

## Hermeneutic Tools in Approaching Maximus: Christos Yannaras' Ontology

YANNARAS' CRITICAL AND RELATIONAL ontology can be approached as an ontology implicitly based on Maximus' vocabulary and thought, as well as on his elaboration of the λόγος-τρόπος distinction, which is crucial for understanding the Confessor. With the hermeneutic aid of Yannaras' ontological proposal, his "toolbox" as it were, which I will present in the following sections, I will attempt to expound Maximus' theory of time as an alternative *paradigm* for understanding temporality. In doing this, I hope to present Maximus the Confessor as a thinker who is not merely of historical/philological interest, but as a philosopher who has a relevance reaching far beyond late antiquity and into modern times.

### Christos Yannaras as a Maximian Commentator

The "new era" in Greek theological and philosophical thought expressed through Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas (continued by a new generation of Orthodox theologians like Nicholas Loudovikos) bears the mark of Maximus the Confessor's thought most distinctively. Christos Yannaras' work is both explicitly and implicitly in constant dialogue with Maximus the Confessor's writings, as can be clearly seen in his magnum opus *Person and Eros*,<sup>1</sup> the German edition of which bears a subtitle that describes it

1. As an example of Yannaras' dependence on Maximus' thought, see *Person and Eros*, 194–99. His exposition of the iconizing principle ("iconic disclosure") for the whole of patristic thought is almost entirely based on Maximus' formulations, with the exception of a quote from the Areopagite writings. Yannaras finds in Maximus a most skilful recapitulator of the whole of the Greek patristic tradition in a language and thought consistently rich in philosophical value and fertility, and it is in this mind-set

most abundantly: *A Comparison of the Ontology of the Greek Fathers and the Existential Philosophy of the West*.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, it is no coincidence that both Christos Yannaras' philosophy and John Zizioulas' theology are heavily influenced by the Confessor: with the exception of the Cappadocians, no other church father's thought is so densely present and so often mentioned in their books as is Maximus.<sup>3</sup> One could maintain it is exactly Maximus' excellence in the philosophical recapitulation of Greek patristic thought up to his time and his aptness in formulating lucid definitions of most obscure and complicated notions that made this "new era" possible and gave a solid patristic grounding to it.<sup>4</sup> In that sense, and from a point of view focusing on the Christian theological side of Yannaras' work, one could read Yannaras and Zizioulas as a commentary on Maximus' work and an elucidation thereof, as has been recognized by many.<sup>5</sup>

For the purposes of this study, I will take the reverse route: instead of studying Maximus to understand Yannaras better, I will choose to study Yannaras in order to shed light on Maximus the Confessor's ontology, not as an artefact merely pertaining to the history of philosophy, to the "Museum of Philosophy," but as a proposed answer to the ontological problem and the question of philosophical cosmology.<sup>6</sup> The hermeneutic tools provided by the study of an ontology that is articulated in contemporary philosophical language while based on Maximus' thought itself (i.e., Yannaras' ontology)

that I am approaching Maximus as well.

2. Yannaras, *Person und Eros: eine Gegenüberstellung der Ontologie der griechischen Kirchenväter und der Existenzphilosophie des Westens*.

3. Cf. Russell, "Modern Greek Theologians and the Greek Fathers," 88: "Maximus was also one of the most philosophically informed of the church's ascetical teachers, who has contributed much to the expositions of relation and personhood by both Zizioulas and Yannaras."

4. In addressing the subject of patristic grounding, see Pui Him Ip's illuminating paper, "On the Patristic grounding of Yannaras' 'Prosopocentric Ontology', A Philosophical Argument," presented at the "Conference in Honour of Christos Yannaras, Philosophy, Theology, Culture," 2–5 September 2013, St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford; forthcoming.

5. Among others, see for Dionysios Skliris' paper, where he seems to have adopted a similar position, "The Use of the Term 'tropos' ('mode') by Christos Yannaras," presented at the "Conference in Honour of Christos Yannaras, Philosophy, Theology, Culture," 2–5 September 2013, St. Edmund's Hall, Oxford; forthcoming. There, Skliris attempts to shed light on Yannaras' use of the term "mode" through Maximus the Confessor's use of the same term, attesting the proximity of both philosophers' use of a certain terminology.

6. It is not the first time that such an approach is attempted at a scholarly level, as Kapsimalakou's above-mentioned thesis, "Ελευθερία και αναγκαιότητα," follows the same path, attesting the historical-philological and methodological legitimacy of such an approach, apart from its purely philosophical value.

will give me the opportunity to engage with the Confessor's ontology not in the philological manner of the history of philosophy, but with the mind-set, method, and goals of systematic philosophy.

## An Introduction to Christos Yannaras' Philosophy

Christos Yannaras, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at the Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences in Athens, Greece, has written extensively on ontology, epistemology, ethics, theology, and politics. He is considered to be "Greece's greatest contemporary thinker" (Olivier Clément) and "one of the most significant Christian philosophers in Europe" (Rowan Williams),<sup>7</sup> whereas Andrew Louth describes him as "without doubt the most important living Greek Orthodox theologian,"<sup>8</sup> albeit being quite controversial in Greece. Until recently,<sup>9</sup> the English-speaking reader could unfortunately acquire only a fragmentary view of Yannaras' work, as most English translations of his works have only been published in the last few years. And a number of Yannaras' books, covering important aspects of his thought or crucial elaborations, have not been translated as yet (for example, *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Linguistic Limits of Metaphysics*<sup>10</sup> and *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*). Fortunately, Norman Russell's arduous work in translating the main bulk of Yannaras' work has brought a significant number of his monographs to print, including his magnum opus *Person and Eros* and his comprehensive overview of philosophy in *The Schism in Philosophy*.

A second difficulty for the English-speaking researcher relates to the fact that most European and American academics who have studied Yannaras' work to date have been theologians and have tended to focus on its theological aspects, considering him exclusively a theologian rather than a philosopher as well. This has not allowed for his work to be judged as a *philosophical* proposal, even in a strictly academic sense and classification.

For the above reasons, I consider it useful to attempt a summary of his work from a primarily philosophical point of view. A simple categorization would be to classify his main works according to the branches of philosophy

7. See Rowan Williams' endorsement on the back cover of Yannaras' Holy Cross Press translations.

8. In his introduction to Yannaras' *On the Absence and Unknowability of God*, 1.

9. This is still the case now, but when this introduction was first written to be published as *Mitralaxis*, "Person, Eros, Critical Ontology" (on which it is based), fewer English translations of Yannaras' works had already been published (cf. my bibliography).

10. Yannaras, *Τὸ ρητὸ καὶ τὸ ἄρρητο*.

to which they pertain. Thus, one may classify the works *Person and Eros*, *Relational Ontology*, *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*, et al. under ontology/metaphysics, the works *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite*, *The Effable and the Ineffable: The Linguistic Limits of Metaphysics* under epistemology, and finally *The Freedom of Morality* under ethics. Other notable contributions include treatises on social philosophy (*Rationality and Social Practice*),<sup>11</sup> political economy (*The Real and the Imaginary in Political Economy*),<sup>12</sup> the relation between contemporary physics and philosophy (*Postmodern Metaphysics*), philosophy of religion,<sup>13</sup> and the historical background of the clash of civilizations.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, Yannaras himself has provided us with a much better approach than such a categorization. In his latest book in Greek under the title *Six Philosophical Paintings*<sup>15</sup>—which I would describe as a “philosophical autobiography”—he introduces us to his thought in a manner that reflects the whole spectrum of his contribution to philosophy. I shall attempt to present such a prioritization here by primarily referring to that particular book as encapsulating Yannaras’ most mature and recapitulatory thought, while considering other areas of his research—such as his political philosophy or his purely ecclesial writings—as a corollary of this main body of ideas.

