

THE BEGETTING OF THE SON AND THE FREEDOM OF THE FATHER ACCORDING TO 4th CENTURY PATRISTIC TRADITION

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Introduction

One of the most important Triadological issues that seriously preoccupied not only Athanasius the Great but also certain other Fathers of the 4th century such as the Cappadocians, Didymus the Blind and Epiphanius of Cyprus, was the matter of associating the begetting of the Son with the freedom of the Father - that is: if and to what extent the begetting of the Son affects the freedom of the Father or not, or, in other words, if the Father begat the Son of His own volition or involuntarily.

This problem – in the form of a pressing dilemma – had been posed by the Arians for discussion, in their endeavour to prove that the Son does **not** originate from the essence, but from the volition of the Father and as

such, the Son must be a creation. In fact, it was for this reason that they had even adopted a metaphysical axiom of Aristotelian origin, according to which, whatever is made “per nature” or “per essence” is made “out of necessity”, whereas whatever is made “per volition”, that alone is made freely ¹. Thus, they asserted, if the Son indeed originated from the essence and not the volition of the Father, then the Father must have acquired a Son out of necessity and contrary to His volition. As they characteristically used to say: « **If He (the Son) wasn't by volition, then it was out of necessity and by not wanting to, that God had the Son** » [Εἰ μὴ βουλήσει γέγονεν, οὐκ οὖν ἀνάγκη καὶ μὴ θέλων ἔσχεν ὁ Θεὸς Υἱόν] ². According to them, the only way that divine freedom could be preserved was if the dependence of the Son's existence –just as every other, created being's existence– depended solely and exclusively on the volition of the Father ³.

On the basis therefore of these presuppositions, the Arians presented the Orthodox the following, pressing dilemma, in the form of a question: « **Did the Father want to beget the Son, or not want to?** » [Θέλων ἐγέννησεν ὁ Πατὴρ τὸν Υἱόν, ἢ μὴ θέλων;] ⁴. The objective of this extortive dilemma was obvious: If the Orthodox were to reply that the Father begat the Son voluntarily (θέλων), then they must necessarily be conceding that the Son does not differ ontologically to any of the other creations. If again they were to reply that the Father begat the Son involuntarily (μὴ θέλων), then they would be forced to concede that the Son was begotten of the Father out of necessity – something entirely inadmissible, because it would have placed doubt, even on the very godhood of the Father ⁵.

The reply given by the aforementioned Fathers to the Triadological problem that was posed by means of the crafty Arian dilemma was a most significant one for the development of the Dogma on the Trinity during the 4th century, and is exceptionally opportune in our day, on account of the related, theological-philosophical concerns that have been observed recently in the inter-Orthodox sphere, and especially in our own country.

a) The Arian dilemma and God's transcendence

The first one to confront this Triadological problem was Athanasius the Great, who, with the extensive and well-documented reply that he presented, essentially carved out the outline and placed the foundations for the elucidation of this problem, followed by the remaining Fathers that we mentioned above. They too contemplated and presented their arguments on the matter, exactly like Athanasius the Great. The chief concern for all of them was to prove that the aforementioned dilemma that the Arians had presented to the Orthodox was essentially a pseudo-dilemma and as such, could not in any way be applied to God.

To begin with, the presuppositions on which the dilemma was based were, according to all those Fathers, both unstable and void. To be sure, the Arians' metaphysical axiom (according to which nature is characterized by necessity, whereas volition is characterized by freedom) is a correct one; however, this axiom can apply only to human and created reality. It cannot be applied to the uncreated and transcendent God. It is precisely because God is uncreated that He can transcend all natural necessity with His essence – 'necessity' being the element that characterizes created beings only. Being uncreated and transcendent, He is above and beyond necessity. «And who is the one who can impose necessity on Him, o most wicked ones?», asks Athanasius the Great rhetorically ⁶. In other words, God's freedom is not only denoted by His volition, as is the case with humans; His freedom also relates to His very essence and His nature. In other words, God not only is free morally; He is also free ontologically. From this aspect, according to the Fathers, God transcends not only the necessity of nature, but also the freedom in volition that created beings have.

However, apart from this, divine nature is also above and ontologically precedent to divine thought and volition; therefore whatever exists or occurs 'by nature' in God does not signify that it exists or occurs perforce. Anyway, the ontological precedence of nature versus thought and volition is not something that characterizes the uncreated God only, but also created beings. For example – observes Athanasius the Great - one builds his house, after first having contemplated and decided how it will be done; however, one cannot ontologically predetermine one's son upon contemplation and volition, but will simply beget a son, "by nature". And this is absolutely reasonable, because a son is not like a house (which is outside the father), but is the offspring of that very paternal essence. If a father were to contemplate and decide on the

ontological determination of his son, it would mean that he contemplates and decides on the ontological determination of his own self – something entirely absurd of course. And Athanasius the Great concludes: « **As much, therefore, as a son predominates over a creation, thus much also is volition predominated by**

nature.» ⁷ [Ὅσω οὖν του κτίσματος ο υἱός υπέρκειται, τοσούτω και της βούλησης το κατά φύσιν] If this metaphysical presupposition therefore applies to created beings, it certainly applies infinitely more to the uncreated God, Who is ontologically unfettered. Under these presuppositions, the distinction between nature and volition in God must not be perceived dialectically – as is the case with people – as a distinction between necessity and freedom. Consequently, the begetting of the Son must **not** be regarded as a product of divine volition, nor, also, as the product of any endo-divine or exo-divine necessity. The reason for this is that the Son's dependence on the volition of God the Father would have marred the 'timelessness' of the divine paternity and would have thus subjugated divine and uncreated nature to the created element of Time – which was exactly what happened with the teachings of Arius. Furthermore, the concept of the Son being the result of a possible endo-divine or exo-divine necessity would have rendered the uncreated God ontologically un-free, something that would have been entirely irreconcilable and contrary to the revealed Biblical perception regarding God. As saint Epiphanius characteristically observes when summarizing the above and responding laconically to the extortive Arian dilemma: « **Neither, therefore, did He beget voluntarily, nor involuntarily, but only on account of the preponderance of nature. For divine nature predominates over volition and is not subjugated to Time, nor drawn by any need** » ⁸ [Ούτε θέλων τοίνυν ἐγέννησεν, οὔτε μὴ θέλων, ἀλλ' υπερβολὴ φύσεως. υπερβαίνει γὰρ ἡθεὶς φύσις βουλὴν, καὶ οὐχ υποπίπτει χρόνῳ, οὐτ' ἐ ἀνάγκη ἀγεται]. The exact same thing is stressed by Didymus the Blind, in his own way: « **Because, precedent to any volition, or to any not wanting - and to every other notion - is the begetter-God and Father Himself, and the Son is the radiance of His glory – and there is nothing else to be found between the One and the Other, from which one can contrive anything.... He begat, therefore, by His beyond-volition-and-thought Nature** » ⁹. [Της θέλησης γὰρ καὶ τῆς ἀνεθελησίας καὶ πάσης ἐννοίας προτερεῖ ο τε γεννήσας Θεός καὶ Πατήρ, το τε ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ, ο Υἱός- καὶ

