

## PLATO SALON TALK – JOHN OPPY

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### **Introduction and Background Information**

Good afternoon, everyone, for those of you who haven't met me, I'm John Oppy, and I'm a Reader in the Russian Orthodox Church, which is a minor clerical role. I'm also a reader, in the non-technical sense, of Plato, and in this talk I'll be bringing these two interests of mine together to discuss the Christian reception of Plato, focusing on the separate trajectories of East and West in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, in which we had the first two Ecumenical Councils of the Church dealing with the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, these being the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD and the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

Having already gotten into the weeds of names and dates, with our two Ecumenical Councils, I'll start us off with a little timeline so that we can position ourselves in the history and see where we stand in relation to Plato and also to the Lord Jesus Christ and early Christianity.

Plato's Academy is founded around 387 BC, and for several decades Plato conducted research there with other “friends of the Forms.” Aristotle studies there for 20 years, but founds his own school, the Lyceum. In the Hellenistic period, the Academy becomes a skeptical school, and finally the Academy is destroyed in 86 BC by the Romans, during the siege of Athens. From the destruction of the Academy to the time of Plotinus, we have the period of Platonism called Middle Platonism. Now turning to the Christian side of things:

Christ was probably born around 1 or 2 BC and he died, very temporarily, in 30 AD.

From that time Christianity begins to spread, first in Judea and Samaria, but very quickly it expands more broadly into the Gentile world of the Roman Empire, and this spread of the Gospel is primarily associated with the figure of St Paul. The early period of Christianity is closed off by the destruction of the Jewish Temple by the Romans in 70 AD – very destructive those Romans, they got the Academy and now the Temple too. By this point, most of the major apostolic figures had been martyred, including St Peter, the head of the 12 disciples, St Paul, the missionary to the nations, and St James, the brother of Christ and bishop of Jerusalem. From roughly 100 AD to 325 AD we have the ante-Nicene period of Christianity, which is basically characterised by the increasing organization of the Church, including the creation of a New Testament canon, roughly, and sporadic bouts of persecution by the imperial authorities.

If you fell asleep for the names and dates, this is the time to wake up, because our story of Christian Platonist philosophical-theology properly begins with Ammonius Sakkas, who was active in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century and early 3<sup>rd</sup> century, so about 100 years from the destruction of the Temple. He was a Platonist philosopher in Alexandria, and teacher of two very important figures: Origen and Plotinus. Plotinus, we may know, inaugurated what we call Neoplatonism. Origen, on the other hand, is one of the most influential figures of Christian history. He was a prolific writer, writing many exegetical works, and he is also the first properly systematic theological writer in his use of Greek philosophy. Now there's some debate as to whether Ammonius was a Christian who perhaps later converted to Paganism, or whether there were two Ammoniuses. And likewise, there is some debate as to whether there were two Origenes, a Christian one and a Platonist one, or only one. Already we're caught up in a problem of the one and the many, and we're still only in the historical information. But, since this is a

salon for Platonists, and we'll see that Christianity and Platonism are quite compatible, I think its fitting to see each of them as one – one Ammonius Saccas and one Origen.

### **Start Philosophical Info**

Now our main information about Ammonius Sakkas comes from Hierocles of Alexandria, and this is where we start getting into the philosophy and theology. Hierocles writes:

*"[Ammonius] was the first who had a godly zeal for the truth in philosophy and despised the views of the majority, which were a disgrace to philosophy. He apprehended well the views of each of the two philosophers [that is, Plato and Aristotle] and brought them under one and the same nous and transmitted philosophy without conflicts to all of his disciples, and especially to the best of those acquainted with him, Plotinus, Origen, and their successors."*

- Hierocles of Alexandria

Expressed nicely here by Hierocles is one of the ideas that would be foundational for Neoplatonism, the symphony thesis that Plato and Aristotle can be harmonised since Aristotle is a Platonist, although a somewhat defective one. The harmony between them is based on a philosophical division of labour in which Plato is authoritative about intelligible reality [point up] and Aristotle about sensible reality [basketball hand].

Orthodox Christian philosopher David Bradshaw expresses this same symphony thesis in the terms of Orthodox theology, by saying that Plato is the father of apophatic theology and Aristotle the father of cataphatic theology. Cataphatic theology is a theology of positive statements about God, whereas apophatic theology seeks to transcend the limitations of positive expressions by negating or ascending above them.

We can see these principles expressed in a non-technical way in the New Testament. St John expresses them in John 1:18:

*No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.*

So no one has seen God – apophatic, God is beyond knowledge. Cataphatic, the Son has declared Him and we can make positive statements.

