

⁵⁹ Many contemporary Systematicians like to think—and will say—that they are doing something new. My phrase '[in] ecclesiological terms' is an attempt to identify and localize that 'newness': a position sounds new because it has a 'new' judgement on familiar terms (e.g. the 'Cappadocians', Augustine's neoplatonic trinitarian theology) but in fact the 'new' is just a rearranging of old, worn, and very familiar presuppositions (e.g. does the Augustine of de Régnon's paradigm and du Roy's 'triads' violate the oeconomia of Cullmann and Newman?). The 'edge' to the newness is all ecclesiastical: a new doctrinal fashion-statement within the same old garment district of historical fabrication.

My own desire would be that contemporary theology investigates each of these historical characterizations for what each reveals about the needs of modern and contemporary theology. The least I would expect from contemporary theology is that it recognize that its claims to 'post-modernity' are cheaply won, for its conceptual tender remains that of the Enlightenment confederacy.

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8 Substance and the Trinity

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William P. Alston

I The Programme

My aim in this paper is to examine a certain criticism of classical formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity, viz., that they are defective by reason of being formulated in terms of a 'substance metaphysics'. I will argue that once we appreciate the character of that metaphysics and disentangle it from views with which it is associated by many contemporary theologians, the charge will be seen to be without substance (if you will pardon the expression). Substance metaphysics does not enable us to resolve all the difficulties inherent in the doctrine, but neither does that metaphysics hamper us in our attempts to deal with those difficulties.

Thus I will be sallying forth in defence of a very traditional way of thinking of the Trinity. But I am anxious to avoid being typecast as the worst kind of pre-modern thinker. Though I find the metaphysics utilized in ancient formulations to be innocent of various charges brought against it, I am far from supposing that there is no useful, valuable, and even essential work to be done on the Trinity by contemporary thinkers. I do not suggest that we simply repeat one or another patristic formulation and let it go at that. The Trinity, no less than other articles of the Christian faith, needs re-examination and reformulation for each age, as has happened throughout Christian history. The doctrine provides inexhaustible riches for exploration, a task to which each period brings distinctive skills and perspectives. For example, recent discussions have illustrated ways in which twentieth-century logic can be employed to render threefoldness in unity less mysterious. Again, twentieth-century theologians have made important contributions to the bearing of the Trinity on worship, prayer, and

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spirituality. Recognizing these and kindred points, the last thing I would want to do, even if I could, is to inhibit creative, imaginative, sensitive reflection on how to

think of the Trinity and how to delineate its place in Christian thought and practice. But, as I see it, the usual reaction against a formulation in terms of substance is misconceived; and so far from aiding creative thought about the Trinity, its tendency is rather the opposite. By locating what is needed in the wrong quarter, it diverts attention from avenues along which real progress might be made in rethinking the doctrine and its implications.

When I say that I want to defend 'classical formulations' from the charge that substance metaphysics renders them defective, what formulations do I have in mind? My concern is not with any particular formulation by a patristic or medieval theologian, or any particular creed. I will be citing several formulations that fit the rubric. For my purposes any formulation will suffice that thinks of the divine threeness in oneness in terms such as the following:

The Son is of one *substance* with the Father

The Son is generated from the *substance* of the Father

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different *persons* (*hypostases*)

Rather than presenting at this point some formulations from the Fathers, I will first go back to the fountainhead of substance metaphysics, Aristotle, from whom the Fathers inherited the concepts in terms of which they set out their substantialist formulations. That will provide a useful, indeed essential, background against which to untangle the often knotty aspect these formulations present. I do not suggest that the theologians in question were card-carrying Aristotelians, even to the extent that Augustine was a card-carrying neoplatonist. I am not even assuming that the patristic theologians I quote were familiar with the *Categories* and *Metaphysics* of Aristotle. But Aristotle's philosophy was the original source of the substance terms employed in these formulations. As long as no notice is given to the contrary, we must assume that the best place to find the concepts expressed by these terms is the *Metaphysics* and the *Categories* of Aristotle.

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II Aristotle on Substance

Chapter 5 of the *Categories* opens with this statement.

Substance, in the truest and primary and most definite sense of the word, is that which is neither predicable of a subject nor present in a subject; for instance, the individual man or horse. But in a secondary sense those things are called substances within which, as species, the primary substances are included; also those which, as general, include the species. For instance, the individual man is included in the species 'man', and the genus to which the species belongs is 'animal'; these, therefore—that is to say, the species 'man' and the genus 'animal'—are termed secondary substances. (2a 11-18)¹

¹ R. McKeon (ed.), *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, trans. E. M. Edghill (New York: Random House, 1941).

What is 'predicable of a substance' is some general property or relation that is true of it, that can be truly predicated of it. What Aristotle calls 'present in a substance' is a particularized property or relation—the colour of this apple or the location of this tree. Leaving aside the fine print, the basic idea is that an individual substance is that which has properties and stands in relations, rather

than being itself a property or a relation of something(s) else. This is the common-sense view, enshrined in language, at least Indo-European languages and no doubt many others as well, that there is a fundamental distinction between things that bear or 'stand under' (*substare*) properties, and the properties they bear. Moreover, the bearer, the substance, cannot be identified with the sum of its properties. It is an entity of a different and more fundamental sort. Aristotle holds to this common-sense conviction through all the abstruse twists and turns of his metaphysics.

The other basic feature of individual substances is that they retain their identity through changes of their properties, at least their 'accidental' properties, those that are not necessary for their being the individuals they are. 'The most distinctive mark of substance appears to be that, while remaining numerically one and the same, it is capable of admitting contrary qualities.'²

² *Categories*, Ch. 5 (4a, 10-12).

