
Reason's Reasons: First Principles in the Second-Century Pagan

Apologetic

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The 2-c debate between the Greek Apologists and the pagan Graeco-Roman tradition is multifaceted and complex. Common ground can be found in the mutual commitment to reason as a reflection of the *Logos*: Reason, or the rationality embedded in things. Logos, in this picture, is participated in through a performance of reasoning whose reliability is presupposed in the discourses of both debating parties—contextualized here as the presupposition that the deliverances and activity of reason are reliable for uncovering reality. Presuppositions are starting points and driving principles of inquiry, here designated as *first principles*. One presuppositional conflict between 2-c Greek Apologists, taking the apologetic works of Justin, Theophilus, Athenagoras, and the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* as a sample, and the pagan tradition, taking Celsus as its 2-c culmination, is over how to justify the commitment to reason's reliability in the above sense. My claim in this paper is twofold: first, that the pagan position is unable in principle to demonstrate the reliability of its own reasoning and that all such inquiry is circular: it is always a further question for the pagan why reasoning reveals reality. I propose that what would count as an answer to this challenge is a metaphysical 'fit' between human embodiment and reality. And second, that the Apologists avoid this unhappy conclusion by committing themselves to the embodiment of Reason in Jesus—that the embodied act of human reasoning reveals reality because Reason itself is embodied in the same way. The upshot is that unless the pagan abandons his position, he is trapped in a circular epistemology and cannot encounter the Christian witness on its own terms.

Christianity, from its beginnings, has been a comprehensive vision of what there is and how things are; an adjustment of life and experience in relation to new a standard of expectation distinct from all that came before. Wilken describes it in this way:

The Christian religion is inescapably ritualistic... uncompromisingly moral... and unapologetically intellectual... Like all the major religions of the world, Christianity is more than a set of devotional practices and a moral code: it is also a way of thinking about God, about human beings, about the world and history.¹

The present study is an attempt to identify one key shift in the intellectual and

¹ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought: Seeking the Face of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xiii.

philosophical outlook accompanying the early Christian witness able to account for its distinctiveness among alternative traditions, an early period in which the voices of the second-century Greek Apologists to the pagan world spoke. The world into which these apologetic voices projected was one dominated by the standards of Greek philosophy, and any attempt to address this world required, on behalf of the Apologists, an effort to approach common philosophical problems in speech and in style akin to that of their intellectual opponents. If the vision of this emergent Christian community was—and is—to be articulated with both philosophical rigor and revisionary scope proportionate to the degree to which this witness diverged from previous knowledge and experience, then the first task will be to suggest the procedure for how this shift in philosophical vision is supposed to take place.

Such a procedure is suggested by Justin in a memorable literary recounting of his conversion experience.² His conversion took place in three steps, each of which describes a period of his search for intellectual and spiritual medicine and the physician through whom this medicine is administered:

1. A person seeks the truth by the unaided effort of reason, and finds it disappointing.
2. That person is offered truth by faith, and accepts.
3. Having accepted, the person finds that it satisfies their reason.³

² I am indebted to Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Tacelli, *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 40 and Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 24-5, for the present formulation. I draw here from Justin's Jewish apologetic rather than those of his works aimed at pagan audiences, but here and in a small number of other contexts in this paper his ideas sufficiently overlap.

³ For a recount of Justin's experience with the old man on the beach, see Thomas B. Falls, trans., *St. Justin Martyr: Dialogue With Trypho (Selections from the Fathers of the Church)* ed. Michael Slusser (Washington D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003), 5-14, *Dial.* Chs. 2-7 *passim*, but see especially 2.6, 3.4-3.7, and

I find that Justin's pattern of conversion captures with rhetorical effectiveness the disillusionment of unbelief and the stated illumination of Christian belief that the Apologists of the second century, each in their own way, articulated and encouraged in their readers. My goal in this study is to examine Steps 1 and 3 in Justin's program, the steps requiring the most cerebral and intellectual attention for which the philosophical project of apologetics, then as now, is most able to contribute.

Justin, Athenagoras, Theophilus, and the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* are four voices in the second century outwardly directed toward dialogue with intellectuals and authorities in the pagan world. For the purposes of my discussion, I will not unite these authors through the various common themes they share—not if this means that I must identify, in my dialectic, a mutual central argumentative emphasis in their overall apologetic projects in addition to those already acknowledged. Rather what I find that interests me is a significant recurring motif, unable to be ignored when seen, one that is at once foundational to the apologetic debate in the second century, and also a locus of continuing disputation between Christians and unbelievers in the twenty-first century academy today.

The distinctive feature shared by these apologists to the pagan world is a particular view of the *Logos*, or Reason: the rationality embedded in what there is.⁴ It is a view that holds that this *Logos*—one and the same as that acknowledged by the Graeco-Roman tradition—did an unprecedented thing by becoming a human being,

7.1-7.3 for some of the more dramatic moments.

⁴ This definition will be clarified in §1 below.

Jesus.⁵ In each of the surveyed apologists, this view of the embodied Logos plays a foundational role in their philosophical dispute with the pagan tradition, which believes the Logos to be a disembodied reality of which acts of reasoning image and in which they participate. I will present this aspect of this historical debate as being a dispute over first principles—the starting points of reason, discourse, and inquiry—between the sampled Apologists and the intellectual taken here as representative of pagan learning and intellectual authority in the second century, Celsus.⁶

The proper concern of apologetic disputation in the second century, as it is today, is with Justin's Step 1 and 3.⁷ It is questions corresponding to these two steps that

⁵ Not every sampled apologist here believes that this Logos was used effectively by the tradition of Greek philosophy, however. See M. Pellegrino and S. Heid, "Apologists – Apologetic," in *Encyclopedia of Ancient Christianity*, ed. Angelo Di Bernardino et al. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 1:186 for the claim that Justin and Athenagoras are distinguished among their contemporaries in their tendencies to "seek to build a bridge with pagan institutions and culture, in which they acknowledge elements truth which they attribute to the intervention of divine providence." For a concurring comment about Justin, see also See Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine, Vol. 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 32. By contrast, both the author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* and Theophilus hold to the contrary. Concerning the author of the *Epistle*, Haykin explains that "Unlike certain contemporaries, notably Justin Martyr, who regarded Greek philosophical thought as playing an important, albeit subordinate, role in preparing Graeco-Roman civilization for the gospel, the writer of this letter flatly asserts the opposite." See Michael A. G. Haykin, *Rediscovering the Church Fathers: Who They Were and How They Shaped the Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011), 57. Theophilus, in turn, held that the Greek poets and philosophers "plagiarized from the Scriptures to make their doctrines plausible"—doctrines which, independently of this influence, were by implication not plausible at all. See Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 33. All in all, from the beginning of the Common Era to the end of classical antiquity, Christian writers "oscillate between" a number of often conflicting attitudes about Hellenistic learning and tradition: these attitudes range from "rejection and total condemnation," to "moderate openness," to "enthusiasm, leading to an impassioned defense of Hellenistic thought." See S. Lilla, "Hellenism and Christianity," *Encyclopedia*, 2:205.

In what follows, particularly in §2, I will speak as though these Apologists are in agreement about the inadequacy of the philosophy of the Graeco-Roman tradition—and at least in this they are: the fullness of truth is in principle unavailable to those without knowledge of God, and, ultimately, "those that [do] not know all that has to do with the Logos who is Christ [cannot but] frequently contradict themselves." See Justin, *2 Apology*, 10:2-3 in Denis Minns and Paul Parvis, trans. eds., *Justin: Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies (Oxford Early Christian Texts)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 309-10.

⁶ The dust jacket of Hoffman's compilation and translation in Celsus, *On the True Doctrine: A Discourse Against the Christians*, trans. R. Joseph Hoffman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) says of Celsus that his work "provides an accurate portrait of the attitudes of most detached pagan observers of the time: interested in the latest religious trends, but suspicious of the religious enthusiasm and the newer proselytizing sects of the empire." It is fitting therefore to take him to be a representative sample of the learned opposition to Christianity in the second century.

