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IDENTITY AND ALTERITY:  
THE MYSTERY AND THE PARADOX OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE  
IN THE THEOLOGY OF FR. DUMITRU STĂNILOAE

**Abstract.** The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the specificity of self-knowledge in Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae thinking. The author present briefly two different ways of approaching the topic apart the theological one. The first one is from the field of neuroscience and the other one from linguistics. Both reveal the creative gnoseology of Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae in which the mystery of self-knowledge is related with the mystery of God and with the mystery of human existence.

**Key words:** neuroscience; linguistic; theology; identity; self-knowledge; alterity.

Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae's work *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* [The Eternal Image of God] was published in 1987 with the blessing of His Holiness Dr. Nestor Vornicescu, Metropolitan Bishop of Oltenia, at the Oltenia Metropolitan Publishing House.<sup>1</sup> After the publishing of the book *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului* [Jesus Christ and the Restoration of Man],<sup>2</sup> in which Fr. D. Stăniloae intended to reflect "the effect of the incarnation of the Son of God and the use of His power to give the man freedom and fulfilment,"<sup>3</sup> in *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* [The Eternal Image of God], from the very beginning, he aims to reflect the value resulted out of the union of the human with God in Jesus Christ, providing an orthodox response to the evangelical denominations which used to promote a new form of Nestorianism, by separating the human being from God in Jesus Christ. Published during the

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<sup>1</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* (Craiova: Editura Mitropoliei Olteniei, 1987).

<sup>2</sup> Dumitru STĂNILOAE, *Iisus Hristos sau Restaurarea omului* (Craiova: Editura Omniscope, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu*, 5.

communist regime, the work distinguished itself by proposing a means of protecting Orthodoxy from foreign teachings “The Tradition of Real Christianity,”<sup>4</sup> an initiative tolerated up to a point, because the official politics saw in it a way to protect the communist society against the western influences that submerged due to religious movements. It is an important contribution because it succeeded in supporting an authentic anthropology, although it did not explicitly aim to do so, and it completely disapproved the philosophy of the *new man* promoted by the communist ideology.

Fr. D. Stăniloae addressed creation and the theological anthropology of the Holy Fathers, by making reference to the profound nature of theological thinking, and provided an answer not only regarding the autonomous anthropologies of his time, but also when referring to the recent apprehensions on the origin and nature of consciousness, stemming either from philosophy, anthropology or neurology.

#### 1. THE QUEST TO UNDERSTAND CONSCIOUSNESS OR “IN SEARCH OF THE GOD NEURON”

The man always feels the need of certainty and objectivity when he finds himself within the framework of the exigencies imposed by science, which “states things as they are.”<sup>5</sup> According to this reasoning, the man is the accidental result of the laws of nature and, from an ontological point of view, is not placed above other forms of life.

If until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, knowledge and the nature of consciousness represented pursuits that had to do more with the domain of philosophy and theology. Starting with the second half of the last century, neurology experienced a spectacular ascension, as a representative of natural sciences, claiming to be able to offer an “objective” answer to such matters. Starting with Antonio Damasio’s famous work, *Descartes’ Error*,<sup>6</sup> and continuing with Semir Zeki’s more recent *Splendours and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity and the Quest for Human Happiness*,<sup>7</sup> or David J. Linden’s provoking *Accidental Mind: How Brain*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> Eugen COȘERIU, *Lecții de lingvistică generală* [Lessons of General Linguistics], transl. from Spanish by Eugenia Bojoga (Chișinău: ARC, 2000), 50.

<sup>6</sup> Antonio R. DAMASIO, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (London, New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Semir ZEKI, *Splendours and Miseries of the Brain: Love, Creativity and the Quest for Human Happiness* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).