### Apophaticism as the Epistemological Stance of the Greek Tradition

To approach Yannaras’ work we must first consider the importance and scope of the term “apophaticism” for him, which is exhaustively grounded in the Greek patristic corpus in both *On the Absence and Unknowability of God: Heidegger and the Areopagite* and *Person and Eros*. It is the Areopagite corpus and Maximus the Confessor’s works that provide Yannaras with the primary sources of the most explicit elucidations of apophaticism in the patristic tradition.

The term “apophaticism” is usually understood as a method to speak about God in theology, as the “via negativa,” that is to say by defining God not through the characteristics that God has, but through the characteristics that God *does not* have (*ineffable*, etc.). Yannaras, however, saw in apophaticism something immensely wider in importance, namely an epistemological

11. Yannaras, Ὁρθός λόγος.
12. Yannaras, *Πραγματικό και φαντασιώδες*.
13. Yannaras, *Against Religion*.
14. Yannaras, *Orthodoxy and the West*.
15. Yannaras, *Ἐξι φιλοσοφικές ζωγραφιές*.

tendency of the whole of the Hellenic/Greek civilization from the time of Heraclitus (with his famous quote, “for if we are in communion with each other, we are in truth, but if we exist privately, we are in error”)<sup>16</sup> to that of Gregory Palamas. As an overall *stance* and *attitude* towards the question of the nature of knowledge and truth, towards epistemology, and not as a *theory* on epistemology, explicit formulations concerning this apophatic *stance* can only be found in fragmentary form in the corpus of Greek texts and seldom as a systematic exposition. As is almost always the case with the epistemological attitude of a civilization, this attitude cannot but be *implicit*, as it is taken for granted in the context of that civilization itself.

According to Yannaras, apophaticism is the stance towards the verification of knowledge that underlies every facet of this civilization and can be defined as “the refusal to exhaust truth in its formulations, the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifier with the knowledge of the signified.”<sup>17</sup> Formulations of truth can only *refer* to the signified truth or knowledge, not exhaust it. By coming to know the formulations that refer to truth, one does not *know* truth—truth can only be lived, experienced, and as such it is not static. There is a gap of crucial cognitive importance between the signifier and its signified reality, as Maximus the Confessor asserts.<sup>18</sup>

In an apophatic epistemology, the individual cannot conceive truth individually as a finite formulation. Truth lies in the field of experience, and more specifically shared experience because “there is no relation that does not constitute an experience and there is no experience . . . not arising from a relation or establishing a relation. Moreover, relation is the foundational mode of the human logical subject: the way in which Man exists, knows, and is *known*.”<sup>19</sup>

Truth can only be attained through shared experience, communed experience, life in communion, and cannot be confined in finite formulations.<sup>20</sup> This excludes the possibility of *a priori* truths, prescribed doctrines and axiomatic theories.<sup>21</sup> Yannaras writes: “Prerequisite and criterion for

16. Diels-Kranz, *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Band I, 148, 28–30.

17. Yannaras, “Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίης, 32.

18. In speaking about truth, Maximus the Confessor stresses the need to understand—and apply—the difference between the signifiers (τῶν λεγομένων) and their signified realities (τὰ σημαίνόμενα), or else confusion will emerge, *D. Pyrrh.*, PG91 292BC: δεῖ, τὸν περὶ ἀληθείας λόγον ποιούμενον διαστελλεσθαι τῶν λεγομένων τὰ σημαίνόμενα, διὰ τὴν ἐκ τῆς ὁμωνυμίας πλάνην.

19. “Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίης, σ. 58.

20. Yannaras often reminds us Democritus’ example about the “bitter honey,” Diels-Kranz, II, 119, 22–26.

21. “Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίης, 26.

critical thinking (that is, thinking that strives to discern right from wrong, truth from falsehood) was the communal verification of knowledge.<sup>22</sup> According to him, “communed experience and not the accuracy of the individual’s intellectual faculty verifies knowledge, even if proper communion of experience presupposes the accuracy of intellectual faculties.”<sup>23</sup> The signifiers allow us “to share our common reference to reality and experience, but cannot replace the cognitive experience itself. This obvious difference can only then be understood when the criterion of the critical function is the communal verification of knowledge.”<sup>24</sup>

I must here note that Yannaras’ apophatic epistemology and the usual understanding of apophaticism (in the context of the study of religion and theology) as the *via negativa* that banishes knowledge to the realm of mysticism are not merely different, but can be seen as polar opposites of each other. The cataphatic approach (either to the understanding of God in theology or of *anything else* in general) would be to attribute characteristics to something and attest that these characteristics truly reflect the nature of their object or phenomenon. *Via negativa* is the choice of negative attributes or of non-attributes in our attempt to encircle reality and knowledge with our intellect. The *via negativa* consists in the attempt to progressively claim the knowledge of an object or phenomenon by *rejecting* certain characteristics or attributes, by defining it in terms of what it is *not*, in order to arrive at a closer intellectual understanding that excludes certain errors and misconceptions. In this context, true knowledge—and above all transcendental knowledge—can only be achieved in the realm of radical subjectivity, in the realm of “mysticism,” without any possibility of sharing it effectively through language and without any vital reference to the community that would exclude the transmutation of radical subjectivity into radical individualism. However, apophatic epistemology, i.e., the refusal to exhaust truth in its formulations and the refusal to identify the understanding of the signifier with the knowledge of its signified reality, lies beyond this polarization between cataphaticism and *via negativa* and beyond a choice of negations rather than affirmations: it is based on the symbolic character of every epistemic expression. Apophaticism sees language as *referring to* truth and reality, *signifying* reality and *iconizing* it,<sup>25</sup> while not exhausting it. It is not *negation*, but the *signifying/semantic function* that characterizes the relationship between language and reality. As such, language is not an obstacle

22. Ibid., 25.

23. Ibid., 25.

24. Ibid., 27.

25. On the iconizing function, cf. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 184–87.

hindering us from achieving an individualistic “mystical” knowledge, but a medium to share, to commune knowledge and truth, and an attempt at a communal participation to it. This elevates the communal verification of knowledge to a criterion of knowledge itself.

So, whereas the *via negativa* is usually understood as *anti-realism*, apophaticism for Yannaras is the prerequisite for realism and realism is the goal of apophaticism. Or rather realism is the *stance and attitude* that is guaranteed by a consistent apophaticism.

Knowledge emerges from participating in experience, not from the understanding of a linguistic formulation. “And the experience is not exhausted in what is affirmed by the senses,” writes Yannaras. “Nor is it simply an intellectual fact—a coincidence of meaning with the object of thought. Nor is it even an escape into a nebulous ‘mysticism,’ into individual existential ‘experiences’ beyond any social verification. By the word *experience* I mean here the totality of the multifaceted fact of *relation* of the subject with other subjects, as also the relation of the subject with the objective givens of the reality surrounding us.”<sup>26</sup>

For Yannaras, every ontological system or statement presupposes and is based on the epistemology on which it is built, i.e., the criteria through which knowledge is considered as valid or invalid.

That is why, he remarks, “we conclude from history that common epistemology (incorporated in the everyday life of the people) and not common ontology constitute a common civilization, i.e., the otherness of common way of life: it is not the content we attribute to truth, but it is the way in which cognitive validity is confirmed that confers otherness in shaping public life, identity of civilization, and ensures the historical continuity of that cultural otherness.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the criterion of the communal validation of knowledge is a crucial prerequisite for the understanding of the ancient Greek ontology and the early Christian ontology as well.