⁷ Kreeft et al., *Handbook* 21 mentions that the gap between the inadequacy of reason and the province of faith—what they later identify as Justin's Step 2—is not traversed on the vehicle of reason, and thus, is not within the domain of apologetic argument. It is, however, within its range: commitments to faith can be evaluated with the tools of reason, but not produced by them.

control the progression of my present discussion: first, why think that the unaided effort of reason is ultimately disappointing? And second, if one were to accept the Christian claim that the Logos is embodied in Jesus, in what way would this satisfy reason? In answering the first question I will claim that the pagan tradition, informed by the unaided (albeit Herculean) efforts of Greek philosophy,⁸ cannot demonstrate that reason—as an essentially embodied activity—uncovers or helps uncover essentially disembodied reality. And in answering the second question, I claim that reason aided by the Christian revelation reveals reality because Reason itself—according to this revelation—is embodied, becoming human and taking on the kind of body and soul whose joint powers of intellect are responsible for performing the activity of reasoning. Aiding reason with the content of this revelation satisfies reason, as required by Justin’s Step 3, because it shows reason to be an activity reliable for learning about and discovering reality: it demonstrates the metaphysical ‘fit,’ or the isomorphic conceptual relationship, between the embodied intellect and reality. The thrust of my view is that if Reason is a disembodied reality, as the pagan suggests, and human reason is embodied, against the pagan suggestion, then there is no guarantee that the embodiment of the intellect does not pollute or interfere with the process of reasoning itself, rendering it unreliable for understanding the way things are.

In §1 I deal with what I call the analytic theory of the Logos, outlining the common role I see first principles playing—as philosophical postulates—in the

⁸ Perhaps I have outed myself as a supporter of Justin and Athenagoras’ views on earlier pagan learning. See my Note 5 above.

competing pagan and apologetic discourses, and their reciprocal commitment to the analytical interpretation of Reason. My goal is to show that every such discourse operates under the presupposition, or the first principle, that the assurance of the activity of reasoning being reliable for understanding reality is itself *reasonable*. In other words, I aim to show that both what reason holds as true—by means of propositions in a discourse—and the performing of the activity of reason in communicating or making visible discourse, are mutually interdependent: that the discourse itself assumes that putting it into practice brings the epistemic agent into conformity with reality.

In §2, building on §1, I defend Justin's Step 1, and claim that the discourse available to the unaided reason in the pagan tradition is circular. Given the unaided reason through which the pagan discourse operates, there is no reason within the discourse to think the first principle that the activity of reasoning accurately reveals reality is true—adopting this first principle is, to the pagan, arbitrary. My goal is to show that the only criterion that can demonstrate the reliability of the embodied activity of reason is one that holds that the embodied intellect does not pollute or interfere with the act of reasoning itself. My proposed criterion is one of metaphysical or conceptual fit between the human form, the composite of body and soul from which the power of the human intellect projects, and the reality that intellect knows through its performances of reason. If the human intellect is embodied, then reality cannot be conceptually isomorphic with it, unless reality is itself embodied in the

same way.⁹

Finally in §3 I defend Justin's Step 3, drawing out the implications of how the aided reasoning of the Apologists' help them justify the first principle that reason itself is reliable. My goal is to show that, given this starting point, the discourse in which the Apologists are engaged, in making use of reason aided by revelation, is not circular in the way claimed of pagan discourse in §2. The Christian is able to demonstrate, using the resources available within the discourse itself, that holding that reason as an activity is reliable is a reasonable rather than an arbitrary presupposition. This is precisely because, as the Apologists claim, Reason—or the Logos—the intrinsically rational reality in which the performances of reason participate, becomes a human being in Jesus, guaranteeing a transparent, conceptual similarity between the embodied intellect and the reality in which humans 'live and move and have their being.'¹⁰ The upshot of all of this is that unless the pagan abandons their discourse based on unaided reason they are trapped in a circular epistemology that does not enable them to properly understand the Apologists' claims, to evaluate the Christian witness on its own terms.

Before I begin, it is necessary to mention the constraints within which the

⁹ I appropriate this argument from one given by Kreeft et al. *Handbook*, 364 in the authors' successful (in my opinion) criticism of the correspondence theory of truth. There is a large tangle of problems and complications associated with this, and I am content only to mention but make no more use of them. It is a conversation for another occasion; I mean only to make clear that the form of my argument here is not original to me; but the circumstances in which it is applied, to my knowledge, is.

¹⁰ This is a paraphrase of a comment made by Paul in the greatest apologetic speech in history, recorded in Acts 17:28. Phillip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2: Fathers of the Second Century: Hermas, Tatian, Athenagoras, Theophilus & Clement of Alexandria* (New York: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), 162, recognizes this when speaking of Athenagoras' treatise *On the Resurrection of the Dead*: "Blest be Athenagoras for completing what St. Paul began on the Areopagus..." Each of the discussed apologists contribute to the apologetic project that Paul started, with what I see as a major contribution being the topics of §'s 2 and 3 below.

discussion takes place that are, in the present context, both closest to the surface and farthest from contention. The topic of §1 deals with a final constraint that will take longer to flesh out, and requires more care. First, by ‘apologetics,’ specifically as it appears in the second century, I mean the collection of literature that “documents the effort of a group of Christian intellectuals to defend their religion from attacks by cultured pagans, popular accusations and persecutions by imperial or local authorities.”¹¹ The apologists are those that have assumed this dialectical assignment. By ‘pagan’ I mean the informal and anachronistic way of demarcating a people who lived “in rural areas outside [Roman] cities, who (after the Christian population became a majority in the urban areas) were said to be the only ones who still held on to the old mythologies.”¹² My use of the term is used more broadly as a characterization of the “inhabitants of the Roman Empire who were neither Jewish nor Christian.”¹³ And by ‘human’ I mean no more than whatever is commonly referred to in familiar circumstances when humans say “us”—assuming this quality, whatever it is, as static across ‘our’ history.

Second, I will understand ‘truth’ in Aristotle’s sense, roughly as that which says of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is the truth; and that which says of

¹¹ Pellegrino and Heid, “Apologists – Apologetic,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:186. See also Haykin, *Church Fathers*, 49 who adds that apologists also “attack... alternative worldviews in the Graeco-Roman world, exposing their inadequacies and problems for belief.”

¹² For an estimate of the proportions of Christians and pagans in Rome during this period of Roman history, see Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 7-9. Here he claims that by the middle of the second century, assuming the rate of growth of the Christian population in the Roman Empire started at 120 (Acts 1:14-15), and grew 40% per decade, the plausible result is that by the year 180 there were an estimated 100 000 Christians in the Empire. In the city of Rome itself, Stark estimates that by 200, 1% of the estimated total population of 700 000 were Christian—a number swelling to 10% of the total population of the Empire by Constantine’s reign circa 300. See also Michael Bland Simmons, “Graeco-Roman Philosophical Opposition,” in *The Early Christian World*, ed. Philip F. Esler (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), 842 for a corroboration of these numbers. My use of ‘pagan’ then is somewhat anachronistic even from the perspective of the second century; I hope considerations of convenience allow for this specific looseness.

¹³ James L. Papandrea, *Novatian of Rome and the Culmination of Pre-Nicene Orthodoxy: (Princeton Theological Monograph* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), e-book Location 205, Note 2.

what is not that it is, and of what is that it is not, is false.¹⁴ Correspondingly, third, I will understand epistemology as “the theory of knowledge [that is] concerned with the nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope, and general basis.”¹⁵ Specifically for the present context, by the Middle period of Platonism dominant in the second century,¹⁶ I will understand epistemology to be the study of whatever “distinguishes knowledge from belief... construed as having something simply before the mind, and considered as true or false.”¹⁷

Fourth, I mean by ‘tradition’ the “Customary sets of belief [or] ways of behaving of uncertain origin,” accepted in the form of “persuasive or even authoritative” customs and norms “which are transmitted by unreflective example and imitation” within any people group.¹⁸ More to my purposes, tradition can be seen as the inherited set of histories, discourses, networks of belief, and ways of seeing the world common to communities linked through intergenerational dialogue.¹⁹ Fifth, crucially, I will understand ‘discourse’ as any collection of thematically united propositions that “can be shown to hang together through relationships of entailment, presupposition,

¹⁴ This is found in the *Metaphysics* 1011b25, cited in Alfred Tarski, “The Semantic Conception of Truth and the Foundations of Semantics,” in *Philosophy of Language*, 4th Ed., ed. A. P. Martinich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70. Aristotle recognized that truth is relative to being, that what is true is the truth about being. Of Tarski, however, the same cannot be said for sure. In this paper, with this in mind, I will not distinguish meaningfully the terms ‘truth,’ ‘what there is,’ ‘how things are,’ and similar constructions apart from considerations of style.

