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Commentary
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# Identity Without Enmity

## On the Metaphysical Intention of John Zizioulas's "Logic of Identity" Notes

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### I

On four leaves of paper, a theologian writes down the law of identity and asks why it holds. A = A. Why is that so? Within standard first-order logic with identity, self-identity requires no additional premise. This does not, however, settle the metaphysical question Zizioulas is exploring. A strictly formal assessment, applied without regard to the exploratory character of the notes, misses what may be taking shape on the page.

What is happening is that the tautology is being made to stand for something. Zizioulas need not be read as proposing to revise $\forall x\ (x = x)$; he never says he wishes to. He is treating A = A as shorthand for a metaphysical picture—one in which a being possesses its identity in itself, in which relations arrive afterwards, and in which the other appears only as the external limit of something already constituted. His symbols are not logical constants but experimental notation for an ontology. Read as deduction, the man-

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uscript does not stand. Read as an ontological thought experiment, it is doing something else, and the something else is worth recovering.

Even so, the leaves do not stand alone. For nearly thirty years Zizioulas taught a course in Christian dogmatics—at Edinburgh, Glasgow, King's College London, and finally Thessaloniki—whose opening lectures treat theological epistemology as a problem of identification, and which his students recorded and transcribed. Read beside those lectures, the compressed steps on these pages are often abbreviations rather than lapses. I draw on them throughout.

## II

The first thing to notice is that Zizioulas and a stringent logical critic such as Wittgenstein share a starting point. "To say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all," writes Wittgenstein at *Tractatus* 5.5303; and the manuscript's own conclusion is that "God = God … we say nothing of the being of God." Both hold that the tautology is empty. They disagree only about what follows from that. For Wittgenstein, the emptiness shows that the question was ill-formed. For Zizioulas it is a report about ontology: if you begin from self-identical substance, you will never arrive at a person. "For God to be God, he is so unique that he coexists with nothing else. Therefore, I cannot know God by excluding something else." This, therefore, is a philosophical disagreement rather than a logical error, and it sets the terms for everything after it.

## III

The manuscript's first movement might be read as an argument and judged invalid. It reads better as a portrait. Zizioulas provisionally adopts the account he means to break—A is A because it is not B—and then does the one thing that tests such an account: he universalizes it. If B is real, then B must be B on the same terms, which is to say because it is not A. The grounding now runs both ways, and a grounding relation that runs both ways is no grounding at all. Worse, a two-term structure in which each term is nothing but "not the other" can have its terms exchanged without any

loss of content. Pure non-identity tells us that A and B differ. It cannot tell us which is which.

He says that being rests upon non-being, and read as a thesis this does not follow: difference presupposes the reality of both relata rather than the nothingness of either, as the *Sophist* had already established in separating the "is not" of otherness from the "is not" of non-existence. But the lectures show it was never offered as a thesis. There Zizioulas runs the same move as a reduction. Identification by exclusion means that "knowing A presupposes the existence of something else alongside it, which I exclude"; apply it to God and "we would therefore have to suppose that something always coexists with God, even if that something is nothingness" — a supposition he ascribes to Aquinas and to Barth, and rejects. The leaves compress an argument his students heard at length. What the immanent critique establishes stands either way: purely differential identity cannot ground concrete identity.

The vocabulary in which he conducts his experiment repays attention, though not where one might expect. He writes of "that which you wish to negate," a phrase that invites a reading in terms of contest; but negation is his ordinary term for identification throughout the lectures, and the word alone will not carry that weight. What carries it is where the lectures say such knowing ends: "there is always a latent utilitarian aspect to this knowledge derived from identifying an object's properties, because these properties immediately lend themselves to use." Identification by exclusion terminates in use. An ontology erected upon it will treat the other as a boundary first and a resource second — a picture with affinities to Hegel's struggle for recognition, Girard's mimetic rivalry, and Sartre's objectifying gaze, though Sartre served Zizioulas elsewhere for the opposite purpose, to show that a person may be present in absence. An older analogue lies in the framework Aristotle bequeathed, where πρός τι is treated as an accident and substance has ontological priority over relation. Zizioulas is describing an ontology of fallen individuality and asking whether being must be competitive. That is the real question of the first movement, and it is not a question about logic.

## IV

"Thus, we must depart from the logic of 1 = 1." The manuscript marks its own turn, and what it departs from is not the formal law but a metaphysics erected upon it. Three positions are now in view. Identity without otherness, A = A, which is empty. Identity against the other, A ≠ B, which, when treated as the basis of identity, makes otherness external and potentially hostile. And identity through a positive, asymmetric relation R(A, B), from which A ≠ B follows: the other is not merely what I am not but is positively involved in who I am.

The theological form of the third is expressed in a sentence that even a critical reader might find compelling: "God = God" says nothing; "God = Father" says something. Fatherhood is not a property a complete individual might possess and afterwards deploy. It is a correlative: there is no father without a child, and Aristotle's own *Categories* say as much, correlatives being simultaneous by nature, so that to destroy one is to destroy the other. The text that made relation an accident supplies the argument that unmakes it. Athanasius had already drawn the consequence against Arius—if there was when the Son was not, then there was when God was not Father—and Zizioulas's formulation is exact: if you do not affirm the Son you lose the Father too. Zizioulas had put the same point to his students without the Arian framing: "if the Son ceases to exist, the Father ceases to exist. If the Father ceases to exist, the Son also ceases to exist."

From here the reconstruction is short. Let the relation be asymmetric: the Father begets the Son, and the Son does not beget the Father. Then, by the indiscernibility of identicals, the Father is not the Son. Difference has stopped being a premise and become a theorem, derived from a positive relation. And the relation that distinguishes them is the same relation that unites them. This reconstruction makes the inference to personal distinction formally valid, while leaving its theological premises to be established.

