



Steven Nemes

The intelligibility of the cosmos and the existence of God in Dumitru Stăniloae's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*

Abstract

In the opening chapter of his *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, Dumitru Stăniloae proposes a close connection between the intelligibility of the cosmos and the existence of a transcendent Intelligence which brings it into being. The object of this essay is to investigate this proposed connection - more specifically, whether the inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause is valid - and to note its significance for Stăniloae's natural theology more generally as well as for the problem of "irreligious experience."



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1 Introduction

The first chapter of Dumitru Stăniloae's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*¹ has to do with the matter of natural revelation. In its opening lines, Stăniloae affirms that the Orthodox Church does not make a (sharp) distinction between "natural" and "supernatural" revelation insofar as, on the one hand, natural revelation is only fully understood and appreciated in the light of supernatural revelation, whereas, on the other hand, natural revelation is given and upheld through a supernatural act of God (2010, 9). Nevertheless, with some clarifications made about their ultimate inseparability, the discussion proceeds with an emphasis on the content of natural revelation, which is constituted by "the cosmos and the human being endowed with reason, with consciousness and freedom, the latter [viz., the rational human] being not only this revelation's object to be known, but also the subject of its knowledge" (10). Both the cosmos and the human being are "the product of God's supernatural act of creation and are maintained in existence by God through an act of conservation" (ibid.). Especially important for present purposes is the rationality or intelligibility of the cosmos. Stăniloae says: "The cosmos is organized in a manner that

¹ Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Ortodoxă Dogmatică* (București: Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune Ortodoxă, 2010), vol. 1. All citations from Stăniloae's text will be done in-text. The translation is my own.

corresponds to our capacity for knowledge. The cosmos and human nature, which is intimately connected to the cosmos, are imprinted with rationality, while the human being - a creature of God - is endowed with a rationality capable of a conscious knowledge of the rationality of the cosmos and of his own nature" (ibid.). This rationality or intelligibility is the result of a creative act of God: "We consider that the rationality of the cosmos testifies to the fact that it is the creation of a rational being, because rationality, as an aspect of a reality ordered to being known, is inexplicable apart from a conscious reason which knows it from the time it creates it, or even before that, and which knows it continuously concomitantly with its conservation [in being]" (ibid.).

The present discussion will focus on the notion of the rationality or intelligibility of the cosmos and its significance for Christian natural theology. There are specifically three aspects which will occupy our attention. First, there is the question of the philosophical strength and value of the inference from intelligible being to an intelligent cause of being. Second, there is the importance of the intelligibility of the cosmos for the greater theological anthropology of Stăniloae's dogmatic enterprise. Finally, there is the significance of the inference from intelligible reality to intelligent cause for the natural "atheological" project of arguing the non-existence of God on the basis of the "godlessness" of the natural world.

2 From intelligible being to intelligent cause

Let us begin with the all-important inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause. Is this a reasonable and valid inference to make? Does the former entail the latter? Or, put another way, is there a way of understanding or framing this inference

that can bring to light its evidence and force? Consider the following example. A person is lost in the woods or in a field and happens upon a pathway whose borders are marked off by small stones. She immediately comes to understand that human beings have been in this area and that if she were to follow the road in either direction, she would probably find others who can help her get back home.

What is important in this short story is just how natural the inference is from the encounter of intelligibility to the conclusion of the presence of an intelligent cause. The intelligible object in this case is the pathway, and the intelligent cause is the human person - whoever it might have been - who prepared it. What is it to be lost, if not to find oneself in an entirely unintelligible environment?

Nothing makes any sense, nothing has any obvious meaning; it is impossible to orient oneself to one's surroundings in such a way as to accomplish one's goals. Now, in the ordinary case, the intelligibility of the world is a precondition for its usefulness, its being workable towards the pursuit of our own ends. Stăniloae especially appreciates this.

He writes: "Being the only being in the world which is conscious of itself, the human being is at the same time the world's consciousness, harnessing the rationality of the world and consciously working it in her favor, in this way also forming herself" (2010, 11).