*Evolution Has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God*,<sup>8</sup> we see just a few attempts to explain the way the mind works, what the self is, where and especially why, the convergence of the two—the self and the mind—gives birth to the human consciousness (see Antonio Damasio's last work *Self Comes to Mind*<sup>9</sup>). Although the instruments used might be slightly different, the premise of such types of researches start from is common: the consciousness and the self come into being at the level of neuronal connections, the world is the result of one substance, not two, the only existing reality is material, everything is body, morality, love and the need of beauty are embodied in the human brain. Although the demonstrations are apparently logical, at a closer look, the circularity of the reasoning is evident. Consciousness is the result of the self and the mind, the self is carefully situated in the hypothalamus or in the cerebral cortex, but in order to define each reality—the mind, the self and the consciousness—neurologists face some serious problems. Consciousness is explained with the help of the self, while the self is already conscious. Where and how it became conscious remains a mystery. The mind is often reduced to the activity of the so called neuronal maps, but although it is perfectly plausible to assume that the neuronal maps have an important role in explaining how the mind works, it is not demonstrated that such maps also have a psychological reality. Maybe the mind needs the brain in order to function, but the former is not deductible to the latter. The brain doesn't think, as our legs don't walk, for we think with the help of the brain and we walk with the help of our legs. Many voices from the area of neurology draw attention to the fact that the path chosen might lead nowhere, and the purely biological level might not be the level where we can find answers to the fundamental questions regarding what the human being is.<sup>10</sup>

The impression of a sincere reader could be that he observes a logical error that attempts to demonstrate one thing by using another, and the latter cannot be named or demonstrated without the help of the former, in other words, he might get the impression of being placed in a vicious circle. Without underestimating the above mentioned researches, which are serious and involve a great consumption of energy and time, it is necessary to adopt a position be-

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<sup>8</sup> David J. LINDEN, *The Accidental Mind: How Brain Evolution has Given Us Love, Memory, Dreams, and God* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Antonio R. DAMASIO, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (London: Vintage, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Steven ROSE, "In search of the God neuron," *The Guardian*, Saturday, 27 December 2008.

yond the circular structure of argumentation, and accept another kind of argumentation in order “to define” the self or to find the source of consciousness.

## 2. CERTITUDE AND LIBERTY IN THE CREATIVE ACT

Before using the theological argumentation of Fr. D. Stăniloae, I will mention one of his contemporaries, Eugen Coșeriu, who in *Lecții de lingvistică generală* [Lessons of General Linguistics], published first in 1973, while speaking about how the language came into being, analysed the sciences of nature and the sciences of culture. “The natural objects belong to the world of necessity which is governed by causes which produce effects, consequently, observing what occurs with regularity, under certain conditions, represents a natural law or an empirical law. The cultural objects, conversely, belong to the world of liberty specific to human beings—a world filled with man’s free activities and creations— where the acts are not determined by causes, but are produced in order to reach an end and coincide with their purpose.”<sup>11</sup>

The reason according to which the sciences of nature and culture are differentiated and, from an anthropological perspective, tend to place the man in one hemisphere or the other, has a positive factor. Being placed within the sciences of culture, the man is seen as the work of a free Author. The theoretical foundation of the sciences of culture, according to Coșeriu, “is not in the hypotheses, but in the *original knowledge*. In this sense, the sciences of culture are more exact than the sciences of nature, because their foundation is not just something assumed, but something known about the cultural objects, the *verum*, the reality of the acts themselves, and the subjective *certum*, as well as the certainty the man has regarding the nature of facts, coincide.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, an object belonging to the sciences of nature is less known than an object belonging to the sciences of culture. What we know about a natural product is only what we observe happening to it. On the other hand, an object of the sciences of culture, as a product of liberty, is known in its profoundness. In this case, the object is known even where it apparently doesn’t express anything, because the author is aware of its becoming even before it manifests. The cultural product is objectively known before it exists in the act, because it is known by the author in its project state. Moreover, a

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<sup>11</sup> E. COȘERIU, *Lecții de lingvistică generală* [Lessons of General Linguistics], 50–51.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 51–52.

cultural product becomes more valuable if others want to gain knowledge of it besides the author, even surpassing the author's knowledge.

Therefore, the theoreticians of natural sciences support certitude and objectivity only in an act created in liberty. In this framework, while on an inquiry of the self, the man can better understand himself as a result of the cultural medium he himself has created. Although this knowledge is partial and insufficient, it contains a positive aspect: namely that it asserts a certain paradox in self-knowledge. The human being gains self-knowledge only in relation with somebody and something placed beyond the ego. However, the insufficiency of such an approach consists of, at least theoretically, the man being able to exhaust self-knowledge because he is the product of his own cultural act.