ουδέν τούτου μέσον και εκείνου εξ ου εστίν επινοηθῆναι δύναται...
Εγέννησεν ουν εν τη υπέρ βουλήν και νουν φύσει.]

In order for the Fathers to prove the correctness of these positions, as well as the sophist character of the said Arian dilemma, they in turn posed similar dilemmas to the Arians, from which it becomes clearly obvious that it is completely foolish to link God's nature to necessity, and His freedom exclusively to His volition:

“When God is seen as ‘benevolent’ or ‘merciful’” – asks Athanasius the Great – **“does God have this attribute of His own volition, or without His volition?”** If we were to accept that He has this attribute **with** His volition, it would signify that He at some point **began** to be benevolent, and that He could, if He so willed, also be mean. But this would have been feasible, only if He were to actually contemplate and decide on His benevolence – an entirely absurd and inadmissible thing for God. If we were to likewise accept that He is benevolent and merciful **without** His volition, then according to Arian logic, He would have possessed His benevolence out of necessity, and not of His own volition. But then there is the question of, **who** would impose such a necessity on God? Therefore, just as God has **eternally** been benevolent “by nature”, without His benevolence being a given fact, out of necessity, thus is the Father (even more importantly) **“eternally** generative, by nature”; in other words, He is “by nature” the Father of the Son, and not “by volition” ¹⁰.

This truth is made evident even more indisputably, by another, more provocative dilemma that Athanasius had posed to the Arians, following closely in the steps of Gregory the Theologian and Didymus the Blind on this point:

“Does the Father exist as God of His own volition, or involuntarily?” If He exists thus **without** His volition, then His existence and His nature are both a given, arising out of necessity. If His existence did indeed depend on and was determined by His volition, then He must not have existed, **prior** to His actual will to exist. But if He did exist, then what was He, **prior** to His will to exist, and furthermore, what more does He have, **after** the realization of this will of His?

Thus, just as God exists “by nature”, and His existence is not dependent on - or determined by - His will, thus also does His Logos exist “by nature” and is

not dependent on or determined by the contemplation and the will of the Father [11](#).

One could reach the same conclusion –according to Didymus the Blind- by posing the dilemma whether God is immortal and benevolent of His own volition, or without his volition. The best answer that one could give to such dilemmas is – as emphatically underlined by Didymus – that none of these ponderings can apply to the uncreated and all-perfect God. In other words, that it is neither with His volition nor without it, that God is existent or benevolent or immortal, but it is on account of His perfect, uncreated nature. Consequently, just as the existence of the Father, His immortality and His goodness are not dependent on or determined by His volition, thus the begetting of the Son is also not dependent on or determined by the will of the Father as the Arians assert, when linking nature to necessity and volition to freedom, in the case of God [12](#).

Apart from the above, however, the notion of the Son's begetting by the Father in the context of natural necessity and volition essentially immures the uncreated and transcendental God within the confines of created reality, and it equates Him ontologically to created beings. That is why the 4th century Fathers unanimously stress with particular emphasis that the manner of the divine begetting is both transcendental and unintelligible.

«**How, then, was the Son begotten?**», asks Gregory the Theologian provocatively - shunning the sophist Arian dilemma – then proceeding to provide the answer himself:

«**This begetting**» - he observes - «**would not have been such an immense thing, if you had been capable of comprehending it. But you hardly know anything about your own begetting, or have comprehended something of it that you are too ashamed to even mention. Furthermore, do you think that you know everything? You must have previously labored at length, to be in a position to also explain how conception takes place, how the embryo forms, or how birth takes place, or the union of body and soul, the mind and the soul, speech and the mind, or movement, or growth, or the assimilation of food, or how the senses function, or memory, or recollection, and all your other organs; what actions are common between body and soul, which of them are inherent and which are acquired... But even if you did comprehend all these things, even then it is impermissible for you to philosophize about**

the begetting by God, because this kind of endeavor is a dangerous one. When you are incapable of knowing anything about your own begetting, how can you be capable of knowing about the begetting by God? The more unapproachable that God is to Man, the more unintelligible the divine begetting is, when compared to your own. It is for this reason» - concludes Gregory the Theologian - «that the begetting by God must be honored with silence. It is an immense enough thing, for you to know that the Son was begotten; to know HOW He was begotten is impossible to be comprehended, even by the angels themselves, let alone by you! Do you want me to explain HOW He was begotten? It is how the Father who begat Him knows, and how the Son who was begotten knows. Anything beyond that is shrouded by the mist of ignorance and it eludes your weak vision!» ¹³.

