I

Introduction

The Depth of Being

1.1 GREEK LIFE AND TRAGEDY

In turning toward the mystery of God from the perspective of Being and relation, we can immediately see how precious of a guide the attribute of divine life can be. It has the merit of covering all terrain, embracing the spheres of religious history, philosophy and theology. In fact, from the most ancient of times, the human being has always taken the fullness of being to be life, and religious thought indeed has emerged precisely as a yearning toward the source and origin of this Life, urged onward by the perception of one’s own finitude. Man places himself before God, for he acknowledges his relation with God to be an essential relation from which springs the life that constitutes his own being. Since the dawn of history, even the most primitive of myths manifest this intertwining of Life, being and relation. Paternity and filiation, the transmission of life, death and the conditions surrounding the subsistence of any community are all essential elements of the religious conception and the literature of all the most ancient civilizations.

All this can be illustrated with an example taken from Greek tragedy. The sequence in the life of Oedipus shows how the collapse of all distinction between being father, mother and son indeed bears with it the ruin of the city, as without any distinction based on relation, life is not possible. A particularly beautiful and meaningful example of this is given in

1 In this volume relation and relationship are respectively used in reference to the metaphysical and the phenomenological dimensions of the state of being related. The content of the book will show the necessity of this distinction. So we speak of relationship in logical and personal terms, whereas its ontological root is denoted by relation.
Antigone, whom Sophocles seems to have sculpted to be the very namesake of tragedy. Oedipus’ daughter lives in Thebes with one of her brothers under the protection of her uncle, Creon. As is recounted in Seven Against Thebes, another of her brothers turns on the city and is subsequently delivered death in the duel with the brother who stands in defense of Thebes. They kill each other. Thus, the curse of Oedipus continues to plague his posterity. Creon decrees that the corpse of this nephew who attacked the city would not be buried, a fate that, according to popular belief of the time, meant the soul would forever be deprived of the peace of the netherworld. Here emerges the crux of the tragedy that weighs so heavily on Antigone, who is torn between her duty of obedience to the law of the community (polis) to which she belongs and a precept of higher law, which is tied to her relation with her brother and family (genos).

In the context of this, an important dialogue occurs between Creon and his son, Haimon, who is involved in the affair insofar as he is engaged to Antigone. As his son approaches, Creon asks him whether he is angry at him for having condemned Antigone. Haimon immediately places himself in submission to the sovereign, acknowledging that he belongs to Creon. The latter responds by stating an incontrovertible principle, that the son must always place himself under the judgment of the father (γνώμης πατρῴας πάντ´ ὑπισθεν ἔσται). Only in this way can the polis continue to subsist, for if Creon’s own sons did not obey him much less would the citizens and soldiers in battle do so. Here the tragedy that is crushing Antigone is translated in terms of the relationship between father and son. Haimon appeals to the voice of the people and natural law, which prohibits killing the innocent, but does not succeed. In the end Creon condemns Antigone.\(^\text{2}\)

Tragedy is, then, born of the struggle between the demands of the whole and those of the individual: Creon defends the city, whereas Antigone considers her brother; the father lays down the law for all, yet the son would save the woman he loves. A fateful aut-aut emerges between the life of the city and the life of the self, that is, between the universal and the particular.

This tragic dimension of life, which characterizes the whole of Greek tragedy, claims metaphysical roots as we shall see, for identity cannot be attributed if not through the category of substance. As Haimon is only

\(^{2}\) Cf. Sophocles, Antigone, vv. 635–780.
himself insofar as he remains in submission to the paternal archetype, so is ontological primacy always assigned to the prototype rather than the individual. The absolute value of the person has not yet been constituted. The death of Socrates is a further example of this.³

This leads to a full-on metaphysical analysis, one that pursues the ontological foundation that lies beyond appearances and all that could be other than what it is. The sought-after principle must be outside the realm of physical reality (μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ) and indeed provide the very basis for this reality. Hence, the fundamental question of being: what is it that renders this reality concrete as opposed to some other reality? What is the essence of this reality (ousia)? What “lies beneath,” sustaining this phenomenal, or external, appearance?⁴

Haimon and Antigone can only live, then, can only be, if they willingly submit to the universal, a universal that stands in marked contrast to their individuality and their relationships. The greatness of Greece does not only consist of having developed metaphysical thought but in furthermore realizing and declaring that its solution is not completely satisfying. The honor of sympathy granted to Antigone together with the declaration of the limit of the paternal answer as received in Haimon’s words constitute the true and proper apex of the Greek literature imbued with a deep humanism. Tragedies could be compared to magnificent tombstones that at the same time are border stones laid on the very limits of Greek world.

