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## Epistemology and the Noetic Faculty of the Soul

**A**MONG THE FOUR MAJOR questions of philosophy as understood by Kant, the first one is: “What can I know?” According to Kant, the previous question (which is the essence of epistemology) is the most important philosophical problem, and it introduces us to all other philosophical questions. Indeed, if we have not first of all estimated and evaluated human cognitive capacities—through which one can acquire, assimilate, and criticize pieces of knowledge—we cannot know anything with certainty. Furthermore, in the context of epistemology, philosophers are concerned with the search for criteria and methods by which one can justify truth claims.

Kant has correctly criticized dogmatic rationalism by highlighting and emphasizing the fundamental difference between the object of consciousness and consciousness’s reference to its object. In other words, Kant has emphasized that we should not confuse the thing-in-itself (i.e., the thing *per se*) with our cognitions about it. However, at a next level, consciousness’s reference to its object can be regarded as an object of conscious investigation (i.e., we may reflect on our cognitions), and this process may continue indefinitely, thus giving rise to an infinite series of cognitions about one’s cognitions. By analyzing cognitions about one’s cognitions and then cognitions about one’s cognitions about one’s cognitions, etc., repeating this analytical process indefinitely, we confine philosophy to cognitions about philosophy and, even worse, to an analysis of propositions that have no real significance.

One can validly criticize dogmatic rationalism for reducing philosophy to a naïve system of speech games, but the overcritical attitude of analytic philosophy concurs with the overcritical attitude of nihilism, whose roots can be traced back to the thought of Friedrich Nietzsche. In his book *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche severely criticizes reason (i.e., a rational motive for a belief or action) and, particularly, instrumental rationality: instrumental rationality is focused on the most efficient or cost-effective means of achieving a specific end, but it does not itself reflect on the value of that end, nor is it concerned with goals of higher value, such as the advancement of human understanding and the improvement of the human condition. But, in contradistinction to analytic philosophy, which may, ultimately, lead to a philosophical “assassination” of philosophy, Nietzsche is not an unqualified enemy of reason; instead, he argues that reason, and, therefore, truth have not been adequately investigated by his predecessors in the history of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> According to Nietzsche, what philosophers actually do is to defend judgments which are equivalent to advocates’ tricks or their own hearts’ desires, and they present them in abstract forms and by means of arguments which they have articulated after (not before) the original conception of their ideas.<sup>2</sup> However, at this point, Nietzsche makes a mistake: the validity of a premise depends not on its “genealogy,” but on its logic (i.e., on its consistency), and the logic of a premise, in its turn, depends on the fact that it can associate a multitude of data under a concrete perspective, and, therefore, transform them into a harmonious “whole.” Hence—at least when one cares about the consistency of one’s syllogisms and does not have the arrogance of Hegel to argue that one’s philosophy signals the end of the history of philosophy—philosophers are not as dishonest as Nietzsche contends.

Consciousness is an outgrowth of life, but it is not an *a posteriori* one; it is potentially inherent in what Bergson has called “*élan vital*” (vital impetus), that is, in the tendency of a being to exist. Thus, consciousness exists even in instinct, which is a logic that governs the behavior of the simplest organisms, and in the processes according to which various forms of life adapt to their living conditions. Between instinct, which is the most elementary form of consciousness, and moral and contemplative

1. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Aphorism 1.

2. *Ibid.*, Aphorism 5.

consciousness, which is the most advanced form of consciousness, there are several intermediate stages in the development of consciousness.

The problem of consciousness is intimately related to the connection between the problem of the continuity of life and the problem of the discontinuity between the “absolute” and the “relative.” The problem of the discontinuity between the “absolute” and the “relative” is derived from the difference between temporality (dependence on time) and atemporality (being independent of time). Everything that is measurable is subject to the jurisdiction of time, which is created by consciousness, since, through time, consciousness is capable of controlling reality according to consciousness’s own relativity. Whatever transcends time introduces us to the realm of the “absolute.”

A conscious shift from temporality to atemporality can take place through the substitution of the categories “before” and “after” with the categories “not yet” and “no more.” The categories “not yet” and “no more” enable us to conceive of the edge of the temporal or relative realm, beyond which consciousness seeks the atemporality of the “eschaton” (i.e., the final and unmeasurable). Thus, as I argued in chapter 2, consciousness resorts to imagination. However, as I also argued in chapter 2, imagination cannot create species. Therefore, on the one hand, philosophy has accomplished the task of proving the reality of the Absolute on the grounds of ontological and moral evidence, but, on the other hand, the truth that philosophy has discovered in this way is unstable (due to the instability of imagination, to which I referred in chapter 2); philosophy has not managed to enter into the substance of the Absolute, and, ultimately, it leads to the conclusion that the source of the significance of being is not consciousness itself, but the Absolute, which, for this reason, is consciousness’s primary object of pursuit. From the previous perspective, we can argue that philosophy contributes to the knowledge of the Absolute, but, with regard to this issue, philosophical reasoning is neither self-reliant nor self-sufficient, and it introduces us to the field of pure theology, which consists in an experience of one’s participation in the Absolute (*methexis*).