¹⁵ See D. W. Hamlyn, “Epistemology,” in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 242.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 242-3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* Roughly, Plato’s epistemology can be considered to understand knowledge as “a state of mind related to an object,” the main question being “what that state and that relation can be.” In addition, Aristotle understood epistemology along the same lines that knowledge is the state arrived at when we know of something’s “reason or cause.” See 243. Plantinga, in a group of renowned works in contemporary epistemology focusing on the historical developments in the field following Plato’s initial but problem-ridden definition (well outside of the scope of this paper), articulates this quality that differentiates knowledge from merely justified true belief as *warrant*. Plantinga surveys the work in contemporary analytic philosophy up to his writing in Volume 1, the first of a broader three-volume series on warrant, Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant: The Current Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

¹⁸ See R.S. Downie, “Tradition,” *Philosophy*, 878.

¹⁹ This notion will be crucial for §2, where I claim the circularity of discourses available to Greek philosophy, on the basis of their being built from first principles through unaided reason, affect the entire Graeco-Roman tradition.

contextual implicature, argumentative coherence, real-world and speaker-related knowledge, etc.” passed on as social artifacts through traditions.²⁰

Last, and most important of the constraints considered up until now, I will understand ‘metaphysics’ and the qualifier ‘metaphysical’ roughly as “the most general attempt to make sense of things” or any activity qualified thereby.²¹ My goal in §3 is to outline the implications of the claim that Reason has taken genuine human form and that this claim allows Christians to make sense of how the activity of reason uncovers reality—that is, how the human ability to make sense of things is itself to be made sense of. Evaluated under this rubric, the present paper expounds a theory of Patristic *metametaphysics*, the attempt at analyzing the possibility, scope, and limits of metaphysics particular to the early Christian apologetic witness.²² The scale of revision the Christian movement forced on every aspect of human thought and life ought to lead us to expect that what is new with Christianity is located at the premises of argumentation—its first and founding principles rather than at the conclusions—and hence calls for us to view the second-century philosophical debate from these most general standpoints.

On this point, the historical context and conceptual environment in which the second-century pagan/ apologetic debate takes place is one in which the reliability of reason is an unstated and peripheral assumption, one not outwardly emphasized in any

²⁰ C. Norris, “Discourse,” *Philosophy*, 202. This definition is spoken in the discourse of modern linguistic analysis, but I will develop, in §1, the more classical analytical approach assumed during the second century.

²¹ See A. W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things (The Evolution of Modern Philosophy)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 1. Moore understands metaphysics in a way germane to my discussion in §1 below. See 4-5 for the idea, fitting with my presentation here, that metaphysics is a self-reflective and self-adjusting *endeavor* rather than a fixed science or systematic study—that it is a pursuit of sense-making rather than something reducible to any well-defined methodology on how making sense of things actually happens, or ought to happen.

²² For more on this unique standpoint of analysis, see Moore, *Evolution*, xviii.

of the sampled second-century writings. There are, as far as I can tell, two reasons the topic of my present discussion is not explicitly stressed, particularly in the writing of the second-century Fathers. The first is that the early church had other, clearly more pressing, priorities. Celsus cites mockingly the harassment to which Christians were subject by Roman authorities: Christians band together, he says, *because* they are persecuted rather than being persecuted because they band together. There is a “sentence of death that looms over them” that accounts for the character of their movement: “Their persistence is the persistence of a group threatened by a common danger, and danger is a more powerful incentive to fraternal feeling than is any oath.”²³ Whether Celsus is right about the motivation for Christian belief is not certain; that these hostilities were among the social conditions in which early Christians lived, however, is. And this called for an urgency of response and practical prioritizing which left, until a less tumultuous time, deeper considerations of metaphysics among the immediate purposes of philosophical and theological study to the side.²⁴ The second is that the Apologists lacked the language required to articulate and defend a position in what I have identified earlier as the inquiry of metametaphysics, the over-arching, narrative vision of how human sense-making is itself to be made sense of.²⁵ Nevertheless, as I will explore in §3 further, I believe

²³ See Celsus, Book I, in Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 53. Pellegrino and Heid, “Apologists-Apologetic,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:186 say that the common characteristics of apologetic literature in early Christian history “documents the effort of a group of Christian intellectuals to defend their religion from attacks by cultured pagans, popular accusations and persecutions by imperial or local authorities.”

²⁴ See Robert M. Grant, *The Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1988), 10 who claims that the apologists are “deeply involved in the political and social struggles of their time and cannot be understood apart from the precise circumstances in which they are writing.” My inquiry, then, is one that makes explicit what I see as an originally implicit factor in the pagan apologetic—bringing to light a hidden narrative through the clues left over in the dark.

²⁵ Frederick Copleston, in his *A History of Philosophy, Vol. 2: From Augustine to Duns Scotus* (New York: Penguin Random House, 1993), 30, notes how the primary interests of the Church Fathers is conversion rather

enough of the raw materials are available in the work of the sampled Apologists to suggest that the beginnings of such an account were starting to be formed.

In what immediately follows I trace one final constraint controlling the progression of my dialectic: the common commitment between our disputants to what I refer to as an analytic interpretation of the Logos, and an examination of the role that first principles play in discourses modeled on this form of reasoning.

§1: Framing the Debate: First Principles and the Analytic Logos

Despite the profound disagreements between the Christian apologists and the pagan Graeco-Roman tradition in the second century, each group is, compared to the academic debate today, in fundamental agreement over the meaning, purpose, and interpretation of reason, logic, and argumentation—what reasoning it is and how it is to be done. In this section, I will outline the view of reason held common between our two disputants, with the goal of demonstrating that, in the ancient world, reason was considered an activity, endeavor, or performance of the whole human being, rather than—as it is commonly thought of today—a merely intellectual activity in contradistinction to other dimensions of thought, action, and being. First, I will follow recent literature in describing the relevant historical understanding of reason along analytic lines. The goal here will be to emphasize reason as a kind of activity performed by epistemic agents. This will be crucial for my discussion in §2, where I

than philosophical instruction, and so it would be “idle to look for a philosophical system.” G. W. H. Lampe in *A History of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Hubert Cunliffe-Jones (London: T&T Clark, 1978), 30 likewise cautions against the search for a robust and systematic theology in the early writers such as Justin, Athenagoras, Tatian, and Theophilus: these authors, at this point in the history of Christian doctrine, have only begun the articulation of such a system.

develop a notion of circularity that builds off of what is established here. And second, I will explain the role of first principles within this framework of reason and discourse, with the goal of setting up the discussion in §3, which clarifies and develops the viewpoints from which the Apologists and the pagan intellectual world approached the articulating and understanding of first principles.

Of any historical analysis, the first question concerning any historical figure should be “what social background is the [thinker] unconsciously presupposing?” Most importantly in the context of historical theology, awareness of the social, cultural, and historical context of a work of theological literature “sets theology firmly in the social background of mankind as a whole, and calls attention to certain objectively ascertained factors of which the theologian may well prefer to be unaware” lest he risk his critics calling into question the “relevance of the theology he is expounding.”²⁶ The apologetic writings of the second century frequently draw upon Hellenistic learning and rhetoric, including the language, vocabulary, and conceptual economy of largely Middle Platonist²⁷ theology, cosmology, and philosophy.²⁸ As a

²⁶ These quotes can be found in H. Cunliffe-Jones in *Christian Doctrine*, ed. Cunliffe-Jones, 18. Behr expresses this succinctly and more generally in saying that “Thought does not exist apart from thinkers;” and that the “writers of antiquity cannot be divorced, as pure dogmatic speculation, from the ecclesial, social, and political situations and struggles in which they were immersed.” See John Behr, *The Formation of Christian Theology Vol. 1: The Way to Nicaea* (Yonkers: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), xii and 4, respectively.

²⁷ Middle Platonism was a philosophically and culturally syncretistic doctrine combining elements of the conceptual systems of Platonism, Aristotelianism, Pythagoreanism, Stoicism, and Egyptian, Zoroastrian, and Greek mythological theology. An important and common philosophical foundation for Middle Platonist authors before late antiquity was the human ability to contemplate and participate in transcendent Forms through the intellect, taken from Plato, and the ability to recognize immanent universals, from Aristotle. See Lilla, “Middle Platonism,” *Encyclopedia*, 2:796. Other common philosophical perspectives and inherited sets of problems were passed from Plato to his successors, such as “the doctrines of the two levels of reality, Being and Becoming; of the benevolence of the Deity; of the purposiveness of the universe; of the theory of Forms; and of the immortality of the soul.” See David Rankin, *Athenagoras: Philosopher and Theologian* (Abington: Routledge, 2009), 48-9.

