

## Anselm's Metaphysics in the Lineage of Parmenides:

### *Nihil est per nihil*

Maria Leonor Xavier  
University of Lisbon

Among those who pay homage to Parmenides as a source of unquenchable inspiration for Western thought, we now revisit the Poem *Of Nature* as the birthplace of the principle of causality through the elimination of non-being at the origin of being. Indeed in Parmenides' Poem, a negative conviction can be found—the refusal that the non-being is at the origin of the being—which leads most philosophers to the affirmative conviction that something is at the origin of the being. The two convictions are two rational beliefs which have stimulated ancient Greek philosophy, and have continuously represented a structuring axis in the history of Western thought. With Aristotle, that affirmative conviction was converted into a principle of causality, that is, into a principle which requires a causal explanation for the intelligibility of reality. In Latin Middle Ages, we find a singular figure who promotes the synthesis of the two fundamental beliefs, the negative conviction, explicit in Parmenides, and the affirmative conviction, explicit in Aristotle: It is Saint Anselm. In an initial chapter (III) of his first work, the *Monologion*, Anselm declares that “nothing is by nothing” (*nihil est per nihil*), and that consequently “all that is, is not but by something” (*quidquid est, non nisi per aliquid est*). All of Anselm's metaphysics is an analysis and a development of this affirmative rational belief. Therefore, we claim Parmenides' paternity of Saint Anselm's metaphysics, of whom one may say he was the medieval Parmenides.

*Keywords:* Parmenides, Saint Anselm, *Monologion*, nothing, Principle of Causality, being inborn, metaphysics

Claiming Parmenides' paternity of groundbreaking paths in the history of Western philosophy has become a commonplace among historians and thinkers of our philosophical tradition. However, “commonplace” does not mean here a place of repetition and banalization of ideas. The return to Parmenides is a “commonplace” in the sense that it is a place frequented by many, who do not necessarily exclude one another, among those who cannot circumvent and avoid said place when questioning themselves on the mystery of how that which the Greeks once conceived as Philosophy, still endures.

Among those who pay homage to Parmenides as a source of unquenchable inspiration for Western thought, is José Trindade Santos, renowned philosopher and exegete of Plato's texts and ancient philosophy in the scene of Portuguese philosophical thought. In Parmenides' Poem, José Trindade Santos apprehends the origin of the classic logical principles—identity, non-contradiction and excluded middle—which offer structure to our rational thinking.<sup>1</sup> Not excluding this line of actualization of the speculative potential of the Poem, wherein we acknowledge the ingenious labor of its interpreter, we now revisit the very same Poem *Of Nature* as the

---

Maria Leonor Xavier, associate professor with Aggregation (Philosophy Doctorate 1994; Aggregation exams in Medieval Philosophy, 2011), director of the Department of Philosophy of the School of Arts and Humanities, University of Lisbon, Portugal; main research field: Philosophy, History of Philosophy, Medieval Philosophy, Metaphysics and Theology.

birthplace of the principle of causality through the elimination of non-being at the origin of being. Let us consider Parmenides' text (B 8.6-13):

Indeed, what origin would you investigate in it? How and where would you add it? Nor shall I let you speak of the non-being; not at all: for it is not speakable, nor thinkable, for it is not. And what necessity would impel its birth, before or after, proceeding from nothing? Hence, it is necessary that it is completely, or not at all. Not even the strength of confidence shall consent that something (remotely) near the being is born from the non-being.<sup>2</sup> (1997, 20-21)

After mentioning several attributes of the being, among which inborn (ἄγένητον), Parmenides takes a step back and questions: For what could give birth to the being? The non-being? However, this hypothesis is so to say ruminatingly dilacerated in the cited passage: The non-being does not share the same attributes as the being; it is completely alien to the being and no conviction forces us to associate it with the being. Quite conversely, the emerging conviction here is that the being cannot originate from the non-being, and hence it is inborn. This attribute is a consequence of that conviction: The being is inborn because it cannot come from the non-being.