However, it should be clear by now that, if epistemology were confined to the functions of consciousness, and if the human soul were identical with consciousness, then pure theology—being concerned with the Absolute and, hence, with the uncreated—would be impossible, since the faculties of consciousness can produce created knowledge (i.e., knowledge that is derived from created sources), whereas the Absolute

is uncreated. For this reason, in the context of methexiology, as I understand and propose it in the present book, the human soul is not only the being of human consciousness, but also it is endowed with the mind (nous), which should be defined according to Hesychasm, that is, the mind should be defined as the repository of God's uncreated energies within the human being; hence, the mind is clearly distinct from the intellect, in the sense that the knowledge that is based on the intellect is derived from a created source (human reason), but the knowledge that is based on God's grace is derived from the uncreated energies of God, i.e., directly from God. Therefore, the mind should be clean and transparent, in the sense that no created source of knowledge should interfere with the mind. In other words, the mind should reach a state of emptiness, or inner stillness and freedom from passions, in order to operate as a pure repository of God's uncreated energies and to be filled with them.

The most important defender of the Hesychast tradition is Gregory Palamas (1296–1359), who is venerated as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. According to Gregory Palamas, Hesychasm can be understood as a deep experience of communion and union with God through the "Jesus Prayer," which exists in several forms; the most familiar formula is: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner," but Gregory Palamas himself was fond of the following formula: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, enlighten my darkness."

Hesychasm is a very old practice in the Greek East, but the first methodical exposition of the Hesychasts' method of prayer in the Greek sources dates only from the late thirteenth century AD, in the work *On Vigilance and the Guarding of the Heart* by Nicephorus the Hesychast, a monk of Mount Athos. Moreover, there is a closely similar description in a work entitled *Method of Holy Prayer and Attentiveness*, which is attributed to Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022 AD), a Byzantine Christian monk and poet, who is venerated as a saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the previous texts, Nicephorus and Symeon the New Theologian describe the physical techniques that are used by Hesychasts as follows:

(i) The aspirant is to sit with his head bowed, and, according to Symeon the New Theologian's *Method of Holy Prayer and Attentiveness*, the aspirant should rest his beard on his chest and direct his bodily eyes together with the mind toward the middle of his belly, that is toward

his navel. The navel controls the digestive tract, and it is related to liver, spleen, stomach, as well as to the alimentary canal and the generative organs. As Bhagavan Das has written, “it is worth noting that in Sanskrit literature the navel is often treated as more central . . . than the heart.”<sup>3</sup> Other Hesychast texts suggest that the aspirant’s gaze should be fixed on the place of the heart. The heart is also closely associated with the thymus; one of the most important roles of the thymus is the induction of central tolerance (a mechanism by which newly developing T cells and B cells are rendered non-reactive to self).

(ii) The aspirant’s breathing rhythm is to be slowed down. In particular, in Symeon the New Theologian’s *Method of Holy Prayer and Attentiveness*, we read that the aspirant should restrain the inhalation of his breath through the nose, so as not to breathe in and out at his ease.

(iii) As he controls his breathing, the aspirant is at the same time to search inwardly for the place of the heart. In particular, Nicephorus writes that the Hesychast is to imagine his breath entering through the nostrils and then passing down within the lungs until it reaches the heart, and, in this way, he is to make his mind remain with the breath within the body, so that mind and heart are united.

Through the aforementioned psychosomatic method of prayer, the Hesychasts want to teach that the mind (i.e., the repository of the Holy Spirit) should be freed from the influences of both the body and the discursive intellect, receptive to God’s uncreated energies, and concentrated in the heart in order to transmute the human being, as a psychosomatic unity, into a spiritualized being in the image of God, and, thus, achieve the deification of man. From the previous perspective, when we read in the book of Genesis 1:26 that God created man in His image, we should understand that God endowed man with the mind, which is the image of God, since it is the repository of God’s uncreated energies, known also as the uncreated grace of the Holy Spirit. There are similarities between the Hesychasts’ notion of mind and the biblical term *neshamah*, which literally means breath, and it can be broadly understood as the “soul proper” and the ability to become partakers of God. In the Old Testament, there are several references to the *neshamah*, such as the following: Isaiah 30:33: breath of God as hot wind kindling a flame; 2 Samuel 22:16 and Job 4:9: as destroying wind; Job 32:8 and 33:4: as cold wind producing ice; 1 Kings 17:17, Isaiah 42:5, Job 27:3, and Daniel 10:7: breath of man;

3. Das, *The Science of the Sacred Word*, Vol. 1, 82.

Genesis 2:7 and Job 34:14 and 36:4: breath of life and God's breath in man; Isaiah 2:22: man in whose nostrils is but a breath.

In his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts* (known also simply as his *Triads*), Gregory Palamas argues that, through pure prayer, which, in essence, is a mental state of Christocentric stillness and spiritual freedom, one becomes, through an intimate knowledge of God within the heart, a true theologian. Additionally, in his *Triads*, Gregory Palamas argues that pure prayer gives rise to a peculiar joy of the heart at the coming of grace, and it leads to a peculiar vision of God, Who manifests Himself in what Palamas calls "uncreated light" (in Greek, *āktiston phos*), or divine radiation (in Greek, *theia ēllampsis*) of God. This light, he maintains, was the same light in which Christ appeared in Mount Tabor at the Transfiguration. It was also the divine light that, according to Acts 9:1–6, Paul experienced on the road to Damascus. In the context of the vision of God's uncreated light, the mind is freed from the influences of both the body and the discursive intellect, i.e., no longer do the physical and intellectual faculties exert any influence over the noetic faculty, and the mind is filled with divine grace. Additionally, in the context of the vision of God's uncreated light, the body, being controlled by the mind, which thus becomes the overseer of the body, is freed from the sin.