### 3. THEOLOGICAL MYSTERY OF HUMAN IDENTITY

Fr. D. Stăniloae, who is deeply rooted in the patristic thinking, reveals how the act of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ restores the entire human nature affected by sin, implicitly its true identity and self-consciousness. According to Saint Atanasius the Great, there was a need for the Incarnation because “men, having rejected things eternal, and, by counsel of the devil, turned to the things of corruption, became the cause of their own corruption in death, being, as I said before, by nature corruptible, but destined, by the grace following from partaking of the Word, to have escaped their natural state, had they remained good. For God has not only made us out of nothing; but He gave us freely, by the Grace of the Word, a life in correspondence with God – because the bad are the ones that don't exist and the good are the ones that exist—once grown apart from God, Who exists, they were emptied of existence.”<sup>13</sup> Under these circumstances, men must be “refilled with existence” and this was made possible only by the One Who is existence, for the human being was incapable to understand its own existence.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> SAINT ATANASIUS THE GREAT, *Tratat despre Întruparea Cuvântului și despre arătarea Lui nouă prin trup* [On the Incarnation of the Word and about His Manifestation to Us through the Body], in coll. *Părinți și scriitori bisericești* (PSB), vol. 15 (București: Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1987), 93–94.

SAINTE ATANASIUS THE GREAT, *On the Incarnation (De Incarnatione Verbi Dei)*, in coll. *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2004), 38

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

Commenting the words of St. Atanasius, Fr. D. Stăniloae notices that existence without knowledge about it, without self-consciousness is useless, is senseless.” Complete existence must have a sense as well. If there were only things and animals without consciousness, they would be senseless. They are given meaning because they are known to the man and help maintain the man as a being, with a soul and a body, and enrich his knowledge with the reasons rooted in the infinity of God. But, if the world receives its sense in the consciousness of man, it has to last eternally. If it didn’t last forever, it would alternate consciousness after consciousness, until the end of earth, and the consciousness of man or his knowledge of the things without consciousness would be pointless. But a human consciousness that lasts forever must progress in grasping an infinite and eternal spiritual content. And this can only be found in God. If a spatially infinite world is governed only by uniform laws, it cannot constantly offer a new content, and the man would be bored with the identical and limited content of laws.”<sup>15</sup> That is why, the man has to consciously head towards his Creator. Human existence gets a new sense when it is known, but the knowledge that gives real meaning to the beings is the knowledge human beings have of God. “Only the knowledge of the One that is infinite as a Person can maintain alive the interest of men and their wish to know. The knowledge of things would not give full sense to human existence if one didn’t know the infinite God through them, always new and good in His communication”.<sup>16</sup>

What is achieved by the incarnation of the Word, according to Fr. D. Stăniloae, is not only the turn of the image of man from what is material to what is above, spiritual, but also a transformation into a kind of a transcending medium. This is probably the most important aspect regarding the restoration of the human being as a knowledgeable subject. The idea is underlined by Fr. D. Stăniloae in the work *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* [The Eternal Icon of God] where he stated that “the incarnation of God, presents the man as the being most capable to become a medium of the image of God. The infinite depth of God’s own image can be seen in the man. The words acquired by God, and therefore understood by me, open up infinite horizons and communicate absolute requisitions. The man is the most accessible being to us and, at the same time, the most revelatory of the absolute

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<sup>15</sup>Dumitru STĂNILOAE, explicative note to SAINT ATANASIUS THE GREAT, *Tratat despre Întruparea Cuvântului și despre arătarea Lui nouă prin trup* [On the Incarnation of the Word and about His Manifestation to Us through the Body], 103.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 104.

mystery, which is above us. However, not any image or any words are accepted, but the ones rising at the highest spiritual level”.<sup>17</sup> The hypostatic union makes it possible. Fr. D. Stăniloae accentuates this aspect stating that the moment the divine hypostasis becomes human hypostasis, “His Self, which is a divine Self, also becomes a human *Self* for any *you* among men. It descends so that it can be experienced by us as an immediate *You*, as any human *you*, but keeping the divine *You* as well, until it makes me, He who is God, a *you* at His level. For nothing is closer to man in knowledge and affection than a fellow man in his *you* or *I* state, which makes him *you*”.<sup>18</sup>

