy between the Active Intellect and light in *De Anima* 3.5 as inspired by Plato’s comparison of the sun to the Good in *Republic* 508a4–509b10.³⁵

Hellenistic philosophy, which may be described as Socratic at its core,³⁶ also incorporated the concept of light. For instance, in various Stoic accounts, air and fire are described not merely as elements that rise upward but as forms of *light*.³⁷ Some authors, such as Cooper, interpret the glow or “flash of light” described by the Stoic philosopher Chrysippus as a symbolic moment in which, following the cosmic conflagration, God pauses to contemplate the design of the cosmos to come.³⁸ Yet the Stoic deity is primarily conceived as a rational and active principle, or a law that governs the universe, rather than as a transcendent, all-knowing being existing outside of nature.³⁹ In this framework, Zeus is conceived as an immanent force, a divine principle present within and actively influencing the natural world. The Stoics, in doing so, uphold the broader tradition of ancient Greek philosophy, which consistently aimed to rationalize religious mythology by stripping away their mythical elements. Such philosophical interpretations typically linked the divine either to essential elements of the cosmos or to inherent characteristics of human nature.

Roman Stoic Epictetus allegedly spoke the following words. It reads as follows:

If God had created colours without also having created the faculty of vision, what good would that have served?—‘None at all.’ [4] — Conversely, if he had created the faculty of vision without causing objects to be of such a nature as to be visible to it, what good would have been served in that case too?—‘None.’ [5] — Or again, if he had brought about these two things, but hadn’t created light? [6] — ‘In that case, too, no good would have been served.’—Who is it, then, who has adapted one thing to another? ... [8] Does each of these works reveal its maker, then, while visible objects and vision and light do not? [9] ... [10] This remarkable constitution of our mind, which enables us not only to receive impressions from sensible objects when they act upon us, but also to choose

³³ See Pl. *Resp.* 514a–520a.

³⁴ Plotinus. *Enn.* V.1[10].6.28.

³⁵ Schroeder 2014.

³⁶ Although the Hellenistic schools of philosophy differ in their teachings, they mostly draw inspiration from ideas traditionally attributed to Socrates. For example, the Cynics glorify poverty, the Stoics embrace the Socratic stance towards virtue, and the Academics advocate the suspension of judgment, derived from Socrates’s position in the *Apology* (21d).

³⁷ See Furley 1999, 445.

³⁸ Salles 2020, 93.

³⁹ For further discussion, see Long 1982.

certain impressions from among them, and subtract from them, and add to them, and so make various combinations, and also, by Zeus, substitute some for others which are in some way related to them—can it really be the case that even this isn't enough to move some people, and make them change their ideas so as to make allowance for the maker? [11] Or otherwise, let them explain what it is that brings all of this about, or how it is possible that such wonders that bear all the signs of workmanship could come into being by chance and of their own accord.⁴⁰

Epictetus, in this passage, underscores *light* as fundamental to perception; without it, neither vision nor visible objects would hold much meaning. Additionally, this suggests that light is a necessary precondition for comprehending reality—not merely as a physical phenomenon, but as a principle of order, intellect, and divine craftsmanship. Vision, visible objects, and light coexist in a carefully arranged system, and their interconnectedness reveals a deliberate, rational design rather than mere chance, and represents evidence of a divine intelligence. The following words are also attributed to Epictetus:

Zeus did not neglect to assign to each of us a good guardian spirit (δαίμων), ever watchful and faithful. [...] Therefore, when you shut the door and *darkness* envelops the house, remember never to say that you are alone; for you are not truly alone, as God and your guardian spirit are within. Do they need *light* to see what you are doing?⁴¹

This rhetorical question underscores a deeper insight: Zeus is intimately associated with the faculty of *vision* and is portrayed as omnipresent—capable of seeing and overseeing all, even in the absence of physical light, even in moments of darkness. In this sense, human beings are never truly alone, for there is always *light*, or at least a connection to it, through the divine and the guiding spirit, the δαίμων, within each individual. This δαίμων can also be interpreted as the voice of reason or conscience, much like Socrates understood it in Plato's *Apology*.⁴² The Roman Stoic Seneca echoes this intimacy between the divine and the human when he writes: “God comes to human beings. No, it is more intimate than that: God actually comes into human beings”.⁴³