Hesychasm is very sensitive to symbolism, and Hesychasts often use a poetic language in order to refer to the experience of deification, which consists in an existential state in which man is unceasingly united with the source of the significance of being (i.e., with God,) and, therefore, he is a partaker of God's mode of being, which is freedom. By being unceasingly united with the source of the significance of being, man is freed from both the logic of the intellect and the logic of the instincts, and, in this way, he is in a state of unceasing prayer, in accordance with Jesus's Parable of the Persistent Widow (Luke 18:1–8), and with the apostle Paul's call to "pray unceasingly" (1 Thess 5:17). When humans "pray unceasingly"—that is, when they are unceasingly united with the source of the significance of being—they are historically active and responsible persons, but the purpose of their historical activity transcends history, and, thus, they are not subjugated to the logic of historical necessities, since they unceasingly refer ("pray") to the Absolute. On the other hand, if human historical activity is exhausted in the pursuit of historical goals—i.e., if the accomplishment of each and every historical task is merely a means to another historical task—then humans are subjected to

the ratio of accounting, of instinctive passions, and of “efficiency indices” instituted by authoritarian political and business elites.

As I argued in the previous chapters, the scholastic representatives of philosophical realism, including Thomas Aquinas, having only a problematic and fragmented access to classical Greek philosophy, misinterpreted Platonic ideas as logical substances and, in the context of their interpretation of Christianity, they identified God’s wills with logical substances. Therefore, they gave rise to a rationalist world-conception, known also as “natural theology,” whose fundamental principles have been methodically expounded by Thomas Aquinas and can be summarized as follows: (i) Reason (*ratio*) governs the soul, and reason’s indirect access to God is the greatest possible spiritual achievement of which the human being is capable. (ii) Love as an attribute of the human being is inferior to reason, because will is determined by the knowledge of the Good as a logical substance and, therefore, by reason. (iii) Freedom as an attribute of the human being is inferior to reason, because freedom necessarily depends on cognition, and, therefore, it is determined by reason. (iv) God’s essence is identical with His energies, in the sense that the scholastic representatives of philosophical realism think of God as an unknowable essence or as an unknowable pure energy, and, therefore, they preclude man from knowing God directly. In other words, by discarding the Hesychasts’ essence–energies distinction, the scholastic representatives of philosophical realism confine man to *created* sources of knowledge, and they even assert that the divine grace which, according to them, perfects reason is a “supernatural,” yet created, gift of God to mankind. In the context of the previous rationalist world-conception, pure prayer is essentially impossible, since God is an inaccessible essence or pure energy. Man can speculate about an inaccessible essence or pure energy through his discursive intellect, but he cannot develop a personal relationship with an inaccessible essence or pure energy. Hence, if God is an inaccessible essence or pure energy, prayer reduces to an expression of romantic feelings to an imaginary fatherly figure.

In contrast to scholasticism, the Hesychasts emphasize that—while, with regard to God’s and humanity’s essences, any kind of direct knowledge of God by man is impossible (since God’s essence is uncreated, but man’s essence is created)—God’s energies are uncreated, distinct from His essence (yet, an outgrowth of His essence), and accessible to human beings, in the sense that human minds, having been created in the image of God, can partake of God’s uncreated energies, thus providing people

with *an uncreated source of knowledge*. Therefore, in the context of Hesychasm, pure prayer is meaningful, and, in fact, it is the essence of pure theology.

Hesychasm was called in question and challenged during the decade 1337–47, in what is known as the Hesychast controversy. The attack on Hesychasm was launched by a learned Greek from southern Italy, Barlaam the Calabrian (ca. 1290–1348), who was influenced by the fourteenth-century rationalist schools of Western Europe. Barlaam was answered by a learned monk from Mount Athos, Gregory Palamas. Palamas's famous book *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, which was probably written between 1338 and 1341, is comprised of nine treatises in the form of questions and answers. By early spring 1341, it was clear that the dispute between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam would need to be resolved by conciliar means. Six patriarchal councils were held in Constantinople between 1341 and 1351 to consider the issues. The dispute over Hesychasm came before a council held in Constantinople on June 10, 1341 and presided over by Emperor Andronicus III Palaiologos. This council lasted only one day, and it vindicated Gregory Palamas. However, Emperor Andronicus III died just five days after the council ended, and, thus, Barlaam hoped for a second chance to present his case against Hesychasm. John V Palaiologos, son of Emperor Andronicus III, succeeded his father in 1341, at age nine. The wife of Emperor Andronicus III Palaiologos was Empress Anna, the daughter of Count Amadeus V of Savoy by his second wife Maria of Brabant. Barlaam soon realized the futility of pursuing his cause, and he left for Calabria, where he converted to the Roman Catholic Church and was appointed Bishop of Gerace. After Barlaam's departure from Byzantium, the theologian Gregory Akindynos continued the legacy of Barlaam's theology in Byzantium and became the chief critic of Palamas.

