

SCIENCE IN THE DESTINY OF THEOLOGY

A DISCUSSION IN THE MIDST OF A PANDEMIC

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The experience of this ongoing pandemic has not been a common and terrifying danger only. It has also been a sign of unity of our scattered post-secular humanity, as the question of our forgotten *common nature* seems to come to the fore again. This now happens as an unexpected medical problem, against our narcissistic dreams of individual prosperity, that is, beyond what Charles Taylor termed *an exclusive humanism*, as the common post-secular *self-authorization*, in Isaiah Berlin's terms, where the only transcendence accepted is Nussbaum's transcendence of an internal and human sort.

That means that nature returns as a threat and an obstacle, unifying humanity not in the glory of its 'aspiring minds', according to Marlowe, but in the misery of its corruption. And now humanity remembers God, bringing him again to the court of theodicy; now God is, again, in the minds of many, the author of this lamentable burden of necessity, which prevents our detached thinking selfhood to fulfil its destiny of dominating the universe. The Greek-Western world has always had two temptations here, which both proved to be problematic: either to surpass or to enhance this nature. Let us start from the latter.

The dream of enhancing this weak nature is not contemporary but older, brought about by post-Enlightenment thought. It followed, in my view, the re-working of Origen's and Augustine's spiritualism, through Descartes and English Empiricism, which reworking culminated both in an affirmation of biological nature *per se* and the genesis of *mathematical physics*, in the context of the Enlightenment. However, this new wisdom rather led to the rise of mechanistic science, according to Taylor, and modern ontic dualism: mind over against a mechanistic, meaning-shorn universe, without purposes, contrary to the older cosmos, which was full of such purposes. However, this mind tried to dominate this dead universe according to Remi Brague, initially through the imagination (by Eriugena, Cusanus, or Paracelse), opening the way to the domination of nature, where man becomes 'a god on earth' (according to G. Bruno); we thus reach the 'kingdom of man', according to Bacon, where man, as Descartes claims, is the 'master and possessor' of nature, while, according to Kant, the human transcendental ego is the proprietor of the world through the 'construction of concepts', and finally, as Fichte asserts, man, in his detached, almost godly intellectuality, is the lord of nature, which is his servant. *Progress* is the fundamental dogma of this new human, both theoretical and practical wisdom, which is given a scientific basis by both Darwin and Marx; the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment do away with original sin, grace, and salvation, thus culminating, through Comte, in the 'religion of humanity', while, according to Vico, history then is simply the kingdom of human creation instead of a place for the revelation of God. Humanism becomes pragmatism, materialism, empiricism, realism, and ultimately it is identified with atheism. Man becomes, in Péguy's words, 'autotheos' (*autothée*), God for himself.

Curiously enough, this also leads, finally, according to Brague, to despising the human being as an imperfect being, and, on the other hand, the supposed domination of nature turns into a domination of man over man. This leads ultimately to a 'transhumanism', the need for re-constructing or enhancing human nature, and thus correcting its inherent imperfections. Predicted by Nietzsche, this starts on the social level with Fascism, Nazism, and Communism and concludes with the temptations of modern genetic technology; man is something that must be surpassed.

Now the consequences of this evolution are noteworthy. On the one hand, it is nihilism, mainly in the form of a divorce of Being from Good. The Enlightenment protested in the name of nature, but nature thus discovered was not a paradise of harmony but a battlefield of sheer and evil antagonism and indifference. This created modern pessimism, along with an inclination towards correcting, surpassing, neglecting, disobeying, and experimenting with nature. On the other hand, since nature resists human interventions, this culminates, paradoxically, in an irresistible new domination of nature over man as instinct, pleasure, death. From humanism we ultimately reach anti-humanism, man's private surrender to the dark sides of nature. According to Sartre, human nature no longer exists, since God, the one capable of thinking of this nature, does not exist and suicide thereby becomes an 'absolute necessity' (according to Hartmann, or Dostoyevsky), since no eternity is waiting for us. The final drama of the modern Greek-Western secularized man consists in not admitting either a wise external *Physis*, which could dictate its wisdom to man, as it did for the ancient Greeks, or the Biblical God, who acts in history, transforming it into his own kingdom. Modernity destroys both the above sources of truth, claiming an unwise *autonomy* for man as a decisive and pernicious independence from both.

