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THE BIO-THEO-POLITICAL PARADIGM OF AUTARCHY AND THE PARADOXICAL LIVING GOD¹

El paradigma bio-teo-político de la autarquía y la paradoja del Dios viviente

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Abstract

In the Western tradition, life has been defined within the idea of reflexivity and unity. These two features of life are intertwined in what I call the Bio-Theo-Political Paradigm of autarchy, in which living beings are defined primarily as self-sufficient entities. The perfect living being, thus, will be the most autarchic, one that can achieve perfect unity within its own self-referred dynamics. This perfect living being is God, and Western theology (both Greek and Christian) conceptualized God as “thought of thought”, for only the intellect can achieve a pure reflexive unity. However, Plotinus and Jean-Paul Sartre (two very different philosophers, coming from very different traditions and in very different contexts) showed the difficulties of such a definition of God. This paper aims at problematizing the Bio-Theo-Political Paradigm of autarchy by showing its inconsistency when reaching the idea of a perfect living being. In doing so, a need to rethink life and God is fostered, a need that Christian Theology in particular should face in order to build a theology of a Trinitarian living God.

Keywords: Life; God; Jean-Paul Sartre; Plotinus; Autarchy; Bio-Theo-Political Paradigm.

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Resumen

En la tradición Occidental, la vida ha sido definida alrededor de las ideas de reflexividad y unidad. Estas dos características de la vida se encuentran entrelazadas en lo que denomino el paradigma bio-teo-político de la autarquía, en el cual los seres vivos se definen principalmente como entidades autosuficientes. Así, el ser vivo perfecto sería el más autárquico, aquel que pudiese obtener la unidad perfecta dentro de su propia dinámica autorreferencial. Este ser vivo perfecto es Dios. La teología Occidental (tanto griega como cristiana) ha conceptualizado a Dios como “pensamiento de pensamiento”, ya que solo el intelecto puede alcanzar una unidad reflexiva pura. Sin embargo, Plotino y Jean-Paul Sartre (dos filósofos con amplias diferencias, que vienen de tradiciones y contextos significativamente distintos) mostraron las dificultades de definir a Dios de esta manera. El artículo se propone problematizar el paradigma bio-teo-político de la autarquía al mostrar la inconsistencia que surge cuando considera la idea de un ser vivo perfecto. En este ejercicio, se promueve la necesidad de repensar la vida y a Dios, la cual debería ser abordada por la teología cristiana para desarrollar una teología de un Dios trino viviente.

Palabras clave: Vida; Dios; Plotino; Jean-Paul Sartre; Autarquía; Paradigma bio-teo-político.

The Bio-Theo-Political paradigm of Autarchy

If we are talking about life and living beings within our Western tradition, we will find that a certain *scale* is built between the different kinds of living beings according to the idea of autarchy or self-sufficiency. In the biological discourse, one could easily detect this *scala naturae* not only in the humanist scheme of Classic Philosophy, where human beings are at the top of the scale because they own themselves and their dynamism more than the other living beings, but even, for example, in Claude Bernards' physiology, where the perfection of organisms is based in their autonomy and their freedom concerning the external medium (Cooper, 2008: 421-422). In the political, the Polis (City-State) represented the ultimate and perfect kind of association or community because of its autarchy (whereas the family, the Household and the villages are not yet self-sufficient) (*Politics*, 1252b 28-1253a 3). In the ethical, as well, to live a good life means to be free, to be autonomous, to need the least. The scale of the living was built, thus, upon the criteria of autonomy and reflexivity: vegetable life, animal life, rational life, are the three main stages on this analogical scale. Living beings participate in life the more they own themselves, the more they relate to themselves. The importance of the “self” is grounding every discourse we have on life, from biology to ethics, from politics to theology. Hence, I call our Western understanding of life the *Bio-Theo-Political paradigm of Autarchy*, for the *self* is the principle of life, and what defines all the living activities as such.³ The perfect living being will be, therefore, the one whose reflexivity and autonomy are mostly achieved. In

3 I have published four papers this far on the examination and deconstruction of this paradigm (2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2020).

other words, the perfect living being would be the one that is both inalterable and impassible, for it does not change nor it is changed by anything else, for it does not need nothing but itself to be alive. I intend to show in this paper the difficulties of such an understanding of life, not only concerning the privilege given to reflexivity over relationality with others, but mainly concerning the internal contradictions that this paradigm leads to, contradictions that will be shown explicitly when considering God as a living being. My ultimate goal is to deconstruct this whole paradigm of autarchy to enable another understanding of life, a more relational one, one in which otherness is not a problem to be solved, but the key to comprehend living beings and their dynamics. Of course, this paper is just a little piece in this project.