A council held in Constantinople in August 1341 condemned Akindynos, but Akindynos and his supporters gained a brief victory at a council held in 1344, since the then Patriarch of Constantinople, John XIV (surnamed Kalekas), was opposing Hesychasm, in general, and Gregory Palamas, in particular. In November 1344, the Patriarch's synod excommunicated Gregory Palamas for heresy and vindicated Akindynos, even though the latter had been condemned as a heretic by the council that was convened in August 1341. Moreover, Empress Anna and Patriarch John XIV had Gregory Palamas imprisoned. Patriarch John XIV was an active participant in the Byzantine civil war of 1341–47 as a member

of the regency for John V Palaiologos against John VI Kantakouzenos. The supporters of John VI Kantakouzenos were in favor of Hesychasm, whereas Patriarch John XIV and Empress Anna were spiritually closer to the West. In May 1346, John VI Kantakouzenos was crowned emperor at Adrianople, and, in February 1347, John VI Kantakouzenos having prevailed over his enemies, a new council declared Patriarch John XIV deposed, affirmed the resolutions of the council of 1341, and it excommunicated Akindynos and his followers. The new Patriarch of Constantinople, Isidore Buchiras, celebrated the triumph of Hesychasm by replacing several senior members of the ecclesiastical hierarchy with supporters of Hesychasm who were loyal friends of Gregory Palamas's. Moreover, Patriarch Isidore ordained Gregory Palamas as Archbishop of Thessalonica. In 1351, a new patriarchal council at Constantinople, known also as the Fifth Council of Constantinople, proclaimed that the Hesychast theological doctrines are the exclusive binding truth for the whole Orthodox church. After Gregory Palamas's death, the controversies around Hesychasm continued until 1368, when the then Patriarch of Constantinople, Philotheos, convened a last council on this matter, which proclaimed Gregory Palamas a saint.

The victory of Hesychasm in the Eastern Roman Empire signals that, for the Eastern Orthodox church, *grace precedes reason, mystery precedes rationality, hypostasis (personhood) precedes essence, and the purpose of the genuine church of Christ is the deification of humanity*. Therefore, the spiritual secret of Hesychasm is that the genuine church of Christ is a community of uncreated knowledge across time and above space, a spiritual community of persons capable of participating and progressing in the Holy Spirit's uncreated grace, a community of spiritually free persons pursuing their ontological perfection, beyond the state, beyond worldly religious authorities and institutions, and beyond the logic of physical and historical necessities. In this way, humans can achieve what the apostle Paul writes in Ephesians 4:23: to be unceasingly renewed in the spirit of their minds.

Apart from Gregory Palamas, another very influential medieval Hesychast who fought against Western rationalism was Symeon the New Theologian (949–1022 AD), a Byzantine Christian monk and poet who is venerated by the Eastern Orthodox church as a saint. Additionally, the Eastern Orthodox church has given the title of "Theologian" to only three saints, one of whom is Symeon the New Theologian (along with John the Evangelist and Gregory of Nazianzus). The title of "Theologian"

was applied to Symeon not in the modern academic sense of theological studies, but to recognize someone who spoke about God from personal experience of God's uncreated energies. On the other hand, Western theology is not focused on personhood, but on logical substances (in the case of scholastic philosophical realism) or on subjective psychological functions (in the case of nominalism). Thus, Western theology cannot easily understand the difference of "religion" as an institutional and psychological issue from "revelation" as a divine call to authentic life, real being.

In the tenth century AD, in the Greek East, Symeon the New Theologian expresses a quest for a kind of faith that is spontaneous, comes from the inside, and it is not exhausted in conforming to conventional specifications. In contradistinction to the theology of Symeon the New Theologian, ritualism seems to declare that the clergy somehow exerts authority over God, who is assumed to have granted his omnipotence to church formalities. Thus, spiritually incompetent clergymen hide their incompetence behind ritualism. Ritualism underpins and secures the psychological authority of the clergy over the laity, and it maintains superstition.

The difference of the Orthodox Christian faith from academic theology can be understood by delving into Symeon the New Theologian's *Hymns of Divine Eros*, in which he contrasts the sense of divine illumination (i.e., a deifying experience) with abstract knowledge and with the argument that everything is explicable entirely within scriptural terms. Symeon the New Theologian's spiritual guide was Symeon the Studite, an influential monk of the famous Monastery of Stoudios in Constantinople during the tenth century AD. Symeon the Studite advised Symeon the New Theologian to read the book *On the Spiritual Law*, which was written by Mark the Ascetic, a Hesychast who lived in the fifth century AD and was a disciple of John Chrysostom's (Mark the Ascetic is also venerated by the Eastern Orthodox church as a saint). Mark the Ascetic, like Plato, argues that the kind of wisdom that a man can achieve by participating in the Absolute presupposes not only the ability to give an account, but also a psychic cleansing or cure, and, therefore, he connects epistemology with ethics and psychotherapy.