Thus, paradoxically, man's effort to enhance his nature goes in parallel with a deeper submission to its corruptive aspects: instinct, pleasure, pain, death. Death has always the last word, as it seems impossible to overcome corruption, due to the universal law of entropy, according to the second axiom of Thermodynamics. This is why the first temptation, the ancient temptation to surpass nature, strangely enough, still remains valid, in a way, in the modern Christian (even if it declares itself an atheist) Greek-Western world.

I mean by this the ancient Platonic temptation, so strongly resisted by Aristotle, although the former finally won the game in the adventurous field of ancient Greek metaphysics.¹ Plato initiated philosophical metaphysics of *representation* and *transcendence*, where the truth abides in heaven and it is reached only through the *ex-carnation* (the opposite of *in-carnation*) of man, that is, man's stripping of his psycho-biolog-

¹ For what follows see my *Unseen Harmony: A Metaphysical History of Ancient Greek Philosophy*, (Athens: Armos 2021), 143–156 (in Greek).

ical nature. Aristotle tried to understand the idea as the *ένυλον είδος*, that is, the idea inherent in beings, giving them concrete substance and real existence. However, the fatal thinker in the history of Platonism is, undoubtedly, Plotinus, precisely because he tried to cut the Platonic Gordian knot of the impossible participation, by identifying human individual *nous* with the One.

In this way, Plotinus created a gnosiology aiming at solving, as we said, the difficult problem of the meaning of participation in Plato's thought, since participation precluded the real psycho-biological existence, on the one hand, but also the problem of the nature of scientific knowledge, on the other. Now, the soul tries to catch a glimpse of the *logoi* of beings that fall from the Nous in the Psyche, and finally they are spoiled by falling in material creation. However, what is of interest for us here is how this gnosiology was transferred in Christian theology by Evagrius Ponticus.

I deal with Evagrius' theology in a forthcoming book of mine, but it is necessary to say a few words here for the needs of this paper. From the Evagrian corpus I chose only one passage from his *Epistula ad Melaniam*, which reveals some of his principles:

Once, the mind was one in nature, person, and rank with God. But it fell from that rank, through its own free will, and thus it became a soul. Sinking down even further, it became a body. But in the end, body and soul will change their wills and become one with the mind, just as before. At present, there is only one being whose nature, person and name are unknown, since he is a 'naked mind': Christ. In being united with God the Father, the rational beings will also be one nature in three persons. Just as into the sea many rivers with their various properties mix, thus God the Father will contain all minds, and these will then be one in nature with him, yes, they will all be one. The minds will be united with God who is and remains one in nature and three in persons. Before the creation, the waters were one (cp. Gen.1). After the creation, there were many different rivers. Just so, before sin had separated the minds from God, they were at one with him. But in the end, the earth will be taken out of the

sea and the waters will be one again. In the same way, sin will be taken away from the minds and they will be one with God again.²

Here, Evagrius seems to imply that the mind was initially equal in nature to God's essence, and after its fall it became, in the beginning, soul, and then, it sunk down ever further and was transformed into a body. Those three things have separate wills, and, if they finally agree, they will return to the mental state, becoming again 'naked mind', thus following the only 'naked mind', which is Christ; in the end, they will be assimilated into God's nature, just as the many rivers join the sea by losing their individuality.

What is extremely important here is that the spiritual way of doing this is, for Evagrius, the contemplation of the *logoi* of things.³ As created nature must finally be surpassed and abolished, we need a way to start doing this from now on; and the way of this overcoming/abolition of nature is precisely the contemplation of the *logoi* of creation, since this reveals to us the divine primordial reality, which is the only true reality. Thus, the contemplation of the *logoi* of nature does not lead to the affirmation of nature and its natural characteristics, as Maximus the Confessor would have put it,⁴ but to its eschatological rejection, as nature does not exist in the Kingdom of God.

