

Science and the *logoi*

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I. MOTIVATION AND RELATION TO FATHER STĂNILOAE THEOLOGY

As is well known ever since the writings of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite, there are two types of knowledge: apophatic and cataphatic. Cataphatic, or rational, knowledge is based on affirmations, and is the way we obtain an understanding of the things that can be comprehended by the human mind. These include most of the created world. On the other hand, to make truthful statements about notions that cannot be comprehended by the human mind, the correct way to proceed is via negative statements. This applies not only to theological discourse, but also to certain aspects of mathematics and physics where one has to work with incomplete knowledge about certain systems¹. This is known broadly as the apophatic approach.

However, it is not clear from the definition above what apophatic theology is, and more precisely, how should it be done. Of course, one can define apophatic theology apophatically, as “not rational”, or “not cataphatic”, but this is not very precise. Indeed, one possibility is that the apophatic approach involves getting rid completely of all rational discourse, undoing it, setting it completely aside, to reach a state of *agnosia*. For example, Lossky, citing the Areopagite says: “it is by unknowing (*agnosia*) that one may know Him who is above every possible object of knowledge”².

One important contribution of Father Stăniloae is to draw a distinction between negative theology, which is the version of apophatism described above, and apophatic theology. The difference between them is that between the “simple negation of the knowability of God and the experience of Him”³. This distinction is coherent with Yannaras’s argument that the language proper to apophatism is closer to that of poetry or iconography than to that of conventional logic, and that

¹ For example, if one only knows the x-components of two two-dimensional vectors, one cannot correctly infer from the fact that these x-components are equal that the two vectors are equal (this would be the equivalent of cataphatic knowledge), but one can infer that if these two x-components are not equal that the two vectors are not equal also (which is a negative statement).

² Vladimir LOSSKY, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Crestwood, NY, Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976 (1st ed. 1944, in French), p. 25.

³ Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality. A Practical Guide for the Faithful and a Definitive Manual for the Scholar*, archim. Jerome Newville – Otilia Kloos (trs), South Canaan, PA, Saint Vladimir Press, 2003, p. 230.

apophatism is neither “nebulous mysticism [...] nor a disconsidering or an underestimation of rational thought”⁴.

Father Stăniloae argues that apophatic knowledge is not a-rational, but rather super-rational, and the access to the Logos comes not by getting rid of our rationality, but by moving to a super-natural contemplation: “The existence of the world itself as a way to God is a proof that the supreme knowledge of God is not an irrational act, but supra-rational; that it is not realized by a premature renunciation of reason⁵ or by a direct leap without reason, but by the surpassing of reason”⁶.

The key ingredient in this apophatic super-natural approach is the understanding and contemplation of the *logoi*. There are several ways to define what the *logoi* are, either from a human perspective, as the workings of God in creation that can be understood by the human mind⁷ or from a higher perspective, as the “primary principles of creatures and the universal essences of beings” created by God “once and for all”⁸. And in Father Stăniloae opinion, the understanding and contemplation of the *logoi* is not an optional side activity, reserved for professional theologians, but an essential ingredient in one’s spiritual path: “On the road of our approach to God stands the world – we must pass via the understanding of it”⁹. Hence the apophatic approach consists not of ignoring the *logoi* of the things of the world, and abandoning reason in favour of nebulous mysticism, but by searching deeper and deeper into the *logoi*, all the way to the boundaries of our reason, with the purpose of attaining true super-rational apophatic knowledge: “The *logoi* of things in the world, far from becoming unnecessary after the revealed vision of God, will help us understand the fecundity of the divine Logos”¹⁰.

We will argue that one can distinguish three rough layers of *logoi*. The first and the most superficial one, which can be understood by all human beings, even those without any spiritual life, consists of the physical laws that govern creation. This layer of *logoi* can fall under the label of Science. The second layer is the way in which these laws manifest God’s presence in the world, and their moral implication for our lives. This layer can be roughly labeled as Ethics. The third and deepest layer, is at the boundary of rational discourse, and points towards the Logos. An understanding of the *logoi* in these two latter levels is predicated on spiritual purification.

⁴ Christos YANNARAS, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, Edinburgh, T & T Clark, 2000, sections 4 and 5.

⁵ This would be the negative way.

⁶ STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 208.

⁷ Andrew LOUTH, “Man And Cosmos in St. Maximus the Confessor”, in John CHRYSAVGIS – Bruce FOLTZ (eds), *Toward an Ecology of Transfiguration*, New York, Fordham University Press, 2013, p. 64.

⁸ Saint MAXIMUS THE CONFESSOR, “Ad Thalassium 2”, in Paul M. BLOWERS – Robert L. WILKEN (trs), *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor* (Popular Patristics Series, 25), Crestwood, NY, St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003, p. 99.

⁹ STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 205.

¹⁰ STĂNILOAE, *Orthodox Spirituality*, p. 204.