

# Logic and the Absolute: Platonic and Christian Views

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ONE of the most deep-seated contrasts, not to say conflicts, in western doctrinal traditions is that between Platonism<sup>1</sup> and Christian theology. Historically speaking, the confrontation between the two traditions was most evident in those great formative centuries of Christian thought which lie between the end of the third century and the beginning of the seventh century, and was naturally at its most intense in urban centres like Alexandria, Athens, Constantinople and Antioch in which both Platonic and Christian schools flourished side by side. But the issues which came to the fore in this confrontation represents what one might describe as perennially divergent tendencies manifested by man in his attempts to give his doctrinal understanding an adequate linguistic formulation. Nowhere is this more clear and more crucial than in respect of the differing estimates which emerged in this confrontation of the role that logic should play in relation to the formulation of divine Truth. The obstinacy with which Christian theologians maintained formulations that from the logical point of view were contradictory exposed them to the charge of blindness on the part of the Platonists; while the determination with which the Platonists insisted on reducing every illogical formulation to a logical formulation provoked counter-charges on the part of the Christian theologians that they, the Platonists, were merely victims of the tyranny of logic. Does anything more profound than recrimination based on mutual

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this paper, the term Platonism is intended to designate also those doctrinal formulations which go under the heading of neo-Platonism.

incomprehension lie behind these charges?

In the Platonic perspective, metaphysical Reality is a subtly graduated structure descending from the undetermined One that is beyond Being through a series of determinations which eventually issue in the human soul. Here at once two points must be emphasized. The first point is that for the Platonists these determinations are not merely products of human thought which lack any objective basis in metaphysical Reality itself. On the contrary, they represent actual gradations of substance in the structure of this Reality. The second point is that each determination subsequent to the One is characterized by a certain loss of reality and absoluteness, this loss being greater the lower the determination stands in the descending series. These two points together mean that Being, for instance, which represents the primal determination of the undetermined One, is in an actual and substantial manner distinguished from the One *in divinis* itself; and that the fact that Being stands in this way subsequent to the One signifies that Being possesses a lesser degree of absolute reality than that possessed by the One; and the same applies, in a gradually increasing fashion, to all those determinations which in their turn issue or emanate from Being and from what stands below Being. In other words, for the Platonists metaphysical Reality comprises a hierarchy of gradations each real on its own level but each possessing a degree of absoluteness and reality which depends on its relative proximity to the pre-ontological One, which alone may be described as absolutely real.

Christian theologians, on the other hand, refuse to admit these descending gradations of substance in metaphysical Reality. They do admit that there are distinctions in this Reality and that in certain respects it may be said to be beyond all determination, even that of Being, while in others it may be said to be determined; and they affirm, moreover, that these distinctions are real and substantive. But they deny that what may be distinguished in metaphysical Reality possesses on that account a lesser degree of absolute reality than what is beyond all distinction. They do not recognize the idea of relativity *in divinis* or that it is legitimate to say that there is something relatively absolute in God in the way that the Platonists affirm. Instead, they not only maintain that God is a

Trinity and this triune character of God represents real distinctions; they also maintain that each hypostasis of the Trinity is as real and as absolute as each other hypostasis, and that the reality and absoluteness possessed by each hypostasis are those of God Himself in His most absolute and intrinsic nature.

It is at once clear from even this brief account of the different ideas of the structure of metaphysical Reality held by Platonists and Christian theologians that, while the Platonic idea is eminently logical, the Christian idea is antinomic. According to the laws of logic, every determination must exclude all those aspects of total reality not subsumed within the terms of its own definition. A wall cannot be a tree or a cow or anything else not included in that entity denoted by the word 'wall'. This is to say that, logically speaking, every determination implies to a greater or lesser degree a limitation when compared with total reality. It is also to say that in the ultimate logical analysis total reality (or the infinite) must be beyond all determination, since any determination, as we saw, implies some limitation and therefore the exclusion of some aspect or aspects of total reality. Hence, in terms which are consistent with the laws of logic, the highest principle in the metaphysical order—that which embraces total reality and is infinite in its nature—must be beyond all determination. It is by means of an analysis of this kind that the Platonists arrive at the idea of an undetermined One that is beyond even Being as the supreme principle in the metaphysical order. It is also by means of an analysis of this kind that the Platonists establish the law that any metaphysical principle which can be logically distinguished from the One, and so must represent some determination of the total reality embraced by the One, must on that account possess less reality than the undetermined One, because by definition it will exclude some aspect or aspects of the total reality subsumed in the One. The greater its degree of determination the more it will exclude of that total reality subsumed in the One and so, correspondingly, the less will be its own degree of reality. It is in this way that the Platonists construe in metaphysical Reality that hierarchy of gradations each real on its own level but each possessing a degree of reality which depends on its relative proximity to the One. Only the One is absolutely real; any metaphysical principle subsequent to the One, and logically