This distinguishes substances from events, which do not remain self-identical through change. Unlike events, a substance has no temporal parts. It is wholly present at each moment and temporal

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period of its existence; hence it is the same thing at each stage of a change; whereas an event clearly does have temporal parts. The whole of a flight across the Atlantic is not present during each minute of the flight. On the contrary! During the first minute only that (temporal) part of the flight is in existence. Since the whole flight exists only over the whole temporal span it occupies, it is not the same event at each period of the change.

What Aristotle calls 'secondary substances' are better known today as 'natural kinds'. He makes a sharp distinction between the natural kind to which an individual belongs (the 'species' that includes it) and all other general properties that can be predicated of it. He takes it to be an objective metaphysical fact about each individual substance that there is one unique kind to which it belongs in the special sense that membership in that kind constitutes the essence of the individual without which it could not be what it is. This is opposed to the widespread modern view, already enunciated by Locke, that an individual belongs to as many kinds as there are general terms that can be truly predicated of it, and that it is arbitrary to pick out one of these as the 'real essence' of the individual. It is as true to say that a particular human being belongs to the kind *capable of laughter* or the kind *University professor* or the kind *baseball fan*, as to the kind *human being*. Each of these constitutes what Locke calls a 'nominal essence'. Depending on the context, one or another of these will be of more interest than others. But there is no objective basis, metaphysical or otherwise, for picking out one of these as the *essence* of the individual.

Since Aristotle takes it to be an objective fact that each individual belongs to a unique kind, such as *human being*, *water*, *horse*, or *maple tree*, which constitutes the essence of those individual substances belonging to it, these kinds can themselves be called 'substance' in a secondary sense. A natural kind is, so to say, 'the substance' of each individual belonging to it. *Being a tree* is 'the substance' of each individual tree.

Aristotle's discussion of substance in the *Metaphysics* is complicated by the oscillation between these two senses—*primary substance*, the concrete individual, and *secondary substance*, that feature of an individual that makes it a substance. Questions are raised such as 'What is substance?', where it is not clear whether he is asking about primary or secondary substance. Nevertheless, a fairly clear position emerges. Corporeal (individual) substances are composites of matter and form, which are related as potentiality and the actualization thereof. This potentiality-actuality distinction (and with it the form-matter distinction) exists on different levels. The proximate matter of a living organism, that which is informed by the essence of the organism (the matter that Aristotle calls 'flesh and bone' when he is thinking of higher animals), is itself a *formed* matter, though less formed than that of which it is matter. Again, the flesh and bone is itself a matter-form composite, with the underlying matter consisting, as we would say nowadays, of certain organic compounds. These in turn involve the informing of more rudimentary matter, their elementary constituents, which in turn. . . . At the bottom of this hierarchy is *prime matter*—*pure* matter, *pure* potentiality, which is intrinsically informed in no way, the *ultimate substratum* of all substance. Being wholly bereft of forms itself, it cannot exist separately but only as an aspect of corporeal substances. Incorporeal substances, on the other hand, are pure subsisting forms with no matter that they inform.

III Classical Formulations

There are, of course, many components to an exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity, many issues on which it can seek to throw light. Here I will concentrate on only one such issue (without any suggestion that it is the only one, though it is particularly fundamental), viz., how are we to understand the unity and diversity in the triune God. God is one what and three what's. That is the main point on which the fathers deployed substance metaphysics. A short formulation is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons (individuals, *hypostases*) in one substance. But this deceptively simple formula conceals many complexities.³

³ I am heavily indebted to H. A. Wolfson (*The Philosophy of the Church Fathers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1956)) in providing this patristic neophyte guidance in locating passages in the Fathers that are crucial for their uses of substance metaphysics. I have also profited from C. Stead (*Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977)), though his discussion is much more detailed and complex than can be reflected in this paper.

The Fathers I will be briefly surveying here—Origen, Tertullian, Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, and John of Damascus—all stress, to various degrees, the individual distinctness of the 'persons' of the Trinity, sometimes to the point of

verging on tritheism. Thus, Origen insists that God and the Logos are real beings and argues against those (modalists) who believe that the distinction between them is not in number but only according to ways we think of them.⁴

⁴ *In Joannem Commentarii*, x. 21, in Allan Menzies (ed.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, x, Supplement, 5th edn. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 401-2.

And Tertullian says of the Son that He is 'to be considered as substantive in reality, by reason of a property of his substance, in such a way that he may be regarded as a certain thing and person, and so be able, as being constituted second to God, to make two, The Father and the Son, God and the Logos'.⁵

⁵ *Adversus Praexan*, 13, cited in Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 323.

Tertullian also refers to each member of the Trinity as a 'substantive thing' (*substantiva res*).⁶

⁶ *Ibid.* 26, 324.

What makes the persons of the Trinity distinct is the causal relations in which they stand to each other. According to Basil, the distinguishing property of the Father is that he is ungenerated, of the Son that he is generated,⁷

⁷ *Ep.* 38, 4, in NPNF, 2nd series, viii. 138-9.

and of the Holy Spirit 'His being sent from God and sustained by the Son'.⁸

⁸ *Adversus Eunomium*, iii. 6, cited in Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 340.

And according to John of Damascus the Father is 'without beginning, that is to say, uncaused, for He is from no one', whereas the Son is 'not without beginning . . . for He is from the Father', and the Holy Spirit comes 'forth from the Father, not by filiation but by procession'.⁹

⁹ *De Fide Orthodoxa*, i. 8, in F. W. Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 187-8.

We also find this conviction of the distinct individual character of each Person in the frequent analogies between the relation of the Persons of the Trinity to their unity, and the relation of created individuals of the same species to their common nature or essence. Thus, Basil, in explaining the unity of the Persons in the divine nature, compares it with four individuals named Peter, Andrew, John, and James, who are all one in that they all belong to the species 'man'.¹⁰

¹⁰ *Ep.* 38, 2, in NPNF 2nd series, viii. 137.