We can indicate similar arguments that express a clearly negative stance towards the manner of the divine begetting, in almost all of the Fathers of the 4th century; but we need to underline that this negativity by the Fathers is **not** the product of any intellectual pondering, as was neo-Platonic negativity for example; it is in fact the immediate and natural gnosiological consequence of the distinction between created and uncreated. In other words, it is because man is created that he is incapable –by nature- to be familiar with the **uncreated** mystery of the divine begetting. And this, according to the Fathers, is furthermore the reason that this inability is not only a characteristic of mankind, but also of angels. ¹⁴

Consequently, the said extortive Arian dilemma is – according to the 4th century Fathers – both a sophist and an unsubstantial one, not only because God with His uncreated nature is above the necessity of nature and free will, as is the case in created beings (because His nature is above and ontologically precedent to His thought and His volition), but also because the begetting of the Son constitutes on its own a supernatural mystery which is impossible for created beings to comprehend by means of metaphysical presuppositions and sophist tricks. This is the precise argument that saint Epiphanius presented and laconically summarized with the reply that he gave –which we mentioned previously- to the extortive dilemma posed by the Arians:

« Neither, therefore, did He beget voluntarily, nor involuntarily, but only on account of the preponderance of nature. For divine nature predominates over volition and is not subjugated to Time, nor drawn by any need » [Ούτε θέλων τοίνυν ἐγέννησεν, οὔτε μὴ θέλων, ἀλλ’ ὑπερβολῇ φύ

σεως. υπερβαίνει γὰρ ἡ θεία φύσις βουλήν, καὶ οὐχ υποπίπτει χρόνῳ, οὐτ
ε ἀνάγκη ἀγεται].

b) The involuntariness behind the divine begetting

But let us see more analytically the teaching of the 4th century Fathers regarding voluntariness or involuntariness behind the divine begetting, the way they had expounded it, in the context of their response to the above sophist dilemma by the Arians.

And first of all, let us see how **involuntariness** behind the divine begetting is perceived. It is commonly agreed by all the Fathers without exception that the begetting of the Son – contrary to Arius' assertion – is something natural; it is "of the essence of the Father", and as such, it is not dependent on the volition of the Father. If the opposite were the case, there would have been absolutely no ontological distinction between the Son and creations, and the Creator would have related ontologically to the creations. But if this were the case – as accurately observed by Gregory the Theologian – the Son would have become entirely alienated from the Father, because the direct cause of His existence would not have been the Father Himself, but only the Father's volition. In other words, as the same Father caustically comments, the Arians with this teaching of theirs, have "**re-created volition, as a kind of new mother, in place of the Father**" ¹⁵. But the Son is not the Son of a volition; He is the Son of a willing Father. In order to comprehend this point, Gregory the Theologian proposed a distinction that was to be a determinant for the Orthodox handling of the overall issue. "**The person who wills something is one thing, while the will per se is another, in exactly the same way that the person who begets is one thing, while the begotten is another; the speaker is one thing, while his utterance is another. The one denotes the personal subject who engages in an action, whereas the other denotes the subject's per se action. In this context, what is willed is not necessarily pursuant to the one who wills; in fact, it can be precedent to the will; but it still most certainly originates from the person who wills it. And if this can apply to created things, it can apply infinitely more to the uncreated God. Consequently, it is entirely inadmissible to regard the will of the Father as the cause of the Son's**

existence, because it cannot be reconciled to the notion of the divine begetting". ¹⁶

"Besides", observes Athanasius the Great, "it would be entirely illogical for the begetting of the Son and Logos of God to be dependent on the volition of the Father, because this would have signified that God wills, thinks, is predisposed and exhorts Himself into willing something, in order that He might acquire a Logos (reason) and Wisdom, and not be reason-less and wisdom-less." ¹⁷

To Athanasius, who is clearly expounding the endo-Trinitarian aspect and functionality of the Logos of God, God is **log**-ical and wise, precisely because He has eternally had the **Logos** and the Wisdom, and there has never been a time during which He was without His Logos and His Wisdom, but had (supposedly) acquired this hypostatic characteristic afterwards, at will. God's will is a determining cause, **only** in reference to His creations. The Son – as the Logos and Wisdom of God – is not to be confused ontologically with them (creations); He is "by nature....the offspring" of the very essence of the Father. ¹⁸

But there is one more basic reason why it is not possible for the Son to originate from the volition of the Father, according to Athanasius the Great: it is because **the Son Himself is the living volition of the Father**, by Whom all creations were created. And the fact that the Logos is the living volition and will -per se- of God, does not allow for any possibility of there being another volition in God, precedent to Him (the Logos-Christ), to which He (the Logos-Christ) would owe His existence. **'Will' and 'volition' in God is the Logos Himself** ¹⁹. In other words, the Father wills, and He wills with His Logos; He contemplates and "wills, through the Son", as Basil the Great would say shortly after, when continuing the theological thought of Athanasius the Great on the matter ²⁰.

But here, one could justifiably pose the following question: How is Athanasius the Great led to relating the Logos to the will and the volition of God?

First of all, we need to stress that this linkage is already clearly witnessed in the Holy Bible, according to Athanasius. To prove this, he resorts to all those passages in the Old and the New Testament that refer to **the dependence of created beings on the creative Logos** or the wisdom and the prudence of God,

as well as to His will or His volition, for example: «On the logos ('word') of the Lord were the skies secured» ²¹, «He uttered, and they were born; He commanded, and they were created» ²², «God laid the foundations of the earth in wisdom, and He prepared the heavens in prudence» ²³, «Everything came to be through Him (the Logos), and without Him (the Logos) not one thing came to be, of those things that are» ²⁴, «Everything that our God willed, in heaven and on earth, He (the Logos) made» ²⁵, «Having willed it, He begat us, through the logos of truth» ²⁶, «For this is the will of God unto us, in Jesus Christ» ²⁷ e.a. **«Given, therefore»** – he concludes – **«that everything according to the Holy Bible came to be through the Logos or the Wisdom or the Prudence and the Will or the Volition of God, it stands to reason that this volition of God can be none other than the very Logos Himself»** ²⁸.

However, apart from the biblical grounds indicated by Athanasius the Great that the Logos is linked to the will or the volition of God, it appears that he is also founding this linkage on the Hellenic philosophical significance given to the meaning of the word “logos”.