In contrast to the Stoics, another Hellenistic school, the Epicureans, advocated the *tetrapharmakon*, a fourfold remedy that included liberation from the fear of the gods and divine intervention. Epicurus argued that religious beliefs disturbed the soul, as conceptions of the divine were shaped by mythological portrayals, particularly those of Homer and Hesiod. These depictions of wrathful and vengeful deities instilled fear, leading people to attribute natural phenomena such as *lightning* and earthquakes to the will of gods like Zeus and Poseidon.⁴⁴ For Epicurus, however, there was nothing inherently supernatural in either *lightning* or *darkness* that should provoke fear or demand human submission.⁴⁵

To summarize, ancient Greek and Hellenistic philosophy continued to place emphasis on the concept of light, thereby extending the dialogue with earlier religious beliefs, sometimes

⁴⁰ Epict. *Diss.* 1.6; R. Hard, Trans.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 1.14.12-15.

⁴² See also Plečaš 2021a.

⁴³ Sen. *Ep.* 73; M. Graver and A. A. Long, Trans.

⁴⁴ Hensley 2020, 138.

⁴⁵ For further insights into the role of sight in Epicurean thought, consult Pavličić & Nišavić (2023). A detailed examination of the *tetrapharmakon* can be found in Nišavić (2022, 173-176).

stripping these beliefs of their symbolic context in an effort to rationally explain both the cosmos and the nature and capacities of human beings.

Illumination and Intellect: Plotinus, Augustine, and Palamas on the Divine and the Visible

In Orphic cosmogony, Phanes, a primordial deity associated with *light* and *goodness*, derives his name from the idea of “bringing light” or “shining forth”. According to myth, Phanes is the first-born of creation, emerging from the abyss identified with Night (Nyx), who, as the myth suggests, came first in order “to be able to see” the new god.⁴⁶ In *Iliad* 14.259, Nyx is portrayed as a “formidable” force, even more powerful than the Olympian gods. Nyx and Phanes are cosmologically inseparable and are often regarded as polarities, each unable to exist or reveal itself without the presence of the other: darkness gives way to light, and light emerges from within darkness. This motif, where Night or Darkness precedes Phanes or Light, mirrors a recurring cosmological structure found in various ancient traditions, including the opening verses of *Genesis*.⁴⁷

In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. Yet the earth was invisible and unformed, and darkness was upon the abyss; and the spirit of God was hovering over the water. And God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. And God saw the light that it was good; and God separated between the light and the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, day one.⁴⁸

In early Christian religious thought and mysticism, as well as in Neoplatonism, the concepts of *light* and *darkness* held central significance, light was associated with the Divine (as Augustine notes in treatise *On the Trinity* 14.21, where God is described as the “source” of light), while *darkness* was linked to the Fall and the realm of shadows. This conceptual framework is present in both Western and Eastern Christian traditions.

Plotinus stands out among Neoplatonic thinkers for his distinctive focus on the relationship between the One and Intellect “as the first dimension of the manifest world” and he investigates the continuity and connection between the One or God, described as “pure light” and an “eternal awakening”, and Intellect, understood as the actualization or expression of that light.⁴⁹

[...] this [light] is from him, and he is it; we must think that he is present when, like another god whom someone called to his house he comes and brings light to us: for if he had not come, he would not have brought the light. So, the unenlightened soul does not have him as God; but when it is enlightened it has what it sought, and this is the soul’s true end, to touch that light and see it by itself, not by another light, but by the light which is also its means of seeing. It must see that light by which it is enlightened: for we do not see the sun by another light than his own.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Rigoglioso 2019, 17.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Gen.* 1:1–5. This translation is taken from a recent study by Isidoros C. Katsos (2023, 18).

⁴⁹ Ahbel-Rappe 2014, 168.

⁵⁰ Plotinus. *Enn.* V.3[49].17.30–39.

Matter darkens the illumination, the light from that source, by mixture with itself, and weakens it by itself offering it the opportunity of generation and the reason for coming to matter; for it would not have come to what was not present. This is the fall of the soul, to come in this way to matter and to become weak, because all its powers do not come into action; matter hinders them from coming by occupying the place which soul holds and producing a kind of cramped condition, and making evil what it has got hold of by a sort of theft—until soul manages to escape back to its higher state.⁵¹

Plotinus’s metaphysics can be described as the *metaphysics of light*, where light fundamentally symbolizes the intelligible realm that permeates all things.⁵² When this intelligible light is depleted or withdrawn, it results in the emergence of darkness, and becomes the darkness where matter consists of.⁵³