This apophatic epistemology, this communal epistemology, refers the possibility of “existence in truth” not in the individual level, but in the field of the relations between logical “othernesses,” relations that manifest the “other” in these “othernesses.” The most suitable term for the will-to-relate, not as a quality of the individual but as a way of being, a mode of existence, is ἔρωσ. “For Plato, the fullest knowledge is love, ἔρωσ; a relationship that attains freedom from all selfishness, that attains the offering of the self to the other.”<sup>28</sup> If valid knowledge and truth can only be attained through a

26. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, xiii–xiv.

27. Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίας*, 45.

28. *Ibid.*, 26.

self-transcendent relation with existence, then the mode of truly existing is the transcendental relation, ἔρωσ according to the Greek language and the Platonic and Areopagite writings.

### ἔρωσ and πρόσωπον: Eros and Person

With the word ἔρωσ, we are introduced to the first of the two elements that constitute Yannaras' ontology of the person (or more precisely, *prosopocentric ontology*, as it is termed in proposition 12.3.2 of *Relational Ontology*; I use this term in order to discern it from personalism),<sup>29</sup> the "person" (πρόσωπον) being the second.<sup>30</sup> "The replies given to the ontological question, as I have identified them in the particular philosophical tradition that I have studied, may be summarized under two basic terms: person and ἔρωσ," Yannaras writes. "In the Greek philosophical literature of the early Christian and medieval periods, the starting-point for approaching the fact of existence in itself is the reality of the *person*. And the mode of this approach which makes the person accessible to knowledge is ἔρωσ."<sup>31</sup>

ἔρωσ here means exactly what it means for the Areopagite writings or for Maximus the Confessor, i.e., self-transcendence, the offering of the self

29. Cf. Zizioulas' distinction between personalism and the ontology of personhood (*prosopocentric ontology*) in his *One and Many*, 19–24. Zizioulas regards their comparison as a "superficial association in terminology" (p. 20), noting that no substantial similarities exist between these two approaches, as the term "person" bears a different semantic content in each case. As such, references to an "Orthodox personalism" remain unsubstantiated. I would say that Zizioulas' explanation is wholly applicable to Yannaras' works as well; the ontology of personhood (*prosopocentric ontology*) is not to be regarded as a stream of thought within (or parallel to) personalism in which the term "person" denotes an individual—instead of a being of relations and otherness.

30. After the publication of Yannaras' breakthrough studies on the importance of the notion of πρόσωπον for philosophy through patristic thought in 1970, Zizioulas' "Personhood and Being" (first published in 1977 in Greek and subsequently in English in *Being as Communion*, 27–65) offered a comprehensive analysis of the development, content, and importance of the term from ancient Greek philosophy to patristic thought and came to be recognized as a landmark publication on this ontological proposal in the English-speaking world. Confusingly enough, this contains a long footnote (in 44–46) downgrading Yannaras' 1970 dissertation, i.e., the very source of this prosopocentric understanding of theology and philosophy of which "Personhood and Being" is such a fine specimen, as wholly subjecting patristic thought to Heidegger's ontology, thereby alienating it from its source. In my opinion, the cited arguments bear little or no relevance to Yannaras' actual text, and Zizioulas' account of an ontology of personhood is in no way different from Yannaras'. In general, the attempt to find such substantial differences in Yannaras' and Zizioulas' thought, especially in theological matters, would be a true challenge.

31. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, xiii.

to the other.<sup>32</sup> If we define the subject merely as an individual, as ἄτομον, as an undifferentiated unit of a whole that cannot be further divided,<sup>33</sup> then by definition it cannot manifest ἔρω.

In this semantic frame, only the person (πρόσωπον) can manifest ἔρω, and πρόσωπον is a word with an absolutely unique semantic content. It is constituted of the words πρὸς (towards, with direction to) and ὤψι/ὠπὸς (face, eye), so that it defines someone whose face looks at, or rather is directed towards, someone or something.<sup>34</sup> Someone who exists in-relation-to, only in relation and in reference to other beings, someone who refers his existence to the other, coming out of his existential individuality; someone who exists only by participating in relations and relationships.<sup>35</sup> So, πρόσωπον is not merely defined as reference and relation, but it defines a reference and relation itself.<sup>36</sup> This entails that personhood is the only possible relationship with beings, as beings are “things-set-opposite,” ἀντι-κείμενα in Greek, *Gegen-stände* in German, etc. Being is manifested only in relation to the person, and as such beings emerge as phenomena, they appear/are disclosed in the horizon of personal relation.<sup>37</sup> Yannaras adds in a Heideggerian tone “beings are (εἶναι) only as phenomena, only insofar as they become accessible to a referential relation or disclosure. We cannot speak of the *being-in-itself* of beings; we can speak only of being-there or being-present (παρ-εἶναι), of co-existence with the possibility of

32. Zizioulas makes an interesting remark that applies to Yannaras' approach as well, “For *eros* to be a true expression of otherness in a personal sense, it must be not simply *ekstatic* [sic] but also and above all *hypostatic*, it must be caused by the free movement of a particular being and have as its ultimate destination another particular being. This cannot be the case either in the [purely] sexual or in the ‘platonic’ form of *eros*. In the case of [purely] sexual *eros*, the erotic movement stems from the self and is dictated by the laws of nature. It is neither caused by the Other nor is it directed ultimately towards the Other. Equally, in the case of *eros* as presented by Plato, love is attracted irresistibly by the good and the beautiful; the concrete particular is used as a means to an end, and finally sacrificed for the sake of the idea” (Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*). Zizioulas previously mentions that “[Yannaras' exposition of the ecstatic character of *eros* in *Person and Eros* is] different from my own approach in many ways” (ibid., 70, fn. 160). Having studied both Yannaras and Zizioulas, I have failed to trace substantial differences in their approaches in regard to this particular subject. I could add that the very nature of *eros* as a whole is to be *hypostatic* and *personal* in character; a failure to be thus realized leaves *eros* as a mere *possibility* or *ability*, essentially deprived of its τέλος.

33. See Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικῆς ζωγραφίης*, 61.

34. Ibid., 63.

35. Ibid., 103.

36. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*, 5.

37. Ibid., 6.

their disclosure. We know beings as presence (παρ-ουσία), not as substance (ουσία).<sup>38</sup>

From early Christian times the word person, πρόσωπον, was very wisely identified with the word υπόστασις, meaning actual existence. “The fact that the identification of the terms person and hypostasis was originally used to logically clarify meta-physical references of the ecclesial experience does not restrict this identification from being used in the field of anthropology. However, a prerequisite for that would be to retain the communed experience of relations as the criterion of the formulations in language.”<sup>39</sup> These pairs of terms, person/hypostasis (πρόσωπον/υπόστασις) and substance/nature (ουσία/φύσις) were first defined and at some point agreed upon and elaborated (as there were many different schools of terminology before the Cappadocians) in relation to God and Christology. This, however, only reflects the way in which the philosophers and church fathers articulated their understanding of the world in language: these terms cannot be reserved exclusively for Christology, the terms reflect their approach to ontology as well.

Yannaras observes “self-transcendent love, έρως, was recognized in the philosophical language of the Christianized Hellenic and Byzantine civilization as the highest existential attainment (or fullness and causal principle) of freedom.”<sup>40</sup> Freedom, because self-transcendence is really self-transcendence when the subject can be freed even from the necessities and prerequisites of his own substance (ουσία). This can only happen if the hypostasis of the subject, the actual and specific manifestation of its substance, has an ontological priority over its substance and is not restricted to the constraintments and prerequisites of its substance.