²⁸ A fuller treatment of the intersections between Middle Platonism and the early Church writings can be found in Lilla, “Platonism and the Fathers,” *Encyclopedia*, 3:207-8. Lilla identifies twelve principles in Middle Platonist philosophy that were either utilized outright or modified in early Christian theology: (1) “God is above all beings;”

result, the apologists were “authors who enjoyed a fuller education in the Greek manner than the majority of Christians, and who could therefore envisage and present their faith in a way that might make it appear comprehensible and tolerable, if not attractive, to initially hostile readers.”²⁹ The forms of argument and approaches to inquiry and debate practiced by those within the Patristic tradition were “influenced not just by the Jewish traditions but also by the classical culture of its promoters,” displaying a noteworthy familiarity “with ancient methods of interpretation of literary, philosophical and legal texts.”³⁰ This broader social, philosophical, and historical context of apologetic literature in the Graeco-Roman world calls for a more detailed examination of which aspects of Hellenistic learning were being drawn upon in the second-century debate.

A range of key terms found throughout early Christian and the broader, largely Middle Platonist, academic context were used in common between the Graeco-Roman tradition and the surveyed Apologists, but used without necessarily the same meaning. Justin, as an example, uses terms and concepts borrowed from Platonic writings while not necessarily “understanding the words in precisely the Platonic sense.” Rather, “the

(2) “God is immortal, immobile, eternal, not subject to change or becoming;” (3) “God is self-sufficient and above all human desires;” (4) “God is an eternal intelligence;” (5) “God can be understood only with the mind;” (6) “God, matter, and the ideas” are the basic building blocks of the world; (7) ideas “are thoughts contained in the mind of God;” (8) the originally Aristotelian teaching of *hylomorphism* wherein matter acquires “form and becomes a fixed and sensible object;” (9) “God began the world by stamping forms and order upon matter that was originally unformed and disordered;” (10) “Primordial matter [is] void of form;” (11) the intelligible world is to be contrasted with the sensible world; and (12) the achievement of something akin to the ‘Beatific Vision,’ a realization of “the wonder caused by the vision of the beauty of the universe, which leads one to go back to one’s designer...” See also Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 8 for a corroborating but less comprehensive survey. Rankin is also clear in *ibid.* 102 on the extent to which the contemporary philosophical vocabulary and vision affects Athenagoras’ presentation of his ideas: “[His] presentation of [the] doctrine of God is, in part at least, set against a framework informed and shaped by contemporary metaphysics.” The specific points of departure for the second century apologists will be given more detailed treatment in §2 below.

²⁹ Richard A. Norris, “The Apologists,” in *The Cambridge History of Early Christian Literature*, eds. Francis Young, Lewis Ayres, and Andrew Louth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 36-7.

³⁰ M. Simonetti, “Patristic Argumentation,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:223.

use of them is... the effect of his philosophic training and of the sympathy which he retained for Platonism.”³¹

Among the most fundamental of the common key terms is a conceptualization and interpretation of reasoning and logic the early Apologists inherited from their surrounding Graeco-Roman culture. The term of interest is *logos*, and its range of meanings, even within the context of the second century, is great: it can mean word, reason, rational principle, logic, “and even a divinely ordered structure.”³² This final characterization of *logos*, as a cosmic pattern of order or the rationality or intelligibility embedded in things ordered toward a transcendent purpose—what I call the Logos or Reason, capitalized—will be my primary use of the notion. Athenagoras stresses similarly that the Logos is the “understanding and reason” of God, the “Intelligence, Reason, [and] Wisdom” at the very foundation of reality.³³ My secondary usage of the term will reflect the contexts in which humans ordinarily reason or make sense of things: this I will consider the image of and participation in the Logos, the reflection of the intelligibility of the world in the intellects of the epistemic agents that contemplate it. If humans reason correctly, therefore, they reflect the cosmic order—and the cosmic purpose—in their sense-making activities.³⁴

³¹ Copleston, *History*, 17. See also my Note 5 above.

³² James L. Papandrea, *The Earliest Christologies: Five Images of Christ in the Postapostolic Age* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016), 86. A balanced understanding of ‘logos’ can be found in Athenagoras’ *Embassy for the Christians*, Ch. 10, where he says that logos to the Greeks meant “understanding and reason.” See Athenagoras, “Embassy for the Christians,” in *Athenagoras’ ‘Embassy for the Christians’ and ‘On the Resurrection of the Dead’: With Notes and Commentary*, ed. Aaron Simms (Suwanee: St. Polycarp Publishing House, 2017), 33. All my subsequent references to Athenagoras will be to Simms’ volume, which preserves Schaff’s translation (see Note 10 above). Dent calls logos a concept “primarily signifying in the context of philosophical discussion the rational, intelligible principle, structure, or order which pervades something, or the source of that order, or giving an account of that order.” See Nicholas Dent, “Logos,” *Philosophy*, 511-2.

³³ See *Embassy* 10.2 and 24.2 respectively.

³⁴ Grant, *Apologists*, 12 explains that Philo “often spoke of the ‘Logos’ as an intermediary between God and the world” and by doing so “anticipated theological developments in second-century Christianity.” The following discussion is concerned with some of these developments.

Reasoning, as mutually understood by the opposing parties in my discussion, is held as a personal activity, distinct from others mainly in possessing an explicit logical structure in the form of argument and argumentative discourse. ‘Logic,’ recently put by Bencivenga, can be seen holistically as a “theory of the *logos*—that is, of meaningful discourse”—rather than reducible to any “theory of inference,” that is, of valid and invalid moves in arguments themselves. ‘Argument’ and its cognate terms, in turn, can be understood as “rational linguistic strategies, not always inferential, by which we attempt to prevail over an opponent.”³⁵ The type of rational linguistic strategy common to our second-century interlocutors can thus be referred to as the analytic form of reasoning.

Correct analytical reasoning is multifaceted. “Subscribing to a(n analytic) logical step,” Bencivenga continues, “requires two things: (a) a reference, however implicit, to the principles warranting the step and (b) a commitment to those principles.”³⁶ These principles of reasoning are normative constraints on how someone is supposed to think about topics and connect ideas: logic does not record the “common patterns in the actual use of a [discourse],” but rather how people “must understand” terms and propositions in a discourse in order to “argue with one another.”³⁷ Reflecting Bencivenga’s presentation, the normative constraints on reasoning are guidelines for: (a) which logical principles ought to be applied in a given argument; and (b) the character of the actions by which valid reasoning is made manifest.

To capture these two aspects of argumentation it is helpful to distinguish between

³⁵ Ermanno Bencivenga, *Theories of the Logos* (Basel: Springer International Publishing AG, 2017), 1-4.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 9-10. Emphasis removed.

the *act* and the *object* of reason: the object of reason is the content of a proposition expressing a truth; and the act of reason is the personal activity or the movement of the intellect by which we express that truth.³⁸ The latter I identify as the *performance* of reason; the activity by which a rival position is not merely modified, refuted, or guided in light of the normative principles of reasoning, but overcome or surpassed “as an early chapter in a story” is surpassed further into the narrative. If reasoning is a reflection of and participation in Reason, or the Logos, and reasoning has a performative dimension, then the performance of reasoning must be the kind of activity, when done correctly, that uncovers reality and brings epistemic agents closer to how things are.

Discourses themselves consist in *both* the body of propositions comprising what is said of a thematically united subject matter *and* the performances and speech acts expressing it. This provides a useful link between the intellect, the means by which both pagans and the Apologists acknowledge conceptual truths are contemplated, and the body: the embodiment of human rationality. I will return to this in §2 below when dealing with an important objection.

The analytic system of reasoning, mathematics being “the most natural terrain for analytic logic,”³⁹ grounds discourses in axiomatic starting points. Axioms are any “one of a select set of propositions, presumed true by a system of logic or a theory, from which all other propositions which the system or theory endorses as true” are

³⁸ Kreeft et al., *Handbook*, 32.

³⁹ Bencivenga, *Logos*, 119.

derivable.⁴⁰ First principles—the presuppositions on which discourses rest—in order to be axiomatic, must be subject to two constraints. First principles can neither be arbitrary nor evidential: they cannot be arbitrary, for if they were, there would be no reason to presuppose them rather than others; and they cannot be evidential, for if they were they would be inferred and so not be presuppositions.⁴¹

Two important developments in my discussion now can be connected. The first is that discourses constructed on analytical reasoning must be founded on non-arbitrary and non-evidential first principles; and the second is that reason is an activity that has a performative dimension. First principles, therefore, must themselves be both ‘objects’ and ‘acts.’ As objects, first principles are the axiomatic presuppositions on which a discourse is grounded that determine the content of what can and cannot be said within the discourse. And as acts, they are the guiding principles that determine which actions can and cannot be performed when putting the discourse into action. Critically, then, first principles as objects determine the range of performances valid for epistemic agents to enact when reasoning by way of a discourse. This is because the performances of reasoning are directed towards the ends or purposes to which engagement in the discourse is oriented, those ends themselves expressed as propositions itemized within the discourse.⁴²

The purpose of discourse, familiar to the classical world, is making sense of

⁴⁰ E. J. Lowe, “Axiom,” *Philosophy*, 72. I distinguish first principles from axioms in that axioms are explicitly propositional, as suggested in the given definition, while first principles are understood as the starting points of reasoning considered in the expanded and additional sense of performative personal acts of reason. This is a sense, which I mentioned, that includes the notion that first principles are also axiomatic, propositional starting points in a discourse as well. More on this immediately below.