## V

There is a further result, and it vindicates the intention more strongly than anything the manuscript states. Suppose three persons are to be distinguished within one being. Whatever distinguishes them must be unshared, or it fails to individuate; and it must not belong to the common nature, or it ranks them, and the derived persons are lesser. No perfection of the divine nature can serve, since these are held in common. A bare individuating thisness satisfies both conditions but does not itself explain communion, risking a picture of three individuals side by side. Relations of origin satisfy both conditions and, unlike a bare thisness, join what they distinguish.

Relations of origin offer a particularly compelling account within this theological framework. On this reading, the tradition's identification of unbegottenness, generation, and procession as the distinctive modes of personal existence is more than an inherited convention: it expresses the need to distinguish the divine persons without dividing their common being. A relational account of personal identity is not merely congenial to Trinitarian doctrine; it is indispensable to its articulation in these terms.

This also locates a tension within the manuscript's terminology. Zizioulas calls the Son "non-Father." The designation states a distinction but does not yet express the positive relation that constitutes the Son's personal identity. His own account of the Eunomian controversy supplies the clarification. "By identifying God's essence or nature with the Father," he told his students, "the Eunomians created the confusion that, since we can know God as Father, we can therefore know God's nature, insofar as the divine essence and the Father coincide completely in meaning." The distinction between essence and Father "upon which the Cappadocian Fathers insisted" ruled out that confusion. Were Father and divine substance identified, whatever is "non-Father" would fall outside the divine substance; the Cappadocian distinction removes the consequence and locates the cause of the Son's generation in the Father. "Non-Father" therefore need not imply exclusion from divinity, but it remains insufficient to say positively who the Son

is. "Begotten of the Father" expresses both his distinction from the Father and his constitutive relation to him. The repair lies in that substitution — and it accords both with the second movement of the manuscript and with Zizioulas's explicit theology in *Communion and Otherness*.

## VI

One question remains open, and it is the one found in the manuscript's margin rather than in its text: oneness as caused by the Person of the Father. Unity so conceived is neither a generic nature instantiated three times nor an impersonal essence prior to the persons, but the one divine being eternally communicated from the Father. That answer escapes subordination only if the Father is never without Son and Spirit, if priority of origin is not priority of being, and if what is communicated is the whole and not a diminished portion—qualifications the tradition supplies and the manuscript assumes.

The manuscript leaves this account of freedom undeveloped. In *Knowing as Willing* he locates Trinitarian freedom in the person of the Father, distinguishing the willing person from the act of willing. If the Father begets by necessity of nature, then nature is prior to person, and the entire thesis reverts to what it was written against. If He might not have begotten, the Son is contingent. On this reading, the Father does not first exist and then decide; his personal being is his self-giving, and divine freedom is ecstatic rather than elective. This avoids construing generation as a decision made by an already constituted individual. Whether the term thereby designates something other than necessity, or furnishes necessity with a more congenial name, the manuscript does not say.

It is worth noting that this is the manuscript's own first question returning. Zizioulas began by calling the unanswerability of A = A "the compulsory nature of being." Taken alone the phrase looks like a confusion of logical necessity with coercion. In the lectures, however, "compulsory" is a term of art, and logical conviction is its chief instance: "To be convinced logically means compulsory knowledge: I do not know freely." Knowledge that

compels is knowledge that overrides freedom, and God "is neither known nor wishes to be known by compulsion." The phrase on the leaves is shorthand for a distinction he had been teaching for years, and it names something real: existence as given, unchosen, unable to offer a reason for itself. Created being is compulsory in that sense; divine being must be self-given. What looked like an equivocation at the argument's opening proves to be the very distinction the argument exists to establish. The notes stop at a question that this reconstruction leaves unresolved.

## VII

The conclusion is not that an exploratory sketch shows Zizioulas to be good at theology but poor at logic. It is that these notes identify the right problem, and that their compression makes a worked position look like a stumble. Formal identity is ontologically empty; an ontology that takes self-sameness as its primitive notion risks making the other into a limit. A theology whose central doctrine requires an otherness that is neither division nor diminution cannot rest content with such an ontology. Where the page seems to break down, the lectures more often than not supply what it omits; what they do not supply is an answer to the question the notes end on, and that question is genuinely open. What the leaves show, in the end, is how a metaphysical proposal was being sought through a logical apparatus borrowed from the position under critique.

The Fathers, he told his students, had no need of an existential analysis of what it means to know "in a person" — "but this does not mean that it must never be undertaken." These leaves are an attempt to undertake it.

Because we do not know whether Zizioulas meant to revise, expand, debate, or abandon these pages, the reconstruction offered here must remain conditional. Their present publication does not turn notes into a completed doctrine; it does, however, make their metaphysical intention available for judgment. On that level the argument is valuable: the other is not the negation

of my identity, and the positive existence of the other can be understood as a condition of it. The notes should therefore be read neither as a failed formal proof nor as an authoritative final statement, but as the germ of an ontology of identity without enmity.

*A note on sources*. Quotations from the manuscript follow the text printed in this issue. Quotations from the dogmatics lectures are my own translations from the Greek transcript of the course, which remains in part unpublished; the published selection is John D. Zizioulas, *Lectures in Christian Dogmatics*, ed. Douglas H. Knight and Katerina Nikolopulu (London: T&T Clark, 2009). Other references are to *Communion and Otherness* (London: T&T Clark, 2006) and *Knowing as Willing* (Los Angeles: Sebastian Press, 2025).