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**SELF-KNOWLEDGE AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE:
ONTOLOGICAL SELF BETWEEN PLOTINUS AND GREGORY PALAMAS**

Abstract. In this paper, I aim to evaluate the meaning of Gregory Palamas' *ontology of the self* in the context of the semantic itinerancy between Plotinus, the first one to propose the ontological dimension of the *self*, and the patristic horizon. I will survey the semantic re-semanticization of terms that can be found from Plotinus to the fourteenth century, the time of Gregory Palamas' anthropological perspective. The corresponding concepts in modern languages have accumulated connotations linked to the horizon of modernity, resulting in semantic alterations or alienations. This confusing interpretative approach is linked, no less, to paradigms of modern sources, as in the case of understanding the Neoplatonic *self* on the scheme of Cartesian dualism.

Keywords: *Self, Self-knowledge, Ontology, Spiritual Practice*

Introduction

Research on the nature of *the self* in Plotinian or Palamite frameworks is currently undergoing international debate, the implication of this perspective of understanding has consequences for the rediscussing of an ideational and doctrinal trajectory that marks European cultural identity, or, as in the case of Palamite texts, of cultural frameworks specific to the European East. Yet, not a few otherwise valuable works have created perspectives that ignored or hijacked the meaning and stakes of the articulation of the paradigm *of the ontology of the self*. This was because there were implied interpretive paradigms of modern sources, as in the case of understanding

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the Neoplatonic self on the scheme of Cartesian dualism. But valuable contributions from recent exegesis, through their pursuit of the constitution and reunification of the paradigm of the *ontological self*, and their engagement with pertinent hermeneutical tools, provided important landmarks for this research.

There are key aspects when discussing the meaning of *the ontology of the self* in Gregory Palamas. First, how the paradigm of the self was resemnified in late Neoplatonism, and what influence did this perspective have on the thought environment in which the doctrines of the patristic period were formulated? Second, what are the reasons Gregory Palamas uses language involving elements of Plotinian syntagms on the ontological dimension of the self, in a situation where it is polemical with the assertions of Neoplatonism and humanism? Palamite anthropological doctrine is articulated in the context of the affirmation of the self in the ontological description as justification of the rostrums of spiritual experience.

Mediated Ascent of the Self in Late Neoplatonism: Iamblichus vs. Porphyry

Neoplatonism departs from the philosophical ideal of Plotinus: philosophy, as a purely theoretical exercise, is no longer capable of bringing the soul to knowledge and union with the divine: for this, recourse must be had to external means, prescribed by the gods themselves and transmitted in the sacred texts. The need arises for a practice appropriate to this worldview, through which union with the gods becomes effective. This practice will be *theurgy* (Vlad 2006, 13). It is an important paradigm shift in the understanding of how it is possible to experience the self and the ascending path of mediation so that the semantics of the terms involved in this type of discourse will provide the discursive ground for the formulations and perspective shift of the patristic age. Iamblichus remarked that if the best part of us were perfect, then what would prevent us from being happy, if the highest part of us always enjoys intelligence and is always turned to the gods? If *νοῦς* is this highest part, this has, however, nothing to do with *ψυχή*. If it is a part of *ψυχή*, then the rest must also be following this state. To bring *αὐτό* and *νοῦς* together

means that the whole *νοῦς* descends, with none of the levels remaining above. Iamblichus' soteriology as *theurgy* brings new elements to bear on the soteriology of his predecessors, for *θεουργία* promises the liberation of *ψυχή* without relieving it of its self-alienation: that which is above to be accessible to the alienated individual and to operate with goodwill towards it. As Gregory Shaw remarks, in his excellent book on *Theurgy and the Soul. The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus*, although it was Porphyry who specifies the necessity of mediation through *θεουργία*, it was Iamblichus who indicated its deeper significance. For Porphyry, *θεουργία* functioned as a mere *preparatio* for the philosophical life, but Iamblichus regarded *θεουργία* as fundamental not only in the life of the philosopher but also for anyone with a spiritual practice. At issue was *the divinity of the world*, and for Iamblichus the most effective means of acknowledging this was by stipulating the performance of rites. For Porphyry, however, Platonism was limited to an intellectual elite. Articulated as *theurgy*, Iamblichus' Platonism indicates the existence of gradations and steps of spiritual experience, corresponding to different levels of the cosmos and society (Shaw 1995, 14). Through *θεουργία*, Iamblichus offered a soteriology indicating that, theoretically, any *ψυχή* could attain *σωτηρία*, from the most matter-bound *ψυχή* to the most spiritualized *ψυχή* (Iamblichus 2002, 32). With such an elaborate metaphysical doctrine, Iamblichus structured Plato's teachings in a way that preserved the mystical elements of Plotinus' soteriology but emphasized the importance of the *ψυχή*'s connections to the physical cosmos or other people (Shaw 1995, 14). Grace, not the effort to raise *αὐτό* (the self) to its higher intellectual life, prevailed, the *ψυχή*'s access to the divine having to come *ἔξωθεν* (*from without*), which was a rationale for the practice of rituals. With Iamblichus and his followers, the soul's ascent is not possible due to the *division of the self and an inner (circular) movement of the self*. Rather, an involvement of an outer dimension/activity of the self is possible and necessary in *σωτηρία*.