To Hellenic philosophy – and more especially to the Stoic school – the word “logos” does not have a theoretical inference only, but a practical one also. In other words, it is not merely the internal mental function of innate reasoning (logic); it also comprises the **voli-tional** (**voulé**, from the Greek root «βουλή», =will), determining cause of things when manifested outwardly, as an action, or as a practical or creative logos ²⁹. In other words, to Hellenic philosophy, the word “**logos**” is always perceived as something volitional, and volition is always perceived as “**logic**”. In fact, this existential unity between the logos and volition can also be detected in the Hellenic language, which is profoundly influenced by Hellenic philosophy. It is not at all by chance that both the Greek verb «βουλεύεσθαι» (pron.: **voolé-ves-thae**) - which denotes the innermost, theoretical function of the logos, contemplation – as well as the verb «βούλεσθαι» (pron.: **voól-es-thae**) - which denotes the outward, practical function of the logos – both have the same etymological root. The semantic unity between the two verbs becomes apparent chiefly in the derivative noun, «βουλή» (pron.: **voo-lee**), which signifies both logical thought as well as a volitional decision. Even today, this word continues to have exactly the same inferences. When we refer to Parliament (Greek = Βουλή), we are referring to a body of representatives of the Hellenic nation, who not only confer (**think** together), but also **decide** together. We are therefore of the opinion that

Athanasius the Great in his confrontation of the Arians is utilizing this existential and semantic unity between logos and volition that characterizes Hellenic philosophy and language so vividly. This is precisely what he allows to be surmised, when, by presupposing a synonymy between the terms “logos” and “thought”, he is expressing a personal opinion which he in fact founds logically, by stating the following: **« I am of the opinion that belief and volition are the same thing. That which someone contemplates is in any event that which he also believes, and that which he believes is also what he contemplates »** [ταυτόν γαρ ηγούμαι φρόνησιν και βούλησιν εἶναι. Ο γαρ βουλεύεται τις τούτο πάντως και φρονεί και ο φρονεί τούτο και βουλεύεται] ³⁰.

What is characteristic in this statement is not only the relating of the terms “thought” and “will”, but also the use of the verb «βουλεύεσθαι» (=to contemplate) instead of «βούλεσθαι» (= to will). In fact, in another part of his 3rd essay against Arians, he alternates the terms «βούλησις» (=will) and «βουλεύεσθαι» (to think), precisely because he regards them as absolutely identical. Specifically, when referring to the Arians’ assertion that if the Son came to be “by volition” then God must have acquired a Son out of necessity and without His will, he responded as follows:

«They regarded the object (the Son) as being of volition, but they did not give any regard to that which is superior and above it. For, just as that which is opposed to opinion is also opposed to will, thus whatever is by nature supersedes and precedes thought. Thus, one constructs a house by contemplating about it, but he begets a son by nature, and whereas construction begins to be realized upon one’s will and is outside the one who constructs, the son however is begotten of the very essence of the father, and is not outside him. This is why He does not contemplate about Him either, so that it not be thought that He contemplates on everything that concerns Himself also. For, as much as the son supersedes a creation, thus much does nature supersede volition, and it pleased them, on hearing that that which is by nature is not to be perceived as being by volition » [Το μεν αντικείμενον τη βουλήσει εωράκασιν το δε μείζον και υπερκείμενον ουκ εθεώρησαν. Ωσπερ γαρ αντίκειται τη βουλήσει το παρά γνώμην, ούτως υπέρκειται και προηγείται του βουλεύεσθαι το κατά φύσιν. Οικίαν μεν ουν τις βουλευόμενος κατασκευάζει, υιόν δε γεννά κατά φύσιν και το μεν βουλήσει κατασκευαζόμενον ήρξατο γίνεσθαι, και έξωθεν εστί του

ποιούντος, ο δε υιός ίδιον εστί της ουσίας του πατρός γέννημα, και ουκ εστίν έξωθεν αυτού". Διό ουδέ βουλεύεται περί αυτού, ίνα μη και περί εαυτού δοκή βουλεύεσθαι. Όσω ουν του κτίσματος ο υιός υπέρκειται, τοσούτω και της βούλησης το κατά φύσιν και έδει αυτούς, ακούοντας ου βουλήσει λογίζεσθαι το κατά φύσιν ³¹.]

The alternation between the terms «βούλησις» (will-volition) and «βουλεύεσθαι» (to contemplate) in the above text is abundant proof that Athanasius the Great relates the term «βουλεύεσθαι» (to contemplate) to the term «βούλεσθαι» (to will), precisely because he unreservedly accepts the existential and semantic unity between the term "logos" and "will", as does Hellenic philosophy and the Greek language. This unity constitutes - for Athanasius the Great - the most suitable prerequisite when confronting the Arian perception (according to which the Son is regarded as a product of the will of God the Father), and he thus poses the following, rhetorical question:

«**How, therefore, is it possible for the Logos – Who is Himself the Volition and the Will of the Father – to have come to being through a volition and will? And if He is the (Father's) Will, how can this Will be within a volition?** » [Πώς ουν δύναται βουλή και θέλημα του Πατρός υπάρχων ο Λόγος γίνεσθαι και αυτός θελήματι και βουλήσει; ³² ...Και ει η βούλησις αυτός, πώς εν βουλήσει η βουλή;] ³³

c) The voluntariness behind the divine begetting

But now let us take a look at how the **voluntariness** behind the divine begetting is understood by the Fathers, which they counterpose as a reply to the familiar, sophist dilemma of the Arians.

The fact that the existence of the Son is **not** dependent on the will of the Father does not –according to the 4th century Fathers- imply that the Son must therefore be “**unwilled...by the Father**” and that consequently the Son exists out of necessity and contrary to His will. « **Not so; for the Son is also willed by the Father** », [Ουμενούν αλλά και θελόμενός εστί ο Υιός παρά του Πατρός] characteristically states Athanasius the Great ³⁴. In fact, to found this position biblically, he directs us to the verse by John: « **The Father loves the Son and**

discloses everything to Him » ³⁵ [Ο Πατήρ φιλεί τον Υιόν και πάντα δείκνυσιν Αυτώ], even though he suppresses similar verses by John on this point, such as « **The Father loves the Son and He has given everything in His hand** » ³⁶ [Ο Πατήρ αγαπά τον Υιόν, και πάντα δέδωκεν εν τη χειρί αυτού], or: « **Father, You have loved Me even before the making of the world** » ³⁷ [Πάτερ ηγάπησάς με προ καταβολής κόσμου], as well as the biblical verse: « **This is my Son, the beloved one** » [Ούτος εστίν ο Υιός μου ο αγαπητός], ³⁸ (which the saint does however use, in other areas), in order to stress the “per essence” relationship between Father and Son ³⁹. Since, therefore, according to the Holy Bible the Father **loves** the Son, this to Athanasius the Great entails that even though the Son does **not** originate “**from a volition**” but “by nature” from the Father, He nevertheless does not have to necessarily exist **contrary to the volition** of the Father. And this is precisely why: given that the Father **loves** Him, He would also naturally **want/will** Him ⁴⁰.

