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# EXPERIMENT AND KNOWLEDGE OF REALITY IN THE HESYCHAST VIEW

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(Received 25 February 2012)

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## Abstract

We usually consider reality as independent of our capacity of knowing, and this 'believe' is correlated with another 'believe': that we have a direct access to what we call reality. But the *reality* concept includes in its semantic area also the *representation* built on what is independent of us. It is clear that the current semantics of reality concept (especially in Physics) actually contains two major versions, corresponding to realistic description and to representationalist one. I assume that an analogous situation appeared in a confrontation of ideas from XIV century, called the *hesychast dispute*. Gregory Palamas, one of the protagonists of this dispute, had to explain the significance gave by hesychasts to the vision of God, described as a view of divine light, not of an essence. The hesychast practice aims the seeing of the uncreated light, which can be understood only as an active process of an unceasing disclosure of the Personal Ultimate Reality. Is involved here the rejecting of any possibility of a direct knowledge of the divine nature, of what characterizes the essence of God. The gnoseological stake implied is obvious: the ultimate knowledge (and also the knowledge of any kind) involves the whole man and not just his intellect, the act of knowledge has the shape of a relationship: here is an anti-essentialism corresponding to the anti-realist position of actual Physics.

*Keywords:* reality, knowledge, hesychasm

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## 1. Introduction

The notion of *reality per-se* is considered to be totally independent of our capacity of knowing, and is correlated with the hypothesis that we have direct access to what we call reality (that we can say something true about it). But concept of *reality* includes in its semantic area also *the representation* build on what is independent of us (based on the phenomena, i.e. the human experience, which can be built without direct reference to reality per-se). The current semantics of the concept of reality actually contains two major versions, corresponding to realistic description and to representationalist one [1]. I assume that an analogous situation appeared in a confrontation of ideas from the fourteenth century, called the *hesychast dispute*. The protagonists of the first stage of the hesychast controversy where: Gregory Palamas, an Athonite monk and exponent of hesychasm (afterwards Archbishop of Thessalonica), and

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Barlaam of Calabria, a learned theologian who before the outbreak of the dispute Hesychast, in talks about the union between the Orthodox and Roman Catholic Churches, in 1339, defended the Orthodox doctrine. Even from the ninth century, behind the facade of apparent cohesion, was a constant opposition between Byzantine promoters of profane Hellenism, who sought to restore the philosophical tradition of Neoplatonism, giving it a greater autonomy as possible from Christian dogma and spirituality, and the defenders of a theology just wanted to be Christian. The fourteenth century controversy put the question trenchant, in all its magnitude.

## 2. The realistic doctrine of supernatural knowledge

Gregory Palamas, one of the protagonists of this dispute, had to explain the significance gave by hesychasts to the vision of God, described as a view of divine light, not of an essence. The hesychast practice aims the seeing of the uncreated light, which can be understood only as an active process of an unceasing disclosure of the One above being. Is involved here the rejecting of any possibility of a direct knowledge of the divine nature, of what characterizes the essence of God. Of course, the gnoseological stake is obvious: the ultimate knowledge (and the knowledge of any kind) involves the whole man and not just his intellect, the act of knowledge has the shape of a relationship - here is an anti-essentialism corresponding to anti-realist position of actual Physics.

Palamas develops a *realistic doctrine of supernatural knowledge*, independent of any sensible experience, but one what was given through Christ to the whole man (soul and body) the man that can still gain access from the Earth to deification and to the vision of God. On this way Palamas offers a justification to psychophysiological method of prayer, opposing the Platonic spiritualism of Barlaam's anthropology. Barlaam's criticism was based on a supposed spiritualism of the hesychast method of pray, one who identifies *supernatural* with the *immateriality*. The very fact of considering the human body as a receptacle of grace may appear to Barlaam as an intolerable abuse. The 'return to self' of the hesychast method was understood not only in the spiritual sense, but also bodily. This kind of criticism is even now assumed by many interprets. But Palamas stated that God is within us and not outside of us: therefore we find the light of the Mount Tabor within us; the Apostles did not receive this vision than outside.