According to the patristic corpus, the testimony of the ecclesial experience identifies such a priority in the case of God, a Trinity of persons/hypostases with common substance. It is being testified in the case of Jesus Christ, who transcends the necessities/prerequisites of his divine substance/nature (“logical” necessities of being outside the boundaries of time, space, the cycle of life and death) without losing it or impairing it by being incarnated as a human being, a crying baby in the manger, in a very specific time and place, and by dying on the cross. And he transcends the necessities/prerequisites of his acquired human substance/nature through the resurrection. Ecclesial experience testifies to man as being made “in the image of

38. Ibid., This first chapter of *Person and Eros* provides a thorough analysis of the signifier πρόσωπον and its implications for philosophy.

39. Yannaras, *Έξι φιλοσοφικές ζωγραφίες*, 104.

40. Ibid., 60.

God” and in the image of this triune existence-as-πρόσωπον, establishing man’s capability to transcend by grace the necessities/prerequisites of his substance and nature through its hypostatic manifestation.<sup>41</sup>

With the coordinates of person, ἕρως, and otherness, Yannaras builds a “relational ontology.” He states “otherness is realized and known in-relation-to-the-other, always relationally. It is an outcome and an experience of relation and relationship. Through this perspective, we can speak (with logical consistency) of a relational ontology.”<sup>42</sup> Relation and relationship is never granted or finite, but a dynamic event that is continually found or lost, a fact that can be traced in our human experience. Given the apophatic nature of the epistemology on which we base “propositions for an ontological interpretation of existence and reality that are subject to critical verification or refutation,”<sup>43</sup> Yannaras concludes a relational ontology can only be a “critical ontology.”<sup>44</sup> He defines “critical ontology” as follows:

We term onto-logy the theoretical investigation of existence (τὸν λόγον περὶ τοῦ ὄντος), the logical propositions for the interpretation of reality. We try, with our rational faculties, to interpret reality and existence as to the fact that it is real and that it exists. We try to interpret the meaning of existence, the cause and purpose of existence.

With the word “critical” we term the process of evaluating ontological propositions, evaluating the logical accuracy of these propositions on the grounds of κοινὸς λόγος (i.e., common sense, word, rationality, language and understanding), evaluating the capability of the ontological propositions to be empirically verified through shared, communed experience accessible to all.<sup>45</sup>

Propositions of a critical ontology are never finite, granted, or “closed”: they are always subject to communal verification or refutation, to the communal criterion of truth, due to the fact that there is no way of individually “securing the truth” of said propositions.

According to Yannaras, every attempt to continue the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greek or Christianized Hellenic and Byzantine

41. See *ibid.*, 74.

42. *Ibid.*, 58.

43. *Ibid.*, 54.

44. As such, I will use these terms interchangeably, as synonyms. However, to be precise, a relational ontology is the outcome of a consistently critical stance towards ontology.

45. Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικές ζωγραφίες*, 51.

civilization without the fundamental prerequisite of apophaticism is inherently dysfunctional. He writes “despite the post-roman West’s boasting of inheriting and continuing the ancient Greek tradition of philosophy and science, the refutation of the fundamental characteristics of Hellenism, i.e., apophaticism and the communal criterion, leaves no room for the validity of such a claim.”<sup>46</sup> Based on this, Yannaras argues that the reception of classical and Christian thought in the West was crucially undermined by the reversal of its epistemological preconditions and their replacement with epistemological criteria that are entirely based on the individual’s capacity to think rationally (*facultas ratiōnis*), a criterion that the West ascribes to the philosophical legacy of Aristotle.

I will come to the philosophical importance of the activities<sup>47</sup> (ἐνέργειαι) and their relation to the hypostatic manifestation of the substance in the following chapter. But I must stress here that Yannaras regards the activities as absolutely important for a coherent ontological terminology. He remarks “an ontology which (out of conviction or ignorance) denies to discern the substance/nature and the hypostasis from the activities of substance/nature, which are hypostatically manifested is condemned to an irreversible deficit of realism; it is trapped in the separation and dissociation of thinking (νοεῖν) and existence (εἶναι).”<sup>48</sup>

46. Ibid., 35.

47. I have chosen to translate ἐνέργειαι as “activities” throughout this study for a variety of reasons. The obvious translation of the patristic term ἐνέργειαι as “energy” leads the English-speaking researcher to misunderstand its meaning, as the word loses its crucially important polysemy and it is often understood as some sort of “magical agent” (i.e., in the same way that some theologians understand χάρις, grace). For example, in the context of the Monothelite controversy, Maximus speaks of the two “energies” of Jesus Christ, but the meaning of this is better conveyed in English with the word “activities.” Andrew Louth, Tollefsen, Melchisedek Törönen, and others have preferred “activities” over “energies” as the translation of “ἐνέργειαι,” and I will here follow their example. However, the word “activity” has certain disadvantages of its own. For this reason and to prevent further misunderstanding due to the use of the improved translation of ἐνέργειαι as activity, I will attempt to mention the Greek original word ἐνέργειαι side by side with its translation as “activity” as often as possible in this book. However, I explicitly state that “activity” is still an incomplete translation of ἐνέργειαι with inherent semantic problems and that we are still in search for a better translation.

48. Yannaras, *Ἐξί φιλοσοφικές ζωγραφίες*, 101.

## Studying Yannaras' Philosophical Terminology through His Critical (and Relational) Ontology

It is interesting to note *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*<sup>49</sup> is one of the few philosophical books by Yannaras that does not mention the church, the Trinity, the person of Christ, or the Eucharist *at all*—it seems to emphasize that “critical ontology” is meant as a *philosophical proposition* in the most strict sense, bearing no resemblance to what we term and categorize under “theology”—for it is certain that Yannaras does not believe in the exclusion of the ecclesial body’s ontological testimony from the field of philosophy. One could perhaps try to explain this omission by saying that the book is also directed towards people who *do* believe in such a contrast between theology and philosophy, but I would have to disagree: *Propositions for a Critical Ontology* attempts to trace the *preconditions* for an ontological enquiry that would be free from philosophical dead ends and contradictions arising from traditions of thought that are, in Yannaras’ view, characterized by arbitrary apriorisms and axiomatic certainties (which would be the case of not only, e.g., idealism or monism, but also of empiricism or materialism)—to “clear the ontological path,” so to speak. His proposal for the *content*, not merely the preconditions, of an ontology freed from problematic starting points, of a truly *critical* ontology, is to be found in the book’s sister volume published twenty years later, Yannaras’ *Relational Ontology*—or, for that matter, in *Person and Eros*,<sup>50</sup> where the patristic literature is studied and employed much more extensively.

This later book, *Relational Ontology*, opens with a phrase from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (1930): “Every proposition that I write always means the whole, and is thus the same thing over and over again. It is as if they are only views of a single object seen from various angles.”<sup>51</sup> The same could be said of *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*: Yannaras applies here certain very specific criteria to a multitude of categories (ontology, epistemology, even society) and arrives at an ontological proposition that calls for communal empirical verification and validation.

49. Yannaras, *Προτάσεις κριτικής όντολογίας*. A form of this introduction to Yannaras’ critical and relational ontology will soon be published as Mitralaxis, “Relation, Activity and Otherness.”

50. Yannaras, *Person and Eros*.

51. The phrase is here taken from Yannaras’ *Relational Ontology*, v. The Greek original, *Όντολογία τής σχέσης*, has been published in 2004 in Athens by Ikaros Publishing.