Having founded his position biblically, Athanasius the Great proceeds to found it logically, by faithfully following Didymus the Blind in his syllogistic method. He observes: Just as the benevolence and the existence of the Father are **not dependent** on His will, but are equally **not opposed to** His will - simply because the Father **wants** to be what He is - the same applies to the begetting of the Son: albeit **not dependent** on the will of the Father, the Son is nevertheless neither un-willed, nor derived out of necessity, but is both wanted (willed) and loved by the Father. As stated by Athanasius the Great, verbatim: « **Just as His being benevolent did not depend on volition, thus also is He benevolent not unwillingly and involuntarily; whatever is, is also willed by Him. Thus also does the Son exist : albeit not dependent on volition, He is nevertheless not un-willed, nor does He exist contrary to desire. Just as He (the Father) wills His own hypostasis, thus the Son- being also of the same essence – was not un-willed by Him. The Son, therefore, was both willed and loved by the Father** » [Ως γαρ το είναι αγαθός ουκ εκ βούλησης μεν ήρξατο, ου μη αβουλήτως και αθελήτως εστίν αγαθός • ο γαρ εστί, τούτο και θελητόν εστίν αυτώ* ούτω και το είναι τον Υιόν, ει και μη εκ βούλησης ήρξατο, αλλ’ ουκ αθέλητον, ουδέ παρά γνώμην εστίν αυτώ. Ωσπερ γαρ της ιδίας υπόστασης εστί θελητής, Ούτω και ο Υιός, ίδιος

ων αυτού της ουσίας, ουκ αθέλητος ἐστίν αὐτῷ. Θελέσθω και φιλεέσθω τοίνυν ο Υἱός παρὰ Πατρός] ⁴¹.

The begetting of the Son –as stressed by Gregory the Theologian also– cannot be involuntary and out of a necessity, as though it were a glass that overflows (according to the Platonic image explaining the origin of the second cause from within the first), or as though it were a natural and irrepressible excrement ⁴². And the reason for this is that to God the Father, the begetting of the Son is willed. In God, he notes characteristically: **“begetting is perhaps the will (per se) to beget”** ⁴³. It is with this precise inference that Cyril of Alexandria later characterized the Son as the genuine and freely born fruit of the paternal essence ⁴⁴.

But one must be careful here. This free and willed element of the Son’s begetting by the Father must be perceived “reverently”, as underlined by Athanasius the Great ⁴⁵ (i.e., Orthodoxically, and not in the Arian manner, by hinging the begetting of the Son on the will of the Father). In other words, the fact that the Father wills and loves the Son does not mean that the volition of the Father constitutes the determining cause of the Son’s begetting, or that the Father begets the Son out of love - as certain Orthodox theologians maintain nowadays - thus giving the impression that in this way, the **love of the Father** is presented as the determining cause of the beginning-less existence of the Son and the Holy Spirit ⁴⁶. It quite simply means that the Father, being uncreated and transcendental, is not restricted ontologically and as such, He transcends the natural necessity and the free will attributed to created beings, for the begetting of His Son. This is precisely what Athanasius underlines, when he states: « **Just as He (the Father) wills His own hypostasis, thus the Son– being also of the same essence – was not un-willed by Him. The Son, therefore, was both willed and loved by the Father** » [Ὡσπερ γὰρ τηςιδίας υπόστασης ἐστί θελητής, οὕτω και ο Υἱός, ίδιος ων α υτού της ουσίας, ουκ αθέλητος ἐστίν αὐτῷ. Θελέσθω και φιλεέσθω τοίνυν ο Υἱός παρὰ του Πατρός] ⁴⁷. Didymus the Blind’s observation at this point is also very enlightening: « **Thus does He (the Father) exist as immortal and benevolent: by wanting to be thus and because He wanted it thus, and the determining cause of this manner of existence –so to speak- is neither attributed to a volition or the absence of volition – in the same way that the determining cause of the Son’s begetting is not the will (per se) of the Father** »

[Ὁντρόπον υπάρχων ὁ Πατήρ αθάνατος τε καὶ ἀγαθός, βούλεται εἶναι ταῦτα καὶ βουλόμενος ἐστὶν ταῦτα, οὐκ αἰτίαν, ἵν' οὕτω φράσω, τὴν βούλησιν ἔχων, οὔτε μὴν ἀνεθελήτως ὡς οὕτως οὐδὲ τοῦγεννήσαι ἡ βούλησις αἰτία] ⁴⁸.

Besides, the will behind the divine begetting is not –according to Athanasius the Great– something that characterizes only the Father, but also the Son.

The Father wants to beget the Son with the very same will that the Son wants to be begotten of the Father. And it is precisely for this reason that the will between Father and Son is one, with regard to the mystery of the divine begetting. The will of the Father to beget is not separate from the will of the Son to be begotten. As Athanasius the Great characteristically stresses: «**For even the will by which the Son is willed by the Father, is the same will that He loves and wants and honors the Father. And the will of the Father in the Son is one, so that one may regard the Son as being in the Father and the Father in the Son**»

[Καὶ γὰρ ὁ Υἱὸς τὴ θελήσει ἡ θέλεται παρὰ τοῦ Πατρὸς, ταύτη καὶ αὐτὸς ἀγαπά καὶ θέλει καὶ τιμᾷ τὸν Πατέρα. Καὶ ἐν ἐστὶ θέλημα τὸ ἐκ Πατρὸς ἐν Υἱῷ, ὡς καὶ ἐκ τούτου θεωρεῖσθαι τὸν Υἱὸν ἐν τῷ Πατρὶ καὶ τὸν Πατέρα ἐν τῷ Υἱῷ] ⁴⁹. Besides, since –according to Athanasius the Great– the living will and volition of the Father **is** the Logos Himself, there exists no other will or volition in the Father, other than the Logos. The Father thinks and wills, through His Logos, which is why He is « **eternally generative, by nature** » [ἀεὶ γεννητικός τὴ φύσει] according to the expression of Athanasius the Great ⁵⁰. Thus, the begetting of the Son essentially comprises a self-affirmation of the Father's existence and an ontological expression of His freedom. In other words, the Father freely wills to exist “pre-eternally” as the Father, and this will of His is expressed with the “pre-eternal” begetting of His Son and Logos. In this way, the Logos –as the will and the volition of the Father– does not only constitute the creative and connective cause of created beings, but also the sole expression of the Father's will to exist as “eternally generative by nature”. Consequently, the Father does not have one will for His endo-Triadic relationships and another will for His exo-Triadic relations with the world, as a certain young theologian had mistakenly and hastily asserted, based on his own evaluation ⁵¹. If we were to accept something like that, then according to the theological presuppositions of Athanasius the Great that we expounded earlier, we must accept two ‘Logos’ for the Father: one for His endo-Triadic