And John of Damascus says that though 'Peter is seen to be actually distinct from Paul . . . we see that Peter and Paul are of the same nature and have one common nature, for each of them is a rational and mortal animal'.¹¹

¹¹ *de Fide Orthodoxa*, i. 8, in Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus*, 185-6.

As we will see

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later, it is dubious that such analogies do justice to the divine unity. But they clearly show their authors to be dead serious about treating Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as so many different individuals.

If the matter is set up in this way, what account is to be given of the divine unity—three persons but one God. The standard formula is *one substance*. But we already have three different divine substances. How, then, can God be *one substance*?

This confusion goes back to Aristotle's use of *ousia* both for the individual bearer of an essence and properties (*prōtōousia*) and for the essential nature that makes the individual a substance (*deutera ousia*).¹²

¹² One may wonder why Aristotle used a nominalization of a form of the verb 'to be' for either of these senses? Why didn't he use *ousia* to mean something like *being*? The explanation provided by Aristotle himself is that while there are many senses in which something is said to be, the primary sense is that of 'substance'. For any other beings are either properties of substance,

relations between substances, affections of substances, and so on. Hence substance *is* being par excellence. In this connection it is interesting to note that in the English translation of the Nicene creed in the latest Episcopal Book of Common Prayer, the more usual translation of *homoousion toō patri* as 'of one substance with the Father' is replaced by 'of one being with the Father'.

The different persons are each said to be a *prōtōousia*, a subsistent individual. The divine unity, when put in terms of *ousia*, is taken to consist of the common essential (divine) nature which the three persons share. The use of the same term for both was bound to cause trouble and did. In Origen, who wrote before the terminological problems were cleared up, we find *ousia* used in both ways. Thus, he says both that 'The Son is a being (*ousia*) and subject distinct from the Father',¹³

¹³ *de Oratione*, 15 in R. A. Greer (trans.), *Origen* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 112.

and that they are of one *ousia*.¹⁴

¹⁴ *In Joannem Commentarii*, x. 21, in Menzies (ed.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, x. 402.

Here the first occurrence is Aristotle's 'first *ousia*', the individual substance, and the second is Aristotle's 'second *ousia*', the essence of an individual substance. And because of this ambiguity the crucial statement of the Nicene creed that the Son is '*homoousios* with the Father' is likewise ambiguous. Though it was undoubtedly intended to mean 'of the same essence as the Father', it could be, and was, understood as 'being the same individual as the Father', in which sense it would be denying the numerical distinctness of the persons of the Trinity. It was the Cappadocian Fathers who put the seal on what

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became the standard way in the East of avoiding this confusion. That involved employing the term *hypostasis* for an individual substance, and reserving *ousia* for essence. *Hypostasis* is not prominent in Aristotle's discussion of the metaphysics of substance,¹⁵

¹⁵ Steve Davis has reminded me that the term is used fairly extensively in Aristotle's scientific works.

even though, ironically enough, it is the etymological twin of *substantia* (substance), which became the standard translation of *ousia* in Latin and many modern languages, including English. Both are derived from roots meaning *standing under*, terms well suited to the Aristotelian conception of an individual substance as that which 'stands under' or 'underlies' properties. In Patristic literature the term is already employed by Origen, who speaks of Christ as *hypostasis*.¹⁶

¹⁶ *de Principiis*, 1. 2. 2 in A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, iv. 246.

In criticizing those who deny that the Father and Son are distinct numerically, he says that they deny that Father and Son are 'different in their *hypostases*'.¹⁷

¹⁷ *In Joannem Commentarii*, x. 21, in Menzies (ed.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, x. 402.

And elsewhere he says of Father and Son that they are 'two considered as *hypostases*'.¹⁸

¹⁸ *Contra Celsum*, viii. 12, in Roberts and Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, iv. 643-4.

Plotinus likewise speaks of the members of his trinity, the One, the Nous, and the Soul as *hypostases*. Basil and Gregory of Nyssa consistently mark the distinction between Aristotle's first and second *ousia* by using *hypostasis* for the first and *ousia* for the second. 'The distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* is the same

as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man.'¹⁹

¹⁹ Basil, *Ep.* 236, 6, in NPNF, 2nd series, viii. 278.

And they are followed in this by John of Damascus. " 'Ousia' means the common species including the *hypostases* that belong to the same species—as, for example, God, man—while "*hypostasis*" indicates an individual, as Father, Son, Holy Ghost, Peter, Paul.'²⁰

²⁰ *de Fide Orthodoxa*, iii. 4, in Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus*, 275.

This gives us an unambiguous terminology for formulating the Trinity in terms of a substance metaphysics. But the Latin Fathers were faced with a somewhat different situation to which they reacted in a different way. What seems in hindsight a natural move would be to parallel the Greek *ousia-hypostasis* distinction by using *essentia* for what is common to the members of the Trinity, and *substantia*

