*Person, Eros, Critical Ontology: An Attempt To Recapitulate Christos Yannaras' Philosophy**

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Professor Andrew Louth, in his introduction to Yannaras' *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, has described Christos Yannaras as 'without doubt the most important living Greek Orthodox theologian'. The Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Rowan Williams considers Yannaras as 'one of the most significant Christian philosophers in Europe', whereas the late Olivier Clément has characterized him as 'contemporary Greece's greatest thinker'. Professor Christos Yannaras is better known in the Western World for the main bulk of his lifetime's work, i.e. his contributions to philosophy and theology, rather than his regular weekly political commentary in the Greek press, as is the case in Greece.

However, there are two main difficulties for a non-Greek-speaking researcher in acquiring a complete overview of Yannaras' work.

The first difficulty is that not all of his works have been translated into English. As most English translations have been published only in the last ten years,[1] the English-speaking reader could only acquire a fragmentary view of Yannaras' work, at least until recently. It should be noted here that some of his most important

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[1] I am only referring to English translations here, as many of Yannaras' works have been translated in 11 other languages. Until the start of the current millennium, only two books had been translated in English: *The Freedom of Morality* (London, 1984) and *Elements of Faith* (Edinburgh, 1991). In the last 10 years the following books have been published: *Postmodern Metaphysics* (Brookline, MA, 2004); *Variations on the Song of Songs* (Brookline, MA, 2005); *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* (Edinburgh, 2005); *Orthodoxy and the West* (Brookline, MA, 2006); *Person and Eros* (Brookline, MA, 2007); *Relational Ontology* (Brookline, MA, 2011); *The Enigma of Evil* (Brookline, MA, 2012).

works have not yet been translated, as for example, *The Effable and the Ineffable* and *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*.

The second difficulty relates to the fact that most European and American academics tend to focus on the theological aspect of Yannaras' work or they consider him a pure theologian rather than a philosopher. This has not allowed for his work to be judged as a philosophical proposal even in a strictly academic sense and classification.

For the above reasons I consider it useful to attempt a summary of his work from a primarily philosophical point of view. A simple categorization would be to classify his main works according to the branches of philosophy to which they pertain. Thus

- in ontology/metaphysics we may classify the works *Person and Eros*, *Relational Ontology*, *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*, *Postmodern Metaphysics*, while
- in Epistemology, we could include the works *Heidegger and the Areopagite*, *The Effable and the Ineffable*, and finally
- in Ethics, we should include *The Freedom of Morality*, etc.

Yet, Yannaras himself has provided us with a much better approach. In his latest book in Greek under the title *Six Philosophical Paintings*[1]—which I would describe as a 'philosophical autobiography'—he introduces us to his thought in a manner that reflects the whole spectrum of his contribution to philosophy. I shall attempt to present such a prioritization here by using phrases from this particular book, while considering other areas of his research such as his political philosophy or his purely ecclesial writings as a corollary of this main body of ideas.

To approach Yannaras' work we must first consider the importance and scope of the term apophaticism for him. The term 'apophaticism' is usually understood as a method of speaking about God in theology, as the *via negativa*, that is to say by defining God not through the characteristics that He has, but through the characteristics that He *does not* have (ineffable etc.). Yannaras, however, saw in apophaticism something immensely wider in importance, namely the

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[1] Christos Yannaras, *Exi Philosophikes Zografies* (Athens: Ikaros, 2011).

epistemology of the whole of the Hellenic/Greek civilization from the time of Heraclitus (with his famous quotation: 'for if we are in communion with each other, we are in truth, but if we exist privately, we are in error')[1] to that of Gregory Palamas, at the very least.

According to Yannaras, apophaticism is the stance towards the verification of knowledge that underlines every facet of this civilisation and can be defined as 'the refusal to exhaust truth in its formulations, the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifier with the knowledge of the signified'.[2] (Allow me to note that such a stance towards knowledge is not self-evident; for example, truth for Thomas Aquinas is the identification of the intellect's conceived thought with reality,[3] which can be understood as the exact opposite of apophaticism). Formulations of truth can only *refer* to the signified truth or knowledge, not exhaust it. By coming to know the formulations that refer to truth, one does not *know* truth—truth can only be lived. There is a very important gap between the signifier and the signified.

