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Life as Relation:
Classical Metaphysics and Trinitarian Ontology

Abstract

Life is a theological and metaphysical problem, because it constitutes the apex of the realm of being. The Aristotelian Unmoved Mover was identified with Life as the act of thinking. Christian doctrine affirms that God is triune just as Life, but here identified both with Logos and Love. The ontology of the First Principle is different in Classical metaphysics and in Trinitarian theology. The question discussed in the paper is how this difference affects the understanding of the relationship between God and the world. Having recourse to the theological framework developed by the Cappadocian Fathers in the discussions that lead to the formulation of the Trinitarian dogma in the 4th century, free and mutual relation is presented as the key concept that was used in theology to overcome the limitations of the metaphysics of the time and to extend it in order to develop a new ontology that is an ontology of life. Trinitarian ontology may also aid our understanding of created life, because it is not simply *meta-physics*, i.e. a description of man and God according to the category of necessity, but is *ana-physics*: life is understood from above with suitable categories for free beings.

Keywords

Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, metaphysics and trinitarian theology

And all other realities will appear immaterial and unnecessary, save this one: father, son and love. In that instant, gazing at the simplest of realities, we shall all say: was it not perhaps possible to decipher this long ago? Has it not been ever-present at the foundation of all that is?

(Karol Wojtyla, *Rays of Fatherhood*)

Introduction

J. Daniélou wrote, "The real metaphysical questions are those which reveal the limits of metaphysics."[1] Life does, in fact, seem to be one of these very questions that poses a challenge for human thought. Certainly religion has always been connected to life and its limits, which refer to the sacred dimension: one thinks, for example, of the religious value of the beginning, the end, and the transmission of life found in every ancient culture. The phenomenological perception of the finiteness of one's own life and the necessity for a source that is identified with the fullness of life itself begs for God.

In this paper we analyze the relationship between life and the first principle, dealing with some fundamental factors in the development of philosophical and theological thought, in an attempt to gather how a Trinitarian revelation permits us to reach a new ontological conception capable of overcoming some difficulties that have emerged throughout the course of history. The key to this transition has been the discovery of the ontological value of the will and of relation.

The analysis begins with the Greek philosophical thought of Plato and Aristotle, in order to then show how the Church Fathers in the fourth century extended the concept of classical metaphysics, according to a model that was later fixed in the synthesis of Aquinas in the Medieval Period. The conclusion of this narrative is a proposal for an ontological re-examination of the notion of life based on those categories developed within human thought by its reflection on Trinitarian revelation.[2]

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[1]   J. Daniélou, *Dieu et nous*, Paris 1956, p. 65.
[2]   For this particular work there have been many important discussions with professor Ariberto Acerbi of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome) and with professor Riccardo Chiaradonna of RomaTre University (Rome).

Classical Metaphysics

In Plato's ontological hierarchy Eros serves as an intermediary uniting the universe.[3] This mythical figure is clearly a reference to life, in all its immediate anthropological and religious resonances. Within the context of the *Symposium* Eros is again tied to authentic life: it is, in fact, defined as the tendency to *engender and give birth to what is in the beautiful* in order to reach eternity.[4]

The relation between ontology and life is therefore intrinsic to the metaphysical understanding of reality. Generation and the tendency towards fullness of life are included in the structure of being in all its gradations. One may wonder if the connection between being and life also applies to the zenith of the ontological spectrum. Clearly, the generative dimension cannot be extended to the perfect World of Forms, but it is extremely interesting to find Plato address life within this realm.

In *Laws* he presents a magnificent line of reasoning that ends with the pre-existence of the soul and its primacy over the body. Classifying the different movements, he demonstrates how the chain of those things that move and are moved must be preceded by something that moves by itself, without receiving motion from others.[5] And this is precisely what is identified with life and the soul.[6]

This doctrine unfolds a genuine evolution in the theological thought of Plato: while in *Phaedo* he represents the World of Forms in a static way, in *Sophist*, one of his last works immediately preceding *Laws*, this vision of the World of Forms is modified, attributing movement, life, soul, and intelligence to it (κίνησιν καὶ ζωὴν καὶ ψυχὴν καὶ φρόνησιν). Certainly this dynamic is related to thinking, inasmuch as the Forms are subject to knowing and being known.[7] In this way, the maturity of Platonic thought reveals a close connection between life and the ontological foundation.

This construction is perfected by Aristotle who, by means of the metaphysical instrument of the act, comes to identify God with the

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[3]   *Cf.* Plato, *Symposium*, 202e, 1–7.
[4]   Plato, *Symposium*, 206.e; see also 208.ab.
[5]   *Cf.* Plato, *Laws*, 894.e.
[6]   *Cf.* Plato, *Laws*, 895.ce.
[7]   *Cf.* Plato, *Sofist*, 248.e – 249.a.

act of living and thinking. Similarly to Plato's analysis,[8] Aristotle, be-ginning from the constant circular movement of primordial heaven, returns to the necessity of some reality that may be the cause of this motion. But the reality that moves because it is moved is recognized as an intermediary (μέσον), which necessarily appeals to an ultimate reality that moves without being moved (ἔστι τι ὃ οὐ κινούμενον κινεῖ), insofar as it is eternal, and simultaneously, substance and act (ἀΐδιον καὶ οὐσία καὶ ἐνέργεια οὖσα).[9]

The Prime Mover must be the final cause of each and every thing. It is highly desirable because it is pure act and pure thought. Hence, it does not communicate movement in that it is moved, as is true of the rest of reality, but because it is attractive as far as it is loved and desired (κινεῖ δὴ ὡς ἐρώμενον, κινούμενα δὲ τἆλλα κινεῖ).[10] The use of the verb ἐράω is extremely significant, because it calls to mind the Platonic reflection on Eros.