If there is a *perfect living being*, certainly we are not going to find it in our world, nor in our natural discourses on living entities. However, the figure of a perfect living being is of the most importance to our Western tradition and it is to be found in the grounding discourses of theology and metaphysics. The theological discourse shows how deep our understanding of life depends on the idea of “self” by characterizing God as the “perfect living being” and, thus, how life should look like in ideal terms. If Theology is the *archaeological discourse* where the World-View is constructed analogically, then it bears the key to the paradigm in which we are living. In this paper, I will argue only from the connection between the theological discourse and the biological and psychological discourse, leaving aside the connections between theology and politics and ethics (which are also bounded by the common idea of life). Concerning the life of God, one should notice that the definition of life by using the reflexive prefix “autos” (that is, chiefly, living being as *self-moved entities*) shows here its paradoxical situation. For, if there is a *self*, there is reflexivity, that is, division, separation, a *hiatus*, within the living itself, and therefore unity is never really achieved. God would express this paradoxical situation, for, as a living being, is self-related and, thus, unable to be One, actually. This theological tension is already at the very beginning of Western Philosophy and Theology, and the basic formula behind it is Parmenides’ identity between thinking (*nóein*) and being (*einai*). The only living activity that can perform unity is the intellectual act, for only intelligence performs the identity between the act of knowing and the object known. But this is only the case when the objects of thought are not really different from the act of thinking them. In Aristotle’s Theology (that is, “First Philosophy” or “Metaphysics”), to achieve this unity is only possible for God, since only He is purely *reflexive*, that is, if His acts absolutely coincide with its objects, that is, absolute unity is achieved because in God the object of knowing and the act of knowing are ultimately identical. Therefore, Aristotelian God is identified with Intelligence (*Nous*); that is, with the perfect operation of the perfect principle that starts and finishes in its own perfection, as “thought of thought” (*noéseos nóesis*). God must only be considered to have no composition, to be simple, to have no commerce with matter (since, ultimately, every composition implies matter, as only what can be dispersed can be *com-pound*). God is, thus, an “Eternal and Perfect Living Being” (*ton theón einai tzoón aidion áriston*), and this eternity and perfection are due to its simplicity, to its absolute Autarchy, to its lack of dependence to any *Other*, to its *Impassibility* (*apathés*) and *Inalterability* (*analloíoton*) (*Metaphysics* 1072b 20-30). The unity of the Intellect is achieved due to its absolute reflexivity, to its sole relationship to itself.

This argument is also to be found in Christian Theology, for instance in a major figure of *Classic Theism* such as Thomas Aquinas. It is quite interesting that Thomas Aquinas deals with God’s Life in the First Part of his *Summa Theologiae*, in the treatise on “The One God”, something hermeneutically important to understand how Greek metaphysics were so deeply rooted in Christian theology, whose God was not just “One”, but “Triune”: we will find in XXth century’s theology -mainly through the work of Karl

Rahner- a Trinitarian *renaissance* that will put into question this subordination of Trinity to Unity.⁴ That the life of God is a question within the first part of the *Summa* on the “One God” shows how intimately the category of unity is bounded to the idea of life. In fact, the question of the life of God is almost in the middle of this first part of Thomas’ *Summa*, coming after God’s Simplicity, Perfection, Goodness, Infinity, Omnipresence, Immutability, Eternity, Unity and Knowledge; and before the part devoted to his Will, his Love, his Justice, his Providence and his Beatitude. We do not consider this organization to be random, for, ultimately, God’s Life is defined by his identification with Intelligence, and every other aspect concerning his Will is subordinated to *Nous*. We must remember that in Thomas’ philosophical system will is like a vicar of intelligence, since it is intelligence that sets and defines what shall be done (there is an anthropological and, more importantly, an ethical concern behind the theological systems). God’s life is a rational or intellectual life, and Thomas Aquinas summarizes the Platonic and Aristotelian Tradition in his *Summa Theologiae*. Following Aristotle’s conception of life, Thomas states that all living beings are characterized by their capacity to move by themselves (*S. Th.*, I, q. 18, a. 1), and that Life is the substance of the living, and not merely an *accidental* property (*S. Th.* I, q. 18, a. 2). God, in this sense of living, is not only alive, but it is the one that has the highest degree of life (*vita maxime priore in Deo est*), for if Living is defined by the capacity to move itself with no need of an-other (*cum vivere dicantur aliqua secundum quod operantur ex seipsis, et non quasi ab aliis mota*), then the most perfect living being would be the one that is ultimately independent (I. q. 18, a. 3). After considering all types of living beings, Thomas concludes that it is intellectual life the one that needs the least from others, since vegetative and sensitive living activities are bound to their objects. However, even intellectual life, as found in humans, has a need for an object to realize its capacity. God would be the only living being whose capacity is neither oriented nor determined by any other, but only by his being itself. This is why God has life in an eminent sense, in the highest degree, and, therefore, has Perfect and Eternal Life, always in Act, for his Intellect is a Perfect one, as Aristotle stated.⁵ Everything in God is alive, for his life is identified with his intellect, and, in God, his thinking and the object of his thinking are the same thing: all of his ideas, by which every being is created, are God himself. In other words, there is no Other with respect to God, for every

4 See: Rikhof, Herwi (2009). I am not able to show in this paper the ways in which the Bio-theo-political paradigm of autarchy is still operating in Trinitarian theology. I have published a paper on one of the most important systematic theologians of the XXth century, Jürgen Moltmann, who -although he constructed his theology on the importance of Trinity- is dependent of the paradigm of autarchy when defining God’s life (see: Grassi, 2018b). How dependent Christian theology is on Greek metaphysics is still a disputable topic in contemporary theology, and I will not address this question in this paper, for it exceeds the scope of my argument.

