

Negative Language and Gödel's Incompleteness in Cappadocian Theology

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Abstract The article presents the difference between the epistemology of the Church Fathers and Greek metaphysics in terms of the introduction of an infinite gap between the first principle and the world. This breaks the identification between being and the intelligible dimension, making negative theology a necessary path to progress in the knowledge of God. This is presented from the perspective of the thought of the Cappadocian Fathers, particularly in terms of the relationship between eternity and time. The path shows the convergence of Cappadocian epistemology with the incompleteness highlighted by contemporary logic. Indeed, the consistency of an intellectual description can only be invoked when the representation is open, in the sense that it refers to a surplus of reality over the merely logical and conceptual dimension.

Keywords: Apophaticism, Incompleteness, Negative Theology, Cappadocian Theology

Received 02/02/2023; accepted 03/05/2023.

0. Introduction: the Gap

The Greek philosophical world is characterized by a radical identification of being with the intelligible dimension. For Plato what really is is the idea, for Aristotle it is the form, but in both cases the multiplicity of the material world is linked to imperfection.

In classical metaphysics, in fact, one is faced with a single finite and eternal ontological level that includes the first principle and the world in one graded structure, which thought can ascend. In fact, the connections between the different ontological levels are eternal necessary causes (*logos*) that thought (*nous*) can recognise. Plato knows that this process requires an openness to an ontological (finite) excess, which, however, is essentially played out at the cognitive level, as the openness to a divine *logos* in the *Phaedo* testifies (85.cd).

Quite different is the picture in the Christian context, where the triune God constitutes the only infinite and eternal ontological level, and therefore transcendent with respect to created realities, all of which had a beginning in time and are finite. The identification between the Creator and the triune God leads to the recognition of an infinite metaphysical gap or hiatus between God and the world, of which the human being is conscious. This prevents any claim of identification between being and the intelligible, requiring that the semantic principle be juxtaposed with a syntactic principle. Indeed,

(wo)man, from a revealed perspective, cannot know the essence of God, not because of the limitations of the knowing subject, but because of the infinite depth of the known object.

This implies a surplus of truth, which forces a radical openness to the other, with lower and upper case. In contrast, in the context of a semantic ontology, where being means being automatically intelligible, such as the Platonian-Aristotelian one, access to truth is given through dialectics, in that it is necessary to discern the different statements by classifying them according to the category they belong to, as later developed in Porphyry's tree. What matters is under which idea or form the different realities stand, realities that are identified in their metaphysical depth with the noetic content.

From the Judeo-Christian point of view, therefore, the fundamental metaphysical configuration is totally different, because being is radically exceeding human thinking, in that it precedes it. Knowledge, on the other hand, is possible and essential, precisely because of (wo)man's creation in the image and likeness of God, but it must pass through divine action, hence through the relational plot inherent in the world and history. In other words, knowledge can never be only semantic, because the Creator exceeds the human cognitive capacities, but knowledge of both God and the world must always be syntactical, that is, relational. This feature of the ontology and epistemology implicit in Revelation has an immediate connection with negative theology and apophaticism, in that knowledge can never be *a priori*, but only *a posteriori*.

In what follows we will show how patristic thought developed this, making negative theology the foundation of its epistemology (1), and then we will present the version developed by the Cappadocian Fathers of this negative theology (2), in such a way as to be able to reread it in terms of the relationship between eternity and time in the doctrine of Basil (3), Gregory of Nyssa (4) and Gregory of Nazianzus (5), in order to conclude by showing the convergence of this approach with the incompleteness formulated at the logical level in actuality. The fundamental thesis is that contemporary theology and epistemology converge in the demand that a formal system must be intrinsically open in order to be useful as a 'map' or representation of a real phenomenon.

1. Patristic Framework

This radical change from Greek metaphysics to Christian theology in the ontological and gnoseological architecture required the Fathers of the Church a turn that had a fundamental initial moment in Justin's thought. His philosophical training led him to read the Johannine *Logos* as the ontological mediator between God and the world, since everything was made through Him. Trinitarian faith made it possible for the martyr philosopher to recognise the Son as a person distinct from the Father. This first theological explanation presents the *Logos* as 'thought' by which the first divine Person creates all things. In this way, the *Logos* itself remained linked to creation as its 'design', like the conception of a work in the mind of an artist. Subsequent reflection, especially with Athanasius and the Cappadocians, had to remove the *Logos* from this ontologically intermediate position, in order to insert it fully into divine immanence.