distinguished from the One by the degree of determination that applies to it, will be only relatively real. In other words, this hierarchy of gradations in metaphysical Reality is one which may be established according to the strict laws of logic effective on the plane of the human intelligence. It corresponds to the order of logic effective on this plane.

The Christian idea of a metaphysical Reality whose ultimate nature is triune cuts directly across that correlation between the order of logic and the metaphysical order which the Platonists assume. According to the laws of logic, any determination, as we have seen, necessarily implies a degree of limitation: this is a truth of the logical order. But because for the Platonists there is a direct correspondence between the order of logic and the metaphysical order, what is true according to the laws of logic will also have its corresponding application on the metaphysical plane. This means that any determination *in divinis* will also imply a relative degree of limitation in what is determined when compared with the undetermined nature of total and absolute reality itself. Hence for the Platonists the Christian affirmation that the supreme principle in metaphysical Reality is distinguished by its trinitarian character indicates that the Christian conception of this Reality begins not with the undetermined nature of total and absolute reality itself, signified for the Platonists by the One that is beyond Being, but with a grade of determination which is subsequent to the One and which might well be identified with Being. For the Platonists, basing their discrimination on logical analysis, the pre-ontological One must both precede all distinction and be more absolute and more real than any distinction; the Trinity; they argue, can therefore only represent a certain degree of determination of the One and so the Trinity itself in its unity and each hypostasis of the Trinity singly must be to some extent less real and less absolute than the One.

Yet it is precisely this that the theologians deny. They fully affirm the pre-ontological aspect of the divine nature—they denote this aspect by the term Essence. But they maintain, first, that even this aspect of the divine nature does not escape or transcend a trinitarian character; and, second, that in so far as the recognition of the trinitarian character of the divine nature signifies a recognition of determination *in divines*, this does not imply that either the Trinity in its unity or any of its three hypostases singly is

therefore lacking in some degree of total and absolute reality. They refuse to accept the idea of an Essence (or One) which transcends the Trinity, or that the Trinity represents certain determinations of the Essence in the sense that each hypostasis of the Trinity expresses a relative mode of the Essence and on that account is to some extent less real and less absolute than the Essence. For them, the Essence itself is enhypostasized, and to posit the idea of an Essence or a One which principally transcends or precedes the Trinity is to posit an idea that is less adequate to the Reality it is intended to indicate than the idea of the Trinity. For the theologians, the idea of the Trinity, although it violates the laws of logic, or at least does not represent an application of these laws to the point at which the Platonists themselves apply them, is yet the most adequate representation of metaphysical Reality that the human mind is able to conceive.

This affirmation on the part of Christian theologians of the central tenet of their doctrine in terms which imply that the ultimate structure of divine Reality is not only super-logical but also illogical or contrary to logic in a way that the Platonists cannot admit, means one of two things. Either it means that Christian theologians are bad logicians pure and simple, and so take refuge in making statements which, because of their incapacity, they are forced to defend by pretending that they are beyond the reach of logic; or it means that they are not necessarily bad logicians but have good reasons for refusing to apply the norms of logic in ways in which for the Platonists it is quite legitimate to apply them. The Platonists themselves usually attributed to a lack of logical subtlety and acumen the failure of the Christian theologians to resolve in a logically consistent manner some of the paradoxical forms in which their doctrine is couched. But this is an over-simplification. On deeper analysis it will be found that the Christian theologians did have reasons which in their own eyes at least justified them in restricting their application of logic to limits beyond which the Platonists regarded it as quite proper to go. Many of these theologians were trained in Platonic schools and were entirely familiar with the whole structure of Platonic thought and with the logical premises on which it is supported. If none the less they wished to distinguish their approach to doctrinal formulation from that of the Platonists it is plausible to assume that they must

have known very well why they did wish to do this. At any rate, some attempt should at least be made to see things from their point of view and to discover whether their refusal to recognize the Platonic structure of metaphysical Reality is due merely to blindness or does have some more intelligible basis. One may then go on to discuss the value of this basis, but that is another matter.