5 “Unde, licet quantum ad aliquid moveat se, tamen oportet quod quantum ad aliqua ab alio moveatur. Illud igitur cuius sua natura est ipsum eius intelligere, et cui id quod naturaliter habet, non determinatur ab alio, hoc est obtinet summum gradum vitae. Tale autem est Deus. Unde Philosophus, in XII *Metaphysica*, ostenso quod Deus sit intelligens, concludit quod habeat vitam perfectissimam et sempiternam: quia intellectus eius est perfectissimus, et semper in actu” (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 18, a. 3).

other being lives in his Life as the Platonic Ideas in which they *participate*.⁶ God's life, then, is absolute; it is not bound to anything but Himself: God *is* Autarchy.⁷

Plotinus: Unity and perfection, beyond life and Intellect

Simplicity and absolute unity are in God, however, still in question within these theological schemes, since every living activity is essentially defined by this *reflexive duality*. In very different philosophical and theological directions (one being mystical-cosmological, the other being atheist), both Plotinus and Jean-Paul Sartre seem to agree in the impossibility to consider God as being alive: *God is either One or None*. For Plotinus, Unity was the ultimate metaphysical category, and the ontological scale was built upon the idea of "One". Matter itself is non-being, for it is pure plurality and chaos; material objects can be divided endlessly, and their unity is just very fragile; living beings achieve unity by their soul, but they are pierced by instincts and desires, and their unity is always to be conquered; rational and intelligent beings achieve unity most successfully, but are still defined by division, for the act of knowing entails both an intelligence and something intelligible, that is, a mind and an idea. Therefore, for Plotinus, the Divine (God) could not be a living being, not even the Aristotelian *Noéseos nóesis*: God is the One, beyond both being and thinking (*epekeina tes ousías*). It is interesting to notice how Aristotle's definition of the Divine as Intelligence was at the heart of later Platonism and middle Neo-Platonism, and how there was a need to surpass an *aporia* within this very scheme. For, not only Intelligence is already intentional, in the sense that it aims at something else than itself (it supposes an object for its activity), and therefore is not One, but also Intelligence faces a plurality of ideas, and, thus, its unity is even more contested by the necessary multiplicity of its objects. Numenius was one of the first and more prominent philosophers that aimed at solving this *aporia* by distinguishing two kinds of Gods, one completely motionless (*otiotius*) and the other that was in charge of the organization of the world (Michalewski, 2012: 32). There are two different kinds of intelligence, one that is said only about the Godhead, and the other that is also divine, but only in an inferior degree.⁸ Taking over the Platonic cosmological and theological scheme of the *Timaeus* and

6 "[V]ivere Dei est eius intelligere. In Deo autem est idem intellectus, et quod intelligitur, et ipsum intelligere eius. Unde quidquid est in Deo ut intellectum, est ipsum vivere vel vita eius. Unde, cum omnia quae facta sunt a Deo, sint in ipso ut intellecta, sequitur quod omnia in ipso sunt ipsa vita divina" (*Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 18, a. 4). In a late work, the *Compendium theologiae* (chapter XXXV), Thomas Aquinas even states that the etymology of the Greek word for God (*théos*) can be traced to the Greek word meaning "to see" or "to consider"; therefore, God identifies itself with Intelligence in his very nature.

7 The case of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel is also quite interesting to examine, for one could find a kind of *inversion* of this same equation: the Divine is not "Thought of Thought", but the "Absolute Knowledge", which entails that God's unity is not defined by the subjective act of knowing, but by the objective final synthesis of its Object, the Idea.

8 «La théologie de Numénios, tout comme celle de Plotin, repose sur trois principes divins: le premier dieu, simple, totalement centré sur sa propre activité, fait advenir spontanément et sans rien perdre sa perfection, une image de lui-même, un second dieu. Celui-ci, à la différence de son principe, est marqué par la division: tourné vers le premier dieu, il pense éternellement les Idées, mais il est également attiré par la matière qu'il s'emploie à soumettre à la rationalité intelligible. Cette tension en direction du sensible divise le second principe en deux divinités: l'intellect pensant et le demiurge en contact avec la matière. Le premier principe, simple et solitaire, est au sommet de la hiérarchie ontologique et n'a aucun souci de l'organisation du monde sensible» (Michalewski, 2012: 29-30).

Aristotle's metaphysical theology, the Godhead achieves absolute unity in being thought of thought, whereas the divine principle of the cosmos contains an internal division in itself, for He intellects a plurality of Ideas which are the models for the generation and organization of the world. Whereas the Godhead is the Principle and King of the World and does not move in any way because of its essential and perfect unity, the "divine maker of the World" (*demiourgós*) is already getting closer to the sensible world because of its internal multiplicity.⁹ If we stick to the question of the Godhead in itself, without entering the problem of the World and how a multiplicity is born out of unity (the main question in Platonic and neo-Platonic cosmologies), there is a need in middle-Platonism to distinguish between a Perfect Intelligence (the Platonic Idea of the Good, that is, the Godhead) and an inferior Intelligent divine being (the Platonic figure of the world-maker, or *demiourgós*). Numenius is aware of this need that is at the heart of his theology and his idea of the Principle.¹⁰ However, Plotinus -heavily influenced by Numenius-, contested this scheme in the name of Unity and of the transcendence of the Godhead, for the analogical procedure in middle-Platonism is still too strong, and God's Unity is still dependent on the pair Being-Intelligence that is connected to the worldly essence.¹¹ As Michalewski argues, the unity of the First is not the same in Plotinus and in Numenius: whereas for the latter, the unity of the first principle is the unity of different elements, being and thought, although achieving an ultimate identity, for Plotinus, the unity of the First is that of the very indifference of an absolute, supra-essential simplicity, that lacks any determination whatsoever (2012: 38).¹² The One is before every-thing and ever-body, even before the Intellect, and, thus, it is beyond *stasis*,

9 «Le premier dieu est exempt de toutes les tâches et il est le Roi, tandis que le dieu démiurge règne en parcourant le ciel» (Numénios, fragment 12, 2-4; quoted in Michalewski, 2012: 34).

