

# From the $\xi\nu$ to the Universe of Sets

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## Introduction

In this essay I conceive theology as a branch of theoretical philosophy, and, among those, I regard it as being the one which most suffered the times in which western culture moved from the Greek  $\Theta\epsilon\omega\rho\iota\alpha$  to the most mundane culture of the Romans, the mediaeval dogmatism and the modern scientism. With the term theology I will therefore not refer to either the modern reduction to anthropology nor the mediaeval dogmatic doctrines, instead I will start from its Greek origins and my main attempt will be to draw a line throughout history up to modern times and consider where could theology and (one of) its evolution into negative theology fit into the contemporary analytical philosophical context.

In the first section I begin with an historical explanation of what the  $\xi\nu$ <sup>1</sup> is, considering mainly the standpoints by Plato, Parmenides and, most of all, Plotin. The second section will then argue why we should regard  $\xi\nu$  as being the object of theological research and lastly I will split the way traced up to that point into two possible outcomes: the first will be the Gödelian positive and ontological approach and the second is the logical and negative approach to theology, mainly based on “The Logical Challenge of Negative Theology”, by P. Urbańczyk.

## 1 Historical Introduction

### 1.1 Parmenides

Instead of giving a complete picture of the Parmenidean system, I want to be very precise about two features that  $\xi\nu$  has and I will, in order to do not lose contact with the authors, make references to the texts<sup>2</sup>.

Ξυνόν δέ μοί ἐστιν, ὁππόθεν ἄρξωμαι· τόθι γὰρ πάλιν ἵξομαι αὖθις.<sup>3</sup>

Only after having well captured the Parmenidean picture, one can actually read in such brief sentences the whole system. The sentence begins in a weak adversative ( $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ ) since the author well knows that what he'll state is against common sense. He affirms that *to him* ( $\mu\omicron\iota$ ) it is  $\xi\nu\acute{o}\varsigma$ , which denotes the *least significance of something*, often translated as *common to many* or *indifferent*; the object of this is  $\delta\omicron\pi\acute{o}\theta\epsilon\nu$  ἄρξωμαι, where the first word denotes a *starting point*<sup>4</sup>, though, as it often happens in many languages and in Greek even more, locative locutions are mostly to be understood metaphorically, this will be of most significance for the interpretation; the following verb, ἄρξωμαι, which comes from the well known word ἀρχή, is a declination of the verb ἀρχω denoting sometimes, like the latin *duco*, the action of *command* and *being in control* but also *being the first* both in significance and time (we shall again notice that locality is one of the many meanings that ἄρξωμαι as ὁππόθεν have); the mediopassive voice shifts the meaning to the one involving less action by the subject, we shall here

<sup>1</sup>I will not translate the Greek words we will encounter in the few passages since I regard as more fruitful and precise, even for whom can't understand nor, perhaps, read them, instead of giving approximate translations which will contaminate the ideas with the modern use of those. The reader, instead, by reading the words used in sentences will definitely be able to address to it a more precise meaning than the one she would accept through a simple translation.

<sup>2</sup>Pieces of the two reported translation come from the essay I wrote entitled: *An Historical Discourse Phenomenological Platonism*. Original sentences have been taken from *Parmenide, Sulla Natura*, Bompiani, G. Reale 2021 and I used the vocabulary *GI*, Vocabolario della Lingua Greca 3<sup>a</sup> Edizione, Franco Montanari. Books that helped the interpretation are *Storia della Filosofia Greca e Romana*, G. Reale, Bompiani, 2018 and *Platone, Alla ricerca della sapienza segreta*, G. Reale, i Fari, 2019 and *La Filosofia dai Greci al Nostro Tempo*, E. Severino, Rizzoli, 2021

<sup>3</sup>Parmenides, B. 5

<sup>4</sup>Remark: for a more proper translation one should consider it as an adverb, not a noun

therefore understand it as *to begin* (for more precision, one might identify it, the mediopassive voice only, with the deponent Latin verb *orior*). The next sentence begins recalling *ὀππόθεν*, we can here simply translate *τόθι* as *there* and *γάρ* adds emphasis to his statement. On the other hand, *πάνιν* has two main meanings which can be reassembled in the German distinction between *wieder* and *wider*, the precise meaning is remarked by repetition by the last word *αὔθις* denoting recurrence, it may be interpreted as never ending. The verb *ἵζομαι* which comes from *ἵκω*, or *ἰκνέομαι* it mediopassive voice; in order to understand better its meaning we can compare it with another Greek verb meaning *to come*, namely *ἔρχομαι*: our verb has a more passive meaning, denoting that this *return to the starting point* is not in the will of the author but instead imposed by more powerful strengths.

