

The Logic of the Absolute

The Metaphysical Writings of René Guénon

by Peter Samsel

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René Guénon (1886-1951), the remarkable French expositor of the *philosophia perennis*, has long enjoyed a reputation among those familiar with his writings as perhaps the preeminent metaphysician of the twentieth century.

While his full oeuvre comprises some twenty-three volumes¹, the core of his metaphysical exposition may be found in three works: *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta*, *The Symbolism of the Cross*, and *The Multiple States of the Being*. All three works complement one another closely and are best taken as a whole in order to be properly understood. Nevertheless, each possesses a distinctive character: *Man and His Becoming* is closely tied to the specific conceptual categories and terminology of Advaita Vedanta; *Symbolism of the Cross*, at once a study of symbolism as well as metaphysics, demonstrates the range of Guénon's doctrinal mastery across traditions while articulating traditional metaphysics in a particularly geometrical mode; *Multiple States*, Guénon's purest metaphysical work, is a logico-deductive demonstration of metaphysical principles, categories, and relationships of astonishing profundity and clarity.

Despite their distinctions of mode and emphasis, all three works are possessed by the same animating question: "What is possible for the human being?" To simply yield up the startling answer that Guénon asserts would not serve, for if it is to be accepted, even provisionally, it must be won by following the inferential chain of ideas that lead inexorably toward it. It is in this respect that Guénon's temperament and training as a mathematician are particularly apparent: for him, one first asserts axiomatic principles and then proceeds, in the quasi-logical manner of a proof, toward consequent conclusions.

Guénon begins his demonstration with a primary axiom, or first principle, which he terms the metaphysical Infinite. For those familiar with traditional sources, it is clear that he is evoking the same notion as that expressed in the *Brahman* of Shankaracharya, the *Gottheit* of Meister Eckhart, the *Tao* of Lao Tzu, the *One* of Plotinus, or *al-Dhat* of Ibn 'Arabi. Yet he deliberately forges a vocabulary independent of such traditional terms, for, in addressing a contemporary audience typically unfamiliar with such sources, he wishes the essential doctrine to stand on its own, through its intrinsic coherence and apart from any such associations. Guénon is careful to distinguish the metaphysical Infinite from the mathematical infinite, which is finite, insofar as it is limited to the domain of numbers. The metaphysical Infinite is simply, and most cogently, that which has no limits of any kind.

Several necessary characteristics follow upon this essential definition: The Infinite is without any limitation, restriction, or determination, for any such would clearly annul its infinitude. It is unique, all-encompassing, and an absolute totality, for if anything were exterior to it, it would not be the Infinite. It is without parts, for any part would be relative and finite and could thus have no common measure or relationship to it. It is absolutely indeterminate, as any positive definition would serve as a delimitation, and thus could not apply to it. By the same measure, it is absolutely affirmed, as its indetermination—the negation of any limiting definition—is

equivalent to the negation of negation as such and thus total affirmation. Finally, it is incontestable, as its absolute indetermination implies that it cannot be defined, discussed or, for that matter, contested.

The essentially apophatic definition of the notion of the metaphysical Infinite implies also that, just as it cannot be rationally contested, so it is not open to rational proof. Rather, another mode of discernment must be appealed to, one that might be termed “intellectual intuition.” Ananda Coomaraswamy, in this respect, has written of traditional doctrine as possessing “self-authenticating intelligibility,”² insofar as metaphysical ideas bear within themselves their own sufficient evidence. Nevertheless, such evidence cannot be expected to speak to all: as Frithjof Schuon states, “The Infinite is what it is; one may understand it or not understand it.”³

The metaphysical Infinite, as an all-encompassing, absolute totality, may be envisaged in aspect as a universal Whole, or universal Possibility, as Guénon expresses it. Universal Possibility encompasses all but the strictly impossible, which, as pure negation, is a literal nothingness, and thus no limit upon the infinitude of the Whole. The relation between the Infinite and universal Possibility may, from one perspective, be conceived as that of active and passive perfection, of essence and substance. From another perspective, this relation may be seen as that of principle and container. In either case, there is only the unique Infinite, for the Whole is in no way distinct from the Infinite as such.

