

# THE EPISTEMIC STRUCTURE AS AN ANIMATE STATUE - PSELLOS' CONCEPT OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY

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Among contemporary scholars the suspicion is circulating that for Michael Psellos, a Byzantine *polyhistor* of the 11<sup>th</sup> c., the Christian identity is a purely formal gesture, through which he secures the legitimacy of his philosophical and literary work according to the criteria of Byzantine culture<sup>1</sup>. The frequent references to Neoplatonist authors and the positive reception of terms and motifs from them raise suspicion as to how real is the differentiation between Christian and non-Christian philosophy made by him. In order to make such an assessment of the ethos of a certain philosopher, one has to take into account the mental evidences and the conceptual paradigms, through which the author legitimizes his occupation with philosophy.

The current text presents an overview of Psellos' concept of philosophy: at stake are the mental evidences, as well as the conceptual and anthropological criteria, through which Psellos grounds the status of philosophy as a science and as praxis. The position of Psellos is compared to the concept of philosophy of Dionysios the Areopagite, as the latter is paradigmatic for the entire Byzantine philosophical tradition, and sets the pattern for adoption of new-Platonic concepts in Christian philosophical speculation. The comparative analysis is focused on the following aspects: 1) systematic connections between Christian and non-Christian philosophy; 2) relation of philosophy to the other particular epistemic spheres, including theology; 3) personal identity of the Christian philosopher.

## 1. Psellos' definitions of philosophy

The main sources for Psellos' definitions of philosophy are the six definitions formulated by John Damascene (7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> c.) in his work *Dialectica*<sup>2</sup>. Whereas art deals with

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Kaldellis. *The Argument of Psellos' Chronographia*. Brill, 1999, p.130.

<sup>2</sup> *Dialectica* 4, 1-27. (Johannes von Damaskus. *Die Schriften des Johannes von Damaskos I*. Ed. B. Kotter. Berlin 1969). John Damascene combines different classical definitions of philosophy, supplemented with Christian semantic extensions. Such combinations are produced by Philo of Alexandria and later by the Christian philosopher Ilias (6<sup>th</sup> c.). The direct text source of the definitions in *Dialectica* is an anonymous Christian collection of logical and philosophical definitions: Cod. Oxon. Bodl. Auct. T.1.6., in: Bonifatius Kotter. *Die Schriften des Johannes Damascenus I*. Walter de Gruyter, Berlin 1969, p. 151-73. Important to

“material and perishable subjects”, the subject of science is “the non-material and true things”<sup>3</sup>. Only philosophy is science in proper sense of the term because its subject is being and the Unchangeable. For Michael Psellos Christian philosophy is a manifestation of true being in human existence and has the task to “present man as God on earth”<sup>4</sup>. As the subjects of the other sciences are partial, they are rather ignorance than knowledge<sup>5</sup>.

Psellos repeats the six definitions of philosophy, formulated by John Damascene in accordance with his theonomic understanding of the essence of beings. He ignores the dichotomy ‘divine-human’ being, defended by John, and fashions the definitions without any specific reference to Christian religion. Philosophy is: “knowledge of being *qua* being”, “knowledge of human and divine things”, “concern for death”, “achieving likeness to God according to man’s powers”, “art of arts and science of sciences” and “love for wisdom”<sup>6</sup>. The first four definitions illustrate the subject and the goal of philosophy. According to its “close subject” philosophy is knowledge of being, while in respect of its remote subject it is “knowledge of human and divine things”. Its immediate goal is the care for death, and its remote goal – achieving likeness to God<sup>7</sup>. The fifth definition shows the priority of philosophy over other sciences and the sixth one is the etymological explanation of the term φιλοσοφία as love for wisdom.

## 2. Method and epistemic validity of Christian philosophy

### 2. 1. Dionysios the Areopagite

For Dionysios the self-articulation of God has an ontological but also an epistemic character, the latter being subordinate to the former. He develops the following three-stage epistemological structure of Christian philosophy: 1) contemplation of divine Scriptures, which is self-reflective (αὐτοπτική) – biblical revelation is a cognitive structure, according to which the human subject of knowledge is constituted; 2) systematic study of the entire scripture (συνοπτική διδασκαλία) – the different paths

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note is that John Damascene introduces further alteration in these definitions, in order to express more properly the axioms of Christian philosophy.