The interpretation I want to give to this sentence in order to let it span the whole Parmenidean system is the following: one should completely drop the locative and instead consider every dimension of the being so that time will recur on every predicate we can assert and therefore all that is, will be and has been is all part of *ἔν*; and time itself is, not ruler of *πάντα χωρεῖ*<sup>5</sup>, instead anything but part of it.

In order to have a deeper understanding of the limits (if they shall be called so) and the context of what *εἶναι* denotes, one should understand its relation to *νοεῖν* which is captured in the following passage:

[...]τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστὶν τε καὶ εἶναι.<sup>6</sup>

This brief passage ends an unknown sentence with a crucial equality: the well known (yet unclear) *εἶναι* with *νοεῖν*. Two are the words that from Greek into English could be simply translated with the verb *think*: the just met *νοέω* or *φρονέω*. The former has in Greek a broader meaning, can be translated as *feel, acknowledge, know, understand* and, not least, *see*<sup>7</sup>. On the other hand *φρονέω* ranges over a way narrower set of meanings, all referring solely to mental activities, from proper actions of the mind, like *think* or *understand* to some states like *have something in mind, being wise* or, more generally, *have mental faculties*.

## 1.2 Evolutions in Plotin

The evolution throughout history of the ideas that humans have in their head when talking about God is anthropologically<sup>8</sup>, in my opinion, one of the most interesting questions. This essay, though, is not concerning anthropology; I want to make nothing more than a brief excursus in order to justify the reason why I have particular interest in Plotin and the platonic stream. One of the most evident evolution in the ancient history, is, in my opinion, the shift from the Attic *Θεωρία* to the roman *Πραξις* and, to sustain this claim, one could give many different examples in all fields, from literature, to science or politics; most evident is to me the way this change took place in philosophy. Even though such patterns, like the shift to *praxis* proceeding over time, seem to be very convincing, one should never get too biased and lose attention and objectivity when examining new texts. Plotin, to me, has been one of these cases. When reading about him for the first time, I could have foreseen how the pure, high Platonism could have been thrown into the infallible *praxis* of Roman culture. Though, very few pages have been enough to convince me of the opposite of my expectations: the Plotinian system still entails the Attic and Eleatic flavours of purest and highest theory. Two main reasons drove me to include Plotin in the centre of this essay: (i) the historical vicinity with Christianity, as Porphyry writes in his *Biography of Plotin*, on average he wrote from 30 to 40 years before the Edict of Milan, his society had therefore the cultural grounding to receive Christianity; (ii) the crucial role that *ἔν* plays in the ontological system, which will be of highest relevance for a theological analysis. In order to show the place where I see positive and negative theology fit into modern philosophy I need now to jump from the path traced, from Parmenides to Plotin, up to the schematic division of the next section.

## 2 The Modern Role of Theology

I regard there as being mainly three views one can modernly have on theology, the first collapses theology to anthropology; the second continuous uniformly the tradition that began with Parmenides

<sup>5</sup>All that changes, moves, becomes, from Heraclitus, Fr. 402.a

<sup>6</sup>Parmenides, B. 3

<sup>7</sup>Remarking the hypothesis on the strong bond present in the Greek culture between thought and visual perception.

<sup>8</sup>For the reasons of this adverb, see section 2.1

and shows in which sense and which assumptions are needed in order to make modern sense of such a standpoint; the third view is the refusal of such assumptions needed for positive theology and instead tries, on a logical bases, to formulate the the negative notions we can have on theology.

## 2.1 The Anthropological View

When thinking about the anthropological view on theology one should directly think about L. Feuerbach<sup>9</sup> and the first chapters in his famous book *Das Wesen des Christentums*. This view is antithetical to the line I have drawn until now, because it refuses the Christian version of the  $\epsilon\nu$ . Though I think it is very worth expanding this thesis in order to understand one role that theology could modernly take and definitely this position gained much popularity, mainly among materialists and scientists. When I say that Feuerbach reduces theology to anthropology I mean that he sees propositions in theology to have no metaphysical meaning but which could, if interpreted anthropologically, gain a full meaning and get credit in a materialist context. I am not a priori against such a standpoint, though, one should here remark that Feuerbach refers to Christianity in his writings and I am referring, as I have explicated in the first lines of this essay, to the Greek tradition and their influences in more modern time, so, not properly to Christianity. Therefore if one considers the most practical, ethical and prescriptive parts of theology then I would probably mostly agree with Feuerbach. Though this essay refers not to such parts of the doctrines, instead I'm referring to the metaphysical and rationalists part of theology, which can be as easily reduced to anthropology as mathematics is.