Yet, already at the level of Justin, negative theology is clearly present and distinct in its essential features from its early Platonic version. The following text suffices:

But there is no name that can be imposed on the Father of the universe, for He is not begotten. For whatever name you call him by, it is necessary that a more ancient being should have imposed that name upon him. The words *father* and *God* and *creator* and *lord* and *master* are not names, but designations derived from his

benefits and works (Justin, *Apologia secunda*, 6, 1,1-2,39).¹

Justin's statement is stark and clearly metaphysical. If we are talking about the first principle, then it is an ineffable being, because there can be no older being to impose a name on it. But then, it follows that all the expressions we use for God since biblical revelation indicate what in the 4th century will be called *oikonomia*, that is, God's salvific action.

This approach will prove fundamental and inescapable in all Christian thought, precisely because of divine transcendence. The difficulty will be to prevent the second Person Himself, who as *Logos* is an expression of the Father, from being reduced to the sphere of manifestation, as was the case in the Sabellian heresy, to being, instead, kept in the heart of being. Thus one arrives at formulations that from the later perspective may be surprising, such as the assertion that the Father cannot be a person, unlike the Son, because being a person was expressed in terms of determination, of circumscribability (*perigraphê*), whereas the first principle by definition must be *aperigraptos*, indefinable (Justin, *Dialogus com Tryphone*, 127).

This (linguistic) tension between the first and second Person of the Trinity, profoundly connected precisely to the need for a negative theology that protects the surplus and the affirmation of the concreteness and authenticity of the relationship between (wo)man and God, is maintained in Clement of Alexandria, who affirms that the *Logos* is Son *kata perigraphên*, and not *kat'ousian*: he is Son according to circumscribability, i.e. the possibility of being expressed, while the divine essence always remains beyond any possibility of expression (Clement of Alexandria, *Excerpta ex Theodotus*, 19.1). Despite the limitations of this position, it is evident that, positively, the connection between the possibility of knowing God and the personal dimension already emerges. This will mark the entire theological development, because apophaticism does not consist in the mere affirmation of the impossibility of knowing God, but in the realisation of the necessity of passing through the personal dimension in order to access an authentic knowledge of His immanence.

Thus, in the patristic sphere, we move into a metaphysical framework that is profoundly different from the classical and late antique philosophical framework. In the place of a single finite and eternal level, in fact, two perfectly distinct levels burst forth, where only the first, that is, the divine nature, is eternal and infinite, while every other being, as a creature, is distinguished by an ontological abyss, by an immense distance, from the Creator. This implies a new epistemology, because the full knowledge of the world cannot be given from the world itself, from within the limited dimension, but can only be given in the relationship between the Father and the Son, since, as Augustine later says, the world is the overflow of the Love of the first two divine Persons, and therefore sustains itself in the third Person itself, which is like their eternal embrace (Augustine, *De Trinitate*, VI,10,11: CCSL 50, 242). This is an extremely powerful perspective, because it grounds matter in the Spirit, i.e. in the Holy Spirit, opening up the possibility of recognising the very positivity and holiness of history and time.

Hence the observation that theology cannot define God and, therefore, that epistemologically its object is not the divine nature, which in itself is unknowable. Instead, it is the relationship between God and the world that is the subject of theological thinking and speaking. Here we have a break with the classical philosophical approach, for which full knowledge consisted in reconstructing the necessary chain of causes up to the first cause. Knowledge obtained not directly, through rational proof, but based on relationship with another was, on the other hand, *doxa*, i.e. opinion, of a

¹ All translations in the article are original.

lower epistemological degree than episteme and true science. Faith was, of course, read in this sphere. But if the first cause is situated beyond human cognitive capacity and the deepest sense of the world is the divine *Logos*, then faith is no longer inferior, but is full knowledge, as it is knowledge in relation, i.e. *cum assensione cogitare*, thinking from a yes, according to Augustine's beautiful definition (*De praedestinatione sanctorum*, 2,5).

