

Atheism and the Principle of (non-) Contradiction

Introduction

In the introductory chapter of *God in Exile*, Fabro makes an important claim regarding the logical underpinnings of modern atheism. He writes: “*Logically*, the error of atheism can be pinpointed and therefore confuted [i.e., proven wrong] in the primacy it assigns to the ‘principle of identity,’ a primacy so drastic as to dethrone entirely the principle of (non-) contradiction.”¹ The Stigmatine then gives three reasons why the principle of identity cannot have primacy over that of (non-) contradiction: “(1) precisely, the created universe is not all that exists; (2) man is distinct from the world around him; (3) man initiates his own cognitive process not simply on his own but rather via the presence of the many and proceeds to judgment on the basis of the distinction between himself and the world around him.”²

To examine this claim more closely, we can consider three things: first, the definitions and content of the two principles that Fabro mentions here, namely, the principle of (non-) contradiction (PNC) and the principle of identity (PI), second, the origins of these principles and their use in realist and idealist philosophies, respectively, and, third, the reasons that Fabro gives for the primacy of the PNC over the PI and how the rejection of that primacy leads to atheism.

Definition and Content of the Principles

¹ Cornelio Fabro, *God in Exile* (Westminster MD; Newman Press, 1968), 18. Emphasis Fabro’s.

² *Ibid.*, 18.

Although Plato offers some hints at the PNC, a clearer definition can be found in book 4 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where he writes: "The most certain of all beliefs is that opposite statements are not both true at the same time."³ This, the logical formulation (meaning, pertaining to the realm of logic), expresses the radical incompatibility between the attribution and the negation of the same predicate to the same subject at the same time, that is, between two contradictory opinions, e.g., between the judgments "The sky is blue," and "The sky is not blue." Earlier in the text, Aristotle proposes the *ontological* version of the principle, stating: "It is impossible for the same attribute at once to belong and not to belong to the same thing and in the same relation."⁴ In other words, some *thing* cannot both be and not be at the same time under the same respect.

The PI states that "a thing is what it is," or "A is A." While hinted at or expressed obliquely, the principle is not clearly formulated among the ancient and the majority of medieval thinkers; among the first to assert the primacy of this principle is the Scotist Antonius Andreas († 1320), using the formula *Ens est ens*. The present form as given above, however, derives from Leibniz.⁵

The origins of these principles and their use in realist and idealist philosophies

As we have seen throughout the course of these Thomistic studies, pre-Cartesian thought has a starting point that is diametrically opposed to that of post-Cartesian thought.

³ See Elders, Leo. *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas: In a Historical Perspective* (New York: E. J. Brill, 1993), 145. He proposes *State* 437a and *Parmenides* 127e as Platonic examples. 1011b13-14. English trans. from Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vols. 17, 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.

⁴ 1005b19-20. English trans. from Aristotle. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, Vols. 17, 18, translated by Hugh Tredennick. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press; London, William Heinemann Ltd. 1933, 1989.

⁵ Cf. Conze, Edward. Trans. Holger R. Heine. *The Principle of Contradiction: On the Theory of Dialectical Marxism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016), 87.