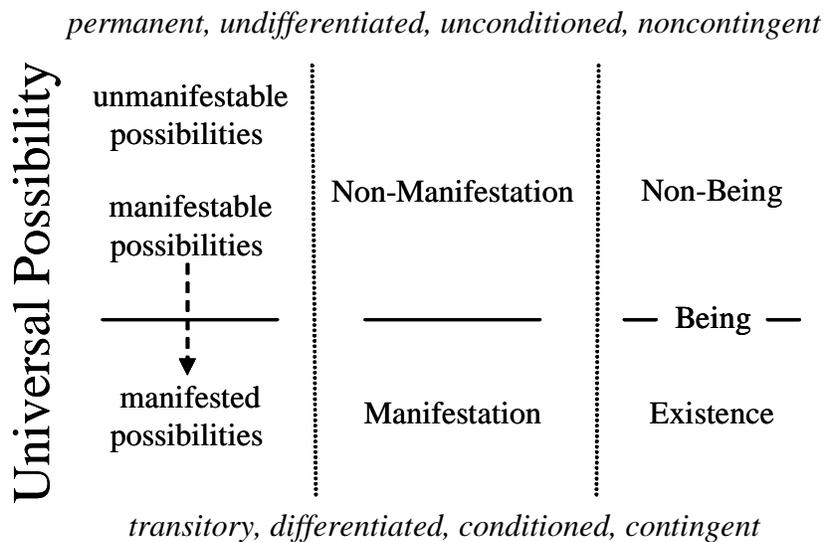
All that is possible finds its place in relation to the Infinite, which may be seen as at once its own generating principle and encompassing container. In this sense, and insofar as it is within universal Possibility and thus not impossible, every possibility may be said to be real. This does not imply, however, that every possibility is manifested. In general, any given possibility may be a possibility of manifestation or a possibility of non-manifestation. This distinction, between manifestation and non-manifestation, is the most fundamental and universal that may be made within universal Possibility. Here, Guénon distinguishes between the two domains of non-manifestation and manifestation. Within the domain of non-manifestation are found both the unmanifestable (those possibilities of non-manifestation), as well as the manifestable (those possibilities of manifestation insofar as they are not manifested). Within the domain of manifestation are found the manifested (those possibilities of manifestation insofar as they are manifested). Together, the domains of non-manifestation and manifestation comprise the whole of universal Possibility.

The manifestable and unmanifestable possibilities within the domain of non-manifestation comprise two distinct and general modes, each conforming to its respective nature. In contrast, the possibilities of manifestation—viewed across the domains of both non-manifestation and manifestation—possess a radically different character in their unmanifested and manifested conditions. In the domain of non-manifestation, all things subsist eternally in principle, in absolute permanence, undifferentiated, unconditioned by any contingent or limiting factors. In contrast, in the domain of manifestation, all things are transitory, differentiated, conditioned and contingent. In essence, the domain of manifestation is of necessity the field of differentiation, multiplicity, contingency, and change, whereas the domain of non-manifestation—at once more principal and simple—antecedes these conditions.

Even when manifested, each possibility of manifestation remains grounded in its immediate principle, which is none other than its state as pure possibility in non-manifestation. It is through this ground that it finds its enduring subsistence, independent of the particular and limiting

conditions inherent in manifestation. What is the case for individual possibilities of manifestation holds also for the domains of non-manifestation and manifestation as such. In one sense, non-manifestation and manifestation may be considered as two separate, independent domains. In another, more profound, sense, however, non-manifestation may be seen as the ground and foundation of manifestation, from which it draws all its reality.

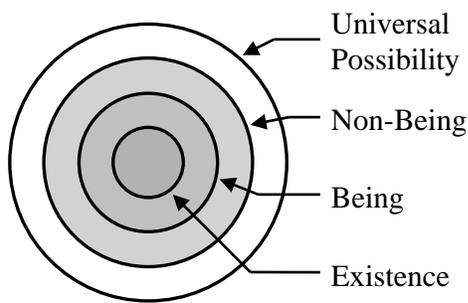
Just as Guénon expresses the articulation of universal Possibility in terms of manifestation, so also does he express this articulation in terms of Being. These two modes of expression are closely equivalent, yet not precisely identical: on the one hand, he distinguishes between the categories of non-manifestation and manifestation; on the other, those of Non-Being, Being and Existence. In clarifying the relation between these two articulations, we may say that non-manifestation and Non-Being are equivalent and coextensive, as are manifestation and Existence. Being is an intermediate category: unmanifest yet distinct from Non-Being; the principle of manifestation, yet distinct from Existence. In one sense, Being may be said to be that aspect of Non-Being that is the immediate principle for Existence as such, or Non-Being insofar as it is expressible into Existence; in another, more profound sense, however, Non-Being is prior to Being, which is the first determination toward Existence, the first distinction towards differentiation, whereas Non-Being in itself is undetermined and indistinct.