Patristic Contours of the Self: Augustine and Maximus the Confessor

The Church Fathers brought a novel perspective on wo/man, but their anthropological doctrines meant to be, in the first place, a response to

the controversies of their time. Augustine formulating on the *free will* in the fifth century AD, and Maximus on the *two wills* in Christ in the seventh century AD, had to express a Christian understanding of the nature of the self.

Augustine states that the *mens*, mind, always knows itself because it is always present in itself and is, therefore, better known than anything else. As W.J. Hankey notes, the relationship with God and all else is *contained* in true self-knowledge for Augustine. We must subtract what we have added wrongly by our immersion in the lower sensual mind. When the confusion resulting from these obstructive additions is overcome, the mind will be left with the knowledge of its nature or substance. When it comes to *true self-knowledge*, however, the mind reaches God. (Hankey 1999, 564). There the human mind encounters that which is superior to it. Moreover, self-knowledge, as self-reflection, is the medium in which the relationship with all other realities takes place (Augustine 2012, 8.6.9). In its relationship with sense and imagination, the mind is receptive to the sensible, bringing into unity, organizing, and creatively reconstructing the sensible beneath it. The temporal and the sensible are lower realities which, by their mutability, hardly exist. The human mind, which is changeable but reaches the immutable above it, stands about all hierarchically graded forms of being. For Augustine, *ratio* characterizes the human, and this, or *mens* (mind), is the best part of the soul. *It has as its direction and purpose through self-knowledge and knowledge of God, which are inevitably intertwined including knowledge of all other realities.* Participation in divine wisdom according to the essential inwardness of reason makes wo/man so close to God that *he becomes* His image. Nothing comes between God and the rational soul. Nothing is closer to the divine, nor better between creatures. Boethius and the medieval Augustinians, such as Eriugena and Bonaventure, would develop this Augustinian teaching to reconcile the human with the universe and to describe the milestones in guiding the soul through the hierarchical levels of reality towards God (Hankey 1999, 564).

In the understanding of wo/man as *ψυχή* embodied in *σῶμα*, Maximus the Confessor, unlike the Origenists, who affirmed the initial and now lost perfection of rational beings, describes perfection as an end *already achieved*, but only in potentiality. A fundamental change in the

description of the ontology and functions of *ψυχή* in wo/man is expressed. The understanding of *ψυχή* is no longer that of a *distinct and separate entity* with autonomous activity since it can only be understood together with *σῶμα*, with which, however, it is neither mixed nor confused. Wo/Man's being in the body is no longer regarded as a sign of the fall and imperfection, for these were given to him to cross the *διάστασις* (distance) and *διάστημα* (interval) which separate wo/man from the goal of his earthly life (Larchet 1996, 193). The ascent towards one's cause, or movement towards the goal of life, that is, towards God, is inherent in human nature. Maximus takes an optimistic view of human nature, while not ignoring the role of grace, which sustains this movement of rational creatures toward God, towards the fulfillment in Him of their *λόγος*. Maximus puts *θέλημα* (will) as the key aspect, as "rational propensity", in describing the human as having *ψυχή*. The emphasis on the rational dimension of *ψυχή* has as its implication the distinction between the *natural will* and the *gnomic will*. If the natural will is in human nature, in what characterizes the human way of being, the gnomic will is proper to the person, about the concrete dimension of *ὑπόστασις*. Through the gnomic will, the person manifests his disposition toward good or evil, in agreement/disagreement with his/hers *λόγος*. The fundamental reference in Maximian anthropological doctrine is based on the concept of *mediation*, wo/man being a mediator by his very nature, since he has *ψυχή* and *σῶμα*. Wo/Man's task is to unify the whole of created reality and to unify it with its Creator. This mission can be fulfilled by overcoming and unifying several polarities between created and uncreated nature, sentient and intelligible beings, earth and heaven, Paradise and the inhabited world, or man and woman. It is a unifying act that takes place at distinct levels of reality, which implies an important correspondence with the Neoplatonic description of reality by *ὑπόστασις*, a perspective that includes certain degrees of reality. With the justification of this anthropological view comes the Maximian claim that wo/man is not only made up of *ψυχή* and *σῶμα*, but also of various distinct 'parts' and powers or faculties of *ψυχή*, which in the state of fallen human nature are at odds with each other, but which can be restored to their unity and order. Though ambivalent, the function and use of these faculties must be considered for the mission that wo/man