Being lost, then, means finding oneself in an environment so devoid of intelligibility as not even to permit escape; it means finding oneself in an environment unfit to serve even this most modest of ends. But once a person has been immersed in such conditions of unintelligibility and stumbles upon even the humblest and simplest intelligible object - say, a path marked off by small stones in a line - it is almost immediately understood that an intelligent being has been in the area, that in fact the intelli-

gibility is the effect of an intelligent cause which has left its imprint on the environment.

By means of such an example, then, we can perhaps illustrate the natural strength and evident validity of the inference from intelligible reality to intelligent cause. The path, as an intelligible reality, has an intelligent cause, namely whoever prepared it. In the same way, if being and the cosmos as a whole are intelligible, then they must be the products of at least one intelligible cause - *et hoc omnes intelligunt Deum*.

But this line of argument is open to objections and, in my opinion, the most considerable counterarguments which come to mind are the following. First, the inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause raises the specter of an infinite regress. Suppose that the cosmos, because it is intelligible, is therefore caused by an intelligent being, namely God. Is God Himself an intelligible being? In other words, is He a substance or individual being with a discernible ontological structure? If so, then He must have a cause. If not, then He has no need of a cause - or at least some reason would need to be given why He would need a cause - but what sense can be made of the affirmation that God is not an intelligible being?

My own inclination is to say that this latter option is not as bad as might sound, if we are willing to go beyond what Stăniloae has written and engage in more experimental metaphysical speculation. If intelligible being arises from an intelligent cause, then active intelligence is prior to being. This line of reasoning naturally tends in the direction of a *sort* of metaphysical idealism.² Furthermore, the doctrine of divine simplicity, which has

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), ch. 4, "Faith in God Today," offers extended reflections on the intelligibility of being and the inference to an intelligent cause of being which are very similar to those offered in the first chapter Stăniloae's *Orthodox Dogmatic Theol-*

a long history in the Christian philosophical tradition, already entails (or at least can be interpreted as entailing) that God is not a being, since He is not subject to the various forms of composition and internal ontological distinctions which characterize beings: form/matter, substance/accident, essence/existence, and so on.³ A more traditional manner of speaking might be to say that He is beyond being, or perhaps that He is subsistent being itself, as in the Thomistic tradition. This first objection, then, which raises the possibility of an infinite regress is not as powerful as it might initially seem.

The second, however, is far more considerable. The question is whether it is right to infer that intelligible being results from an intelligent cause. It seems to me that what really motivates the inference to an intelligent cause is not so much the *intelligibility* of a being but rather its evident *artificiality*. Obviously not all intelligibility is artificiality, and in fact intelligibility is absolutely prior to artificiality since artificiality presupposes intelligibility: in order to construct an artifact, there is first need of intelligible materials, whose properties can be known, and which can be arranged in such a manner as serve some non-natural end reliably. Artificiality, on the other hand, is not the same as intelligibility, since it is possible to encounter an arti-

ogy. He also compares theism to idealism, the difference being that theism conceives of the absolute as personal, endowed with freedom, who creates free creatures with whom to have fellowship. In the present context, "idealism" refers to any metaphysics which posits an absolute ontological priority of consciousness (not necessarily human consciousness) to material being.

³ Consider John of Damascus, according to whom God "does not belong to the number of beings, not because He does not exist, but because He transcends all beings and being itself", *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* I, 4, in John of Damascus, *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1958).

fact without understanding what it is more precisely or what it is used for; i.e., the artifact remains unintelligible beyond the fact that it is an artifact. In our brief story, it is because the path marked off by small stones is not a natural arrangement but very evidently a non-natural, artifactual one that a person immediately understands that it was brought about by intelligent consciousness. Its intelligibility as a path is only incidentally related to the inference that it was brought about by an intelligent cause and is not actually what occasions or motivates it.

If one might grant that there is a way around the objection with the infinite regress, nevertheless there does not seem to be an easy way around this latter objection about artifactuality. For me at least, it is very difficult to find an instance in which it is the pure intelligibility of an object, whether artifactual or not, which occasions the inference that it had an intelligent cause. Stăniloae himself, moreover, does not offer any extended argumentation in favor of the inference but only takes it as a given of the Christian natural theological tradition.