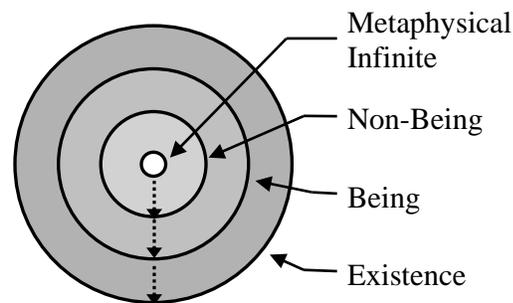
If the metaphysical Infinite may be viewed under the double aspect of principle and container, such that one may speak at once of the metaphysical Infinite and universal Possibility, this twin perspective is also found in the subsequent metaphysical categories of Non-Being and Being. Thus, Non-Being may be seen as the containing principle or encompassing ground of Being, just as Being bears this same double relation with respect to Existence. This double relation of principle and container is fundamentally inherent: each antecedent category, as the source or basis of the category subsequent to it, necessarily comprehends and encompasses, in principle, the whole of that category. Expressing this double aspect metaphorically, one might observe that the acorn is at once the ‘seed’ principle of the oak, while also encompassing, in principle, all aspects of its subsequent growth and form.

A pair of suggestive images may make the fundamental relationships between metaphysical categories clearer. Consider four nesting circles or spheres, each associated with a particular metaphysical category. In [Image 1], suggestive of the perspective in which each antecedent category encompasses the category subsequent to it, the outermost circle represents universal Possibility, the next Non-Being, the next Being, and the innermost and final circle, Existence. Each circle contains that subsequent to it, in a descending manner, tracing from universal Possibility to Existence. In [Image 2], suggestive of the perspective in which each antecedent category is the immediate principle of the category subsequent to it, we may employ the same four nesting circles, but with an inversion of relationships, for now the innermost circle will represent the metaphysical Infinite, the next Non-Being, the next Being, and the outermost and final circle, Existence. Each circle is the principle of that subsequent to it, in a radiating manner, tracing from the metaphysical Infinite to Existence.

Encompassing Perspective



Principial Perspective



Two additional, general consequences may be ascertained from these categorical relationships. First, while an antecedent category is metaphysically distinct from the category subsequent to it, it is not thereby isolated from it. The principial relationship between categories, in which a subsequent category is grounded upon and draws its reality from its antecedent, implies that, in a certain manner, its antecedent participates in it, or equivalently, that it is ‘participated by’ its antecedent. Again, expressed metaphorically, an acorn and oak are clearly distinct, but there is also an evident continuity, insofar as the acorn principally participates in the oak in its subsequent unfoldment.

The second and critical consequence is that, while this ‘continuity in distinction’ between categories is most immediately relevant between a given category and its immediate antecedent, the extension of this principle makes it clear that it must persist between a category and its entire set of antecedents, as each in turn bears a continuity in relation to its prior. Thus, Existence is participated not only by Being, its immediate prior, but also by Non-Being and the metaphysical Infinite as well. The decisive corollary is that the metaphysical Infinite, while transcendently unique, principally participates in and is present to the entirety of its subsequent metaphysical categories, down to and including the entirety of Existence. Ultimately, there is only a single Principle: the metaphysical Infinite itself.

The language of metaphysics, necessarily one of high abstraction, is rendered more accessible by Guénon through the employment of several suitable metaphors. Just as the term metaphysical Infinity at once evokes and transcends mathematical infinity, so Guénon extends this numeric metaphor to the other metaphysical categories. Thus, Non-Being, in its unmanifest undifferentiation, may be considered as “metaphysical Zero”; Being, as the primal

differentiation, may be considered as “Unity”; Existence, taken in its comprehensiveness, is a “Unicity,” which comprises multiplicity as such, taken in the indefinitude of its manifest possibilities. Unity may be seen as the affirmation of Zero, just as Unicity preserves an essential unity, while nonetheless expressing multiplicity. In geometric terms, one might consider Non-Being as that which antecedes space and extension, Being as the primordial point, spaceless in itself, yet possessing all of space in virtuality, and Existence as the entirety of space, in its indefinitude of extension. Similarly, in terms of speech, one might consider Non-Being as silence, as all that is inexpressible, Being as pure sound, or the pure possibility of speech, and Existence as the entirety of the expressible, of all that is spoken.