If body did not exist, soul would not go forth, since there is no place other than body where it is natural for it to be. [...] Soul’s rest is, we may say, confirmed in absolute rest; a great light shines from it, and at the outermost edge of this firelight there is a darkness.⁵⁴

The soul possesses the inherent capacity to become enlightened and to draw near to the source of light. However, not everyone is inclined or willing to change, nor prepared to adopt a different way of seeing. Accordingly, Plotinus urges his readers to engage in the inner purification of the soul and to turn inward, toward “another way of seeing”, thereby enabling the soul to ascend to the contemplation of Beauty in its ideal form, a Beauty that ultimately emanates from the Good, that is, from God:

Let him who can, follow and come within, and leave outside the sight of his eyes and not turn back to the bodily splendours which he saw before. When he sees the beauty in bodies he must not run after them; we must know that they are images, traces, shadows, and hurry away to that which they image. For if a man runs to the image and wants to seize it as if it was the reality [...] then this man who clings to beautiful bodies and will not let them go, will [...] sink down into the dark depths where intellect has no delight, and stay blind in Hades, consorting with shadows there and here. [...] Shut your eyes, and change to and wake another way of seeing, which everyone has but few use.⁵⁵

Augustine of Hippo, in his *Confessions*, argued that the human mind requires illumination from an external source of *light*, a concept that notably resonates with certain Stoic and Neoplatonist perspectives on divine reason and enlightenment. His epistemological theory, commonly referred to as the “doctrine of illumination”, represents a clear departure from empiricist models, drawing instead on a likely Neoplatonic interpretation of Plato’s theory of recollection.⁵⁶ Like the Stoics and Plotinus before him, Augustine maintains that by turning inward, from the corporeal to the spiritual, and from the sensible to the intelligible, we may

⁵¹ *Ibid.* I.8[51].14.40–50.

⁵² Beiewaltes 1961; Rappe 2007, 91. See also Katsos 2023.

⁵³ Plotinus, *Enn.* IV.3[27].9.20–27; Ahbel-Rappe 2014.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* IV.3[27].9.20–27.

⁵⁵ *Enn.* 1.6[1].8.4–28.

⁵⁶ Tornau 2024.

ultimately transcend ourselves and encounter the supreme being, identified as God and Truth.⁵⁷ He even reflects on the misguided nature of his early spiritual quest, acknowledging:

I was walking on a treacherous path, in darkness. I was looking for you outside myself and I did not find the God of my own heart. I had reached the depths of the ocean. I had lost all faith and was in despair of finding the truth.⁵⁸

The truth that Augustine sought is closely associated with light, particularly in his treatise *On the Trinity* (8.2):

For it is written that “God is light” [John 1:5] not as these eyes see it, but as the heart sees it when it hears: “He is Truth” [John 14:6]. Do not ask: “What is Truth?” [John 18:38].

Furthermore, he who is not in God is not in the light, because “God is light and in him is no darkness” [John 1:5]. If anyone, therefore, is not in the light, what wonder is it if he does not see the light, that is, if he does not see God, because he is in darkness?⁵⁹

Augustine asserts that the human mind is created by God to be intrinsically oriented toward intelligible reality, possessing a capacity to perceive “the intelligibles in the light of intelligible truth”, analogous to how the eye is naturally suited to perceive colors through the light of the sun.⁶⁰ However, Augustine regards the pleasure of sight as the most pervasive of all sensual experiences, observing in his *Confessions* that light, as the “queen of colours,” envelops and illuminates everything visible, surrounding and gently touching him wherever he finds himself during the day.⁶¹ While the contemplation of beautiful objects can serve as a means of ascent toward transcendent Beauty there remains a persistent danger of becoming captivated by material beauty itself and failing to move beyond it; moreover, visual distractions extend beyond aesthetic allure.⁶² Yet Augustine, like Plotinus and the Roman Stoics, maintains that it is possible to transcend visual impressions by turning inward, as *true* happiness is to be found within the self. He articulates this conviction in a particularly reflective passage:

The good which I now sought was not outside myself. I did not look for it in things which are seen with the eye of the flesh by the light of the sun. For those who try to find joy in things outside themselves easily vanish away into emptiness. They waste themselves on the temporal pleasures of the visible world. Their minds are starved, and they nibble at empty shadows. How I wish that they would tire of going hungry and *cry out for a sight of better times!* This is the answer they would hear from us: *Already, Lord, the sunshine of your favour has been plainly shown to us.* For we are not ourselves *the Light which enlightens every soul.* We are enlightened by you, so that we who once *were all darkness* may now, in the Lord, be *all daylight.*⁶³

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ August. *Conf.* 6.1.