10 «Le premier dieu contient dans l'unité de sa *phronesis* ce que le second intellect déploie et divise dans l'acte de penser (*noein*) qui le caractérise. La simplicité du Premier n'exclut pas l'identité de l'être et de la pensée, elle exclut la possibilité que l'être se scinde ou se divise, comme le fait le second intellect. Le premier dieu est le plus haut point d'unité entre l'*ousía* et la pensée, si bien que même l'écart réflexif est impossible, délégué au second intellect. Au sein du premier dieu, il y a un contact immédiat, direct, sans faille, entre l'être, totalement concentré en lui-même et l'intellect qui l'apprehende dans son unité. Ce contact est caractérisé par Numénios comme 'immobilité' (*hestekòs éstai*), mais cette immobilité peut aussi être comprise comme 'un mouvement inné, d'où procèdent l'ordre du monde, sa manence éternelle'. L'intellection proprement dite n'apparaît qu'au niveau du second intellect que le premier 'utilise' pour penser. Le fragment 22 présente en effet la relation des trois dieux comme régie par une *proskhresis*, une 'utilisation' du principe inférieur par le principe supérieur» (Michalewski, 2012: 36). «La *phronesis* du premier dieu est une réalité qui permet au second intellect de se constituer comme intellect conscient de lui-même et réflexif. Avec la naissance du second intellect, 'image' du premier, apparaît aussi la multiplicité des Formes, un second niveau d'*ousía*, image de l'unité du Premier» (Michalewski, 2012: 37).

11 «Il y a un *analogon*, un rapport de proportion, entre chaque niveau principal. Ces différents niveaux peuvent apparaître comme différentes manifestations plus ou moins unifiées d'une seule et même divinité. (...) Le premier principe de Numénios n'est pas *totaliter alius*. Il est un intellect et un être, plus unifié que le second dieu, lui aussi intellect et être. Or, ce principe de continuité en vertu duquel le second intellect est une image du premier dieu, qui est l'unité de l'être et de la pensée, pourrait mener à une régression infinie. En effet, pourquoi ne pas fonder l'unité du Premier dans une unité encore supérieure? Cette fidélité à l'héritage aristotélicien, selon lequel l'unité parfaite du dieu est celle d'un intellect, impose une sorte d'*anangké stenai*. Dès lors que le fondement est plus parfait (ou plus unifié), mais toujours de même nature, que ce qu'il fonde, ce genre de problème logique ne manque pas de réapparaître. C'est précisément à ce type d'insuffisance théorique que la pensée plotinienne du premier Principe se propose d'apporter une réponse» (Michalewski, 2012: 37).

12 L'Un n'est rien d'autre que la condition de possibilité infiniment puissante de faire advenir l'être. Plutôt que de chercher à faire coïncider l'unité du Premier avec la multiplicité inévitable que comportent les notions d'être et de pensée, Plotin ôte au Premier toute détermination. La simplicité du Premier vient de ce qu'il n'est, à strictement parler, rien – rien

even that perfect identity within duality attributed to the *First* by Numenius (Michalewski, 2012: 39). Plotinus both criticizes Aristotle's and Peripatetic's cosmological theology, concerning their idea of a First Mover (*Enneads*, V.1.19), and their metaphysical theology, in which Aristotle argued for the simplicity of God as the outcome of God's identity between Being and Intellect (*Enneads*, V.3.12). Plotinus considers that the Intellect is in itself multiple and, therefore, cannot be the First Principle:

And it is clear also from the following that intellect cannot be the first (*prótera*): it is necessary that intellect exists in its thinking (*tòn noûn en tõi noeîn eînai*), and that the best intellect, the one which does not look outside itself, thinks what is before it; for in turning to itself it turns to its principle. And if intellect itself is what thinks (*nooûn*) and what is thought (*nooûmenon*), it will be double (*diploûs*) and not single (*haploûs*) and so not the one (*tò hén*); but if it looks to another, it must certainly be to that which is better than it and before it. But if it looks both to itself and to what is better than it, in this way also it is second. And one must suppose that intellect is of such a kind that it is present to the good and the first and looks to him, but is also present with itself and thinks itself, and thinks itself as being all things. It is far, then, from being the one since it is richly various. The one then cannot be all things, for so it would be no longer one; and it cannot be intellect, for in this way it would be all things since intellect is all things; and it cannot be being; for being is all things (*Enneads*, VI.9.2, 30-47).¹³

The Intellect is multiple in two main aspects: on the one hand, Ideas are the object of the Intellect, and as everything participates in the Ideas, the Intellect is, somehow, everything; thus, being everything, the Intellect is in itself multiple. On the other hand, even in a deeper level (which eludes the possibility of conceptualizing a First Intellect as simple, and the *Second Intellect* as multiple, as Numenius argued), the Intellect is, by definition, an intentional operation, and as such entails the difference between the activity of thinking (*nóesis*) and the object of its thinking (*noéma*). Although the Intellect, as every other vital activity, is reflexive and immanent, for it refers to itself referring to others, its reflexivity is already pierced by duality. If God is the ultimate and first principle, then it cannot be the Intellect, for the criterion of the analogy between everything, what makes everything be every-thing is unity, not duality (*Enneads*, VI.9.1). As much something achieves unity in itself, the higher degree of being it will have: "for the things which are said to be one each is one in the way in which it also has what it is, so that the things which are less beings have the one less, and those which are more beings, more" (VI.9.1, 25-30). The ontological scale is, thus, construed in the name of the One. The First principle of reality is the One, and as such, no-thing can be really said about it: it is beyond being and beyond intellect, it is beyond every ontic category, such as place, movement, and even rest (*prò stáseos*).¹⁴ Moreover, being absolutely self-sufficient, it is beyond

de ce qu'il engendre et qui dérive de lui. Parce qu'elle est générative, la nature du Premier est nécessairement autre que tout ce qu'elle engendre» (Michalewski, 2012: 41).