For Aristotle and Aquinas, the outside world, i.e., the realm of extra-mental being, imposes itself upon the subject, and it falls to the subject to make sense of it: the first principle, therefore, is the one that follows immediately from that first apprehension. In ST I-II, q. 94, a. 2, corpus, Aquinas explains: “That which, before all else, falls under apprehension, is ‘being,’ [*illud quod primo cadit in apprehensione, est ens*] the notion of which is included in all things whatsoever a man apprehends. Wherefore the first indemonstrable principle is that ‘the same thing cannot be affirmed and denied at the same time,’ which is based on the notion of ‘being’ and ‘not-being’: and on this principle all others are based.” Three characteristics should be noted: first, the PNC follows from the apprehension of *ens*, that is, something outside of the subject; it is from this apprehension, and the subsequent apprehension of its opposite, namely, non-being, that the subject is able to form the first principle. Second, it is *the* first principle, and it is *per se nota*, meaning, once the subject apprehends “being” and “non-being,” it immediately and without error grasps the relation between the two. As Aquinas writes: “Self-known principles are such as are known as soon as the terms are understood, from the fact that the predicate is contained in the definition of the subject” (ST I, q. 17, a. 3, ad 2). The sort of “non-being” referred to here, “the not-being which is contrary to being, is not not-being as a pure denial, but a not being in a particular sense (*secundum quid*), namely, a not-being-this.” This is because “the intellect which formed the concept of being from the things which the senses presented to it, now becomes aware of the fact that it is not another thing, and the intellect grasps this when it is confronted with this other.”⁶ Furthermore, because it is the *first* principle, no direct proof of it is possible; the mind simply cannot err with regard to it, but at best the truth of the

⁶ Elders, Leo. *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 151.

PNC can be demonstrated only indirectly.⁷ Thirdly, the PNC has priority over the PI. In *De potentia*, q. 9, a. 7, ad 15, Aquinas offers an insightful explanation:

Hence division logically precedes unity, and this is proved as follows. The first object of the intellect is being; the second is the negation of being. From these two there follows thirdly the understanding of distinction (since from the fact that we understand that this thing is and that it is not that thing we realize that these two are distinct): and it follows fourthly that the intellect apprehends the idea of unity, in that it understands that this thing is not divided in itself [*i.e., it is what it is*]; and fifthly the intellect apprehends number, in that it understands this as distinct from that and each as one in itself.

If the PI were merely to state the obvious, e.g., “A tree is a tree,” it would be a mere tautology, void of any real content or substantial import. Rather, for the principle to mean something, that is, in order for it to really be a *principium* from which further judgments can arise, it must be taken, rather, as an affirmation of the absence of internal division. That a thing is what it is implies and indeed requires that it first be understood that to be itself and to not be itself are not the same. The PI is founded upon the PNC. As Fabro comments, “the genuine principle of identity reveals itself to be a principle of verification of the real, not a principle capable of serving as a universal basis for the primary nexus between being and knowing.”⁸

The starting point for thinkers after Descartes is radically different. As Fabro states, “[The *cogito*] has made being dependent on a function of thought.”⁹ No longer does the world of extra-mental beings impose itself on the subject, who is in turn obligated to conform his thoughts to extra-mental reality, thus rendering thought dependent on being; rather, it is the subject who, of himself and by himself, “creates” reality, as it were, by

⁷ Cf. Elders, *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 153-4.

⁸ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 18.

⁹ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 59.

means of thought. In this way, being and thought are *to be identified*; they are *identical*. A thing *is* what I *think* it is, and this becomes the foundation of modern thought. It is this identity that Fabro has in mind when he speaks of the “principle of identity”: this identity is truly the principle, the *principium*, from which everything else derives.

Although Fabro doesn’t expound a great deal on the principle of identity as such (meaning, as we saw it in Aquinas’s thought) in the development of atheism (indeed, the term “principio d’identità” only appears seven times in the whole of *Introduzione all’ateismo moderno*, and four of these are in the paragraphs we’ve been citing from the introduction), it can be helpful to see the fate that both the PNC and the PI, as formulated earlier, suffer in modern thought. Two particularly telling examples are Kant and Fichte.

Kant’s pre-critical works lay the foundation for the primacy of the PI and the emptying of the PNC. In his 1755 *A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*, Kant argues explicitly that the first axiom is not the PNC, but rather the PI, which is an analytical (i.e., judgments whose predicates are contained within their subjects) and *a priori* judgment which forms the basis for all other analytical judgments.¹⁰ However, both the PNC and the PI are quite useless for synthetic judgments, i.e., ones that yield an increase in knowledge. Indeed, the import of the PNC is even further attenuated in the 1763 *Attempt*