Here, in this conviction, we find a commonplace among philosophers of Greek tradition. Indeed, a place frequented by the oldest philosophers of nature, which sought for the principles of the cosmos: For how would that search be possible, if not based on that sort of aversion to the emptiness at the origin of things, which Parmenides expresses and perfects by negating an origin of the being from the non-being? The quest for the original substances of reality, which greatly characterizes Pre-Socratic philosophy, cannot but partake in Parmenides' conviction that the being cannot come from the non-being.<sup>3</sup> In the non-being, there is no substance, force, or thought which might render things manifest: There must be something in the origin of the latter, be it material or immaterial.

Such affirmative conviction is correlative of the negative one we find in Parmenides, both being as two sides of the same coin: the negative conviction, that is, the refusal that the non-being is at the origin of the being, leads most philosophers to the affirmative conviction that something is at the origin of the being. The two convictions are two rational beliefs which have stimulated ancient Greek philosophy, and have continuously represented a structuring axis in the history of Western thought: In the beginning, there is, nearly always, something—be it a matter, a thought, an idea, or a word...

The correlation of the two fundamental beliefs is in such a way consolidated in Aristotle that he ratifies as cause that which is at the origin of what is. There is no true knowledge without cognition of causes, for the dissociating step between knowledge and experience is given by the consideration of causes.<sup>4</sup> According to Aristotle, the merit of the preceding philosophers was the discovery of various causes—material, efficient, and formal ones—which determine the construction of our knowledge of reality, and prepare us for the discovery of the final cause, which the Stagirite himself would introduce. With Aristotle, the affirmative conviction that there must be something at the origin of things was converted into a principle of causality, that is, into a principle which requires a causal explanation for the intelligibility of reality.

In Latin Middle Ages, we find a singular figure who promotes the synthesis of the two fundamental beliefs, the negative conviction, explicit in Parmenides, according to which the being cannot come from the non-being, and the affirmative conviction, explicit in Aristotle, according to which all being comes from something: It is Saint Anselm, who is thought to not have read Parmenides, nor to have known Aristotle beyond rudiments of the *logica vetus*. And yet, Anselm declares in an initial chapter (III) of his first work, the *Monologion*, that “nothing is by nothing” (*nihil est per nihil*), and that consequently “all that is, is not but by something”

(*quidquid est, non nisi per aliquid est*), as follows: "All which is, is either by something or by nothing. But nothing is by nothing. In truth, one cannot think that something is by nothing. Hence, all which is, is not but by something" (1986).<sup>5</sup>

Nothing is by nothing, because it is unthinkable that something be by not-something: Thus, expresses Anselm the same rational aversion towards the emptiness at the origin of the being which is common to the heritage of Greek philosophy. But more radically than the absence of an original matter or a material principle, that unsustainable emptiness is the absence or negation of the being as was indicated by Parmenides. Anselm shares the same fundamental conviction of Parmenides, which is the negation of the non-being at the origin of the being. From such a negation, one deduces on the one hand the negation of the origin of the being, which is explicit in Parmenides—the being is inborn—and on the other hand the affirmation of being at the origin of the being, which is explicit in Anselm's principle "all that is, is by something." Indeed, all of Anselm's metaphysics is an analysis and a development of this principle.

However, Saint Anselm is not acknowledged by this fact, rather he is celebrated by his argument in the *Proslogion* in favor of the existence of God, which gave rise to several congeneric arguments, and many other refutations. Only the concept of God in Anselm's argument is not to be understood without some of the attributes of the being in Parmenides, such as, for instance, the one of inborn: If God were not inborn, that is, if God had been born, then He would not be something insurmountably thinkable, for He would be surmounted by something thinkable devoid of beginning. And, in turn, this attribute of inborn is not to be understood outside the signification of the being by itself (*per se*), which is the one that does not depend on any other cause, and hence is a non-relative form of being by something (*per aliquid*), but nonetheless is covered by the principle "all that is, is by something."