The path, however, was not an easy one, because the reality of God's unity and trinity could not be expressed on the basis of categories elaborated from creaturely experience. Thus Origen succeeds in stating the distinction between the transcendent God and created natures with great clarity, but he has no metaphysical tools at his disposal to formulate the personal distinction within the divine immanence. For this he resorts to participatory expressions, which will later be exploited by the Arians to appeal to the authority of the Alexandrian. Unlike in his thought, however, here the participatory structure places the Son and the Spirit on the side of creation, according to a metaphysical architecture incompatible with the revealed datum. The discussion in the 4th century would therefore focus precisely on generation, which the Arians interpreted in a creaturely sense, invoking its incompatibility with being God, while Athanasius and the Cappadocians conceived in a new sense, never perceived at a categorical level. In fact, the Generated, in God, is eternal as the Generator, therefore numerically identical according to *physis* with Him, a single God in personal distinction.

The battlefield will thus become the Johannine prologue, the true source of Apophatic thought. Its chiasmic structure (Maspero 2021: 20-22) relates the *incipit* «in the beginning was the *Logos*, the *Logos* was with God and the *Logos* was God», with the final verse «God no one has ever seen: the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has revealed him». The *arché* has an inside that is the bosom of the Father in which there is the Son, this Son who is the *Logos*, who is distinct from the Father precisely because he is turned towards Him relationally, as the use of the Greek preposition *pros* reveals. But this radical novelty of an *arché* that has an inside in which the personal distinction is given by the relationship lies in the apophatic affirmation that no one has ever seen God, that is, in the realisation that we are moving into a radically new ontological horizon.

This new panorama can be defined as ontological, not in the Heideggerian sense, but in the etymological sense of 'discourse on being', within which metaphysics can be found as a particular case of a discourse on being aimed at the search for the ultimate foundation of the cosmos, i.e. *ta physika*. The crisis point of this tension is the relationship between time and eternity, called into play by the very names of the divine Persons revealed. In fact, a father on a creaturely level is always prior to his own son, while for God the second divine Person is as eternal as the first, shifting thought to a new dimension of being with respect to the categorical one.

For this reason, revelation allows a broader view of being, which requires the development of new categories or the extension of previous ones. An obvious example is Celsus' medioplatic critique of prophecy. For the second-century philosopher, if a prophet has foretold the death of the Messiah, he cannot but die, so that everything is reduced to that very necessity that is the rule of *ta physika*. Origen's answer is masterly:

Celsus is of the opinion that a prophesied event happens precisely because it was prophesied by virtue of foreknowledge. But we do not concede this, we say instead that the prophet is not the cause of the future event by virtue of having foretold that it would happen; rather, it is the future event, which would have happened whether it was foretold or not, that is the cause of the prophet, who knows it in advance by predicting it (*Contra Celsum*, II, 20).

The heart of the matter is precisely the possibility for the prophet to be in relationship with God, who is eternal. For him, the moment of yesterday in which prophecy takes place is always today, as is the tomorrow in which Christ's death takes place. So the prophet in his yesterday knows in God's today what in relation to him will happen tomorrow, but for God it is always today. The causal arrow thus does not go from the prophet to the cross, but exactly the reverse. The creaturely categories are unhinged here, because the theologian must learn to think from the relationship between the finite and the infinite, between the temporal and the eternal.

2. Cappadocian Apophaticism

In this framework, apophaticism is not conceived as the limit of the knowing subject, but as the perfection of the known object. And the fundamental point here is that, due to the doctrine of creation in Christ, this cognitive limit is also transferred to the cosmos, that is, to those *ta physika* from which the metaphysical enterprise started. In fact, if the ultimate reason for the world is *in* God, i.e. in that Trinitarian immanence inaccessible to human thought with the forces of reason alone because it is constituted by the personal dimension of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then even full knowledge of any creature cannot be obtained apart from the Word, even more, apart from the incarnate Word. Thus Gregory of Nyssa mocks his adversary Eunomius, asking him how he thinks he can know the nature of God, when he cannot even intellectually embrace the nature of an ant (*Contra Eunomium III*, GNO II, 238.19-20).

The Cappadocian gnoseology cannot be further from that of Neo-Platonism, because the way to the infinite is precisely the finite. The salvation *from* the world proposed by Plotinus is replaced by a salvation *of* the world, because paradoxically, it is precisely the veil of flesh that reveals:

Then he [the Word] continues: "from our shadow bed" (Ct 1:16). That is: human nature has known You [the Lord] or will certainly know You because You have become a shadow in history for our salvation. That is why the text says: Thou hast come, my beloved, gracious, and hast made Thyself a shadow in our bed. For if Thou hadst not covered Thyself with shadow, veiling from Thee the pure ray of Divinity with the form of a servant, who could have sustained Thy appearance? For no one shall see the face of the Lord and live (cf. Ex 33:20) (Gregory of Nyssa, *In Canticum Canticorum*, GNO VI, 106.20-107.5).