¹⁰ For Kant’s critique of the PNC, see, for instance, Kant’s 1755 *A New Elucidation of the first principles of metaphysical cognition*, in *Kant Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*. Trans. David Walford (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 9-10: “The proposition which arrogates to itself the title of the absolutely supreme and most general principle of all truths must be formulated, firstly, in the simplest terms, and, secondly, in the most general terms. It seems to me beyond doubt that the twin principles of identity satisfies these two conditions. . . . The principle of contradiction, which is expressed by the proposition: *it is impossible that the same thing should simultaneously be and not be*, is in fact nothing but the definition of the *impossible*. . . . But in what way is it possible to establish that all truths ought to be referred to this definition as to a touchstone?” Here, too, Kant explicitly credits Leibniz with this discovery, but comparing him to the “father in one of Aesop’s fables” (8). It is by a double principle of identity, “What a thing is, it is,” and “What a thing is not, it is not,” that the other judgments arise.

to *Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* wherein Kant distinguishes two sorts of opposition: logical and real. Logical opposition merely means that the simultaneous affirmation and negation of the same predicate of the same subject is contradictory; indeed, Kant agrees with Aristotle that such a contradiction is impossible, thus affirming the validity of the PNC on the logical plane. However, real opposition concerns real predicates, and on this plane contradiction doesn't exist. All predicates are to be considered on a scale, as it were; rather than contradict, they cancel each other out, negating each other and their consequences. For instance, "suppose that there are +8 units of capital and -8 units of passive debt; no contradiction is involved in attributing them to the same person. However, one of these magnitudes cancels an amount which is equal to that which is posited by the other, and the consequence is zero."¹¹

As Kant's thought develops, this idea that the PNC merely applies to logic and to the realm of thought is reinforced. In both editions of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 and 1787), Kant proposes his version of the PNC as "the universal and completely sufficient *principle* of all analytic cognition." However, he specifies, "this proposition belongs merely in logic" (A 151 / B 190). "Although we shall always take care never to act against that inviolable principle [meaning, our judgments can never contradict it], we can never expect from it any information regarding the truth of the synthetic kind of cognition" (A 151-2/ B 191).

The PNC means nothing in the world of experience; indeed, the problem of contradictions in objects, that is, on the level of perception, is merely an apparent one. "On

¹¹ Kant's 1763 *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, in Kant *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*. Trans. David Walford (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214.

the supposition that our empirical knowledge conforms to objects as things in themselves,” Kant writes, “we find [they cannot] be thought without contradiction. . . . On the other hand, [if] we suppose that our representation of things, as they are given to us, does not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but that these objects as appearances conform to our mode of representation, the contradiction vanishes” (B XX). In other words, if the philosopher tries to see things “in themselves,” they can only be understood as contradictory. If the focus shifts away from the supersensible and back to the examination of appearances, contradictions cease to exist.¹² Here we can see quite clearly what Fabro means: the primacy of “a thing *is* what I *think* it is” eliminates any understanding of contradiction at all.

After Kant, Fichte poses an interesting application of the PI, one that expresses the point that Fabro is making. In his 1794 *Foundations of the Entire Science of Knowledge*, Fichte proposes to “discover the primordial, absolutely unconditioned first principle of all human knowledge,” one that can neither be “proved nor defined.”¹³ This first principle must simply be accepted, and Fichte begins, not with the PNC, but rather with the PI: $A = A$. From this, through a rather lengthy and contrived series of derivations, Fichte is able to conclude that what is really being said by “ $A = A$ ” is that “I am I,” since the unconditioned self is at the basis of all positing. “*The self begins by an absolute positing of its own existence.*”¹⁴ This self is therefore the absolute self; this self arises from consciousness, without any other ground or foundation. It is simply posited, produced by itself. Ultimately,

¹² See Limnatis, Nectarios G., *German Idealism and the Problem of Knowledge* (New York: Springer, 2008), 68-70.

¹³ Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*. Trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 93.

¹⁴ Fichte, *Science of Knowledge*, 99.