Briefly, the argument of the Platonists, as we have seen, is that metaphysical Reality is subject to gradations which correspond to those of the logical order. This means that one is perfectly entitled to apply logical analysis to the structure of metaphysical Reality and to distinguish in a way that conforms to this analysis a hierarchy of gradations each real on its own level but each possessing a degree of absolute reality which depends on its 'distance' from the divine Source. But this line of reasoning, it is clear, depends upon consciously or unconsciously accepting as true the presupposition that the order of logic does in fact correspond to the structure of metaphysical Reality. This is to say that it depends upon consciously or unconsciously accepting as true the presupposition that ultimately nothing in the structure of divine Reality is illogical or contrary to logic. For if this presupposition is true, then of course the idea that divine Reality is subject to gradation necessarily follows, because the order of logic is one of degrees or grades; and this graduated structure of logic can simply be transposed or applied to this Reality, which it is presumed to reflect in the first place. Indeed, if this presupposition is true, it then follows quite directly that once it can be shown that one proposition referring to divine Reality stands higher in the logical order than another such proposition, then the level or grade of that Reality to which this first proposition refers must also stand higher in the metaphysical order than that to which the second refers. For instance, if it can be demonstrated that what is beyond Being stands higher in the order of logic than Being, it will follow that what is beyond Being stands higher than Being in the metaphysical order. Hence the absoluteness of Being will be less than, or only relative when compared with, the absoluteness of what is beyond Being; and so on, down the logically graduated scale.

What does all this imply? Logic may be defined as the capacity to draw conclusions from a given starting-point or from a series of given starting-points. In principle, there are

no grounds for affirming that this starting-point or these starting-points must be logical in form. The logical capacity can make deductions from a starting-point that is illogical in form just as well as it can from one that is logical in form: Platonists and Christian theologians alike agree on this. Platonists and theologians also agree that logical analysis is governed by certain laws, of which the most basic is that of non-contradiction, expressed in its simplest form in the proposition that a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be. The question at issue between Platonists and theologians does not therefore concern the nature of logic itself or how it must be used when it is used. It concerns only the relationship between the logical order and the metaphysical order. The arguments of the Platonists, we have seen, depend upon accepting as true the idea that there is an adequation of the two orders. This does not mean that for the Platonists the order of logic coincides with the metaphysical order. But it does mean that the order of logic on its own level mirrors the structure of the metaphysical order, so that the laws of logic not only derive from but also analogically may be applied to the metaphysical order. In other words, when metaphysical Reality is reflected on the logical plane of the human mind, the concepts it forms of itself will be, or at least in principle should be, logically consistent and non-contradictory because, the Platonists affirm, ultimately nothing in the nature of this Reality is opposed to the principle of logical consistency and non-contradiction. It is for this reason that the Platonists feel quite justified in applying the laws of logic to their representations of the metaphysical realm, and why they claim that there can in the nature of things be no doctrine that is beyond logical explanation.

This Platonic line of reasoning is of course a circulatory one. It presupposes that the structure of metaphysical Reality is graded in a manner that is reflected in the order of logic, and it then proceeds to apply the gradations of the logical order to metaphysical Reality and to assert that the pattern which emerges represents the nature of this Reality more adequately than any pattern which ignores these gradations. But unless he is to admit that the presupposition underlying his line of reasoning either is a matter of faith or is arbitrary, then the Platonist must be able to point to the objective grounds on which he accepts it as true. He must, that is to say, be able to show why he presupposes that

ultimately nothing in the nature of metaphysical Reality is opposed to the principle of non-contradiction and so why he is entitled to predicate a direct correlation between this Reality and the order of logic. Logic itself cannot demonstrate the validity of this presupposition. Indeed, there is no way in which it is possible to demonstrate it. All that one can do is to assume that it is valid and then go on to apply the laws of logic to formulations of divine Truth as if it actually were valid. But the validity or otherwise of the presupposition itself is beyond either proof or disproof.