⁴¹ See David Bentley Hart, “Reason’s Faith,” *First Things*, March 2015, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/03/reasons-faith>.

⁴² This last point will be indispensable for §2 below.

reality, of what there is and how things are. Athenagoras in his *Embassy for the Christians* explains this when he acknowledges the mutual pursuit of truth between Christians and their pagan interlocutors:

For poets and philosophers, as to other subjects so also to this, have applied themselves in the way of conjecture, moved, by reason...by his own soul, to try whether he could find out and apprehend the truth...⁴³

Given that truth is arrived at through the intellect, and the intellect performs reason by means of discourses, then among the most important first principles operating within both pagan and early Christian discourse is the presupposition that *the deliverances and activities of reason are reliable or trustworthy for uncovering (or coming to knowledge of) reality*. Reasoning, in other words, for both the pagans and the Apologists, is assumed to be reliable for pursuing truth—the challenge is which group, if either, can justify its reliability.

This first principle, to recapitulate, can be neither arbitrary nor evidential. These two dimensions can then be captured in a single question: what reason is there to think this first principle is not an arbitrary, brute presupposition in a discourse, unable to be shown to be reasonable given the resources available within the discourse itself? Answering it, I will claim, requires that reality itself and the embodied human intellect have an isomorphic conceptual relationship: that there is something about the embodiment of the intellect and the character of reality such that the activities of the intellect are able to bring humans closer to the truth, and into fuller participation in reality itself. Otherwise, if no such metaphysical similarity exists, there is no reason to

⁴³ *Embassy*, 7.2.

suppose that reasoning helps make sense of things.

In §2 I will move on to discuss the first principles of the discourse used in the mainstream pagan, Graeco-Roman tradition, represented in the polemical work of Celsus. The discourse used is based on unaided human reason, and I will claim that any such discourse is circular and unable to justify the aforementioned first principle. More specifically, I claim that any analytical discourse based on unaided human reason is unable to show the first principle that the deliverances and activities of reason are reliable for uncovering reality is non-arbitrary. To this I now turn.

§2: *Celsus and the Analytic Circle*

Earlier I have described first principles as the presuppositions within discourses that come in two varieties, as objects and as acts, correspondingly reflecting the content and the performance of reasoning. Once again, the first principle of interest here, assumed in every discourse based on the analytic interpretation of reason, is the presupposition that *the deliverances and activities of reason are reliable or trustworthy for uncovering reality*. The question explored in this section is whether any such discourse based on unaided reason—the natural abilities of the human intellect to know what there is and how things are—can verify that the activity of reasoning itself is trustworthy, that the process of reasoning is not interfered with by the intellect's performances.

Celsus represents a culturally high and intellectually sophisticated criticism of the early Christian movement insofar as it was visible to someone in a position of social

consequence, such as he was. His *True Doctrine*, a work largely reconstructed from fragments dating from the following century, is caustic and direct, an attack which “still needed refutation seventy years after it was written.”⁴⁴ As for the interpretive viewpoint from which his philosophical criticism is projected, he is difficult to pin down: Wilken classifies him, with some reservation, as a “conservative intellectual” that supports “traditional values and defends accepted beliefs,” whose “philosophical and religious ideas are not simply theoretical convictions” but “are interwoven with the institutions, social conventions, and political structures of the Greco-Roman world.”⁴⁵

Celsus gives two types of arguments against Christianity: the first is Christian beliefs should not be accepted on logical and philosophical grounds: “One ought first to follow reason as a guide before accepting any belief, since anyone who believes without testing a doctrine is certain to be deceived.”⁴⁶ The second is that “truth and antiquity [are] one and that what [is] handed down by the ancients [is] true *because it [is] old.*”⁴⁷ These two tests for truth are means by which one and the same discourse can be shown to reveal reality—a discourse, for Celsus, that is constructed on unaided reason. The author of the *Epistle to Diognetus* articulates, in the terms in which I have expressed it, the difference between aided and unaided human reason:

⁴⁴ Robert Louis Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), xvi.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 95.

⁴⁶ Celsus, Book I, in Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 54. See also Origen, Book III: 44, in *Origen: Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 158 for Origen’s quoting Celsus as saying of Christianity, “*Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near.*” Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Wilken, *Christians*, 121. Emphasis in original. Hamman along with Wilken expresses that Celsus both “accused Christians of attaching themselves to a faith they could not rationally justify” and “reproved Christianity for its novelty...” See A. Hamman, “Celsus,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:479. Chadwick corroborates this as well, stating that “Celsus believes that there is a true doctrine, of the greatest antiquity... misunderstood first by the Jews, and then by the Christians...” See *Origen: Contra Celsum*, xxi.

The course of conduct which [Christians] follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.⁴⁸

In the present context, then, unaided human reason is best understood as whatever conceptual and analytical equipment is available to the human intellect absent direct intervention from the divine.

An illustration of this difference might be of most help: let us imagine a case of the author of a novel inserting themselves into their own narrative.⁴⁹ Imagine the author were to reveal to the characters something of the structure of the narrative of which they are part, the overall progression of, and interconnections within, which is fully understood only to the author. Such an event would illustrate the shape that aided reason takes, judged from the point of view of the characters having been informed by the author. Unaided reason, by contrast, would constitute whatever powers of contemplation and sense-making are available to the characters for discerning the structure and details of the narrative in which they live, absent authorial intervention. Why, then, do I claim the discourses circulating among these characters, unaided by the guidance of their author, are circular?

I have mentioned above that a crucial first principle for analytic discourse is that *the deliverances and activities of reason are reliable or trustworthy for uncovering reality*. Epistemic agents, I claim, in order to have reason to think the activity of reason is reliable must be able to justify the trustworthiness of reason itself

⁴⁸ See Malthetes (Anonymous), *Epistle to Diognetus* (The Fig Classic Series on Early Church Theology, 2013), 5.3. Haykin adds that the writer “assumes a key principle for Patristic theologians: ultimately only God can reveal God, and we can know nothing about God unless he reveals himself.” See *Church Fathers*, 56. I will deal with this more thoroughly in §3 below by focusing on the other sampled Apologists’ developments of this idea.

⁴⁹ Kreeft et al., *Handbook*, 154. Their context is different, but applicable to my discussion.

from within the discourses in which that reason is exercised. This, I claim, cannot be accomplished by means of discourse based on unaided reason. There is no ground on which to suppose, given unaided reason, that there is evidence to think reason itself reliable. Put another way, there is no warrant within the boundaries of unaided discourse for believing “in the power of [rationality] to give rise to true knowledge of reality.”⁵⁰ Returning to my earlier illustration, from the point of view of the characters of a novel isolated from direct communication with their author, there is no way for these characters to verify that they are equipped with the kind of intellect capable of correctly imaging, reflecting, or participating in their narrative reality’s intelligibility. Therefore any discourse unable to validate the first principle that reason itself is a trustworthy guide to truth turns out to be a rationally indefensible position: the reliability of reason is believed “even though there cannot possibly be any reason for that belief.”⁵¹ In other words, the first principles of a discourse taking place within the boundaries of unaided reason “can hardly provide an epistemic foundation for their consequences.”⁵²

The consequence of lacking such an epistemic foundation for the relevant first principle is a species of the analytical fallacy of vicious circularity, taking pace when the consequences of a discourse are assumed as one of its starting points.⁵³ In the present context, I challenge the pagan tradition using the same words through which the tradition, by the end of the second century, challenged Christianity: insofar as they

⁵⁰ Hart, “Reason’s Faith.”

⁵¹ Ibid. See also Kreeft et al., *Handbook*, 35 for a comparably forceful presentation.

⁵² Bencivenga, *Logos*, 82.

⁵³ See Michael Cohen, “Vicious Circle,” *Philosophy*, 898: a circular argument is one that “[assumes] its conclusion as a premiss...”

are separable, it is the credulity rather than the creed of the pagan tradition that is objectionable—the credulity that the reliability of a discourse can be evidenced in the present success of that discourse, and in its continuing applicability over time.⁵⁴ Given that analytic logic “is obsessed with keeping reasoning free from error,”⁵⁵ the starting presuppositions of a discourse must be non-arbitrary or reasonable for the process of argumentation itself to be reasonable and to reliably reach true conclusions. The pagan, having no ground on which to verify the reliability of reason itself, is therefore in error.