Symeon the New Theologian read Mark the Ascetic's book *On the Spiritual Law*, and he was excited by the following statement that he found in that book: "seeking therapy, pay attention to your conscience and act as it dictates, and, thus, you will benefit yourself." Following Mark

the Ascetic's previous advice—according to which “therapy” is the goal of spiritual life, and “paying attention to one's conscience” is the means to spiritual therapy—Symeon the New Theologian articulated a theology that is founded on the principle that a faithful person can be united with God even during his present life. In particular, Symeon argues that the purpose of ascetic life is to cure “spiritual illness,” by which he means selfishness and the pathological attitudes that are associated with it, that is, the separation of man's will from God's will. Why does the essence of spiritual illness consist in the separation of man's will from God's will? Because, when man's spirit is selfish (i.e., committed to the service of its own will) it cannot actualize its God-given potential, which is to become a hypostasis that attains to universality by receiving the universal God. A really faithful person maintains an infinitely large psychological space in order to receive and accommodate God, whereas a selfish man is shrunk to and entrenched in his “ego,” and he approaches everything and everybody from a utilitarian perspective.

Vaingloriousness, voluptuousness, and avarice are “symptoms” of selfishness that usually are not directly manifested, because they are usually hidden behind a socially acceptable principle of self-affirmation. For instance, I may behave in a saccharine way in order to take advantage of other persons, I may help others in order to affirm myself and/or to receive benefits, etc. However, even though others may not be aware of our hidden expediencies, and even though we may deceive ourselves by focusing on deeds and not on intentions, Mark the Ascetic argues that our secrets are known by God and by our conscience, and that God and our conscience bring correction to us.

Mark the Ascetic argues that, in the context of asceticism, the purpose of paying attention to one's conscience is the following: we resort to our inner judge, precisely, to our conscience, because “conscience is the natural Bible” and those who study it have an “experience of divine perception,” and because our conscience knows our intentions, and, therefore, it can inform us about what is really good and judge dishonesty. Therefore, from Mark the Ascetic's perspective, the essence of asceticism consists in developing a moral theory that is focused not on our deeds themselves, but on the intentions that guide our deeds, and in accepting the master of the Good, namely, God, as the king of our intentionality. The previous thesis of Mark the Ascetic transcends every conventional recipe for moral behavior and ritual worship, and it underpins the theology of Symeon the New Theologian.

The era in which Symeon the New Theologian lived, that is, the tenth and the eleventh centuries AD, was characterized by the domination of rationalist theology over Western Europe. As regards the doctrines of Christianity, this new Western theology was made manifest through the doctrinal innovation of the *Filioque*. As I argued in chapter 3, the doctrinal innovation of the *Filioque* is intellectually rooted in the tendency of several Western theologians (including Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas) to interpret the revelation of God and, particularly, the Persons of the Holy Trinity according to the model of Neoplatonic ontological series that describe the descent of Logos into the world by identifying the divine essence with the divine energies and by identifying each Person of the Holy Trinity, individually, with the divine essence as if each Person of the holy Trinity were an energy of the divine essence, and, in this way, they reduced the energies of the Persons of the Holy Trinity to created symbols through which, according to Western theologians, humans can know God. For this reason, in the context of Augustinian theology, the only way in which humans can know God in this life consists in ecstasy, while unceasing prayer, to which I referred earlier in this chapter, is impossible. From the perspective of Augustine's Neoplatonism and according to the doctrinal innovation of the *Filioque*, the Holy Spirit, proceeding from both the Father and the Son, is an ontological "stage" that produces created symbols of God (created grace). Therefore, the doctrinal innovation of the *Filioque* and, generally, Western Christianity's Neoplatonism lead to the following conclusions: (i) humans cannot participate in God, but can only think about God; (ii) since the symbols of God's revelation, the divine signatures in nature, are created, God's grace is created, and, particularly, it consists in a psychological habit that guides the human will toward God. In the context of the previous Western theology, the deification of humanity (i.e., human participation in the Absolute, the "uncreated") is impossible, and, since humans are confined to the realm of created beings, the spiritual freedom of humanity is a shadow of itself.

The aforementioned Western theological tradition cannot understand the Hesychast teachings about the liberation of the mind from selfish passions, because, by arguing that God's grace consists in a natural habit (something created), the aforementioned rationalist theological tradition identifies the mind with the intellect, and, therefore, it treats a mind that is subjected to rational selfishness as if it were a divinely illumined one, and it dignifies technocracy, looking down upon those who, like Jesus Christ, are "humble in heart" (Matt 11:29) and upon those

to whom Jesus Christ referred when he said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (Matt 5:3). Moreover, during the era of Symeon the New Theologian, a form of technocratic theology had already started developing in Byzantium, too. That Byzantine technocratic theology was based on knowledge derived from the study of books and formal definitions, and, even though it was outwardly maintaining all the characteristic elements of Eastern Orthodox Christianity, it did not have a strong bond with Orthodox spiritual life. Therefore, even though the previous Byzantine technocratic theology could not be accused of doctrinal deviations, which would trigger theological controversies, it was severely problematic as regards the maintenance of the Orthodox Christian way of life, that is, as regards the application of the Greek church fathers’ teachings, which had been degraded into a system of theological formalism. During the era of Symeon the New Theologian, the theological elite of Constantinople was perceiving “holiness” not as the Christians’ traditional way of life—which can be achieved by anyone who decides to follow the path of unceasing prayer, called *nepsis* by the Hesychasts—but as a historical phenomenon that belongs to the past, and, therefore, the practice of Christianity in the present was reduced to ritual worship and doctrinal accuracy. The previous trends of academic theology were rejected and severely criticized by Symeon the New Theologian. Moreover, Symeon the New Theologian attempted to reform Byzantine monasticism, since, by the eleventh century, monks had become subservient to the emperor and overly concerned with the acquisition of property, books, and artefacts, instead of following the path of unceasing prayer.