Aristotle arrives at the apex of his reflection in the moment he presents the Prime Mover as life, similar to that which for human beings is, though for a brief time, the most elevated:

> If, then, the happiness God always enjoys is as great as that which we enjoy sometimes, it is marvelous; and if it is greater, this is still more marvelous. Nevertheless it is so. Moreover, life belongs to God (καὶ ζωὴ δέ γε ὑπάρχει). For the actuality of thought is life (γὰρ νοῦ ἐνέργεια ζωή), and God is that actuality; and the essential actuality of God is life most good and eternal (ἐνέργεια δὲ ἡ καθ᾿ αὐτὴν ἐκείνου ζωὴ ἀρίστη καὶ ἀΐδιος). We hold, then, that God is a living being, eternal, most good (φαμὲν δὴ τὸν θεὸν εἶναι ζῷον ἀΐδιον ἄριστον); and therefore life and a continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God (ὁ θεός) is.[11]

This passage contains striking beauty: E. Berti appropriately under-scores the fact that only at the end of the argument is the name of God

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8   Beyond the *Laws*, Plato a similar construction in *Lysis*, where he demonstrates the existence of a First Friend (πρῶτον φίλον), from whom descends every friendship and attraction (*Cf.* Plato, *Lysis*, 219.d).
9   Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, XII, 7:1072.a.21–26.
10   Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072.b.1–4.
11   Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1072.b.24–30.

(ὁ θεός) introduced.[12] It ought to be stressed how Aristotle tries to lead human contemplation to that act which is divine life. The theological claim is of enormous significance, so much as to constitute, perhaps, the extreme limit to which one can elevate human reason deprived of revelation. The beauty of intellectual contemplation allows one to reach God who is alive inasmuch as he thinks, identifying himself with thought itself. In this way, Aristotelian ontology is presented as an ontology of life that *is* an ontology of thought.[13]

Simultaneously, this apex also represents a limit, because the fullness of life is identified with the necessary dimension, which explicitly excludes relation and the will.[14] Aristotle's God is pure act and therefore can desire nothing and cannot relate to anything: simply put, insofar as he is absolute, God is not concerned with the concrete individual.[15] Life is always interpreted according to the dynamic of necessity. At the same time the identification of the first principle with life and thought is placed at the base of every ulterior metaphysical reflection of reality.

Thus, summarizing the contributions of Greek reflections concerning God and life, one can say that:

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[12] *Cf.* E. Berti, *"Per i viventi l'essere è il vivere" (Aristotle, De anima 415.b.13)*, in: M. Sánchez Sorondo (ed.), *La vita*, Roma 1998, p. 29.

[13] *Cf.* E. Berti, *"Per i viventi l'essere è il vivere"...*, p. 30.

[14] Enrico Berti instead maintains that the Aristotelian first mover is a person, understood in the sense of the subject that is *capable of intending and desiring* within Roman law. The attribution of the will would be demonstrated by the fact that for the first principle the act is pleasure (ἡδονή), from which one would deduce the presence of will (*Cf.* E. Berti, *Attualità dell'eredità di Aristotele*, PATH 5 (2006) p.302–305). Here there seems to be an interpretation of intellectual pleasure as will that cannot be completely shared because it applies to the first principle the category of ὄρεξις, which Aristotle strictly uses in anthropological contexts. As well known, psychological theory of Aristotle represents a significant progress with respect to Plato (*Cf.* A. Bausola, *La libertà*, Brescia 1990, pp. 57–59). Nevertheless, the application of the analysis of pleasure and desire to the first principle was not developed by Aristotle and seems impossible to identify it with pure act. It also seems improper to attribute personality to the Aristotelian first principle by virtue of the identification of traditional Greek deities with the various movers: the gods themselves, in fact, are none other than mythological personifications of natural forces, that pertain to the realm of necessity. It seems anachronistic to read Aristotle's texts with an ontological conception of the person and the will. The same could be said for the platonic demiurge or every other ancient, mythical personification of the divine.

[15] We refer to the affirmations of Giovanni Reale in G. Reale, *Metafisica di Aristotele*, Milano 2004, p. cxxiv.

Both Plato and Aristotle start from a metaphysical conception consti-
tuted by a continuous ontological scale that combines the world and its
first principle in a single order.
Plato is perfected by Aristotle: the former, at the end of his work, in-
troduces life and thought in the theory of Forms and Ideas, the latter
identifies the Prime Mover as the act of life and thought.
Both confirm thought as the ultimate metaphysical dimension of the
first principle's life.