The Old Testament awareness of the divine transcendence and the disproportion of the creature to its Creator takes on a new significance with the Incarnation, in which the radical novelty of the apophaticism of the Church Fathers is highlighted in comparison to that of philosophy. The flesh with all its limitations is the only way to know the transcendent God, who infinitely surpasses every possibility of human thought.

It is sufficient to read the following text by Gregory of Nyssa against the background of Plato's *Phaedrus*:

For what God is by nature remains inaccessible to human nature and incomprehensible, inasmuch as it rises ineffably into flight beyond the reason of men. But a certain imprint of the ineffable nature arises through the virtues like a sketch drawn with the shadow (*σκιαγραφία*) in those who turn their gaze to it. Thus all knowledge and wisdom and science and the approach to conceptual understanding are not the divine wings, but the shadow of the divine wings. And this, though a shadow, is a great benefit to us (*In inscriptiones Psalmorum*, GNO V, 155.25-156.5).

Knowledge of God and truth cannot be given in semantic terms, by elevating our mind, which Plato imagines winged. In fact we are anchored to the earth, as we are on this side of the infinite ontological hiatus between the triune Creator and finite creatures. But on this earth we can follow the movement of the shadows of the divine wings and recognise in us a sketch traced with the shadows, that syntactically leads us to the truth. Everything is given in relationship. And the shadow reveals. This is shown in full force in the following text by Gregory of Nazianzus, where he defines the role of the theologian:

But by making us an idea (σκιαγραφοῦντες) of what concerns him [God] (τὰ κατ' αὐτὸν) from the realities that surround him (ἐκ τῶν περὶ αὐτὸν), we put together (συλλέγομεν) an obscure and uncertain image from different things (ἄλλην ἀπ' ἄλλου). In our opinion, the best theologian is not the one who has understood the whole, because the limit does not contain the whole, but is the one who has been able to imagine more than the others and more unite within himself (συναγάγη) the mental image of truth or a shadow (ἀποσκίασμα) of it or whatever we want to call it (*Oratio 30 [De filio]*, 17, 9-14: SCh 250, 262).

Literally, the verb σκιαγραφέω means to write with the shadow and corresponds to the σκιαγραφία of the previous text by Gregory of Nyssa. It is, precisely, the drawing of a sketch by means of outlines. The terminology is of Platonic origin and is taken up by Clement of Alexandria (Maspero 2022). This activity is what characterises the best theologian, who cannot aspire to understand God, because (s)he knows that the infinite cannot be grasped by the finite. Yet this semantic limit, rooted in the divine transcendence and infiniteness from which apophaticism derives, is not the last word, because the true theologian knows how to 'put together' (συλλέγω) and 'unite' (συνάγω) the traces between them, reconstructing the relational texture not only of the cosmos, but also of God's action. Thus theology necessarily plays on syntax, right from its beginning in Mary's thinking. It is no coincidence, in fact, that the verbs used by Gregory of Nazianzus are reminiscent precisely of the keeping and meditating in the heart expressed by *ymballō* in Lk 2:19.

This is linked to the relationship between time and eternity,² that is here sketched from the ontological perspective and its logical consequences in Cappadocian theology. Right from the beginning of Greek thought, in fact, this relationship was presented from the point of view of paradox. It is sufficient to give the example of two expressions of Thales recorded by Diogenes Laertius. The first, which is also taken up by Clement of Alexandria (*Stromata* V, 14,96, 4,3-4: GCS 15, 396), shows the connection between divinity and eternity: «What is the divine? That which has neither beginning nor end» (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* I, 36,8). However, it is precisely this combination which throws into question human thought, characterised by the finite dimension: even when it tries to think of eternity in a cyclical way, as was typical of the ancient world (Spira), it does not manage to escape the aporia. That is why it is said of Thales «When someone asked him which came first, the night or the day, he used to say: the night, because it comes before a day» (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* I, 36,1-3).

This view can be shown to be valuable for grasping how revelation comes to have a bearing on a question which Greek philosophy already regarded as a critical point for the claims of human reason in the double etymological sense of critical.