and one for His exo-Triadic relationships. But Athanasius the Great is absolutely clear on this point: The will of the Father – both for His endo-Triadic and His exo-Triadic relationships - is one and the same, because His pre-eternal Logos is only one, and it is He who comprises His only will and volition.

Moreover, the one and only volition - with which the Father wills to beget the Son and the Son wills to be begotten of the Father – does not mean that this volition determines the relationship between Father and Son, but that it comprises the main expression and the supreme proof of the “omoousion” (=of the same essence) between the two divine persons. Thus, the voluntariness behind the divine begetting is not irreconcilable or dialectically opposite to the “par essence” relationship between Father and Son. The irreconcilable element and the dialectic antithesis of the voluntariness behind the derivation of one being from another with their ‘par essence’ association and their ‘omoousion’ (same essence), is an exclusive characteristic of the cumbersome nature of created beings, and not the omnipotent and uncreated nature of God. That is why Gregory of Nyssa so characteristically points out that neither the ‘omoousion’ (same essence) between Father and Son should lead us to a dismissal of voluntariness behind the divine begetting - because it supposedly entails an unintentional and imposed begetting of the Son - nor again should a voluntariness behind the divine begetting lead us to a denial of the ‘omoousion’ between Father and Son, supposedly because volition is interpolated between them ⁵².

The element of ‘omoousion’ of these two divine persons and the voluntariness behind the divine begetting are both in a balanced, unbroken and functional association between them. To make this point clear and understandable, so that it will not be prone to any misinterpretation, Athanasius the Great has, in this case, faithfully followed Gregory of Nyssa, by using the example of the association between light and radiance. Just as radiance – he writes - does not owe its existence to a prior volition by the light source, but emanates from it like a natural offspring of it, and in a sense is “willed” by the light, thus does the Father love and want the Son, “not upon the thought of a volition, but by nature and in truth”, exactly as the Son loves and wants the Father. ⁵³ Thus, this one, mutual will between Father and Son not only comprises the determinant cause of the event of the divine begetting, but it also confirms eventually that God, being transcendental and uncreated, in the case of the

divine begetting supersedes the dialectic between need and freedom, which characterizes respectively the nature and the volition of created beings. In other words, during the begetting of the Son (but also during the procession of the Holy Spirit), the freedom of the uncreated and transcendental God is an ontological freedom and cannot be related to the freedom as in the case of created beings (which is only the moral kind, i.e., a freedom of choice). This is why, according to the 4th century Fathers as we saw previously, the Father both “naturally” begets the Son, and the One Whom He begets ‘by nature’ He also loves and wants. And this is precisely what constitutes, expresses and confirms His ontological freedom: His triunal communion.

Conclusion

With everything that we have said, we have attempted to render somewhat palpable one of the most important triadological issues that had preoccupied the major Fathers of the 4th century, from the solution of which issue depended in large not only the safeguarding of the Nicene dogma from the assaults of the Arians, but also the pursuant development of the entire dogma on the Trinity.

As we saw from the aforementioned, with their reply to the cunning dilemma of the Arians of « **Did the Father beget the Son voluntarily, or involuntarily?** » [Θέλων ἐγέννησεν ὁ Πατήρ τὸν Υἱὸν ἢ μὴ θέλων;], the Fathers safeguarded both the element of ‘*omoousion*’ (same essence) between Father and Son, by stressing that the begetting of the Son was not dependent on the volition of the Father, as well as by stressing the voluntariness behind the divine begetting . In this way, they radically overthrew the metaphysical presuppositions upon which the Arian dilemma was based. According to the Fathers, that which is done by God “by nature” does not signify that it was done perforce and consequently, the begetting of the Son – albeit “by nature” – was not contrary to the will of the Father. The freedom of the Father in the begetting of the Son is not dependent on His volition, but is linked to His uncreated and transcendental nature – His “excessive and ineffable nature”, according to the expression by Saint Epiphanius ⁵⁴ - which is why it is an ontological freedom.

With this answer by the 4th century Fathers, they essentially safeguarded the beginning-less, existential relations of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, independently of the volition of the Father, without affecting either the freedom of the Father (Who, as the source and the cause of divinity, begets the Son and sends forth the Holy Spirit), or the freedom of the Son (Who is begotten of the Father), or the freedom of the Spirit (Who proceeds from the Father). And this is because the Persons of the Holy Trinity – being uncreated and transcendental – not only possess moral but also ontological freedom, and as such, they supersede the dialectic of the necessity and the freedom that characterizes respectively the nature and the volition of created beings.

These are the precise, basic folds of Orthodox Triadology that are found concisely formulated in the laconic reply given by Saint Epiphanius to the said, cunning dilemma of the Arians:

«**Neither, therefore, did He beget voluntarily, nor involuntarily, but only on account of the preponderance of nature. For divine nature predominates over volition and is not subjugated to Time, nor drawn by any need**» [Ούτε θέλων τοίνυν ἐγέννησεν, οὔτε μὴ θέλων, ἀλλ' ὑπερβολὴ φύσεως. ὑπερβαίνει γὰρ ἡ θεία φύσις βουλήν, καὶ οὐχ ὑποπίπτει χρόνῳ, οὐτὲ ἀνάγκῃ ἀγεται].