What would make the aforementioned first principle reasonable? Necessarily not, I suggest, any consideration within the scope of any discourse based on unaided reason; any application of such discourse will assume reason’s reliability. Gilson, on this front, points out that the “errors of Plato and Aristotle are precisely the errors into which pure reason falls, and every philosophy which sets out to be self-sufficing will fall into them again.”⁵⁶ This point, however muted under the emergencies affecting the second-century church, is present in the work of the Apologists. Humans, it is stressed, when reliant upon their own means of reasoning, are made vulnerable to “their own delusions” and are “led astray by demons.”⁵⁷ Athenagoras articulates this

⁵⁴ See Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 28 stating that, “As a rule, the pagan critics of the later second century, Celsus included, are critics of Christian credulity, not of Christian creeds.” Celsus himself expresses this in many places, rarely more caustic than the following: the Christian “runs away at a gallop from people of learning and culture—people whom they cannot deceive and trap illiterate people instead.” See Celsus, Book VIII, page 94 in the cited volume.

⁵⁵ Bencivenga, *Logos*, 77.

⁵⁶ Gilson, *Spirit*, 5.

⁵⁷ Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 110. Justin in *1 Apology* Chapters 6 and 13, *passim*, and Athenagoras in *Embassy* 13.1 address, among other places, their notion that the Roman gods are demons, a sentiment they amply generalize to the Graeco-Roman tradition’s reliance upon human means of knowing, whose ends and highest expressions are directed toward knowledge of such beings. See Hamman and Di Bernardino, “Accusations against Christians,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:23. See also Celsus, Book VIII, Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 103 for one example of his insistence on human reason as intrinsically ordered towards the contemplation of God, a being he considers to be within the same metaphysical category as the Romans gods. Criticizing this notion, Hart, in his *Atheist Delusions*, (New

in a presentation characteristic of the second-century controversy. We must avoid, he says:

the irrational and fantastic movements of the soul about opinions [that] produce a diversity of images [which in turn] give birth to empty visions in the mind, by which it becomes madly set on idols.⁵⁸

The idol of concern in this present discussion is, from the point of view of the Apologists, the idol of a self-sufficient human philosophy, of a non-circular discourse based on unaided reason. Theophilus stresses equally, albeit from a slightly different angle, that:

For this reason it is plain that all the rest were in error and that only the Christians have held the truth—we who are instructed by the Holy Spirit who spoke in the holy prophets and foretold everything.⁵⁹

Theophilus here claims that the Self-revelation of God in Jesus, the most significant of God’s revelations, is the sole criterion of the fullness of knowledge and truth, absent which partial error is guaranteed.

Establishing and defending this idea is the province of Justin’s Step 2, highlighted above. Here, however, I skip this important question in favor of asking another: what

Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 207 says that God is not to be understood, as Greek philosophy does, as a “sublime absence... at the summit of reality.” Rather the God that is truly transcendent “could never be confined merely to the top of the hierarchy of beings.” Critically, if he were, then he himself “would be within the economy of the high and the low,” considered as part of a still greater reality encompassing both him and the sequence of gradually diminishing intermediaries below him. Simmons in Esler, *Christian World* reports that Celsus in his Book VI: 19 explains that God is the “Ultimate being,” in contrast to the Incarnate God of Christians. Of these profound metaphysical differences between the mature pagan and early Christian tradition I will not dwell on any longer here, but must not be kept far from mind when evaluating the theological dispute during this historical period.

⁵⁸ *Embassy*, 27.1-2.

⁵⁹ Theophilus in Book II: 33 in Robert M. Grant, *Theophilus of Antioch: Ad Autolyicum (Oxford Early Christian Texts)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 83. Theophilus, like others of his contemporaries, stressed the antiquity of the Christian tradition, an age he claimed dwarfed that of his pagan interlocutors. Speaking to them, he bemoans how “shameful [it is] for infant children to have thoughts beyond their years; for as one grows in age in an orderly fashion, so one grows in the ability to think.” See Book II: 25 in *ibid.*, 67. His comments are applicable to my purposes in claiming the irreversible inadequacy of unaided reason.

criterion, if accepted, could guarantee an epistemic agent's ability to justify the first principle that the deliverances of reason, along with the process of reasoning itself, are reliable guides to reality? In other words, what satisfies the criterion of metaphysical fit or conceptual isomorphism between the embodied human intellect and the intelligible reality in which it participates? If the discourse available to the pagan tradition is to avoid circularity, then it must account for how discourse based on unaided reason can reflect the Logos. As Athenagoras states,

worldly Wisdom and divine differ as much from each other as truth and plausibility: the one is of heaven and the other of earth...⁶⁰

and that

the eternal providence of God... addresses itself to the deserving individually, according to truth and not according to opinion...⁶¹

Discourse based on unaided reason must account for why the first principle of reason's reliability is not entirely arbitrary: how, in other words, the human intellect, by way of which the world is discovered and known, is capable of participating in and mirroring the intelligibility latent in reality itself.

Before examining the Apologists' solution to this problem, a last stand at this point can be mounted for Celsus and the pagan tradition. Justin Martyr and Athenagoras, in writing against the intellectual and civil authorities of the Roman elite, write against thinkers who held both that the afterlife is a disembodied existence, and that the human intellect, in its purest state, is likewise disembodied.⁶² Aristotle,

⁶⁰ Athenagoras, *Embassy*, 24:6. See also Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 78.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 25.2

⁶² Papandrea, *Christologies*, 50.

whose views on the soul were in large part incorporated into the backdrop of Middle Platonist philosophy, the metaphysical position that carried the bulk of the historical authority of the pagan tradition,⁶³ “had said that only [*nous* or intellect] is completely detached from the body, has no relation to it, and must be distinguished from the rest of the soul.”⁶⁴ Recall that the intellect is mutually considered among the Apologists and pagans alike as the natural instrument through which to come to knowledge of reality: “come and contemplate, not with your eyes only, but with your understanding, the substance and the form of” things, says the author of the *Epistle*.⁶⁵ Athenagoras says likewise: both “the eternal Intelligence and God [are] apprehended by reason.”⁶⁶ Celsus shares this attitude in stating that “One ought first to follow reason as a guide before accepting any belief, since anyone who believes without testing a doctrine is certain to be deceived.”⁶⁷

The pagan tradition views the “eternal Intelligence,” the intelligibility of things at large, in a way similar to how it views the human intellect: in its proper place, as a disembodied and purely conceptual reality. Celsus, on this note, holds that God by nature cannot have a body.⁶⁸ Cicero, a figure capturing the zeitgeist of the

⁶³ For more on this see Note 28, Principle (8), and Note 58 above for the relevant intersections of Aristotelianism and Middle Platonism.

⁶⁴ See S. Lilla, “Aristotelianism,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:231.

⁶⁵ *Epistle to Diognetus*, Ch. II.

⁶⁶ Athenagoras, *Embassy*, 23.7. See also Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 80.

⁶⁷ Book I, Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 54. Celsus’ stance on knowing God through reason is somewhat more complicated; here I focus only on his general agreement with the Apologists of the place of reason in intellectual life. Unsurprisingly, he disagrees about its application in Christian thought: “[Christians] persist doggedly to seek justification for the absurdities [they] have made doctrines.” See *ibid.* 65. Origen, Book VI: 65, Chadwick, *Origen*, 380 reports Celsus claiming that “*God is derived from nothing...Neither is he attainable by reason.*” Emphasis in original. Origen replies by drawing a distinction I have characterized, albeit with a different vocabulary, between logos and Logos—the rational intelligibility of the world itself versus its reflection in human discourse—agreeing with Celsus that God is not attainable by reason through the former but is through the latter.