Palamas rehabilitate the mater, which spiritualist tendencies of Hellenism had always inclination to despise. He does not preclude spiritual to material but *supernatural to created world*. Palamas oppose a supra-rational knowledge to the Balaam's rationalism [2]. He says that the beings own condition is state of creature, but when they transcend their own status communicating with God, they *participate* in the uncreated life. Knowing God does not require certain exteriorization between subject of knowledge and the object known, but a *union* in the uncreated light; man has no faculty able to see God; to have a vision of God becomes possible because God unites with man, sharing the knowledge that

He has about Himself. When He is known, remains unknowable in His essence, as a revelation of the divine essence would put God among creatures and makes man a god by nature. Any revelation, any participation, any deification, is thus a free act of the living God: *a divine energy*.

Palamas finds himself in the situation of signifying again, or explaining again, the meaning of certain terms. There was necessary to be explained the signification which the hesychasm had for God's understanding. The goal of the hesychast practice is the view of Tabor's light, which can be understood only as an active process of continuous revelation of the One who is above the being. Here is involved the rejection of any possibility of knowing directly the divine nature, of what characterizes and defines God by essence. Certainly, the gnosiological stake is obvious: the ultimate knowledge (just like the knowledge of any kind) involves the man as a whole, not only his intellect. The act of knowledge has the dimension of a relationship between man and God, understood as a dynamic process and not as an essential view of a stable nature, and here is an anti-essentialism which corresponds to the anti-realist position in the present physics. In terming his unmediated experience of God a vision of 'light', Palamas clearly understood that such language is a 'pointer', and not a strict description. He regards the terms 'light' and 'darkness' as both appropriate: 'light indicates the supreme positive character of the experience', 'darkness indicates its radical transcendence vis-à-vis all else that we know' [3]. Repeatedly Palamas insists that, when talking of divine reality, we cannot speak with exact precision but only by the way of symbol, image and analogy [4]. Palamas' discourse has an amount of ambiguity, the reason for this being that he theologized true to the apophatism which serve as the baseline for all Eastern Theology. More than that, we can talk about a programmed and self-conscious destabilization of theological language. Theological language, while conceptualizing created beings' experience of God, must also call attention to and acknowledge its own shortcomings. No worthy conception of God can be attained through the intellect alone, as true knowledge of God comes from God, leads to God, and conforms to God the one who acquires [3, 1, 1, 3].

### **3. The palamite signification of *energeia***

A decisive term in explaining the non-essentialism of the hesychast doctrine is *energeia*, which Gregory Palamas takes over from Aristotle, but also from the usage of the previous Byzantine authors, term to which it will enrich and nuance the signification area. Looking for a proper term for the light of Transfiguration, Palamas decides to use Aristotle's concept of *energeia* [5]. The decision of its usage is better understood nowadays when a number of studies (just like David Bradshaw's book, invoked here) reveal the spectacular complexity and the nuances of the term, but also the fact that since Aristotle's times, *energheia* has been the term that received an exceptional usage. Initially Aristotle uses the term by taking it from Plato: in Euthydemus, Plato makes the difference between the possession (*ktesis*) and the usage (*hresis*) of things

[Platon, *Euthydemos*, 280 b-e]. With Aristotle it becomes a distinction not between possession and usage in general, but between the usage and possession of a capacity or a faculty of soul.

It is important that Aristotle admits the existence of several reality grades. Aristotle's reasoning if man is a simple being, man's sole proper work is to attain truth; on the other hand, if man is composed of several faculties, his proper work is that of the highest among them. Consequently, the one who is active in thinking, lives and exists more than the one who is not like that, although the highest reality grade is not described as an actuality (*energeia*), it is explained that a person who is at the highest grade is active (*energie*) [Aristotel, *Protrepticus*, B 86]. The understanding of *energeia* as an activity shall receive its technical signification, of *actuality*. Moreover, *energeia* starts to change its meaning to a more extended notion of the update, capable to contain static conditions (in *Physics* Aristotle states that *energeia* remains a kind of capacity exercise even if it is no longer an active exercise [Aristotel, *Physics*, VIII, 4, 225b8-12]).