has to fulfill. In addition, the aspect of human consent to the process of restoration and mediation must also be considered (Thunberg 2005, 190).

Maximus formulates an anthropological paradigm with a higher degree of complexity than what had been formulated before about human. The Maximian view of *ψυχή*, stipulates that *ψυχή* does not have an independent reality and function, as it was in classical Greek philosophy or Neoplatonism, since *ψυχή* is always part of a couple that cannot be radically distinguished from *σῶμα*. Wo/Man cannot be essentially understood and described by *ψυχή*, which is no longer the highest and truly the essential part, but part of a complex process of mediation with consequences on the nature of the compound *ψυχή-σῶμα*. In the act of mediation, this compound *ψυχή-σῶμα*, is called upon to grasp what is deeper, being the rational seed in the various aspects and levels of reality, what Maxim calls *λόγοι*. In place of the Platonic doctrine of the eternal mind, Maxim elaborates a theory of providential *λόγοι*, formulating not only the paradigm of a *Λόγος* of nature, but especially of a *λόγος* of each particular rational being (Benevich 2009, 137). The status and role that *ψυχή* has in the human psycho-somatic hypostasis are even more precisely expressed when Maxim indicates what is the *τέλος* of the mediating activity performed by wo/man in creation. The goal and final state of the human mediating act, between contraries, is *rest in motion*, of moving rest which presupposes a kind of *διάστημα* (extension) beyond *χρόνος* (time) and yet lacking God's timelessness: a *temporal timelessness, a motion in stillness* (Plass 1984, 177). Wo/Man enjoys "eternal moving rest" as a finite being open to infinity, who knows an "eternal motionless motion", for the finality of finite man is infinite and beyond limitation (Christou 1982, 261).

There is a simultaneity of transcendence and immanence in creatures that have reached the end of their movement and transcended their physical level. The final repose, in the Maximian description, is not simply the opposite of movement, but its elevation to a higher level. For Maxim, deification is the *σκοπός* of the whole *κόσμος*. It is more than salvation, it is the orientation towards the attainment of a destiny originally seeded with the help of pre-existing reasons, *λόγοι*. The Maximian view of human evolution is given by the state of *θέωσις*, a doctrine that is a summary of his entire anthropology. The ultimate goal, *σκοπός*, of spiritual evolution is conceptualized by *θέωσις*, a notion which, despite its ambivalent connotation, refers to the totality of the person (Blowers 1992, 164-166).

Maximus the Confessor brings a broad change of perspective in the understanding of human, with emphasis on the *rational propensity* as his essential dynamic, which also means a dynamic of mediation between the spiritual and the bodily, with the new outline of understanding the *person* as an integral entity. In this new register of understanding of human data, the *ontology of the self* is no longer one that can be assigned to the spiritual dimension of man, whatever it may be, but must be put in the perspective of the inseparable soul-body composite.

Gregory Palamas' Comprehension of *Noûς* and the Intellectual Context of the Byzantine Fourteenth Century

Gregory Palamas' involvement of an ontological perspective of the *self* appears as a necessity, on the one hand, to justify the meaning and the coordinates of the spiritual practice, and on the other hand to formulate answers to the criticisms coming from his opponents in the controversies related to the possibility of knowledge obtained through experience, through the spiritual perception. To be intelligible to his opponents, but also to those who supported his statements, Gregory Palamas' doctrinal formulations could only be expressed in the conceptual universe of the fourteenth century. This conceptual universe presented that "stratification" of epochs and perspectives which brought into play a common philosophical and theological vocabulary. This extraordinary semantic accumulation of Greek philosophical and theological terms, beyond the common ground of discourse, posed just as much difficulty and paradox when they were brought into play in another intention and a distinct conceptual/doctrinal context. This is what Palamas does when he puts special and new semantics into play in the key terms of his doctrinal formulations. Palamas will formulate a vision of the human with a degree of complexity that goes beyond anything that existed in the Byzantine tradition until then.