In truth, this is the principle which we have apprehended at the top of Anselm's metaphysics, which we have designated as "principle of the relational disposition of the being, according to a relation by something" (1999).<sup>6</sup> This is the principle which rules over all the being which is mediated by the relation by something (*per aliquid*). Two other principles are structurally solidary with the latter: the "irreflexivity principle" and the "asymmetry principle" of the same relation by something.<sup>7</sup> The irreflexivity principle of the relation by something establishes that nothing is relationally by itself, that is, nothing is born from itself or nothing is made by itself.<sup>8</sup> In turn, the asymmetry principle of the relation by something establishes that the two terms of the relation by something are not reciprocally or symmetrically by each other, that is, no being is born from what is born from it, or no being is made by what is made from it, "for it is irrational to think that anything is by that which it originates."<sup>9</sup> Hence, these three fundamental principles of Anselm's metaphysics rule over the relations of origin of the being.

Three other principles are structurally solidary with these three relational principles: one of difference and two of order. If, in light of the irreflexivity principle of the relation by something, no being is born from itself or is made by itself, then the terms of this relation are necessarily distinct. Such is postulated by the principle of difference between the terms of the relation by something: "All that comes to be from something or by something, is not at all the same as that from which or by which it comes to be."<sup>10</sup> Hence, the relation by something generates difference between the terms which constitute it, and hence alterity of one in regard to the other. But both of them, inasmuch as one is originated in the other, and consequently depends on the latter, cannot be pair terms, nor can they be placed alongside. That which is by something and that by which something is, must be rendered uneven, and ordered according to the principle of order of the relation by

something, which is also a relation of dependence, and which therefore establishes that the original term is greater than the originated term.<sup>11</sup> And, within the scope of a relation by something, nothing can be rendered different and uneven as other greater or lesser, but by being what it is.<sup>12</sup> Such is postulated by the principle of priority of the being over the being-other, according to which the other is second in regard to the being, and is only thinkable in the domain of the being.<sup>13</sup>

Hence, in Saint Anselm's philosophy, we find six principles which are essentially congruent amongst themselves—the one of relational disposition of the being according to the relation by something, the one of irreflexivity of the relation by something, the one of asymmetry of the same relation, the one of difference between the terms of the relation by something, the one of order of the terms of the same relation, and the one of priority of the being over the being-other—six principles laid upon Anselm's Parmenidian conviction: “nothing is by nothing.” Now, those six principles arose in Saint Anselm with the same unquestionable necessity with which the being arose in Parmenides. But, unlike Parmenides' being, which is not relational, Anselm's six principles of being by something rule over fundamental relations of the being, and are therefore maximally universal principles which may legitimately be classified as metaphysical principles of Saint Anselm's philosophy.

The relations ruled by the six discriminated principles of Anselm's metaphysics are, first and foremost, relations of origin, and among these, relations of causality immediately spring to our mind. The effect of a cause is something which is by something, in Anselm's sense of a relation by something. All the principles of a relation by something are applied pertinently to the relation cause-effect: A causal relation is irreflexive, inasmuch as it excludes self-causation or self-production; a causal relation is asymmetrical, for a cause cannot be an effect of its effect, nor can an effect be the cause of its cause; a causal relation implies difference and an order of greater (cause) and lesser (effect) between its terms; and a causal relation cannot originate the alterity of that which is effect, if not through the cause. Hence, relations of causality are those to which Anselm's metaphysical principles of being by something most obviously apply.

Since these principles, which rule over causal relations, rest upon Parmenides' conviction that “nothing is by nothing,” we may infer that the rational understanding of reality by means of a causal explanation has its remote origin in that same conviction. Anselm's metaphysics of being by something very acutely points to that origin, while simultaneously revealing its Greek philosophical nature.

However, Anselm's metaphysics should integrate a different heritage: the Judaic-Christian tradition. Now, this tradition conveyed the idea that the world had been made from nothing, and that this was the expression of the immense power of God the creator (2 Mac 7, 28). Hence, the idea of something having been made from nothing (*ex nihilo*) could not be completely irrational. So much so, that Saint Anselm integrated it in his metaphysics, as the contrary of being by something. Let us see how.