## Preconditions for a Critical and Relational Ontology: λόγος, Relation, Consciousness

According to Yannaras, we can name *critical ontology* the answer to the ontological question that is subject to critical evaluation and verification, subject to the principle of the falsifiability of knowledge (2nd proposition).<sup>52</sup> Answers to the ontological question can only then be subject to critical and empirical verification or refutation “if we affirm the cognitive access to the existential event as an experience of *relation*.” “A *critical ontology* is possible, if we affirm the experience of the subject’s consciousness of self as a starting point for the interpretation of the existential event” (7.3).

This experience of the self’s consciousness of self is the only cognitive event that is truly, universally verified by all human persons—and “this experience is only constituted through *relation*, which means that the experience of relation and its *referential widening* (i.e., the communal verification of the relation) constitutes the prerequisite for the cognitive access to the existential event.” Knowledge is the experiencing of relation, and the nexus of shared experiences validates and verifies knowledge (7.3). The criterion thereof is the communal verification of knowledge, which can never be finite or taken for granted. This verification is an “attainment” (κατόρθωμα), and by “attainment” I mean it is always open to a fuller, a more complete communal verification, excluding the possibility of certainties or apriorisms (2.1). Linguistic and semantic formulations “signify the experience of relation without being able to exhaust it, as a relation is actualized [ἐνεργεῖται] as the manifestation and unveiling of the subject’s existential otherness” (2.11).

Consciousness of self is a prerequisite for this. The subject’s consciousness, the consciousness of the fact that it exists, is the first and only certainty. The reality of consciousness precedes every assertion concerning reality (1.41). The existence of consciousness, of the self, can be the only constant of a critical epistemology and ontology, as it is a cognitive event that precedes any epistemological stance, method, or assertion, even a *critical* stance. Consciousness of the self, the consciousness of one’s existence and otherness, cannot but be *the only certainty* of a critical ontology (1.42). However, this does not lead us to forms of solipsism, as it is the relation to other realities that reveals our consciousness of self.

52. For practical reasons, in this chapter I will not cite the book’s pages in footnotes, but its propositions in brackets, which are hierarchically numbered statements in the style of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. An elaboration of each point I make can be found in the book’s cited proposition, which is also the case with the quotes mentioned.

The semantic function, not only in its linguistic meaning, but in every relation of signifier and signified, is a cornerstone of the actuality of relations. The word Yannaras uses to denote all facets of the semantic function is the word λόγος, with all of its multiple meanings (and, sadly, any translation of the word in English would annihilate this polysemy). This use of λόγος is the manifestation of a signifier, which in turn signifies a presence. To be signified is to be manifested as a presence, and this referential function of λόγος turns it into the first precondition and manifestation of *relation*. A relation is *logical* as it pertains to λόγος (1.3). Each manifestation of something in the horizon of consciousness is a λόγος, a revealing of the other to the subject, to the subject's consciousness. It is a referential revealing; a relational revealing (1.31). For Yannaras, "λόγος is the subject's ability to *relate*, to manifest a perceptual relation to existence. The subject perceives existence as a revealing, as a manifestation which signifies the *otherness* of each phenomenon" (1.33).

I am not referring to abstract conceptions of relation. The physical impression constitutes a relation, as it functions as a signifier representing something for someone. The term we use for each and every semantic function is λόγος; it effects the distinction between the two constituents of the relation, and in doing so constitutes the relation (1.332).

To perceive a λόγος (whether visual or auditory, sensible or intelligible, etc.) and to experience a relation to and connection with something or someone is to become conscious of one's individuality, as one perceives the other part of the relation as an otherness. Consciousness of the self is the consciousness of a difference, of an otherness, which is revealed in the relation. But the *fact* of consciousness precedes this: the *event* of consciousness is the prerequisite for every relation, it is manifested through relation, but it precedes it, thus making it possible (1.341).

Yannaras maintains the word λόγος signifies every referential activity that manifests the subject's otherness. (A similar definition of λόγος that he often employs is that λόγος is the mode in which everything that *exists* is *manifested*, becomes *known*.<sup>53</sup>) In different contexts, λόγος can mean a word, a meaning, "an image, a sound, a visual representation, form, shape, a musical melody, a painting, etc. The polysemy of λόγος allows us to say that the mode in which λόγος informs us of the subject's otherness is the mode of λόγος (ὁ τρόπος τοῦ λόγου)—that the subject itself is actualized (ἐνεργεῖται) as λόγος." This would mean that λόγος is the *mode of relation*. "The *mode of relation* in the subject's ability to make the participation in its

53. Cf. Yannaras, *Σχεδιάγραμμα εἰσαγωγῆς*, 20: "τὸν λόγο τοῦ κόσμου, τὸν τρόπο μὲ τὸν ὁποῖο ὅ,τι εἶναι γίνεται φανερό, φαίνεται."

otherness possible, as well as the *mode of relation* in the subject's ability to participate in the activities that manifest the other subjects' othernesses" (6.13).

### Ontological Categories: Substance, Particulars, Activities

What would be the meaning of *truth* in a critical ontology? The notion of truth as a static and finite formulation, either known or unknown, would surely be excluded, together with the notion of truth as stemming solely from the individual's rational faculty. For a critical ontology, truth is not an *object*, but an event in which we participate: truth is *the mode of reality*. For Yannaras, it is the fullness of the subject's participation in existence that is the criterion of truth (2.3). It is an empirical truth, the knowledge of which can never be finite and consists of the nurturing of the subject's relationship with reality. However, the subjective experience of the individual is not enough: the cognitive event of individual experience is to be validated intersubjectively. The fullness of this communal verification is also a criterion of truth (2.31). For Yannaras, if truth is the mode of reality, then every true knowledge has a sound ontological starting point: he excludes the possibility of relativism or skepticism concerning the existence of truth itself (2.32).

It is in recognizing truth as the mode of reality and reality as manifested through relation that we are led to an anti-essentialist notion of substance (οὐσία). Yannaras traces in the Greek word οὐσία, in its etymological implications, a relational conception thereof. Stemming from the feminine participle of the verb *to be* (εἶμι—οὔσα),<sup>54</sup> it signifies the event of *participating in being*. It defines existence as *the mode of participating in being*, which is even more the case when the word οὐσία is used to specify a specific substance, the qualities that manifest something as different from something else. Something is different from something else (in this context, a stone from a horse, not this horse from that horse), because it has a different *mode of participating in being*, and this is what defines its substance. In this, the *substance* (οὐσία) is the *mode of participating in being*—the substance not as a *what*, but as a *how* (4.13).<sup>55</sup>

54. Cf. *Scholia in De Divinis Nominibus*, CD4.1 313C, “ἀπὸ γὰρ τοῦ εἶναι τὸ ὄνομα παρῆκται τῆς οὐσίας.”

55. Yannaras also illustrates notions such as the body and soul as *modes* and not as *entities*, *modes* that are revealed and manifested as relations through the activities. To conceive of these sums of actualized relations in a perpetual becoming as *things*, as some sort of material or immaterial *objects*, would be a grave misunderstanding, he writes (2.372—3.1).

This understanding of substance (οὐσία) as the mode of existence dictates a corresponding understanding of a *particular existence*. Excluding an understanding of substance as an entity in itself, we have cognitive access to the substance only through its particular actualizations and manifestations—through the mode in which they are different, through the mode in which they manifest otherness. “Every particular actualization of the substance recapitulates the substance in its universality without exhausting it. A piece of stone embodies the universal truth of ‘stone,’ by coming to know this particular piece we come to know *what stone is*, but the reality of ‘stone’ is not limited to that particular piece. That piece of stone manifests the totality of the mode in which something is a stone, it manifests the *substance* (οὐσία) of stone. However, this mode has also other, possibly infinite, manifestations.” We can only know the substance through its particular manifestations (4.131).