² See, for example, Otis (1976), Escribano-Alberca (1972), Balás (1976), Mees (1976) and Plass (1980).

3. Basil and True Eternity

The relationship between time and eternity is central in Cappadocian theology insofar as it constitutes the very heart of their response to the Eunomians. The latter based their theological position on two principles: a) generation implies temporality and, therefore, the inferiority of the one generated in relation to the eternal one generating; b) the 'logical' correspondence between being and names in such a way that the Father, as the only one who can be called 'ungenerated', is God, while the Son cannot be eternal because, by definition, he is generated. In the face of these positions, Basil takes up Athanasius' distinction between the world and the one uncreated and eternal nature which is identified with the Trinity.³ As already seen, between the Creator and the creatures there exists an infinite metaphysical hiatus which removes the deity in its immanent dimension from the realm of human thought. The latter can know the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit only thanks to revelation and so through the history of salvation.

This theological position required the overcoming of the graduated conception of metaphysics that was typical of Platonism.⁴ The relationship between time and eternity becomes central in this perspective in that the Son cannot be distinguished from the Father through an ontological intermediary:

The God of the universe is Father from eternity and has never begun to be. In fact, no defect of the will prevented him from achieving what he wished. He did not have to wait for the cycles of the world to reach his capacity to generate, as is the case for men and other animals, obtaining what He desired after the completion of a specific age. Indeed, one has to be mad to think and speak in this way. No, his paternity, to call it that, is coextensive with his eternity. Therefore, the Son too, who is before the ages and always is, has never begun to be, but, from when the Father is, thus is the Son in such a way that the notion of the Son appears immediately with that of the Father. Because it is evident that the Father is Father of the Son. Thus, the Father has no beginning and the beginning of the Son is the Father without there being anything between them (μέσον). (Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* II, 12,9-23: SCh 305, pp. 44-46).

Between the first and second Persons of the Trinity, therefore, there cannot be inserted a *meson*, but the eternity of the Father must coincide with that of the Son in such a way that, not only nominally but also ontologically, the one is together with the other and *vice versa*. In this way, Basil establishes a two-way correspondence between coeternity and personal correlativity.

In the light of the coextensive nature of the Paternity and eternity, Basil describes the Arian doctrine as sophism (*Adversus Eunomium* II, 12,24: SCh 305, p. 46). He thoroughly excludes that there could be a *diastêma* between the Father and the Son (*ibidem*, II, 12,26: SCh 305, p. 46). This category (Verghese 1976; Patterson 1966) was to become central in the ontological distinction between time and eternity in that the former was to be identified precisely with *diastêma*:

If, then, the communion of the Son in relation to the One who is God and Father is revealed to be eternal in that our thought proceeds from the Son to the Father without crossing any void but joins the Son to the Father immediately (ἀδιαστάτως), there being no kind of intermediary (μέσση) separating them, what space still remains for the wicked blasphemy of those who say that [the Son] was brought

³ More details on this in Ayres (2006): 189-190.

⁴ For an acute analysis of the role and origins of the graduated ontology of Eunomius, see Batllo (2013).

from non-being to being? (Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* II, 12,27-33: SCh 305, p. 46)

As Ysabel de Andia has shown, in Basil, the *koinonia* of the Father and the Son takes on an ontological value, equivalent to identity of nature (de Andia 2005). Thus, the eternity of the generation is presented precisely as a consequence of this *koinonia* which excludes any participatory dimension. This response will mark the path taken by the two Gregories. However, they do not fail to develop Basil's argument in an original way. In particular, their theological proposal will deepen the logical dimension inherent in the ontological distinction between time and eternity, connecting it with logical openness.

4. Gregory of Nyssa and Apophatic Epistemology

Particularly evident in the work of Gregory of Nyssa is his continuity and fidelity in handling the anti-Eunomian theology of his brother.⁵ At the same time, the years and preparation for the Council of Constantinople enabled him to make an epistemological progress which is manifested especially in his emphasis on the apophatic dimension. Basil's arguments are taken up in a logical, almost geometric form, elements dear to Gregory for his closeness to the medical tradition and his knowledge of neo-Pythagoreanism mediated by Iamblicus (Iamblicus, *In Nicomachi arithmetica introductionem*, 76,23 and 110,28):