⁶⁸ Origen in Book I: 39 in Chadwick, *Origen*, 37. Celsus, to be clear, speaks here of it being impossible that God has a *corruptible* body, demonstrating the intersection of this debate with that of the resurrection of the body, related to my topic but wholly outside its present scope. I think, as this discussion moves on, that my chosen omission does not change the substance of the pagan position, unfairly skewing the results. In his Book V,

Graeco-Roman philosophical tradition, expresses the tendency to view the intrinsic intelligibility of the world as a disembodied and conceptual rationality with brilliancy:

For reason existed, having originated from the nature of things, both impelling toward doing correctly and calling away from transgression. It did not begin to be a law precisely when it was written, but when it arose. And it arose together with the divine mind. Therefore, the true and chief law, suitable for ordering and forbidding, is the correct reason of Jupiter the Highest.⁶⁹

Cicero is clear: the rationality embedded in things is mental and conceptual precisely in contradistinction to what is embodied. In antiquity, it must be made clear, “the body was disparaged as the ‘enemy’ of the soul”—‘soul’ here understood as intellect.⁷⁰ Exercising reason in an “essentially dispassionate and disinterested” way, absent any “essentially unreasoning paroxysm of the will” has the capacity, or so the pagan last stand can say, for participating in disembodied Reason in a transparent, reflective, and trustworthy way.⁷¹

Hoffman, *True Doctrine*, 85, Celsus goes still further than this, stating that: “No god or son of God came down to earth; nor would anyone deserving the name God have come down to earth.” I’ll touch on this again in the final section below.

⁶⁹ Marcus Tullius Cicero, *On The Laws*, trans. David Fott (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014), 2:10.

⁷⁰ T. Spidlik, “Body,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:368. Spidlik continues to describe the Christian rebuttal, in the context of the internal debates between those orthodox, heterodox, and heretics in the early church but which can be extended to the pagan debate without change (at least in this statement), in saying that the Christian “reaction against the dualism of [their interlocutors] was decisive for the historical development of the conception of the body.”

The historical progression of the concept of ‘soul’ is difficult to trace, and its understanding in Middle Platonism metaphysics is complicated. Viewed in one way the soul is the center of the psychological, conscious self; viewed in others, it is the animating power permeating throughout living things. On the interrelationship between Plato and Aristotle on this point, see in addition Hendrik Lorenz, “Ancient Theories of the Soul,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2009 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, 10 for a statement about how Plato’s concern about the ancient question of whether the soul survives death led him to a focus on that question in a way that may have precluded examination of other aspects of the soul, such as its permeation throughout the body. Of Aristotle’s account of the soul’s relation to the body, see Lilla, “Aristotelianism,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:228-31, where he describes a number of principles of Aristotelian philosophy were unacceptable to early Christian writers, among them the propensity to imply the mortality of the human soul, given that it is the animating principle or spirit of the body, from which the body could not be separated, insisting instead that immortality is possessed by the intellect alone. This last issue gets into a debate I am not prepared to enter; suffice to say that the early Christians began developing a position incorporating the advantages but not disadvantages of Platonic and Aristotelian conceptions of the soul. See principle (8) given in Note 28 above, explaining that the Middle Platonist philosophical movement adopted Aristotle’s hylomorphism—a doctrine applicable to the human soul and body—as a helpful articulation of the basis of identifying and individuating concrete things. I have assumed no necessary conflict between these two conceptions of the soul throughout my discussion here, but as one and the same reality understood in accord with different purposes, as compatible solutions to different problems.

⁷¹ Hart, “Reason’s Faith.”

If reality is itself a disembodied, purely conceptual world of intelligible Forms, then the Middle Platonist notion of a detachable and disembodied intellect will appear, by my criterion, to conceptually “fit” the disembodied Reason in which the world participates. If both the intellect, by which humans reason, and the intelligibility of the world itself, that which human reason images, are purely conceptual, ideational, disembodied realities, then the ideas of human reason, properly applied, and the Ideas of Reason in their purest form are sufficiently conceptually similar for human reason to mirror reality in the required way. This would thereby refute my argument that reality and human reason are too dissimilar to guarantee reason’s ability to uncover reality, condemning pagan discourse as circular.

In reply I have not so much an argument as I do an observation—a powerful one—made by ancient Christians and suitably manifested in experience as such.⁷² Athenagoras observes in his treatise *On the Resurrection of the Dead* that the human being is “composed of soul and body,” both of which, crucially, are “responsible for human choices” and hence co-participants in all performances, including that of reasoning.⁷³ Humans are “composite creatures,” a unity of soul and body

[which] belongs to man by nature, and [which] requires food for his life, and requires posterity for the continuance of the race, and requires a judgment in order that food and posterity may be according to law, it of course follows, since food and posterity refer to both together, that the judgment must be referred to them too (by both together I mean man, consisting of soul and body), and that such man becomes accountable for all his actions, and receives for them either reward or punishment.⁷⁴

⁷² I will be clear in §3 why the ancient Christians made this claim and not their interlocutors.

⁷³ See P. Nautin and E. Prinzivalli, “Athenagoras,” *Encyclopedia*, 1:286. I will return to this in §3 with a fuller treatment. Athenagoras’ treatise on the *Resurrection of the Body* has the unity of the human person, of which the embodied intellect of my focus is part, as a central idea. Among his audience are various heterodox and heretical Christians, “whose profoundly dualist position... prevents any suggestion of an after-death existence of the body.” See Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 15.

⁷⁴ *Resurrection* 18.4.

It is therefore not proper, he continues,

that either the soul alone should receive the wages of the deeds wrought in union with the body... or that the body alone should... but man, composed of these, is subjected to trial for each of the deeds wrought by him...⁷⁵

Gilson, in turn, expresses this with expected elegance: the human is a “unity given as such,” and a fact that “the philosopher is bound to take account of.” When “I say that I *know*, I do not mean that my body knows by means of the soul, or that the soul knows by means of the body; but that this concrete being ‘I,’ taken in its unity, performs an act of knowing.”⁷⁶ It follows therefore that the embodiment of the human intellect is not so much something that needs making sense of but a given reality without which no sense-making can take place.⁷⁷

My challenge can now be restated with added rhetorical force: Why think, to state again, that the embodiment of the human intellect does not interfere with the sense-making endeavor itself, if the objects of contemplation toward which the intellect is oriented are themselves not embodied realities? Athenagoras provides the framework for fulfilling my criterion of conceptual fit between the intellect and reality which in the next section I wish to expand:

⁷⁵ Ibid. 18.5.

⁷⁶ *Spirit*, 181. See also Hart, *The Experience of God Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 199: “a living embodied mind is neither simply an incorporeal intellect nor a mechanical function; it is a power that exceeds material causality without being free of the conditions of corporeal life...” Karamanolis, “Early Christian Philosophers on Aristotle,” in *Brill’s Companion to the Reception of Aristotle in Antiquity*, ed. Andrea Falcon (Leiden: Brill Academic Pub., 2016), 469, says that Tertullian, writing in the century after the context of my present discussion, and although bitterly critical of pagan philosophy, sites approvingly both Stoic and Aristotelian conceptions of the soul as *pneuma*—spirit—rather than merely as the subject of conscious experience as in Plato’s *Phaedo*—in apparent corroboration with Athenagoras’ presentation and so with his understanding of the body-soul unity of the human found in his *Resurrection 18.4-5*.

⁷⁷ On this note, one of Tolkien’s characters in the first volume of his *Lord of the Rings* expresses my point with the highest eloquence: “he that breaks a thing to find out what it is has left the path of wisdom.” Human beings cannot be fully present, nor fully understood, apart from their fundamental, ontological unity. See J. R. R. Tolkien, “The Fellowship of the Ring,” in *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 258.

...we have for witnesses of the things we apprehend and believe, prophets, men who have pronounced concerning God and the things of God, guided by the Spirit of God.⁷⁸

The position is that ultimately “only God can reveal God”;⁷⁹ and reason, if it is to escape the vicious circle looming around its unaided exercise, must accept direction from God in order to be capable of uncovering reality. Athenagoras continues his counsel by warning that “susceptible souls,” those unaided epistemic agents, have “no knowledge or experience of sounder doctrines,” therefore do not “consider thoughtfully the Father and Maker of all things,” and so cannot help but get “impressed with false opinions...”⁸⁰

The following and final section of this paper will attempt to expand on Athenagoras’ comments to give a fuller second-century Patristic answer to the following question, corresponding to Justin’s Step 3: given the Apologists’ belief that the Logos become a human being in Jesus, how is Christian discourse able to verify the trustworthiness of reason, avoiding the same form of circularity affecting the unaided discourse of the pagans?

§3: The Logos Becomes Human

Thus far I have claimed that the discourses available to the pagan Graeco-Roman tradition have been circular: given unaided human reason, there is no ground on which to claim that the practice, activity, or performance of reason is reliable or

⁷⁸ *Embassy*, 7.3.

⁷⁹ Haykin, *Church Fathers*, 56.

⁸⁰ *Embassy*, 27.1.

trustworthy for uncovering reality. In what follows I answer the question posed at the end of the previous section: what satisfies the criterion of metaphysical fit or conceptual isomorphism between the embodied human intellect and the intelligible reality in which it participates?