13 See also: "If, then, Intellect is Intellect because it is multiple, and thinking itself, even if it derives from Intellect, is a kind of internal occurrence which makes it many, that which is absolutely simple and first of all things must be beyond Intellect. And certainly if it is going to think, it will not be beyond Intellect, but will be Intellect; but if it is Intellect, it itself will be multiplicity (*auto tò plêthos éstai*)" (*Enneads*, V.3.11, 25-30).

14 "For since the nature of the One is generative of all things it is not any one of them. It is not therefore something or qualified or quantitative or intellect or soul; it is not in movement or at rest, not in place, not in time, but 'itself by itself of single form', or rather formless, being before all form, before movement (*prò kinéseos*) and before rest (*prò stáseos*); for these pertain to being and are what make it many. Why, then, if it is not in movement is it not at rest? Because each or both of these must necessarily pertain to being, and what is at rest is so by rest and is not the same as

self-sufficiency (*epékaina autarkeías*), for to be self-sufficient already entails the reflexive folding of the “self”.¹⁵ God is *in itself*, but that is also a way of speaking, for there is no such a thing as the self in the One: language is here the limit, and to refer to the One, as it is, in it-self, we already refer to It as self (in analogy with the known realities of this world).¹⁶ However, there is no “self” in the One, properly speaking, and the One does not only relate to others, but It is also not related to it-self, he is in no need of itself.¹⁷ Intellect, on the contrary, being “in-itself”, is already multiple, and its reflexive nature entails a necessary duality. In an extraordinary text, Plotinus makes it clear that there is at the heart of consciousness a division, even in attesting one’s own existence (preluding somehow all the complications of the Cartesian “ego cogito”):

“For, in general, thought seems to be an intimate consciousness of the whole when many parts come together in the same thing; [this is so] when a thing knows itself, which is knowing in the proper sense: each single part is just itself and seeks nothing; but if the thinking is of what is outside, the thoughts will be deficient, and not thought in the proper sense. But that which is altogether simple and self-sufficient (*tò pánte haploûn kai aútarkes*) needs nothing; but what is self-sufficient in the second degree (*tò deuteros aútarkes*), but needs itself (*deómenon de heautou*), this is what needs to think itself; and that which is deficient in relation to itself achieves self-sufficiency by being a whole, with an adequacy deriving from all its parts, intimately present to itself (*sunòn heautôi*) and inclining to itself (*eis hautò neûon*). For intimate self-consciousness (*synaísthesis*) is a consciousness (*aísthesis*) of something which is many; even the names

rest; so rest will be incidental to it and it will not be the same as rest. For to say that it is the cause is not to predicate something incidental of it but of us, because we have something from it while that One is in itself; but one who speaks precisely should not say ‘that’ or ‘is’; but we run round it outside, in a way, and want to explain our own experiences of it, sometimes near it and sometimes falling away in our perplexities (*aporíais*) about it” (*Enneads* VI, 9.3, 40-55)

- 15 “What then is better than the wisest life, without fault or mistake, and than Intellect, which contains all things, and than universal life and universal Intellect? If we say ‘that which made them’ – well, how did it make them? And, in case something better may appear, our train of thought will not go on to something else but will stop at Intellect. But there are many reasons for going higher, particularly the fact that the self-sufficiency (*aútarkes*) of Intellect which results from its being composed of all things is something which comes to it from outside: each of the things of which it is composed is obviously insufficient; and because each of them has participated in the absolute One and continues to participate in it, it is not the One itself. What then is that in which it participates, which makes it exist, and all things along with it? If it makes each individual thing exist, and it is by the presence of the One that the multitude of individual things in Intellect, and Intellect itself, is self-sufficient, it is clear that it, since it is the cause of existence and self-sufficiency, is not itself existence but beyond it and beyond self-sufficiency (*epékaina tautés [ousía] kai epékaina autarkeías*)” (Plotinus, *Enneads*, V.3.17, 1-15).
- 16 “The One, as it is beyond Intellect, so is beyond knowledge, and as it does not in any way need anything, so it does not even need knowing; but knowing has its place in the second nature. For knowing is one thing, but that is one with the thing; for if it is one thing it would not be the absolute One (*autoén*): for ‘absolute’ (*autò*) comes before ‘something (*ti*)’” (*Enneads* V.3.12, 48-53).
- 17 “But someone could also think of his oneness in terms of self-sufficiency (*tôi autárkei*). For since he is the most sufficient and independent of all things, he must also be the most without need; but everything which is many is also in need unless it becomes one from many. Therefore its substance needs to be one. But the One does not need itself: for it is itself. Certainly anything which is many needs all the things which it is, and each of the things in it, since it is with the others and not by itself, and exists in need of the others, makes a thing like this needy both in each single part and as a whole. Given, then, that there must be something supremely self-sufficient, it must be the One, which is the only thing of such a kind as not to be in need either in relation to itself or to anything else (*mête pròs hautò mête pròs állo endeés einai*). For it does not seek anything for its being or for its well-being, or its establishment in its place” (*Enneads* VI.9.6, 15-25).

bear witness to this [reference to the word: *syn –aísthesis* (note of Armstrong)]. And thinking, which is prior, turns inward to Intellect which is obviously multiple; for even if it only says this, ‘I am existent’, it says it as a discovery, and says it plausibly, for existence is multiple: since if it is concentrated its gaze on itself as something simple and said ‘I am existent’, it would not attain either itself or existence. For it does not mean something like a stone by existence, when it is speaking the truth but says many things in one word. For this being –which is meant to be real being and not what has a trace of being, which would not even be called being because of this trace, but is as image to archetype – contains many things. Well, then, will not each of these many things be thought? Now if you want to grasp the ‘isolated and alone’ (*éremón kai mónon*), you will not think; but absolute being is multiple in itself, and if you speak of something else, being contains it. But if this is so, if anything is the simplest of all, it will not possess thought of itself: for if it is to possess it, it will possess it by being multiple. It is not therefore thought, nor is there any thinking about it” (*Enneads*, V.3.13, 13-37).