Greek metaphysics pulls together, therefore, the connection be-
tween being and life at the level of the first principle, identifying the
fullness of life with thought. The intelligible, in fact, does not pass away,
but survives within the material and phenomenological dimension. But
this thought is strictly related to the necessary causal connections that
rule the cosmos and are extended to the single ontological order that
includes the first principle and the world.

Trinitarian Ontology

Christian thought made Greek metaphysical thought its own, but at
the same time required modification. The encounter with God urges
one to wonder w h a t this being i s that speaks and acts in history.
And this is a metaphysical question, as is the question w h a t Jesus
i s. The Cross itself shows that those who crucified Christ understood
that this new rabbi claimed to be God: the very cause of the Cross was
the answer to such a metaphysical question. In this sense, the use of
metaphysics was imposed by the search for the meaning of Scripture.
Yet, the necessity of uniting the question of w h a t to the question
of w h o emerged. The first Christian thinkers were forced to face the
paradox of receiving the answer before the question. At this point one
may open to the fact that Jesus is one with the Father (see John 10:30)
though he is also distinct from Him, because in addition to the di-
mension of essence comes the dimension of the person. However, this
demands an extension of classical metaphysics, which always relegated
the w h o to the accidental and phenomenal level.
    Already in the Old Testament one observes this insufficiency, be-
cause God is shown as having a will and entering into relations in a way
that exceeded the limits of classical philosophy, born from a reflection

on the cosmos and necessity of nature. One could no longer find a mere cosmic and necessary foundation of what is beyond physical reality (μετὰ τὰ φυσικὰ). In fact, the Creator reveals himself over and beyond nature, giving origin to all things out of nothing, for the sake of love, and is in ever-present contact with human beings. This entering into a relationship with God pushes itself, then, to the extreme point of the Incarnation. So, with the revelation of the New Testament one discovers that God not only h a s relation, but also *is* identified as three Persons all uniquely themselves within their reciprocal relations. In the same way one discovers that God thinks not only of himself, but also thinks about and loves everything in existence, human beings in particular who are created in His image and likeness. Finally, the God of the New Testament is not only seen to have a will, a will of love, as in the Old Covenant, but is identified with the will itself, as it is stated that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8).

The history of the development of Trinitarian doctrine can be revisited precisely as the slow and laborious self-development of this new ontology, no longer merely a metaphysical theory. Access to being and its foundation can now be given only in the relationship and the gift that God offers to humanity. With respect to the Greeks, the identification of the divine life with thought alone had to be revised: the Greek ontological scale, in fact, implied that the first principle could have been known from the bottom up by means of human reasoning. God's relation to the world was a necessary causal relationship that could be traced by the mind of philosophers all the way up to the various levels of being. The Creator God of the Bible could still be known in this way, although only *a posteriori*, insofar as this God is the origin and end of the cosmos. However, within his own personal dimension he could only be known by way of his self-revelation. The journey is merely the freedom of love with which He discloses his immanence. In order to know God, not only thought but also the will becomes essential: the will of God who gives himself and the will of the man who opens himself to this gift. The distance between the creature and the Creator can be traversed only if the Creator himself desires it and then opens himself to the creature. So the concept of the *logos* is re-examined and extended in a personal sense: while the Greek *logos* is identified precisely with the necessary causal link that connects the different levels of that single ontological scale intended to be between God and the world, the Christian *Logos* is the gift of the Father – the free and personal Word

in the New Testament is indeed the Word, the Person of the eternal Son. To think of the triune God becomes impossible except from the starting point of Christ, from the *Logos* made flesh.

Thus, the transition to this new ontology can be identified in the formulation of a new thought not solely based on a *logos ut ratio*, that is a *logos* understood as a necessary causal link, but as a thought that is born out of the *logos ut relatio*, that is, from the thought of the Son whose being is a purely ontological relation with the Father.[16] Initially, the Trinitarian theology of the third century was influenced by the metaphysical conception of the *logos*, finding it difficult to express the complete identity of nature and dignity between the Father and the Son. The identification of the second Person with the eternal *Logos*, the thought of God, always refers to the creation and the causal link with it, because in the philosophical tradition the *Logos* assumed the function of ontological mediation that united in a necessary way the various planes of being. But this implied an ontological difference with respect to the first Person, in such a way as to induce a subordination (at least verbal) of the Son to the Father. The Son ran the risk of being identified with the Platonic Eros or one of the Aristotelian intermediate movers, by influence of the graduated Neo-Platonic theology.

This difficulty was not overcome until the fourth century, with the thought of Athanasius and later the Cappadocians. In this context, the relation between God and the world was no longer expressed through the ontological mediation of the *Logos*, but with the new instrument of the theology of nature: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit were identified with the single, eternal, and uncreated nature, while all other existing natures were recognized as ontologically dependent on this first nature. Between God and the world opened an infinite gap, which could not be overcome by any degree of ontological intermediary. This allowed for the expression of the creative and redemptive act in terms of love and freedom, placing the divine will in the first order and recognizing its ontological density. Hence, an ontology arose that had to acknowledge the relation and the will within the first principle. The concept of life also had to adjust accordingly.