The differences that Aristotle makes between *kinesis* and *energeia* have a particular significance, as Bradshaw indicates it. Thus, we can say about *kinesis*: it has a termination; is not an end, but it's for the sake of an end; is complete when it achieves what it aims, must cease before perfect tense can apply; has parts which are different in kind from one another and from the whole; the 'whence' and the 'whither' give them their form; occurs quickly or slowly; in time. Whereas we can state about *energeia*: has no termination; is an end or has end within it; is complete at any moment because it does not lack anything which coming into being later will complete its form; present and perfect tense apply simultaneously; is homogenous; does not occur quickly or slowly; in the 'now' [5, p.10]. It is important to emphasize that Aristotle's *energeia* is thorough in any moment; its perfection does not need a temporal process. Its function is to delimit a *higher* reality grade. *Energeia* is that kind of activity that is its own goal and can exist only in a state of fulfilment. It is both the substance cause and the thorough reality, regardless of the appearances it takes. For all of these reasons Aristotle finds *energeia* worthy of the highest appellation he can give it, that of divinity. We have to notice that the equivalence of the term *energeia* with the Latin *operatio* does not confer the same semantic abundance as the original term (there has been another equivalence by *actus* and *actualitas*). It is one of the reasons why the term does not play an important role in the Latin tradition.

By using the notion of *energeia* to create a distinction from essence or nature, Palamas does it cautiously because the theological vocabulary of that time was too deeply marked by the essentialist categories of the Greek philosophy in order to express the existentialist reality of the Supreme Being. Paradoxically, in the context of using this concept, the Byzantine author was preoccupied to release the theological discourse from Aristotle's philosophical categories due to their inadequacy in expressing the mystery. For example, Palamas refuses to call the energies 'qualities of God', because the quality notion cannot contain the liberty dimension in any way, whereas these energies

are the expression of God's sovereign will. The doctrine of the immanent energies implies an intensely dynamic vision of the relationship between God and the world. The whole Cosmos is a vast burning bush, permeated but not consumed by the uncreated fire of the divine energies. These energies are 'God with us'. They are the power of God at work within man, the life of God in which He shares [6]. Palamas's theology of Light is not a theology which makes use of rational concepts to express abstract realities, but is, on the contrary, the apophatic expression of a mystical experience culminating in the beholding of God, as affirms Dom Clement Lialine [7].

Thus we understand better the stake of the term usage by Gregory Palamas in explaining a critical aspect of his doctrine: the signification of the ultimate reality (in other words what content can be given to the reality notion when the ultimate instance situation is looked for). When discussing about the divine light (as *energeia*), Palamas states that it is a *natural symbol*, by denying that it is a *created symbol*. The argumentation is that a natural symbol always accompanies what it symbolizes, and its existence depends on it, just like the aurora accompanies the sunset, and the heat accompanies the burning power of the fire because of the innate association [3, 3, 1, 14]. If *energeia* or the divine light has this meaning, then what we call a natural (or physical) reality has a much enlarged signification. The physical reality is not a static, inert one, but matter plus energy: it is something that can be described as an active alive process where we find the presence and the intentionality of a Person and that as a *natural dimension*. On the other hand, we can state that in this description the reality is constituted by the experience in the most radical way: the ultimate reality is the human experience of the uncreated energies. Any statement that would aim at something beyond the content of this experience, such as the direct knowledge of an essence, is rejected. In the same time the gnosiological pessimism is rejected: the Supreme Personal Reality is not incognoscible due to its transcendence, because it makes itself known by these manifestations called *energeia*. In the case of God, the nature, or *physis* from which the divine energy proceeds is the essence (*ousia*) of the God, while the hypostasis using the energy is in this instance threefold since the persons of the Trinity act always together. The 'consequence' of the energy, the *energima*, is the effect of God's activity in the created world. Thus there is a significant difference between *energeia* and *energima*: the *energima*, as the consequence of God's action, forms part of the created order, but the energy which brings that consequences to pass it itself uncreated and eternal. It is possible that Earlier Greek Fathers, in certain passages where they speak about God's energies, mean simply the created effects of the divine activity; but in later Patristic theology a clear distinction is drawn between the created effect and the uncreated *energeia* that causes it and maintain it in being [6].