In an apophatic epistemology, the individual cannot conceive truth individually as a finite formulation. Truth lies in the field of experience, and more specifically shared experience because 'there is no relation that does not constitute an experience and there is no experience [...] not arising from a relation or establishing a relation. Moreover, relation is the foundational mode of the human logical subject: the way in which Man exists, knows and is *known*.'[4]

Truth can only be attained through shared experience, communed experience, life in communion, and cannot be confined in finite formulations.[5] This excludes the possibility of *a priori* truths, prescribed doctrines and axiomatic theories.[6] Yannaras writes: 'the prerequisite criterion for critical thinking (that is, thinking that strives to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood) was the communal verification of knowledge. [...] Communed experience and not the

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[1] H. Diels-W. Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* (1934–54), I, 148, 28-30.
[2] *Exi Philosophikes Zografies*, 32.
[3] *Veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus*: *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.
[4] *Exi Philosophikes Zografies*, 58.
[5] Yannaras often reminds us of Democritus' example about the 'bitter honey': Diels-Kranz, II, 119, 22-26.
[6] *Exi Philosophikes Zografies*, 26.

accuracy of the individual's intellectual faculty verifies knowledge, even if proper communion of experience presupposes the accuracy of intellectual faculties.'[1] 'Signifiers allow us to share our common reference to reality and experience, but cannot replace the cognitive experience itself. This obvious difference can only take place [...] when the criterion of the critical function is the communal verification of knowledge.'[2]

For Yannaras, every ontological system or statement presupposes and is based on the epistemology on which it is built, i.e., the criteria through which knowledge is considered as valid or invalid. That is why, he remarks, that 'we conclude from history that common epistemology (incorporated in the everyday life of the people) and not common ontology constitute a common civilization, i.e. the otherness of common way of life: it is not the content that we attribute to truth, but it is the way in which cognitive validity is confirmed that confers otherness in shaping public life, identity of civilization, and ensures the historical continuity of that cultural otherness'.[3] Therefore, the criterion of the communal validation of knowledge is a crucial prerequisite for the understanding of ancient Greek ontology and early Christian ontology as well.

This apophatic epistemology (which I would also term as communal epistemology) refers the possibility of 'existence in truth' not on the individual level, but in the field of the relations between logical 'othernesses', relations that manifest the 'other' in these 'othernesses'. The most suitable term for the will-to-relate not as a quality of the individual but as a way of being, a mode of existence, is *Eros*. 'For Plato, the fullest knowledge is love, *Eros*: a relationship that attains freedom from all selfishness, that attains the offering of the self to the other'.[4] If valid knowledge and truth can only be attained through a self-transcendent relation with existence, then the mode of truly existing is the transcendental relation, *eros* according to the Greek language and the Platonic and Areopagite writings.

We are introduced with the word *eros* to the first of the two elements that constitute Yannaras' 'prosopocentric' ontology (I use

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[1] Ibid., 25.
[2] Ibid., 27.
[3] Ibid., 45.
[4] Ibid., 26.

this word on purpose to distinguish it from personalism), the 'person' (*prosopon*) being the second. *Eros* here means exactly what it means for the Areopagite writings or for Maximus the Confessor, i.e. self-transcendence, the offering of the self to the other. If we define the subject merely as an individual, as *atomon*, as an undifferentiated unit of a whole that cannot be further divided,[1] then it cannot manifest *eros*.

Only the person, *prosopon*, can manifest *eros*, and *prosopon* is a word with an absolutely unique semantic content. It is constituted of the words *pros* (towards, with direction to) and *ops/opos* (eye, face), so that it defines someone whose face looks at, or rather is directed towards, someone or something.[2] Someone that exists in-relation-to, only in relation and in reference to other beings, someone who refers his existence to the other, coming out of his existential individuality; someone who exists only by participating in relations and relationships.[3]

From early Christian times the word person, *prosopon*, was very wisely identified with the word *hypostasis*, meaning actual existence. 'The fact that the identification of the terms person and *hypostasis* was originally used to logically clarify meta-physical references of the ecclesial experience does not restrict this identification from being used in the field of anthropology. However, a prerequisite for that would be to retain the communed experience of relations as the criterion of the formulations in language.'[4]

Yannaras observes that 'self-transcendent love, *eros*, was recognized in the philosophical language of the Christianized Hellenic and Byzantine civilization as the highest existential attainment (or fullness and causal principle) of freedom'[5]—freedom, because self-transcendence is really self-transcendence only when the subject can be freed even from the necessities and prerequisites of his own essence (*ousia*). This can only happen if the hypostasis of the subject, the actual and specific manifestation of its essence, has an ontological

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[1] See ibid., 61.
[2] See ibid., 63.
[3] See ibid., 103.
[4] Ibid., 104.
[5] Ibid., 60.

priority over its essence and is not restricted to the constraints and prerequisites of its essence.