As Giorgios Mantzaridis remarks in his excellent book, *The Deification of Man. St Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition*, the great Byzantine sees what is "after likeness" as primarily in the *νοῦς*, which is also the highest aspect of human nature: what is after image resides not in *σῶμα*, but in *νοῦς*, which is the highest aspect of human nature. Like God, also

in the case of wo/man's *νοῦς*, created after likeness, Palamas distinguishes between *essence* and *energy*. *Νοῦς'* energy, realized as thought and intuition, cannot be identified with the *intellectual nature* from which it originates; neither can it be viewed as altogether different from it. Although the *νοῦς* energy is distinct from its nature, it is nevertheless related to and united with the *intellectual nature*, being its expression (Mantzaridis 1984, 17). Adopting the tripartite division of the *ψυχή* introduced by Plato, in *λογιστικόν, ἐπιθυμητικόν, and θυμός*, Palamas emphasizes the natural function of intelligence, which consists in governing and directing the other two parts of the *ψυχή*. The *ἐπιθυμητικόν and θυμός*, being the passionate parts of the *ψυχή*, should obey the *λογιστικόν*. When this does not happen, a spiritual anomaly arises, and passions take birth. This tripartite distinction of *ψυχή* does not mean a division of *ψυχή* into three parts, for *ψυχή* is one, but with many levels. When any one of the powers of *ψυχή* is affected, *ψυχή* is affected in its entirety. For it to be permanently cured, there must first occur an elevation of its lowest part, *θυμός* (Palamas, 1120C). Like God, who is Tri-Unity, wo/man is *νοῦς, λόγος and πνεῦμα*, being made in his image, a conjunction of *νοῦς, λόγος and πνεῦμα*. On this trinitarian model, wo/man's *νοῦς* is like God, as the *νοῦς* loves the *πνεῦμα*. This relationship of *ψυχή* with *σῶμα*, which is "after likeness", is dynamically present in the whole human, without, however, being a composite of physical and spiritual elements (Mantzaridis 1984, 17). As John Zizioulas Notes, wo/man's dynamism was described in the Byzantine tradition as *personhood* but should not be understood in terms of 'personality', as a complex of natural, psychological, or moral qualities which are in some sense 'possessed' by or 'contained' in the human *individuum*. Being a person is different from being an individual or 'personality' in that the person cannot be conceived as a static entity, but only as it *relates* to. Thus, personhood implies the *ἐκ-στασις* of being, a movement towards communion that leads to a transcendence of the boundaries of the self (Zizioulas 2006, 212). The combination of the notion of *ἐκστασις* with that of *ὑπόστασις* in the idea of the person reveals that personhood is directly related to ontology, not as an added quality to beings, something that beings 'have' or 'have not', but it is *constitutive* of what can be ultimately called a 'being' (Zizioulas 2006, 213).

Gregory Palamas affirms the participation of the body, *σῶμα*, in the communion of uncreated grace; he argues, however, that during this

mystical experience, it is the *νοῦς* that first participates in the radiance and through the *νοῦς*, the *σῶμα* connected with it becomes more divine (Palamas 1959, 444). The recognition of participation *σῶμα* in the union of wo/man with uncreated indwelling grace is a fundamental aspect of the Palamite doctrine, implying human experience of this union as *αἴσθησις*, sensation. But it is also called *νόησις* (intellectual), taking place in the *νοῦς*. Yet, intellect does not receive divine illumination by its power, but only to the extent that the grace of the Holy Spirit enables it to do so.

Ἐκ-στασις: Ek-static Union of *Νοῦς* in Palamas

Palamas view that *νοῦς* can rise above itself and on this basis affirms the possibility of a mystical union with God. We can see here the use of the Neoplatonic perspective on the self, adopted via Dionysius Areopagite's writings. If *νοῦς* were not incapable of rising above itself, it could not unite with the divine light at a level above *αἴσθησις* and *νοῦς*; but, having this ability, it achieves an *effective* ecstatic union with God. In this way, Palamas regards as illusory the incorporeal ecstasy of the *νοῦς* whereby he has intellectual visions. The ecstasy of which Gregory speaks is not to be regarded as the *νοῦς'* exit from *σῶμα*, but as the transcendence of human powers alone, which presupposes the self-concentration of the *νοῦς*, achieved by the presence of divine illumination. When *νοῦς* is concentrated in its energy, inducing self-conversion and self-observation, it transcends and communicates with God. Such *ἔκ-στασις* implies a God-inspired love in wo/man. Thus, through God's descending ecstasy and wo/man's transcendent ecstasy, a mystical encounter and union is achieved: receiving the deifying grace of the Spirit, *νοῦς* is deified and communicates this grace to *σῶμα*, so that the whole of wo/man partakes to *θέωσις* (Mantzaridis 1984, 102).