Fichte will propose that the self is the result of the will's self-positing as both subject and object. As Fichte says, this transition or determination "by means of a self-grounding act of absolute freedom . . . is a creation out of nothing, an act of producing something that did not exist before, an absolute beginning."¹⁵

From here, then the self can posit the rest of the universe. As Fabro says elsewhere, "Fichte's absolute idealism claims a 'victory over the opposition between thought and being,'" but the victor is clearly thought, and not being, which is reduced to what the self produces.¹⁶ Being *qua* being doesn't even survive the conflict; indeed, the most conspicuous casualty is the Supreme Being, since the self can produce itself, and everything else, without the need of anything or anyone.

Scholium: is the formalist metaphysics of decadent scholasticism and some modern Thomists implicitly atheistic?

An interesting question arises from these considerations: both decadent scholasticism, which gives priority to essence over *esse*, and some modern Thomists, also give primacy to the PI over the PNC. These moderns include figures such as Garrigou-Lagrange and Maritain. The first still parts from a realist understanding of the world; the Dominican affirms the primacy of the PI because he maintains that the first principle cannot be a negative judgment (we've already seen why this isn't the case). Maritain argues

¹⁵ Fichte, *Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre 'nova methodo')*. Trans. Daniel Breazeale. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 139.

¹⁶ *s.v.* Fichte, Johann Gottlieb. Article originally appeared in the first edition of the New Catholic Encyclopedia in 1967, and reappears in the New Catholic Encyclopedia 2E. © 2003 Gale, a part of Cengage Learning, Inc. Reproduced by permission. www.cengage.com/permissions

the same way, but he also accepts the primacy of the PI because of his acceptance of certain elements of modern thought.¹⁷

The question that arises is the following: when Fabro speaks of the primacy of the PI over the PNC in modern thought as a cause of atheism, is this primacy the same as or perhaps a continuation of the primacy accorded to the PI by the essentialist metaphysics of decadent scholasticism and later? In other words, is essentialist or formalist metaphysics atheistic at its base?

To examine this question, we should make two distinctions: first, regarding the PI of identity as it was in pre-modern thought, and as Fabro explains it within the context of modern thought. In formalist metaphysics, the PI is broad, in the sense that “a thing is what it is,” the affirmation of the primacy of the essence of a thing over the *actus essendi*. For modern thought, as Fabro conceives it, the principle of identity is more nuanced: it is the identity between thought and being, that what is thought is the cause or the font of being. In this sense, then, we see a radical break between the affirmation of the primacy of the PI before and then with/after Descartes: one gives priority to the essence, but still allows, and in many (if not all) cases, affirms, a Creator, whereas the second eradicates the need for such a one. What salvages the first is that the point of departure is still realist; it still begins from the world of extramental reality, whereas modern thought does not.

Nonetheless, the two schools of thought are *similar* in that both deny the primacy of *esse ut actus essendi*, that is, in the real order, both schools give the primacy to something

¹⁷ See C. Ferraro, *Metaphysica* and also Elders, *The Metaphysics of Being of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 153-4.

other than being. One gives priority to the essence, and the other, to thought, and both base their affirmation of the primacy of the PI on this.

A second distinction needs to be made between being implicitly atheistic, and helping push thought towards the *cogito* and hence atheism. Immediately following the death of Saint Thomas, the proper understanding of *esse ut actus essendi* is buried under the terminology of *actus existendi* (Peter of Tarentasia), *esse essentiae – esse (actualis) existentiae*, where *esse* just means “reality” in the vaguest sense [*esse essentiae, esse existentiae, esse generis, esse speciei . . .*] and where the error appears of considering the *esse essentiae* as the “essence in itself,” and then the simplification to the couplet *essentia – existentia*.¹⁸ Since the Thomistic school neglected to properly defend Thomas’s original terminology and distinctions, there would be no way to properly defend against the claims of Scotus (1265/66 - 1308), who posits a univocal understanding of being and a voluntarist God; a castrated metaphysics can provide no sure support against these or any other deviations proposed later. In the Regensburg Address, then-Pope Benedict XVI clearly indicates the problems that result:

There arose with Duns Scotus a voluntarism which, in its later developments, led to the claim that we can only know God’s *voluntas ordinata*. Beyond this is the realm of God’s freedom, in virtue of which he could have done the opposite of everything he has actually done. This gives rise to positions which clearly approach those of Ibn Hazm and might even lead to the image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God’s transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions.