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for each member. That would give us three substances in one essence. But *substantia* was so firmly entrenched as a translation of *ousia* that the way to this solution was barred. What happened instead was that *substantia* was used for Aristotle's second *ousia*, and the individual members of the Trinity were designated as *personae*, thus giving rise to the standard Latin formula of *three persons in one substance*. Of late it has become fashionable to assert that *persona*, as used by the Latin Fathers, had a meaning radically different from our modern term 'person'. I find much of this talk to be misguided and even confused. There is an interesting history of *persona*, and the Greek term *prosopon*, involving masks used by actors and the legal notion of the bearer of certain rights and responsibilities. And since the Greek Fathers made little use of *prosopon* for the members of the Trinity, preferring *hypostasis*, the meaning of their term of choice has no special connection with the modern concept of a person (whatever that is), or any other concept of a person. *Hypostasis* is used for any real individual substance; and its trinitarian employment was chosen for the sake of real individuality, not anything distinctively personal. Nevertheless, and this is the crucial point, the Fathers were quite clear that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinctively personal in possessing knowledge, purposes, and intentions, and in performing intentional actions, including actions vis-à-vis human and other persons. There are, no doubt, connotations and associations that have accrued to the word 'person' in the last few centuries that are not applicable to the persons of the Trinity, such as *autonomy* and *extreme self-enclosedness*. The fact that the persons of the Trinity all together constitute one God inhibits our thinking of them in those terms. But there is a more fundamental notion of a person, as distinct from other types of substances, that would seem to be common to Christian theology and our talk of human persons through the centuries. This is the notion adumbrated by the above reference to distinctively personal attributes and activities. Given all this, I take it that Boethius' famous definition of *persona*, viz., *an individual substance of rational nature*, though it could be further elaborated, captures very well the sense of the term in which it is applied to members of the Trinity by the Latin Fathers. To be sure, we must always remember that terms originally developed for application to creatures

cannot, usually, be truly applied to God in exactly the same sense, though that does not

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prevent a partial univocity such as I believe to hold with respect to 'person' as applied to the members of the Trinity and to human beings.

This brief excursus into person-talk is a detour from the main line of the paper. The question of the sense in which members of the Trinity have been spoken of as 'persons' in Patristic times and at other periods, and the question of the sense in which they can be truly called 'persons', is more specific than the one on which this paper is focused. In Aristotelian metaphysics, persons constitute only one sub-class of individual substances. Hence, the problem of whether the terms of that metaphysics are apt for conceptualizing the Trinity is a more general, and a more basic, one than the question of whether and in what sense 'person' is apt for that purpose.

There is one final resource of substance metaphysics used by the Fathers in formulating the unity and diversity of God. That involves another term that figures importantly in Aristotelian metaphysics, *hypokeimenon*, translated into English as 'substratum' (from Latin *substratus*). The etymology is similar to 'substance' and *hypostasis*, 'lying under' rather than 'standing under'. In both cases the metaphor captures the idea that the possessor of properties 'supports' them. But for Aristotle, whereas the emphasis of first *ousia* (substance) is on the concreteness and independent existence (subsistence) of the individual, the emphasis of *hypokeimenon* is on being that which 'receives' and 'supports' properties and can remain the same through change of properties. Thus, 'first *ousia*' is an absolute term. An entity is or is not an individual substance. But *hypokeimenon* is a relative term. X may be a substratum in one relationship but not in another. In particular, an individual substance, for Aristotle, is the substratum of its properties including its essence as well as its accidents. But the individual substance itself, as I pointed out earlier, is a composite of forms and what underlies and possesses them; and this at various levels. The ultimate substratum of all the forms of a material substance is prime matter, that which is intrinsically formless but is the ultimate bearer of all forms.

This is all a prelude to pointing out that some of the Fathers chose to represent the divine unity, not as a matter of the Persons possessing an essence in common, but in terms of their sharing a common *hypokeimenon*, an analogue to a *stuff* or *material* of which they are composed. In Book VII of *de Trinitate*, Augustine presents

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this substratum construal in opposition to the view that the divine unity consists in the Persons sharing a common species or genus. 'So now we are not talking any more in terms of genus and species, but rather in terms of what you could call the same common material. For example, if three statues were made of the same gold, we would say three statues, one gold; and here we would not be using statue as a specific and gold as a generic term, nor even gold as a specific term and statue as an individual one.'²¹

²¹ *de Trinitate* vii. 11, in St Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City Press, 1991), 229.

This is, of course, presented only as an analogy. None of the Fathers thought that God is literally constituted of some stuff or material. With respect to their favourite material analogue, several gold statues all being made of gold, they were at pains to point out that the common divine *hypokeimenon* is not something that is capable of independent existence, as gold can exist unformed into statues. Thus, Augustine writes: 'we do talk about three persons of the same being, or three persons one being; but we do not talk of three persons out of the same being, as though what being is were one thing and what person is another, as we can talk about three statues out of the same gold'.²²

²² Ibid. 230. Notice how Augustine distances himself from the analogy by using 'being' rather than 'substratum' in speaking of the Trinity.

IV Some Problems With These Formulations

Although I am concerned in this paper to defend the use of substance metaphysics in patristic trinitarian formulations, I do not claim that all is clear sailing with these formulations. And in saying that, I do not simply mean that they do not represent the Trinity as totally intelligible and free of mystery. That goes without saying. It is rather that in certain respects they fail to deliver what can be reasonably required of a formulation, in particular in their account of the divine unity.

We have seen two ways of using substance metaphysics to do this. Either the unity amounts to the Persons sharing a common essence or nature, or to their sharing a common 'stuff' or 'material'. Either a common (second) *ousia* or a common *hypokeimenon*. These suggestions display different weaknesses. The

trouble with the second is more glaring but, perhaps, in the end less serious. The basic trouble is that it simply does not seem at all appropriate to think of incorporeal persons being constituted of any material or stuff. As we have seen, Augustine cautions us that this is only an analogy and not to be taken literally. But in the absence of some further indication of just how the analogy is to be understood, some indication of what there is in the divine being that is significantly 'stuff-like', it may well be felt that the analogy is insufficiently illuminating.

With the shared essence view, the problem is quite different. Here there is no difficulty in taking literally the thesis that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share a common essence or nature. Since they are all divine, that commends itself as an eminently plausible suggestion. The trouble is that this in itself does not constitute a tight enough connection, a sufficiently intimate relationship, to give content to the conviction that all together they constitute one God. How does sharing a common essence amount to that? We have seen Basil comparing the trinitarian situation to four individuals named Peter, Andrew, John, and James, who are all one in that they all belong to the species 'man'. And I cited John of Damascus saying that though 'Peter is seen to be separate from Paul, still Peter and Paul are both of the same nature and have a common nature, for each of them is a rational and mortal animal'. But clearly Peter, Paul, James, and John do not make up one man by virtue of sharing the essence of humanity. How then

are we to think of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit making up one God by sharing in the divine essence?