Indeed, the metaphysics of Creation in the biblical tradition gave Saint Anselm yet another reason to once again question the meaning of nothingness in its origins. Hence, we find the author of the *Monologion* radicalizing the question, while questioning himself on the supreme being, namely, if he may somehow be understood as being from nothing:

In truth, it is not by nothing, for in no way can it be intelligibilized that what is something be by nothing. And if, in any way, it is from nothing, either it is by itself, or it is by other, or it is by nothing from nothing. But it is said that in no way can something be by nothing. Hence, if in any way it is from nothing, then either it is by itself, or it is by other from nothing. But by itself, nothing can be from nothing, for if something is from nothing by something, then it is necessary that

that by which it is, be first. Hence, since this essence is not prior to itself, in no way can it be from nothing by itself. And if it is said that it existed from nothing by any other nature, then it is not supreme in relation to all things, rather it is inferior to something.<sup>14</sup> (19; 22-31)

In this reflection, Anselm nearly seems to reenact Parmenides. The question of the origin of the supreme being from nothing is analyzed according to three hypotheses. The first one is the hypothesis of being from nothing by nothing, which is immediately excluded by Parmenides' conviction that nothing is by nothing. The second one is the hypothesis of being from nothing by itself, and this one is eliminated by two general principles of the relation by something: the irreflexivity principle of this relation, and the principle of greater/lesser order between the terms of that relation. The third one is the hypothesis of being from nothing by other, and this one contradicts the attribute of divine supremacy. Hence, in light of the most general principles of being by something, in no way can the supreme being be from nothing. In no way, that is, in a causal or relational way.

However, there is a purely negative way, according to which one may understand that the supreme being is from nothing, namely, as unmade. In this case, to be from nothing is the same as not being made, or not being caused.<sup>15</sup> *Ex nihilo*, with regard to the supreme being, therefore means negation of causal dependence.

In turn, with regard to being caused, *ex nihilo* cannot mean negation of all causal dependence, but it can mean negation of a particular cause, as is the material cause. In fact, Anselm considers the material cause among the three types of cause that he distinguishes: the efficient cause, the material cause, and the adjuvant cause.<sup>16</sup> The idea of a production of something devoid of material cause is compatible with the biblical sense of *ex nihilo* creation, in which matter is not a cause, but an effect. In this, the biblical idea of *ex nihilo* creation differs from ancient Greek philosophy, which repeatedly admitted matter as cause and principle. Even in the cosmogony of Plato's *Timaeus*, this conception prevails, since there creation is an ordination of chaotic, yet original matter. Actually, Anselm never says explicitly that the *ex nihilo* creation is a creation devoid of material cause. Perhaps this would be too opposed to the Greek rationality which is still profoundly embedded in his metaphysics.

Conversely, Anselm's most suggestive analogy to interpret the *ex nihilo* creation allows us to insert the concept of nothingness in the scope of a table of contraries, which in turn is perfectly compatible with the heritage of Greek philosophy. Here is the analogy: Just as he who was poor is now rich, and just as he who was sick is now sane, so are all things which were nothing now something.<sup>17</sup> In this analogy, nothing is a contrary of deprivation, just as something is a positive contrary. Furthermore, nothing becomes the genus of all contraries of deprivation, and something becomes the genus engulfing all positive contraries. And the *ex nihilo* creation is the transition of contraries of deprivation to positive contraries. Here is an interpretation of the biblical idea of *ex nihilo* creation which, so to say, makes peace with the heritage of Greek philosophy, which is still an indirect, yet profoundly structuring axis of Saint Anselm's thought.