## 2.2 Gödel's Rationalism and Realism

Between theology and realism, in my opinion, there must be a very strong bond, which I often, don't see enough emphasised. Here a digression on what I precisely mean with realism should be a must, though I'll briefly try to clarify the concept. Realism, in the Gödelian (and Platonic) sense mainly refers to the so-called "Begriffsraum" is it going to try abbreviate okay Bruno Zio, Grindr Oreste I don't have any cats cats cats put a timer on is it what is it you know say dial Barbara died say that so in the morning which in the Gödel's system corresponds to the Platonic  $\epsilon\pi\epsilon\rho\upsilon\rho\alpha\acute{\nu}\iota\omicron\varsigma\ \tau\acute{o}\pi\omicron\varsigma$ , the place beyond the world. Such a Begriffsraum is, in my opinion, the core idea of rationalism, realism and theology all together, and here I shall briefly explain why<sup>10</sup>. As I have explained in the first paragraphs on Plato, such  $\epsilon\nu$  (which in Plato is distinct from the totality of the ideas, but in Gödel such a distinction is way less evident) guarantees the existence of all being, their reality independently form our understandings.<sup>11</sup>

Such a background allows Gödel to affirm that, since every question has an answer in the Begriffsraum, at a future time, thanks to the careful study of such a place (namely theology), we'll have a precise formal method to study every subject, art, psychology and, obviously, God Himself. Such methods, though, are not guaranteed to be in any way easily accessible to us, therefore we shall expect, when we approach them properly (formally), to have complex and abstract systems but which will anyway entail the harmony of the Begriffsraum and therefore still appear to us as perfectly rational. It should now be clear how such a theological background entails both realism and rationalism. The following passage shows particularly well the vicinity of the Gödelian and the Plotinian methodology<sup>12</sup>.

I am under the impression that after sufficient clarification of the concepts in question it will be possible to conduct these discussions with mathematical rigour and that the result will then be... that the Platonistic view is the only one tenable.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup>[plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ludwig-feuerbach), Ch.4

<sup>10</sup>One may here well remember the distinction between realism and materialism, which, in this context are clearly antithetical. Realism consists in claiming that all that happens (or is) takes place (or exists) independently from finite minds. Materialism, on the other side, claims that all that exists takes place in a material (or actual) world that we can practically conceive.

<sup>11</sup>Such a belief in Gödel will, in a later period of his life, change dramatically in favour of phenomenology and the influences by Husserl, for more read [plato.stanford.edu/entries/goedel/goedel-phenomenology.html](https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/goedel/goedel-phenomenology.html) or my already quoted essay *An Historical Discourse on Phenomenological Platonism*.

<sup>12</sup>One could truly believe that the following passage has been written by Plotin himself; with Plotinian methodology I am here referring to the well-known Plotinian  $\delta\iota\omega\lambda\epsilon\kappa\tau\iota\kappa\eta\ \tau\acute{\epsilon}\chi\eta\eta$ .

<sup>13</sup>1995, *Collected Works. III: Unpublished essays and lectures*, S. Feferman, J. Dawson, S. Kleene, G. Moore, R. Solovay, and J. van Heijenoort (eds.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.322

## 2.3 The Negative Logical Standpoint

After having seen what I denote with positive theology and the influences that the Plotinian  $\xi v$  had one has already a well-formed context in which negative theology fits and therefore it happens to be already negatively well described.

I want anyway to present this standpoint in a particular manner, namely giving a mathematical interpretation to the platonic view on the  $\xi v$ . A well known and simple mathematical structure are the orderings by inclusion, they consist in sets and we say that  $x \subseteq y$  iff.  $x$  is a subset of  $y$ . In the platonic system one can say that a property  $p$  entails a property  $q$  iff. every object that has  $p$  must also have  $q$ <sup>14</sup>; in this way we get, similarly as with sets, an ordering. We shall then define the  $\xi v$  as being that property  $\epsilon$  such that:  $\forall_x x \subseteq \epsilon$ , namely the property including all other properties (and therefore all the negations too) and we can define  $\xi v \alpha$  as the property  $\beta$  s.t.  $\forall_x \beta \subseteq x$ . Such a (inconsistent) theory gives us formal representation of the platonic system and shows why nothing on  $\xi v$  can be said; my claim is that such methods could be better applied in order to obtain a well understandable model that could be defended in modern debates.

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<sup>14</sup>Such a conception would incur in the famous Russell Paradox which brings to the distinction between *sets* and *classes*. This is one of the many formal problems one gets while formalising such structures, though, for the moment they can be ignored.