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[16]   *Cf.* G. Maspero, *Patristic Trinitarian Ontology*, in: G. Maspero, R. J. Wozniak (eds.), *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions And Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, London–New York 2011.

Gregory of Nyssa

The novelty of this idea is quite clear in the theology of Gregory of Nyssa. His reflection on the Trinity develops at the end of the Arian crisis, containing his central point in the interpretation of the *God from God* formula derived from Nicea. His reply to Eunomius required a refinement of conceptual instruments, a true and proper extension of metaphysics and classical gnoseology. The Nicean formula was understood, Arianism aside, as a confirmation of the subordination of the Son with respect to the Father, because the *being from* someone implied not being original and therefore being metaphysically inferior. The central point was therefore to identify the ontological value of generation. The Christian first principle is Trinitarian and contains in itself not only the life of thought, but also the life communicated in a total way from the Father to the Son in generation. Their relation is not merely a causal connection in which the Second necessarily depends on the First as the effect of the cause: the Father does not generate the Son merely giving him some thing, but gives him all of Himself. For this the Son is one with the Father. The Father, then, generates the Son in the total gift of that full and eternal Life that is the very being of God. And the Son is the perfect image of the Father precisely in the re-giving of Himself to the Father, in such a way that the Father is Father in the Son and the Son is Son in the Father in their mutual relation of pure, reciprocal, and absolute gift.

The *being from* is revisited from the perspective of absolute life that gives and generates, a life that is reciprocal relation. Being in classical metaphysics, that in its absolute form cannot admit prepositions (grammatical signs of relations), must be reformulated in an ontology that includes the relations themselves within the first principle. As an example of this, Gregory of Nyssa's *Contra Eunomium III* might be of some help. The work was finished between 381 and 383, immediately after the Council of Constantinople[17] and presents the theological questions treated as the correct hermeneutics of the Nicene *True God from true God* (θεὸν ἀληθινὸν τὸν ἐκ τοῦ ἀληθινοῦ θεοῦ).[18] For Eunomius, in fact, generation

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[17]   *Cf.* J. I. Ruiz Aldaz, article *Contra Eunomium III*, in: L. F. Mateo-Seco, G. Maspero, *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, Leuven 2010, pp. 307–310.

[18]   The Nicene formula in *Contra Eunomium* III appears explicitly in 1,65,12 (GNO II, 27,3) and in 1,85,9–10 (GNO II, 33,15–16), in this case accompanied by *light from light* (φῶς ἐκ φωτός, θεὸς ἀληθινὸς ἐκ θεοῦ ἀληθινοῦ).

implied a substantial difference, through which the generated substance could not be the same substance as that not generated.[19] From this perspective the procession was read as proof of the subordination.

Gregory, then, presents the first principle as possessing some immanence, an *in-side*. It is precisely this dimension, expressed by the preposition *in*, that obliges one to claim the substantial identity between the first two divine Persons, because, as is written in John 1:18, the Son is *in* the bosom of the Father:

> The Father is principle (ἀρχή) of all things. But it is proclaimed that the Son is also in this principle (ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ ταύτῃ), since he is by nature that which the principle is. In fact, God is principle and the Word that is in the (first) principle (ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ) is God.[20]

If the second Person is inside the first, it cannot then be something else with respect to that Person. In this way the Son is not Himself a different ontological principle with respect to the Father and cannot be understood as an effect, but is entirely in the original ἀρχή. Hence, the Son identifies Himself with Life, and with all other divine attributes, just like the Father is God precisely because He identifies Himself with Life:

> Godhead is essentially Life (αὐτοζωή), and the Begotten God is God and Life, and Truth and every conceivable thing that is sublime and God-befitting.[21]

This means that the second Person of the Trinity is *Life from Life* with respect to the first Person. This formula is used by Gregory explicitly in *Contra Eunomium III,* together with *Light from Light* and *God from God.*[22] The expressions of the Nicene Symbol are then read in light of the claim that the true Life is that of the Father and the Son, that is, true Life includes generation.[23]

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[19]   *Cf. Contra Eunomium* III, 1,67: GNO II, 27,21–28,6.
[20]   *Contra Eunomium* III, 6,22,1–4: GNO II, 193, 23–26.
[21]   *Contra Eunomium* III, 6,75,1–3: GNO II, 212,15–18.
[22]   *Cf. Contra Eunomium* III, 8,57,1–58,3: GNO II, 260, 12–22. One can also see a similar context: *Contra Eunomium* I, 1,688,1–8: GNO I, 223,27–224,5.
[23]   This is in stark contrast with how the platonic Eros is viewed and within the entirety of the Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic traditions, that always understand

This statement would not be possible without introducing a new ontology and modifying the Greek metaphysics on one essential point, the point that Eunomius denies by citing relation and generation as proof of subordination. Gregory's basis for the position he takes is Scripture, specifically the exegesis of John's prologue, where the Evangelist writes:

> that the Word was God, and was Light, and was Life (*Cf.* John 1:1–4), not merely being in the beginning and with God and in the bosom of the Father, in such a way that by this kind of qualification the Lord is deprived of being in the strict sense. By saying that he was God, he cuts off every way round for those whose minds are running into wickedness, and furthermore, even more important, he proves the evil intent of our opponents. For if they claim that being in something (τὸ ἔν τινι εἶναι) is a sign of not strictly being, they surely agree that the Father also strictly is not, since they learn from the Gospel that as the Son is in the Father, so too the Father is in the Son, according to what the Lord says (John 14:10). To say that the Father is in the Son, is the same as saying that the Son is in the bosom of the Father.[24]

In the first place, Gregory accepts as a hypothesis Eunomius' claim that the being accompanied by prepositions, that is relative being, would indicate a metaphysical inferiority. He opposes this with the fact that John does not merely say that the *Logos* was in relation to the Father, as prepositions would express, but claims that *Logos* is God, Light and Life in an absolute sense, adding nothing more. This would indicate that Eunomius' objection is unfounded. The reply does not end here, but follows with an attack on the metaphysical premise itself, checkmating his opponent. In fact, if being in relation were to exclude absolute being, then not even the Father would be God in an absolute way, because in John 14:10 it is written that the Father is *in* the Son. The expression "being in something" (τὸ ἔν τινι εἶναι) has fundamental value in classical metaphysics, because it indicates accidental being that must inhere in some substance and cannot subsist on its own.

This ontological extension also manifests itself in the reexamination of the role of the will. Regarding the Greek tendency to equate will

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generation as degeneration.

[24]   Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomium* III, 8,40,11–41,6: GNO II, 253,25–254,11.

and desire to thought, as is evident in Plato's *Symposium* and in Socratic ethics, Gregory of Nyssa inverts this relation and places the will itself in the ἀρχή to explain the relation between the Father and the Son:

> The Father wanted something, and the Son who is in the Father, had the same will as the Father, or better yet, he himself has become the Will of the Father.[25]

The being of the Son is the doing of the Father's will, "wanting" *to be from* Him, that is, accepting and completely giving back the divine being to the First Person in an eternal exchange of reciprocal gift through which each Person is God not alone, but in relation with the two other Persons.

Augustine and Aquinas

The discovery of the ontological value of relation and will allows for the re-examination of the identification of life and being, in such a way as to place freedom and love as the foundation of being itself. The essential step for the development of Trinitarian doctrine in the fourth century was the distinction between two different ontological levels: that of the world and that of the Trinity. Classical metaphysics was developed from the point of view of the former, but now, because of Revelation, a new ontological plane can be accessed by human knowledge, albeit only in part. This plane is characterized by the possibility of perfect identity between the single substance and three divine Persons, a modality that is impossible to achieve on a creaturely level. The "giving Life" *in divinis* does not imply losing it: rather, being consists precisely in the giving of oneself.

This new outcome had to have an effect on the ontological comprehension of creation as well, and more specifically for what concerns human beings created in the image and likeness of the Creator (Gen 1:26). Clearly, the distance between the two ontologies remains necessarily absolute, but what had been discovered as the perfection of divine being could not exist in an equivocal way in creation as imperfection. For example, being in relation realizes itself in an absolute

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[25]   *Idem*, *Contra Eunomium* II, 1, 216, 1–2: GNO I, 288, 17–19.

and perfect way in God, and therefore cannot correspond in human beings to something that is not a perfection. Rather, the perfection of the human being must pass precisely through his or her own relations, and through communion. The same can be said for some of the virtues that were not recognized as such by pagan ethics, like humility, whose ultimate foundation is the Trinitarian *being one in the other*. Lastly, the will becomes discovered in all its ontological depth that allows for the real union between lover and beloved. Here the difference between knowing and wanting is emphasized: while one might know bad things without becoming bad himself, wanting implies a transformation of the one who wants in the act of wanting, by which one actually becomes that which he desires. From this breakthrough the entire ontology of love is born.

All this was made manifest, then, in the identification of divine life not only with the act of thinking, but now also with that of wanting (or desiring). It is precisely this distinction between the two ontologies that permits Augustine to develop his psychological analogy. This does not consist in the projection of an anthropology within divine immanence, but rather recognizes in the being of God Himself, disclosed by Revelation, the ultimate source of an anthropological element that ancient philosophy was unable to fully appreciate. Specifically, in describing the triad memory, intelligence and will in human beings, Augustine demonstrates how these might be a single life:

> Since, then, these three, memory, understanding, will, are not three lives, but one life; nor three minds, but one mind; it follows certainly that neither are they three substances, but one substance. Since memory, which is called life, and mind, and substance, is so called in respect to itself; but it is called memory, relative to something. And I should say the same also of understanding and of will, since they are called understanding and will relatively to something; but each in respect to itself is life, and mind, and essence. And hence these three are one, in that they are one life, one mind, one essence; and whatever else they are severally called in respect to themselves, they are called also together, not plurally, but in the singular number. But they are three, in that wherein they are mutually referred to each other.[26]

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[26]   Augustine, *The Trinity*, X, 11, 18.