In a way, tragedy itself reveals how Greek metaphysical thought aspires to go beyond what it knows in search not only of the principle of that which lies outside of all physical reality but also of that which is the basis of the reality that is properly human and hence the very sense of

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³ One might say that the very philosophical reflection is none other than the extreme answer of reason to this problem, if it is true, as Soloviev claims, that Platonic philosophy is born of the existential drama caused in Plato by the death of Socrates: “The tragedy was not personal, not subjective, not in the parting of student and teacher, son from father; in any case, there remained for Socrates but a short time to live. The tragedy was in the fact that the best public community in all humankind of that time-Athens-could not endure the simple, naked principle of truth; that public life turned out to be incompatible with personal conscience.” V. Soloviev, “Plato’s Life-Drama,” in Politics, Law and Morality: Essays by V.S. Soloviev (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 232.

⁴ The term “sub-stance” conveys this “being underneath.” This is a mold of the Greek hypostasis that is exactly what makes this substance-dimension possible at least until the end of the fourth century, at which point the term ceases to be considered synonymous with ousia and instead becomes used to indicate person. More on this can be found in Section 4.4.1.
the mystery of freedom. Yet the history of thought demonstrates how it is only through Revelation that this avenue of new exploration is opened.

1.2 METAPHYSICS AND SCRIPTURE

A personal encounter with God lays out for the human being the means by which to fulfill this undertaking. The Fathers of the Church were able to wield Greek thought as an instrument, particularly in the Middle- and Neo-Platonic periods, for it did not dismiss nor overlook metaphysics. Rather, they used it to consider the truth of being as was presented to human thought by the encounter with God. In a certain sense, the Fathers came to accomplish the very dynamic of Greek thought, one that is invoked through tragedy’s deep cry of despair.

But what is the content of this innovation so introduced? Largely through an analysis of the work of the Cappadocians, the present study proposes that this ontological innovation lies in the fact of having recognized relation to be an original co-principle together with substance. As opposed to other authors who deal with relational ontology, also in reference to Cappadocian theology, the idea advanced here is that relation has not supplanted substance: if one were to analyze the ontology of the Fathers, one would instead see the first placed next to the second, without any superiority of one over the other.

Indeed, it could not have been otherwise if it is true that theology must always be based on real and salvific events. Metaphysics is not some arcane science reserved for a few elect, rather it is an essential facet to any and all thought that aims to explore what is real. The necessity of metaphysics and its field of investigation are illustrated by a consideration

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5 This ability to use in a non-manipulative way is essential in the Fathers’ method and is called *chrēsis*, as Christian Gnilst pointed out: see Ch. Gnilst, *Chrēsis: Die Methode der Kirchenwäter im Umgang mit der antiken Kultur: Der Begriff des “rechten Gebrauchs”* (Basel: Schwabe, 2012).

that might be called a child’s favorite question. It is also a kind of translation of the most fundamental metaphysical question there is: What is it? Why? It is not without cause that wonderment is the underlying attitude that moves both children and philosophers.

To wonder of a certain thing, what is it, means precisely to inquire after its essence. This is an ordinary and even daily problem, as is for instance knowing whether or not what one ordered at the restaurant will in fact be brought to the table and not something else. Likewise in Scripture this same question continually emerges. When manna is discovered in the desert, the Israelites wonder what is it? Hence, the phrase man hu (Ex 16:15), from which derives the very name of this substance given them from heaven. In various encounters with God, they must continually revisit this same question. “This thing that speaks to us, places itself in our midst, what is it?” Is it simply one of the local divinities or does it belong to that single category that claims one and only one representative, inasmuch as it is the One on high and therefore the only God? Little by little the Israelites come to understand that God is the Creator, the One who made all things from nothing, that He is substance in a way superior to all else, as He is the living God and origin of all being. The human being as well as all other things need Him in order to subsist, whereas He identifies Himself with Being and Life itself. The innovation here is that this God is the Absolute and yet has a name, that He enters into relation, that He is a person.