<sup>3</sup> *Philosophica minora* I, Opusc.49, 15-20 (Michael Psellos. *De omnifaria doctrina*. ed. L. G. Westernik, Utrecht 1948).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 103-104.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 101.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 112-118.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

to divine knowledge are traced; 3) study of the terms and logical methods, leading to divine knowledge<sup>8</sup>. On the first level at stake is the simple intentionality of the intellect, its “natural inclination” towards divine being. On the second level human intellect grasps the cosmological hierarchy by means of analogy between created and uncreated being according to the apophatic method of predication. The characteristics of created being, conceptualized by means of logic, are extrapolated towards the beginning of the order of causality. Thus the divine act of creation and revelation are grasped by human intellect. This is the domain of analogical cognition, of speculative theology and of Christian philosophy. The lowest third level bears neither existential, nor conceptual reference to the One. It is typical of “the lower degrees of illumination”. Following the law of the hierarchy of things (θεσμός), the concepts of the mind are referred to divine being through the apophatic predication. Thus divine contemplation (θεοπτικῆ διάνοια) is achieved. Thus the epistemic program of Dionysios encompasses the following three levels: analysis of the characteristics of contingent being; apophatic re-consideration of this content in accordance with the dogmas; direct divine contemplation

The model of Dionysios is based on a modified version of Proclus’ hierarchy. The latter comprises elements, each of which – except for the first (the One) and the last (Matter) – has two modes of reference to the next element in the chain: divisible and non-divisible. The One is entirely non-divisible, and matter is entirely divisible. An element, possessing a divisible and a non-divisible mode is a middle term between the higher and the lower member. In the model of Dionysios the role of a middle term is played by human subject of knowledge, whereby God is not a member of the hierarchy, but a Creator, who is absolutely transcendent to it. Thanks to divine enlightenment human intellect should consider any term, denoting some characteristics of being as an analogy to the entire divinity with a certain degree of similarity<sup>9</sup>. Transcending the multiplicity of the contingent world, man is illuminated and reaches likeness to his ontological principle<sup>10</sup>. The divine enlightenment, as well as the natural inclination of the intellect, instigate to speculative philosophy, whereby divine law traces the boundary between objects unachievable for human knowledge and objects which

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<sup>8</sup> *De divinis nominibus* 1, 2 (*Corpus Dionysiacum* I. ed. B. R. Suchla. Berlin 1990).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 2, 2.

<sup>10</sup> *De ecclesiastica hierarchia*. 3, 2 (*Corpus Dionysiacum* II, ed. G. Heil. Berlin 1991.).

should be studied (ἡμῖν δεδώρηται μανθάνειν)<sup>11</sup>. The Trinitarian and the Christological dogmas contain such a differentiating criterion. These principles do not allow that the dissimilarity between philosophical speculation “and the mystic unity which cannot be acquired through a scientific discourse” be blurred<sup>12</sup>.

Christian philosophy provides orientation in the theological science (θελογική ἐπιστήμη) “according to the truth of scripture” and transforms the subject of knowledge, due to which the latter is illuminated by divine grace. This correspondence between the order of being and human knowledge is confirmed on the level of contemplation, on the lower cognitive levels, and even through sense perception.

In this epistemic program non-Christian philosophy and the particular sciences belong to the third cognitive level, which is inferior in the order of knowledge. The terms and concepts produced by them should be connected in apophatic propositions, so that they can be used as a tool for Christian philosophy; in other words, the content of theological reasoning should be reflected in the perspective of the ontological hierarchy. This reflection is guided by the Christological and Trinitarian dogmas.

The three-level epistemic program, drawn by Dionysios transcends the antinomy ‘unity-multitude’ and enables the analogical perception of the ontological hierarchy, notwithstanding the remoteness of the concrete object of knowledge from the first Cause. This program corresponds to the ontological hierarchy and elevates the antinomy ‘unity-multiplicity’. The prerequisite for transcending the unity on the different cognitive levels is to always have in mind the relation between the contingent things and the first cause. In this case philosophy is not a meta-science, which orders the particular sciences in accordance with their subjects. Its task is to keep the correspondence between the analogical speculation on the hierarchy of being, on the one hand, and divine illumination, on the other. According to this concept philosophy is a trustworthy and indispensable method, but it is not a *habitus* of existential relation towards Christ, as is the case, e.g., by John Damascene.