Hence, certain meanings of the expression *ex nihilo* are philosophically and theologically pertinent, and therefore they need to be rendered compatible with the prime principle of Anselm's metaphysics: the principle of the relational disposition of the being according to a relation by something—all that is, is not but by something. The very conception of God as Trinity would demand this, for in divine Trinity there is a Person, the Father, which proceeds from no other, and which is therefore *ex nullo*, that is, from no one. Hence, in a later work dedicated to the procession of the Holy Spirit, *De Processione Spiritus Sancti*, Anselm would complement his prime principle with the principle of the contrary of a relation by something, which is stated as follows: "All

which is, is either by something or by nothing.”<sup>18</sup> This principle is the concession that a relation by something admits contraries. The relation by something is the great genus of the relations of origin, namely, causal relations. But the deprivation of the relation of origin, that is, the contrary of deprivation, of the relation by something, is necessary to the conception of that which is original. That is why Anselm had to integrate that contrary of deprivation in his metaphysics of being by something.

In a word, something which is by nothing, or from nothing: Is this a parricide against Parmenides? Not at all: the expressions *per nihil* and *ex nihilo* apply to exceptional cases, which, as the saying goes, confirm the rule, and are always concepts of deprivation. Hence, Parmenides' paternity of Saint Anselm's metaphysics, of whom one may say he was the medieval Parmenides, suffers no blow.

## Notes

1. José Trindade Santos, “Interpretação do Poema de Parménides,” in *Da Natureza*, de Parménides, Queluz, Alda Editores, 1997, 59-142.

2. “τίνα γὰρ γένναν διζήσεται αὐτοῦ; πῆι πόθεν αὐξήθεν; οὐδ' ἔκ μὴ ἔόντος ἕασσω φάσθαι σ' οὐδὲ νοεῖν· οὐ γὰρ φατὸν οὐδὲ νοητὸν ἔστιν ὅπως οὐκ ἔστι. τί δ' ἄν μιν καὶ χρέος ᾤρσεν {10} ὕστερον ἢ πρόσθεν, τοῦ μηδενὸς ἀρξάμενόν, φύν; οὕτως ἢ πάμπαν πελέναι χρεῶν ἔστιν ἢ οὐχί. οὐδὲ ποτ' ἔκ μὴ ἔόντος ἐφήσει πίστιος ἰσχύς γίγνεσθαι τι παρ' αὐτό·” Parmenides, Fragment B 8.6-13 (Text of the 6th edition Diels-Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Berlin, 1954, reprod. and trans. by José Trindade Santos, *Da Natureza*, de Parménides, Queluz, Alda Editores, 1997, 20-21).

3. Even though, from B 8.51, Parmenides excludes from truth human opinions on the cosmos.

4. Aristotle, *Metaphysics A*, 981 a 28-b 2.

5. “Omne namque quod est, aut est per aliquid aut per nihil. Sed nihil est per nihil. Non enim vel cogitari potest, ut sit aliquid non per aliquid. Quidquid est igitur, non nisi per aliquid est.” Saint Anselm, *Monologion* 3 (Text of the critical edition by F. S. Schmitt, I, 15; 29-30; 16; 1, reprod. in M. Corbin (Dir.), *L'Oeuvre d'Anselme de Cantorbéry* 1, Paris, Cerf, 1986, 60-62. Henceforth: *Mon.*).

6. M. L. Xavier, *Razão e Ser. Três questões de ontologia em Santo Anselmo*, Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/FCT, 1999, 410; 412-25.

7. *Ibid.*, *Razão e Ser...* 411; 442-63.

8. “Nihil quippe per seipsam fieri potest,” Saint Anselm, *Mon.* 29 (Schmitt: I, 47; 16).

9. “... quoniam irrationabilis cogitatio est, ut aliqua res sit per illud, cui dat esse.” *Ibid.*, *Mon.* 3 (Schmitt: I, 16; 11-12).

10. “Quidquid autem ex aliquo vel per aliquid incipit esse, non est omnino idem illi, ex quo vel per quod incipit esse.” *Ibid.*, *Mon.* 18 (Schmitt: I, 32; 16-18). M. L. Xavier, *Razão e Ser...* 411; 465-76.