And St Paul, in Romans 1:20-21 speaks about cataphatic theology:

*[S]ince the creation of the world [God's] invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that [the nations] are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.*

Now to go back to Plato, in Republic 509b, the Analogy of the Sun, Plato has Socrates say:

*“You will agree, I think, that the sun not only gives things that can be seen the ability to be seen, but also their generation, growth, and nurture without being the generation itself.”*

*“No, for how could it be?”*

*“And that therefore in objects of knowledge, not only is the ability to be known present, thanks to the Good, but also being and reality is in them because of it, although the Good is not being, but reaches even farther beyond it in rank and power.”*

So here, very importantly, **we have the link between being and intelligibility expressed**, and the point is made that the Good **transcends the realm of being and the intelligible as its cause**. Transcending the intelligible realm – apophatic theology, and causing, or manifesting as, the intelligible realm – cataphatic theology.

[Are we following so far, do we have any questions at this point?]

Now we need to very briefly look at Aristotle’s contributions. In the area of theology, Aristotle was defective since he saw ultimate reality as *nous*, translated mind or intellect, but did not acknowledge what transcends *nous* and is beyond being, the Idea of the Good or the One, as Plato also calls it. Where Aristotle did make a useful contribution was in further developing the concepts of potentiality, or power, and actuality, or activity – in Greek, *dynamis* and *energeia* – as technical ideas in philosophy. Even here, of course, he was building on Plato who had a less developed version of this idea in his difference between having (*ktesis*) and using (*chresis*) or holding (*hexis*), for example in *Theaetetus* with the example of having birds in the aviary contrasted with actively holding them as a picture of the active use of knowledge that we possess.

The Aristotelian idea of energy entered into Christian thought through St Paul’s use of the term to express the working of God and of lesser spirits in men. For example, in Ephesians 2:1-2:

*And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works [energises] in the sons of disobedience.*

Or in Ephesians 3:20-21

*Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power [dynamis] that works [energises] in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*

St Paul uses this term throughout his epistles to denote the working of spiritual powers, and to express synergy, where the spiritual energy cooperates with the human.

Now in the work of the ancient medical writer, Galen, it was understood generally that a thing’s energy manifests its nature or essence. Man is the speaking animal, or logical animal – rational animal, but we can only know this essence because of its manifestation in the activity, the energy, of actual speech. This manifestation of essence in energies led to one of St Athanasius the Great’s arguments for the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the same in essence, *homoousios*. St Athanasius is the great defender of the Nicene Council of 325 AD, so we’re in the first half of the 4<sup>th</sup> century. His argument depends on how St Paul used the term energies in his writings. A particularly clear example is 1 Corinthians 12:4-11

*There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities [energises], but it is the same God who works [energises] all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all: for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works [energises] all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.*

Now the argument is that if God the Father and the Holy Spirit work with the same energy, then this shows us that they are manifesting the same essence. Now, the distinction here between knowable energy and unknowable essence aligns with the distinction above between the Idea of the Good, or in *Parmenides*, the One, which is unknowable, and that knowable realm of being and intelligibility that is the level of Aristotle's Prime Mover, and in Christian thought from at least the time of Origen, the philosophical conception of the unknowability of the essence of God had been traditionally accepted.

[Again, we can stop here if there are any questions?]

Moving on, in his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle interpreted the Prime Mover as the being whose *ousia* is *energeia*, whose essence is actuality. This is the famous thought, which is a thinking of thinking. In the Neoplatonic interpretation, this is the second hypostasis, Nous, and it both thinks all intelligible content and is all intelligible content – remember the connection between being and the intelligible that we had before in *The Republic*. For Plotinus, the things of the intelligible realm are simply *ta onta*, the things that are, the perfections of sensible reality.

Plotinus also further develops the connection between energy as activity and energy as actuality in his theory of the two acts. Each hypostasis has two energies – internal and external. Now if you don't know what these are, the hypostases are the One, Nous or Mind, and Psyche or Soul, in this particular hierarchical order. And in *Enneads* V.I.6 Plotinus writes as follows:

*All things which exist, as long as they remain in being, necessarily produce from their own substances, out of their present power, a dependent surrounding reality directed towards what is outside them, a kind of image of the archetypes from which it was produced: fire produces the heat which comes from it; snow does not only keep its cold inside itself. Perfumed things show this particularly clearly... And all things when they come to perfection produce; the One is always perfect and therefore produces everlastingly; and its product is less than itself. What then must we say about the most perfect? Nothing can come from it except that which is next greatest after it. Intellect is the next in greatness and second to it; for Intellect sees it and needs it alone; but it has no need of Intellect; and that which derives from something greater than Intellect is Intellect, which is greater than all things, because the other things come after it: as Soul is an expression and kind of activity of Intellect, just as Intellect is of the One. But Soul's expression is obscure – for it is an image of Intellect – and for this reason it has to look to Intellect, but Intellect in the same way has to look to that God, in order to be Intellect.*