Notes

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1. Compare with Aristotle, "Meta ta Physika" (Beyond the Natural) A, 5,1015a 20-1015b 15.
 2. See Athanasius the Great, "Against Arians" 3, 62, PG 26, 453AB. See also Cyril of Alexandria, thesaurus regarding the Holy and Homousios Trinity 7, PG 75, 88C.
 3. See G. Florovsky, «The Concept of Creation in Saint Athanasius», in *Studia Patristica* 6 (1962), page 52. J. Romanides, «Highlights in the debate over Theodore of Mopsuestia's Christology and some suggestions for a fresh approach», in *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 5, 2 (1959-60), page 174 expl. By G.. Martzelos, *The Essence and the Energies of God according to Basil the Great. A contribution to the Orthodox Church teaching on the historical-dogmatic examination of the 'circum-essence' and the energies of God*, Thessaloniki 1984, page 76.

[4.](#) See Epiphanius of Cyprus, 'Agyrotos' 52, PG 43,105D. Compare to Gregory Theologian, Essay 29, "On the Son" (3rd theological essay) 6, PG 36, 80C. Didymus the Blind, "On the Holy Trinity" 1,9, PG 39, 281B.

[5.](#) Epiphanius of Cyprus, as prev., PG 43,108AB. Gregory the Theologian, as prev., PG 36, 80C-81A. Didymus the Blind, as prev., PG 39, 281BC. See also Cyril of Alexandria, "Dialogue on the Holy and Homoousios Trinity" 2, PG 75, 773D-776A.

[6.](#) PG 26, 453B.

[7.](#) As above

[8.](#) PG 43,108B.

[9.](#) PG 39, 281 C-284A. See also Cyril of Alexandria, PG 75, 780AB.

[10.](#) PG 26, 453C-456A.

[11.](#) See Athanasius the Great 63, PG 26, 456AB. Gregory the Theologian 7, PG 36, 81CD. Didymus the Blind, PG 39, 285A. See also Cyril of Alexandria, PG 75, 776BC.

[12.](#) PG 39, 285B. Also compare Gregory of Nyssa, To Eunomius, opposing essay (Ευνόμιον αντιρρητικός λόγος) 8, PG 45, 776AB.

[13.](#) PG 36,84C.

[14.](#) See also G. D. Martzelos, "Der Verstand und seine Grenzen nach dem hl. Basilius dem Groben", in the celebratory Volume of the 1600th anniversary of Basil the Great (379-1979), Thessaloniki 1981, p. 239, also G.D.Martzelos, as above, p. 68 etc.

[15.](#) As above, 6, PG 36, 80C-81A.

[16.](#) As above, PG 36, 81ABC.

[17.](#) As above, PG 26, 456C.

[18.](#) As above, As above,
"...τα μεν γενητά ευδοκία και βουλήσει γέγονεν, ο δε Υιός ου θελήματος εστί δημιούργη
μα επιγεγονώς, καθάπερ η κτίσις, αλλά φύσει της ουσίας ίδιον." γέννημα [...as for created
things, they came to be through condescendence and volition; the Son however was not a
creation that came to be through a volition –as Creation was – but (He) was –by nature- the
offspring of the Essence...]

[19.](#) As above, PG 26, 456C-457A. See also Cyril of Alexandria, "On veneration and worship in the Spirit and the Truth" 11, PG 68, 728BC: «βουλή και σοφία και θέλησις του Πατρός ο Υιός»

[By the will and the wisdom of the Father was the Son]. Dialogue on the Holy and Homooousion Trinity 2, PG 75,776BC: «Εἰ γὰρ ἡν ἐν σοφίᾳ καὶ λόγῳ τὸ θέλειν τοῦ Πατρὸς • οὐ γὰρ ἀσοφὸν γε καὶ ἀλογον τὴν θεῖαν ἐροῦσι θέλησιν. Σοφία δὲ καὶ Λόγος ἐστὶ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς ὁ Υἱός, αὐτὸς ἄρα ἐστὶν ὁ ἐν ᾧ πάντα θέλησις τοῦ Πατρὸς... Βουλὴν δὲ καὶ θέλησιν τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ Πατρὸς τὸν Υἱὸν ὁ θεὸς ἡμῖν ὀνομάζει λόγος» [For if the will of the Father is in wisdom, so is His reason; for they shall not say that the divine will was wisdom-less and reason-less; for the Wisdom and the reason (Logos) of God the Father is the Son; therefore, it is He (the Son), Who is the One in Whom every volition of the Father resides.... “will” and “volition” of God and Father are referred to as the Son, per our divine definition.]

[20.](#) See Basil the Great, Περί Αγίου Πνεύματος (On the Holy Spirit) 19, PG 32, 101C. 104A. 20, PG 32, 104BCD. 38, PG 32, 136B. See also G.D.Martzelos, as above, p. 100 etc.

[21.](#) Psalm 32, 6.

[22.](#) Psalm. 32,9.

[23.](#) Proverbs. 3,19.

[24.](#) John. 1,3.

[25.](#) Psalm. 113,11.

[26.](#) James. 1,18.

[27.](#) Thess.I, 5:18. See also Athanasius the Great, as above, 65, PG 26,460C-461A.

[28.](#) As above, 64, PG 26,457B.

[29.](#) See Aristotle “Meta ta Physika” V, 1, 1025b, 20-25. Diogenes Laertius, Philosophers’ Lives, VII, 1,130. I. ab Arnim, Stoicorum veterum fragmenta. Stuttgart 1964, Vol. I, σ.50, excerpt 202 • Vol. II, p.43, excerpt 135 • Vol. III, p.42, excerpt 175 • p.79, excerpt 323 • p.134, excerpt 495. See also J. Hirschberger “Geschichte der Philosophie” I (Altertum und Mittelalter). Basel-Freiburg-Wien 91974, p.180 • 258 etc.

[30.](#) As above, 65, PG 26,460B. Compare: Cyril of Alexandria, “Thesaurus on the Holy and Homooousion Trinity” 7, PG 75, 92D-93A.

[31.](#) As above, 62, PG 26,453BC.

[32.](#) As above, 64, PG 26, 457B.