¹⁸ Fabro, Cornelio, *Participacion y Causalidad*, 252-3.

A voluntarist God “beyond reason” is one who doesn’t have to obey the PNC; He does what He wants, unfettered by anything, and hence our knowledge of Him (and, shortly, our knowledge of anything) becomes more and more doubtful.¹⁹ Although Ockham (1285 - 1347) might claim to support the PNC, he empties it of content, since he rejects that there are universals. Thus, “saying that ‘A human being is not an animal’ would amount to nothing more than saying that *as we currently use the words ‘human being’ and ‘animal.’* ‘A human being is not an animal’ is indeed necessarily false; but since there is no essence of human being [Ockham denies the existence of universals], there is no reason why God could not create a human being who was not an animal.”²⁰

These deviations give rise to skepticism about God and the world, and we can see a sort of culmination in Suarez (1548 – 1617). For example, he maintains:

- “In no way is the distinction between essence and *esse* necessary for distinguishing the accidents from the subject. Rather, accidental forms exist by their own act.”²¹ If accidents have their own *esse ut actus essendi*, how they reveal the substance is unclear.
- “Although God is proved to be the universal cause ordering everything, nevertheless the great ways of Aquinas that are proved from accepted principles, namely, ‘everything that moves is moved by another,’ and ‘where there is more and less, there must be a maximum,’ are not effective: on the contrary, these *principles* are

¹⁹ It seems that Scotus maintains that contradictory predicates can exist in one subject, because the predicates belong to different formalities, although the formalities might all be in one subject.

²⁰ Gerard J. Hughes, *The Nature of God*. (Routledge, New York: 1995), 125

²¹ Cf. *Disputationes metaphysicae*, d. 5, ss. 7, 8, and 9.

either false or at least dubious.”²² If these principles are in doubt, the proof for God’s existence is also tenuous.

- “Insofar as God differs from creatures as existing necessarily, it is false that every creature is composite, and especially that within one thing being (*esse*) and essence should be distinguished,”²³ and “No matter what should be held concerning the analogy of being, the objective concept of being is simply one.”²⁴

All of this has an impact on modern thought: as one author writes:

Suárez’s philosophical legacy is, simply put, immeasurable. Certainly, if René Descartes is to be taken as the father of modern thought . . . then the philosophical formation he received at La Flèche would play no small role in the shift to modernity. . . . In a letter to a French Jesuit, Descartes confesses: ‘It is there [La Flèche] that the first seeds of everything I have ever learnt were implanted in me, and I am wholly obliged to your Society for this.’²⁵

Likewise, Gilson summarizes: “Himself a pupil of the Jesuits, [Descartes] had learned metaphysics according to Suarez. . . . To Descartes, Scholastic philosophy was Suarez.”²⁶ It would be impossible to explain briefly all of Suárez’s thought, but two lines are quite telling: “Suárez makes the ‘subjective’ (i.e., the formal concept) the criterion and avenue to the ‘objective’ (i.e. the objective concept). The distance between Suárez’s still-realist metaphysical orientation is, however, not all that far from the . . . methodical doubt of René Descartes.”²⁷

²² Cf. *Disputationes metaphysicae*, d.18, s. 7; d. 29, s. 1, nn. 7 et ss; s. 3, n. 21.

²³ Cf. *Disputationes metaphysicae*, d. 31, *praesertim* ss. 4, 6, and 13.

²⁴ Cf. *Disputationes metaphysicae*, d. 2 ss. 2 and 3.