So as I understand it, the internal act of the One is a kind of self-contemplation, its external act is the hypostasis of the Intellect, the Intellect's internal act is a contemplation of the One, and its external act is the production of the Soul, and the pattern repeats again with Soul, although there are also some differences when we get into the generation of the rest of reality. The main thread that we are following though, is this connection between the One and Intellect, as it is expressed in terms of energy

or act, which we can hopefully see is very important to Neoplatonism here, but also to Christianity with St Athanasius' use of the concept of energy for his argument for the Trinity being one in essence.

There is a lot more that could be said about Plotinus' Neoplatonism and late Ante-Nicene and early Nicene theology, but with the time we have left it's necessary to move on and have a look at how these same topics of apophatic theology and cataphatic theology, the Good and the realm of Forms, God's essence and His energies, show up in different ways in St Augustine of Hippo in the West, and then also in the Cappadocian Fathers in the East.

## St Augustine

St Augustine is the most prominent Christian Father of the West and easily the most influential theologian for the entire Western Christian tradition, both Roman Catholic and Protestant. He was born in 354 AD and died in 430 AD, so we should understand that he was active around the time of the refinement of Nicene theology. Unfortunately, however, he was not able to read Greek, and so his thought developed independently of the mainstream of the Greek Patristic Tradition.

Now, Augustine converted to Christianity later in life, and a large factor in his conversion was his exposure to Platonism, particularly the Neoplatonism of Plotinus and Porphyry. In his Confessions Bk7 he writes about how reading certain books of the Platonists convinced Him to renounce his former materialism, he held a sort of Stoic pantheistic view that all things are material including intelligible things, and he also said that he read the same doctrines that are expressed at the start of the Gospel of John, *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...* Now to say that he found the same ideas is a very strong way of putting the relationship between the Scriptural teaching and Neoplatonist philosophy, and Augustine ran into some problems.

For St Augustine, God belongs to the realm of intelligible things and is seen by the mind. Thinking about what was mentioned previously about apophatic theology, this might already be setting off alarm bells. If Augustine was converted by his reading of Platonist books, why has he collapsed the Good, the beyond being, into the level of being and the intelligible? It seems that Augustine identified the Biblical doctrine of Christ as the Logos with the Neoplatonic realm of the intelligible patterns of the sensible created world **and so** with the level of being, since in the Scriptures Christ is associated with the revelation of God and all things are created through Him. But, because St Augustine also held to the Nicene doctrine that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in essence, he was forced to say that God's essence is perfect being and not anything that transcends being, otherwise he would admit the Arian idea that Christ is a subordinate being in relation to the transcendent Father. He couldn't say that the Father is beyond being while the Son is perfect being.

Collapsing the transcendent One or Good into the intelligible order is bad enough, but unfortunately, it does get worse. In, *On the Catholic and Manichean Ways of Life*, Augustine writes:

*Those things which tend toward being, tend toward order, and in attaining order, they attain being, so far as it can be attained by creatures. Order reduces whatever it orders to a certain harmony. To be, however, is nothing but to **be one**. And so, to the extent that a thing acquires **unity**, to that extent it has being.*

Here we have an application of the basic Platonic idea of the "one over the many" in relation to levels of reality, but instead of culminating in the reduction to the first principle of the One beyond being, for

Augustine we have the reduction to the absolutely simple oneness of being. So for St Augustine, all of God's attributes and activities, or energies, are the same as His essence, His being, and even beyond this, God's will is identified with his essence. It is hard to see how one can avoid such doctrines as the eternity of the cosmos or double predestination, where people are locked into either heaven or hell from before creation, on the view Augustine expresses, because in this view for God to will differently to what He did would be to be different, and so threaten immutability. The majority of the Latin and Protestant errors arise from these metaphysical mistakes in the reception of Platonism in St Augustine.