But when Palamas incorporates elements of the Neoplatonic tradition, he does not omit the basic principles of patristic anthropology but invariably emphasizes the participation of the whole person in the Holy Spirit's gift. Wo/Man's true knowledge of God is the fruit of *θέωσις* coming from God. This true knowledge is not acquired through his/her mental capacities but is the gift bestowed on those who live in the Holy Spirit.

Wo/Man can express with certainty only when he or she has experienced a supernatural union with uncreated energies that can only be known through experience (Palamas 1959, 453).

Palamite Ontology of the *Self as Returning towards the Self*

Palamas *νοῦς* in the center of his psychophysical being, in the *heart, and towards him/herself*. This orientation of the *νοῦς towards the self* is possible because the *νοῦς* is not only essence but also energy, which moves not only in one direction, linearly but cyclically, always returning to its primordial cause. After all, according to the tradition of patristic anthropology, there is a common psychosomatic energy. Palamas does not hesitate to speak of a return of the *σῶμα to itself* (Mantzaridis 1984, 84). So, Gregory does not hesitate to involve the Platonist interpretive tradition along the lines of Evagrius and the one of Gregory of Nyssa. He is convinced that the compatibility of the two traditions is not only possible but necessary. Macarius' view that *νοῦς and wolman's thoughts are situated in the heart*, and Gregory of Nyssa's view that *νοῦς, being incorporeal, is not to be limited to σῶμα*, can be reconciled, according to Palamas, as to provide a comprehensive anthropological interpretation (Meyendorff 2010, 137-138). Just as the claim that God, being incorporeal, is not limited to any place, does not imply any contradiction in terms of the truth of the incarnation, like Gregory of Nyssa's doctrine of the incorporeal intellect, which does not conflict with Macarius' doctrine of the heart as the place of intelligence. Even if the *νοῦς*, as incorporeal, is not enclosed within the *σῶμα*, it is not found outside it either, since it is bound to it and uses the heart as its main organ. Concentrated within itself, within the heart, in a position of sovereignty, the *νοῦς* governs through each of the *ψυχῆ* capacities. Self-control is cultivated by controlling both the content of sensory perception and its orientation. Wo/Man concentrates all powers to suspend passionate attachment to the external world, overcoming the fragmentation of *νοῦς* and attaining spiritual equilibrium. Thus, "wholly entered into him/herself" becomes *self-conscious* and awaits *within him/herself* the coming of God and *θέωσις*, the divine transformation (Palamas 2002, 394).

Conclusion

So, it is justified to argue that Palamas implies the Neoplatonic view that *νοῦς* can rise above itself and on this basis sustain the possibility of mystical union with God. If *νοῦς* would be incapable of rising above itself, it could not unite with the Divine Light on a level above *αἴσθησις*; but, having this ability, it achieves an effective ecstatic union with God. However, Palamas regards as illusory the incorporeal ecstasy of the *νοῦς* whereby has intellectual visions. The ecstasy of which Palamas speaks is not to be regarded as the *νοῦς*' exit from *σῶμα*, but as the transcendence of human powers, which presupposes the *νοῦς*' self-concentration, which is achieved by the presence of divine illumination. Such *ἔκστασις* implies a God-inspired love in wo/man. However, when Palamas incorporates elements of the Neoplatonic tradition, he does it by implying the fundamental principles of patristic anthropology, emphasizing the participation of the whole wo/man in the Holy Spirit's deifying gift.

So, the Palamite description of the ontological self is a core aspect of this doctrine, since it describes the effective and dynamic transformations that happen in wo/man by the means of the Hesychast practice. This is a crucial aspect in understanding the stakes of spiritual practice since has not merely psychological or physiological effects or outcomes, but it changes the entire human being, and this at an ontological level. This way we can better understand the exceptional value of Palamas' understanding of the Hesychast practice's scope as a defining hallmark for the Christian East until today.

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