The Greek word for “mode” (τρόπος, from the verb τρέπω, i.e., to turn, to turn in a certain direction, to alter, to change) does also have a dynamic meaning: it presupposes action/activity (ἐνέργεια) and an actualized relation. Substance (οὐσία), *the mode of participating in being*, is an event of perpetual becoming (it is interesting to note the patristic identification of οὐσία with φύσις, nature, which stems from φύεσθαι, to grow, to become). And it is known to us through the subject’s perceptive activity (ἐνέργεια). The substance as the mode of participating in being *is* and *is manifested* as a whole of activities and realized relations (4.133).<sup>56</sup>

### The Activities (ἐνέργεια) as a Primary Ontological Category

According to Yannaras, the activities (ἐνέργεια) are to be ascribed to the substance, to the mode of existence—they constitute each hypostasis, each particular existence, and manifest its substance. For him, “the activities constitute an *ontological category*—the third ontological category together with the *substance* and the particular existence (καθέκαστον),” what one more commonly terms as the *hypostasis* (4.2).<sup>57</sup>

56. On a comparison with some of Maximus the Confessor’s definitions, see *Opusc.*, PG91 149B, 152A, 260Df., *Car.*, 4.9.2–3, “Πᾶσα δὲ ἡ κτίσις σύνθετος ὑπάρχει ἐξ οὐσίας καὶ συμβεβηκότος.” —“Every creature is a composite of substance and accident” (trans. Berthold).

57. On an account of the philosophical importance of the *activities* (ἐνέργεια) in patristic thought and related matters, see also *Person and Eros*, 43–70 (in which ἐνέργεια is rendered as *energies*). The reader would do well to consult this chapter in relation to Maximus’ understanding of the activities as well.

The notion of *activities* (ἐνέργεια) emerges as a key term in Yannaras' propositions for a critical ontology, a criterion for the existential realism of said propositions. For Yannaras, the *activities* are not just a "third term," an elucidation of previous terminology, but another way of perceiving and analyzing reality. By approaching the existential event through the relations of (a) substance and activities, (b) substance and the particular (the hypostasis), and (c) the particular and the activities, our terminology acquires the prerequisites for a realism that is not to be found in the common distinction of substance and hypostasis.<sup>58</sup> As Yannaras writes,

- a. We acquire cognitive access to the *substance* through its *activities* as its common mode of participating in being, as the sameness of the particulars' nature.
- b. We come to know each *particular*, each hypostasis, as a manifestation of its *substance*, while the substance itself is known through its particular existential realizations.
- c. We come to know the *activities* as the *modes* that signify the *substance*, but also as the othernesses which constitute the particular as particular (4.21).

"The *substance* is distinct from both the activities *and* the particular, as it is *through the activities* that the substance's sameness of nature and the otherness of the particular is manifested, and as it is *through the particular* that the substance is recapitulated and manifested but not exhausted." To mention an example, *smiling, to smile, or laughing, to laugh*, is an activity of the human substance and nature, it is to be found in every human being, in every particular manifestation of "humanity."<sup>59</sup> But *each human person* manifests smiling or laughing, *smiles and laughs*, in a completely unique

58. As Maximus the Confessor is accounted with noting in *Ἐξήγησις τῆς κινήσεως, Documents from Exile* 62–63, "No being exists without natural activity. . . . It is impossible for any nature at all to exist or be recognized apart from its essential activity."—"οὐδὲν γὰρ τῶν ὄντων χωρὶς ἐνεργείας φυσικῆς ὑφέστηκεν . . . μῆτε εἶναι μῆτε γινώσκεισθαι χωρὶς τῆς οὐσιώδους αὐτῆς ἐνεργείας τὴν οἰανδήποτε φύσιν."

59. Note, in comparison, how Maximus the Confessor names various human *activities* in order to stress Jesus Christ's incarnation and his human nature in *Amb.Th.*, 5.85–92, "For the Λόγος beyond being came into the realm of being as human once and for all, and possessed as his own undiminished property, along with the things characteristic of human being, the movement of being which properly characterizes him as human. This was formally constituted by everything that he did [ἐνήργει φυσικῶς, which stems from ἐνέργεια] naturally as human, since indeed he truly became human, breathing, talking, walking, moving his hands, naturally making use of the senses for the apprehension of sensible realities, hungering, thirsting, eating, sleeping, growing weary, weeping, struggling" (trans. Lollar).

way, in a way that actualizes (not merely *reveals*, but *actualizes*) his substance as a hypostasis, in a way that *actualizes complete otherness*. The activities, being distinct from both the substance itself *and* the hypostasis itself, *belong to the substance but actualize the hypostasis*. The activities (ἐνέργειαι) are *hypostatically manifested activities of the substance* (4.211).

These *signifiers*, together with their signified realities, cannot function as apriorisms, as axiomatic statements and certainties, because their definitions emerge from their intertwined relations, relations that “signify the realized manifestation of the existential event.” That is why the notion of activities as an ontological category is a precondition and a necessity for the articulation of a critical ontology, if it is to be truly critical (4.212).

It is the interference of the notion of *activities* that subjects this ontology to the critical (intersubjective and communal) validation or rejection of its empirical testimony. For it is the notion of *activities* that demonstrates the contradictory character of a perception of either the substance or of the particular as existences-in-themselves, thereby transcending ontological categories such as the *phenomena* or the *noumena*, materialism and idealism, etc. (4.213).

### Otherness (ἑτερότητα) and Artistic Expression

The absolute otherness of each human person and its indeterminacy in language is not an abstract concept. Even the physical form of each particular person is impossible to be exhaustively described by language—and by physical form I am referring to “the way (τρόπος) in which [each person’s] bodily otherness is actualized (ἐνεργεῖται)—from the fingerprints and the exact shape of the body to his gaze, his smile, his hand gestures.” Even an exhaustive description of a person cannot but correspond to more than one human hypostases, as the function of each separate specification is to objectify the specified for it to be understood by more people—whereas shared, common experience affirms that each human being constitutes a whole of absolutely unique and unprecedented mental and physical activities and actualizations (ἐνέργειαι), “an absolute existential otherness” (6.11).

We come to *know* this otherness, we have cognitive access to it, but we cannot *define* it, exhaust its reality in formulations of language. And we come to know each otherness through the manifestation of its activities (ἐνέργειαι), of the mode in which they are actualized. To directly experience a personal otherness is to participate in the activities and actualizations (ἐνέργειαι) that manifest it, in the way in which this otherness becomes *known*. “And that is why the recognition of another subject’s otherness is

a *relational event, a relational experience*" (6.12). *Descriptions*, however exhaustive, cannot contain, manifest, or reveal a person's otherness. However, the participation (μετοχή-μέθεξις) in the λόγος of a person's creations can and does reveal it. A painting, a musical symphony, a poem, or a sculpture *can* and *do* reveal the otherness of their creators<sup>60</sup>—"only the creation's λόγος can 'signify' the reality of the subject, its otherness" (6.321).