To wrap up this section on St Augustine, I'll turn back to Plato with a comment from David Bradshaw. Dr Bradshaw, in his paper *Augustine the Metaphysician*, contrasts the Augustinian view with Plato's late view on the relation between the Forms, being, and unity. Here is what he says:

*Plato ultimately moved away from the identification of being with undivided wholeness that is typical of the middle dialogues. In the Sophist he argues that the Forms blend or partake of one another, so that all partake of the Form of the Different, and even non-being "is" inasmuch as each of the Forms is not the others. On such a view, to be is not simply to be one, for each of the Forms truly is, yet its being is constituted partly by its relations to the others. Thus Plato himself provides grounds for rejecting any straightforward identification of being with unity.*

If we want to return to this in discussion, he is talking here about *Sophist* 256d-e. For now, we need to turn to the Cappadocian Fathers to see what they have to say.

### **Cappadocian Fathers**

The Cappadocian Fathers, St Basil the Great, St Gregory Nazianzen, and St Gregory of Nyssa, are most important for establishing the authoritative interpretation of Nicene theology and rebutting the neo-Arians, who were led by a theologian named Eunomius. So these Fathers are associated with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Ecumenical Council of 381 AD and the refinement of the doctrine of the Trinity, and they standardized the terminology of one divine essence, and three divine hypostases, but we have to remember that unlike in Plotinus, there is no subordination or hierarchy for the Cappadocians between the hypostases, they are the Persons of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and the intratrinitarian relations all occur, to use the Plotinian terminology, at the level of the internal act of the One, rather than in descending levels of reality. Now Eunomius, the Cappadocian's great opponent insisted on both the knowability of the essence of God, which he identified with the Father, and on the absolute simplicity of the divine essence, its absolute unity and oneness. In these respects, he is very close to the Augustinian view. In St Basil's Letter 234 we get a response to some of the questions posed by Eunomius:

St Basil Letter 234

*Do you worship what you know or what you do not know? If I answer, I worship what I know, they immediately reply, What is the essence of the object of worship? Then, if I confess that I am ignorant of the essence, they turn on me again and say, So you worship you know not what. I answer that the word to know has many meanings. We say that we know the greatness of God, His power, His wisdom, His goodness, His providence over us, and the justness of His judgment; but not His very essence. The question is, therefore, only put for the sake of dispute. For he who denies that he knows the essence does not confess himself to be ignorant of God, because our idea of God is gathered from all the attributes which I have enumerated. But God, he says, is simple, and whatever attribute of Him you have reckoned as knowable is of His essence. But the absurdities involved in this sophism are*

*innumerable. When all these high attributes have been enumerated, are they all names of one essence? And is there the same mutual force in His awfulness and His loving-kindness, His justice and His creative power, His providence and His foreknowledge, and His bestowal of rewards and punishments, His majesty and His providence? In mentioning any one of these do we declare His essence? If they say, yes, let them not ask if we know the essence of God, but let them enquire of us whether we know God to be awful, or just, or merciful. These we confess that we know. If they say that essence is something distinct, let them not put us in the wrong on the score of simplicity. For they confess themselves that there is a distinction between the essence and each one of the attributes enumerated. The operations are various, and the essence simple, but we say that we know our God from His operations, but do not undertake to approach near to His essence. His operations come down to us, but His essence remains beyond our reach.*

Similarly, in *Against Eunomius* (3.1) St Gregory of Nyssa writes:

*...we hold fast to the doctrine they insult. We confess that we are indeed inferior to them in the knowledge of things beyond knowledge. But we declare that we worship what we really know. We know the sublimity of the glory of the one we worship by the very fact that we are not able by reasoning to comprehend in our thoughts the incomprehensibility of his greatness.*

Here we have that same principle we found in Galen again, where just as a general principle we know essences indirectly by their energies, but here this principle is applied to God. And again, the distinction is very similar to what we get in Plotinus with the distinction between the One and the Nous, with the essence at the level of the One and the energies at the level of Nous. St Gregory the Theologian, or St Gregory Nazianzen, the third of the Cappadocians also taught the same doctrine.

So, in responding to Eunomius, the Cappadocian Fathers also ended up putting forward a view opposed to the Augustinian metaphysics. Thus, already on the fundamental level of first principles and first theology, the split between East and West, with all its eventual civilisational and geopolitical implications, was accomplished in the establishment of two different trajectories in Christian philosophical theology by the end of the 4<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Conclusion**

Now we're coming to the end, and if that idea of the divergence of two civilisations was not provocative enough, I'll leave us with one more thought from one of the most important figures of the later Eastern tradition, St Gregory Palamas. He suggested that the Latin metaphysics would inevitably lead to atheism.

*It is absolutely necessary that the person who says that the activity in God is not different from his essence falls into the trap of atheism. For we know that God is only from His proper activities. Hence, for him who destroys God's activities and does not admit that they differ from His essence, the necessary consequence is that he does not know that God is.*

- *Dialogue Between an Orthodox and a Barlaamite*

Thank you for listening!