11. A principle which is applied to the deduction of the superiority of the universal cause: “At quidquid est per aliud, minus est quam illud per quod cuncta sunt alia.” Saint Anselm, *Mon.* 3 (I, 16; 20-21). M. L. Xavier, *Razão e Ser...* 412; 488-97.

12. “Contingit enim aliquem esse quod est, priusquam sit alius, et contingit aliquem alium in existendo fieri; prius autem quemquam esse alium, quam sit hoc quod est, non est possibile.” Saint Anselm, *De processione spiritus sancti* 2 (Text of the critical edition by F. S. Schmitt, II, 187; 21-23, reprod. in M. Corbin (Dir.), *L'Oeuvre d'Anselme de Cantorbéry* 4, Paris, Cerf, 1990, 240).

13. M. L. Xavier, *Razão e Ser...* 412; 497-501.

14. “Per nihil vero non est, quia nullo modo intelligi potest, ut quod aliquid est, sit per nihil. At si quomodo est ex nihilo: aut per se, aut per aliud, aut per nihil est ex nihilo. Sed constat quia nullo modo aliquid est per nihil. Si igitur est aliquomodo ex nihilo: aut per se aut per aliud est ex nihilo. Per se autem nihil potest esse ex nihilo, quia si quid est est ex nihilo per se. At si dicatur per aliam aliquam naturam extitisse ex nihilo, non est summa omnium, sed aliquo inferior;” *Ibid.*, *Mon.* 6 (Schmitt: I, 19; 22-31).

15. “Unus quidem modus est, quo volumus intelligi penitus non esse factum, quod factum dicitur ex nihilo. Cui simile est, cum quaerenti de tacente unde loquatur, respondetur: de nihilo; id est: non loquitur. Secundum quem modum de ipsa summa essentia et de eo quod penitus nec fuit nec est, quaerenti unde factum sit, recte responderi potest: de nihilo; id est: nequaquam factum est.” *Ibid.*, *Mon.* 8 (Schmitt: I, 23; 6-12).

16. “Quo denim dicitur esse per aliquid, videtur esse aut per efficiens aut per materiam aut per aliquod aliud adiumentum, velut per instrumentum.” *Ibid.*, *Mon.* 6 (Schmitt: I, 19; 1-3).

17. “Quamvis non inconvenienter et sine omni repugnantia ea quae facta sunt a creatrice substantia, dici possint esse facta ex nihilo, eo modo quo dici solet dives ex paupere, et recepisse quis sanitatem ex aegritudinem. Id est: qui prius pauper erat, nunc est dives, quod antea non erat; et qui prius habebat aegritudinem, nunc habet sanitatem, quam antea non habebat. Hoc igitur modo non inconvenienter intelligi potest, si dicitur creatrix essentia universa fecisse de nihilo, sive quod universa per illam facta sint de

nihilo; id est: quae prius nihil erant, nunc sunt aliquid." Ibid., *Mon.* 8 (Schmitt: I, 23; 26-33).

18. "Omne namque quod est, aut est per aliquid aut per nihil. Esse autem (spiritus sanctus) nequit nisi aut ex aliquo, sicut filius, aut ex nullo, sicut pater." Ibid., *De processione spiritus sancti* 2 (Schmitt: II, 187; 33-34). M. L. Xavier, *Razão e Ser...* 412; 476-88.

### Works Cited

- Aristotle. *Metaphysics*. Trilingual edition by Valentín García Yebra, 2<sup>a</sup> ed. rev., Madrid, Editorial Gredos, 1990.
- Corbin, Michel (Dir.). *The Works of S. Anselm*. Paris, Cerf, t.1, 1986, t.4, 1990.
- Diels, Hermann and Kranz Walter. *The Fragments of the Presocratic Philosophers*. Bd.1, 7<sup>a</sup> ed., Berlin, 1954.
- Santos, José Trindade. *Parmenides' Of Nature*. Queluz, Alda Editores, 1997.
- Xavier, Maria Leonor. *Reason and Being. Three Questions of Ontology in S. Anselm*. Lisboa, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian/FCT, 1999.