It is at this point that one may begin to discern how the differing ideas which Christian theologians and Platonists form of metaphysical Reality are directly related to their differing appreciation of the relationship between the logical order and the metaphysical order. If the theologians affirm, as they do affirm, that the most adequate expression in verbal form which may be given to metaphysical Reality is one that must be couched in terms that are paradoxical and, further, that attempts to give logical explanations to this paradox will result in more, and not less, opaque coagulations of that Reality—if the theologians affirm this, it must be because they do not assume that concordance or correlation between the metaphysical order and the order of logic which the Platonists do assume. They do not assume that ultimately nothing in *divinis* is opposed to the principle of non-contradiction in logical terms. On the contrary, they affirm that ultimately there is something *in divinis* opposed to this principle. They affirm that ultimately the nature of metaphysical Reality cannot be expressed in terms compatible with the laws of logic, and correspondingly that an axiom entirely true according to these laws cannot be applied to statements about the nature of this Reality as though it were also true of the conditions appertaining to that nature.

In concrete terms apposite in this context, the theologians would argue, for instance, that a determination, which on the logical plane implies a limitation, does not necessarily imply a limitation *in divinis*. Consequently the statement that the absolute and intrinsic nature of divine Reality is a single Essence in three distinct hypostases, each hypostasis embracing total and absolute reality in its own right, although a contradiction from the point of view of the logical order, is not necessarily a contradiction in terms of the supra-

logical conditions appertaining to the metaphysical order. The Platonists, for their part, in the name of the logical axiom that a determination implies a limitation, would try to reduce this antinomic statement about the triune character of the Absolute to a statement which contains no logical contradiction, as though that axiom did in fact apply to the conditions appertaining to the metaphysical order. They would argue, in the way we have seen, that since each hypostasis in the Trinity represents a determination *in divinis* it cannot on that account represent absolute and infinite reality in its own right because the logical axiom that every determination implies a limitation applies not only on the logical plane but also to the conditions appertaining to the metaphysical order. Each hypostasis therefore must represent something less real and less absolute than absolute and infinite reality, which in its turn must be represented by a totally undetermined principle. Hence, if this undetermined principle of absolute and infinite reality is designated by the term Essence, then the Essence must transcend all hypostatic distinction, and each hypostasis must express the Essence in but a relative mode. Yet for the theologians, to reduce, in the name of a logical axiom, an antinomie statement about the Absolute to a statement which contains no logical contradiction, as though this axiom had direct relevance where the conditions appertaining to metaphysical order are concerned, is radically to misconstrue the nature of that order. For them, there is a kind of hiatus or lack of analogy between the logical order and the metaphysical order, and no necessary adequation between the laws effective in the first order and those effective in the second.

It is because of this that the theologians deny that the laws of logic can be applied to formulations of divine Truth in the way that the Platonists apply them. In other words, the presuppositions underlying the theologians' line of reasoning is directly opposed to that of the Platonists. The Platonists maintain that ultimately nothing in metaphysical Reality contradicts the laws of logic. The theologians maintain that ultimately there is something in this Reality which contradicts the laws of logic, however subtle and refined these may be. The theologians of course cannot demonstrate the validity of their presupposition any more than the Platonists can demonstrate the validity of theirs. Indeed, unless both Platonists and theologians are to admit that their adherence to the opposing

presuppositions underlying their lines of reasoning is arbitrary, then they must affirm that ultimately these presuppositions are matters of faith deriving from or rooted in different forms of Revelation. But again it would be quite futile to try to establish the superiority of the one form of Revelation over the other by demonstrating that the doctrinal principles of the one are more logically consistent or subtle than those of the other: this would be merely to repeat the same circulatory argument in another context.

There must be no confusion in this. Christian theologians do not deny that logic has a role and that this role is of enormous significance. They do not deny either that the language in which to express what may be expressed about metaphysical Reality should be as logically intelligible as possible—if they did deny this they would have to give up speaking about metaphysical Reality altogether. But they do maintain that logical axioms cannot be applied to this Reality as though the conditions appertaining to it are subject to laws which correspond to those of the logical order. This may be put in another way, similar to that used when speaking of the Platonists: according to the theologians, when metaphysical Reality, ultimately and essentially paradoxical in character, is reflected in the mirror of the human intelligence, it is reflected in a form which can most adequately be translated into the conceptual language of the reason in terms that are correspondingly paradoxical; and the function of logic is to draw conclusions from this paradoxical starting-point which have their application in all the many contingent spheres of human discourse and action. It has already been said that the capacity of logic to fulfill its role is not affected by whether or not its starting-point is in a form that is logically consistent or logically contradictory: it can function equally well whatever the starting-point. In other words, although the theologians completely accept that logic may deploy itself downwards from a starting-point which has its ultimate roots in Revelation, they affirm that it will overstep its limits if it deploys itself upwards and tries to resolve the paradoxical expression of the paradoxical complexity of metaphysical Reality as if that Reality were susceptible to its laws. And they affirm this not because they lack the capacity for logical reasoning and so in self-defence arbitrarily place the key ideas of their doctrine beyond the reach of logic; they affirm it because they deny that there is that

concordance or correlation between metaphysical Reality and the order of logic which the Platonists accept as axiomatic.