⁵⁹ August. *De Trinitate* 8.8.

⁶⁰ Tornau 2024.

⁶¹ August. *Conf.* 10.34.

⁶² Conybeare 2016, 73.

⁶³ August. *Conf.* 9.4.

Augustine recounts two attempts at an *inward ascent* to higher understanding in his *Confessions*.⁶⁴ In the first, he turns inward and perceives, through the limited capacity of his spiritual vision, an unchanging light existing far above his mind, utterly transcendent. However, the intensity of this experience proves *overwhelming*, and he retreats, recognizing his distance from the divine. “Your light shone upon me in its brilliance, and I thrilled with love and dread alike. I realized that I was far away from you.”⁶⁵ Later, his approach proves more fruitful, though brief: “I caught sight of your invisible nature, as it is known through your creatures. But I had no strength to fix my gaze upon them.”⁶⁶ This reflects a core insight that Augustine inherits from Plotinus, namely, from the *Enneads*: the ontological fullness of God, who, though invisible, is a spiritual reality, both the ground of being and the source from which all being proceeds.⁶⁷ Moreover, this idea echoes some of the narratives in Greek mythology discussed earlier in this paper, in which light and divine radiance, in the chosen examples, prove overwhelming for mere mortals. After all, such examples are also found in the biblical narrative, for instance, in the well-known story of Saul’s conversion, when he was blinded by the heavenly light.

Centuries after Augustine, Gregory Palamas, who also looked to Augustine “as a source of inspiration” for some of his views,⁶⁸ further developed the concept of Divine light, particularly in the context of the Hesychast controversy. This notion of Divine light, or Grace, associated with the light witnessed by the apostles during the Transfiguration on Mount Tabor, was formally affirmed as a doctrine by the Orthodox Church in the 14th century, solidifying the theological significance of Divine light in Eastern Christian mysticism.

In Palamas’s theological thought, the concept of divine energies (δυνάμεις θεοῦ)—frequently articulated in terms of light (φῶς) or illumination (ἐλλάμψις) holds a central and significant position. Following the tradition of the Church Fathers, Palamas articulated more precisely the distinction between the divine essence and the energies accessible to human participation, a doctrine first systematically presented in his *Third Triad*.⁶⁹ According to his theological perspective, while the Divine essence itself remains inaccessible, the Divine energies are available to human experience. Moreover, the light is not a created phenomenon, as in Augustine’s theory, but rather a *manifestation* of God’s very mode of existence—an expression of how He reveals and represents Himself to the world:

There exists, then, an eternal light, other than the divine essence; it is not itself an essence—far from it!—but an energy of the Superessential. This light without beginning or end is neither sensible nor intelligible, in the proper sense. It is spiritual and divine, distinct from all creatures in its transcendence; and what is neither sensible nor intelligible does not fall within the scope of the senses as such, nor of the intellectual faculty considered in itself.⁷⁰

Palamas equates the doctrine of divine energies with that of divine Grace, which was revealed in prophetic visions and “in the life and person of Jesus Christ”.⁷¹ On the other hand, darkness is found within those who are deprived of illumination, for instance, within evil angels.⁷²

⁶⁴ Conybeare 2016.

⁶⁵ August. *Conf.* 7.10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* 7.17.

⁶⁷ Conybeare 2016.

⁶⁸ Cf. Tomoioagă 2015, 151-152.

⁶⁹ Cf. Demetracopoulos 2011.

⁷⁰ Palamas *Tr.* III.2.14.

⁷¹ Tomoioagă 2015, 146.

⁷² Cf. Palamas, *Cap.* 64.

Like Plotinus, Augustine, and the Stoics before him, Palamas also emphasized contemplation and inward turning as essential means of approaching the Divine and oneself. According to Palamas, through silent prayer from the heart, a person forms a close connection with God, and the light that may appear and be seen in prayer represents “the very presence of God, His blessings, and His grace.”⁷³

Another saint, one of the most perfect, saw the whole universe contained in a single ray of this intelligible sun—even though he himself did not see this light as it is in itself, in its full extent, but only to that extent that he was capable of receiving it.⁷⁴

Once again, we encounter the motif of God concealing His true form from humanity, His brilliance and overwhelming radiance being too intense for mortals to endure. Yet those who seek God are called to live a virtuous life and to endure earthly trials with an open heart. This idea is expressed in the following passage.

