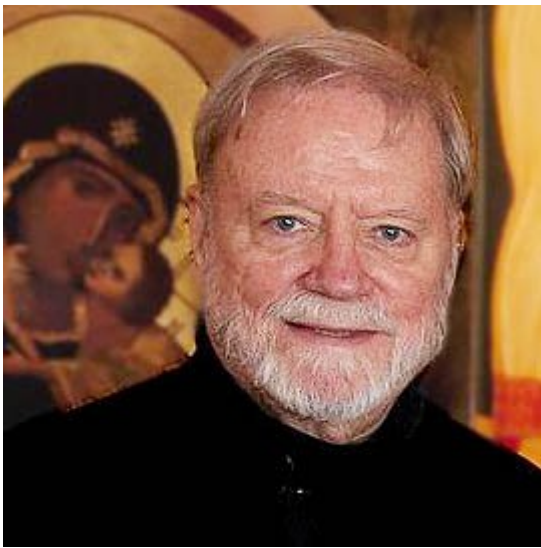


Communion & Division - The Structure of Knowledge: The Loss of the Logos (Fr. Patrick H. Reardon)

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Rev. Patrick H. Reardon

Finally, a third brand of philosophy against which divine revelation should put us on guard is, I submit, the nominalism that appeared in the eleventh century, at exactly the time when the Eastern and Western churches became divided. The villain in this case is John Roscelinus. Since Roman Catholics, after his condemnation at the Council of Soissons in 1092, had the good sense to burn most of his writings, we are obliged mainly to rely on secondary sources to study Roscelinus, which is often enough the case in the history of philosophy. And surely it is significant that the sharpest contemporary critic of Roscelinus was that most *real* of Realist philosophers, St. Anselm of Canterbury, himself the author of that most *real* of Realist demonstrations, the Ontological Argument.

Logic itself, Roscelinus believed, is a “name” game, involving only the critical juxtaposition of conventional verbal symbols. Universal concepts exist only in our thought, he contended, and solely for the purpose of organizing our thought. Universals themselves are no more substantial than the air with which we speak them. They are the mere products of our thought, with no foundation outside of our

thought.

We do well to examine the implications of this thesis with respect to knowledge, because it affects also the processes of reason itself. Let us recall that classical logic recognizes four kinds of syllogistic reasoning: the categorical syllogism, the disjunctive syllogism, the hypothetical syllogism, and the dilemma. Now, of these four types of deduction-based double premises, three are entirely functional: the hypothetical, the disjunctive, and the dilemma. That is to say, if properly constructed, these lead to valid inferences, but they require no noetic content. They actually say nothing beyond themselves. The disjunctive syllogism is founded on an “either/or,” the hypothetical syllogism is based on an “if,” and the dilemma simply combines hypothesis and disjunction. Each of these three syllogisms is, so to speak, pure process, and one observes that each is entirely tentative in its structure: “either/or,” “if,” and a combination of “either/or” and “if.” While each, if properly constructed, is valid, the truth content of such inferences depends entirely on the facticity of empirically known fact, or what Leibniz calls “truths of existence.” They represent solely the mind’s orderly arrangement of facts. They make no reference to what Leibniz calls “truths of essence”; they stand independent of any consideration of being. They are activities of logic set loose from noetic reference. These arguments are logic with no necessary relationship to Logos. By themselves and in conjunction with the empirical faculties, these arguments can deal with the relationship between facts, but without reference to knowable being.

The only rational exposition that refers to a general state of ontology is the categorical syllogism. This is the only deductive process with a universal reference. The categorical syllogism is the only act of reason dependent on what Leibniz calls “truths of essence.” It is the only form of deduction that appeals to truth as such, *veritas in se*, the only form of argument founded on the recognition of a general state of truth. The categorical syllogism has a responsibility, not only to logic, then, but to Logos.

For this reason, every valid categorical syllogism requires a universal term in at least one of its premises. Thus, Roscelinus’s denial of universals effectively dissolved the only real relationship between the processes of logic and the structure and nature of reality. Ironically, his reasoning on the point was perfect: Since all valid inferences of categorical logic require recourse to at least one universal concept, and since no universal concept corresponds to an ontological reality, it logically follows that logic ultimately has no relationship whatsoever to reality. What could be more logical? From this point on, the only possible knowledge available to the human mind is ultimately based on empirical evidence,

and empirical evidence alone never provides absolute certainty, either with regard to facts or to the significance of facts. The human mind thus has no access to that eternal Logos that holds all things together and confers truth on whatever is true.

I think it is very significant that in contemporary predicate logic, since the time of George Boole (1815–1864), the categorical syllogism has been absorbed into the hypothetical syllogism, so that category functions only as a form of hypothesis. This development, I think, has at least the merit of recognizing the present condition of philosophy, which is best described by such adjectives as experimental, provisional, tentative, and makeshift. Indeed, philosophy's current state is perhaps well summed up by the three forms of argument that are still left to it: hypothesis, disjunction, and dilemma.

By reason of this total divorce of logic from the Logos, we find already in Roscelinus the substance of those notions characteristic of nominalism, ideas that are with us still and have certainly had their consequences. Nominalism's denial of the mind's ability to know anything *real* above itself quickly led to the disrepute of metaphysics and eventually cut the ground from under everything else to which metaphysics gives rise, such as the prescriptive authority of inherited language, the anchoring of the moral imagination, and the defining validation of law. I have argued elsewhere that

Nominalism also produced modern materialism. Nothing so turned Western man's thoughts back to the things of earth than this sudden persuasion of his being unable to grasp anything higher. The denial of man's ability to perceive transcendent, intellectual realities above himself guaranteed that the Western mind would thenceforth turn ever more completely toward the only reality that remained, physical reality, the world of matter. ("Materialism and the Abdication of Intellect," *Epiphany*, 1997)

I submit that a conscience formed by the gospel will abhor such notions. How can it be that we who know the just God are possessed of minds incapable of discerning the essence of justice? How is it possible that we to whom have been revealed "all riches of the certainty of the understanding, the knowledge of the mystery of God, . . . all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge," are natively unable to apprehend universal truths?

Even among Christians, this distrust of man's ability to apprehend universal truths has led to some strange developments in recent times. For example, it has forced several eminent contemporary Christian apologists (such as Wolfhart Pannenberg,

Clark Pinnock, J. W. Montgomery, and Gary Habermas) to attempt what—as far as I can tell—no early Christian apologist would ever have thought of attempting. Namely, to appeal to the Resurrection of Christ as a major argument for Theism. This approach, I submit, is a massive departure from the thought of St. Paul, who argued for Theism, not from the Resurrection of Christ, but from the principle of causality with respect to the created world. In other words, St. Paul appealed to metaphysics, and it is apparently their distrust in metaphysics that prompts some modern apologists not to follow Paul in this regard. Similarly, another prominent apologist, Alvin Plantinga, treats the Ontological Argument as though it were an argument from probability. This is quite remarkable. Probability is something measurable; it pertains to quantity. The Ontological Argument, however, is a deductive argument, which is either valid or invalid. Validity is a question of quality, not quantity. There is nothing measurable about it.



Fresco by Romanian artist Ioan Popa

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