It is in artistic creations we can more clearly discern this reality, but every act, creative activity, and creation (πράγμα, πεπραγμένο) has the subject's otherness imprinted in it and is manifesting it—however evidently or subtly.<sup>61</sup> Human *action* is not merely contrasted to *theory*, but it manifests and preserves the personal otherness' λόγος, the personal otherness' reality. And as such, "every human action is a relational event, a communal event" (6.322). Yannaras mentions the example of man's ability to discern the otherness of the poet in his poetry, or of the musician in his music—to be able to recognize Baudelaire's poetry and to distinguish it from Eliot's poetry, to be able to recognize the otherness of Mozart in his music and to be able to discern it from Bach's music. The fact that man is led from the information gathered by the senses to the "empirical recognition of the otherness of the artist's creative λόγος is a cognitive event that is valid and true while annulling the 'objectivity' of perceptible information," as it cannot really be demonstrated scientifically or formulated linguistically in its fullness. It can be only experienced and never defined, only inadequately signified through language, science, or by other means. In the communal validation

60. Applied to creation and its relationship with its Creator, Maximus follows a similar train of thought in order to describe the path from contemplating the λόγοι of beings to knowing (the otherness of) God, their Creator, as follows, *Amb.Io.* 15, 1216AB, "Who, through the mediating power of λόγος, conducts the forms and figures perceived by the senses toward their manifold inner λόγοι, and concentrates the manifold diversity of the λόγοι that are in beings (discovered through the power of λόγος) into a uniform, simple, and undifferentiated intuition, in which that knowledge, which is called indivisible, nonquantitative, and unitary, consists—such a person, I say, through the medium of visible things and their good order, has acquired a true impression (as much as is humanly possible) of their Creator, sustainer, and originator, and has come to know God, not in His substance and subsistence (for this is impossible and beyond our grasp), but only with respect to the simple fact that He exists" (trans. Conostas).

61. Cf. Maximus the Confessor's *Amb.Io.* 26, 1265D–1268B, "They say that among beings there exist two general kinds of activities. The first of these enables beings naturally to bring forth from themselves other beings identical in form and substance and absolutely identical to them. . . . The second kind of activity is said to produce things that are external to the essence, as when a person actively engages something extrinsic and substantially different, and from it produces something foreign to his own substance, having constructed it from some other source of already existing matter. They say that this kind of activity is a scientific characteristic of the arts" (trans. Conostas).

of experience, experiences of different persons *do* overlap, but this does *not* constitute “objectivity,” “as the affirmation of the difference between Bach’s music and Mozart’s music is not adequate to transmit the knowledge of this difference” (7.2201).<sup>62</sup>

### Axiomatic Dichotomies and Problematic Ontologies

A critical ontology is an attempt to transcend philosophical apriorisms and dichotomies of the past, which were based on a lack of realism. Philosophical contemplation has at times identified the *abstract* with the *non-existent*, or the *abstract* with the *truly existing*. However, both theses overlook the fact that every abstract formulation functions as a signifier and every signifier constitutes a relation. This relation is an empirical reality in cases of both sensible signified realities and abstract/intelligible notions. For Yannaras, the question is not whether the signified is sensible or abstract/intelligible, but if the relation between the subject and the signified is genuine or false, real or imaginary—and this is to be verified communally, not individually, it is to be judged from the wholeness of relations (2.35). To equate the abstract with the non-existent or with the truly existing is to impose apriorisms and axiomatic certainties to reality, giving birth to dichotomies such as materialism and idealism, whereas the basis of a critical ontology would be the realism of relation (2.351).

In a critical ontology, both the reality of sensible and abstract/mental signifiers and manifestations are subject to intersubjective, communal experience, to the “cognitive widening” of experience (2.36). “Knowledge can neither be solely objective (independent of the subject) nor solely subjective (irrelevant of the object). The contradistinction of objectivity and subjectivity divorces and contrasts the object from the subject, it ceases to accept them as partners and constituents of a cognitive relation” (2.361).

62. Art, usually not a subject directly pertaining to ontology, gives me the opportunity to comment on ontology’s relation to *society*. There are ontological preconditions, whether clearly articulated and widely known or not, behind each collective approach to the *meaning* of reality, each approach to organizing society, each choice in living collectively. A particular interpretation or reality, a particular ontological approach is to be discerned even in facets of life or in disciplines where one would not suspect the direct presence of ontology—perhaps due to the absence of articulated ontological reasoning (8.11). Yannaras discusses Karl Marx’s insights on several occasions in his *Propositions for a Critical Ontology* (mostly in 6.2–6.613). In these pages, Yannaras not only demonstrates Marx’s vital and radically new ideas concerning the core of Western philosophy’s dead ends, but also the inner contradictions of Marx’s own system—contradictions that pertain to its implied or explicit ontological basis.

It is not only philosophy as an isolated “discipline” that gives birth to the need for a critical ontology. Yannaras maintains that the profound changes in the scientific worldview during the twentieth century and up to the present cannot but change the way we see philosophy. Our perception of reality cannot be the same as the one offered to us by Newtonian physics, Euclidian geometry, and the Cartesian “cogito.” Yannaras discerns in science’s recent developments that our perception of reality as a sum of separate entities of a given structure cannot but be substituted with a perception of reality as a sum of relations and relationships that cannot be understood and explained in a singular and given way. “Relation emerges as both the *mode* of reality and the *mode* of *knowing* reality,” of having cognitive access to it (4). In this it is *physics* that trace new paths for *metaphysics*.

For Yannaras, the sharp distinction between physics and metaphysics that is taken for granted and self-evident in mainstream philosophy seems to be the corollary of a specific understanding of λόγος as individual *ratio*, as *facultas ratiōnis*. The cognitive access to reality is thus limited, as he analyses, to the formulations stemming from method, ideology, and proof, giving birth to dualisms such as matter and spirit, dualism and monism, physics and metaphysics, science and ontology (7–7.023). However, the antithetical distinction between physics and metaphysics (ontology) seems to exclude the possibility of a *critical* access to the ontological question, the possibility of a critical ontology. For this contradistinction to exist “every anti-thesis presupposes a definitive thesis, a thesis not subject to critical evaluation. In terms of the distinction between physics and metaphysics, the position (thesis) that is not critically examined and evaluated is the assumed axiom of either matter, or mind, or both. Because of that, the contrast between physics and metaphysics is always subjecting ontological reflection to the dogmatic apriorism of either dualism or monism” (7.1).

The focus of critical ontology on experience and consciousness does not lead to empiricism or mysticism. The experience of (self-)consciousness transcends the information gathered by the senses. Consciousness of the self “is not the only cognitive event that arises from experience without being limited to the information that is gathered by the senses.” Yannaras maintains that “every relational experience, every experience of relation is a cognitive event which may arise from the information of the senses, but the relation as a cognitive event is not limited to this information” and transcends it (7.22).

## Different Accesses to Reality: A Personal Causal Principle and the Fullness of Participation

Every subject is participating in reality, the question is to what extent one participates in the fullness of reality.<sup>63</sup> Yannaras illustrates how a different stance towards reality produces seemingly equally valid conclusions in their inner logic, which are however radically different from one another. For example, while contemplating a painting by Van Gogh, a strict positivist would acknowledge the reality of it as a sum of canvas and oil paint. A different access to the reality of the painting would be to recognize the image it depicts. A third possibility would be to define the painting by its subjective aesthetic integrity, mastery of technique, etc. A fourth and different type of access to the reality of the painting would be “to recognize in the painting the visual λόγος of the person that created it, the otherness of the creative activity (ἐνέργεια) of this particular artist, whom we today have never met as a tangible presence, but the existential otherness of whom is ‘defined’ by the reality of his painting. Neither of these four interpretations is false concerning the description of the painting’s reality, but the description and definition of reality differs according to the fullness of the subject’s relation to it,” which is actualized by the degree of the subject’s participation in the observed reality (7.4101).<sup>64</sup>

Yannaras applies the same approach to the subject’s perception of reality as a whole. There are approaches to reality as a whole that only recognize the constituents of reality, matter and energy, or even the beauty of the cosmos. However, another approach to accessing reality—an approach signified by the fullness of one’s personal participation in the world, to reality as a whole—would be “to recognize in cosmic reality the otherness of a personal creative activity (ἐνέργεια), the ‘bearer’ of which we have never encountered as a sensible presence, but whose personal existence is signified by the world’s reality.” The fullness of one’s personal participation in the aforementioned painting or to reality as a whole is that which distinguishes these different paths to accessing reality, none of which is false in itself, even