Existence, as the realm of manifest possibilities in all their diverse, differentiated multiplicity, is necessarily comprised of diverse degrees or modes, each formed of an ensemble of compatible possibilities subject to common conditions, such as space, time, form, and corporeality. Within this general conception, the individual human being may be viewed as a certain collection of manifest possibilities, both corporeal and subtle, subject to certain defining conditions. As such, a given human being comprises one particular degree or state of universal Existence among an indefinitude of others. If Existence were isolated from its antecedent metaphysical categories, then an individual human being would be no more than a fragmented unity, present among an indefinite diversity, isolated in itself from any other state. At the level of human individuality, this is precisely our existential condition. However, Existence is principally “participated in” by its antecedent metaphysical categories, just as each manifested possibility within the domain of Existence is grounded in its unmanifest principle.

The “continuity in distinction” between metaphysical categories implies that a human being is more than his particular individuality, as he bears the principal mark of all those metaphysical priors that participate in him. But just as this is true for a human being as one particular state of Existence, so it is true of every state, whatever its nature. And yet, in the end, there is only one prior, one Principle—the metaphysical Infinite—present in all its reverberations down through all the metaphysical categories and all those possibilities that they comprise. In this sense, one may consider the metaphysical Infinite in yet another aspect, apart from universal Possibility, one which Guénon terms the integral or total Being. This Being—which should be clearly distinguished both from Being as a metaphysical category, as well as from the individual human being—may be understood as the metaphysical Infinite in its aspect as it principally participates throughout the entirety of universal Possibility. As such, it is at once singular in itself, yet differentiated across metaphysical categories and possibilities.

A closely related term that Guénon employs is “the Self.” Most fundamentally, the Self is identical with the total Being, but taken from the point of view of the human individual, the Self is that ultimate principle through which the entire ensemble of manifest and unmanifest possibilities comprising the human being subsist. The Self, then, may be understood as the total Being as viewed under the particular and limitive aspect of a given human individual. Under this aspect, one might say metaphorically that if the total Being is a sun, then the Self is a ray; if the total Being is a tapestry, then the Self is a thread. The Self, as principle, is the true reality of the human being, the individuality only a transient and contingent modification.

The human individual, from the standpoint of his individuality, is, at best, a fragment within the vast multiplicity of manifestation. As participated in by the Self, however, the individual is rooted in and traces back to the metaphysical Infinite itself, of which the Self is a particular

aspect. It must be so, for without this essential continuity, the individual would be altogether without reality, cut off from his sustaining ground. This continuity, for all its fundamental importance to the individual, is unfelt, unperceived, and unknown. It is this that is at once the tragedy and promise of the human condition: a tragedy, as without this knowledge, this gnosis, we experience ourselves in the narrow, fragmentary manner with which we are all too familiar; a promise, as no other correction is required save for this liberating knowledge. We cannot *do* anything, for there is nothing to be done; we need only know what is, what always has been, and what must be.

What is possible for the human being is to realize his essential identity with the Self, and thus with the integral and total Being, the metaphysical Infinite in its participative aspect within universal Possibility. With this realization, the human being transcends his particular individuality, his humanness, no longer a fragment, but a totality. Guénon describes this ultimate condition in the words of the great Vedantic sage Shankaracharya: “The yogi, whose intellect is perfect, contemplates all things as abiding in himself and thus, by the eye of Knowledge, he perceives that everything is the Self. He knows that all contingent things are not different from the Self and that apart from the Self there is nothing.”⁴

1. See Sophia Perennis Books: www.sophiaperennis.com/guenon.html
2. Alvin Moore, Jr. & Rama P. Coomaraswamy (Eds.), *The Selected Letters of Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, 1988), p.191.
3. Frithjof Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Middlesex, UK: Perennial Books, 1987), p.55.
4. René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), p.168.