Our authors and their colleagues were not unaware of this difficulty. Apollinaris, in a letter answering the raising of this difficulty by Basil, invokes the distinction between an aggregate of individuals which are not causally connected with one another and a causally connected series of individuals. In the latter case, he says, two or more can be the same in *ousia*, just as all men are Adam, being one with him in *ousia*, since his essence is communicated to us in our generation. And it is in just this way that the Son is the same in *ousia*, as the Father, since He, begotten of the Father, derives that *ousia* from His begetter.²³

²³ See Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Church Fathers*, 342-6. I understand that today the scholarly consensus is that this epistle is spurious. But even so, the suggestion contained therein can be discussed.

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The appeal to the idea that all human beings are one in Adam does not answer the difficulty. For surely, according to the doctrine of the Trinity, there is only one God in a much stronger sense than that there is only one man, however the latter is spelled out. Otherwise the charge of tritheism remains on the table. Nor does John of Damascus settle the matter by the point that in the case of Peter and Paul their separation is seen by observation, but their unity is discerned only by 'reason and thought'; whereas for the Trinity, their unity is observed in 'actuality', while their plurality can be perceived only by 'thought'.²⁴

²⁴ *de Fide Orthodoxa*, i. 8, in Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus*, 185-6.

Though this may be a sound point, it does not seem to advance the question of how the possession of a common nature results in the Persons being one God rather than three Gods.

We find a more promising suggestion in Gregory of Nyssa's treatise 'Not Three Gods'. He makes a number of points there, but the most illuminating is the following. First, no term signifying the divine nature signifies that nature as it is in itself, since that is in principle unknowable to us. Instead it signifies how that nature manifests itself, or the effects that flow from it, or the ways in which it is related to creatures. And so when we confess one God, the specific meaning of this has to do with the divine operations that impinge upon us. He continues: As we have to a certain extent shown by our statement that the word 'godhead' is not significant of nature but of operation, perhaps one might reasonably allege as a cause why, in the case of men, those who share with one another in the same pursuits are enumerated and spoken of in the plural, while on the other hand the Deity is spoken of in the singular as one God . . . ; men, even if several are engaged in the same form of action work separately each by himself at the task he has undertaken, having no participation in the individual action with others who are engaged in the same occupation. . . . But in the case of the divine nature we do not similarly learn that God does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation . . . has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. For this reason the name derived from the operation is not divided with regard to the number of those who fulfil it, because the action

of each concerning anything is not separate and peculiar, but whatever comes to pass, in reference either

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to the acts of His providence for us, or to the government and constitution of the universe, comes to pass by the action of the Three, yet what does come to pass is not three things. . . . From Him, I say, Who is the chief source of gifts, all things which have shared in this grace have obtained their life. When we inquire, then, whence this good gift came to us, we find by the guidance of the Scriptures that it was from the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet although we set forth Three Persons and three names, we do not consider that we have had bestowed upon us three lives, one from each person separately; but the same life is wrought in us by the Father, and prepared by the Son, and depends on the will of the Holy Spirit. Since then the Holy Trinity fulfils every operation in a manner similar to that of which I have spoken, not by separate action according to the number of Persons, but so that there is one motion and disposition of the good will which is communicated from the Father through the Son to the Spirit . . . neither can we call those who exercise this Divine and superintending power and operation towards ourselves and all creation, conjointly and inseparably, by their mutual action, three Gods.²⁵

²⁵ In NPNF, 2nd series, viii. 333-4.

Here we see Gregory reading the 'economic Trinity' back into the 'immanent Trinity', by virtue of the thesis that all our terms for the latter are based on terms for the former.

But there is also a more general line of which the above is a particular application. It is by virtue of a more intimate interrelationship that the members of the Trinity distinguish themselves from a group of men or other created substances. Another development of this general point is found in the notion of *perichoresis*, or mutual indwelling set forth by various writers. Thus, John of Damascus speaks of the three Persons as being one 'by reason of the co-eternity and identity of *ousia*, operation, and will, and by reason of the agreement in judgment and the identity of power, virtue, and goodness—I did not say *similarity*, but *identity*—and by reason of the one surge of motion'. He further says that this unity of *ousia* and rule is not due to a 'composition' or to a 'blending' whereby they would lose their individual distinctness, but rather a 'circumincession [*perichoresis*] one in the other' of the persons.²⁶

²⁶ *de Fide Orthodoxa*, 1. 8, in Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus*, 186-7.

Thus, the deficiencies of the notion of a common *ousia*, if taken by itself, are remedied, to some extent, by the introduction of the idea of a mutual *perichoresis*. And both Gregory and John, as well as Basil, take the ontological unity of common *ousia* and the 'economic'

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unity of joint action as not separate from each other but as two aspects of one situation. It is by virtue of sharing in Godhood, as *they do*, that the Persons of the Trinity so interpenetrate and dwell in each other that the action of one is the action of all.

V Contemporary Dissatisfaction With Substantialist Formulations

Although the problems I have just been canvassing are important ones, they are not what worry current theologians about formulations of the Trinity in terms of substance. The dissatisfactions they do express, I will argue, are, for the most part, misguided and do not really tell against the use of categories of substance in construing the Trinity.²⁷

²⁷ I do not regard all such dissatisfactions to be misguided. For example Pannenberg's suggestion that it is better to think of the divine unity as a unity constituted by the interrelations of the Persons than as a unity of substance (essence) deserves serious consideration. See W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, i, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), ch. 5, sect. 3. Another exception is R. W. Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), which will be briefly touched on below.