Whoever claims that the Father's life is older than that of the Son is certainly inserting the delay of an interval (διαστήματι τι) between the Only Begotten and the God of the universe. And either it is supposed that this interval (τὸ διὰ μέσου διάστημα) is in some way infinite, or else it is limited with boundaries or points that are clearly identifiable. But the concept of an intermediate position (ὁ τῆς μεσότητος λόγος) will not allow us to say that it is infinite, otherwise we would be completely eliminating from our discourse the notion of the Father and the Son; and it will not even be thought to be intermediate as long as it is infinite, that is, not determined by one side or the other, in that the notion of the Father does not interrupt the proceeding of the infinite in an upward direction and that of the Son does not cut off infinity in a downward direction. In fact, the very idea of the infinite consists in its being extended through its own nature in every direction without being bounded by any limit or any border. Therefore, in order that the notion of being as regards the Father and the Son remain firm and immutable, it will not be possible to conceive the space between (διάστημα) as infinite; [it] will necessarily separate the Only Begotten from the Father with some kind of limit. Thus, I maintain that, according to this discourse, the God of the universe is not from eternity; rather, it postulates that He had his origin from a particular point (Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* I, 344,2-347,1: GNO I, 129,1-19).

The argument develops *per absurdum*, in the sense that if one takes seriously the statement that the life of the Father is prior to that of the Son, then it will be inevitable to introduce an interval between the two, involving the Father in the same dimension as the Son. In fact, both the mutually exclusive possibilities are absurd, that is, whether the interval between the two Persons is infinite or finite.

The central point of the question is precisely the reflection on the relationship between adiastratic eternity and the diastematic time of the distinction into two ontological levels of the Trinity and the creation which, in Cappadocian theology, are separated by an infinite metaphysical hiatus.

⁵ On Gregory of Nyssa's philosophy of language, see La Matina (2009).

Apophatism is the epistemological reflection of this ontological structure (Maspero 2013), in that it removes all claim of projection from the dimension of the categories into the divine immanence, declaring, in fact, the impossibility of imprisoning the Trinity in concepts and in the necessary and necessitating logic which characterises creaturely knowledge:

That which truly exists is the true Life. And this is inaccessible to knowledge. If, then, the life-giving nature is beyond our knowledge, what can be comprehended is precisely not Life. But what is not Life cannot by its nature generate life. Thus, Moses is filled with what he desires precisely insofar as his desire remains unsatisfied. He learns from what was said that the divinity, by its very nature, is incomprehensible, since it is not circumscribed by any limit (πέρατι). In fact, if one were to think of the divinity as somehow limited (ἐν τινι πέρατι), it would be necessary and appropriate to consider together with this limit what lies beyond it (πέρατι). (Gregory of Nyssa, *Vita Moysis*, II, 235,1-236,4: GNO VII/1, 115).

As is clear from the text quoted, we find ourselves here at the very centre of Nyssa's theology which combines the ontological excess of the triune God with apophatism and *epektasis*, that is the description of the human being's union with God in terms of a limitless growth in the capacity to participate in His being, in such a way that human desire is always fulfilled and always revived, from glory to glory.⁶ Thus Moses knows God only by recognising in the encounter that He is unknowable. In this way, (wo)man's infinite desire becomes a guide to the true knowledge of the Creator. We see that in this context too, which is not part of the polemical or dogmatic works of Gregory, there is a repetition of the principle present in the *Contra Eunomium* I: whatever limit is predicated of God would imply lowering Him to a single level together with the two sections which would mark this limit.

5. Gregory of Nazianzus and Open Logic

That what we have here is a common strategy in Cappadocian theology is demonstrated also by the *Oratio* 29 (*De Filio*) by Gregory of Nazianzus. The radical difference between generation within the divine immanence and that on the creaturely level is reaffirmed in order to deny the possibility of any kind of ontological participation on the part of the Son:

But then [the Father] is supposed to have generated one who exists or who does not exist? These are ravings: this goes for you and for me since we were, in a certain sense, «in the loins of Abraham» (Heb 7,10), like Levi, and we came to be. In a certain way, therefore, our mode of origin is partly from what is and partly from what is not, by contrast with the primordial matter which clearly exists from a state of non-being even if some describe it as unbegotten. Where God is concerned, however, being begotten coincides with being and with «from the beginning». (Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oratio* 29 (*De Filio*) 9,1-6: SCh 250, pp. 192-194).