But what are these *logoi* of things in this different perspective? I have found more than twenty different meanings of the term *logos* in the ancient Greek literature.⁵ Word, story, narrative, description, discussion, a maxim, agreement, a written piece, account, worth, value, internal thought, cause, argument, to be right, measure, dialogue, relation, analogy, principle, rationality, definition, are some of them. By identifying *logos* with God's loving will, Maximus, following and developing the Areopagite, understands it not simply as a cause or principle, but also as a personal relation, analogy, and dialogue at the same time: that is, as a radical loving intention of God to create another freedom outside him, that is, another free intention that could precisely

² *Ad Melaniam*, 301.

³ See Sinkewitz, R.E., *Evagrius of Pontus. The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2003), xxxv.

⁴ See my *Analogical Identities. The Creation of the Christian Self. Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era*, (Turnhout: Brepols 2019), 308–310, 331–333.

⁵ See my *Unseen Harmony...op.cit*, 248–251.

make this divine principle or cause real also as relation, analogy, and dialogue.⁶ Or, to put it more accurately, God creates not only some passive *logikoteta* (λογικότητα), consisting of non-human creatures, but also an active *λογικότητα*, which gives life and meaning, and, indeed, it activates, in this way, the passive *λογικότητα* of the non-human part of creation. The spiritual basis of science is thus present: the *tropoi* of the created, passive *λογικότης* of creation being images of the divine *logoi* behind it can be deciphered by man.

God, according to a long Patristic tradition that starts from Irenaeus and culminates in Gregory Palamas, seems to create precisely what was unthinkable and impossible for ancient Greek philosophy: an *intention* incredibly and absolutely independent of his own. That means that he does not create a senseless cosmos but an absolutely God-like image of his own freedom, as an equal partner for an eternal, adventurous discussion. God the Logos creates his Dia-logos, an analogical syn-ergy, i.e., the human world, full of intentions/logoi/energies, culminating and assumed manifoldly in human logos/intention/energy (or act, if you prefer). This anthropological cosmology and gnosiology is thus expressed as a constant dialogue/synergy of two equal freedoms. Creation is an unexpected and contingent intention of God's loving will, an intention to somehow risk his absoluteness out of love by surrendering it to the created intentionality of a God-like creature. That means that what is given by the divine logoi/acts energies to beings is not just a concrete and immutable essence but, fundamentally, the possibility of an abyssal free response; what is thus established is not just a hierarchy of beings but a free discussion/synergy concerning what each essence *could finally be*: *eschatology is thus introduced in ontology as a new Biblical dimension of it*. Created being can be fallen or restored, distorted or resurrected, annihilated or fulfilled, in dependence on this eschatological dialogue where God is or is not given the possibility to become *a God for his creation*.

Paradoxically, the uncreated logoi or energies are thus deeply connected but, at the same time, also independent from creatures; they are not meant to express God in his own essence, but only in his essential movement within creation. In this way, the logoi are, according

⁶ For what follows, see my *Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor's Eschatological Ontology of Dialogical Reciprocity*, (Boston: Holy Cross Sem. Press, 2010).

to the Confessor's expression (and we can find similar expressions in Palamas), 'the fire existing in the essences of creatures'. But curiously enough for any Platonizing mentality, these essences, although full of divine glory, are also independent from their burning, divine source, as they are *created* results of the latter's *uncreated* activities: for a typically Western mind nourished by Thomist doctrines that means, perhaps, a real danger of losing participation because of this self-positing freedom of creation. On the other hand, the typically Western theological mind will also probably search for seeds of semi-Pelagianism in any expression of this kind of freedom. But, for Maximus, as well as for the Areopagite, or for Gregory Palamas, we need precisely an *analogical synergy*, as a *dialogical reciprocity* between man and God in order to achieve participation (and, in parenthesis, the Christ-event is, precisely, the culmination of this synergetic/dialogical reciprocity—this dialogical reciprocity finally is expressed, in its utmost form, in the undivided and unconfused hypostatic union of the two natures, created and uncreated, with the whole of their natural wills and energies, in the one person of the incarnated Logos).