Symeon the New Theologian endured severe opposition from church authorities, and one of his most fierce enemies was the chief theologian of the emperor’s court, Archbishop Stephen of Nicomedia, who had previously been a politician and diplomat. Under the influence of rationalist theology, Archbishop Stephen accused Symeon the New Theologian of obscurant enthusiasm and heresy for supporting personal direct experience of God’s grace and for teaching that direct experience of God’s grace gives monks the authority to preach and give absolution of sins, without the need for formal ordination (as practiced by his own teacher, Symeon the Studite). However, Symeon argues that the real heresy is to teach that man is incapable of having direct experience of God.<sup>4</sup> In contradistinction to Archbishop Stephen’s theology, Symeon

4. *Discourses* 29.4; Hymn 27.125–32.

emphasizes not only the possibility, but also the necessity of personally experiencing God's uncreated grace. Furthermore, Archbishop Stephen found fault with Symeon for revering his spiritual father, Symeon the Studite, whom Archbishop Stephen attacked as unholy and sinful. In 1005, after an ecclesiastical trial, Symeon the New Theologian was forced to resign from his position as abbot of the monastery of Saint Mamas, near Constantinople, and, in 1009, he was sent into exile near Paloukiton, a small village near Chrysopolis, on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus, where, with the economic assistance of one of his spiritual children, he renovated a deserted and ruined chapel that had been dedicated to Saint Marina, and he created his hermitage (religious retreat) there. Symeon spent the last thirteen years of his life in exile, remaining at the hermitage of Saint Marina, and he reposed on March 12, 1022. However, ultimately, the Eastern Orthodox church vindicated Symeon by canonizing him and bestowing upon him the title of "New Theologian," thus confessing that the Holy Spirit is the ultimate criterion of truth and the ultimate church authority.<sup>5</sup>

Symeon the New Theologian is interested in the kind of knowledge that underpins salvation (in Greek, *soteria*), meaning ontological fulfillment, and not in the kind of knowledge that merely satisfies man's natural curiosity. In the context of the Greek patristic thought, "salvation" does not mean a static, passive, and actually tedious state, nor an infinite extension of time. Furthermore, in the context of the Greek patristic thought, "hell" does not mean an eternal penalty in a legalistic sense. In particular, from the Hesychasts' perspective, "salvation" does not mean that one is "saved from" something (e.g., from a danger or from a penalty), but it means that one is integral, whole, precisely, that one has reached ontological fulfillment. In other words, "salvation" means the full actualization of one's existential potential. Thus, the Greek word *soteria* is derived from the Greek word *sōos*, which means integral, whole, healthy, and safe. Similarly, the English word "salvation" comes from the late Latin *salvationem*, which comes from *salvare*, which itself is derived from the Latin *salvus*, meaning "healthy" or "safe." Moreover, the proto-Indo-European root of "salvus" is *solwos*, the base of which is *sol-*, meaning "whole." Furthermore, from the perspective of the previous remarks, "holiness" means a struggle for ontological integration and wholeness, and the kind of knowledge that underpins salvation is a kind of practical spiritual therapy.

5. Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology*, 75.

In his *Hymns*, Saint Symeon the New Theologian emphasizes the sense of God's uncreated light, and he maintains that God revealed Himself through the incarnation of His Logos in order to save humanity, and that humanity's salvation is impossible without the continuous presence of God; in Saint Symeon's own words, humans can know God only "by the vision of the Light which comes from Him." Man's spiritual freedom is founded on and stems from the continuous unity between man and God, and, therefore, in his *Hymns*, Saint Symeon writes the following: "By what boundless mercy, my Savior, have you allowed me to become a member of your body? . . . How is that you have clothed me in the brilliant garment, radiant with the splendor of immortality, transforming all my members into light?"<sup>6</sup> Additionally, in his *Hymns*, Symeon the New Theologian expresses his gratitude to God by writing the following: "I thank you that you have become one spirit with me, without confusion, . . . you the God of all. And that you have become everything for me . . . I express my gratitude to you because for me you have become unsetting light and non-declining sun."<sup>7</sup>

Symeon the New Theologian clarifies exactly what he means by the "total salvation" of humanity in his fifteenth hymn, which Dionysios Zagoraios, an eighteenth-century Orthodox Christian priest and monk, silenced and excluded from his 1790 edition of Symeon the New Theologian's complete works, because Symeon the New Theologian's fifteenth hymn is too provocative for narrow-minded pietists. In particular, in his fifteenth hymn, verses 121, 127–28, 141–79, 226–27, and 235–38, Symeon the New Theologian emphasizes God's presence and energy within and outside the world by using images of physical love related to wedding, nudity, and sexual intercourse. In fact, from the perspective of Symeon's fifteenth hymn, Christ's church is a symbol of the spiritual wedding between man and his archetype, namely, Christ. In the context of the church mystery, man walks barefoot (i.e., with a deep sense of holiness, in accordance with Isaiah 20:2), bareheaded (i.e., with a mind that is devoid of the intellect's images and receptive to God's uncreated grace, in accordance with Isaiah 42:1 and Matthew 5:3) and openhearted in order to joyfully meet and be united with the non-declining Sun, namely, God.