- [33.](#) As above, 67, PG 26, 464C-465A.
- [34.](#) As above, 66, PG26,461C.
- [35.](#) John 5, 20. See also Athanasius the Great, as above.
- [36.](#) John 3, 35.
- [37.](#) John 17, 24.
- [38.](#) Matth. 3, 17.
- [39.](#) See "Against Arians" 2, 62, PG 26, 280A. 3,59, PG 26, 448B• 65, PG 26, 461B.
- [40.](#) As above, 3, 62. PG 26, 456A. 66, PG 26, 464ABC. See also Cyril of Alexandria, as above, PG 75, 93C.
- [41.](#) As above, PG 26, 461C. See also Didymus the Blind, as above, PG 39, 285AB. Compare:Cyril of Alexandria, "Thesaurus on the Holy and Homooousion Trinity" 7, PG 75, 93CD.
- [42.](#) As above, 2, PG 36,76BC See also : Plato, "Timaeus", 4ld. Plautin, "Enneads" V, 1, 6.
- [43.](#) As above, 6, PG 36,81B.
- [44.](#) See "Interpretation on the Gospel according to John" 5, 5, PG 73, 868D.
- [45.](#) As above PG 26, 464A.
- [46.](#) See John D. Zizioulas «From the guise to the person. The contribution of Patristic theology to the meaning of person», in the "Charisteria" in honour of the Metropolitan of Chalcedon, Geron Meliton, Thessaloniki, 1976, p, 299. J. D. Zizioulas, Being as Communion, Studies in Personhood and the Church, New York 1985, p. 41. Chr. Yannaras, "Anthropological presuppositions" in the periodical "Synaxis", Edition No.2 (1982), p. 40. By the same author, "The Alphabet of faith", Athens 1984, p. 60. 93. Critical observations on the above view by John Zizioulas, which Yannaras follows faithfully, see also N.A.Matsouka, "Dogmatic and Symbolic Theology" B' (Essay on the Orthodox Faith), Thessaloniki 1985, p.96, footnote 56.
- [47.](#) As above, PG 26, 461C.
- [48.](#) As above, PG 39, 285C-288A Compare also:Cyril of Alexandria, "Thesaurus on the Holy and Homooousion Trinity" 2, PG 75,780B: «Εστι γαρ (ένν. ο Πατήρ) ουκ ανεθελήτως ά εστί φυσικώς, σύνδρομον έχων τη φύσει την θέλησιν του είναιο εστιν.

[49.](#) As above, PG26,464A.

[50.](#) As above, PG 26,464B. Compare: Cyril of Alexandria, "Thesaurus on the Holy and Homousion Trinity" as above, PG 75,775B.

[51.](#) See St. Yagazoglou, «Foreword to the study of Saint Gregory Palamas' Theology on uncreated energies", in "Gregory Palamas" (1991), p.760, footnote 74. In a re-publication of this study, titled "Foreword to the theology of uncreated energies". A study on Saint Gregory Palamas, "Tertios" publishers, Katerini 1992, St. Yagazoglou proceeds to correct the error that exists in the above publication of this study of his in the periodical "Gregory Palamas", characterizing as "forced" and "pointless" the distinction between the one will –on one hand- which refers to the pre-eternal manner of the Son's and the Spirit's existence by the Father, and the "one will" on the other hand- which, as a common energy of the Trinity relates God to His creation. As he himself points out: "The danger of such a distinction is obvious: it thus divides the uniform character of divine will, at a theological and a providential level..." (p. 62 etc., footnote 80).

[52.](#) See also PG 45,773D-776A: «Ούτε γὰρ ἡ ἀμεσὸς αὐτῇ συνάφεια (ενν. μεταξύ Πατρὸς καὶ Υἱοῦ) ἐκβάλλει τὴν βούλησιν τοῦ Πατρὸς, ὡς κατὰ τίνα φύσεως ἀνάγκην ἀπροαιρέτως τὸν Υἱὸν ἐσχηκότος • οὔτε ἡ βούλησις δύστισι τοῦ Πατρὸς τὸν Υἱόν, ὡς τι διάστημα μεταξύ παρὲμπίπτουσα. Ὡς μήτε ἐκβάλλειν τοῦ δόγματος τὴν ἐπὶ τῷ Υἱῷ βούλησιν τοῦ γεννήσαντος, οἷον στενοχωρουμένην ἐν τῇ συνάφειᾳ τῆς τοῦ Υἱοῦ πρὸς τὸν Πατέρα ἐνότητος, μήτε μὴν τὴν ἀδιάστατον διαλύειν συνάφειαν, ὅταν ἐνθεωρεῖται τὴ γεννήσει βούλησις. Τοῦτο γὰρ τῆς βαρείας ἡμῶν καὶ δυσκίνητου φύσεως ἐστὶν ἴδιον, τὸ μὴ ἐν ταυτῷ πολλοὺς παρῆναι ἡμῖν, καὶ τὸ ἔχειν τι, καὶ τὸ βούλεσθαι • ἀλλὰ νῦν μὲν βουλόμεθά τι ἔχειν ὃν οὐκ ἔχομεν, μετὰ ταῦτα δὲ τυγχάνομεν ὃν τυχεῖν οὐκ ἠβουλήθημεν. Ἐπὶ δὲ τῆς ἀπλῆς καὶ παντοδυνάμου φύσεως, ὁμοῦ τὰ πάντα καὶ κατὰ ταυτὸν νοεῖται, καὶ τὸ θέλειν τὸ ἀγαθόν, καὶ τὸ ἔχειν ὅπερ ἠθέλησε». [Neither does this immediate relationship (he means between Father and Son) cast out the will of the Father, as though He acquired the Son unwillingly through some kind of natural necessity; nor does the will set apart the Son from the Father, like a kind of interposed distance between them. Thus, one may not cast out of the dogma the will of the Begetter as regards the Son (inasmuch as it might be restricted by the unity between Father and Son), nor dissolve their distance-less relationship when the begetting is regarded as a volition. For this is (characteristic of) our own, heavy and cumbersome nature: that what we have does not coincide with what we wanted. But now, we want something of those that we do not have, and afterwards, we might have something that we did not want. Whereas, in a simple and omnipotent nature, everything is perceived together in the same way; in other words, to want something good and to have it because we wanted it.]

[53.](#) As above, PG 26,464BG See also Gregory of Nyssa, as above, PG 45, 776BC.

[54.](#) As above, PG 43,108C.

Translation: K. N.