Along with the apophatic dimension of human nature, Fr. D. Stăniloae also asserts man’s self-consciousness. He refers to a self, aware of his own existence, which makes him a man, but also asks himself constantly *what am I?* In this context, the theological intuition of Fr. D. Stăniloae answers the questions addressing the origin of consciousness in the domain of neurology. The answer is paradoxical or antinomic and is in favour of a spiritual knowledge reality similar to a light which emerges out of the human self, a light projected, at the same time, towards a self that wants to better understand who and what he is and why he exists. This is how the Romanian theologian describes the mysterious and paradoxical discovery of the self: “He calls himself *I*, and the one he addresses *you* and the one he thinks or talks about *him*, he uses a pro-noun, helpless when attempting to specify the self or the other by using an appropriate name which exists.”<sup>19</sup> Following this path “he knows he is dependent upon something that surpasses his comprehension. This way, he is adding the consciousness that his being is in a dependent relation with an infinite, not the self, and is above his means of comprehension, thus imprinting incomprehensibility to the human existence. That is why, the human person is a *mystery*, it is apophatic or inexpressible in a proper sense. Such a mystery, aware of his existence as a mystery, is capable to inquire about the self. Moreover, there is a need to ask about the self. By being aware that he is a mystery, the man is, at the same time, aware that he can progress and has to progress in revealing his mystery. Nevertheless, he knows that he will never reach the end of his mystery, because the roots of his being are supported by an Infinite, with which he is connected and upon which he depends.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> D. STĂNILOAE, *Chipul nemuritor al lui Dumnezeu* [The Eternal Icon of God], 162

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 161-162.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

Therefore, according to Fr. D. Stăniloae, the man is part of the mystery in a continuous process of self-knowledge, and, furthermore, self-consciousness is discovered through the other. "Self-consciousness allows the man to examine himself with his distinctive features which differentiate him from others, but he never gets to understand what he is, although his way of living is different." The man enriches himself not only by communicating with others, with and through the world of objects, "because self-awareness and the awareness of the objects situate him above, but also because he finds meanings in their materiality, meanings that surpass this materiality and its power and often generate questions: where am I from, how are they connected, what purpose do they serve? And as the man cannot ask himself such things, the objects of the world are somehow connected with him, increasing his mystery; he exists in connection with them, he must exert their *light function* to be able to enlighten the self. The world is dependent upon him, but not in its existence and structures; and he is dependent upon the world, not because of his existence, but because there is an urge to bring value to the world and to himself."<sup>21</sup>

On one hand, the greatness of man consists of his knowledge of the creative Reason, as a man created in this image, and, on the other hand, as a way to reveal God to His creation, whose master He is. Following this logical path, the man can discover himself only by knowing God. He is the subject that knows and can look at the self to discover alterity, to discover another Subject which wants to be revealed. The latter, the revealed Subject (named object in the Cartesian logic) attracts into the Self the knowledgeable subject until he discovers himself and states: *I* no longer live, for it is *You* who lives in me.

Therefore, the search for the origin of consciousness in natural sciences, or in cultural sciences can be considered an honest endeavour as long as it doesn't claim that the proposed solutions are categorical and universal. The fact that the new anthropological approaches make reference to human nature according to which, in the body and mainly in the brain, one could find the source of self-consciousness and, implicitly, the idea of God brings us closer to the divine *logoi* theme, which is analysed in the theology of Fr. D. Stăniloae. We could say that from a certain standpoint in science, in this case neurology, there might be a confirmation of Christological anthropology. But, unfortunately, such researches, at least the ones pertaining to the domain of neurology, aim to prove that God does not exist and assume that the origin of the idea of God can be proved if one can scientifically demon-

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 57-58.



strate and explain how the mechanisms of consciousness came into being. It is not characteristic to the orthodox theology to become defensive, using the same kind of arguments against science, but it is natural to make use of the alive Church experience. That is why, Fr. D. Stăniloae's theology, which is alive and nourished by the spring of grace, can provide answers to such challenges. According to his theology, consciousness has to do with the existence of the human person as a mystery because the human person is aware of this inexpressible form of existence.

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#### TOŹSAMOŚĆ I INNOŚĆ — TAJEMNICA I PARADOKS SAMOWIEDZY W TEOLOGII O. DUMITRU STĂNILOAE

##### Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest podkreślenie specyfiki samowiedzy w refleksji ks. Dumitru Stăniloae. Autor krótko przedstawia dwa różne sposoby, poza sposobem teologicznym, podejścia do zagnadnienia – pierwszy wywodzi się z obszaru neurobiologii, a drugi z lingwistyki. Oba ukazują

kreatywną gnozeologię ks. Dumitru Stăniloae, w której tajemnica samowiedzy jest związana z tajemnicą Boga i z tajemnicą egzystencji ludzkiej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** neurobiologia; lingwistyka; tożsamość; samowiedza; inność.