²⁵ Victor Salas and Robert Fastiggi, “Francisco Suárez, the Man and His Work,” in *A Companion to Francisco Suárez* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2015), 25.

²⁶ Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers*, 109.

²⁷ Salas and Fastiggi, “Francisco Suárez,” 25.

Most of these thinkers could not be characterized as atheists according to Fabro's criteria: as he writes, there is but:

one genuine notion of God and, consequently, but one valid form of theism, namely, that which admits God as the supreme ontological Principle who is the supreme Being, distinct from the world created by him, and who is simultaneously the supreme spiritual Principle, i.e., a knowing and a willing and hence a personal Being, therefore the all-embracing and free cause of the world.²⁸

The majority of these decadent scholastics do not deny God's existence; for them, God exists, and He maintains those essential attributes, although perhaps the import of God as *Ipsium Esse Subsistens* is diminished. Nonetheless, such thinkers have laid the groundwork for Descartes and atheism, inasmuch as the Thomists distorted the true thought of Aquinas, and proposed their own systems and distinctions that lacked the strength to refute the challenges from other schools and thinkers.

Perhaps we could say that the affirmation of the primacy of the PI in later scholasticism is a symptom of thought being corrupted, and it is that corruption which leads to modern thought, and thus to atheism. However, it would be difficult to find evidence to say that it is the affirmation of the PI alone that corrupted thought, or that simply the affirmation of the primacy of the PI leads to atheism *per se* and without qualification. Indeed, in the case of Garrigou-Lagrange, we have a Thomist who is a formalist but realist. Although priority might be given to essence over *esse* or *existence*, he still parts from a realist understanding of reality. For such a one, and other thinkers like him, it seems that it would be quite extreme to say that they are atheists, certainly not explicitly, nor even implicitly.

²⁸ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 21.

Nevertheless, such an affirmation is symptomatic of the formalist deviation within Thomism; perhaps we could say that giving primacy to the PI does not necessarily lead to atheism. What is more important is the starting point of thought: either external reality or within the subject. If the starting point is within the subject, the end result will be atheism. If the starting point is outside the subject, in extramental reality, the affirmation of the PI does not necessarily entail or lead to atheism, since the external world leads us to inquire about the world and God, as we will see. However, it indicates a flawed metaphysical foundation that historically has led to atheism when the connection to the world is severed.

Reasons for Primacy of the PNC and why rejection of it leads to atheism

We already saw the ontological and epistemological reasons why the PNC has primacy over the PI. In the beginning of the section, Fabro offered three others, all of which revolve around man and his place in the world. Mere experience suffices to show that man is not the same as the world; man is related to and in contact with the world. He is surrounded by being, relates to being, and comes to know it. To deny that man and the world are distinct, in other words, to affirm the primacy of the PI, naturally leads to atheism, as Fabro continues explaining:

Any assertion of the identity of thought (awareness, cognition) and being, such as is made by modern monism, whether materialist or idealist, is a denial of reality to the relationship between them, to that association of the one to the other which excludes identity precisely because it is defined *as* a relationship of *association*. Now, it is precisely this essential association of thought to being (and, in its own way, of being to thought . . .) that constitutes the primary nucleus of the problem of God; for the human being, such association really signifies distinction and dependence of cognition upon being.²⁹

²⁹ Fabro, *God in Exile*, 19.

The fact that man and the world are different is the foundation for, and indeed gives rise to, the problem of God. Neither the world alone, nor man alone, suffices to explain the realm of beings. To see limited beings in the world, and to see oneself as a limited being, leads naturally to the consideration of transcendence and the transcendent, to the consideration of the Being.

If that connection is severed, however, or if man tries to make himself the measure and indeed creator of all things, through giving primacy to the principle of identity, then he closes himself in as a self-sufficient void: the irony is that as he makes himself the source and determination of being, as he makes himself the measure of all things, he distances himself more and more from the true Source of Being. The confines of his mind are narrow indeed when compared to the absolute richness that is the Fullness of Being.