From a slightly different angle it might be said that the Platonists and theologians appear to part company in their attitudes towards the character of the higher or spiritual faculty of the human intelligence—that organ of perception, if it may be so described, which is capable, when illuminated by the Spirit, of a direct apprehension of and insight into metaphysical Reality—and its relationship to the purely rational faculty. For the Platonists it is the human intelligence itself, comprising both these faculties, which is endowed with a logical character because the Reality of which it is the image or emanation is thought to possess precisely that graduated structure which is reflected in the order of logic. It is therefore quite legitimate for the Platonists to apply the gradations of logic upward and to formulate their ideas of this Reality accordingly because in so doing they will simply be operating in a manner that has its justification in the divine Intellect itself. For the theologians, on the other hand, logic does not characterize the human intelligence *tout court*, but only that aspect of it which is represented by the rational faculty. Logic is a function of the *ratio*, not of the contemplative or intuitive higher or spiritual faculty. For the theologians, this latter faculty is supra-logical in character; and although in principle it is capable of a knowledge of divine Truth, it is not on that account characterized by logic because the divine Truth of which it is the image is not a logical principle or a principle to which the laws of logic apply. In other words, Christian theologians appear to discriminate far more sharply than the Platonists between the supra-rational faculty of the human intelligence and the rational faculty, and to regard the logical capacity as a function of the latter alone. Hence, while they are just as rigorous in applying the laws of logic in drawing conclusions from the ultimately paradoxical form in which the Truth, contemplated in or through the divine image or the spiritual faculty in man, clothes itself when translated into conceptual or rational terms, they are less ready, for obvious reasons, to assume that this form itself can be explained in non-paradoxical terms.

Indeed, one may say that for the theologians the Platonic assumption that the

ultimate form in which divine Truth can be conceived on the human plane is not paradoxical but logical represents a kind of revolt of the lower or logical faculty of the human intelligence against the higher or supra-logical faculty. This revolt is not unconnected in their thought with the fall of man (it should be recalled that in paradise the human intelligence is regarded as operating in as supra-logical or 'angelic' manner); and they see it perpetuated in the continuing tendency in 'fallen' man to allow his logical capacity to overstep the limits to which its activity should be restricted and to try to reduce all formulations of divine Truth to a level at which they are subordinate to that law of non-contradiction by which logic itself is governed. For them, logic is adapted to and has its circumscribed but significant sphere of relevance in the fallen conditions of the physical order and man's existence in it; and a truth established according to the laws of logic—such as that every determination implies a limitation—and so valid for the logical order, may in certain respects also be valid for and also apply to these conditions of the physical order; but it has no necessary validity for or application to the conditions of the metaphysical order.

In the final analysis, the antinomic character of the doctrine of the Trinity is for Christian theologians a more complete expression of the complexity of divine Truth on the human plane than any of the logical explanations, however, complex and subtle they may be, to which it may be reduced—even a more complete expression of the Truth than the sum total of all the logical explanations of which it is susceptible. For them, the many attempts made by Platonists —and, be it said, by those Christian theologians themselves who have been seduced, as the more orthodox would put it, by the 'Platonizing' tendency in man—to resolve this antinomic character in terms compatible with the laws of logic are made from below; and they result in over-simplifications which represent an even greater coagulation or hardening of the Truth than is already implicit in the antimony itself, and so constitute further obstacles between man and his knowledge of God. For the Platonists, on the other hand, with their different view of the role of logic in doctrinal formulation, the reverse is the case. Whether the Platonic or the Christian idea of the Truth is the more adequate is a theme that lies beyond the scope of this paper. But at least

it should be clear that any positive discussion of this theme must begin, not with a consideration of these ideas in themselves, but with a consideration of the grounds on which the Platonists accept a relationship between logic and the Absolute which the theologians reject, and *vice-versa*. Any discussion of this theme that does not begin with this consideration is bound to be fruitless or recriminatory or both at once.