Immediately after presenting life of the human spirit as a unity within a trinity, Augustine traces all of this back to the Trinity itself as the foundation of being.[27] In this way all the components of the new ontology emerge: relation and the addition of the will alongside the intellect, from which the former can be distinguished only in a relational sense.

The psychological analogy then reveals itself as a consequence of the new ontology elaborated to present the distinction in the one and triune God not substantially, but relationally. In this way the theology of the *Logos* of the first three centuries can be read as an incomplete psychological analogy, that little by little perfected itself according to the continuous deepening of the orthodox theological comprehension of life at the human level and in God, parallel to the development of this new ontology.

After the passing of centuries, in the Golden Age of Scholasticism, Aquinas comes to the formulation of the psychological analogy in the context of an extensive theological system with particular coherence. In the *Disputed Questions on Divine Power,* recovering the outline of the Greek analysis of the movement, he reconnects the procession of the Son and the Spirit to the claim that God is alive. In the body of the first article of the tenth question, he draws the line between two kinds of operations: those that emanate from the agent to a different object or the external realm and are common both to living and nonliving things, and those operations which are immanent and proper only to living beings. The analysis moves from Aristotelian psychology to affirm that immanent operations are not a sign of imperfection, but rather characterize the act of a perfect being. In fact, Life would consist of the capacity to move oneself, according to all that Plato claimed. Aquinas, however, completely detaches himself from the Greek analysis when he adds the immanent operation of love that proceeds from the lover to the word that proceeds from he who speaks. God is said to be living precisely because He possesses the immanent operations of the intellect and will, without which he would not be perfect. In fact, with regard to immanent operations Aquinas writes:

> We attribute another kind of operation to God insofar as we speak of him as understanding and willing. For he would not be perfect if he

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[27]   *Cf.* Augustine, *The Trinity*, X, 12, 29.

did not exist in an act of understanding and willing. In this way we acknowledge him to be a Living Being.[28]

So, for Aquinas to say that God is Life is the same as saying that God is triune, because the Life most ontologically elevated, the source of every other life, is that which consists of two processions. The divine Persons are numbered to be three, among themselves distinct but identical to a single substance, precisely because God is intellect and will, in such a way that the two immanent processions relationally differentiate the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Aquinas, at the end of the *corpus* in question, explicitly reconnects himself to the Greek theology developed in the fourth century in order to respond to the Arians, whose theology would imply a God dead and void of intelligence.

In this first article of the tenth question, Aquinas develops the thought of Augustine, who was very clear in warning that the psychological analogy could not be understood as an *explanation* of the Trinity,[29] making explicit note of the identity between the claim that God is living and that God is triune. This has become possible precisely because the history of salvation has revealed the divine act in history as pure gift, from which proceeds the value of the will and relation. The *descending* Judeo-Christian model, derived from the establishment of God's love as the source of human life, supplants the *ascending* Greek model that is based on geometric and necessary proportion. The absolute disproportion of the gift received by the divine will replaces ontological necessity.[30] This implies that the will and love are read in the light of an absolute gift and no longer in the Greek terms of desire and attraction.

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[28]   Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions Concerning Divine Power*, q. 10, a. 1, co.

[29]   Augustine, *The Trinity*, XV, 7, 11; 22, 42; 23, 43.

[30]   This point reconnects to the apophatic dimension of theology, that characterizes the pinnacle of thought from the Cappadocians until Aquinas through the mediation of Pseudo-Dionysius: the role of the will within creation introduces, in fact, a discontinuity in the necessary chain of causes, whereby the same transcendence freely operates as the direct principle cause irreducible to the other. In this way, human thought can no longer trace back to penetrate the being of God, but not taking as a starting point the divine act in history, to arrive at the personal dimension starting from the connection between being and act. In this way, the same apophaticism marks the limit of philosophical reflection, which cannot penetrate the strictly Trinitarian dimension.

All of this leads one to think that the psychological analogy is never at risk of being interpreted as some kind of projection on the basis of human categories in God, insofar as the historical analysis suggests that this full recognition of the ontological statute of the will might be the fruit of Revelation, and concretely from the discovery of God as the Trinity. At the same time, the development of Trinitarian thought from Augustine to Aquinas shows how the identification of God and Life is accomplished in the affirmation of the Trinitarian dimension, tied to the comprehension of the ontological density of the will and relation.

ANAPHYSICS AND METANTHROPICS

A sentence from Etienne Gilson, that has attracted the attention of Y. Congar, J. Daniélou, and G. Lafont, seems perfect to conclude this journey: "Metaphysical theories grow old because of their physics."[31] This shows that metaphysics is necessarily connected to that physics starting from which one pursues the ontological foundation of reality. Classical metaphysics has succeeded in drawing together a reflection on God and life, identifying, in the work of Aristotle, life itself with thought. Tracing the various causal links, the human being reaches a first principle that is a universal and necessary thought. The limit of this endeavor is the capacity to give value to the concrete and the individual. The same Greek tragedy gives evidence to the difficulty of preserving the life of the individual in the face of universal value.