I will begin the survey with a commentary on a passage in a recent work, *God as Trinity* by Ted Peters.²⁸

²⁸ (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993).

My quotations are taken from a section entitled 'Is the Trinity Tied to Substantialist Metaphysics?'

When the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed was formulated in AD 381 our theologians were quite confident that they could speak about the *being* of God. Whether speaking about the divine *ousia* in Greek or *substantia* in Latin, no one doubted that these terms referred to the divine reality itself. (p. 31)

Peters then says that such a classical commitment 'to a substantialist understanding of God's being' runs into an obstacle in modern thought, viz. 'the denial that we could know God in the Godself' (pp. 31-2).

This, of course, is not a specific objection to a substance metaphysics but a much more general objection to any supposition that we can know 'the being of God' in any terms at all. But the idea that the ancients and other pre-moderns (or is it pre-Kantians?) felt confident in human ability to gain an adequate cognitive grasp of the divine being and nature does not fit the facts. Patristic and

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medieval literature is replete with statements that the being and nature of God far outstrips human cognitive capacities and that we are incapable of understanding the divine essence as it is in itself. Nor is this confined to the more mystically inclined like the pseudo-Dionysius. I have just quoted Gregory of Nyssa to the effect that all our terms for God express God's relations to his creation rather than what he is in himself. John of Damascus writes that 'it is impossible to find in creation an image which exactly portrays the manner of the Holy Trinity in Itself'.²⁹

²⁹ *de Fide Orthodoxa*, i. 8, in Chase (trans.), *Writings of St. John of Damascus*, 183.

And to go beyond the Patristic period, do not forget that Aquinas' *Summa Theologiae* announces near the beginning that 'because we cannot know what God is, but rather what He is not, we have no means for considering how God is, but rather how He is not' (Introduction to I. Q. 3). One can hardly get less confident than that of knowing 'God as Godself!' To be sure, what Peters explicitly says these ancients were confident of was that their 'terms referred to

the divine reality itself'. But if that is all he is saying, it is no big deal. I can refer to things I have virtually no understanding of at all. I do it all the time. If his contrast with contemporary thought is to have any force, what will have to be attributed to the ancients is a confidence that they could attain an impressively detailed grasp of the divine nature. And on that, the evidence tends in the other direction.³⁰

³⁰ Of course, in any period there are disagreements on this as on many other issues. Not all ancient theologians were as modest as John. But then not all twentieth-century theologians are as pessimistic about grasping the divine being as Peters suggests.

Here are some more specific complaints about substance metaphysics:

What it means for God to be understood in terms of divine substance was spelled out over time. Augustine described God as a substance that is invisible, unchangeable, and eternal. Thomas Aquinas identified God with the fullness of being, as pure act. This excludes such things as becoming and potency. Thus God is immutable and cannot change, because change consists in the transition from potency to act. God in the Godself is unchanging and eternal. The world, in contrast, is temporal and constantly changing in relation to God.

Included in the substantialist presumptions was the distinction between absolute essence and relational attributes. The essence of an entity is absolute, remaining unchanged if identity is to be maintained. Relationality

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takes place through the attributes. What could not be countenanced is the notion that the divine essence is contingent upon the relational dimensions of its being. (p. 31)

To these ways of thinking of God, Peters opposes another 'obstacle in modern thought', viz., 'the apparent incompatibility of an eternal unchanging God with the biblical view of a God in relationship to a world he loves'. He goes on to spell this out:

If God is not capable of change or becoming, it would seem that God could not be affected by the world. Even the suffering of its creatures could not elicit divine sympathy. God would be apathetic, unable to feel the pain of others. In addition, human freedom seems to be rendered superfluous because it would make no difference whether I love God or not. How, we might ask, can we reconcile the God of substantialist metaphysics with the portrait of God in Jesus' parable of the prodigal, as a grieving father who goes in search of his lost child? The scriptural story of salvation assumes that God responds to human conditions and actions, and to do so God must be affected by what happens in the world.

Such considerations in recent times have led to an attack against the substantialist metaphysics that are presumed to underlie our idea of God as Trinity . . . ; the classical picture of God makes God look aloof, impersonal, unrelated to the world and hence uncaring. To speak of God as a divine substance that is immutable and existing independently of all other things seems to make it impossible for God to love us. To love, one must be affected by the beloved, perhaps even to suffer in loving. This implies change and mutability. (p. 32)

Now Peters, following Hartshorne and Whitehead, has an important point that if God loves us and is concerned for our well-being (and, one might add, even if God just knows about us), then he is related to us, and more generally to his

creation, in a way that makes a difference to his being. And hence, unless we are able to scrap any significant relations of God to the world, we cannot think of God as pure act, free of any potentiality, and as unaffected in his being by relations to us, and hence not as purely simple as Augustine and Aquinas would have it. But there is absolutely no justification for saddling substance metaphysics as such with these commitments to timelessness, immutability, pure actuality with no potentiality, and being unaffected by relations to other beings. To see this, we only have to recall that the Aristotelian metaphysics of substance was developed for application to finite created substances, particularly living organisms. And these are far from

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'invisible, unchangeable, eternal', pure actuality with no trace of potentiality, and absolutely simple. Quite the contrary! Indeed, as pointed out above, Aristotle takes one of the basic features of substances to be that they retain their identity *through change*. Hence, there is nothing in the category of substance itself that constrains a theologian who applies that category to God to think of God in the ways Peters objects to in the above passages. Moreover, it is particularly ironic to cite Aquinas as one who construes God in these ways *because* he thinks of God as a substance. On the contrary, Thomas was led by his doctrine of divine simplicity—which is the root of his denial of divine potentiality, change, and dependence on creatures for anything—to deny that God is in any genus, including the summum genus of *substance*.