I claim that the only position capable of fulfilling this criterion would be one suggested by the Incarnation—the Logos taking on the fullness of humanity.⁸¹ Human reason is reliable because Reason, the intelligibility underlying reality itself—which human reasoning reflects and in which it participates—is itself a human being. This criterion would show that humans as embodied epistemic agents are inherently capable of discovering reality itself, capable of having the fullness of their reason satisfied, because the Reason in which they participate is itself like them, in every relevant way. This satisfies Justin’s Step 3, that the one who accepts the faith offered to them finds, upon acceptance, that it fully satisfies their reason, allowing for the fullest possible participation in the truth. Let us therefore see how the Apologists present their case.

“A reasoned defense of the Christian faith cannot,” expresses Haykin, “leave out of consideration the person of Christ. Indeed, it is upon his uniqueness and deity that

⁸¹ It is beyond the scope of my study to outline just what counts as an incarnation of this sort. For recent literature on this, see Papandrea, *Christologies*, 87-8, 101, 109, 111, 114, and 116 for highlights in an extended discussion of what he calls ‘Logos Christology,’—Jesus is fully God and fully human—the middle way between the excessive and imbalanced ‘high’ and ‘low’ Christology of both Gnostics and Adoptionists, respectively, the main competitors to the orthodox interpretation in the second century. Logos Christology, he stresses, is the only account that preserves a true and genuine incarnation: of all the available Christologies in the second century, “all but Logos Christology rejected the belief in a bodily resurrection of Christ” and only Logos Christology could account for the unification with, and perfection through, a renewed connection to God. See 116 for this. See also Papandrea, *Novatian*, e-book Location 916, for his claim that Logos Christology is “both an apologetic response to the opponents of the church, as well as a refutation of heretical alternatives within the church.” It was not to be the final Christology before its climax in the Nicaeanic interpretation, in which Logos Christology was replaced with a fuller and more theologically sophisticated version. See *ibid.*, e-book Location 909.

Christianity hangs.”⁸² After the Incarnation human reason had to attend to what was new in history: the person of Jesus Christ. This changes the terrain on which the vehicle of reason traverses: “For the Greeks,” says Wilken, “God was the conclusion of an argument, the end of a search for an ultimate explanation, an inference from the structure of the universe to a first cause. For Christian thinkers, God was the starting point, and Christ the icon that displays the face of God.”⁸³ This change in philosophical and theological orientation is captured with joy in the words of Theophilus:

...the ears of the heart and the eyes of the soul are potentially capable of beholding God. For God is seen by those who are capable of seeing him, once they have the eyes of the soul opened.⁸⁴

Whom do the eyes of the soul see, when opened? Justin supplies the answer:

...true reason and judicious inquiry... were brought to light not only among the Greeks by reason, through the words of Socrates, but also among the barbarians by the Logos himself, who acquired physical form and became a human being and was called Jesus Christ.⁸⁵

Reason itself, the rationality in which human reasoning participates, became a human being. Christian doctrine is thereby, Justin continues,

shown to be more majestic than every human teaching through the fact that the whole rational principle became the Christ, who was made visible for our sake, body and

⁸² Haykin, *Church Fathers*, 58. Wilken, *Spirit*, 3 concurs in that the approach with which Christians interacted with pagans was not that of constructing a systematic intellectual position, but rather the understanding, articulating, and witnessing of something given to them.

⁸³ Wilken, *Spirit*, 15. Gilson characterizes this in turn with the following counsel: “[It] is a fact that between us and the Greeks the Christian revelation has intervened, and has profoundly modified the conditions under which reason has to work.” See Gilson, *Spirit*, 5.

⁸⁴ Theophilus Book I: 2 in Grant, *Ad Autolyicum*, 3.

⁸⁵ Justin, *1 Apology*, 5.3-4 in Minns et al. *Apologies*, 91. Behr, *Formation*, 96 states that for Justin, “the meaning and context” of the Scripture which reveals this “is not a human construction, but is Christ himself, the Word of God, latent in what is written... but clearly proclaimed in and as the Gospel of God.” Christ’s presence within the Scripture can be detected through “grace of understanding,” which is “nothing other than the apostolic demonstration from Scripture.” See *ibid.* 97 for this, and Justin, *Dial.* 92.1 and 119.1 in Falls, *Dialogue*, 142 and 178 respectively.

logos and soul.⁸⁶

That the “rational principle” became a human being is, in the terms in which I have expressed the debate in this present study, the guarantee, if true, that the discourse of the Apologists is not circular in the way the pagan discourse is. The Apologists’ discourse is based on reason aided by the Self-revelation of God, one that shows Reason itself is embodied in the same way the human intellect is embodied. There is thus a metaphysical similarity, a transparent relationship between, the intellect and reality: the first principle that reason itself, as an embodied human activity, is reliable is shown to be reasonable, thus satisfying—at least in this important regard—the demands of rationality placed upon epistemic agents.

Justin’s three-step process can with this be completed; the physician and the medicines of philosophy can finally be found. “All things,” Athenagoras confesses,

have been subordinated to you, father and son, who have received the kingdom from above... so all things have been subjected to the one God and the Word from him, known to be his inseparable Son.⁸⁷

Among that which is subordinated is the collective task of philosophy and the interpretation of reason on which philosophical discourse rests, in the context of second-century Rome. Thus, the only way within the confines of the second-century debate for the pagan to vindicate the first principle that reasoning is reliable is to

⁸⁶ Justin, *2 Apology*, 10.1 in Minns et al., *Apologies*, 307-9. Rankin, *Athenagoras*, 87-8 adds helpfully that for “Athenagoras, knowledge, not just of God’s existence but of God’s very being, comes only through... the self-revelation of God... confirmed through reason,” representing “reliable and certain knowledge of the divine.” Athenagoras states in *Embassy* 9.1 that “our doctrines might by some be looked upon as human. But, since the voices of the prophets confirm our arguments,” and so that we “may not be carried away by... popular and irrational opinion” we are given “the truth clearly before” us: our opinions are “not human but uttered and taught by God” himself. See *Embassy* 11.1 for these last points. Justin here appears to be following Paul in 1 Thess. 5:23 in attributing a tripartite analysis of humankind. I have not, and will not comment on this further in my discussion.

⁸⁷ *Embassy*, 18.2. See also Grant, *Apologists*, 102.

accept the position offered by the Christian witness. Hauerwas conveys gracefully the task facing apologists:

Christians in modernity thought their task was to make the Gospel intelligible to the world rather than to help the world understand why it could not be intelligible without the Gospel.⁸⁸

I suggest the same task is being presented in the second-century Fathers, one which begins then to be completed amid many more pressing and far less academic concerns. Perhaps the rightful rhetorical question is the one Christians can most aptly ask themselves: once in possession of Christ's revelation, how can we possibly philosophize as though we had never heard it?⁸⁹

In conclusion, I have claimed here that pagans, within the constraints present in the second-century debate with the Apologists, are trapped inside a circular epistemology. They cannot claim that the reason they champion is itself a reliable guide to knowledge, but at best arbitrarily posit it as such, and hence are vulnerable to an overwhelming challenge: on what non-arbitrary grounds do they presuppose reason's own trustworthiness? The Apologists can justify this first principle because they claim to have been visited by God, the author of the world's narrative, who has become a character in his own story, revealing what in epistemic agents, in every analytical discourse, assume: the transparency between reason and reality.

Hart, speaking of the contemporary apologetic debate against Secularism, claims

⁸⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, "Preaching as Though We Had Enemies," *First Things*, May 1995, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/1995/05/003-preaching-as-though-we-had-enemies>.

⁸⁹ This close paraphrase is taken from Gilson, *Spirit*, 5.

that “It is pointless to debate what it would truly mean for Western culture to renounce Christianity unless one first understands what it meant for Western culture to adopt Christianity...”⁹⁰ For the Christian apologetic to the second-century Graeco-Roman world, the converse of this statement is just as apt: it is pointless to debate what it would truly mean for Graeco-Roman culture to renounce paganism unless the pagan first understands what it means for Graeco-Roman culture to adopt Christianity.

The unified theme through which Celsus expresses his rejection of the early Christian church “arises out of his views about the society in which he lives, the intellectual and spiritual traditions that animated this society, and the religious convictions on which it was based.”⁹¹ In the second century it was time for a new enterprise to take hold, a philosophical and theological project budding in the witness of the second-century Apologists. It is their legacy, I believe, that is still waiting to be refueled in our modern academy.

⁹⁰ *Delusions*, 16.

⁹¹ Wilken, *Christians*, 117.

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