This passage reveals Gregory's awareness of being faced with a question that is essentially metaphysical and so of coming up against the great classical tradition, as shown by his reference to the primordial matter. The point is the same as the one already seen in Basil and in Gregory of Nyssa: for the Son, being generated coincides

⁶ On this subject, see Sferlea (2014).

ontologically with being itself, in such a way that having origin from another does not imply inferiority because it does not go out of the one divine nature.

As the discussion continues, the debate takes on an extremely interesting logical dimension because, as already in Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium* I, it proceeds *per absurdum*. But in Nazianzen's case, the paradoxical dimension emerges explicitly:

I, however, do not accept either of the two possibilities and declare that the question is absurd while the response is not difficult. Yet, if it seems to you that one of the two must necessarily be true, according to the assumptions of your discourse, let me pose you a little question: is time in time or is it not in time? If it is in time, what time is that? And how is it different from other time? And how does it contain it? But if it is not in time, what is this strange wisdom that introduces an atemporal time? But now, with regard to «I am now lying», admit the one or the other: either that it is simply true or that it is false. Indeed, we shall not admit both. But this is not possible: since by lying he is telling the truth, or else he is telling the truth with a lie. And this is inescapable. But then, why do you marvel that, as in that case the opposites agree, here, both the possibilities are false in such a way that your ingenuity is shown to be empty (Gregory of Nazianzen, *Oratio 29 (De Filio)* 9,15-28: SCh 250, pp. 194-196).

The force of the question as to whether time is within time or outside time is clear. It is actually a reformulation of the statement of the 'adiamasticity' of the divine being or, in other terms, of the surpassing nature of the ontology of the Trinity with respect to the creation. The observation of the impossibility of both the outcomes of the syllogism, or, better, the sophism, according to Basil's expression, is arrived at through the paradox of the liar.⁷

6. Conclusion: Logical Incompleteness before Gödel

There is thus a convergence of philosophical study and the theological reflection which has developed on the basis of revelation. In fact, the Eunomian claim, is confronted with a basic requirement of thought, which can be such only to the degree in which it remains open to the surpassing nature of the real, and so to the possibility of the intervention of God in history.

Thus, the logical argument reiterated by the Cappadocians in their response to Eunomius springs literally from Scripture and from that paradoxical dimension which characterises the Gospel. The same paradox of the liar is found again Tit 1,12-13, where it says: «One of them, in fact one of their prophets, had already said: 'The Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, greedy bellies'. This testimony is true» (Tit 1,12-13).

The prophet to whom Paul is referring is Epimenides, whose expression, according to Diogenes Laertius, was to be taken up and formalised by Eubulides (Diogenes Laertius, *Vitae philosophorum* II, 108). In the words of Roy Sorensen, «Eubulides may have poked through the ashes of Epimenides' remark and discovered a live ember; it would be odd if Epimenides' 'The Cretans always lie' entails that some Cretan is not a liar. Sure, it is a historical fact that some Cretans sometimes tell the truth. But one should not be able to deduce this historical fact from logic alone» (Sorensen 2003: 94).

It is precisely the opening of thought to the surpassing dimension of the real and so the presence of the Logos in human life that is the point of contact with the Megarian philosophical reflection, which is later taken up in the Stoic sphere (Rüstow 1987; Mignucci 1999), through which it probably reached the Cappadocians. Eubulides

⁷ On this theme, see Barwise & Etchemendy (1987).

operated simply in defence of the Parmenidean positions (Sorensen 2003: 90-91), using the paradox to cause the collapse of the distinction between premises and conclusions so as to bring about the emergence of an absolute identity. However, thanks to the revelation of the triune God, the Fathers succeed in grasping the deeper message contained in that fire hidden under the ashes, formulating for the first time the distinction between the ontological and the logical-epistemological levels.

The ontological perspective is fundamental in order to grasp the novelty of the theological proposal of the 4th century as is demonstrated by its convergence with the modern demonstrations of logical incompleteness. From Bertrand Russell to Kurt Gödel and later to Alan Turing, these proceed by reformulating the paradox of the liar as «This proposition is false» in order to translate it into «This proposition cannot be proved» and, then, in terms of information theory, as «It is incalculable/immeasurable» (Chaitin 1999). The point of arrival is the same as for the Cappadocians in that thought cannot be closed to the real, but every formal system can aspire to be consistent only if open to the reality which it intends to formalise, just as theological thought can only be itself if it remains ever open to the ontological excess highlighted by the apophatic dimension of which the distinction between time and eternity is the foundation.

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