As the Principle of all things, the One is the principle of their unity, for only as far as they *are one*, they *are*. The unity is performed by the Intellect in the highest degree as possible, but only because it founds in itself and imitates its Origin, the One:¹⁸ everything else is below this degree and matter itself is itself pure potency in the sense of pure dispersion and lack of unity; in this regard, matter as such (*prote hyle*, in the Aristotelian sense) is non-being (*me ón*) (*Enneads*, II.4). It is pure power, the power of everything (*dynamis pánton*), not in the sense of the matter that can receive any form whatsoever (pure potency), but, on the contrary, the power that makes everything come to be.¹⁹ The One does not give anything nor causes anything: the gift of the One is to invite everything else to imitate Him and to achieve unity and

18 “Now what comes from him could not be the same as himself. If then it is not the same, it cannot of course be better: for what could be better than the One or in any way transcend him? It must then be worse; and this means more deficient. When then is more than the One? That which is not one; it is therefore many; but all the same it aspires to the One: so it is a one-many (*hèn pollá*). For all that is not one is kept in being by the one, and is what it is by this ‘one’: for if it had not become one, even though it is composed of many parts, it is not yet what one would call ‘itself’ (*tis autó*). And if it is possible to say of each individual part what it is, one says it because each of them is one and it is because of this very fact. But that which does not already have many parts in itself is not one by participation in the One, but is the One itself, not the ‘one’ predicated of something else because it is this One from which, somehow, the others derive their oneness, some [in a greater degree] because they are near and others [in a lesser degree] because they are far away. For that which comes immediately after it because its multiplicity is a one-everywhere; for although it is a multiplicity it is at the same time identical with itself and there is no way in which you could divide it, because ‘all things are together’; for each of the things also which come from it, as long as it participates in life, is a one-many: for it cannot reveal itself as a one-all. But [Intellect] does reveal itself as a one-all, because it comes after the origin; for its origin is really one and truly one. But that which comes after the origin is, somehow, under the pressure of the One, all things by its participation in the One, and each and every part of it is both all and one” (*Enneads*, V.3.15, 15-30).

19 «Le terme ‘Un’ n’est qu’une appellation de convention pour désigner le premier principe: ce qu’il faut avoir à l’esprit en évoquant ce terme, ce n’est pas tant son ‘unité’, que la simplicité primitive qui est à la sienne, la simplicité d’une puissance infiniment indéterminée. L’Un est comme la condition d’apparition, la source de l’être. Il est un abîme de puissance, une origine simple mais dont tout jaillit, tout surgit, spontanément, parce que sa puissance infinie ne peut rester stérile, sans rien engendrer après elle. (...) La puissance de l’Un, réfléchie en elle-même, forme une vie éternelle, celle de l’Intellect qui possède dans la plénitude de son acte la totalité des Formes intelligibles. La position de l’Un, radicalement au-delà de l’être, permet, pour ainsi dire, de justifier la perfection de l’être: l’être est parfait parce qu’il est auto-constituant et porte en lui sa propre raison d’être, imitant ainsi autant qu’il est possible son principe» (Michalewski, 2012: 46). See, also: Zamora Calvo, 2016.

self-sufficiency.²⁰ Concerning human, ethical life, therefore, in order to be one-self, one must be One, one must achieve absolute unity in the very losing of the Self, in the mystic road that is reserved for the wise and god-like life of the initiated: “This is the life of gods and of god like and blessed men, deliverance from the things of this world, a life which takes no delight in the things of this world, escapes in solitude to the solitary (*phugè mónou pros mónon*)” (VI.9.11, 49-51).²¹

The impossible idea of a God: Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of a perfect living being

The critique of the idea of the Absolute being a Thought, the Principle of reality being in itself an Intelligence, is not only to be found in Plotinus. Of course, the history of the critique of the idea of God is quite complex and long, and knows many different approaches: coming from the naturalistic World-view, where the hypothesis “God” is rendered useless; or claimed in the name of freedom, where God is seen just as the limitation of our essential power to self-determine; or also coming from denouncing the presence of evil in the world and in history; but also coming from the mistake of making of God one more object or kind of being within the *logique* of the world (what is called the onto-theological scheme). Interestingly enough, one could find many ways to discard God's existence in the name of all of these problems; however, it is also the case that the very idea of God (let us say, to be precise, the idea of a Judeo-Christian God) is put into question because of its very definition. Coming both from Hegel's dialectic idealism and from Heidegger's “existentialist” phenomenology, Jean-Paul Sartre claimed that the very idea of God is contradictory, for it refers to a “perfect conscious being”. To understand this claim, one must look at Sartre's basic ontology, which classifies “Being” into three categories: being-in-itself (*être en soi*), being-for-itself (*être pour soi*), being-for-another (*être pour autre*). Pure material objects, *things*, are just beings, without any reflexive relationship to themselves. Things are: they are always the same, they are identical to themselves; thus, they do not have any time at all, they do not change, they do not move towards a future. *Things* conform the realm of pure *facticity*, of what it is there. However, the realm of consciousness is defined by reflexivity, that is, by being referred to itself, and this reference to itself is characterized in the negative way of *lacking*.²² “The existence of desire as a human fact is sufficient to prove that human reality is a lack” (Sartre, 1956: 87). What defines consciousness is not just *Being*, but also