## 2. 2. Michael Psellos

The anthropological guarantees of human knowledge according to Psellos are human soul and the intellect. Following the hierarchical model of the Areopagite, which is in

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> DN 2, 9 (nt. 8).

fact a Christianized version of Proclus' hierarchy, he builds a parallel between the antinomy 'unity-multiplicity' and the cognitive powers of man. Thus the integrity of man is put into question. The intellect (νοῦς) is a divine entity, which is monadic and is a constitutive principle of being. The soul bears multiplicity. The intellect and the soul are contrasted axiologically. In spite of the fact that Psellos allows for the possibility that the soul participates in divine intellect, there is a basic incompatibility between the two. The intellect is the basic structure of all being and of the soul itself. However, being divine, it is transcendent to everything. The intellect and the soul are responsible for different aspects of human knowledge: on the one hand, processing empiric data, imagination, induction and deduction and, on the other, divine contemplation. In connection to this division two questions occur: 1) what guarantees the coherence between the two levels of knowledge; 2) how does the subject of knowledge preserve its integrity<sup>13</sup>.

In contrast to Dionysios, for whom the goal of human intellectual knowledge (νόησις) is overcoming plurality towards unity with God, Psellos sees onto-gnoseological duality on each field of knowledge. Whereas Dionysios describes the transition from philosophical speculation on divine Revelation towards pure contemplation (θεωρία), Psellos is interested in the possibility for preserving the idea of a creative and a providential principle on each level of rational discourse. The main concern of Psellos is not the analogy between created being and the characteristics of divine being, as is the case by Dionysios, but the formulation of epistemic principles, which enable human intellect to delve into different regions of knowledge, without destroying its own integrity, as well as the coherence between cognition and Revelation.

A key role in this process plays philosophy. The method of philosophy is to analyze the relation between a certain subject of human knowledge and its transcendent principle, i.e. the "the intellect, ruling the entire universe". The reason why philosophy builds the systematic connection between the sciences is not because it serves as a tool for theoretical validation of their principles and methods (for Psellos their principles are self-evident, and the methods result from the subjects). In fact, in contrast to the special sciences, philosophy tackles the different subjects of knowledge from the point of view of the intellect and the One. This One is absolutely transcendent but it is constitutive

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. David, Jenkins. Psellos' Conceptual Precision, in: Reading Michael Psellos, ed. by Charles Barber and David Jenkins. Brill 2006, p.141.

for contingent being. The epistemic specificity of each science is the deviation of its methodology from the intellectual noetic principles, expressed by the self evident logical rules and the apodeictic syllogistics. Philosophy determines the degree of deviation between the simple logical principles which are coherent to the simplicity of the divine intellect and the susceptibility of the subject of the science to be conceptualized through necessary logical rules. This is the principle of the hierarchy of sciences. It is determined by the more central role that man plays in the ontological hierarchy, as compared to the model of Dionysios – for Psellos man is the only mediator between the divine Intellect and the Soul.

The epistemological requirement of Psellos poses the antinomy ‘unity-multitude’ as an identity problem of the human subject of knowledge. In order to solve this theoretical difficulty, Michael constructs the specific structure of the epistemic hierarchy. Thus theoretical philosophy, which grasps the noetic simplicity of each subject of knowledge, is not followed by the partial physics or astronomy, whose principles are lower than the first cause, but by sciences that render form to the different types of human activity – namely social relations and articulation of thought<sup>14</sup>. At stake here are rhetoric and legislation. As these intellectual practices refer to human beings, i.e. to the mediator between the Intellect and the Soul, they are superior to the sciences, dealing with created multiplicity. Rhetoric is for Psellos a hermeneutic instrument for articulation of philosophical thought in public. Legislation generalizes the variegated constellation of social life and reduces the variety of human acts to the first simple principles. However, Psellos notices that due to specific historical developments, legislation has moved away from the first principles and is being produced from a “shorter perspective”<sup>15</sup>. On the other hand, exactly rhetoric and legislation help to extrapolate higher meaning from the principles of private sciences and to integrate them in Christian philosophical discourse, dealing with the first Cause.