6. Symeon the New Theologian, "Hymn 2," ed. Koder, *Sources Chrétiennes*, Vol. 156, 178.

7. Ibid., Preface to the Hymns: "The Mystical Prayer of Our Father Saint Symeon," ed. Koder, *Sources Chrétiennes*, Vol. 156, 150–52.

According to methexiology, which is founded on the works of Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas, the deifying vision of God's uncreated light is not a kind of divine reward or favor, since it is not an exclusive privilege of the "prizewinners" of the afterlife, but it is also a privilege of those who are spiritually cured in this life. The vision of God's uncreated light, to which Symeon the New Theologian and Gregory Palamas refer, is a consequence of *metanoia* (an ancient Greek word that means "changing one's mind," precisely, turning toward what is holy and eternal) and spiritual freedom in this life. In other words, by throwing off our soul's darkness (i.e., selfishness), and, thus, by being devoid of egoism, we automatically see God's grace, which flows unceasingly toward us. Those who advocate a rigid rationalist and egocentrically idealist attitude toward theology have no hope of gazing at the divine splendor in this life, because of the following reasons: (i) they identify free and intentional will—which is called *gnomikōn thēlema* by the Greek church fathers—with the concept of "natural will," in general, and, therefore, they are unable to conceive of a will or disposition that is not determined by egoism; (ii) they identify logic with the mind, and, therefore, they are unable to conceive of the intellect liberated from the "ego"; (iii) they identify God's uncreated light with God's uncreated essence, and, therefore, they render human participation in God's uncreated light impossible (since man cannot participate in God's essence, anyway), and they teach that, in the afterlife, a material form of fire will be burning the damned humans, while the saved ones will be rewarded with the vision of God and the *eudemonia* that stems from the concurrence between God's will and man's will. According to the scholastic theology of the afterlife, punishment and reward are determined by the judicial judgment of a judgmental and revengeful God, whose ethos reasonably incites humans to atheism, unless someone is neurotically fixated on the idea of God. In other words, the only genuine atheists are those who negate God's goodness and transform Him into an oppressive source of rules of correct conduct.

In his forty-sixth hymn, Symeon the New Theologian writes that we must know our divine father, and that the knowledge of our divine father can be achieved by experiencing our baptismal grace and not merely by studying and preserving religious doctrines and rituals. Religious formalism conveys the impression that the Incarnation of the divine Logos took place only formally, intellectually, but not substantially. Therefore, Symeon the New Theologian emphasizes that we should experience

God's uncreated light, and that our acts should reflect the Savior's mode of being.

Methexiology, in keeping with Hesychasm, emphasizes the essence–energies distinction and, by implication, the mind–intellect distinction. For this reason, it is very useful to delve into the controversy between Gregory Palamas and Barlaam. Barlaam argued that the Hesychasts' epistemology is similar to the heresy of Messalianism,<sup>8</sup> because, according to Barlaam, the Hesychasts aim at achieving a physical vision of God by experiencing what they regard as being God's essence. In keeping with the Augustinian and Thomistic theological traditions, which prevailed in the scholastic West, Barlaam maintains that the divine light to which the Hesychasts refer is a product of created grace. As I have already mentioned, the scholastic West, in general, maintains that the energies of God are either identified with God's essence, in which case they are inaccessible to man, or constitute created apparitions of grace, in which case they are accessible to man. By contrast, in his *Hagioritic Tome*, Gregory Palamas emphasizes that, unlike Messalianism, Hesychasm neither seeks a physical vision of the totally transcendent and unknowable essence of God nor identifies God's uncreated light with God's essence. In particular, in keeping with Plato's theory of spiritual vision and with the suprara-tional noetic experiences of the biblical prophets and of Christ's disciples, Palamas argues that the uncreated light mentioned by the Hesychasts is a manifestation of God's uncreated energies, which are distinct from God's essence, and that God's uncreated energies can be perceived by both the mind (i.e., the repository of God's energies in the human being) and the senses, but only after the senses have been purified and spiritualized by the return of the mind to the heart, wherein it is filled with God's uncreated grace.

After the aforementioned response by Gregory Palamas, Barlaam put forward another accusation against Hesychasm, claiming that, by advocating the essence–energies distinction, Gregory Palamas had posited the existence of two Gods. Palamas's response to the previous accusation was that both God's essence and His energies are uncreated, and that the distinction between them implies that man is capable of achieving deification by participating in God's energies, while God's essence remains

8. The term "Messalian" comes from the Syriac term *mesalyāna*, meaning "one who prays." Messalianism was a fourth-century Christian heresy, according to which, through prayer, man experiences the *essence* of God, and, therefore, he is freed from moral obligations and ecclesiastical discipline.

totally inaccessible, and, thus, God is above every essential or logical determination. Founded on the doctrine of the essence–energies distinction, Gregory Palamas’s epistemology implies that humans can know the Good and the truth without the mediation of intellectual images. From this perspective, Palamas’s epistemology is a Christocentric perfection of Plato’s theory vision/knowledge, to which I referred in chapter 2. Moreover, like Plato, Gregory Palamas maintains that the experience of the Absolute (precisely, God’s energies) presupposes a psychic cleansing.