Robert W. Jenson's work, *The Triune Identity*,³¹

³¹ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

might seem to be another case of rejecting a substantialist construal of the Trinity on the mistaken supposition that such a construal requires absolute simplicity, timelessness, immutability, and the lack of internal relations to creations. Indeed, Jenson, like Peters, inveighs against those features of classical theological treatments of God. And he plumps for a non-substantialist view of the trinitarian God as an 'event', 'the event between Father, Son, and Spirit' (p. 161). But a closer reading would reveal that Jenson has a much more sophisticated understanding of substance metaphysics than that. In distinguishing his reading of the Cappadocians from the likes of Augustine and Aquinas, he writes: By distinguishing *ousia* from *hypostasis* in the case of God, Basil and his protégés pushed God's *ousia* unambiguously to the side of the possessed complex of attributes. Their possessor would not have to be either the event of which the Cappadocians predicate 'God', or the hypostases, singly or together. . . . God only *has ousia*; he is not one. (pp. 162-3)

If God is 'one substance', this is a 'substance' with internal relations to other substances. (p. 120)

One could hardly say more clearly than this that applying the category of substance to God does not itself require us to think of God as absolutely simple, impassible, not internally related to creatures, and so on. Thus, Jenson is not, despite first appearances, guilty of underestimating the resources of substance metaphysics. To be sure, he rejects it. He does not want to think of God even as

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a substance with internal relations to other substances. But that rejection is the culmination of a complex argument with many strands, among which are the emphasis on the economic Trinity as *constitutive* of the immanent Trinity and a view of divine infinity as preventing the attribution to God of any fixed set of essential attributes.

Jürgen Moltmann, on the other hand, does base his advocacy of getting away from the 'substantialist unity' of God towards a relational unity in which the divine threeness is given priority, on an overly restrictive view of substantialist unity. The unity of the three Persons . . . must consequently be understood as a *communicable* unity and as an *open, inviting unity, capable of integration*. The *homogeneity* of the divine substance is hardly conceivable as communicable and open for anything else, because then it would no longer be homogeneous. . . . The at-oneness of the three divine Persons is not presupposed by these Persons as their single substance. . . . The unitedness, the at oneness, of the triunity is already given with the fellowship of the Father, the Son and the Spirit. It therefore does not need to be additionally secured by a particular doctrine about the unity of the divine substance. . . . It must be perceived in the *perichoresis* of the divine Persons.³²

³² J. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 149-50.

But Moltmann is setting up false dichotomies here. As the previous section should make clear, we can recognize that on either interpretation of 'same substance' (second *ousia* or *hypokeimenon*) the 'at-oneness' of the Persons is not sufficiently secured unless we add to this a requirement of a *perichoresis*. Moltmann seems to think that this addition is incompatible with postulating a community of substance. But this view is based either on a gratuitous insistence on a *homogeneity* of substance (gratuitous because not required by the category of substance itself), or on taking the unity of divine substance as an 'addition' to the 'fellowship' of the Father, Son, and Spirit. But the sensible, and sensitive, way to do the doctrine of the Trinity in substance terms is that exemplified by Gregory of Nyssa in the longish quotation in the last section. There the commonality of substance is not an 'addition' to the *perichoresis* but rather its ontological basis, not, indeed, a basis that requires the *perichoresis*, but one that is receptive to it. My final exhibit of misguided objections to substantialist trinitarian

formulations is John Macquarrie. In his *Principles of Christian Theology*³³

³³ 2nd edn. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977).

we find the following:

The Christian community believed that God, who had created heaven and earth, had become incarnate in a particular man and that furthermore he still dwelt with the community and guided it. This, we may say, was the narrative or mythological expression of their faith, and like us, they looked for an alternative interpretative language that would express the same faith in a different way. They came up with the trinitarian formula. (p. 191)

I am sure that both patristic theologians and their non-revisionist successors down to the present day would be surprised to hear that the 'trinitarian formula' was developed as an *alternative* to the belief that God became incarnate in a

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particular man, one who still dwells with the community and guides it. It certainly seems for all the world as if the 'trinitarian formula' was intended to spell out the ontological presupposition of the incarnation of God and of the continuing life and activity of Jesus Christ, not as a replacement for it. And it has been commonly understood in that way through the centuries. But it is no part of my task here to fight that battle. I include this passage only because it sets the framework within which Macquarrie's objections to substance metaphysics are made.

[T]he formula of one substance and three persons constitutes an interpretation that has ceased to communicate, for it talks the language and moves in the universe of discourse of an obsolete philosophy. This does not mean, however, that the formula is to be rejected. Especially if it does indeed conceal within itself essential Christian insights, what is required is a new act of interpretation that will interpret in a contemporary language this ancient and hallowed formula of the Church, just as it in turn had interpreted the mythological and historical material that lies behind it. (p. 192)

In the part of the book devoted to the Trinity, from which the above passages are taken, Macquarrie does not make explicit just what he finds defective in substantialist metaphysics (except that it is 'obsolete!'). But earlier in the book, in setting out his metaphysics of existence (being) he says things like this.