63. Maximus the Confessor makes a similar distinction in *Q.Thal. I*, 49.311–14.

64. According to Maximus the Confessor, this participation in reality that becomes a participation in the personal otherness of its Creator, a relationship with him, is the very purpose of creation. For him, creation has not been brought into existence out of any necessity, but with the purpose of the creatures’ participation in their Creator, *Car.*, 3.46.1–2, “God who is beyond fullness did not bring creatures into being out of any need of his, but that he might enjoy their proportionate participation in him” (trans. Berthold). And, in *Car.*, 4.11.1, “God is participated only; creation both participates and communicates” (trans. Berthold).

if they represent different degrees of personal participation in the fullness of reality (7.411).<sup>65</sup>

If it is the experience of relation that constitutes the cognitive event, if reality is known and is manifested and revealed through relation and the dynamics of relation, the question about its fullness (7.42), then “the hermeneutic access to the [philosophical] problem of the *causal principle* of reality can be freed from the dualism and contrast between physics and metaphysics,” between science and ontology (7.43). The dynamics of each person’s (and humanity’s) relation to reality is an actual event, “which can be subjugated to neither the natural ‘objectivity’ of the sensible,” to the natural sciences, “nor to the abstract (mental, reductive) nature of metaphysical enquiry” (7.4202). This is in no way to be understood as a “proof of God’s existence” or even “proof of God’s inexistence” or anything of the sort: the very notion of a critical ontology is constituted against “proofs” as compulsorily convincing constructs of the logical faculty. However, it recognizes the communal affirmation of the presence of the relationship’s Other—of the wholly Other of each person’s relationship with reality, God. The personal discovery of a personal creative activity (ἐνέργεια) beyond physical reality, which constitutes physical reality, “is a hermeneutic access to reality that cannot be confined or subjugated to the ‘extra-subjective’ (objective) certainties of science and metaphysics. It remains a hermeneutic proposal that differs from other hermeneutic proposals in the fullness of the personal relation to [and participation in] the cosmic reality that it actualizes” (7.43). The fullness and realism of the subjective, personal, cognitive participation in reality is to be judged by “the wide referentiality of relation, its *communal* validation” (7.44). The *meaning* that each person’s participation in reality grants to his life, the meaning that each society’s or community’s collective participation in reality grants to each facet of human coexistence, makes a very real and tangible difference in the mode of that participation (7.45).

The recognition of a personal causal principle of the world in the field of ontology has direct implications for our human coexistence. If the universe in its infinite complexity and vastness is not a product of randomness but the outcome of a personal activity (ἐνέργεια), if the world is a manifestation of God’s activity (ἐνέργεια), then “the principle of conscious experience (consciousness), freedom, and creativity is not an inexplicable exception pertaining only to the human subject, but the causal principle

65. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Q.Dub.*, 44.9–15, “For to those who recognize the Creator from the beauty of the created things and through these are led up to their cause, there is knowledge of good; but to those who remain in the sense-perception alone and, being tricked by the superficiality of perceptible things, have turned every appetite of the soul toward matter, there is the knowledge of evil” (trans. Prassas).

of existence”—the causal principle of existence as the existential otherness arising from consciousness and freedom. If that is the case, freedom and otherness must be recognized as “real (and not evaluative, i.e., arbitrary) criteria for the genuineness of history and society: dependence, subjugation, and oppression are to be recognized as very real forms of existential corruption,” not merely as the corruption of social relations (5.22).

Ultimately, the question of a critical ontology is a question of meaning, a question of truth. And this question is not limited to the world of philosophy, but extends to the world of human coexistence, of civilization and history.

Philosophical *ontology* is a proposal concerning the *meaning* of man’s existence and its relations—a proposal of meaning concerning the mode of existence. And *critical* ontology builds its proposal on the subject’s existential self-awareness as an experience of freedom and otherness. Freedom and otherness become accessible to us as a cognitive and empirical event through relation and the dynamic indeterminacy of relation. The criterion of reality is the experience of relation to reality and the verification of the relation’s genuineness through its collective widening—i.e., the equally indeterminable dynamics of the social event that constitutes history and civilisation. (8.21)

Yannaras completes his *Propositions for a Critical Ontology* with proposition number 9: “For a critical ontology, truth is relation. And relation—i.e., truth—is never taken for granted. It is an attainment” (9). If Ludwig Wittgenstein has completed his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* with the famous phrase “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” I could say that Yannaras’ answer would be: *Whereof one cannot speak, therein one must participate*.

### Employing Yannaras’ Thought as a Hermeneutic Tool

I have attempted to expound Christos Yannaras’ philosophical terminology through perhaps his most densely philosophical book, i.e., *Propositions for a Critical Ontology*, without presenting those monographs of his that explicitly reflect on ecclesial ontology, history, and practice; that is, by consciously overlooking the fact that in many of his other works he engages directly with the ecclesial event’s history, the patristic tradition, and the thought of church fathers such as the Cappadocians or Maximus the Confessor. I have chosen to do so in order to first present Yannaras as a philosopher and not as a commentator or exegete, which would be a grave misunderstanding of

the nature of his philosophical work and would deprive me of *hermeneutic tools*, supplying me with *helpful comments* instead. (The same misunderstanding would be effected if I were to approach Maximus the Confessor merely as a commentator or exegete—regardless of the fact that he might very well have considered himself as one.) I aimed at studying Yannaras' primary contributions to philosophy and, specifically, ontology. However, it is exactly his scholarly engagement (and the monographs that are its fruits) with Maximus the Confessor, the church fathers, and the ecclesial tradition, history, and practice that makes Yannaras' work so valuable in shedding light on Maximus the Confessor's dense and difficult—while at the same time immensely illuminating—formulations and definitions, Maximus' comprehensive *Weltanschauung*.

The definitions of a great many Greek terms provided in the previous pages will prove valuable in the course of the present study. Yannaras provides us with definitions and elucidations of key notions for the Greek fathers and Maximus the Confessor—such as λόγος, substance (οὐσία), hypostasis (ὑπόστασις), nature (φύσις), person (πρόσωπον), activity (ἐνέργεια), etc.—in a manner that is not lacking in patristic grounding and in a way that is more illuminating than a significant number of philological treatises and articles on the historical development of these terms' meaning, at least in the context of my systematic endeavor.

The same can be said of John Zizioulas' work, which, however, is dedicatedly theological in nature and, like Yannaras', markedly Maximian in perspective and approach. I will not present John Zizioulas' work in a dedicated chapter, as this has been already done by many.<sup>66</sup> However, the approach, perspective, and terminology of Christos Yannaras and John Zizioulas will be cited and implemented throughout my study, both in chapters dealing with the early Christian/patristic context of Maximus' philosophy, as in the previous one, and in chapters expounding the basic tenets of Maximus the Confessor's unique ontology. It is this perspective of Yannaras that I will refer to as "relational."

With this perspective in mind, I can now proceed to a contemporary reading of a number of patristic Christian and Maximian themes in ontology, cosmology, and anthropology, before embarking on the study of his understanding of motion and temporality and his notion of time, as this preliminary study is a prerequisite for the latter one.

66. See e.g. Knight, *Theology of John Zizioulas*, which also includes a comprehensive bibliography up to 2007. Apart from this particular book, a great number of doctoral and master's theses on Zizioulas' work have been written and published worldwide.