What is most important for this Conference is that, in this way, science has a place in eternity, as it forms a necessary part of *God's language* (as Francis Collins called it), and of the human response to it. As I said above, through science the *tropoi* of the created, passive λογικότης of creation, being images of the divine logoi behind it can be deciphered by man. Science assists, in this way, this process of dialogical reciprocity between man and God. In a way, we need Science in order to fully understand *what it means to be in the world and in God, at the same time*. And we of course need Theology in order to understand the scientific experience of the world as a divine dialogical suggestion, revealing the meaning and the purpose of this world in a future where freedom meets wisdom. This connection is not only possible, but also necessary in the universe of Denys the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, or Gregory Palamas, while it is almost impossible in the universe of Evagrius. In this perspective, theology can help science not simply to dominate nature, but, first of all, to *listen* to its hidden God-like wisdom, and thus enlarge the very range of human knowledge, making it holistic, existential, spiritual, as it reveals not only

the structures of beings but also the hidden divine intentions, vocations and suggestions concerning them and lying behind them.

Concerning the present pandemic, this way of approaching reality can perhaps help us think that beyond the dialectic between causality and randomness, or even beyond the terrifying dialectic between Providence and Godforsakeness, there possibly exists an emerging harmony between the silent and passive divine rationality (in the sense always of *logikoteta*) of creation, and the active, *dialogically divinized* rationality of human beings. The latter can *dialogically/synergetically* activate the former, and thus it can transform its seemingly chaotic freedom, again, into divine wise words and realities. Here science becomes a way of theological devotion, helping us discern the spiritual meaning of the *language of God*, as this is articulated in and through creatures...

And, perhaps most of all, this theological understanding of science can help us solve the thorniest problem of our post-secular Greek-Western world, which I call *closed history*, along with the *velvet totalitarianism* that derives from it.⁷ I call ‘closed history’ modernity’s fundamental understanding of the philosophy of history, stemming from the failure of Western philosophy to solve the problem of Natural Law, initially between Grotius and Hobbes, on the one hand, and the way Hegel understood Thomas Aquinas, on the other. It has to do with an understanding of history as self-explained and self-justified, through the Thomist Created Grace, which finally becomes the Hegelian Logos/Spirit, incarnating itself in nature and history, and acquiring self-consciousness in and through the human mind. History, in this way, contains the fullness of being, and the only logoi and energies found in it are decisively created, needing no uncreated intention behind them. Moreover, Western Enlightenment and Post- Enlightenment thought never managed to solve the thorny problem concerning the priority between objective and subjective aspects of nature, and, subsequently, the problem of whether nature can dictate to humanity a general and commonly accepted natural law, or the content of the latter is decided, in a dominant way, by each human subject. Unfortunately, this is a concept of history (and, consequently, a concept of State) that can

⁷ See my *The Open History and its Enemies: The Rise of the Velvet Totalitarianism* (Athens: Armos, 2020), in Greek.

generate forms of totalitarianism, with ‘velvet totalitarianism’, which has already, in a way, started, at their final consummation. This ‘velvet totalitarianism’ is perhaps the most desirable form of totalitarianism, deriving from the happiest possible surrender of individual desire to its almost unconditional fulfilment.

The possible explanation of events such as the pandemic, or the present war, or the threat of starvation and nuclear contamination, or even the possible partial catastrophe of the planet through the inadequate conceptual tools of such a totalitarian mentality of unconditional self-fulfillment leads societies to a deeper and deeper submission to a desperate intra-worldly self-reference, which objectifies and instrumentalizes human beings, forever closed in their pan-phobic strictly biological condition. Unless we re-instate a forgotten spiritual hermeneutics as that described above, all these calamities cannot teach us ways out from this collective desperate and ineffective self-closedness; on the contrary, they can even be weaponized against *open history*, which sees God, through his creative act, and the nature-created-by-him, as the ultimate source of meaning, Providence and life of the world—since people tend to take the above misfortunes as simple natural inadequacies, just needing some necessary psycho-biological enhancement. But, again, who gives this enhancement justification and purpose?

At the same time, all this enhancement, when it is theologically and philosophically blind, can, at the same time, abolish our God-like *open nature* that expresses the image of God upon us, as an *analogical identity*,⁸ which can transfer, through our free synergy, divine consubstantiality in this turbulent world...

⁸ See my *Analogical Identities...op.cit.*, 264–270.