Joseph Ratzinger pointed out that the essential difference between polytheism and monotheism is not expressed in the fact that the former worships a plethora of deities, whereas the latter recognizes but one. For even in various forms of polytheism, the Absolute is considered to be singular, precisely as it is in monotheism. The essential element of polytheism is, rather, that this same Absolute, often identified with the god of heaven, apex of the divine hierarchy, is not addressable (ansprechbar), as It does not enter into relation with the human being. In such a context as this, the human being can only address the finite reflections of the Absolute or those gods that represent the intermediate ontological degrees

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7 This wonder approaches philosophy to poetry, as María Zambrano showed. At the same time philosophy is limited by the necessity to renounce to the very source of this wonder in search for real being. From this perspective metaphysics should always be open to new answers. See M. Zambrano, Filosofía y poesía (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1996).
that in a determined manner connect the Absolute and the world.\textsuperscript{8} It was once inconceivable that the supreme God be a concrete \textit{who}, a \textit{someone}, one who likewise enters into dialogue as a \textit{thou} with respect to the \textit{I} of the individual human being. Personal being was understood to be necessarily limited. One can hereby grasp in what way the ontological innovation introduced by the thought born out of Revelation resides precisely in the personal and relational dimension.

A perfect example of this is the theophany on Mount Sinai (Ex 3). Finding himself before the burning bush, Moses takes steps toward it to understand what it might be. Yet emanating from this burning bush is a voice that calls out to him, addresses him and intimates to him that he should remove his sandals because the ground he treads upon is holy. There is already a startling notion in all of this: in sacred space, there where God abodes, man can only enter as naked and stripped from anything that might act as a barrier, that might protect him. God does not tell Moses to distance himself, rather to approach in his bare feet. Hence, the question \textit{what is it} is transformed into the question \textit{who is it}, and indeed into an earnest request for a name. In Exodus 3:14, it is exactly substance and person that are closely united: God says of Himself \textit{I am}, He Who is. He is the One who is more, greater than all else, for He is the beginning and end of all beings. He is truly an \textit{I} who speaks, who creates, who loves. God is a Person and has relations, desiring to enter into relation with his people. His very distinctiveness must assume as an image not a stone or totem, rather communion and unity of the people, of a people who on their own are weak and without a homeland. God reveals Himself, therefore, precisely in His relation with the human being.

Hence, in the New Testament, God not only discloses His personal being but also reveals Himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet again, the questions \textit{what} and \textit{who} emerge side by side. Indeed, the crucifixion itself is a sort of ultimate metaphysical judgment and demonstration of how the High Priest knew very well that Jesus claimed to be God, essentially offering a precise answer to the first question: “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30). What is Jesus? God. His substance is the substance of God, one, absolute, infinite and eternal. Yet Jesus simultaneously offers a different answer to the question of \textit{who}: He is not the Father but the Son. Christianity thereby implies keeping together the two

levels of *what* and *who* in concomitance, without confusing them with each other or placing one before the other. This is not something derived out of the cultural milieu in which the Greek Fathers found themselves, nor any specific moment of history, for the very sense of Scripture depends on this twofold question. It is only by making oneself a child (Mt 18:3) that one grasps the sense found herein. Hence, it is asking exactly those questions that arise out of the wonder of both children and philosophers.

It is in traversing this path of development that Christian thought has in stages come to acknowledge that the one and only God in three Persons not only *has* relations but *is* also three eternal Relations. Greek metaphysics has thus been extended through this sense of *who*, that is, in the personal sense, becoming a relational and Trinitarian ontology and a relational ontology precisely because it is a Trinitarian one.9

1.3 SYSTEMATIC APPROACH: TRINITARIAN ONTOLOGY

The scope of the present volume is to offer an outline of the Cappadocians’ elaboration on this new ontology, in particular of Gregory of Nyssa’s work on the category of relation. He was the younger brother of Basil and the most speculative of the Cappadocian Fathers.10 He is noted for the vital role he played in the preparation and unfolding of events at the First Council of Constantinople in 381. The Cappadocian thought cannot be considered merely a proposed theory, nor simply as one voice among an ocean of other opinions. Rather, it constitutes an essential element in the formulation of Trinitarian dogma, one might even say an objective point of departure, as the Cappadocian thought, having been developed in relation with the definitions of the Council, may be

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considered to belong to the dimension of data. We are dealing with normative thought that takes precedence and claims a place on a plane distinct even from that of Augustine, who would be immensely influential in the West, though subsequent to the formulation of Trinitarian dogma as this is instead fixed in the Greek area. In a certain sense, Cappadocian thought belongs to a category that is properly systematic and is not solely situated in the sphere of theological reflection.