Indeed, it would seem impossible to come up with an example which justifies the inference: if the example makes use of an artifact, it is susceptible to the objection that it is the artifactuality and not intelligibility which motivates the inference to an intelligent cause; if the example makes use of a natural object, it would seem to be no different from the argument Stăniloae is already offering, only on a smaller scale. So, the case for the validity of the crucial inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause remains unproven in Stăniloae's text.⁴

⁴ One way forward is to connect the notion of intelligibility with ontological structure. If beings are ontologically structured, then they are obviously contingent unities of their metaphysical constituents (e.g., form and matter, or essence and existence, or whatever). From the notion of a contingent unity to the existence of an intelligent cause of that unity, there is a very short inferential distance to be crossed. See, for

3 The intelligibility of the cosmos and the personal God

In any case, regardless of whether this inference can be shown to be valid, it is clear that the notion of the intelligibility of the cosmos is very important for Stăniloae's theological-anthropological enterprise more generally. In the first place, it is precisely the intelligibility of the cosmos which allows the human being to find a "home" within it by making use of the materials it offers her.

Stăniloae writes that the world exists for the sake of being humanized, rather than the human being existing for the sake of being assimilated into the world (2010, 12). This latter alternative would mean nothing less than the destruction of the human being as a special creature to whom the world is subordinated, though she did not create it (*ibid.*). Moreover, because the intelligibility of the cosmos is supposed to lead a person to understand that it is the product of an intelligent cause, it follows that the intelligible cosmos becomes the medium of a "dialog" between the human being and God (2010, 11).

Divine communication, in other words, is not limited to the context of special revelation as contained in the Bible and the Tradition of the Church, but also extends to the world itself, which is a product of transcendent thought and therefore inherently meaningful and full of sense.⁵

example, Edward Feser, *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017). See also William F. Vallicella, *A Paradigm Theory of Existence: Ontotheology Vindicated* (Kluwer, 2002) for an extended argument in favor of constituent ontology and divine simplicity.

⁵ Stăniloae offers what might be called an "open" theological epistemology, in contrast to the "closed" theological epistemology of a figure like Karl Barth. It is "open" because he admits the possibility of theological knowledge (say, of God's existence and His nature) by means of ordinary forms of knowing, such as metaphysical reflection on the condi-

Finally, the intelligibility of the cosmos also leads to a natural theological conception of a distinctly *personal* God. Stăniloae points to the desire inherent in the human being to “love and to be loved more and more, tending towards a love that is absolute and endless. Yet we cannot find this except in relation with an infinite and absolute Person, a conscious Person, to speak redundantly” (2010, 14).

Indeed, it is precisely because human beings are *persons* that they tend towards the infinite. But since this infinite desire cannot be satisfied in any finite created things, nor within the limits of this lifetime, it follows that this natural desire, essential to our very being as persons, must find its natural object in the Creator of all things, that transcendent Person (or community of Persons) “infinite in being, in love, in beauty” (ibid.).

In Stăniloae’s intelligible cosmos, everything must find its appropriate counterpart, including this yearning for the infinite on the part of human persons which they cannot satisfy themselves by recourse to any terrestrial reality. Of course, some theologians make much of the supposed distinction between the “God of the philosophers” and the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The God of Scripture - so the story goes - is starkly personal, whereas the God of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus is far off, impersonal; He does not lower Himself to converse with mortals; He does not take their nature upon Himself; He does not speak to them or commune with them; He is not moved by

tions of being, whereas Karl Barth, in his rejection of natural theology, does not permit epistemological access to God by any other means except by God’s direct, supernatural intervention in the normal order of things. A fascinating discussion of Karl Barth’s epistemology in dialog with contemporary analytic philosophy of religion can be found in Kevin Diller, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2014).

their prayers nor saddened by their sufferings; etc. Stăniloae's natural theology explodes this distinction insofar as it insists on the essential continuity between "natural" and "supernatural" revelation: both have their origins in the same God and are destined for the same human beings, special revelation merely being clearer and more direct than natural, while natural revelation establishes a context in which special revelation can be received according to what it is, a communication from the Creator of all. In this respect, he stands in good company, reaching all the way back to the beginnings of the Christian intellectual tradition in Justin Martyr, Origen, and others.⁶

4 The intelligible cosmos and irreligious experience

Finally, I wish to make an observation about the significance of the intelligibility of the cosmos in Stăniloae's natural theology for the question of irreligious experience.⁷ We have seen that the inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause is questionable and certainly needs to be investigated further. This investigation could take many different forms. One might, for instance, adopt a more "analytic" philosophical approach by attempting to adduce reasons in favor of the inference and construct a cumulative case: for instance, it might be that some such inference is implicit in some intellectual activity we consider to be reliable and truth-seeking, perhaps some science or

⁶ For a comparative discussion of Stăniloae and Origen on the question of philosophical knowledge of God, see Steven Nemes, "On the Priority of Tradition: An Exercise in Analytic Theology," *Open Theology* 3 (2017): 274-92, especially 286-90.