The development of the Trinitarian doctrine, from the fourth century until Aquinas, demonstrates how Christian thought has had to push the boundaries of the classical metaphysical concept, to make sense of the one and triune God who is relation and enters into relation. Revelation has provided access to a new ontology that characterizes the first principle alone and sets it apart from the ontology of creation. The Aristotelian first mover and the world belonged to a single metaphysical order that philosophical thought could explore. On the contrary, one can only know the ontology of God through that which has been revealed. So one discovers the value of the will and relation, deeply

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[31] "C'est par leur physique que les métaphysiques viellissent," quoted in G. Lafont, *Peut-on connaitre Dieu en Jésus-Christ?*, Paris 1969, p. 10.

connected to each other: the distinction between the necessary Greek causal connection and Christian relation is properly given by freedom and the reciprocity that characterizes the latter within the new onto-logical conception.

The Trinitarian doctrine can then be defined as *ana-physics*, which is an extension of *meta-physics*: while the Greeks sought an ontological foundation starting with physical and cosmic reality, viz. out of neces-sity, Christian thought must describe an ontology that is not simply beyond (*meta-*) the physical realities, but is above (*ana-*) them. This ontology finds its foundation above, not below. It is precisely this *ana-physics* that allows for a treatment of life that is able to take into account the fact of relation and freedom.

The phenomenon of life in this way stresses the limits of classical metaphysics, because it has been developed from the point of view of a cosmos where the individual does not have absolute worth, but only the universal enjoys ontological priority. In this sense, the single basis of life can be the thinking thought of the First Mover, that moves all things as a necessary cause, but has relation to nothing. It is a life that is purely intellectual and not in any way relational, a life that knows nothing of the gift or will.

Christian thought, on the other hand, has had to gather the onto-logical priority not only of thought, but also of the will, with respect to the cosmos: the world is wanted and loved by God. The ultimate reason is love, and therefore freedom.

These categories of relation, gift and love may also be utilized within the ambit of creation to develop an ontology that seeks after the foundation of being starting from those realities that are essential to the human being. This is, in fact, the image and likeness of the Creator and the ontological structure of the human being must bear the sign of those perfections that are uncovered through *ana-physics*. For example, if God's immanence can only be known through free self-revealing, this would allow one to gather the existence of an ana-logical dimension of self revelation in the knowledge of the personal immanence of the human being, leading one then to recognize the value of revelation and faith on a purely human level, regardless of faith. According to the Greeks, faith was merely an inferior mode of knowing, to be followed solely when science was impossible. But now, faith and the opening of oneself become the highest vertices of knowledge, insofar as they are personal.

A similar ontology could be defined, then, as *meta-anthropics*, because it seeks the ontological foundation not claiming a necessary or fixed cosmos as a prototype. Rather, it takes off from freedom, relation, and gift. From μετὰ τὰ φυσικά one would pass to μετὰ τὰ ἀνθρωπικά. This does not negate nor undermine metaphysics. The human being does not cease to be physical or obey the necessary laws of the cosmos. But the proper categories of true life, that is, of thought and love, assume a new value for each and every human being. They are ontologically capable of providing a foundation for morality and are not merely aprioristic and voluntaristic. From this perspective, measureless love, even giving one's life for an enemy, does not represent a loss but a gain in that Being properly consists in relation.

Even physics is re-examined, starting from the notion of gift and every thing is recognized as the word of God, a word of love. The meaning of all reality becomes the Son and the Gift. This opens the way to a new ontological dimension that recognizes not only the necessary cause, but also the free cause. The one and triune God need not be autarkic to maintain His primacy, but is God precisely in His absolute openness to relation. In the Greek world desire was seen as deprivation, and therefore could not be attributed to God; in the Christian world desire is the desire of self-donation and therefore supremely divine.

This new conception of the divine changes the way to read the finite world: precisely because created ontology subsists in the relation with what is not created, its finiteness is relation to an infinite Creator. The creaturely limit becomes an opening to the infinite in the relational cross-reference to God who gives Himself, creating without losing anything of Himself and without confusing Himself with His creation. The relational ontology makes it possible to comprehend how God would have no need of "protecting Himself," but can be absolutely transcendent, also making Himself truly present in the world.

From this perspective relation should not be understood according to the classical metaphysical model, where it takes on the role of an accident, but starts from its new ontological dimension revealed by God. The life of human beings can only be fully understood from above: and gazing vertically from the Trinity towards human beings one may find the instruments that would then permit us to understand human beings horizontally in all their value. Within God, relation is

characterized by absolute freedom[32] of the mutual and divine self-gift, without that kind of necessity typical of the causal effects in creation. Relation in God is not thought alone but also will. For this reason the two processions follow a double "movement" of flow and reflow parallel to that of intellect and will. The knower in a movement of attraction grasps the known, and the lover is united to the beloved in an ecstatic movement. This is how the Father generates the Son, his *Logos*, and this generation is inseparable from spiration by which the Lover and the Loved – that is, the Generator and the Generated – are united in Love: the Holy Spirit.