Joseph Ratzinger emphasized in his theological writings the revolutionary breadth of Trinitarian theology from the point of view of metaphysics and in particular underlined the new ontological status it recognizes in relation. He reached such a conclusion upon a reflection of Augustine’s Trinitarian doctrine. This has led Piero Coda to write that it is precisely in Patristic thought where one recognizes an initial, authentic Trinitarian ontology, even if the expression Trinitarian ontology in and of itself is of rather recent origin. In speaking of this, one primarily begins with the Thesen of Klaus Hemmerle, in the form of philosophical letters written to Hans Urs von Balthasar, who in turn deals with this question in his Thedramatik. Likewise, the tendency toward a close conception

It seems that this is something passed over by a few systematic theologians who risk treating Cappadocian thought as an opinion of contemporary theology, expressing judgments as to the value of the coherence of their thought. Examples of this include T. F. Torrance when he claims, “It would have been better if the Cappadocians had paid less attention to the concept of causality in God,” in The Trinitarian Faith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988), 238–239. Or when he laments the fact that the Cappadocians have “[introduced] the ambiguity into the doctrine of the Trinity,” in The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), 179. Other examples of this include: G. Lafont, Peut-on connaître Dieu en Jésus-Christ? (Paris: Cerf, 1969), 62–72; and L. Scheffczyk and A. Ziegenaus (eds.), Katholische Dogmatik II (Aachen: MM Verlag, 1996), 242–243.


of the relationship between philosophy and theology, common in Orthodox thought, is linked to Trinitarian ontology, particularly in the work of Pavel Florenskij and Sergej Bulgakov.\textsuperscript{16} The same can be said of certain areas of research in contemporary philosophy,\textsuperscript{17} such as the work by Antonio Rosmini, the phenomenology of Edith Stein\textsuperscript{18} or the discussions on onto-theology.\textsuperscript{19} In this context, the categories of person, relation and communion play a fundamental role.\textsuperscript{20}

In the present work, what is meant by the expression \textit{Trinitarian ontology} is precisely the ontology of relation as it is conceived through Trinitarian revelation. Indeed, an analysis of the Greek tradition shows that the dogmatic development of the fourth century could actually be re-read as the history of the birth of a new ontology of relation, one that surpasses classical Greek metaphysics.

This, then, would be a kind of contribution to a “neo-patristic synthesis” as desired by John Zizioulas in his well-known \textit{Being as Communion},\textsuperscript{21} in the hope that this work might encourage and advance dialogue among the many different Christian denominations.\textsuperscript{22}

Currently, a reflection on the ontology of the person and relation is front and center in many interesting studies that attempt to analyze the reflection of the Trinity in the structure of created being, and in particular


\textsuperscript{20} See the contributions on this point made by L. Ayres, A. Cordovilla Pérez, and K. Tanner in R. Wozniak and G. Maspero (eds.), \textit{Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions and Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology} (London: T&T Clark, 2012).

\textsuperscript{21} J. Zizioulas, \textit{Being and Communion}, 26.

\textsuperscript{22} The ecumenical value of a reflection on Trinitarian ontology is highlighted, for example, in J.-Y. Lacoste, “Being,” in \textit{Encyclopedia of Christian Theology} 1 (New York: Routledge, 2005), 193.
in anthropology. For example, there is the work of John Zizioulas, Colin Gunton and Christoph Schwobel. Clearly, this type of analysis must place itself in direct contact with the early Church Fathers and with the doctrinal advancement made in the fourth century, whose metaphysical innovations are highlighted in these approaches.

Studying the work that has emerged in the last thirty years of this past century, one can schematically identify, at least in a historical-dogmatic analysis, two principle lines of development: one that is more prevalent in the West, which moves along the Augustinian tradition and focuses on the concept of relation, building upon its relationship to substance; then there is the development more prevalent in the East, which, beginning with the impressive theology of the Greek Fathers, focuses mainly on the concept of person, demonstrating its precedence with respect to philosophical substance.

The former perspective, largely on account of Joseph Ratzinger, emerges from a background of Augustinian thought, successfully echoing in a Thomistic-inspired philosophy as well with the work of Norris Clark and his notion of being as substance-in-relation.

The latter perspective is mainly represented by the above-mentioned author John Zizioulas, Metropolitan of Pergamon. In his Being as Communion, first published in 1985, he expands a reformulation of metaphysics from the perspective of the history of dogma and the personal principle of the monarchy of the Father. The doctrine of the Greek Fathers of the fourth century constitutes a fundamental moment in the development of ontology inasmuch as they position the Person of the Father as the source of all Being, both on an intra-divine level as well as

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23 For a noteworthy synthesis of this, see Cordovilla Pérez, “The Trinitarian Concept of Person,” in Rethinking Trinitarian Theology, 105-145.
24 See the works of J. D. Zizioulas cited in note 6.
26 Ch. Schwobel, Gott in Beziehung (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2002).
27 Cf. Greshake, Der dreieine Gott, 454.