. . . [T]he attempt to understand the self as substance is really an example of reductionist naturalism at its most abstract. The model or paradigm underlying the notion of substance is that of the solid enduring thing

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(like a rock). But thinghood cannot be an enlightening model for selfhood. . . . This is to reify the self, to treat it as a thing, however refined that thing may be thought to be. This is at bottom a materialistic understanding of selfhood that cannot do justice to it. The self, as personal existence, has a dynamism, a complexity, a diversity-in-unity, that can never be expressed in terms of inert thinghood . . . (p. 72)

He goes on to say that what is needed for 'an understanding of the self is not substantiality or thinghood but rather temporality, with its three dimensions of past, present, and future that makes the kind of being called "existence" possible' (p. 76). Here, of course, Macquarrie is rejecting the category of substance for *human* selfhood. But he says similar things about an understanding of divine selfhood. In the course of developing his conception of God as *being*, he says: It must also be denied that being can be equated with substance, the *hypokeimenon* or substratum sometimes supposed to underlie the phenomenal characteristic of beings. Leaving aside some of the other problems which the notion of 'substance' raises, it cannot be equated with 'being' because it is above all a static idea, having thinghood for its model. (p. 109)

This characterization of substance as 'inert' and 'static' is at least implicit in some of the quotations from Peters and Moltmann, but it is much more explicit in Macquarrie. It suffers from the same defect as the complaints of Peters against immutability and lack of relation to the world, viz., mistakenly taking features of some theological uses of substances to be necessarily involved in any invocation of substance metaphysics. We can see this at the beginning of the last quotation but one, when Macquarrie takes a *rock* to be the paradigm of a substance. For

Aristotle and medieval Aristotelians, the paradigm was a living organism. Living organisms, though they may be 'solid' are by no means inert or static, as any dog owner can testify. And when Macquarrie suggests replacing *substance* with *temporality* as his key notion, he, like Moltmann, is guilty of posing a false dichotomy. Aristotle's individual substances, most basically organisms, are very much involved in temporality, in the contrast of past, present, and future. Hence, if we are to use Aristotelian substance as our basic model for conceptualizing God, we can think of God as being as *temporal* as you like. There is no need for a choice here.

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Macquarrie does much more by way of developing an alternative metaphysics for theology, and for the Trinity in particular, than Peters or Moltmann (though not than Jenson). In doing this he first follows Aquinas in taking the *essence* of God, that which is shared by the divine persons, to be *Being*. He then spells out a broadly Heideggerian understanding of the sort of Being characteristic of each person:

These three 'persons', however, are . . . 'so to speak' movements within this dynamic yet stable mystery that we call 'Being'. . . . The Father may be called 'primordial' Being. This expression is meant to point to the ultimate act of energy of letting-be, the condition that there should be anything whatsoever, the source not only of whatever is but of all possibilities of being. . . . The second person of the Trinity, the Son, we shall call 'expressive' Being. The energy of primordial Being is poured out through expressive Being and gives rise to the world of particular beings, having an intelligible structure and disposed in space and time. Being mediates itself to us through the beings. . . . We may designate him (the Spirit) 'unitive' being, for it is in the 'unity of the Holy Ghost' that the Church in her liturgy ascribes glory to the Father and the Son, and, more generally, it is the function of the Spirit to maintain, strengthen and, where need be, restore the unity of Being with the beings, a unity which is constantly threatened. (pp. 198-201)

If I had unlimited space in this paper, I would make some critical remarks on this way of conceptualizing the divine and would compare it unfavourably with classical ways that make use of substance metaphysics. But it would be highly unfair to do this on the basis of the above snippets; and I have no space for the more extended treatment. Let me just say that though Macquarrie's ontology is certainly not 'obsolete', it suffers from the more serious disability of obscurity. For example, just how are we to understand 'letting be', and how is it that while the Father is primordial letting be, it is reserved to the Son to 'give rise to the world of particular beings'? Why isn't the latter also a matter of 'letting be'? But leaving all that aside, my central point here is the same as the one I have made about Peters and Moltmann. The things Macquarrie is anxious to get into the picture are simply not, as he supposes, excluded by the use of substance metaphysics. Insofar as I can understand 'letting be' (which may not be very far), I don't see why a (suitably exalted) substance can't be a primordial letter-be. And so for the other notions Macquarrie seeks to utilize *in place*

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of substance. Once again, the supposition that a certain way of thinking of the Trinity has to be an alternative for a substantialist way stems from arbitrarily saddling substance metaphysics with assumptions to which it need not be committed.

VI Conclusion

Once we get straight as to what is and is not necessarily included in any metaphysics of substance, we will see that most twentieth-century objections to the use of substance metaphysics in formulating the doctrine of the Trinity are based on features of such formulations that are not required by substance metaphysics, rather than on features that are necessarily connected with substance metaphysics as such. Immutability, timelessness, lack of real relations to the world, impassibility, inertness, being static or 'rocklike'—none of these follow just from the employment of the category of substance. The contemporary theologians who object to substantialist formulations on the grounds that features from the above list are objectionable have failed to understand what is essential to substance metaphysics. They have mistaken outer garments that can be donned or discarded at will for the real person wearing those clothes. And so even if they are justified in their strictures against characterizing God as immutable, timeless, impassible, and not really related to creatures, that does not tell against all substantialist formulations of the Trinity. Inveighing against substance on these grounds only serves to divert attention from the real problems in trinitarianism that need addressing.

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9 Anti Social Trinitarianism

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Brian Leftow

The Athanasian Creed tells Christians that 'we worship one God in Trinity . . . the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.'¹

¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 864f.

Such odd arithmetic demands explaining. The explanations I have seen fall into two broad classes. Some begin from the oneness of God, and try to explain just how one God can be three divine Persons. As Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas pursue this project, let us call it Latin Trinitarianism (LT). Others start from the threeness of the Persons, and try to say just how three Persons can be one God. Some call this theological project Social Trinitarianism (ST). I now try to recommend LT over ST. I now argue that ST cannot be both orthodox and a version of monotheism. I show *en route* that LT does not have ST's problems with monotheism.

I Two Problems Posed

In LT, there is just one divine being (or substance), God. God constitutes three Persons, but all three are at bottom just God. Thus, the Creed of the Council of Toledo has it that 'although we profess three persons, we do not profess three substances, but one substance and three persons . . . they are not three gods,