Gregory Palamas' theory of immediate experience of God by a created being in and through divine grace makes use of terms and logic of *essence*, *energies*, and *hypostasis* scheme previously embodied by Palamas' predecessors, for its demonstrated utility in the Trinitarian and Christological debates.

Conceptualization of deification through the essence and energies distinction required a retrenchment of the inaccessibility of God in light of the intimacy of contact in the divine energies and the treat of a complete ontological confusion. Palamas chooses to signify the radical transcendence of the inaccessible aspect of the Ultimate Reality by qualifying 'essence' with 'superessential' [3, 3, 2, 7]. The conceptual elements Palamas made to the model are a way of explaining the vertical relationship between God and created being culminating in deification. But Palamas radicalized the model in two opposing models: the theory of deification conceptualized the immediate experience of God by created being and this in turn provoked the theological restatement of God's transcendence over created being [8]. The hierarchy of God's noetic, linguistic, and experiential relationship with the created world illustrates the interplay between God's accessibility and inaccessibility. God is then directly accessible in the divine energies. The object of the vision in deification is technically inaccessible, in that as created being cannot approach the divine energies. Deification requires the 'uncreation', and is beyond sensation, intellection, and all forms of knowledge. The divine light transcends all beings, all created things. The deified subject 'sees' the divine light to the extent that the subject is 'uncreated', but no knowledge follows from this state. God's noetic accessibility decreases as his experiential accessibility increases. The superessential essence of God transcends the inaccessibility and accessibility of the divine energies. The name 'God' itself refers to the defying energy. The divine superessence, however, is 'more than God', more than the energetic revelation of God, exists beyond all affirmation and negation. God is both 'God', the sum of the names attributed to God based on divine energies, and 'more than God', the supraessential divine essence [3, 3, 13, 31]. There is a non-being by transcendence which is accessible to created beings when they are uncreated, a non-being which is not the divine essence; the superessential essence of God transcends even this non-being. When created being crosses into the uncreated dimension, it experiences both the immediate presence of God and God's incomprehensibility. Beyond this, however, there still lies the hypertheos, the 'more than God', the absolute inaccessible superessential essence of God [8].

The multitude of divine manifestations can not harm the unity of God, for God is beyond categories of whole and parts. Remain unknowable in His essence, He is revealed in full in each energy, as a living God. God, by virtue of its simplicity is totally present in His essence and His energies – on this way Palamas gives an answer regarding the problem of link between Absolute divine and the world. Between God and His creatures there is no independent reality, but God himself, through a free condescension, it is this reality. Divine energies are not things different from an ultimate 'thing' that would be the essence of God. Grace is an object with what God would reward his creatures, but the very manifestation of the Living One. This is an *existential personalism*, in particular by applying the concept of 'simplicity' not to essence, but to the being of God which is manifested at the same time, in the essence and in free acts - or energies of God. The *originality* of Palamism towards essentialist conceptions of God is

to not add a foreign divine reality, but to relate to God in an existential way, maintaining His absolute transcendence.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In the hesychast controversy was disputed the hypothesis that the access to the ultimate reality would be only an act mediated by the hierarchy of the beings. That is why appears the syntagma ‘uncreated energies’ (but the possibility of a total access to essence, to the absolute on the rational way is rejected). The experimentality is decisive, the truth criterion being provided by the ‘appeal to experience’. In modern Science this thing is clear; in hesychasm there was the same kind of exigency when Palamas, in the dispute with his adversaries, used to invoke repeatedly the appeal to experience as a criterion. The hesychasm is different than other spiritual practices from the Christian area by the fact that it emphasizes the experience in the shape of the experiment: it’s supposed the existence of a method, of a verifiability criterion, and validation – henceforth the interest for the ultimate reality or, in the hesychast language, for the uncreated energies. There is an analogy between science and hesychasm regarding some discussions about the nature of the ultimate reality.

#### **Acknowledgement**

This paper was made within The *Knowledge Based Society Project* supported by the Sectorial Operational Program Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed by the European Social Fund, and by the Romanian Government under the contract no. POSDRU ID 56815.

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