⁷ "Irreligious experience" refers to those experiences which occasion doubt or disbelief in the existence of God.

other; or it may be that it is judged to be intuitively more probable than not on various grounds; or whatever.

My own approach, on the contrary, has rather been “phenomenological,” if we may call it that, in that I have attempted to identify some experience familiar to us all in which the force of the inference comes to light and becomes evident for us. On this reading, Stăniloae is concerned not so much with a piece of abstract reasoning, but with an experience of the intelligibility of the world which naturally and forcefully occasions the inference of an intelligent cause beyond it. Of course, there are many who have had somewhat opposite experiences: in the face of tremendous suffering, for example, the senselessness of the world strikes them with such clarity and strength that they seem straightaway to intuit that there is no God.

The point I wish to make is the following: in spite of appearances, these experiences are not perfectly analogous. The difference is in their focus. In the experience of the intelligibility of the cosmos or of some being or other, one’s “focus” is on the “beingness” of the being, that most fundamental aspect of its reality. It is precisely as a being - rather than as a dog or a cat or whatever - that a being is intelligible; being and intelligibility overlap entirely. On the other hand, in the case of the atheistic experience, one’s gaze is focused upon some accidental feature of a being, in other words upon something posterior to its beingness.

It is precisely the “godlessness” of sickness or of warfare or of scenes of carnage - in other words, an accidental feature of these objects, in the Aristotelian sense of the word “accident” - which occasions the sense that there is no God directing the scenes of the world’s history. But the beingness or substantiality of a thing is a prior condition of its accidents, since every accident only exists in a substance, and substances or beings are intelligible, even if they are godless in various ways. God-

lessness as a reality exists only at the level of accident, whereas intelligible being or substantiality is the more fundamental ontological truth, and it is precisely this which (according to Stăniloae) requires the existence of God as a transcendent intelligent cause.

The experience of godlessness in the world does not justify the conclusion of atheism, strictly speaking, but rather shows the possibility of *hell*: beings can be, and therefore depend on God as their cause, while at the same time being so removed from God that He is nothing other than that which sustains their (apparently irredeemably) miserable existence.

5 Conclusion

Let me therefore summarize the points which have been made in this discussion. My discourse has revolved around the notion of the rationality or intelligibility of the cosmos in the natural theology of Dumitru Stăniloae. More specifically, I have considered the value and significance of the inference from intelligible being to intelligent cause. It naturally moves in the direction of a species of idealist metaphysics in which active intelligence or consciousness is prior to being. It also resonates with the classical doctrine of divine simplicity, at least insofar as it would require that God is not a being.

However, the inference is difficult to justify experientially. The perception of artifactually naturally invites the inference to the presence of an intelligent cause, but it is not clear whether intelligibility itself does this.

In any case, however, the intelligibility of the cosmos is important because it justifies the natural theological conclusion of a distinctly personal God: the disposition towards infinite personal communion inherent human beings remains an absurdity

apart from the existence of a personal God in friendship with whom it can be satisfied.⁸ Finally, Stăniloae's argument offers a way of understanding the relationship between theistic and atheistic "religious" experiences. The object of the atheistic experience is godlessness as an accidental feature of some reality, whereas that of the theistic experience pertains to the substantiality or beingness of some being or of all beings whatsoever. If the inference from intelligibility to intelligent cause is a good one, then it follows that atheistic experience does not justify atheism so much as a doctrine of hell.

⁸ Here Stăniloae would seem to be offering a version of the so-called "argument from desire" which has found a number of other proponents, such as C.S. Lewis. In this sense, I think it encapsulates an essentially Christian way of understanding human desire.