From the perspective of methexiology, and in accordance with Gregory Palamas, the purpose of psychic cleansing is psychological transparency. A soul is transparent if it is cleansed from every element that may impede the descent of God’s uncreated energies into the mind. If the mind is identified with the intellect, that is, if the mind is governed by reason (*ratio*), then the soul is not transparent, because, in that case, the mind is constrained to created sources of knowledge. Nicetas Stethatos, a distinguished eleventh-century Hesychast, in his work *On the Soul*, argues that the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is mentioned in Genesis 2:9, symbolizes two spiritual paths: according to the path that corresponds to the knowledge of Good, man strives to cleanse his mind from every element that may impede the descent of God’s uncreated energies into it, whereas, according to the path that corresponds to the knowledge of evil, man tries to discern good from evil by means of created reason, that is, without seeking his participation in God’s uncreated energies. Hence, through rationalist theology, man repeats Adam’s error, which caused Adam’s exile from the uncreated Paradisiacal light.

Furthermore, Barlaam found fault with Hesychasm for teaching that “pure prayer” consists in praying by concentrating the mind (i.e., the repository of the Holy Spirit’s uncreated grace) in the heart, that is, in the body. According to Barlaam and his followers, the mind should be freed from the body in prayer. The previous argument of Barlaam and his followers is derived from Augustinian mysticism, to which I referred in chapter 1. In his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas maintains that the previous argument of Barlaam and his followers contradicts the apostle Paul’s doctrine that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within man.<sup>9</sup> According to Gregory Palamas, when the mind is cleansed from sin and selfish passions, it functions in concord with the

9. 1 Corinthians 6:19.

body, and man sees in himself the grace that Jesus Christ promised to the pure in heart.

In the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas emphasizes that Hesychasm regards it “as evil for the mind to be concerned with the mindings of the flesh, and not wrong for the mind to be in the body, since the body is not evil.” Moreover, in the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas poses the following question: “We who carry as in vessels of clay, that is, in our bodies, the light of the Father, in the person of Jesus Christ, in which we know the glory of the Holy Spirit—how can it dishonor our mind to dwell in the inner sanctuary of the body?” In the second triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas answers the previous question as follows: “When spiritual joy comes to the body from the mind, it suffers no diminution by this communion with the body, but rather transfigures the body, spiritualizing it. For then, rejecting all evil desires of the flesh, it no longer weighs down the soul that rises up with it, the whole man becoming spirit.”

The heart is the essence of the mind. The soul is united with the body into a unified psychosomatic nexus, and the mind is a power of the soul. But the mind is not an organic component of the soul, because it is derived from outside the soul, in the sense that it is the repository of God’s uncreated grace within the human being. Hence, the mind should be filled only with God’s uncreated grace, since it is the psychic faculty through which man can achieve direct knowledge of God and be deified. In the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas argues that “the heart is the secret chamber of the mind and the prime physical organ of mental power.” Therefore, the term “mind” should not be used interchangeably with the term “intellect.” The intellect is a distinct power of the soul, and, particularly, it is the seat of reason, i.e., the psychic faculty of cognition. Whereas the knowledge that is based on the mind is derived from God’s uncreated energies (i.e., directly from God), the knowledge that is based on the intellect is derived from a created source. “Paradise” as described in the book of Genesis is a symbol of that existential state in which man is united with the source of the significance of being, and, thus, in “Paradise,” the human mind can see God directly. The “Fall of man” as described in Genesis symbolizes the loss of man’s direct communion with God. Before the “Fall,” the human mind was unceasingly oriented toward and concerned with God, whereas, after the “Fall,” the mind of man became mingled with the intellect, and,

therefore, it became dispersed upon the created world, and concerned with the created world.

In the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas argues that, “after the Fall, our inner being naturally adapts itself to outward forms,” and, in the second triad of the same book, he adds that the aim of the Hesychast is to prevent his mind from “straying hither and thither” and to restore the lost direct communion between his mind and God. Moreover, in the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas quotes Basil the Great, arguing that “the mind, when not dispersed outwardly, returns to itself, and, through itself, ascends to God.” With regard to the movements of the mind, Gregory Palamas follows Dionysius the Areopagite, and, thus, he discerns two movements of the mind: the mind is like the eye, in the sense that it sees and observes things other than itself, and, according to Dionysius the Areopagite, this movement of the mind is called the “direct movement” of the mind; but, according to Dionysius, the mind can return to itself, and this movement is called the “circular movement” of the mind. In the first triad of his *Triads in Defense of the Sacred Hesychasts*, Gregory Palamas maintains that the circular movement of the mind is the highest and most befitting mental activity, since, through its circular movement, the mind “even transcends itself and is united with God.”

The thought of the Greek church fathers is founded on the fundamental distinction between the “uncreated” (absolute and timeless) and the “created” (relative and subject to temporality). The human soul is not essentially immortal, but it becomes immortal due to God’s grace. Therefore, man is free to choose if the end of his life will be spiritual death—that is, existence in separation from God, who, according to John 14:6, “is the way and the truth and the life”—or, alternatively, deification and, hence, existential wholeness and eternal life in God.