20 «L'originalité de Plotin par rapport à la tradition dont il hérite se manifeste dans le fait que l'Un donne à ce qui dérive de lui la puissance de s'auto-réaliser et de suffire à soi. Il communique à son produit le désir de se convertir vers lui et d'être ainsi une réalité parfaite et éternelle» (Michalewski, 2012: 43).

21 Interestingly, the analogical structure of reality in the name of unity and the One was also taken by the French phenomenologist, Henri Duméry, who, influenced by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Blondel, took the spiritualist philosophy of Plotinus to describe the dynamism of the spiritual life (Mc Cool, 1969). For Duméry, the Husserlian “reductions” (*epoché*) are not enough: intentionality is based upon the duality between thinking (*noésis*) and thought (*noéma*), but intentionality itself rests in the exigence of unity. Thus, the ultimate and deeper epoché is that which connects with the Principle of our intentional activities, that is God, the One. This *epoché* Duméry calls it the “henological reduction” (Duméry, 1957).

22 “Of all internal negations, the one which penetrates most deeply into being, the one which constitutes in its being the being concerning which it makes the denial along with the being which it denies -this negation is lack. This lack does not belong to the nature of the in-itself, which is all positivity. It appears in the world only with the upsurge of human reality” (Sartre, 1956: 86).

Nothingness, because reflexivity, to be referred to oneself, entails a difference within one's own being. Even more, the nature of this nothingness is a reflexive negation, for it introduces nothingness by negating the identity between the *for-itself* with the *in-itself*: it is a nihilation of the in-itself by the for-itself in order to avoid becoming an object or thing.²³ Thus, existence (something that is properly claimed of human beings, that is, of conscious beings) entails time, for identity is forever deferred, never actually achieved. This nothingness grounds freedom, for human beings are not just what they are, but they are what they are not, and what they choose and not choose what to be. This is what Sartre means when he famously claimed in his little treatise that in the case of human beings, "existence precedes essence (*l'existence précède l'essence*)" (Sartre, 1996), for the definition (identity) of men is not given, but performed freely. In few words, "what the for-itself lacks is the self-or itself as in-itself" (Sartre, 1956: 89).²⁴ In the case of existence, that is, the way human beings are, they are both conscious and have a body: therefore, they are referred to themselves and also referred to the others, for their bodies expose them to the look of the other, and therefore to exist is both to be factual and to be conscious.²⁵

Human existence is, thus, defined by its need to surpass the internal *hiatus* between the in-itself and the for-itself. In this need, however, human beings are condemned to failure, because the for-itself or consciousness is but the annihilation of the in-itself. Even more, human existence is itself a failure, and failure is the very trace of its unsurpassable inner division.²⁶ "Human reality is a perpetual surpassing toward a coincidence with itself which is never given" (Sartre, 1956: 89). Human beings aim at surpassing their lack by achieving a *totality*, that is, being itself as being founded not just by nothingness (as with the

23 "The for-itself can not sustain nihilation without determining itself as a lack of being. This means that the nihilation does not coincide with a simple introduction of emptiness into consciousness. An external being has not expelled the in-itself from consciousness; rather the for-itself is perpetually determining itself not to be the in-itself. This means that it can establish itself only in terms of the in-itself and against the in-itself. Thus since the nihilation is the nihilation of being, it represents the original connection between the being of the for-itself and the being of the in-itself. The concrete, real in-itself is wholly present to the heart of consciousness as that which consciousness determines itself not to be" (Sartre, 1956: 85).

24 "The for-itself, as the foundation of itself, is the upsurge of the negation. The for-itself founds itself in so far as it denies in relation to itself a certain being or a mode of being. What it denies or nihilates, as we know, is being-in-itself. But no matter what being-in-itself: human reality is before all else its own nothingness. What it denies or nihilates in relation to itself as for-itself can be only itself. The meaning of human reality as nihilated is constituted by this nihilation and this presence in it of what it nihilates; hence the self-as-being-in-itself is what human reality lacks and what makes meaning. Since human reality in its primitive relation to itself is not what it is, its relation to itself is not primitive and can derive its meaning only from an original relation which is the null relation or identity. It is the self which would be what it is which allows the for-itself to be apprehended as not being what it is; the relation denied in the definition of the for-itself -which as such should be first posited- is a relation (given as perpetually absent) between the for-itself and itself in the mode of identity. (...) What the for-itself lacks is the self-or itself as in-itself" (Sartre, 1956: 89).

25 It would be interesting to see how Sartre understands life as such, for if desire seems to play the main role concerning human existence, then one could easily transfer his arguments concerning consciousness to bare life.