The testimony of the ecclesial experience identifies such a priority in the case of God, a trinity of persons/hypostases with common essence. It is being testified in the case of Jesus Christ, who transcends the necessities/prerequisites of his godly essence/nature (logical necessities of being outside the boundaries of time, space, the cycle life and death) without losing it or impairing it by being incarnated as a human being, a crying baby in the manger, in a very specific time and place, and by dying on the cross. And he transcends the necessities/prerequisites of his acquired human essence/nature through the resurrection. Ecclesial experience testifies man as being made 'in the image of God' and in the image of this triune existence-as-*prosopon*, establishing man's capability to transcend by grace the necessities/prerequisites of his essence and nature through its hypostatic manifestation.[1]

With the coordinates of person, *eros* and otherness, Yannaras builds a 'relational ontology'. He states that 'otherness is realized and known in-relation-to-the-other, always relationally. It is an outcome and an experience of relation and relationship. Through this perspective, we can speak (with logical consistency) of a relational ontology'.[2] Relation and relationship is never granted or finite, but a dynamic event which is continually found or lost, a fact which can be traced in our human experience. Given the apophatic nature of the epistemology on which we base 'propositions for an ontological interpretation of existence and reality that are subject to critical verification or refutation',[3] Yannaras concludes that a relational ontology can only be a 'critical ontology'. He defines 'critical ontology' as follows:

> We term onto-logy the theoretical investigation of existence (*ton logo peri tou ontos*), the logical propositions for the interpretation of reality. We try, with our rational faculties, to interpret reality and existence as to the fact that it is real and that it exists. We try to interpret the meaning of existence, the cause and purpose of existence.

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[1] See ibid., 74.
[2] Ibid., 58.
[3] Ibid., 54.

> With the word 'critical' we term the process of evaluating ontological propositions, evaluating the logical accuracy of these propositions on the grounds of *koinos logos* [common sense, word, rationality, language and understanding], evaluating the capability of the ontological propositions to be empirically verified through shared, communed experience accessible to all.[1]

Propositions of a critical ontology are never finite, granted, or 'closed': they are always subject to communal verification or refutation, to the communal criterion of truth, due to the fact that there is no way of individually 'securing the truth' of said propositions. According to Yannaras, every attempt to continue the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greek or Christianized Hellenic and Byzantine civilization without the fundamental prerequisite of apophaticism is inherently dysfunctional. He writes that 'despite the post-Roman West's boasting of inheriting and continuing the ancient Greek tradition of philosophy and science, the refutation of the fundamental characteristics of Hellenism, i.e. apophaticism and the communal criterion, leaves no room for the validity of such a claim'.[2]

Based on this, Yannaras argues that the reception of classical and Christian thought in the West was crucially undermined by the reversal of its epistemological preconditions and their replacement with epistemological criteria that are entirely based on the individual's capacity to think rationally (*facultas rationis*), a criterion that the West inscribes on the philosophical legacy of Aristotle.

The constraints of this short overview prevent me from presenting other foundational principles of Yannaras' thought, such as the philosophical importance of the energies/actions/activities, *energeies* ('actions' or 'activities' would be a better choice of words to convey the meaning of *energeiai/energeies* in English) and their relation to the hypostatic manifestation of the essence. Yannaras regards the energies as absolutely important. He remarks that 'an ontology which (out of conviction or ignorance) refuses to distinguish the essence/nature and the hypostasis from the energies of essence/nature which are hypostatically manifested is condemned to an irreversible deficit of realism, is trapped in the separation and

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[1] Ibid., 51.
[2] Ibid., 35.

dissociation of thinking (*noein*) and existence (*einai*).'[1] I have not managed to summarize how the energies, the actions, contain in their outcomes the otherness of the person, as for example is the case in Art. Nor have I mentioned the application of these philosophical principles in the field of ethics or political philosophy, political economy and social practice in general. Nor have I spoken about Yannaras' ecclesiology and the oppositional distinction between the ecclesial event and religion. However, I hope that this short presentation may give additional motivation to others for a thorough examination of Yannaras' work as a whole. For it seems that we are witnessing an ever-increasing academic interest in Yannaras' contribution to philosophy.

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[1] Ibid., 101.

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