From the perspective of a particular science grasping of the principal unity of being, as well as of the order of divine providence would be a contradiction in subject. The absolutely monadic intellect would be divided among the particular things (ὁ νοῦς καθ’ ἕκαστα μεριζόμενος)<sup>16</sup>. Therefore, Psellos insists that human knowledge moves to the

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<sup>14</sup> Phil.min.I, Opusc.2 (nt. 3).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

opposite direction: from the knowledge of the first principles of the Intellect towards the private scientific subject.

It is not by chance that for Psellos the decisive argument against the assertion of the skeptics that true knowledge does not exist, is exactly the instance of the Divine intellect, through which the world was created and which guarantees divine providence over it. Exactly because divine providence exists, human aspiration for wisdom could and should be satisfied.

The status of Christian philosophy as a mediator between the intellect and the soul does not require the application of special logical methodology in the field of Philosophy, as is the case by Dionysios. The Areopagite develops a special logical tool for constructing true propositions about God, namely the apophatic predication. For Psellos, correctly applicable in philosophy are the general logical methods applied also in the other sciences.

### **3. The relation of Christian philosophy non-Christian philosophical traditions**

The criterion for adopting non-Christian philosophical models is Christian dogmatic. Some philosophic positions are rejected, other accepted and still others – transformed. Psellos refers to St. Gregory the Theologian, who, although being acquainted with the terms “monad”, “supreme essence” and “supreme intellect” uses their Christian alternatives: “simple essence and life” and “creative intellect”. Talking about the essence he points out that it is not a completely independent instance of being, but its self-existence and self-subsistence are guaranteed through the divine creative activity. But the study of non-Christian philosophical models is valuable in itself, because it helps the philosopher to reflect on the scope and the validity of philosophical science. Non-Christian philosophies are an attempt of past generations to refer to being from the point of view of universals. They are very instructive for the philosopher, as they help in developing strategies for getting over the plurality of worldviews and the inconstant stream of history of ideas. Non-Christian philosophies are epistemic propaedeutics for Christian philosophy, and not a proper existential ethos for the Christian philosopher.

### **4. The identity problem and the way out**

The intermediary status of philosophy between soul and intellect makes it very difficult for Christian philosophers to preserve their personal identity. Psellos solves the

identity problem of the subject of knowledge, by turning to human existence, i.e. to practical philosophy. He adopts a practical principle in epistemology, instead of the theoretical monistic approach of Christian Neo-Platonism. In order to determine the scientific field, which most properly corresponds to the truthful philosophical life, Psellos does take into consideration the closeness of the subject of a particular science to pure noetic contemplation and, respectively, to the simplicity of divine being. However, he accentuates especially on the existential dimensions of philosophical activity. In his *Letter to Xiphilinos* Michael recommends rhetoric as an appropriate field for practicing philosophy. This has a special epistemic reason. To the subject of knowledge, fluctuating between the simplicity of pure contemplation and the multitude of contingent being, rhetoric provides some kind of 'rest': it constructs a "watch-tower" (περιωπή), lying equally remote from the theoretical scientific discourse and from the changeability of the created world. Such scientific occupation creates an existential *habitus*, which allows for communion with God. This special mode of philosophical *vita activa* is represented as alternative to the traditional Christian ascetic ideal. Both these modes of life are in accordance with the concept of Christian philosophy, typical for Byzantine culture. The way of Psellos is based on a hierarchy of sciences, reflecting the ontological hierarchy and designed, in order to preserve the integrity of the human person. The paradigm of this integrity is the animate statue<sup>17</sup> – a *topos* in Psellos' philosophy denoting the coherence of beauty and truth in human life.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., Theol. I. 19.49-69 (Michael Psellos. Theologica I. ed. Paul Gautier. Leipzig 1989.). Cf. Stratis Papaioannou. Animate Statues: Aesthetics and Movement, in: Reading Michael Psellos, ed. by Charles Barber and David Jenkins. Brill, 2006, p.95-116.