26 "The for-itself in its being is failure because it is the foundation only of itself as nothingness. In truth this failure is its very being, but it has meaning only if the for-itself apprehends itself as failure in the presence of the being which it has failed to be; that is, of the being which would be the foundation of its being and no longer merely the foundation of its nothingness -or, to put it another way, which would be its foundation as coincidence with itself. (...) Such is the origin of transcendence. Human reality is its own surpassing towards what it lacks; it surpasses itself toward the particular being which it would be if it were what it is" (Sartre, 1956: 89). One could notice here the influence of Søren Kierkegaard, or even of Karl Jaspers, who thought of failure as the key *cipher* of existence and transcendence.

for-itself, who founds itself by a reflexive negation), but also being found in its *in-itself* (which is never founded in itself, but by another, for it is contingent and factual, given to a consciousness).²⁷ And, at the same time, this perfect being, this totality, cannot be just an in-itself, for to become a substance (a being *in-itself*) would entail the very death of the for-itself, its own annihilation.²⁸ The perfect being, the totality made up of the identity between the in-itself and the for-itself is that what is *lacked* in human existence, and is that which we long for at all times. However, this idea of perfect being is a *chimera*, a contradictory conceptual object,²⁹ although it has been objectified in the idea of God:

Let no one reproach us with capriciously inventing a being of this kind; when by a further movement of thought the being and absolute absence of this totality are hypostasized as transcendence beyond the world, it takes on the name of God. Is not God a being who is what he is -in that he is all positivity and the foundation of the world- and at the same time a being who is not what he is and who is what he is not -in that he is self-consciousness and the necessary foundation of himself? The being of human reality is suffering because it rises in being as perpetually haunted by a totality which it is without being able to be it, precisely because it could not attain the in-itself without losing itself as for-itself. Human reality therefore is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state (Sartre, 1956: 90).

In sum, taking the definition of God as being both perfect and reflexive, Sartre argues that this would mean that God is, at the same time, absolutely in itself (*en soi*) and also absolutely referred to itself (*pour soi*); therefore, the very idea of a perfect living-intelligent God is contradictory, for it would entail that God is absolutely defined by Being (perfection), but also defined by Nothingness (intelligence, consciousness). God is the Being that founds its own being (in-itself) by it-self (for-itself), that is, God is *Causa Sui*, that which is impossible. Again, *God is either One or None*. And this entail a more fundamental metaphysical and biological claim: human beings (we could even dare to say, living beings) are forever damned to persist in their inner division, in the inner and dialectical struggle of their own dynamics of life. To search for an ultimate conciliation and harmony with one-self is but a “useless passion”.³⁰

27 “Imperfect being surpass itself toward perfect being; the being which is the foundation only of its nothingness surpasses itself toward the being which is the foundation of its being. But the being toward which reality surpasses itself is not a transcendent God; it is at the heart of human reality; it is only human reality itself as totality” (Sartre, 1956: 89).

28 “This totality is not the pure and simple contingent in-itself of the transcendent. If what consciousness apprehends as the being toward which it surpasses itself were the pure in-itself, it would coincide with the annihilation of consciousness. But consciousness does not surpass itself toward its annihilation; it does not want to lose itself in the in-itself of identity at the limit of its surpassing. It is for the for-itself as such that the for-itself lays claim to being-in-itself” (Sartre, 1956: 90).

29 “Thus this perpetually absent being which haunts the for-itself is itself fixed in the in-itself. It is the impossible synthesis of the for-itself and the in-itself; it would be its own foundation not as nothingness but as being and would preserve within it the necessary translucency of consciousness along with the coincidence with itself of being-in-itself. It would preserve in it that turning back upon the self which conditions every necessity and every foundation. But this return to the self would be without distance; it would not be presence to itself, but identity with itself. In short, this being would be exactly the self which we have shown can exist only as a perpetually evanescent relation, but it would be this self as substantial being. Thus human reality arises as such in the presence of its own totality or self as a lack of that totality. And this totality can not be given by nature, since it combines in itself the incompatible characteristics of the in-itself and the for-itself” (Sartre, 1956: 90).

30 “Each human reality is at the same time a direct project to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-Itself and a project of the appropriation of the world as a totality of being-in-itself, in the form of a fundamental quality.

Conclusion

In this paper, I aim at showing how the definition of life within the paradigm of autarchy entails an unsurpassable paradox. If life is defined both by reflexivity and by unity, then the perfect life would entail an absolute identity with oneself, but an identity that is pierced by difference, by the *hiatus* that comes with the very idea of *selfhood*. This double need in the Western tradition to keep both unity and reflexivity found a key strategical argument in identifying the perfect life with the intellect, in which the act of knowing and its object are the same. The Aristotelian definition of God as “thought of thought” seemed to cope with this challenge of picturing and conceptualizing a perfect living being. The success of this strategy is clearly seen within the whole of our theological Western tradition. However, this strategy is still troublesome, and both Plotinus and Jean-Paul Sartre (coming from very different traditions and writing in very different contexts) showed the difficulties of such a theological scheme. Either God is One, or God is none: but in neither case, can God be a *living* being. This radical difficulty stems from the definition of life as autarchy, and if we are to think about God as a living being (and that is, for Christian Theology, one of its most important axioms: a Living and Loving God), then one should first deconstruct the Bio-Theo-Political paradigm of autarchy, and find new ways of understanding what life is. Let this paper be just one more attempt to show the need of this deconstruction, in the hope of new theological, biological and political paradigms to come, where life is not defined by its reflexivity and self-sufficiency, but by its relational nature, for life never happens in solitude. Christian Theology bears a critical conceptual tool to foster this new understanding in the dogma of Trinity, a dogma that pictures God not as a lonely and apathetic living being, but as being in itself a community of living *personae*. Thus, a Trinitarian theology -to be successful- should first deconstruct the basis of the understanding of God, which is to be found in the idea of life.

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Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *Ens causa sui*, which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion” (Sartre, 1956: 615).

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