It is a matter, therefore, of grasping how father, son and love could be terms of truly ontological value, since the same *Ipsum Esse Subsistens* is Father, Son and Love. For theological imagery, then, at the created level, filiation and paternity cannot be read as mere accidents, but possess unique ontological density.[33] Through this filiation the essence of human beings can be re-examined. In the same way, interpersonal relations can be re-examined not strictly from a moral or psychological perspective, but from the very same being. Sociology also follows this path when it demands a new metaphysical conception that could recognize the familial reality.[34]

This insufficient vision of the world based solely on essentialist metaphysics is also noticeable in contemporary science. The mechanistic rationalism of classic mechanics went into crisis in view of the radical, relational dimension brought to light by the discovery of chaos: understanding the evolution of a minimally complex system, in fact, requires that account be taken of the interactions of objects that are on opposite sides of the planet. Further still, quantum mechanics has

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[32] *Cf.* J. Zizioulas, *Trinitarian Freedom: is God Free in Trinitarian Life?*, in: G. Maspero, R. J. Wozniak (eds.), *Rethinking Trinitarian Theology: Disputed Questions And Contemporary Issues in Trinitarian Theology*, London–New York 2011, s. 193–207.

[33] From this ontological point of view one could recognize the metaphysical value of the phenomenological analysis of the human psyche that, from the time of S. Freud onwards, identifies the wounds of human filiation as the source of pathology: *Cf.* G. Maspero, *Remarks on the Relevance of Gregory of Nyssa's Trinitarian Doctrine for the Epistemological Perspective of 20th Century Psychoanalysis*, European Journal of Science and Theology 6 (2010) pp. 17–31.

[34] One may see an extremely interesting analysis in P. Donati, *Relational Sociology. A New Paradigm for the Social Sciences*, London–New York 2011, pp. 66–72.

proven this relational structure:[35] When one enters into the dimensions of the studied phenomena, the very interaction of the measurement placed in act from the knowing subject modifies the known object. Instead of a representation based on objects as different essences, one must introduce a conception of reality as relations.[36]

This relational dimension grows as we approach the phenomenon of life, where the complexity becomes essential to quantitatively analyze the phenomenon. Biological organicity is really an integrated form of relatedness. But this process stops in the face of human life characterized by freedom. The organic relation is, in fact, still marked by necessity and the will is not brought into play. Life highlights the category of relation in the description of reality and at the same time shows the insufficiency of the category of relation understood solely as a necessary interaction when we approach human life. This category of relation developed by Trinitarian theology proves to be quite valuable, even for those who do not share a perspective of faith. This contribution allows us to understand the value of the mutual and free relation as the essence of man.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of life has a profound religious significance that points to its relationship with the first principle. Classical metaphysics approached it from the bottom up, by the search of a foundation to the physical realities of the cosmos. Life has been identified with thought and necessary causality as such. In this approach, however, the universal alone fails to take into account the individual and the person. This raises the difficulty of studying life in this metaphysical perspective.

Trinitarian doctrine developed by the Church Fathers of the fourth century can be recognized as a true and real ontology that offers thought and conceptual tools capable of giving an account of life at the properly human level, because they proceed from freedom. It is, therefore, not

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[35]   This point has been noted by J. Ratzinger in 1968: *Cf.* J. Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, San Francisco 2004, pp. 173–177.

[36]   For an introduction of these two scientific theories markedly aware of the sensitiveness manifested here, see P. Musso, *Science and the Idea of Reason*, Milano–Udine 2011, pp. 351–405, 475–495.

a metaphysic, but an *ana-physic*. Starting from the relation of free and mutual gift in God, one can then descend to man to define his life not simply from the organic perspective. Very briefly, one could say that the conquest of Greek metaphysics is the definition of life not only through self-movement, but also through the capacity of thought, the theoretical activity: starting from *being alive because one moves*, changes to *being alive because one reasons*. This is an important gain, but will be completed later thanks to Christian revelation when *being alive because one reasons* is completed by *being alive because one reasons and loves*.

It is important to stress that this approach does not promote relation over substance: the ontology developed in the 4th century by the Fathers of the Church in order to give an appropriate formulation to the Trinitarian doctrine assigning the same fundamental role to both the former and the latter.[37]

Moving from top to bottom, starting from this ontology discovered by Trinitarian revelation, concepts and tools are found that may be applied also by those who do not share the faith to develop an ontology that would not only be metaphysical, but could also be *metanthropical*, because it can account for those traits that are essential to human life: freedom and love. If the anthropological instance in times past has been expressed in an anti-metaphysical sense, perhaps it is because there was no development of such an ontology.

Therefore, the Christian solution to the question about life and death is not only a reference to thought and universal truth, as in Greece, but is love: true life is being for another and in the other for love.

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[37]   This approach seems to overcome L. Ayres' critical remarks to relational ontologies in L. Ayres, *(Mis)Adventures in Trinitarian Ontologies*, in: J. Polkinghorne (ed.), *The Trinity and an Entangled World*, Cambridge 2010, pp. 130–145.

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