Now that the kingdom of heaven has drawn near to us through the condescension of God the Word unto us, let us not remove ourselves far from it by living an unrepentant life. Rather, let us flee the wretchedness of “those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death.” Let us acquire the works of repentance: a humble attitude, compunction and spiritual mourning, a gentle heart full of mercy, loving justice, striving for purity, peaceful, peacemaking, patient, glad to suffer persecutions, losses, disasters, slander and sufferings for the sake of truth and righteousness. For the kingdom of heaven, or rather, the King of heaven—O the unspeakable munificence! —is within us. To him we ought always to cling by works of repentance and perseverance, loving as much as possible him who loved us so much.⁷⁵

Concluding remarks

In this paper, I have explored the concepts of light and darkness as they have been treated across centuries of philosophical, mythological and theological thought. Certain continuities and divergences have emerged throughout the discussion.

Firstly, it is evident that the concepts of light and darkness occupy a significant place across various intellectual and religious traditions. Despite historical and cultural differences, their core meanings have remained remarkably consistent throughout the centuries: light is typically associated with the Good, the Divine (or the gods), and with the soul or intellect, while darkness is commonly linked to the Fall, materiality, and the realm of the senses. While vision was the most valued sense among ancient Greek philosophers, Christian thinkers emphasized a different kind of seeing, one that is not oriented toward sensual or bodily pleasures, but toward spiritual insight. Nonetheless, the philosophical tradition also embraces the motif of turning inward, toward the soul, heart, or intellect, as a path to self-knowledge, and it associates vision with Intellect.

Secondly, while in ancient Greek and Hellenistic mythology darkness and light are sometimes intertwined—such that both qualities can at times be attributed to the same gods, as shown earlier in this paper—this demarcation is less blurred in philosophy. Yet, as has been noted, light and darkness remain closely related to each other: one cannot be easily perceived or

⁷³ Cf. Tomoiogă 2015, 147.

⁷⁴ Palamas *Tr.* I.3.22.

⁷⁵ Palamas, *Cap.* 57.

understood without the presence of the other as its opposite. The Christian God is associated primarily with light and goodness, while darkness and vice are not attributed to Him.

Furthermore, the awareness that divine light is *overwhelming* can be traced back to the earliest myths of ancient Greece, and this motif continues to appear in the works of Plotinus, Augustine, and Palamas. Yet, it seems that Greek mythological consciousness is familiar with the idea of punishment for humans who transgress boundaries, emphasizing the fundamental distinction between the human and divine realms in a way that is not found in the Neoplatonist and Christian authors discussed in this paper. On the other hand, the Greeks and Romans were not familiar with the concept of original sin as understood in Christianity, an inherited condition linked to the universal punishment of humankind.

Finally, while (Neo)platonism and Christianity share some key insights, such as the belief in a first principle (the One or God) and the notion that this principle is the ultimate criterion for truth, which can also be found in earlier Greek and Hellenistic thought, important distinctions remain. Notably, Christian thought tends to reject the idea that Platonism, or philosophy more broadly, can lead to *true* happiness, or salvation. This is largely due to its emphasis on intellectual ascent and the primacy of reason, which contrasts with the Christian emphasis on love, as emphasized in the New Testament.

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**ПОЈМОВИ СВЕТЛОСТИ И ТАМЕ: МИТОЛОШКА, ФИЛОЗОФСКА
И РЕЛИГИЈСКА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА ОВИХ ФЕНОМЕНА**

Овај рад тематизује разумевање концепата *светлости* и *таме* кроз вишевековну традицију. Први део рада посвећен је старогрчкој, хеленистичкој и римској митолошкој мисли, религији и филозофији, а други одређеним аспектима Платиновог разумевања датих концепата, као и начинима на који су о светлости и тами мислили и писали свети Августин и Григорије Палама, који су и сами били под утицајем раније грчке и хеленистичке митологије и филозофије, као и касније филозофске традиције (нео)платонизма. Завршни део текста идентификује неке сличности и разлике у начинима на који су концепти светлости и таме схватани, а истовремено показује и како су се значења преплитала и окоштала кроз време. Овај рад нема за циљ да понуди исцрпнији или свеобухватан историјски преглед ове тематике, већ пре да укаже на одређени концептуални континуитет којим се обухватају различите филозофске и теолошке традиције.